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into a different dimension. For example, when the attempt is made to approach the understanding and practice of baptism from the perspectives first, of God's activity in Jesus Christ initiating the Gospel, secondly, of the community of the people of God receiving and communicating that Gospel, and thirdly, the response of the individual within that community to the Gospel, then the issue of baptism, whether infant or believer's, looks rather different. Maybe the baptismal issue needs to be approached by all Churches in this overarching perspective of God, His community, and the individual responding within that community and world. Whether the guarded optimism of the Louisville report in its Preface is over-optimistic, time alone will tell. But, for the present writer, who has been involved in Faith and Order work since just before the Lund Conference in 1952, to have been at the consultation and to have been a participant there, was a refreshing ecumenical experience. I arrived at Louisville apprehensive. I left hopeful.

W. M. S. WEST.

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## Baptism: Report of the Faith and Order Consultation, Louisville 1979\*

*Report of the Consultation with Baptists initiated by the Faith and Order Commission and held at the Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, from March 28-April 1, 1979.  
To the Standing Commission of Faith and Order*

### Preface

The participants in the Consultation at Louisville are grateful for the opportunity it afforded for a frank exchange of views on the issues raised by the Faith and Order Paper No. 84. The brief report which follows is intended to be a comment in response to that document and therefore a contribution towards the consensus process on Baptism.

Although the divide between paedobaptist churches and the Baptists evidently remains, there are signs of bridge-building from both sides. Conversations revealed that for some from both groups the bridge is sufficiently complete to allow mutual recognition of each other's practices. For others the gap remaining has narrowed sufficiently to permit mutual respect and growing understanding of the reasons for the different practices.

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There are grounds for optimism, provided always that the existing disagreements are not swept under some ecumenical carpet in the cause of consensus, but are faced openly and worked at constantly at all levels of church life.

In particular, five significant points of agreement within the consultation may be recorded:

1. The acceptance that believers' baptism is the most clearly attested practice of baptism in the New Testament, together with the recognition that infant baptism has developed within the Christian tradition and witnesses to valid Christian insights.

2. The statement that the personal faith of the recipient and continuous participation in the life of the church are essential for the full fruit of baptism. In believers' baptism the believing community has played its part in the nurture of that personal faith, whilst in infant baptism, the supportive believing community surrounding the infant will nurture the child's personal faith as it moves towards discipleship.

3. The recognition in all the group reports that both forms of baptism require a similar and responsible attitude towards Christian nurture and a serious development in the concept of the Christian catechumenate.

4. The reminder that the pressures of contextuality have always borne in on the understanding and practice of baptism and that in these present days contextuality requires radical rethinking by both groups as to what form of baptism they practise and why.

5. The conviction that indiscriminate baptism is seen as an abuse to be eliminated.

*The design of the consultation:* When theologians gathered at Crêt-Bérard, Switzerland (June 1977), to study the responses of the churches to the agreed statements contained in "One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognized Ministry" (Faith and Order Paper No. 73), they recommended that the Faith and Order Commission initiate "a consultation with Baptists, to explore the issues involved in the debate on infant baptism and believers' baptism which remain many and complex and need to be addressed at this time if we are to move forward in the agreement on baptism". (Faith and Order Paper No. 84, p. 15.) The Louisville consultation was planned and held in response to the recommendation and was designed to address specifically the questions outlined at Crêt-Bérard (Faith and Order Paper No. 84, p. 7).

The consultation heard a number of scholarly papers prepared especially for the event. Dr. L. A. Hoedemaker, a member of the Task Force charged with guiding the revision of the agreed statements, described the history and future of the consensus effort and set the consultation in the context of the whole process. Dr. Morris West, who had participated in the Crêt-Bérard meeting, elaborated the issues which had been identified as needing special attention at such a consultation. Dr. Thorwald Lorenzen surveyed recent Baptist

ecumenical conversations on baptism. Two central issues were then addressed by a Baptist and a non-Baptist. Dr. George Beasley-Murray and Fr. Joseph Eagan presented papers related to the authority and justification for believers' baptism and infant baptism. Dr. Horace Russell and Dr. Laurence Stookey addressed the issue of personal and community faith in relation to baptism and other rites of Christian initiation. Near the conclusion of the meeting, Dr. William Carpe described believers' baptism as it is understood by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). His presentation served to remind the consultation that Baptists are not the only churches which practise believers' baptism, nor is their understanding of the practice universally shared among the churches which hold to the practice.

Four groups were assigned specific questions related to the issues raised at Crêt-Bérard and re-formulated in Dr. West's paper, to be discussed in the light of the papers presented. The group reports were presented and fully discussed in plenary and therefore belong to the whole consultation.

This report is offered first as a contribution to the work of the Faith and Order Commission in the revision of the agreed statement on baptism and then as a contribution to the ecumenical debate on baptism more widely in anticipation of the time when baptism will be a sign of the unity of the Church rather than a source of division.

## **Group I Authority — Justification**

### *I. Authority for Baptism*

The early Church possessed a tradition that the Risen Lord, when sending his disciples on mission, commanded them to baptize. The command is explicit in Matt. 28: 18-20, is reproduced in a different form in the oral tradition embodied in the catechetical summary of resurrection appearances attached to Mark's Gospel (16: 15-16). It is also attested to in the apparently universal practice of baptism by the Apostolic Church from its earliest days, attested in the Letters of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, and the writings of the Fathers. Consequently, the Church baptizes.

### *II. Justification for Believer's Baptism*

The justification for believer's baptism rests on the conviction that it:

- A — expresses both the total Christ event as contained in the New Testament and the response the Gospel demands to it;
- B — achieves the initiation into Christ and his Body by the Spirit and so entry into the saving rule of God with all that this connotes for the believer: forgiveness of sins, life as a new creation through union with the crucified and risen Lord, and hope of fullness of salvation in the final Kingdom of God;
- C — calls attention to the missionary character of the Church between the cross-resurrection and the parousia.

### III. *Justification for Infant Baptism*

The justification for infant baptism rests on the conviction that it witnesses:

- A — that this infant of Christian parents is brought into relationship with God within the fellowship of Christ's people;
- B — that the Paschal Mystery of Christ (the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ) is made present for this infant;
- C — to the Church's hope and trust that the infant will be brought to personal faith commitment to Christ through the nurturing ministry of the family and of the Church in Word and Sacrament;
- D — to the understanding that in sacraments God acts in Christ and his Spirit for this child.

The basis for baptism by those who practise it rests on the conviction that:

- A — infant baptism rose out of the historical experience and the instinctive faith sense of Christians and gained the approval of church leaders and people alike as a development seen to be consonant with the total Christ mystery;
- B — despite believers' baptism being the norm for baptism as presented in the New Testament, infant baptism witnesses to valid Christian insights, e.g. God's initiative in our salvation and the absolute gratuity of His gifts; communitarian nurture of the Church; and Christ's care for children.

### IV. *Further Observations*

- A For those who hold the New Testament pattern to be permanently normative, the baptism of infants creates a problem. Most believer baptists therefore consider it as not a baptism at all, but there are other believer baptists who recognize it as valid but irregular.

For those who hold the development toward the baptism of infants to be authentic, there is no basis for rejecting adult baptism.

- B From the perspective of Orthodoxy, baptized infants are believers. Therefore, a distinction between infant and believers' baptism does not arise.
- C It is highly desirable, for theological and pastoral reasons, that indiscriminate baptism, whether practised by paedo-baptist or believer-baptist churches, be carefully avoided.

## Group II Sacrament — Faith

I. Sacraments or ordinances are signs of the grace of God and are effective when faith is present.

II. Grace is God's continuous activity, incarnate in Jesus Christ. This grace is evident in God's act in Creation, manifest in the Incarnation, present in the work of the Holy Spirit, and will be consummated in the Kingdom of God.

III. Faith is our obedient trust in a gracious God. This faith is both personal and communal.

IV. Baptism, as a sacrament or ordinance of the Church, is an effective gift of the Lord to His community, appropriated by experience and leading to new life. While believers' baptism, as a norm, accurately reflects New Testament baptism with its emphasis on personal faith in the full work of Christ, infant baptism has developed within the Christian tradition and witnesses to the primacy of God's activity in the process of redemption.

V. The personal faith of the recipient and continuous participation in the life of the Church are essential for the full fruit of baptism. In believers' baptism the personal faith of the believer has already been nurtured by the corporate faith of the community. The believing community, including the family, will continue to be supportive of the believer in the life of discipleship. In infant baptism, the corporate faith of the community is already supportive of the infant, and will nurture the personal faith of the growing child as it moves towards discipleship.

VI. In response to the spirit and hope of our ecumenical time, both believers' baptism and infant baptism deserve mutual respect in the life of the whole Church where the imperatives of Christian nurture are recognized as indispensable to the effectiveness of both forms.

VII. The practice of indiscriminate baptism, wherever it occurs, whether infant baptism or believers' baptism, destroys the integrity of the sacramental act.

VIII. It is imperative that the churches continue in diligent study and dialogue on the theology and practice of baptism. This should take place both within and between denominations.

IX. The churches need to give thought to their theology and practice of baptism with reference to the retarded and senile persons within the scope of their ministry.

### Group III Ecclesiology

I. We speak in the light of the New Delhi Statement on the Church (cf. *The New Delhi Report*, London; SCM, 1962, p. 116f).

We affirm that the Church is the universal body of Christ which finds concrete manifestation in a local situation. It constitutes a fellowship fully committed to Jesus Christ as Lord.

II. A We are agreed that membership in the Church implies:

1. incorporation into the Body of Christ;
2. conversion—Metanoia;
3. discipleship.

B The Church celebrates these elements in liturgical forms.

C We differ as to the times when these elements become real in the life of a person, e.g. in the Orthodox tradition an infant is considered to be a believer, while in the Baptist tradition personal confession of faith is the necessary mark of a believer. Therefore, infant baptism is not generally recognized by Baptists.

D Baptists could develop a more "open" attitude to infant baptism if a personal appropriation of that baptism (e.g. confirmation and/or confession) were made a constitutive part of the total "baptismal event" (understood as an ongoing life in Christ).

III. We all reject the notion of "re-baptism", for we all regard baptism to be the unrepeatable act of commitment to the Lordship of Christ and of incorporation into his Body.

However, a serious difficulty arises when a person baptized in infancy applies for "believers' baptism", Paedo-baptists will regard such an act as re-baptism and therefore invite the person to renew his or her baptismal vows through confession and partaking in the eucharist. Most Baptists, on the other hand, will admit such a person to believers' baptism, thereby implicitly regarding his or her infant baptism as no baptism. They would also consider it a violation of the individual's freedom of conscience if the request for believers' baptism were denied.

IV. Concerning a theology of the child.

A The following agreements represent our common understanding of the place of the child in God's creation and in the Church:

1. We reject the doctrine of "inherited guilt" as a valid motive for infant baptism.
2. We affirm that all children born into this world are in the saving care of God.
3. We recognize the responsibility of the churches of both traditions to nurture the child into the full stature of Christ.

B Children of Christian parents are privileged in that they are related to God through the community of Christians and have access to the Word of God. Consequently:

1. Churches of the paedo-baptist tradition baptize their infants and thereby imply admission into the community in which the child will receive continuing instruction in the faith.
2. Baptist churches could reinstate the ancient practice of a catechumenate and admit children into it by a "service of blessing".
3. A responsible administration of the initiation rites presupposes full awareness and commitment on the part of the community and the parents and should rule out any form of indiscriminate baptism.

#### **Group IV Contextuality**

I. *Understanding baptism in relation to context* leads to two observations:

A each form of baptismal practice, theology and terminology is determined by its particular history, socio-cultural context and missionary concern;

B baptism itself can be seen as referring the Christian community and the individual to the larger context of God's dealings with humankind, and thus to the missionary nature of the Church.

II. Both of these points can be seen in each of the following examples of contemporary experience in the churches:

- A *The celebration of new life.* Many churches in different cultures are responding to the need in their societies to enable the family unit (in whatever form such a unit might take) to celebrate the gift of life and the giving of a name in the perspective of the new life promised by God in Christ.

This is true for both paedobaptist and believer-baptist churches: In Baptist churches in Kingston, Jamaica, there are appropriate services for the celebration of new life for both committed and uncommitted parents. In the former case the emphasis falls on the obligation for Christian nurture within the fellowship of the church; in the latter on the prophetic announcement of God's promises within the context of the missionary concern of the church.

In a local ecumenical project in Oxford, England, which includes both paedobaptist and believer baptists, the service for the celebration of new life includes opportunity either for infant baptism or for infant blessing with or without the dedication of the parents.

- B *Christian nurture.* Nurture involves formation in the Christian faith through instruction and experience of Christian worship (possibly including communion) within the caring fellowship of the Church leading to both mature discipleship and full humanity. These elements are present in both paedobaptist and believer baptist churches and can create problems within the traditional practices of Christian initiation. In Southern Baptist Churches in the USA, where there is a graded system of Christian education for each age group, there is a growing tendency for the age of baptism to go down which seems to be a consequence of Christian nurture designed to effect early commitment.

Some synods of the Lutheran churches in the USA have recently introduced a new policy regarding confirmation, whereby children are invited to first communion around the age of 10, and at 17 are invited to reaffirm their baptismal vows. This change of emphasis seems to arise from a deeper understanding of the nature of nurture.

- C *Witness and service.* Discipleship implies that churches and individual Christians are committed in witness and in service to the ultimate unity of humankind in Christ, a commitment which inescapably leads to a sharp awareness of situations of injustice, especially where baptism seems to be linked with domination. The fact that reference to the unity of humankind is an essential element in baptism is particularly significant in this respect. It is attested in both the paedobaptist and believer baptist traditions. One of the reasons why the National Baptist Convention in the USA was constituted separately was the feeling of those concerned that the baptism practised in the white churches referred only to a limited unity.

### Conclusion

The illustrations given above underline the fact that in a diversity of contexts and historically separate traditions, there is a convergence of concerns and interests. This convergence is accentuated by the increasing mobility of modern society whereby people not only move more easily from one church to another but also move in and out of active participation in the life of the church. This challenges the churches to accept each other's members and to devise rites for the renewal of Christian commitment. Above all it challenges them to rethink both paedobaptist and believer-baptist practices (including modes) in the perspective of the missionary nature of the Church. This may well involve the mutual acceptance of several different patterns of initiation.

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## Review

*Baptist Roots and Identity.* By J. K. Zeman. Baptist Convention of Ontario and Quebec, 1978. 43pp.

*The Believers' Church in Canada: Addresses and Papers from the Study Conference in Winnipeg, May 1978.* Edited by J. K. Zeman, Walter Klaassen & J. D. Rempel. Baptist Federation of Canada and Mennonite Central Committee (Canada), 1979, 410 pp. \$9.95 (Canadian).

*The Diary of Joseph Dimock.* Edited by George E. Levy. Lancelot Press, 1979, 207 pp. \$6.95.

These three publications are welcome because they come from Canada, but also because of their content. In each of them Professor J. K. Zeman has had a hand. Born in Czechoslovakia, he is now after