Baptism in Ecumenical Dialogues

Baptism is not a central theme in the modern ecumenical movement. For a large majority of Christian Churches, baptism has not led to doctrinal condemnations. For this churches the continued existence of a common baptism is a decisive factor of unity beyond the divisions. A common baptism is an important, already given impulse on the way to the re-establishment of one church.

There are ecumenical partners, or course, who are not prepared to speak of a common baptism. Baptists and traditions with a baptist orientation (e.g., Pentecostal churches) raise questions about the legitimate recipient of baptism. In dialogues involving these churches, problems are discussed of infant or adult baptism, of the relation between grace and faith, and ultimately of the understanding of sacrament. Nevertheless, such baptist churches assign a relatively small place to baptism in the general life of the church and so do not make a common understanding of baptism a precondition for their participation in the ecumenical movement.

For the Orthodox churches, on the other hand, baptism is of the greatest importance. They have raised questions in dialogues with other churches about the unity of the sacraments of initiation (baptism, anointing, Eucharist): must not baptism take place within the ritual structure followed by patristic tradition, an initiation rite not maintained by the West? The question is also repeatedly raised about who baptizes: Can a schismatic administer true baptism?

Against the background of these introductory remarks, the shape of the status question is of the ecumenical dialogue over baptism becomes clear:

1. First, the multilateral and bilateral dialogues results which as a rule proceed from a far-reaching consensus in the understanding of baptism will be discussed.
2. Second, the dialogues with baptist churches will be taken up.
3. Third, the dialogues with the Orthodox Churches will be analyzed.

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1 The second section of the German study, Condemnations of the Reformation Era is dedicated to the sacraments. Eucharist, confirmation, anointing of the sick, marriage, and ordained ministry are each considered. Baptism is not explicitly taken up. It is dealt with by only a few references in the chapter on confirmation. Cf. The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?, edited by Karl Lehmann & Wolfhart Panneberg, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

[Translator's note: The capitalized word "Baptist" will throughout refer to those churches which call themselves Baptist; the noncapitalized word "baptist" will refer to non-Baptist churches which share with the Baptists an affirmation of believer's baptism only. When the word falls syntactically at a point that demands capitalization, it is hoped that context will clarify who is meant.]
1. CONVERGENCE AND CONSENSUS IN THE UNDERSTANDING OF BAPTISM: MULTILATERAL AND BILATERAL DIALOGUES

At the center of this section must stand the baptism section of Baptism. Eucharist and Ministry (BEM), the convergence document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC). This is the most complete modern ecumenical text on baptism. That almost all Christian traditions took part in its development gives it added significance. The theme of baptism, however, is not a manifestly central theme within the WCC, as can be seen in the work of the 5th World Assembly on Faith and Order (Santiago 1993). Despite the theme "On the Way to Fuller Koinonia," baptism is hardly mentioned in the preparatory documents. The Assembly's Final Report deals with baptism in a few short references.

1.1. The Content of the Baptism Section of BEM (BEM-B)

BEM-B first recalls the institution of baptism: "Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection" (BEM B-I). It "is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ (2)." Appealing to the Scriptures, BEM-B describes baptism as "participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Cor 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a reclothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (I Peter 3:20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor. 10:1-2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27-28; I Cor 12:13)" (BEM B-2). These biblical images are commented on and completed with a reference to incorporation into the Body of Christ (6) and to baptism as a sign of the Kingdom of God (7).

Within this basic theological description, the existing differences between the churches are said to be differences of "practices of baptism" (6c). Disputed questions do not concern fundamentals and it should not be too difficult "to recover baptismal unity" (6c).

In its more systematic section, however, BEM-B does not appear to avoid the theological difficulties. Part III addressed the problem of gift and faith, the classic problem of the dialogues involving the baptist churches (see below). "Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift" (8). BEM-B rightly emphasizes the necessity of faith (8) and the understanding of baptism as "life-long growth into Christ" (9). In addition, baptism calls for the realization of the will of God in all realms of life (10). Against this background, the problem of infant and believer baptism is discussed (11,12). BEM-B recommends a common recognition of both practices. (12c).

The basic question of the dialogue with the Orthodox also here becomes explicit.

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This problem, however, is not treated as a basic question but as a practical one, as is already clear in its placement in section IV: "Baptismal Practice". Not only Baptists, but also most western churches have reservations about an initiation which does not at some point include a personal confession of faith. The Orthodox, however, do not understand why most western churches deny communion to baptized children. BEM-B attempts to bring these positions closer together and formulates a basic consensus: "that Christian baptism is in water and the Holy Spirit" (14). It attempts to overcome the more difficult questions by the statement that baptism must be "constantly reaffirmed" and that the baptismal vow requires "renewal" (14c). The request for the western churches to reflect anew on communion by children (14b) stands in a certain contradiction, however, to the earlier strong emphasis on the faith of the person baptized. In addition, the statement in the concluding paragraphs that "baptism is normally administered by an ordained minister, though in certain circumstances others are allowed to baptize" (22) might have better been explained, since this is a debated point in the dialogue with the Orthodox.

1.2. Comments on BEM-B

1. As is well known, the Lima Document is often misunderstood. Although the authors have repeatedly emphasized that they have worked out convergences and in no sense a consensus, the responses of many churches show how this statement has often not been heard. Here lies an important difference from the bilateral dialogues, which mostly have worked toward consensus. The result of BEM-B are convergences of the highest importance. They demonstrate in fact a far reaching common understanding of baptism, especially in relation to the biblical witness to baptism, which each tradition, however, interprets in its own way.

2. BEM-B strives for a mutual recognition of baptism. One senses a certain anxiety to burst barriers. This naturally means that when "hot potatoes" are taken up, they are not touched where they are hottest. Typical examples are:

- the interplay of gift and faith in the baptismal action. That both are essential, as BEM-B stresses, is agreed by all. The articulation of these two realities, however, is not addressed. Whether baptism itself "effects" grace or is only the ethical answer of the baptized remains open. Is the validity of baptism dependent on the faith of the baptized?

- the concept "sacrament" appears for the first time only in 13c. It is avoided in the main text and relegated to the Commentary.

- the same is true for "sign" (2). Does the sign effect what it signifies? The question remains open.

- Do the "open questions" really all belong to the area of practice?

3. Such an ecumenical method also runs the danger of imprecision. Two examples can be given by way of illustration:

- BEM-B works with the alternative infant baptism—believer's baptism. In some translations the alternative is between infant and adult baptism (the French translation of BEM) For BEM-B, it appears that infant baptism is never the baptism of a believer. The theological

4 See the six volumes edited by Max Thurian, Churches Respond to BEM (Geneva: 1986-1988).
problem is unclear. The different traditions do not always mean the same thing when they use the word "baptism."

- something similar is the case in the important assertion that baptism is unrepeatable (13). All agree that this is so. But here again, all do not mean the same thing. A baptist church is baptizing a convert for the first time when it baptizes someone already baptized as an infant in another tradition. Since in the understanding of the baptist church this earlier baptism was in fact no baptism, it can also reject rebaptism.

Thus, despite its significant development of many convergences, BEM-B in the end avoids the questions which stand in the way of communion between the western churches and either the baptist churches or the Orthodox.

1.3. Consensus in the Bilateral Dialogues

This first section, which has so far focussed on the convergences in BEM-B, should conclude with a discussion of the dialogues which have been able to speak not simply of convergence but of consensus in the understanding of baptism. As a rule, these involve western traditions whose differences in the understanding and practice of baptism are and have been without church-dividing effect. As a result, any section on baptism in these dialogue reports, when present, has been small. The mutual recognition of baptism is normal.

We will look at the international dialogues conducted under the official mandate of the churches and briefly cite their statements on baptism. Afterwards, some national or regional dialogues of these same families will be mentioned. Not their great numbers, but rather that fact that these latter dialogues have formulated no new initiatives on the theme of baptism permits a selection of a few important examples.


"Baptism, administered with water and the threefold name, is the effective means by which God brings a person into the covenant of salvation wrought by Christ and translates him from darkness and bondage into the light and freedom of the Kingdom of God. The baptized are grafted into the church, adopted as children of God, brought into a relation with him which means justification, the forgiveness of sins and exposure to the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit in the believing, witnessing and serving community.

Faith is necessary for the right receiving of the sacrament.... The practice of infant baptism necessitates the provision of opportunity for personal profession of faith before the congregation. In both our traditions this has been associated with confirmation ...."

This same consensus in the understanding of baptism is repeated in the later Niagara Report (1987).

At the level of the regional dialogues, the statements of the Porvoo Common

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5 In Growth in Agreement: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level [hereafter, GA], edited by Harding Meyer and Lukas Vischer (New York: Paulist; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1984), 22. Misprint of "exposure and" corrected to "exposure to."

Statement (British-Irish/Scandinavian-Baltic), of the Meissen Declaration (Church of England-
Evangelical Church in Germany) or the Reuilly Declaration 7 are in their content simply
repetitions of the international dialogue.


This dialogue perhaps offers—next to BEM—the most detailed unfolding of a theology of
baptism. It repeats on several pages a consensus in a way similar to BEM or the Lutheran-
Anglican dialogue. New in this report is the appearance of the problem of the relation between
baptism and church membership (para 57). This connection is controversial in many Reformed
communities. The dialogue is of the opinion that this problem is simply a function of context. It
notes that in many congregations baptism has become a problem since many members have
become influenced by newer movements, especially charismatic ones, which communicate
more baptist ideas (para 58). 8

On the regional level, reference should again be made to the Meissen Declaration
(see above), in which the German or French Reformed churches participated.

3. Anglican-Roman Catholic: Ministry and Ordination: Elucidation, 1979 (para 2)

"The priesthood of the whole people of God (1 Peter 2:5) is the consequence
of incorporation by baptism into Christ. This priesthood of all the faithful... is not a matter
of disagreement between us" (para 2). 9

This is later expanded in the document "Church as Communion" (1990) (para. 15):

"Visibly, this communion is entered through baptism and nourished and expressed in
the celebration of the eucharist. All who are baptized in the one Spirit into one body are united
in the eucharist by this sacramental participation in this same one body." 10

4. Lutheran-Methodist: The Church: Communion of Grace, 1984 (para 44-51) Here again a
far reaching consensus in the understanding of baptism is formulated. But differences are also
described: Lutheran endorsed the emergency baptism of small children in special situations,
which Methodists reject. More important, however, is the appearance again of the problem of
baptism and church membership (parallel to the Anglican-Reformed): "We agree in looking
upon baptism as entrance into the church. However, there is a difference among us about the
way in which we more precisely define the relationship between baptism and church
membership. For Lutherans, baptism establishes church membership. Most Methodists
distinguish between preparatory and full membership. The former is given through baptism, the
latter through explicit admission on profession of faith." 11

7 Porvoo Common Statement in Together in Mission and Ministry. The Porvoo Common Statement with Essays on
Church and Ministry in Northern Europe (London: Church House Publishing, 1993); Meissen Declaration in
Ecumenical Bulletin 103 (January, 1991): 4-9.; Called to witness and service. The Reuilly Common Statement,
9 GA.p.85.
10 Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, Church as Communion: An Agreed Statement
11 Lutheran-Methodist Joint Commission, The Church: Community of Grace (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation;
The international Reformed-Methodist dialogue (Together in God's Grace, 1987)\textsuperscript{12} did not deal with baptism. The national dialogues also emphasize on the one hand the consensus in the understanding of baptism and on the other the different understandings of the interrelation of baptism and church membership. Such occurred, e.g., in the German dialogue\textsuperscript{13} and in the pan-European declaration of church fellowship between Lutherans and Reformed on the one side and Methodists on the other.\textsuperscript{14}

The Methodist-Roman Catholic dialogue (Nairobi Report 1985, para. 12) limited itself to the following remark: "Baptism initiates the individual into the koinonia of the Church."\textsuperscript{15}


"Lutherans and Catholics are conscious that they participate in one and the same baptism. In keeping with the statement BEM, we jointly confess that 'Christian baptism is rooted in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, in his death and in his resurrection. It is incorporation into Christ, who is the crucified and risen Lord; it is entry into the New Covenant between God and God's people.' This common understanding of baptism is expressed in the manner in which baptism is administered and is confirmed by the fact that almost everywhere our churches have officially recognized each other's baptism. Moreover, our churches are faced by common or similar pastoral tasks concerning the understanding of baptism, and how it is expressed and concretized in baptismal practice, faith-life and the piety of congregations and the faithful."\textsuperscript{16}

National dialogues between these two traditions have on occasion treated the theme in detail (e.g., the dialogues in the USA\textsuperscript{17} and in Germany\textsuperscript{18}). These simply reached the same conclusion as that of the international dialogue.

6. Reformed-Roman Catholic: The first international dialogue of these two families (The Presence of Christ in Church and World 1977) has long sections on Scripture, salvation, Eucharist, and ministry; the theme of baptism does not appear. Only in the conclusion to the second dialogue (Toward a Common Understanding of the Church 1990) is the desire expressed for a general, mutual recognition of baptism, "provided that it has been celebrated in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and with the use of water".\textsuperscript{19}

Mutual recognition is also the major concern of national dialogues, e.g., the French dialogue (in which Lutherans participated) which declared such a recognition already in 1973 after a common exposition of a theology of baptism.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{13} Vom Dialog zur Kanzel- und Abendmahlgemeinschaft (Hanover/Stuttgart, 1987), sections 16ff.
\textsuperscript{15} In Information Service, Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, 62 (1986 IV), p. 208.
\textsuperscript{17} Paul C. Empie and T. Austin Murphy (eds.), One Baptism for the Remission of Sins: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue II (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1966).
\textsuperscript{18} Kirchengemeinschaft in Wort und Sakrament (Paderborn/Hanover, 1984), sections 24-30.
\textsuperscript{20} See A. Birmel and J. Terme (eds.). Accords et Dialogues Oecumeniques (Paris, 1995), Section 8, pp. 235-238.

2.1. A Settled Controversy of the Reformation Period?

1. In 1969, E. Schlink wrote: "The most profound difference runs its course not between the Eastern Church and Augustine, nor between Thomas and Luther, nor even between Lutheran and Calvin, but between all of these on one side and Zwingli and the Baptists on the other. The most profound difference is not the acknowledgement or nonacknowledgment of infant Baptism, but the understanding of Baptism either as God's deed or as the deed of human obedience."\(^{21}\)

Even if formal doctrinal condemnations in relation to baptism did not exist between the major streams of the Reformation, this topic was more controversial than one usually assumes. Its consequences can be found in the Reformation churches up through the present. The Marburg Colloquy between Luther and Zwingli (1529) centered on the Eucharist. The mediation of salvation was the issue. Since nothing less than the general understanding of sacrament was under debate, baptism also was involved.\(^{22}\) Luther, the former Augustinian monk, certainly sought to avoid a false, "magical" understanding of sacrament, yet it was clear for him that God has chosen certain means of communicating himself to persons. God had thus bound himself to the word of Scripture, the elements of the Lord's Supper, and the water of baptism. The word of God occurs not only in the audible word of the sermon but also in the visible word of the sacraments, which can never be separated from the spoken word. The gift of God in the sacrament is not dependent on faith, even if this gift can only be received in faith. Zwingli, however, differentiated the external sign (water, bread, wine) from the "inner" spiritual gift, which alone is finally important. The former are not the bearers of the latter. Sacraments are not gifts of salvation but signs of a salvation already worked in Christ. The salvation effected by Christ is given and received in faith in the proclaimed word.

There is thus no special gift of salvation in the sacraments, whose meaning is then limited to that of initiatio and opignoratio (pledge).\(^{23}\) The sacrament presupposes faith and is a celebration of faith. It is the confirmation of an already present inner reality whose existence is independent of this sign.

On the basis of the Consensus Tigurinus (1549), it has often been assumed that Calvin shared Zwingli's approach in this area. Calvin's refusal to bind the infinite God to finite realities indicates a similarity and has strengthened the suspicion of a common outlook.

Nevertheless, Calvin's emphasis on baptism as covenental bond is much closer to Luther than is at first apparent. Statements such as "a sacrament is ... a visible form of an invisible grace"\(^{24}\) or "it is therefore certain that the Lord offers us mercy and the pledge of his


grace both in his Sacred Word and in his sacraments\textsuperscript{25} are common in his writings. It is thus no surprise that "Calvinist" Reformed confessions, such as the Confession of La Rochelle, explicitly condemn the Zwinglian "Sacramentarians."\textsuperscript{26} This difficult theological situation in the sixteenth century was made more complex by the presence of Anabaptist streams. The latter were influenced by Zwingli's approach, but did not simply derive from it.

That this controversy is not limited to the Reformation era but continues in the life of the church of the Reformation into the present is shown by statements of such famous theologians of the twentieth century as K. Barth, E. Brunner, or J. Moltmann.\textsuperscript{27} Baptism is sometimes understood as the first, ethical answer of the believer to whom God has given grace through the word.

It was the task of modern ecumenical dialogues to overcome the controversies which had arisen through these questions.

2. The controversy with the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century over the understanding of baptism (and rebaptism) continued with their immediate successors in this stream, the Mennonites. All dialogues with this stream have confirmed the disagreement in the understanding of baptism. For example, in the French dialogue the Mennonites emphasized:

"Being baptized is an act of confessing the faith: it means that we wish to reject the past life in order to live the new life which has been poured into us by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.... Baptism thus brings to expression the will of those who publicly respond to the grace of God, wish to serve the life and witness of a local community through their gifts, and intend to live with their brothers and sisters in accord with the rules of fraternal behavior (Mt. 18)." On the Lutheran side such an emphasis on faith is not to be rejected, but baptism cannot be so limited. The Mennonites explicitly separate themselves from the sacramental Lutheran understanding of baptism.\textsuperscript{28} The dialogue in the Netherlands\textsuperscript{29} and the dialogue recently completed in Germany confirm this still existing divergence.

3. Particular interest is merited by the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue, since many of these churches appeal to Luther, Calvin, and also Zwingli. The questions were first worked through in national European dialogues (France and Germany\textsuperscript{30}) and then in pan-European dialogues (Arnoldshain Theses 1959)\textsuperscript{31}. A notable consensus was reached. Proceeding from an exegetical basis, they understood baptism as participation in Christ's death and resurrection: "We are grafted into Christ through baptism. This is a non-repeatable event.... The righteousness which

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., IV.14.7; p. 1282.
\textsuperscript{26} In Confessions et catechismes de la foi reformee. ed. 0. Fatio (Geneve 1986), pp. 126f. See also Calvin's Catechism (1545), ibid., p. 96, or the Heidelberg Catechism, ibid., p. 156.
\textsuperscript{28} Text in Wachsende Kirchengemeinschaft: Gespräche und Vereinbarungen zwischen evangelischen Kirchenm Europa, edited by C. Nussberger (Bern, 1992), pp. 178f.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 195.
\textsuperscript{30} France: "Lyons Theses," in Accords et dialogues oecumeniques (op cit), part 2, pp. 170f; Germany (Westphalia), in Auf dem Weg I: Lutherisch-reformierte Kirchengemeinschaft (Zurich 1967), pp. 81f.
our Savior has won on the cross is reckoned to us and so our sins are forgiven. We are now liberated from the domination of all alien powers and free for walking in newness of life.\textsuperscript{32} The concept promissio helped to bridge the divide between a causative and a cognitive understanding of baptism: "Through the preached Word and the water-bath connected to it, God pledges to those baptized that they will be children of God and in baptism he grants such. In faith we are certain that what God promises, God does in the power of the Holy Spirit, prayed for by us and promised by God.... The special feature of baptism is that here, through a Word clothed in an action and in a unique, unrepeatable, and irrevocable way, new life is given to the individual and sealed. Christ is himself the agent in baptism.

Therefore, it cannot be understood as an event separated from the acting Christ and guaranteed through the mere performance of a ritual or through the power of human faith. Baptism thus cannot be understood only as a symbolic act separated from the promise of God and representing a mere illustration of the event of salvation.\textsuperscript{33}

In the conclusion, various themes were emphasized: the necessity of faith as answer to baptism; incorporation through baptism into the church, the body of Christ; the eschatological orientation and ethical consequences of baptism.\textsuperscript{34}

The consensus reached at Arnoldshain is of the highest significance for the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches of Europe. The Leuenberg Agreement of 1972 could simply adopt these results without further dialogue: "In preaching, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ is present through the Holy Spirit. Justification in Christ is thus imparted to men, and in this way the Lord gathers his people.... Baptism is administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit with water. In baptism, Jesus Christ irrevocably receives man, fallen prey to sin and death, into his fellowship of salvation so that he may become a new creature. In the power of his Holy Spirit, he calls him into his community and to a new life of faith, to daily repentance, and to discipleship."\textsuperscript{35} After the ratification of this agreement by the synods of the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches in Europe, the theme of baptism was taken up in further dialogues. The results of the Arnoldshain discussions have been repeatedly affirmed.\textsuperscript{36}

The international Lutheran-Reformed dialogue also was satisfied simply to repeat the statements of the Leuenberg Agreement.\textsuperscript{37}

2.2. The Dialogues involving Baptist Churches

After these Lutheran-Reformed dialogues, we need to look at the dialogues

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., Alf (II 1+2).
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., A2 (III, 1-3).
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., A3f (IV, 1-3).
\textsuperscript{36} For example, in the document "Lehre und Praxis der Taufe," approved by the Assembly of the signatory churches of the Leuenberg Agreement in Vienna, 1994. In Wachsende Gemeinschaft in Zeugnis und Dienst (op cit), pp. 63-72.
\textsuperscript{37} Lutheran-Reformed Joint Commission, Toward Church Fellowship (Geneva: Lutheran world Federation, 1989), para. 59, p. 22. In this context it is important to note that the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue in the US did not address the theme of baptism (An Invitation to Action, op cit).
involving churches of a baptist character. These churches do not directly go back to the sixteenth century, but nevertheless belong to the Reformation tradition. In this category belong above all the international dialogues between Pentecostal churches and the Roman Catholic Church (P-RC I, P-RC II, P-RC III), between Baptist and Reformed (B-R), between Baptist and Lutheran (B-L), between Baptist and Roman Catholic (B-RC), and dialogue of the Disciples of Christ with the Catholics (D-RC) and with the Reformed (D-R).

A chronological rather than confessional ordering recommends itself for an analysis of these results. It is interesting to note that the dialogues which occurred during the run-up to the Lima statement exhibit a different fundamental outlook than those which took place after Lima. The one exception is the 1987 dialogue of the Disciples with the Reformed, which clearly wished to remain on the line of the Lima text and is to be placed with the first group.

1. The first series of dialogues, those which occurred prior to the Lima statement, are oriented toward consensus and are concerned to demonstrate convergences.

Agreement exists that baptism is an incorporation into the Body of Christ, the church (P-RC 1,19; D-RC 23; B-R 15). The foundation of every Christian baptism is the baptism of Christ in the Jordan and the practice spoken of by the Scriptures (D-RC 26). Baptism is carried out in the name of the triune God (D-RC 28). It is not only water baptism, but is always connected to baptism in the Holy Spirit (P-RC 1,11-15). It places the baptizand into a new relation to God and to other believers (B-R 16) and has ethical consequences (D-R 23).

Even when one turns to the traditional controversial questions, one still finds agreement.

Baptism must not be understood magically (P-RC 1,22), but must be connected to faith (P-RC 1,21-25; D-RC 31; B-R 9, D-R 23). It is not clarified, however, whether baptism is simply the confirmation of faith or it mediates salvation to the believer. It is also not clarified whether this faith perhaps is, as with Luther, a fides aliena. What exists are simply convergences that faith is necessary and that grace has the priority since the grace of God always comes before human faith (P-RC 1,23; D-RC 38). This prevenient grace, however, is not explicitly connected to baptism. Throughout these dialogues, it can be understood as the grace out of which the faith arises which baptism presupposes. Only the Baptist-Reformed dialogue really addresses the question whether baptism is to be understood as an action of God or a human action. This alternative is rejected. Human and divine action occur here always together, so that "baptism is a powerful sign and effective means of grace" (B-R 14,21). Such a statement is, taken in itself, real progress. It must, however, be read in the general context of the document, which limits its significance. The Baptists add that grace is given in the gospel of the cross and resurrection and that baptism is a means of grace only insofar as the faithful there express their "appropriation of God’s gift through faith" (B-R 9).

39 GA. 131-151.
42 GA. 153-166.
All these traditions finally agree that any rebaptism is to be rejected (P-RC 1,27; D-RC 30; D-R 27). This rejection of rebaptism, however, is only relative, since the churches which reject infant baptism emphasize that infant baptism is no baptism and thus the baptism of an adult already baptized as an infant is in their eyes not a rebaptism (P-RC 1,27).

In these dialogues, as similarly in BEM, the points of divergence are seen primarily in open questions of baptismal practice. Two are stressed: the form of the rite of baptism and the age of the baptizand. In relation to the rite, Pentecostals and Disciples require of other traditions that they return to baptism by immersion (P-RC 1,21; D-RC 37). On the age of the baptizand, these churches are of the opinion that all infant baptism is to be excluded since they believe that this practice is in contradiction to the biblical witness (D-RC 33; P-RC 1,27). Only the Baptist-Reformed dialogue saw in this question more than a problem of practice. For the Baptists, infant baptism is unacceptable because it contradicts the necessary temporal sequence of the preaching of the gospel which awakens faith, which then leads to confession, expressed in baptism (B-R 9). This temporal order excludes all infant baptism.

The dialogue between the Pentecostal churches and the Catholic church established the same divergence, but it appears there to be a question of form (P-RC 1,21).

The basic question whether baptism is to be understood as a means of grace or as a confirmation of faith is not really addressed. The possible recognition of a church with a different understanding of baptism and a different baptismal practice could not yet be addressed in this first phase. D-RC 39 envisaged the possibility; B-R 17 excludes it until the dialogue has made greater progress; D-R 24 emphasized the mutual recognition of baptism and the invitation to the Eucharist.

The Italian dialogue among Waldensians, Methodists, and Baptists, which led to an important agreement in 1990, also belongs to this category. The locus of important differences is found only in practice and not in basic questions. It sees a temporal separation of water baptism and Spirit baptism as possible (3.4) and understands water baptism as both a sealing of and an invocation of Spirit baptism. Against this background, a twofold practice is possible, even if the Waldensians and Methodists continue to advocate infant baptism and the Baptists reject such (3.7f). For all the participants, what is decisive is less baptism itself than the value of the fruits of baptism. When these fruits are present then "a mutual recognition" is possible (3.10).

2. The dialogues pursued after "Lima" are more open to expressing differences. A clear hardening of the lines can be observed. The most recent dialogue do not avoid labeling the divergences by name.

The Lutheran-Baptist dialogue completed in 1990 mentions the convergences emphasized by previous dialogues (shared understanding of faith and discipleship and their necessity, B-L 22f). In distinction from BEM, this dialogue differentiates between infant or adult baptism on the one hand and believer baptism on the other (30). Recent developments in Lutheranism have led to an increasing number of adult baptisms, but "the traditional point of disagreement between Lutherans and Baptists still remains" (30). The dialogue "could not bridge the gap" (33). "Lutherans stress that baptism is a form of God's word—a visible word, the expression of

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the priority of divine grace. It is God who through baptism incorporates the person baptized into the kingdom and thus into the community of the church. In baptism, therefore, God gives the gift of salvation, a gracious gift which only faith can receive. Baptism and faith belong together for without faith God's baptismal gift is of no use. But lack of faith cannot nullify God's action; as God's gracious action baptism remains valid even without faith" (39). "Baptists do not recognize a biblical foundation for such an interpretation of baptism as a visible word of prevenient grace. They do not attribute to baptism the place the gospel occupies, the gospel which is proclaimed and testified to. Baptists must regard the Lutheran understanding as altering the character and place of baptism in the biblical order of salvation. Baptism is not the first step. For Baptists, the Lutheran view isolates and overestimates baptism, giving it an independent theological weight and function. They fear this could lead to attributing to baptism the place reserved for Christ and his cross" (40). This difference has consequences also for understanding the person's "free decision" (41ff) and for ecclesiology (50ff), especially the emphasis on the universal church on the one side and on the local community—Congregationalism—on the other. This was already emphasized in the earlier national dialogue in Germany. 45

The Baptist-Roman Catholic dialogue (1984-1988) also stressed the same difference. "Baptists emphasize the importance of an initial experience of personal conversion in which the believer receives the gift of God's saving and assuring grace. Baptism and entrance into the congregation are witnesses of this gift, which expresses itself in a life of faithful discipleship. For Catholics, baptism is the sacrament through which a person is incorporated into Christ and born again in order to take part in the divine life" (B-RC 18). Both emphasize the necessity of faith. Nevertheless, "the heart of the problem which one must address in this connection appears to be the nature of faith and the nature of the sacraments, which most Baptists name 'ordinances'. Thereby a series of questions are raised which Baptists and Catholics must deal with together. Is faith simply the individual's answer to God's gift? Can the faith of the community replace the personal faith of the infant? Can one speak of a community of faith, i.e., of the Body of Christ, as the subject of a common faith in which the individual participates? Are the sacraments external signs of a prior inner commitment? Are they means through which Christ effects his saving and redeeming work? What is meant by the phrase that baptism is 'the sacrament of faith'" (51). These questions stand on the agenda of further dialogue.

In their third dialogue (1989), Pentecostals and Catholics repeat their earlier essential convergences (the unity of baptism and faith, P-RC III,43f), but at the same time emphasize a basic problem: "the meaning of the concepts sacrament and rite" (41). It therein becomes clear that for most Pentecostals baptism is "a visible symbol of rebirth" (47). They "reject the Roman Catholic teaching of baptism as a constitutive mediation of the salvation worked by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ" (51). Catholics understand "conversion as a process of the incorporation of the individual into the church through baptism. Even in infant baptism, a later, personal appropriation or acceptance of one's own baptism is an absolute necessity" (48). For them "baptism is the sacrament of entry into the church, the koinonia of those saved in Christ and taken into his death and resurrection." In this sacrament "faith is given to the child" (61).

Particularly important in this dialogue is the connection between the theology of baptism and ecclesiology. Catholics emphasize that the recognition of Pentecostal baptism is the basis of the ecumenical dialogue. This has as a consequence "a real even if imperfect koinonia." "The unity of baptism constitutes and demands the unity of the baptized" (54).

The Pentecostals, however, do not attribute to baptism such a significance for the nature of the church and its unity. More important is "unity in faith and in the experience through the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" (55). The end result is neither a mutual recognition nor a clear rejection of baptism within the other tradition.

3. THE DIALOGUES WITH THE ORTHODOX

3.1. The Problem

A major concern of the Orthodox is to stress the unity of the sacraments of initiation: baptism, anointing [chrismation], Eucharist. The immersion of the baptizand under the water signifies insertion into Christ's death; coming out of the water signifies rising with Christ. In baptism it is a matter of an ontic unity with Christ through the Holy Spirit. In the accompanying anointing with oil, the Holy Spirit is mediated, in dependence on the Pentecostal event. Baptism and anointing follow one another in a single liturgical celebration and are the basis for membership in the church, the body of Christ. Since this membership is represented and strengthened in the Eucharist, the newly baptized can immediately participate in the Eucharist. The celebration of baptism continues into the celebration of the Eucharist, a practice of the ancient church which in Orthodoxy is still carried out even in the case of infant baptism. In ecumenical dialogues, the Orthodox state their expectation that all churches will return to this practice. "Strictly speaking, the eastern churches require (in dependence on Cyprian of Carthage) a full initiation when heretics or schismatics convert. Even when they show 'leniency' and limit themselves to the administration of a penitential-pneumatic chrismation, the attribution of value to the baptism received prior to conversion is avoided."

Against this background one can understand why some Orthodox churches (e.g., the Greek) baptize all converts, even if they have already been baptized in some other Christian tradition, while others (e.g., the Russian) forgo a new baptism and only anoint, without pronouncing upon the earlier baptism and its schismatic administration.

This Orthodox understanding has been questioned by western theology. Even theologians sympathetic to Orthodoxy (e.g., G. Kretschmar) have questions about this unity of the initiatory sacraments and ask whether "here something is being ascribed to confirmation which in reality belongs to baptism." A

The question repeatedly is asked whether a deep theological difference really

47 G. Kretschmar, "Firmung," in TRE, s.v.
exists between the eastern and western understandings of baptism. Or is it a matter of a different question: the recognition of the western church as a true form of the one church of Christ?

Non-doctrinal factors also play an important role in this dialogue. For example, the open questions between Orthodox and baptists are not first those about baptism but those relating to baptist evangelization and mission in traditionally Orthodox countries.

Against this theological background, besides to the Orthodox participation in BEM only two international dialogues involving the Orthodox have directly addressed the question of baptism: the Old Catholic-Orthodox and the Roman Catholic-Orthodox dialogues. The Anglican-Orthodox dialogue, which has continued already for twenty years, has only one short reference to baptism, which states that "the Church baptizes her members into the death and resurrection of her Lord, bringing them from the state of sin and death into membership of his body and participation in his eternal life."50

For the sake of completeness, reference must be made to the regional dialogues of the Evangelical Church in Germany with the Russian Orthodox Church and with the Romanian Orthodox Church. The former, pursued since 1969/70, has not led to a common declaration. Six series of short convergence theses have been signed only by two theologians from the two traditions. The dialogue with the Romanian church led to a detailed report. The results, however, did not go beyond the convergences formulated in BEM. The temporal unity of baptism, anointing, and Eucharist remains a "difficult unsettled question." A strength of this dialogue is that pastoral and ecclesial questions of baptismal practice are considered in the present social context.

3.2. The Old Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue

This dialogue, already with a long history, completed in 1985 a declaration on baptism. Its content is classic: emphasis on incorporation into the church (12), baptism as necessary to salvation (13), stress on the apostolic practice of a threefold immersion (14f), the necessity of a "personal acceptance of the divine gift in faith, conversion, and works of love" (16).

What is not said in this dialogue is also important. The declaration states that "baptism has as a natural and immediate consequence the possibility and necessity of the baptized partaking in the gift of the Holy spirit poured out at Pentecost and acceding to the sacrament of Eucharist" (2.3). This is confirmed in the immediately following statements on anointing and Eucharist. Nevertheless, the dialogue never speaks of the temporal unity of the three sacraments of initiation. The dialogue emphasizes the spiritual and theological unity of the three actions of the church, but the necessity of a unified celebration is not addressed. The question remains open. The dialogue also states that "in emergency cases" baptism can be administered by a deacon or a

52 Die Taufe als Aufnahme in den neuen Bund und als Benifung zum geistlichen Kampf in der Nachfolge Jesu Christi, edited by K-Schwarz (Hermannsburg, 1995), pp. 191ff (second section of a volume the first section of which is entitled Rechtfertigung und Verherrlichung [Theosis des Menschen durch Jesus Christus]).
53 Ibid., p. 195.
lay person, even if the rule is that a bishop or presbyter administers it (2.4). It is not clear whether this statement is merely descriptive or represents a theological conviction. No theological consequences are drawn from it. In particular, the question of a possible mutual recognition of baptism remains unclarified.

3.3. The Roman Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue

After conversations about church and ministry (Munich 1982), these two traditions in 1984 began a dialogue about sacraments. The theological views of this dialogue offer for the present no totally new insights.

"Faith is a presupposition of baptism and the entire sacramental life which follows it. Indeed, one participates through baptism in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6). Thus begins a process which continues all through Christian existence" (12). This faith is passed on in the sacrament itself through the church to the recipient of baptism (13). The liturgical tradition itself is a passing on of the faith (14). Through the Holy Spirit the Lord "makes his work pass into the Church's celebration. The sacraments of the Church transmit grace, expressing and strengthening faith in Jesus Christ, and are thus witnesses of faith" (17).

It should be added that this understanding of faith does not correspond to that of a baptist tradition. In this dialogue, however, precisely this understanding of faith is the first condition for a true communion among the churches: "the true faith is presupposed for a communion in the sacraments" (21). The basic orientation of this dialogue thus becomes clear: its goal is the declaration of a communion in the sacraments on the basis of an ascertainment of true communion in the faith and so a mutual recognition as church of Jesus Christ. Yet just this important goal, built on a common understanding of baptism and which this dialogue at first systematically pursues and in the end almost reaches, is suddenly interrupted ... by a renewed reflection on baptism (37ff). The spiritual unity of the three sacraments of initiation is emphasized by both Catholic and Orthodox (38). The model of their temporal unity in a single liturgical celebration "remains the ideal for both Churches since it corresponds as exactly as possible to the appropriation of the scriptural and apostolic tradition accomplished by the early Christian churches which lived in full communion with each other" (46). Since in the West this tradition has not been maintained, a consensus does not exist in the understanding of baptism and sacrament. This is not formulated expressis verbis, but it appears that on the basis of this divergence the dialogue broke off at this point (48). In the concluding paragraphs the items of consensus in the understanding of baptism are listed without further elucidation: "1. the necessity of baptism for salvation; 2. the effects of baptism, particularly new life in Christ and liberation from original sin; 3. incorporation into the Church by baptism; 4. the relation of baptism to the mystery of the Trinity; 5. the essential link between baptism and the death and resurrection of the Lord; 6. the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism; 7. the necessity of water which manifests baptism's character as the bath of new birth" (49). "On the other hand, differences concerning baptism exist between the two Churches: 1. the fact that the Catholic Church, while recognizing the primordial importance of baptism by immersion, ordinarily practices baptism by infusion; 2. the fact that in the Catholic Church a deacon can be the ordinary minister of baptism" (50).

The crisis situation that led to this breaking off of the conversation is difficult to interpret. The clear systematic construction building toward a consensus in the understanding of baptism
ends in an attached listing of points of consensus and difference in the understanding of baptism, which does not really belong at this place. Why are precisely the questions which appeared solved in the dialogue with the Old Catholics now again the locus of radical conflict? Why did the later dialogue, begun again after a certain period of time, not take up these questions anew? Much suggests that this listing is a pretext for other problems which suddenly hindered the dialogue.

Here is not the place to speculate on the internal problems of this dialogue. The Benedictine Dom Emmanuel Lanne, who participated in this dialogue, refers to the unspoken questions which stood in the background. In his opinion nothing less was at stake than mutual recognition and sacramental communion. In order to avoid this, the dialogue had to be broken off and the difference in the understanding of baptism played up.54 Whether this assumption is correct is not here to be debated, but such a background would explain the peculiar development of this dialogue. In the end, it was a matter not of the understanding of baptism, but of basic ecclesiological questions which had been settled to the point that sacramental communion became possible. The time for this, however, did not appear ripe.

This dialogue with its peculiar history is additional evidence for the significance of baptism in the ecumenical dialogues. The question of baptism is not as such absolutely central. It is so, however, in its significance for church communion and mutual recognition.