

Baptized into Christ

Baptized into Christ

*A Guide to the Ecumenical Discussion
on Baptism*

DAGMAR HELLER



World Council
of Churches
Publications

BAPTIZED INTO CHRIST

A Guide to the Ecumenical Discussion on Baptism

Dagmar Heller

Copyright © 2012 WCC Publications. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in notices or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: publications@wcc-coe.org.

WCC Publications is the book publishing programme of the World Council of Churches. Founded in 1948, the WCC promotes Christian unity in faith, witness and service for a just and peaceful world. A global fellowship, the WCC brings together more than 349 Protestant, Orthodox, Anglican and other churches representing more than 560 million Christians in 110 countries and works cooperatively with the Roman Catholic Church.

Opinions expressed in WCC Publications are those of the authors.

Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, © copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Used by permission.

Cover design: 4 Seasons Book Design/Michelle Cook

Cover image: Mosaic of Christ's baptism in the Jordan, a copy of an 11th-century original from Daphne, Greece, offered by the Ecumenical Patriarchate to the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre, Geneva.

Book design and typesetting: 4 Seasons Book Design/Michelle Cook

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1577-1

World Council of Churches
150 route de Ferney, P.O. Box 2100
1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland
<http://publications.oikoumene.org>

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
Chapter 1. Baptism in the World Church: The Different Confessional Positions	1
Churches Practicing Infant Baptism (Paedobaptist Churches)	1
Churches Practicing Believers' Baptism (Credobaptist Churches)	27
Consequences for the Mutual Recognition of Baptism	41
Chapter 2. Baptism in Historical Perspective	43
Baptism in the New Testament	43
Baptism in the Early Church	47
Baptism in the Middle Ages	83
Baptism in the Time of Reformation	95
Developments after the Reformation until Today	97
Chapter 3. Baptism in Ecumenical Discussion	103
Baptism in Multilateral Discussions	103
Baptism in International Bilateral Dialogues	133

Chapter 4. Baptism in Theological Controversy	161
The Controversy on Infant Baptism	162
The Controversy between Orthodox and Non-Orthodox Churches	173
The Controversy on Spirit Baptism	182
The Controversy over the Baptismal Formula	187
The Controversy on Immersion, Affusion (Pouring) or Sprinkling	190
A New Controversy: Inculturation of Baptism	192
A New Challenge: Baptism as Entry into the Local Congregation	195
 Chapter 5. Toward Mutual Recognition of Baptism	 197
Multilateral Developments	199
Bilateral Developments	219
Perspectives for Further Work	235
 <i>Bibliography</i>	 243
<i>Glossary</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	267

Preface

THIS BOOK RESULTS FROM MY TEACHING IN ECUMENICAL theology at the Ecumenical Institute at Château de Bossey, Switzerland, during the winters of 2007-2011. Every year students of all the different confessional traditions and from all the continents come to Bossey for the sake of deepening their knowledge and discussing with each other how their churches could achieve unity. Most of them hear for the first time and meet for the first time people of certain traditions that do not exist in their countries. Thus, all of them are challenged to present and explain their own tradition to people who do not know anything—or who know very little—about this tradition.

Given the main task of introducing students to the ecumenical discussions on theological issues, the challenges for the teacher in this setting are manifold. It has become clear to me that in order for students to understand ecumenical discussions, it is first necessary that they understand the positions of the different confessional traditions. Thus the challenge is to present all the different traditions in such a way that representatives of those traditions sitting in the class would find appropriate. At the same time, the different confessional positions should be made understandable to people from different confessional and cultural backgrounds. The second challenge stems from the fact that ecumenical discussions have become an impenetrable forest through which students need guidance.

For the subject of baptism I was greatly helped by a German book written by the Baptist scholar Erich Geldbach,¹ in which the author gives an overview of the different confessional traditions and of the ecumenical dialogues, multilateral and bilateral. Because I could not find anything similar in English, and because time had progressed and further ecumenical work had been done since the publication of Geldbach's book in 1996, I felt I had to write a book myself.

The result is a book that is meant to provide an overview of the confessional traditions as they understand baptism, of the history which led to the ecumenical situation as it is today in regard to baptism, and of solutions proposed and agreements made. This book is written as a guide for students and other interested readers for their own reflection and for further research. For this purpose I have tried to quote as much as possible from primary sources.

I am aware of the fact that this book has its limitations. First of all, I tried to write from an overall perspective, but I cannot deny that my background is the Lutheran tradition. And this cannot be erased, although I tried to do justice to other traditions by giving the manuscript to colleagues from other confessional backgrounds for their feedback.

Another limitation is that I could only use literature which is available in English, German, French and to a small extent Russian, as these are the languages I can handle. This was especially regrettable for the first chapter, in which it would have been helpful to have access to some texts and literature in other languages. For example I could not find a lot of English sources for the Coptic understanding and practice of baptism. The same is the case for the African Independent Churches. Also, for the Orthodox positions, some Greek and Russian literature would have been helpful. In particular, especially the historical overview is limited to existing translations of the primary sources and does not discuss literary critical issues.

1. Erich Geldbach, *Taufe*, Ökumenische Studienhefte 5, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1996.

Nevertheless, I hope that this book will be a helpful tool for the study of ecumenical theology.

I would like to express my deep thanks especially to Thomas F. Best and Geoffrey Wainwright, who helped me with the English language, which is not my mother tongue. I also would like to thank all the students who have sat in my seminars during the last five years. Among those special thanks go to Dilene Fernandes (Brazil), Andrej Zuckowicki (Poland), Renata Nehring (Poland), Eva Guldanova (Slovakia), and Bruce Myers (Canada), who helped me to find some of the agreements between local churches on mutual recognition of baptism. I am also grateful for the help of Martin Junge (Chile-Switzerland), Christopher Dorn (USA) and Leo Koffeman (Netherlands). Thanks go as well to John Gatu (Kenya), Alan Varghese (India) and Christos-Filotheos Kolliopoulos (Greece), who looked at parts of the manuscript and made helpful comments and corrections. Jean-Daniel Plüss, a Pentecostal from Switzerland, also offered important comments on parts of the text, for which I am grateful. The same is true for Artem Borzov (Russia), Nang Kim Mang and Ram Din Puia (both Myanmar), who helped with the index. I am also grateful to the World Council of Churches for granting me a three-month study leave in 2011 in order to do research for this book. Finally, I would like to express my thanks to the publisher of WCC, Michael West, for his friendly and helpful collaboration.

Bossey, Palm Sunday 2012

Dagmar Heller

Introduction

“**T**HROUGH BAPTISM, CHRISTIANS ARE BROUGHT INTO UNION WITH Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity.”¹ This bold statement was made about 30 years ago by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.² It includes two major aspects: that there is one, common baptism, and that this baptism is a uniting bond for Christians. The same conviction is shared by many others, from whom I quote just one statement, made by Roman Catholic Cardinal Walter Kasper: “Through our common baptism a fundamental unity is already given. The reflection on the common baptism and on the baptismal confession which we repeat at every Easter Vigil is the starting point and reference point of the ecumenism of life.”³

During the last decades, however, there has been more and more a question whether this conviction reflects common ground for ecumenical conversations. Already the official responses of

1. World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1982, “Baptism,” par. 6.

2. Ibid.

3. Walter Kasper, “Ökumene des Lebens,” Vortrag auf dem Katholikentag 2004 in Ulm, published at www.foerdereverein-unita-dei-christiani.com/deutsch/index.htm, translation into English by the author.

the churches to the 1982 WCC document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* showed that within some churches there are reservations about such statements. These reservations are related to the two different themes mentioned above: Orthodox churches question the emphasis on baptism as bond of unity because in their understanding unity cannot be based just on baptism. On the other hand, Baptists and other churches which baptize only persons who can speak for themselves question the idea that there is one common baptism because they do not see a possibility of recognizing infant baptism.⁴

Nevertheless, all churches know the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, which say: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6). The reality in worldwide Christianity reveals a different picture—and the churches are aware of the discrepancy between the biblical statement and their reality. As the Roman Catholic scholar Susan Wood puts it:

*We do not believe the same things about baptism. We have different notions of what constitutes a sacrament. We disagree on the relationship between the sign of baptism and the reality it signifies. We disagree about the effect of baptism. We engage in sometimes heated arguments about who can be baptized, some churches baptizing infants while others reserving baptism to adults. We do not necessarily baptize in the same way, some churches using *immersion while others sprinkle or pour water over the person being baptized. The very formula of baptism has become contested ... We have different practices of admitting the baptized to the Eucharistic table, thereby raising the question about the interrelationship of the three sacraments of initiation and the relationship between baptism and church membership.*⁵

4. More details in Dagmar Heller, “Baptism into the Body of Christ : An Exploration of Its Ecumenical Implications,” 2010, <http://doc.rero.ch/record/20538?ln=fr>.

5. Susan K. Wood, *One Baptism: Ecumenical Dimensions of the Doctrine of Baptism*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2009, 21ff.

The fact that these positions differ has a concrete and often painful effect when *converts (words with * are explained in the glossary) who have been baptized in their original church are baptized by the church they enter. Against the background that, according to common Christian tradition, baptism cannot be repeated, such baptism is often understood as re-baptism by the church which the convert has left, and thus as a manifestation that his or her first baptism is not recognized as such by the newly entered church.

Mutual recognition of baptism, therefore, is one of the most important goals for the ecumenical dialogue.

In the framework of the complex network of multilateral and bilateral dialogues on international, regional and local levels—mainly between the traditional churches which have engaged in the ecumenical movement during the last 60 years—various proposals have been made which would enable churches to mutually recognize their baptism. In some cases agreements for mutual recognition have been signed, in other cases this has not (yet) been possible. During the last 20 years new churches, such as Pentecostal churches and African Independent churches, have also begun to enter ecumenical discussions and have brought new perspectives and positions that need to be taken into consideration much more than has been the case until now.

All the material existing in this regard shows that the issue of baptism is more complicated than originally envisaged by many pioneers of the ecumenical movement. For the younger generation it becomes more and more difficult to keep an overview of the different discussions, the attempts at solutions and the agreements made. All these can only be understood if the problems and the issues involved are clear and their historical and systematic aspects known.

This book, therefore, offers an overview of baptism as an ecumenical issue. It begins with the general ecumenical situation concerning baptism and especially the attitude of the different confessional traditions toward mutual recognition. In order to understand the different positions, it is necessary to have a look into the history of baptism and its theological conception, as far as we know

about it from historical documents; I undertake this in Chapter Two. Chapter Three introduces the reader to the ecumenical conversations on baptism in the multilateral and bilateral dialogues on the international level. A systematic view in Chapter Four offers some more insights into the nature of the ecumenical theological discussions and the doctrinal difficulties preventing mutual recognition. The final chapter presents the most recent work towards mutual recognition of baptism on the multilateral level as well as in bilateral discussions and agreements on national levels.