

Baptism

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Baptism is a ritual practiced in all Christian churches that combines in itself various theological interpretive dimensions. The denominational traditions emphasize these dimensions differently. Diverging practices with regard to infant baptism in particular – but not only this – create difficulties for a mutual recognition of baptism. Ecumenical dialogues have so far made numerous suggestions for how to solve these difficulties.

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Links to other media and further information regarding this topic can be found in the German version of this article.

Introduction

With very few exceptions, baptism is a ritual that is practiced in all Christian churches and communities. It consists of two primary components, namely, immersion in, or sprinkling with, water and a baptismal formula. As evidenced by the New Testament, a convert was either baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:16) or “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:18–20), with the latter formula becoming the most accepted version.

Baptism was originally performed on adults, but it seems that children were also baptized from quite early on. Infant baptism eventually prevailed as the dominant practice when Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman empire, although adult baptism was not subsequently abolished. With the emergence of the anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century along with its rejection of infant baptism, two baptismal practices now stand opposed to each within Christianity as a whole. The reasons for this division are divergent understandings of the theological significance of baptism and different emphases on certain aspects of its significance.

1. The Meaning of Baptism

As the New Testament and the history of baptism suggest, the theological meaning of this ritual has multiple dimensions that the various churches and denominational traditions emphasize in different ways.

1.1. Sacrament or Ordinance

The churches that practice infant baptism understand baptism – along with other ritual practices – as a “Sacrament” (or “mysteries” in the Orthodox churches). Those churches that do not practice infant baptism mostly define baptism using the concept of “Ordinance” (*Anordnung*). This terminological divergence indicates a fundamental difference in how baptism is understood: As a “sacrament,” baptism essentially has one effect: it conveys God’s grace. The term “ordinance,” on the other hand, emphasizes that baptism is practiced because Jesus instructed it.^[1]

1.2. Baptism as Initiation

The majority of churches view baptism as an event that marks the beginning of a life-long process. This explains why many traditions define it using the superordinate concept of “initiation.” In doing so, they emphasize that, on the one hand and in accordance with church law, baptism establishes membership in the Church – especially in those churches that practice infant baptism. On the other hand and when viewed spiritually, baptism simultaneously incorporates someone into the Church as the body of Christ. As practiced since the early Church, three sacraments belong to this process of initiation – namely, baptism, confirmation, and eucharist. The Orthodox churches have preserved this format most clearly. Confirmation (anointing with Chrism or Myron) follows directly after water baptism, and first communion occurs on the following Sunday at the latest. In terms of their theological meaning, these three sacraments also belong together in the Roman-Catholic church where they form the sacraments of initiation.^[2] However, they are separated in time differently:^[3] water-baptism is usually administered to infants, first communion occurs around roughly the age of nine after a time of preparation, while confirmation does not take place until adolescence. With the Reformation, confirmation ceased to be a sacrament but was understood as a non-sacramental blessing that confirms baptism. Thus, baptism became the sole sacrament within the post-reformation churches that incorporates someone into the body of Christ.

1.3. Baptism as Divine and as Human Act

Baptism is simultaneously an act of God upon humans and a human act.

Since the Church is understood as the body of Christ, baptism is the beginning, or the ratification of, someone’s belonging to Christ. For the person being baptized, this incorporation into the body of Christ has a passive and an

active component: he/she receives baptism and is thereby passively incorporated into the body of Christ. At the same time, baptism requires an active decision to undergo baptism. On the passive side belongs the cleansing from, or the forgiveness of, sins, while on the active side belongs the life following baptism that is lived on the basis of Christian values. The passive side includes the reception of the Holy Spirit, the active side the renunciation of the devil. Likewise, the gift of faith is a passive component, while the confession of faith is an active one.

1.4. Baptism as Life-Long Process

As the incorporation into the body of Christ, baptism is simultaneously an incorporation into the visible community of the Church and “instructs [...] in the probation of being a Christian in everyday life situations.”^[4] This includes a life-long growth into the fundamentals of the faith as well as a life-long responsibility to act upon the basis of faith. Martin Luther ^{GND} designated baptism the beginning of a daily death and resurrection that only ends with our earthly death.^[5] The Christian tradition has always been aware that baptism carries fundamental significance for Christian ethics, something emphasized anew by Karl Barth ^{GND}.^[6]

1.5. The Theological Significance of Baptism in the Different Denominations

Largely independent of the point in a person's biographical development at which he/she is baptized, the various denominations place different emphases upon the fundamental theological meanings of baptism as these are alluded to in the New Testament.

The *Orthodox* tradition stresses the understanding of baptism as a death and resurrection with Christ^[7] and therefore the dimension of being born anew. As a transition into a new life, baptism is the incorporation into the people of God: “[b]aptism [...] is both the gift of new life in the Spirit, the source of Trinitarian grace, and the entryway into the Church, where the sacrament of initiation is fulfilled.”^[8] From the Orthodox tradition's point of view, baptism is necessary for salvation. This tradition also emphasizes the “life in Christ,” that is, the growth in faith and proof of faith. Baptism is the beginning of a process in which the image of God (cf. Gen 1 and art. Imago Dei) is renewed (*Theosis*) in the baptized person.

Roman Catholic theology understands baptism as “the gateway to life in the Spirit” and, because of this, as “the basis of the entire Christian life.”^[9] It washes away original sin and is therefore necessary for salvation. The baptized person becomes a “new creature,” an “adopted son of God,” who has now become a “partaker in the divine nature.” He or she is now a “member” of Christ and a “temple of the Holy Spirit.”^[10] More recent Catholic theology places emphasis above all else upon incorporation into the body of Christ.^[11] According to the Second Vatican Council, baptism is also a participation in the priesthood of Christ and, accordingly, a prerequisite for participating in the mission of the Church.^[12] The primary effects of baptism are the cleansing of sins and a new birth in the Holy Spirit.^[13]

Generally speaking, the *Old-Catholic church* (*altkatholische Kirche*) follows the Roman Catholic understanding of baptism.

The *Lutheran church* emphasizes three meanings of baptism: baptism as (1) an “assignment to the crucified and risen Christ,” (2) a “surrender into Jesus' death and resurrection,” and (3) a “gift of new life and an admonition to walk in newness of life.”^[14] Baptism is someone's admission into the Church and incorporation into the people of God. The Lutheran church also understands baptism as necessary for the attainment of salvation.^[15] It is the start of a lifelong process that, if not embraced with faith, remains incomplete.^[16]

The theology of the *Reformed church* understands baptism as analogous to circumcision in the Old Testament – that is, as a sign of admission to the people of God. It is an external sign for the cleansing from sins^[17] as well as an objective sign of membership in the Christian community that finds its fulfilment in God's blessings and promises.^[18]

Baptism confirms an inner event, and it serves above all to remind and strengthen a person's faith in God's promise to wash away sins.

The *Anglican* tradition conceives of baptism primarily as a sign of new-birth through which the baptized person becomes a member of the Church and through which the promises of the forgiveness of sins and of becoming a child of God are visibly signified and ratified.^[19]

In the *Methodist* church we find a lack of clarity concerning what exactly baptism actually "does" and how to understand its relation to the Christian life as a whole.^[20] According to John Wesley ^{GND}, baptism is not simply a rebirth but also a call to repentance and sanctification.^[21] Moreover, Wesley does not view it as necessary for salvation.

The *Mennonite* understanding of baptism focuses on the admission into the Church. As a result, the emphasis lies on baptism "as a visible testimony to faith and as a sign of obedience."^[22] Baptism is a public manifestation of the response to the faith that emerges in response to teaching (catechesis). According to Menno Simons ^{GND}, baptism follows rebirth. In other words, rebirth occurs by means of faith in the Word of God, not baptism.^[23]

With the *Baptists*, one finds a twofold understanding of baptism. The first follows a more "sacramental" view of baptism as a rite through which God adopts believers as his children. The second places emphasis on baptism as a "witness to what the grace of God *has* already achieved in the experience of those baptized."^[24] Only faith – not baptism – is considered necessary for salvation.

In the majority of *Pentecostal* churches, water baptism is seen as a public testimony of identification with Christ, his universal Church, and a local assembly of believers.^[25] These churches also distinguish between baptism in the Spirit and water baptism. What is more important in the classical Pentecostal movement is the gift of the Spirit in the rebirth of a person. Only after someone is able to confess his or her faith is water baptism celebrated as a rite in which public witness is given to the grace of God.^[26] However, there are Pentecostal churches that practice infant baptism.^[27] Water baptism in Pentecostal churches is carried out in a congregational context, while the baptism in the Spirit is a personal experience that, according to most Pentecostal churches, occurs at some point in the life-long process of sanctification. In many Pentecostal churches, water baptism is required before partaking in communion, but it is not central for them.

2. Baptism in the Ecumenical Dialogue

The ecumenical debate occurs in different formats: multilateral talks between several different church traditions or bilateral dialogues between two partners. Both formats exist on the local, regional or international levels. Although baptism is often identified as the "sacrament of unity," it nonetheless remains a dividing factor among the churches with regard to both how it is understood and how it is practiced.

2.1. The Theological Obstacles to a Reciprocal Recognition of Baptism

The fundamental question in the ecumenical discussion is that concerning the reciprocal recognition of baptism between the churches. Practically speaking, this issue becomes particularly pressing when a believer converts from one confession to another. This is especially the case when people who were baptized in their original church are baptized (once again) upon joining a new church. This is interpreted as a non-recognition of the baptism administered in the original church.

There are different reasons for not recognizing a baptism carried out in another church:

- a. The most common case is the rejection of infant baptism. According to those churches that reject infant baptism (*credobaptist* churches), the baptismal candidate's personal confession of faith belongs constitutively

to baptism. Baptism carried out on an infant is therefore not a baptism according to those churches.

Those churches that practice infant baptism (*paedobaptist* churches) include the Orthodox churches (Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox), the Catholic Church, the Lutheran churches, the Reformed churches, the Old-Catholic churches, the Anglican churches, and the Methodist churches. Infant baptism is rejected by the Mennonite churches, the Baptist churches, as well as by the majority of Pentecostal churches and many Charismatic, neo-Pentecostal, and independent churches.

The fundamental differences that divide both groups can be summarized as follows: in the past and still today, a central argument brought against infant baptism is that the New Testament does not clearly verify it. The relevant texts in the New Testament describe only the baptism of adults. In response, defenders of infant baptism refer to biblical passages such as Acts 16:14ff. or Acts 16:25–34, where baptism is administered to an entire “household” or family that must have also included children. As indirect legitimization of infant baptism, defenders also appeal to passages such as Mt 19:14 where Jesus says “Let the children come to me.” In addition, it is sometimes pointed out that the New Testament accounts, which deal with the conversion of the first Christians, cannot be applied to later circumstances, i.e., to a state or folk church (*Volkskirche*). Operating behind these different arguments are conflicting interpretations of the Holy Scripture.

Another biblically-based argument against infant baptism appeals to those passages in the New Testament (e.g., Mk 16:16, Acts 10:44–48, Acts 16:14ff., Acts 16:31ff.) where baptism requires repentance and faith as a response to hearing the Gospel.^[28] It follows upon the initiative of the person being baptized. In response and with recourse to the Church Father Augustine ^{GND}, the paedobaptist churches appeal to the “faith of the Church” that can stand “in for the baptized person’s lack of faith.”^[29] Since the faith of the Church carries and guides the individual both during and after baptism,^[30] having faith is not a necessary requirement for an individual to be baptized. It is instead the fruit of an “infused gift of God” given in baptism. A different understanding of faith is operative here.

The primary obstacle that prevents credobaptist churches from recognizing infant baptism is, however, the fact that, in many state or folk churches, raising children in the faith is not taken seriously enough. No demands are made upon the children following baptism with regard to instruction in the faith or to living a Christian way of life.

A final issue at stake in this dispute is the understanding of sin. Traditionally speaking, infant baptism is closely associated with original sin. Consequently, even infants must be baptized in order to be saved from eternal damnation. In opposition to this traditional position, some Baptists, for instance, argue that “all those who fail to attain an age of moral competence are exempted from guilt and consequent damnation that is part of original sin.”^[31] Baptizing such individuals therefore makes no sense.

- b. Even among the paedobaptist churches baptism is not universally reciprocally recognized. For the Orthodox churches, a baptism performed outside of their church is considered invalid. There were and still are different practices that deal with the admission of Christians from other confessions. Within Orthodoxy, the ecclesial status of the post-reformation churches remains unclear still today. Because of this, Lutherans, for instance, who convert to Orthodoxy, are (or were) in some cases baptized at varying times and places, while they are not baptized at all in other cases. Confirmation is, however, carried out in every case. As for Catholics or Anglicans converting to Orthodoxy, usually only a confession of the Orthodox faith is required. If the person is not yet confirmed, then he/or she must be confirmed at a later stage. Converts to Orthodoxy from the newer churches are practically always baptized.^[32]

Operating in the background of these practices is a close connection between baptism and ecclesiology. From

the Orthodox point of view, a baptism is only considered valid when it is carried out within the context of the Church. Since the Orthodox Church understands itself as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church^[33] that was instituted by Jesus Christ and is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, baptisms in other denominations are – strictly speaking – invalid. With that said, a lack of agreement currently prevails in Orthodoxy concerning how to classify the ecclesiological status of other churches. Those churches that recognize episcopal succession and that practice the three sacraments of initiation (as do the Catholic and Anglican churches) tend to be viewed as churches, even if not in the full sense. In addition, Orthodoxy recognizes the possibility of “Oikonomia” – that is, the possibility that exceptions to the rules can be made based upon pastoral considerations.

Additionally, in the twentieth Century

- c. the question concerning the baptismal formula became a point of contention: groups influenced by feminism (especially in the English speaking world) changed the baptismal formula by rejecting the gender-based, personal terms “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” and replacing them with “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” For the same reasons, many groups also began to baptize “in the name of Jesus Christ,” a formula that can be justified biblically. Some churches (e.g., Roman-Catholic, Orthodox) do not, however, recognize these baptisms.

Finally, there is also

- d. the question concerning the elements used in baptism: in areas of the world where water is scarce, people have started to baptize, for example, with sand. Many churches do not recognize, or at least question the validity of, such baptisms.

2.2. The Ecumenical Debate and its Proposed Solutions

In numerous ecumenical documents, baptism into the body of Christ is understood as the most important foundation for unity among Christians. The efforts to form unity on the basis of baptism therefore function as an important foundation for wider debates about Christian unity.

In particular and at the multilateral level, the convergence document “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” also known as the Lima-Document—published by the WCC-Commission for Faith and Order was a crucial instigator for debates about the mutual recognition of baptism. It focuses primarily on the controversy surrounding infant baptism. Based upon the evidence in the New Testament, it characterizes infant and adult baptism as two alternative ways of practicing the *one* baptism.^[34] Both practices are thereby seen as emphasizing different aspects of how faith can be understood – namely, corporate faith on the one hand and personal faith on the other.^[35]

The Lima-Document makes two concrete suggestions: both forms of baptism require a responsible stance toward instruction in the Christian faith. A rediscovery of ongoing instruction in the faith has the potential to facilitate the mutual recognition of baptism. Additionally, the document underscores the suggestion that baptism be understood as a lifelong process.^[36] A personal confession of faith later in life thereby plays an important role for those who are baptized as infants, whereas, in the case of the baptism of adults, a blessing for the newborn should be considered.

The Lima-Document only touches briefly upon the problem of the mutual recognition of baptism between the Orthodox and non-Orthodox churches. It addresses the difference between the Orthodox churches that require baptism, confirmation, and reception of the Eucharist for full membership and the protestant churches that do not practice confirmation. It also discusses those churches where full membership is possible without confirmation (e.g., Roman-Catholic church) insofar as membership is expressed primarily through reception of the Eucharist. The difference between these churches lies in the understanding of how or when in baptism the Holy Spirit is imparted. The Lima-Document simply invites churches to consider whether, by not allowing baptized children to receive communion, they truly take the consequences of baptism seriously enough. However, what is overlooked here is that, in those churches where this is the case, confirmation is either not practiced or it occurs at a later stage. That is, the

document does not fully grasp the difficulty that emerges for Orthodox churches with regard to the recognition of (infant) baptism in other churches. Moreover, the document does not address the issue of ecclesiology.

The Lima-Document also does not include a discussion of the other baptismal practices highlighted earlier that render it difficult for many churches to recognize the baptisms administered in other churches.

Between 1990 and 2011, the Commission on Faith and Order continued to work on the issue of the non-recognition of baptism between credobaptist and paedobaptist churches. What was finally proposed is that baptism be understood as a point in a lifelong process of becoming a Christian that can be performed either at the beginning, somewhere in the course of, or also at the end of this process.^[37]

In the framework of the various bilateral dialogues, there are at this stage two concrete proposals for how to solve this controversy. The first emerged out of the dialogue in Italy between Waldensians and Methodists (both are paedobaptist churches) together on one side and Baptists on the other. The second emerged out of the dialogue between Baptists and Lutherans in Germany.

The Italian churches noted above call for a return to the New Testament where “more value is placed upon the fruits of baptism than on its form.”^[38] In the document in which this is proposed, the Italian Baptists therefore declare their willingness “to recognize a person as brother or sister [...] and to receive him or her in every respect as a member of their Church, if the reality of the fruits of baptism is recognizable in the person, irrespective of which form or at which point in time the baptism was carried out. The presence of the fruits demonstrates that, thanks to the work of the Spirit, the essence of baptism is present in that person.”^[39] In contrast, the German document entitled „Church Communion on the Way“^[40] (*„Kirchengemeinschaft auf dem Weg“*) that was co-written by the Baptists and Lutherans in Germany follows the approach found in the Lima-Document. This amounts to an understanding of Christian initiation, to which baptism belongs, as a process of becoming a Christian. This process takes place either between baptism and confirmation or between the acceptance of faith and baptism. It concludes when the candidate assumes responsibility for following Christ and is prepared to declare publicly his/her faith. On this basis and so long as it includes a personal confession of faith and a life of following Jesus, Baptists can recognize as faithful to the Gospel the path of becoming a Christian that for Lutherans normally begins with infant baptism. Both sides affirm that they are prepared to accept the decisions based upon the conscience of candidates who convert from a Lutheran to a Baptist congregation. “The person who wants to change membership should not be pressurized into believer’s baptism in order to become a member of a Baptist congregation.”^[41] Simultaneously, Lutherans can respect the wishes of the person in question when he/she explicitly desires to be baptized when making the conversion. Despite the continuing differences in their understanding of baptism, the relationship between the two churches can be understood as a communion “on the way.”

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