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Baptism

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Baptism

Dagmar Heller

Baptism (from the Greek *baptizo*: to immerse, to submerge) is a ritual that is practised in practically all Christian churches and communities. It involves a person being immersed in water – or having water poured over them – along with the spoken trinitarian formula. This article outlines the origins of baptism, its development throughout history, its meaning and practice, as well as the ecumenical-theological problems that emerge.

Keywords: Christian theology, Baptism, Doctrine, Denominational theology, The Christian church, Initiation, Water rite, Sacraments, Eucharist, Liturgy, Ecclesiology, Ecumenism, Church history

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1 Origins of baptism in Holy Scripture

From the very beginning, the first Christian communities practised baptism. This is evident from the many reports of baptisms in the New Testament, especially in the Acts of the Apostles. Up to the present day, the basis for this practice is understood to be the so-called Great Commission, which the risen Christ gave to his disciples according to Matt 28:18–20 (also in Mark 16:15–16):

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'.

Although the historicity of these verses is doubted by New Testament scholars, it is not a matter of debate that Jesus' disciples practised baptism with water (see the reports of baptism in Acts, but also John 4:2) – most likely because Jesus directed and authorized them to do so (see Ferguson 2009: 1010). However, it remains unclear in the New Testament whether or not Jesus baptized people himself (John 3:22f. and John 4:1f.).

It is clear, though, that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist (Luke 7:24–28f.; Mark 1:9–11; Matt 3:13–17). One cannot infer from the New Testament that Jesus' baptism was the basis for Christian baptism, but 'the declaration of Jesus' sonship and the coming of the Holy Spirit on him at this time provide a parallel to the promises attached in a lesser sense to Christian baptism' (Ferguson 2009: 100). In the account of Jesus' baptism, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and therefore the acceptance of Jesus by God as his 'dear Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased' (Matt 3:17), plays the central role. In this respect, Jesus' baptism provides an example or model for Christian baptism.

With this in view, baptism can be described as being rooted in the baptism of Jesus and based on the instruction of the risen Christ. Baptism is meant for 'all nations' and, as such, has worldwide significance. According to Matthew 28, baptism has implications for the lifestyle of the baptized, while in the parallel passage in the Gospel of Mark (16:15–16), the idea of being saved – and the close connection between faith and baptism – are central concepts.

There are still further texts in the New Testament that are helpful for the practice and understanding of baptism. On the one hand, there are reports about baptisms conducted by disciples of Jesus. Stories of this kind are only found in Acts (1:5f.; 2:38f.; 8:12–17, 36–38; 9:17–19; 10:44–48; 16:14f., 29–34; 18:7f., as well as 19:1–7). From these passages, it becomes clear that people were baptized with water, either as individuals or in groups, and always after some kind of teaching. Moreover, in Acts, baptism is always linked to

repentance, forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is connected to faith in Jesus Christ and was performed by immersion.

On the other hand, the theological significance of baptism is explained in the New Testament letters attributed to Paul. The theology of baptism is found explicitly in Rom 6:1f.; Gal 3:26f.; Col 2:12f.; 1 Cor 12:13; 1 Cor 1:11–17; Eph 4:5; 1 Pet 3:20f. Further texts give clues to the theological significance of baptism indirectly (i.e. without using the term ‘baptism’), or can otherwise be understood as referring to baptism: 1 Cor 6:11; Eph 1:13; Eph 4:30; 1 John 2:20–27.

To summarize on the basis of these biblical texts, the following statements can be made about Christian baptism:

- Baptism is not self-baptism.
- Baptism is a unique event in a person’s life.
- Baptism is understood as anointing (1 John 2:20–17).
- Baptism seals a person with the Holy Spirit for the day of salvation (Eph 1:13; 4:30).
- Baptism means cleansing (1 Cor 6:11).
- Baptism means dying and resurrecting with Christ (Rom 6:1f.; Col 2:12).
- Baptism is connected to belief in the resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:1–5).
- Baptism results in a new life (Rom 6:1f.; Col 2:12).
- Baptism makes the baptized belong to Christ (they are ‘clothed’ in Christ) (Gal 3:27).
- Baptism works deliverance from sin/forgiveness of sins (Rom 6:6f.).
- Baptism brings salvation/healing (1 Pet 3:20).
- Baptism conveys the gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13).
- Baptism unifies the baptized in one community (one ‘body’) (1 Cor 12:13).
- Baptism creates unity (Eph 4:5).

Not much can be deduced about the ritual of baptism as such from the New Testament sources. According to Acts, baptism was administered ‘in the name of Jesus Christ’ or ‘in the name of the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).

2 Baptism in the history of religion

To better understand (1) how Christian baptism developed and (2) its specific meaning(s), it seems prudent to consider it within the context of similar rituals during the time in which it emerged.

2.1 Initiation rites in other religions and cults

Most religions and cults practise initiation rites of various types. In some of these rites, death – and to a lesser degree, rebirth – plays a role, especially in the mystery religions where the idea of death and perishing is central (Gerlitz 2001: 660). Indigenous peoples

have initiation rites into manhood in which the candidate symbolically dies and is reborn. In the Jewish practice of circumcision, the removed foreskin symbolizes the renunciation of anything which veils the view of God and his creation (see Stern [n.d.]). Although such rites are one-time only and serve the initiation/introduction or incorporation of a person into the corresponding group (like baptism), they have no parallel to water baptism in their outward form.

Rites associated with water are known in some cults (e.g. Attis and Mithras Mysteries, Dionysos and Isis cults) in the form of ritual ablutions, which served cleansing and connected death with a ritual of immortality. There were ritual ablutions in Egypt, and the idea of holy water to ward off evil existed in Mesopotamia (see Gerlitz 2001: 660). In Judaism, immersion baths are also known (see Qumran); and in Hinduism, water serves the absolution and healing of bad karma and therefore one's preparation for rebirth (see Gerlitz 2001: 662). The ritual use of water for the purpose of healing, initiation, and particularly sacral cleansing is thus widespread in the geographical context of the New Testament and within other religions. At the same time, the differences between these practices and baptism are very clear: these are rites that have been performed repeatedly and therefore cannot be considered as actual models for early Christian baptism.

In Judaism, converts enter an immersion bath for acceptance into the Jewish community (through so-called 'proselyte baptism'). Despite some outward similarities, this also cannot be taken as a direct model of Christian baptism: it has its own distinct theological and ritual significance that is not reflected in Christian baptism – not least because it is a self-baptism.

2.2 John the Baptist

John the Baptist seems to be the first in Judaism who baptized others (Schnelle 2001: 663). In the relevant reports in the New Testament, it is described that the people came to John to be baptized (Matt 3; Mark 1; Luke 3). In contrast to the ritual ablutions in Judaism, baptism by John was both a passive and a one-time procedure for those who received it. Its central significance was not that of ritual purity but of repentance, penance, and forgiveness of sins. As Gerhard Lohfink (1976) has shown, John the Baptist can be understood as infusing familiar motifs with new meaning. Particularly notable for understanding the significance of Christian baptism is John's emphasis on divine judgment and the related expectation of the imminent coming of the messiah as the theological-historical context for the baptism he administered.

Four elements in particular connect the baptism of John and the baptism of the first Christians. (1) In both cases, baptism is administered by one person to another. (2) Both baptisms are one-time, and (3) they both involve a personal decision of the baptized.

Further, both cases are about (4) penance and turning away from the previous (way of) life (see also Schnelle 2001: 664).

However, John the Baptist also points out the difference between the two forms of baptism: 'I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit' (Mark 1:8), or according to the report in the Gospel of Matthew:

I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. (Matt 3:11; see also Luke 3:16 and John 1:26f.)

According to Acts 19:4–6 as well, the two baptisms are distinct from each other in that John's baptism is one which serves penance and repentance in view of the approaching kingdom of heaven and the judgment associated with its manifestation. By contrast, through the baptism practised by Jesus' disciples the Holy Spirit comes down upon the baptized – and thus what was announced by John comes true.

While the early church adopted the form (water) and certain theological components (penance, forgiveness of sins) of John's baptism, early Christian baptism differs from John's in one very essential point: it referred to the conviction that the kingdom of God is already present on earth through Jesus Christ, who not only proclaimed salvation but 'fulfilled [it] in his behaviour, in his practice and in his destiny in a symbolic way' (Lohfink 1976, translated from the original German). Christian baptism, therefore, is not only a sealing, i.e. receiving a sign of reassurance of the presence of the Holy Spirit in view of the coming judgment, but also the transfer of salvation that became a possibility through Jesus Christ.

At the same time, early Christian baptism implied a reference to community in a way that is lacking in John's baptism. Affiliation to Christ is constituted through baptism, connecting the recipient of baptism with all others who are baptized into the body of Christ (see [section 5.3](#)).

3 Baptism in history

3.1 Early church

From the very beginning, baptism was seen as a one-time event in a person's life. According to different sources from the early church (Didache, Didascalia, Hippolytus of Rome, Apostolic Constitutions, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, etc.), in the early times of Christianity baptism was usually conducted in the name of the triune God. Those receiving baptism were usually immersed – probably thrice – in running water. Furthermore, baptism was preceded by a period of preparation that involved fasting and catechesis (religious education). It is clear in these early sources that baptism had

already become the precondition for participation in the Eucharist – which in most cases immediately followed baptism.

Catechesis in particular seems to have developed further over time. In the church constitution attributed to Hippolytus of Rome (third century), which is known under the name *Traditio Apostolica* (apostolic tradition), a three-year catechumenate is described, which was accompanied by frequent exorcisms and in which a virtuous life and practising active charity played a large role (see Yarnold 2001: 677). Sponsors (godparents) witnessed such a life of the candidates. From the fourth century, baptism became subject to *disciplina arcani* (arcane discipline; i.e. secrecy towards outsiders). Because of this, the baptismal rites had to be explained in detail to the recipient after the baptism in 'mystagogical catecheses' (see Cyril of Jerusalem [n.d.]).

The water rite itself had some local variants which took slightly different forms. Various exorcist rites as a preparation for being baptized were associated with baptism. A confession of sin and a renunciation of the devil were added before the baptism, and one or more anointings took place (before and/or after the water rite). During the baptism, immersion in water was accompanied by the use of a creed in different forms (recitation, answering questions based on the creed, etc.). After the baptism, the baptized were dressed in a white gown. In some sources, a washing of feet is also mentioned in connection to baptism (e.g. Ambrosius of Milan).

Thus, a certain diversity existed here. Particularly in early times, there was obviously a difference between the Syrian (and Armenian) tradition and the Western baptismal liturgies regarding the use or absence of an anointing after baptism. This – according to Dominic Serra (2005) – relates to a different emphasis on the significance that is ascribed to anointing: in the West, an anointing *before* baptism was connected to exorcism, while anointing after baptism was an act of consecration. Conversely, in the early Syrian tradition there was only an anointing for consecration, which took place *before* baptism and was considered more important than the water rite.

Differences can also be found in the baptismal formula: in some regions it took the form of the Coptic and Latin rite, 'I baptize [Name]...', whereas in the Greek and Syrian rites it was expressed as '[Name] is baptized'. In the early church, these rites catered towards baptizing adults, but from the second and third century CE it is likely children were also baptized, as can be seen in the *Traditio Apostolica* (Heller 2012: 55–60).

From these ancient sources, the early Christian understanding of baptism also becomes apparent. In the oldest source, the Didache (probably end of the first century), there is no explicit interpretation of baptism, but the reference to the candidates fasting together with other people in preparation for baptism suggests that baptism was understood as entry into the community of believers (the church, the body of Christ – so also in Justin

of Rome [Martyr], Tertullian, Augustine, etc.). Interpreting baptism as conveying the forgiveness of sins is also found in early sources (Epistle of Barnabas, Justin of Rome, Tertullian, Augustine). Therefore, baptism is necessary for salvation (Shepherd of Hermas, Tertullian). It is also the entrance to the kingdom of God, and signifies birth, new life, or rebirth (Justin Martyr, Cyprian of Carthage, school of Antiochia, Ephrem the Syrian, Theodore of Mopsuestia). The term 'enlightenment' is also used in the context of baptism (Justin Martyr, Apostolic Constitution). Baptism is compared to circumcision in Judaism (Justin Martyr).

In some sources, baptism is closely associated with living a pure life – both as a consequence of receiving baptism and, in some cases, also as a prerequisite for being baptized (*Traditio Apostolica*). Eventually, in most sources, baptism is connected to the gift of the Holy Spirit (Tertullian, Ephrem, etc.). Interpretations vary, however, regarding how and when the Holy Spirit is transferred to the person being baptized. It seems that in early liturgies the gift of the Holy Spirit is connected to post-baptismal anointing (where this is practised) or in some cases to a laying on of hands after the anointing (Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage). In contrast, Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century) connects the Holy Spirit to an anointing before baptism (Ferguson 2009: 506). In some later texts, the coming down of the Holy Spirit is associated with the water rite itself (John Chrysostom, fourth century; see Ferguson 2009: 559).

From the fourth century, baptism occurred during the Easter vigil, or at least during Eastertide. This is because baptism had become strongly conceptualized as an identification with 'the Anointed One', and therefore as an imitation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

3.2 Middle Ages

From at least the beginning of the seventh century, infant baptism had become the most prevalent form of Christian baptism in the Roman Empire. This shift from adult baptism led to some changes in the practise of baptismal rites. In particular, the catechumenate (instruction in preparation for baptism) could not be delivered as it had been previously, as infants were not capable of such learning. Instead – especially in the West – exorcisms received a higher priority. In the East, the rite of cleansing the mother after birth played a larger role. The anointings connected to baptism developed differently as well: in the West, anointing with chrism (consecrated oil) after baptism by a priest, as well as the First Communion, were all administered at around the same time at first. However, the signing of a cross on the forehead with chrism (known as chrismation) by the bishop became distinct from baptism as a separate rite that was performed at a later time (Wahle 2008: 34). This was because the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was associated with chrismation, was understood to be reserved for the bishop (Innocent I., Ep. 25.3; see *Patrologia Latina*

1845), and the bishop could not be present at every child's baptism. Thus began the separation between baptism, confirmation (chrismation), and Eucharist, which is common in the Roman Catholic Church today (see [section 4.3.3](#)). In the East, churches kept the three rites of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist together, and secured the role of the bishop for chrismation-confirmation through the consecration of the chrism by a bishop (Yarnold 2001: 689; see [section 4.3.2](#)).

In the West, through the influence of the Doctor of the Church Augustine of Hippo and his doctrine of original sin, the forgiveness of sins was more strongly emphasized in the theological understanding of baptism. Thomas Aquinas, for example, differentiates between the washing away of sin and the forgiveness of sin as effects of baptism (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 69 a.1, a.2; see Ulrich 2001: 699). In the East, by contrast, baptism is understood mystagogically 'as the "first mystery", which allows for access to the others' ('als das "erste Mysterium", das den Zugang zu den anderen gewährt', Ulrich 2001: 700). In baptism, the image of God that has become unrecognizable (see Gen 1) is newly imprinted on the person; as such, that person is capable of leading a life that engages them in the process of *theosis* (deification) towards community with God.

3.3 Reformation

During the Reformation, disputes arose surrounding the question of the legitimacy of infant baptism. This question emerged due to the radical application of the *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) principle by the so-called Anabaptists, or rather by their literal interpretation of scripture and their understanding of faith. Since, on the one hand, the New Testament accounts in Acts explicitly report only of the baptism of adults, and on the other hand, the close connection between faith and baptism emerges from the other relevant biblical texts, Anabaptists do not recognize infant baptism as baptism but only baptize people who are able to confess their faith (believers' baptism). Practised this way, baptism becomes more definitively an act of profession after people have found faith. Compared to water baptism, which is seen in this view as merely an outward sign of confession, Spirit baptism or baptism of faith is considered more important (e.g. Balthasar Hubmaier 1525; see [Anabaptist Theology](#)).

By contrast, the Reformers of the Wittenberg and the Swiss Reformation held fast to child baptism and pointed to scriptural texts which speak of the baptism of a whole 'household' (e.g. Acts 16:15): a 'household' included children in the time of the early church. According to Martin Luther, baptism is not founded on faith, of which a person can never be certain, but it is based on the word and commandment of God (Luther 1528; *WA* 172.17–173.4). The faith involved here is the faith of those who bring the child to baptism (*fides aliena*; Luther 1520; *WA* 538.4–7). The creed can therefore be spoken in

the child's stead by parents, godparents, and the congregation. Through infused faith, mediated through the prayer of the church, and parents and godparents, the baptized child is purified and renewed. The personal faith of the baptized is therefore not a prerequisite for baptism; but faith nourishes itself, as it were, through baptism, by taking hold of the grace conveyed through baptism, constantly adhering to the divine non-imputation of sin, and thus constantly practising baptism in the constant dying to sin (*reditus ad baptismum*, return to baptism; Luther 1520; *WA* 527.17; see zur Mühlen 2001: 702). In this understanding, baptism takes on a dimension that relates to the entire life of the baptized person.

John Calvin's view of baptism is similar: 'Baptism aims [...] for the justification of the sinner in such a way that his sin is not counted against him for Christ's sake, even if its de facto power is not yet completely abolished' (*'Die Taufe zielt [...] so auf die Rechtfertigung des Sünders, dass ihm seine Sünde um Christi willen nicht angerechnet, wenn auch in ihrer faktischen Macht noch nicht völlig aufgehoben wird'*, zur Mühlen 2001: 707). Simultaneously, baptism is a sign of confession 'with which we finally publicly declare and assure what kind of faith we have' (Calvin 1989; *Institutes* IV 15.13).

3.4 Developments after the Reformation

In the Eastern church, the significance and practice of the rite of baptism (as it had developed up to the eleventh century) stayed largely unchanged. In the West, by contrast, various developments took place after the Reformation. In the second half of the seventeenth century, in so-called Lutheran orthodoxy, baptismal theology was rediscussed regarding the necessity of infant baptism. Exorcisms were increasingly seen as adiaphora, meaning unnecessary for faith, and eventually disappeared. In the eighteenth century, in the time of pietism and rationalism, the 'inner experience' of the person receiving baptism was placed in the forefront. Because of this, John Wesley, for example, concluded that rebirth cannot take place through the outward performance of baptism but only through inner transformation. In the nineteenth century, various movements rediscovered sacramental rites that had dwindled after the Reformation. In Denmark, for example, there was a revival in the use of exorcisms (the theologian N. F. S. Grundtvig played an important role in this), while theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher saw in infant baptism the danger of a magical understanding of sacramental rites.

In the twentieth century, discussions concerning baptism were dominated by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth's doubts surrounding child baptism (see Spinks 2006: 137–142). For Barth, the ritual itself is not the cause of the individual's rebirth; baptism only points to that which Jesus Christ has already achieved (Spinks 2006: 138). Therefore, baptism is an 'active, obedient answer' to the promise of Christ, which needs the human person as an active partner. Baptism is therefore only complete after a confession of faith, which in turn

follows instruction (see Barth 1948: 47). (For more on the discussion surrounding infant baptism and its ecumenical implications, see [section 6.1.1.](#))

In the second half of the twentieth century, the role of confirmation was another major subject of discussion. While the Anglican theologian Gregory Dix understood baptism as the forgiveness of sins and confirmation as the gift of the Holy Spirit, others within the Anglican Communion saw the water rite as the full inclusion into the church and confirmation as the confession of faith by people who were baptized as children (Spinks 2001: 716f.). Many Protestant churches, under the influence of the ecumenical movement, changed their former positions to allow baptized children to receive communion before they had been confirmed. In the Roman Catholic Church, confirmation (chrismation) is no longer reserved for the bishop but can also be administered by the baptizing priest – one of many shifts to occur as a result of the Second Vatican Council. As ever, confirmation is understood as a sacrament, but there are different opinions regarding its efficacy.

In many baptismal liturgies of the twentieth century, the focus is no longer on the forgiveness of original sin; instead, the emphasis is placed more strongly on the integration of the individual into the body of Christ. The Roman Catholic Church has developed an order for initiation which underscores the understanding of baptism as a part of a longer process. In Baptist churches, particularly in Great Britain, there is, according to Spinks, ‘a tendency to find new emphasis in the divine action in the ritual of baptism, though without abandoning the emphasis on personal faith’ (Spinks 2006: 158).

With the growth and independent development of Christian churches in the Global South, some specific questions have emerged relating to theological and cultural context of baptism as it has developed within particular communities and cultures. These questions often pertain to the use and significance of rituals, symbols, and gestures that have been integrated into baptismal rites by Christian communities within their respective cultures, particularly in African churches (e.g. Lumbala 1999). A further discussion in the twentieth century concerns feminist theological perspectives on baptism, and especially feminist critiques of the baptismal formula (see Duck 1991; and [section 6.1.3.](#), below).

4 The practice of baptism

4.1 Baptismal formula(e)

From the very beginning, the two determining components of baptism were the use of water and a baptismal formula. According to the New Testament accounts, it seems one was either baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 8:16), or with the trinitarian formula ‘in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit’ from the Great Commission (Matt 28:19), the latter of which developed eventually as the prevailing practice.

4.2 Infant baptism versus adult baptism

In early Christian history, predominantly adults were baptized, although children were apparently also baptized from early on. Infant baptism was established from the early Middle Ages onwards, after Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire; nevertheless, this does not mean that adult baptism was abolished. With the emergence of the Anabaptist movement and its rejection of infant baptism, two practices of baptism are juxtaposed in Christianity as a whole.

4.3 Baptismal rites

The liturgical style of a baptism is affected by whether it being performed for adults or for children. The baptismal rituals in the early church were intended for adults. With the rise in popularity of child baptism, the preparation for baptism especially changed (see section 3.2). Furthermore, the godparents had a different role. They took on the task of confessing the faith or renouncing the devil in the place of the child at the baptismal service and of ensuring that the child was brought up in the Christian faith.

With infant baptism, the way in which the baptismal water is used also changed: in many churches where infants are baptized, the baptismal candidates are no longer immersed; instead, water is poured on the forehead, or they are sprinkled with water. Only the Orthodox churches have retained the (triple) immersion of infants (see section 4.3.2, below).

4.3.1 The connection between baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist

In the Orthodox churches, baptism, chrismation (confirmation), and Eucharist are so closely intertwined that baptism is immediately followed by chrismation (confirmation) with the First Communion usually taking place on the following Sunday. In the Roman Catholic Church, these three sacraments are understood as unified as well, despite being performed years apart (*Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC]:* 1285). In those churches that came into being during the time of the Reformation, confirmation is not celebrated, at least not as a sacrament. The custom of drawing a cross on the baptized person's forehead after the water rite and saying a blessing has remained in many Lutheran and Reformed churches. However, an application of oil or anointing does not take place. In churches that only practise believers' (adult) baptism, there is also no confirmation. Some of these churches practise a laying on of hands after the water baptism (Fiddes 2008: 74).

4.3.2 Orthodox

Because baptism is understood as an element in the mystagogical process of initiation in the Orthodox churches, the rite is embedded in a series of prayers and further ritual and symbolic actions. The service begins with a preparation of prayers to receive the

catechumen (a custom from the early church, when catechumenate preceded baptism). Afterwards the person to be baptized is turned towards the West, the seat of the 'Prince of Darkness'. The idea here is to thrice denounce the devil. Then they are turned to the East from where 'the Sun of Justice' rises. With this, the person joins Christ by answering the question, 'do you unite yourself with Christ?' with 'yes' three times. This is followed by the commitment to faith, where the person to be baptized recites the Nicene Creed three times. Only then does the baptism proper follow, with the robing of the priest, the lighting of candles, the censing of the baptismal font, and an introductory blessing. The baptismal water is blessed with an epicletic prayer, invoking the Holy Spirit; the person to be baptized is anointed with the 'Oil of Joy' and finally immersed in the baptismal water three times. The baptismal formula is:

The servant of God [Name] is baptized in the name of the Father. Amen.
And the Son. Amen.
And the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The water rite is immediately followed by confirmation: the baptized person is anointed with chrism in the form of a cross on the forehead, eyes, nose, mouth, ears, breast, and hands. Each time, the words 'Seal of the Holy Spirit. Amen' are spoken. A procession with the baptized around the baptismal font follows. Finally, the baptized person receives the Eucharist – in recent times, this usually takes place on the following Sunday. The end of this process of initiation is the washing off of the chrism oil (historically, eight days after the baptism) and the cutting of a tuft of hair as a sign of obedience and sacrifice.

4.3.3 Roman Catholic

Baptism in the Roman Catholic Church proceeds in a similar manner to the Orthodox: after entering the church, an exorcism is usually performed on the person to be baptized, who is then anointed (as preparation for the fight against Satan) and denounces Satan before reciting the creed. Then the baptismal water is consecrated with an invocation of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis). Although immersion is recommended in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RICA), in practice water is usually poured over the person's forehead three times. The baptismal formula is:

[Name] I baptize you in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Then an anointing with consecrated oil follows, where the ears and mouth of the baptized are touched by the anointing priest. This part of the rite is associated with the donning of a white robe. Infants, however, are presented in a white baptismal gown at the beginning of the service. In addition, the newly baptized person is given a baptismal candle (given to the parents or godparents in the case of infants) as a sign of enlightenment through the

light of Christ. A second anointing, which is also intended to follow baptism, is understood as a sacrament of its own (confirmation). It is performed immediately after baptism for adults and at a later time for children. The sacrament of First Communion also follows immediately when an adult is baptized, but later in the case of an infant baptism (see [section 5.3](#)).

4.3.4 Anglican and Old Catholic

The [Anglican](#) and Old Catholic baptismal rite share the same essential features as the Roman Catholic rite.

4.3.5 Reformation churches

During the Reformation, the Lutheran and Reformed churches maintained the baptism of infants, but through redefining what may be regarded as a sacrament. In Lutheran and Reformed theology, only baptism and the Eucharist are recognized as sacraments; as such, the understanding of the triad of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist as a process of Christian initiation was lost. With Luther, and in many Lutheran churches up to this day, the denouncing of Satan is retained (Truscott 2008: 47), as well as the recitation of the creed and the threefold pouring over of water – although Luther himself preferred immersion. Here the actively formulated baptismal formula is also used. Instead of an anointing after the act of baptism, a laying on of hands with the sign of the cross is performed. This includes a spoken formula which makes clear that this is a sign of the Holy Spirit. Today, as in the Roman Catholic rite, a baptismal candle is often given to the baptized person. In the Reformed tradition, the denouncing of Satan is no longer practised, but otherwise the baptismal rite is similar to the Lutheran one.

4.3.6 Anabaptist

For Mennonites and Baptists, there is no generally applicable baptismal rite but rather a recognizable pattern across traditions. For the Mennonites,

there is a period of instruction and preparation for baptism. The rite itself is introduced with an explanation of the nature and purpose of baptism. The candidates are asked a number of questions concerning Christian faith. Before or after the water rite there is a prayer asking for the Holy Spirit's activity in the life of the believers. The candidates kneel for baptism while water is poured over the candidate's head. The baptismal formula is 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. After this the right hand of fellowship is extended to the newly baptized. (Slough 2008: 92)

According to Paul Fiddes, one can summarize the baptismal rite in the Baptist tradition as follows: '(1) ministry of the word, (2) the act of baptism, (3) laying on of hands, (4) reception into membership, (5) participation in the Lord's supper' (Fiddes 2008: 74). The baptism takes place in the name of the triune God.

Also in the Church of the Brethren and with the Disciples of Christ, baptism is performed by immersing the baptismal candidate three times in the name of the triune God. This takes place after the person to be baptized has said a creed or answered questions regarding their faith. A laying on of hands follows 'as a powerful symbol to point to the truth that the Spirit comes to us through the lives of others in the body of Christ' (Brown 1986: 33).

4.3.7 Pentecostal

There is great diversity in the Pentecostal churches regarding the practice of baptism. According to Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. and Jerry L. Sandidge, baptism can occur through immersion but that is not the only form (Robeck and Sandidge 1990: 509). Daniel Albrecht describes the underlying structure of the baptismal rite in the Pentecostal movement phenomenologically as a 'dramatized liturgy of testimony' (Albrecht 2008: 151) with a twofold structure. The two parts are described as movements: 'Into the Waters' and 'Out of the Waters' (Albrecht 2008: 149). The first part contains the witness of the baptismal candidates, an address, and a prayer by the pastor, as well as immersion in water. Usually the formula 'I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit' is used (Albrecht 2008: 154), but there are also variances here (Robeck and Sandidge 1990: 514ff.). The second part is made up of emergence from the water, which is sometimes accompanied by signs of the Spirit (speaking in tongues or other manifestations of the Holy Spirit) and answered by the congregation with singing, shouts of joy, or applause. The baptized person leaves the water and joins the waiting congregation.

4.3.8 New developments in the Global South

With the spread of Christianity in the Global South, and the effort to incorporate rites and customs from the respective culture into the practice of the Christian faith, new baptismal rites have emerged in various places and churches through the incorporation of specific elements of a culture into existing baptismal rites. An example is anointing with white kaolinite in the Roman Catholic Church in the Congo instead of the giving of a baptismal candle and a white gown (see Lumbala 1999: 37f.).

5 Significance of baptism

As the New Testament texts on baptism and the history of baptism both indicate, the theological interpretation of baptism has several dimensions that are emphasized in different ways and to differing degrees in the various churches and confessional traditions.

5.1 Sacrament or ordinance

In the churches that practise infant baptism, baptism is understood – together with other ritual acts – as a 'sacrament' (called 'mysteries' in the Orthodox churches).

Meanwhile, churches that reject infant baptism usually use the term 'ordinance'. This hints at a fundamental difference in the understanding of the actions which are elsewhere considered sacraments, and with it also in the understanding of baptism. Understood as 'sacrament', baptism by its very nature has an effect: it conveys the grace of God. The term 'ordinance' expresses that it is an act which Jesus Christ has 'ordered'. As an 'ordinance', baptism is understood as 'as a visible testimony to faith and as a sign of obedience' (Miller 1986: 18).

5.2 Theological significance of baptism in different confessional traditions

Largely independent of when baptism occurs in a person's life, the various confessional traditions place different emphases on the theological interpretations of baptism indicated in the New Testament.

In the Orthodox tradition, baptism is emphasized as a process of dying and resurrecting with Christ (Schmemmann 1974: 8ff., 18) and thus of being newly born. As a transition into a new life, baptism is the means to becoming part of the people of God. As such, '[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' (Schmemmann 1974: 8). Moreover, in the Orthodox understanding, baptism is necessary for salvation. The Orthodox tradition emphasizes the 'life in Christ', which means growing in faith and is itself proof of faith. Baptism is therefore the beginning of a process in which the image of God (see Gen 1) is restored in the baptized person.

In Roman Catholic and Old Catholic theology, baptism is understood as 'the gateway to life in the Spirit' and therefore as 'the basis of the whole Christian life' (CCC: 1213). Baptism washes away original sin and is in this sense necessary for salvation. The baptized person becomes "a new creature", an adopted son of God, who has become "partaker of the divine nature", member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit' (CCC: 1265). In more recent Catholic theology, baptism is especially understood as the means to becoming a member of the body of Christ (Rahner 1976: 400). At the same time, it constitutes – according to the Second Vatican Council – participation in the priesthood of Christ and therefore the prerequisite for participating in the mission of the Church (Lumen Gentium 33 [1964]). The effects of baptism are the cleansing of sins and a new birth in the Holy Spirit (CCC: 1262).

Lutheran theology highlights 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 (Schlink 1972: 42–58). Baptism is admission into the church and incorporation in the people of God. Baptism is understood as necessary for attaining salvation here as well (Augsburg Confession, II).

However, baptism is simultaneously the beginning of a lifelong process. It must be taken in faith, otherwise it remains incomplete (Luther 1921: 565–773).

The Reformed churches generally follow the Lutheran view; however, Ulrich Zwingli emphasized baptism in the Holy Spirit – meaning, for him, that the inner process is more important than an outward ritual. For Zwingli, baptism is an objective sign of one's membership in the Christian community, which finds its fulfilment in God's blessing and promises. For John Calvin, the most important meaning of baptism is that it makes a person a member of the church (Calvin 1989; *Institutes* IV 15.1). Baptism confirms an internal experience and, as such, is not so much a catalyst that brings about an effect as a reminder and encouragement for the individual in his/her faith through the promise of the washing away of sins.

In the Anglican tradition, baptism is understood 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 being recognized as a child of God are visibly signified and sealed (article 27 of the Thirty-Nine Articles, 1801). Today, however, a variety of theological perspectives on baptism are present within Anglicanism and not all hold to this interpretation. (For a fuller discussion on the theological breadth of the Anglican communion, see [Anglican Theology](#).)

In [Methodist theology](#), according to the liturgist Karen Westerfield Tucker, there is a certain ambiguity regarding what baptism actually 'does' and how baptism is to be understood in relation to the fullness of the Christian life (Westerfield Tucker 2008: 101). Gayle Felton finds this ambiguity already in the theology of John Wesley (Felton 1992: 48). For Wesley, baptism was not only a rebirth but a call to repentance and healing (United Methodist Church 2008). Furthermore, in Wesley's understanding, baptism is not necessary for salvation.

In the Mennonite understanding, as well, baptism is about joining the church. In this way, the emphasis is placed on baptism 'as a visible testimony to faith and as a sign of obedience' (Miller 1986: 18). Baptism is understood as a public declaration of the answer to faith, which was created through teaching (catechesis). According to Menno Simons, baptism occurs after rebirth, meaning that rebirth happens through believing in the word of God rather than through baptism (Simons 1974: 227ff. [originally published 1539]).

In Baptist theology, it is possible – according to Paul Fiddes – to find two understandings of baptism. One follows a more sacramental understanding of baptism as a rite, through which God transforms the believers; the other emphasizes baptism as 'witness to what the grace of God *has* already achieved in the experience of those baptized' (Fiddes 2008: 76, original emphasis). Baptism is not seen by Baptists as necessary for salvation.

Something similar is also true for the Church of the Brethren: baptism is an act that is done in obedience to Christ. It is closely related to penance and the forgiveness of sins (Brown 1986: 32).

The Disciples of Christ understand baptism as forgiveness of sins, as one step in a longer process that leads a person to salvation (Geldbach 1996: 70).

In most Pentecostal churches, '[w]ater baptism is seen as a public testimony of identification with Christ, his universal Church, and a local assembly of believers' (Albrecht 2008: 148). A distinction is made here between the gift of the Holy Spirit (baptism in the Spirit), which happens at the time of a person's rebirth, and water baptism. That is, a person receives water baptism after the experience of being born again and before the baptism in the Holy Spirit, i.e. at a time when he or she is able to profess faith. There are, however, also some Pentecostal churches that practise infant baptism (Albrecht 2008: 158). In Pentecostal churches, water baptism is a rite which is conducted in the context of a congregation, whereas Spirit baptism is a personal experience. Baptism is thus understood 'as a step of obedience that gives witness to the grace of God' (Albrecht 2008: 158). Baptism with water is therefore not central for Pentecostal churches, although it is a prerequisite for taking part in Holy Communion in many. (For an in-depth discussion of Spirit baptism and baptism in Pentecostal doctrine, see [Pentecostal Theology](#).)

The ecumenical convergence document on 'Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry' (1982), produced by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches (WCC), tries to identify the commonalities between the different confessional traditions. It describes five common aspects of baptism: (1) 'Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection', (2) 'Conversion, Pardoning and Cleansing', (3) 'The Gift of the Spirit', (4) 'Incorporation into the Body of Christ', and (5) 'The Sign of the Kingdom' (WCC 1982: section II, 'The Meaning of Baptism'). This description can therefore be understood as a summary of the different confessional understandings of baptism. Depending on the context, certain aspects are brought forward more strongly in some confessional traditions than others.

5.3 Baptism as initiation

In most churches, baptism is understood as an event that marks the beginning of a lifelong process. Therefore, in some traditions, the generic term 'initiation' is used to describe baptism. The language of initiation expresses, on the one hand, that baptism formally establishes membership in the church (particularly in churches that practise infant baptism). On the other hand – spiritually speaking – baptism as initiation also indicates incorporation of the baptized person into the church as the body of Christ. Since the early church, initiation in the spiritual sense has involved three sacraments: baptism, chrismation (confirmation), and Eucharist. This has been most clearly preserved

in the Orthodox churches, where water baptism is immediately followed by confirmation (anointing with chrism or myron) and by First Communion soon afterwards (no later than the following Sunday; see [section 4.3.2](#)). In the Roman Catholic Church, too, these three sacraments belong together theologically and form the initiation sacraments (CCC: 1285), but they are separated in time (Heller 2012: 15f.): water baptism is usually given to infants; first participation in the Eucharist takes place after a period of preparation at the age of about nine years; and confirmation is administered around the age of adolescence (see [section 4.3.3](#)).

With the Reformation, confirmation ceased to be a sacrament for Protestant churches and was instead developed as a non-sacramental blessing to confirm baptism (see [section 4.3.1](#)). Thus, in the Reformation churches, baptism alone became the sacrament of incorporation into the body of Christ. In the churches that practise adult baptism, formal membership is not usually linked to baptism. In Baptist churches, for example, church membership is marked by a separate act of acceptance into the congregation (Heim 1998: 155).

5.3.1 Baptism as lifelong process

As an incorporation into the body of Christ, baptism is simultaneously an incorporation into the visible ecclesial community. Thus 'baptism introduces into the probation of being a Christian in everyday situations' (*'weist die Taufe ein in die Bewährung des Christseins in den Situationen des Lebensalltags'*, Kühn 2001: 732). This includes a lifelong process of growing into the fundamentals of faith as well as a lifelong responsibility of acting on the basis of faith. Luther's statement is to be understood in this sense, as he calls baptism the beginning of a daily dying and resurrection that only ends with earthly death (Luther's baptismal sermon, 1519). According to Ulrich Kühn, the Christian tradition has always been aware that baptism has a fundamental significance for [Christian ethics](#) (Kühn 2001: 729). Through Karl Barth this was highlighted anew (*Church Dogmatics* IV/4; see Barth 1936).

5.3.2 The divine and the human dimensions in baptism

Baptism can be understood as an event involving both divine and human action. As initiation into the church – and as the church is the body of Christ – baptism constitutes the beginning (or sealing) of one's belonging to Christ. This incorporation into the body of Christ has both a passive and an active dimension regarding the person being baptized: the believer is baptized and therefore (passively) receives incorporation into the body of Christ; at the same time, the individual's (active) decision to be baptized is a crucial factor. The passive aspect – that is, what is received by the individual through baptism – includes the cleansing/forgiveness of sins, while the active part includes the life resulting from baptism on the basis of Christian values. The passive dimension includes receiving

the Holy Spirit; the active dimension includes renouncing the devil. The passive dimension also includes the gift of faith; the active dimension involves the confession of faith.

6 Baptism in the ecumenical discussion

The ecumenical theological debate takes place both multilaterally (between multiple churches at once) and bilaterally (between different pairs of denominations or traditions). Even though baptism is often referred to as ‘sacrament of unity’, baptism in its definition and practice is still a dividing factor between churches. (For more on Christian unity and ecumenical discussions, see [Ecumenism and Church Relations](#).)

6.1 Theological obstacles to mutual recognition of baptism

The fundamental question that arises in ecumenical discussion is that of the mutual recognition of baptism – that is, whether churches recognize the validity of baptism as it is practised in other denominations or traditions. In the churches’ practical life together, this question becomes relevant above all when believers of one denomination convert to (or seek membership within) another denomination. In particular, when people who were baptized in their original church are baptized (again) upon entering another church, this is understood as a non-recognition of the baptism that was performed in the church of origin. There are several reasons for the non-recognition of the baptism in other churches, as outlined below.

6.1.1 Non-recognition of infant baptism

The most common reason for the non-recognition of baptism in another tradition is the rejection of infant baptism. This ultimately concerns what we might call the ‘definition’ of baptism. According to the understanding of churches who reject infant baptism (credobaptist churches), baptism constitutively involves the personal confession of faith by the person being baptized. Therefore, in credobaptist churches, a baptism performed on an infant is not considered a baptism.

The churches that practise infant baptism (paedobaptist churches) include the Orthodox (Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox), Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Old Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches. Infant baptism is rejected by the Mennonite churches, the Baptist churches, the Church of the Brethren, and the Disciples of Christ, as well as in most Pentecostal and many charismatic, neo-Pentecostal, and free churches. The fundamental differences that separate these two groups of churches in their views can be summarized by noting the main arguments for and against infant baptism.

A longstanding argument against infant baptism – in history until the present day – is that there is no clear evidence for the practice of infant baptism in the Bible (see, for example, *Responses to BEM III*, 233; Thurian 1986–1988): the relevant texts in Acts only report the

baptism of adult persons. In contrast, proponents of infant baptism refer to Bible passages such as Acts 16:14f. or Acts 16:25–34, where the baptism of a whole ‘household’ or a whole family is mentioned, which apparently also included children. Verses such as Jesus’ invitation ‘[l]et the children come to me’ (Matt 19:14) are also interpreted as an indirect legitimation of infant baptism. Furthermore, proponents of infant baptism argue that the New Testament accounts dealing with the conversion of the first Christians cannot be applied to the church as it later developed, especially following the conditions that arose for the practice of Christianity as it became recognized and adopted by the state (i.e. Christianity’s development from the Holy Roman Empire onwards). Ultimately, however, the arguments on both sides concern different interpretations of Holy Scripture.

Another argument against infant baptism, also relating to scripture, is that according to the New Testament testimony (e.g. Mark 16:16; Acts 10:44–48; Acts 16:14f.; Acts 16:31f.) baptism requires repentance and faith in response to hearing the gospel. In this reading, baptism is performed as the result of the conscious decision, and indeed on the initiative, of the person to be baptized. In contrast, the churches that practise infant baptism uphold the concept of the vicarious ‘faith of the church’ through recourse to Augustine (see Schlink 1972: 144). The faith of a person is ‘created’ through baptism by God (Schlink 1972: 169). These arguments indicate different understandings of faith, and especially the origin of faith, between the two positions. The main hinderance for credobaptist churches’ recognition of infant baptism in this context is, however, the issue of the long-term formation of children’s faith after infant baptism is administered. Those who object to infant baptism on these grounds argue that the children’s subsequent growing into faith is not taken seriously enough, especially in state churches where children can receive infant baptism regardless of whether they or their caregivers otherwise participate in the life and faith of the church. After all, baptism does not entail any demands concerning later Christian instruction or Christian way of life. Therefore, a child may receive infant baptism but have little or no opportunity to grow into the faith.

Finally, this theological disagreement is also about the understanding of sin. Infant baptism is often traditionally brought into close connection with original sin, which makes it necessary for even infants to be saved from eternal damnation by baptism. However, other Christians reject this position. Some Baptists, for example, argue that individuals ‘who fail to attain an age of moral competence are exempted from the guilt and consequent damnation that is part of original sin’ (Beach 2001: 55). For those who hold this view, baptizing an infant who cannot be held morally responsible does not, therefore, make sense.

6.1.2 The connection between baptism and ecclesiology

Even within the group of those churches that practise infant baptism, a baptism that was performed outside of one’s own church is not necessarily recognized. As the most

prominent example, the Orthodox churches have taken different approaches to admitting Christians from other denominations throughout history (and not always unanimously). Lutherans who converted to Orthodoxy were treated differently at different times and places: in some cases, they were (or are) baptized into Orthodoxy, but in every case, confirmation is administered. When Catholics or Anglicans convert to the Orthodox Church, usually only a confession of the Orthodox faith is required. However, if the person has not yet been confirmed, confirmation must also be obtained. Converts from younger traditions are usually baptized when converting to Orthodoxy (for a more detailed account of the Orthodox position, see Heller 2012: 173–178).

The reason for this position is the strong connection between baptism and ecclesiology. According to Orthodox understanding, a baptism is only valid if it is administered within the Church. Since the Orthodox Church regards itself as the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church instituted by Jesus Christ and confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (cf. Basic Principles 2000, paragraph 1.18), baptisms performed in other communities – in the strict sense – are not valid. However, there is disagreement in Orthodoxy about how the other churches are to be understood ecclesologically. Churches that adhere to an understanding of episcopal succession and practise the three sacraments of initiation (such as the Catholic and Anglican churches) are more likely to be recognized by Orthodoxy as churches – albeit not in the full sense. Furthermore, Orthodoxy holds to the principle of *oikonomia*, which allows the Church to make exceptions from the usual rule (or, in other words, to depart from the letter of the law) where doing so is justified for pastoral reasons. *Oikonomia* may thus, in a discretionary manner, be applied to the acceptance of Christians from other denominations into the Orthodox Church, as well as to the degree of recognition given to an individual's baptism if it was performed outwith the Orthodox tradition.

6.1.3 The wording of the baptismal formula

In the twentieth century, questions surrounding the wording of the baptismal formula became a focus of debate. Feminist groups began to use a modified baptismal formula, avoiding the gender-based personal terms 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' to speak of 'Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer'. Like the traditional wording they replaced, these terms are derived from the Bible; however, in English, they are gender neutral. Some have moved to baptize 'in the Name of Jesus Christ', the use of which can also be justified biblically. However, some churches (such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox churches) do not accept the validity of these modifications to the baptismal formula and therefore do not recognize any baptism in which such a formula is used.

6.1.4 Other elements used in baptismal rites

Finally, questions have also been raised regarding variations to the elements used in baptism. In regions of the world where water is scarce, for example, baptism might be administered with sand in place of the traditional water rite. This kind of variation is also not recognized – or is at least brought into question – by some churches.

6.2 The ecumenical debate and its proposed solutions

Generally, baptism into the body of Christ is understood to be of the utmost importance as the basis for unity amongst Christians. Therefore, the efforts for unity with regard to mutual recognition of baptism are an important foundation for all further debates on Christian unity.

On the multilateral level, the above-mentioned convergence document on ‘Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry’ (BEM; also known as the Lima document) of the WCC Commission for Faith and Order was an important catalyst for the debate surrounding the mutual recognition of baptism. In particular, the document takes up the controversial debate on infant baptism and concludes that both adult and infant baptism are founded in the New Testament, even if there is a clearer witness for adult baptism (WCC 1982: Baptism, paragraph 11). Infant baptism and believers’ baptism are, therefore, understood as two different ways to practise the *one* baptism (WCC 1982: Baptism, paragraph 11). As a possible solution that could lead to a mutual acceptance of baptism, the Commission states:

The differences between infant and believers’ baptism become less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God’s own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community. (WCC 1982: Baptism, Commentary 12)

Here the two practices are understood as highlighting different aspects of baptism:

The practice of infant baptism emphasizes the corporate faith and the faith which the child shares with its parents [...] The personal faith of the recipient of baptism and faithful participation in the life of the Church are essential for the full fruit of baptism. The practice of believers’ baptism emphasizes the explicit confession of the person who responds to the grace of God in and through the community of faith and who seeks baptism. (WCC 1982: Baptism, Commentary 12; see also paragraph 16)

Specifically, two recommendations are made. First, since both forms of baptism call for a responsible attitude towards Christian instruction, concentrating on the rediscovery of ongoing learning in the faith could facilitate mutual recognition between churches that hold different stances on infant versus adult/believers’ baptism. Further, the suggestion of understanding baptism as a lifelong process (WCC 1982: Baptism, paragraph 9) is highlighted, whereby a confession of faith occurring later in life is recognized as playing

an important role in the fulfilment of infant baptism, while churches that practise believers' baptism are encouraged to consider administering blessings on the children.

The problem of recognition between Orthodox and non-Orthodox churches is only briefly mentioned in BEM under the heading 'Baptism – Chrismation – Confirmation' (WCC 1982: Baptism, 'IV. Baptismal Practice', 'B. Baptism—Chrismation—Confirmation'). In other words, the difficulty that arises for the Orthodox churches with regard to the recognition of (infant) baptism in other denominations or traditions is not fully grasped. The problem of ecclesiology is also not taken up here. The difference regarding church membership is addressed, however. In the Orthodox churches, full church membership includes baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist, while confirmation is absent in the Reformation churches – or rather, full membership, which is expressed through participating in the Eucharist, is also possible without confirmation (cf. the Roman Catholic Church). The difference lies in the understanding of how, or at which moment, the Holy Spirit is conveyed in baptism.

BEM only asks churches to think about whether they take the consequences of baptism completely seriously if they do not admit baptized children to the Lord's Supper (that is, communion/the Eucharist). However, with this proposal BEM does not capture the entire complex of difficulty for the Orthodox churches to recognize (infant) baptism in other churches, because it would be necessary to find a solution regarding the understanding and practice of confirmation.

The other above-mentioned baptismal practices (see [section 6.1](#)), which in some churches justify non-recognition of baptism, are also not included in BEM.

Between 1990 and 2011, the problem of non-recognition of baptism between credobaptist and paedobaptist churches was considered further by the Commission on Faith and Order. In this context it was emphasized that baptism should be seen as a point in the lifelong process of becoming a Christian, and can take place either at the beginning of this process, somewhere along the way, or at the end of the process ('One Baptism', WCC 2011).

Notable are initiatives by churches in different countries to declare the mutual recognition of baptism (see Heller 2012: 214–234). In many cases, such agreements can be traced back to the initiative of the Roman Catholic Church, which as a matter of principle recognizes the baptism of other Christian communities as long as it is carried out with water and the trinitarian formula (Directory on Ecumenism [1993], No. 95.58).

In the field of the different bilateral dialogues, there are now two concrete suggestions to solve the controversy between credobaptist and paedobaptist churches. One suggestion stems from the dialogue between Waldensians and Methodists (who practise infant baptism) and Baptists (who reject infant baptism) in Italy. The other was developed in the

dialogue between Baptists and Lutherans in the German state Bavaria. The mentioned Italian churches suggest a recommitment to the New Testament, where 'greater store is set on the fruits of baptism than on its form' (1992: 163, author's translation). Therefore, in this document, the Baptists declare their willingness

to accept a person in every respect as member of their community, if in this person the reality of the fruits of baptism can be found, independently of the form and time of the performance of baptism. The existence of the fruits shows that, thanks to the work of the Spirit, the essence of baptism is present in this person. (1992: 163, author's translation)

The Bavarian document goes about this differently, pursuing the approach suggested by BEM further – that is, to understand Christian initiation, of which baptism is a part, as a process of becoming a Christian (BALUBAG 2009: 16). This process takes place either between baptism and confirmation, or between acceptance of faith and baptism. The process of initiation is completed when the candidate takes on the responsibility of following Christ and is ready to publicly declare his or her faith. Therefore, 'the Baptists recommend to their congregations that they resist problematic requests for baptism which question the uniqueness of baptism as presented in the gospel' (BALUBAG 2009: 18). What is meant here is that converts from the Lutheran Church to the Baptist Church are not to be automatically (re)baptized. Of the suggestions arising from these two dialogues, the second in particular is now being discussed further on the European level.

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