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Introducing **One Baptism:**
Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation
(Faverges II/Revised)

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When, in 1982, the Faith and Order Commission, gathered in Lima, Peru, unanimously adopted the convergence statement on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* [BEM]¹, members were aware of the “remarkable degree of agreement”² already achieved around the issue of baptism. They knew, however, that what had been achieved was a convergence, not a consensus. Fully aware of this, the authors of the *Preface to BEM* looked forward to the consensus yet to be reached. “Full consensus can... be proclaimed” they said, only “after the churches reach the point of living and acting together in unity.”³

The process leading to published responses to BEM revealed⁴ that much work remains to be done toward the realization of the consensus which bilateral and multilateral church dialogues have been seeking to achieve. Yet, there has been a growing awareness of the fact that, because Christians have been incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, not even centuries of division can separate the churches from one another.⁵

Reflecting on the progress of the work toward visible church unity, delegates to the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Canberra, Australia, agreed that “churches have failed to draw the consequences for their life from the degree of communion they have already experienced and the agreements already achieved. They have remained satisfied to co-exist in division.”⁶ Drawing upon BEM, the text entitled **One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition of Christian Initiation**, hereafter referred to as the **One Baptism** text or simply the text, reaffirms the convergence already achieved. It also probes areas where full agreement has not been achieved as a contribution to the process leading to the visible unity of the church.

The Aim of the Text

Regarding baptism as “the event, unique and unrepeatable, by which Christ claims his followers and makes them his own” (§1), the **One Baptism** text issues a compelling invitation

¹ Faith and Order Paper No. 111, Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.

² See the Preface to *BEM*, p. ix.

³ Consensus is understood as “that experience of life and articulation of faith necessary to realize and maintain the Church’s visible unity.”

⁴ See the churches’ responses published in six volumes, *Churches Respond to BEM*, ed. Max Thurian, Faith and Order Papers Nos. 129, 132, 135, 137, 143, 144, WCC, Geneva 1986-1988, as well as *Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry 1982-1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 149, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990.

⁵ See *Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper No. 184, eds. Thomas Best & Dagmar Heller, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999, p.3.

⁶ See the Declaration on *The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling* in *Signs of the Spirit: Official Report of the Seventh Assembly, Canberra*, ed. Michael Kinnamon, Geneva: WCC Publications, and Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 172-174. The Statement on the unity of the Church is reproduced in many places, e.g. *Documentary History of Faith and Order, 1963-1993*, Faith and Order Paper No. 159, ed. Gunther Gassmann, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993, pp. 3-5.

to the churches to consider baptism into Christ as constituting “a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship” (§1). The text calls the churches both to make the mutual recognition of baptism a feature of their life, and to discern and live out the full implications of this recognition.

To this end, the text seeks to:

- clarify what mutual recognition of baptism means,
- identify some of the implications of such mutual recognition, and
- elucidate some issues that prevent mutual recognition.

The hope is that, if it is generally agreed that “all Christians who have received their baptism into the one Church have also received a radical calling from God to communion with all the baptized,” the churches will regard this as an invitation to “renewed efforts toward full ecclesial union, in order that the unity which Christ has forged among all Christians through the waters of baptism may find its realization at his one table” (§85).

The Nature of Mutual Recognition of Baptism

The ***One Baptism*** text probes the nature of mutual recognition of baptism, conceiving this in terms of churches acknowledging “an already-existing quality, identity or status that it has discerned in another” (§11). Acknowledging that mutual recognition is variously understood, the ***One Baptism*** text identifies three essential dimensions of mutual recognition, namely:

- Christians recognizing one another as Christians,

- churches recognizing the baptism of persons seeking entrance into their community and from another ecclesial community in which they have already been baptized, and

- churches recognizing one another as churches.

For such mutual recognition to take place, the ***One Baptism*** text calls for discernment at various levels, viz. in relation to the baptismal rite, the larger pattern of Christian initiation, and the entire life and witness of the particular Christian community (§14).

In offering an understanding of mutual recognition, the text urges the need for agreement on this fundamental conception. It also points to the urgency of the need for the churches’ convergence on ecclesiology, which is a *sine qua non* of full mutual recognition.

The Symbolic Dimension of Baptism

If, in some discussions of sacrament and sacramentality in relation to baptism, there is a serious polarization in the understanding of sacrament and ordinance, the text offers a possible way of dealing with the symbolic dimension of sacrament in general, and of baptism in particular. It presents a possible way of reconciling the various interpretations of the significance of baptism.

By focusing on the liturgical expressions of the symbolic meaning of baptism, the ***One Baptism*** text endeavours to “elucidate the many theological realities associated with baptism” (§24). It affirms both the expressive and instrumental understandings of sacraments to point both to the divine realities which they express and the way in which God uses them in bringing about a new reality. Conceived in this way, the ***One Baptism*** text suggests that these two approaches to understanding the sacraments may be regarded both as “essential for understanding the full meaning of baptism” and as representing “different starting points in considering the interdependence of faith as an ongoing process and a sacramental event” (§30).

Baptism and the Baptismal Life

In an effort to aid the mutual recognition of baptism, the ***One Baptism*** text sets the liturgical water rite of baptism within the wider context of Christian initiation and of the whole process of

growth into Christ. The hope is that, conceived within the larger process of formation in faith, the event of baptism and continuing formation in faith, the churches will be helped to discern a “convergence in their baptismal intentions, if not always in their practice”(§7).

Acknowledging that many churches regard the baptismal event as “a one-time, unrepeatable liturgical rite in which God acts and the Christian faith is confirmed”, the text notes that this “one- time ritual, this single event reflects and recapitulates the catechumenate, and the life-long processes of nurture and growth, that lead to and follow it.” The **One Baptism** text identifies as the three elements constituting “the pattern of baptismal life” “formation in faith, baptism in water, and participation in the life of the community, fostering a life-long process of growth into Christ” (§33).

The **One Baptism** text urges that the three aspects – formation in faith, water rite and participation in community – “may be discerned in some form in the baptismal practices of the churches, whatever the age of the person being baptized.” These aspects are also reflected “in the wider context of events which surround the act of baptism, and which mark the beginnings or early stages of the Christian life.” Furthermore, the three aspects are “reflected in life-long growth in Christ into which the baptized enters ever more deeply”, such that “the way of discipleship is marked daily by the baptismal experience of dying to self and sin and rising with Christ to forgiveness and new life” (§35).

The text asks whether “the churches can find some way forward in the mutual recognition of various traditions” by considering “the interplay of the three aspects of the pattern of baptismal life, and in the manner in which they are enacted in their lives” (§37).

Baptism and Church

Describing the church as “the *koinonia* of those who have come into faith – who have been baptized and who are witnesses to the saving grace of God”,⁷ the text clearly affirms that it is “God, acting through the Holy Spirit, [who] establishes a lasting relationship with each and every believer, drawing the baptized into a firm relationship of love with the other members of the body of Christ” (§42; Cf. §48-50). However, as the text shows, because baptism occurs within particular communities with a confessional identity, “it is the faith of the church as expressed in that community in which a person is baptized that determines - either intentionally or as a matter of fact - the confessional identity of the baptized” (§52). Because these communities are not in full communion with one another, a paradox results, namely, that “while baptism brings Christians into the unity of Christ’s Body, which is One, at the same time, the location of baptism within a specific confessional community means that the baptized experience disunity with many other Christians” (§53).⁸ This is a challenge needing to be recognized and addressed. It points to the need for the churches to address ecclesiological concerns being addressed by Faith and Order.⁹

In the context of an understanding of baptism as an act of entry into the church (§III B), the text considers the issue of the admission of the baptized to the eucharist. According to the **One Baptism** text, both baptism and eucharist “realize the same mystery by the action of the Holy Spirit, namely, the anamnesis ... of the paschal events of Christ’s dying and rising in expectation of their fulfillment in the coming of the kingdom” and that they lead to incorporation into Christ and the church (§49). Yet, not all the baptized are admitted to the Lord’s Table. On account of this, churches are called upon to probe how they maintain “the intimate and intrinsic link” between baptism and eucharist (§54). Besides, the existence of different understandings of confirmation calls for urgently needed dialogue among some confessions concerning “the place and role of confirmation within the practice of Christian

⁷ Cf. *The Nature and Purpose of the Church: A stage on the way to a common statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 181, WCC/Faith & Order, 1998, § 9-13 & 48-60.

⁸ Perhaps more churches need to mine the treasures in the Apostolic Faith Study. See *Confessing the One Faith: An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is Confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)* Faith and Order Paper No. 153, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1991.

⁹ The ecclesiology study has the aim of serving the churches’ goal of working toward such convergence on the nature and purpose of the Church as will enable them to recognize church in themselves and in each other.

initiation" (§40c). Another matter for discussion is that, even where there is mutual recognition of baptism, some churches do not admit to Holy Communion members baptized in other confessional groupings. This is the result of the inseparable link between ecclesiology, baptism, eucharist and ministry.

The text offers a useful discussion of the complex relation of baptism and church membership. Many may want to consider the suggestion that the notion of *Christian initiation* – understood as “the process of conversion leading to conformity to Christ and participation in Christ-existing as community” is a richer concept than that of church membership (§56-68).
Baptism and Faith

Acknowledging the Triune God as the source of faith (§60), the text elucidates the relation of the faith of the believer both to God’s initiative and to the faith of the community. It identifies the ways in which the convergence between the *I believe* and the *We believe* gained expression in the church throughout the ages (§63). The journey of the baptized is to be marked by growth in faith, a process supported by Christian family life and by intentional nurture in local churches. It envisages the full involvement of all in the worship life of the congregation (§73).

Baptism into trinitarian faith is said to create a “living unity.” The visible expression of this unity, which is said to transcend geographical, social, ethnic and temporal boundaries, and which encompasses “the whole body of Christ in all places and all times” (§63) is the goal of ecumenical endeavours.¹⁰

Steps Toward Mutual Recognition

The **One Baptism** text points to the extent to which the mutual recognition of baptism as has provided a basis for the increasing common witness, worship and service (§74). It offers in Section V, a summary of specific issues that the churches are invited to address in order to further this mutual recognition in service of the overall goal of the “search for visible unity.” The text does not pretend to address all of the issues related to the mutual recognition of baptism, not least the relation of baptism and salvation and the relation of mutual recognition of baptism and “more effective sharing in the mission of God” (§84).¹¹ However, it is a resource that the Spirit may use to advance the progress toward a fundamental goal of the ecumenical movement. By engaging with the practical suggestions affirmed in the appendix to the text, churches may be led to move from the biblical affirmation of one baptism to the actual mutual recognition of baptism and its implications.

FOOTNOTES

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² See the Preface to *BEM*, p. ix.

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¹⁰ See, for example, “Ethnic Identity, National Identity and the Search for the Unity of the Church” in *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission*, 9-16 January 2002, Gazzada, Italy, Faith and Order Paper No. 191, Geneva: WCC, 2002, pp. 64-69. See also the work being undertaken in relation to Theological Anthropology in *ibid.*, pp. 69-71.

¹¹ Further consideration may be given to the relation of baptism and ethics. A promising start to the consideration of this matter in a multi-lateral ecumenical context was made at Faverges in 1997. See Vigen Guroian, “Baptism and Ethics: The Implications of Baptism for Christian Ethics” in *Becoming a Christian*, pp. 65-73. See also the Report of the Consultation in *ibid.* § 88-95.

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