

## **Baptist-Reformed dialogue**

### **Report of theological conversations sponsored by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Baptist World Alliance, 1973-77**

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### **Introduction**

Between 1969 and 1973 a variety of contacts at various levels between the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Baptist World Alliance led to a mutually agreed proposal that the two world families of churches should engage in theological conversations. At an official planning consultation held in Rüslikon, Switzerland, February 3, 1973, a documented plan of work was approved by representatives appointed by Warc and the BWA.

The motivation of the conversations was agreed:

"Both Baptist and Reformed traditions recognize a common root in their history, which runs back through the Reformation period, the early Fathers of the church, to the New Testament. It is interesting to observe that historically the theology of Calvin and Zwingli has had a very great influence on the development of Baptist thinking since the Reformation. It can also be noted that both traditions share a common emphasis on the normative source of Holy Scripture, the central place of the Word of God, the witness to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, the sovereignty of grace. Further both traditions have a common concern to live out today a witness and service in the obedience of the faith. At the same time obvious theological and historical differences come to mind. Because of the deep-going divergence in theology and practice between Baptist and Reformed traditions and because of our close kinship it would seem very important that we explore together the nature of our disagreement and how best we may overcome our differences."

"Further relevant aspects may be noted as the widespread concern in many Reformed churches about the doctrine and practice of baptism (infant baptism, believer's baptism); the emergence of church union consultations and indeed one union now consummated in North India in which Baptist churches are fully involved; and further to all this there is the basic importance of investigating a theological problem which is central to the ecclesiological question, confronting the whole ecumenical

movement, on the nature and understanding of the church. Both traditions are fully aware that this bilateral conversation should be properly carried out in the awareness of our responsibility within the one Family of the People of God."

**Possible subjects were recommended:**

a) The identification of possible areas of agreement:

The centrality of scripture as witnessing to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord, the trinitarian basis of theology, the emphasis on the Headship of Christ in the church. The interrelationship of justification and sanctification; the meaning and implications of conversion; Christian witness in church, state and culture. Again the responsibility of the Christian church in the field of social ethics and the witness of the Christian at every level, in his life, in the world, etc.

b) Specific Topics:

1. Baptism and its context
  - Gospel
  - Christology, person and work of Christ
  - Atonement
  - Holy Spirit
  - Conversion and faith
  - Church membership
2. The doctrine and structures of the church
  - Community
  - Ministries
  - Order
  - Church and State." (Reformed/Baptist Planning Consultation, February 3, 1973)

At a subsequent planning session, held in Rüschtikon, June 20, 1974, it was reported that the recommendations of the 1973 meeting had been approved by the Executive Committees of Warc and the BWA. Agreement was also reached that the conversations proper should begin in December 1974. Concerning the structure of the discussion, it was felt that the group appointed for the conversations should as a whole have the freedom to determine the particular subjects and the approach within the terms of their mandate.

This controlled the general nature of the papers presented at the first full session, December 14-18, 1974, held in the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschtikon, Switzerland. The Distinctive Elements of the Baptist and Reformed Heritages Today, authors respectively, Dr Ernest Payne (Baptist), England, and Dr Sandor Czegledy (Reformed), Hungary; The Baptist and Reformed Perspectives in Understanding the Gospel, authors respectively, Dr Günter Wagner (Baptist), Switzerland, and Dr Karel Blei (Reformed), The Netherlands. Detailed discussion of these papers provided both direction and specificity for the ensuing three years of work: "Our discussions have been most stimulating and illuminating when we have seen these traditional 'loci' of theological reflection in the context of wider questions about the world and God's purpose in it through our Lord Jesus Christ that confront all the churches in our time" (Interim report, 1974).

The same meeting articulated clearly the agreed aim of the projected discussions: "We have noted in our mandate that the Executive Committees of the BWA and Warc recognize it as "very important that we

explore together the nature of our disagreement and how best we may overcome our differences'. The mandate speaks also of baptism as presenting "a theological problem which is central to the ecclesiological question, confronting the whole ecumenical movement, on the nature and understanding of the church'. A programme of the above nature and methodology will have the threefold aim (a) to provide our member churches with information on our present theological positions, (b) to do this in a way which helps to overcome the differences which still exist along with so much that we have in common, and (c) to treat our particular convictions about baptism in a way which illuminates their relation to, and consequential nature within, a total understanding of theology and of the church's task today."

The second session, September 7-11, 1975, Cartigny, Switzerland, had as its theme and work plan the following scheme: The Christian Understanding of God's Purpose for the World in Our Lord Jesus Christ: Doctrine of God and Man.

General Issues:

- Context (i) The Sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ, Creation and Redemption, Covenant, Relation between community and individual, Personal responsibility before God.
- Context (ii): The way in which divergent views on these matters are derived from the same scriptures, the way in which views on these matters both determine and are influenced by basic understandings of man and history.

Particular issues: The relation of baptism to covenant: the "newness" of the new covenant as expressed in baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Theme papers:

- The understanding of covenant in the Old and New Testaments (Paper by Dr Jannes Reiling, reaction by Dr Sandor Czegledy).
- Changing understandings of man and their bearing on theology (Paper by the Rev. Prof. Martin H. Cressey, reaction by Dr Rudolf Thaut).

The third session, March 26-30, 1976, Rüschtikon, centred on two distinct presentations:

- A. The church in the world but not of it  
The church as a holy community in relation to justification; world affirming and world denying forms of Christian thought and life; the church in its local fellowship; the church in its universal dimension and mission (Paper by the Rev. Prof. Martin H. Cressey, reaction by Dr Penrose St Amant).
- B. A detailed survey and analysis of recent statements on baptism and church membership from a selection of Baptist and Reformed sources, prepared jointly by Dr Karel Blei and Dr Günter Wagner.

The fourth session, December 10-14, 1976, Rüschtikon, dealt with Baptist and Reformed thinking in the light of their understanding of the work and gift of the Holy Spirit.

Specific theses were presented on the following issues:

- A. The church: with special emphasis on the local and universal church, Dr Karel Blei and Dr Jannes Reiling.

- B. The ministry: with special emphasis on charism and office, the Rev. Prof. Martin H. Cressey and Dr Rudolf Thaut.
- C. Baptism: with special emphasis on Spirit and baptism in the complex of initiation, Dr Sandor Czegledy and Dr Günter Wagner

At this fourth session, the various reports of previous sessions were further examined and within the scope of the original mandate the ensuing final report was worked out and agreed for submission to Warc and the BWA.

Readers of the report will be aware of the developing processes of the discussion which inevitably emerged from a debate centred in a relatively small intimate group and spread over a four-year time span. In the final editorial work on the report as a whole it was agreed that such obvious signs of theological growth should be allowed to stand. In this way the report has to be read not as it were in "the flat" but with the dimension of "depth", taking note of those elements of seeming repetition which are never in themselves mere repetition but signposts marking our common pilgrimage in learning together.

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### **The centrality of Scripture**

Both the Reformed and the Baptist traditions share a common emphasis on Holy Scripture as the normative source for faith and practice. We have therefore attempted to subject our respective convictions and tenets to biblical scrutiny in order to test their foundations in scripture. In the course of our discussions, however, we have noticed again and again that biblical interpretation is more than just finding out "what the Bible says" and that we have to take into account various factors on the part of the interpreters.

### **The biblical revelation as the normative source (norma normans)**

We have registered considerable agreement on what has been pointed out in one of the theme papers; that the scriptures are always read through "spectacles" and that every theological opinion has not only "theological grounds", but also different (psychological, sociological, cultural, etc.) "causes", of which we have to be (and are more and more) aware. There was also agreement on the necessity to discriminate between what is read into the scripture and what is objectively given in it. "The text has its own weight." Yet on this last point there is some difference of emphasis within each of our traditions. Some underline the difficulty of making that distinction, more than its necessity. Is not everyone ready to find his own opinion in the scripture? Therefore, it is said, we must keep in close contact with Christians of other traditions; it is in the living interplay with them that we are mutually corrected. Others underline the necessity (despite the difficulty) of going back to the normative significance of the scripture, the scripture as itself norma normans.

### **The interpretation of the Bible and of history in grappling with today's problems**

In all ecumenical conversations the problem of biblical interpretation and of the lessons of history arises. Ours is no exception to this rule and much time has been spent on the subject. There is much common understanding in biblical and historical scholarship across the lines of traditions and denominations. But the great question is always how the results of biblical and historical scholarship can be put to a good use in the situation of today. The problem of hermeneutics is universal and not even a specific

Christian one. Yet for the Christian church which lives on the Word it is a very crucial issue.

The discussion of the concept of covenant led to the following consideration: in order to determine the relevance of a concept like "covenant" for today we should begin to investigate what meaning it had for Israel in understanding its own place in the purpose of God and then address the same question to the history of Christian thought and practice. We should then proceed and see what help and guidance this would give us in grappling with the problems of our own day with regard to God's purpose for the world and the role of the church in that purpose.

A similar process was followed in our preliminary discussion of baptism. After some consideration of specific New Testament passages, e.g. Col 2.11, Rom 4.11, 6.1-6, we discussed the meaning and practice of baptism in the concrete pastoral and missionary situations of our churches today. We found many common problems confronting our churches. All of them are set in an environment where they must present the gospel to secularized men and women or to those of other faiths. No longer can any church assume an identity between itself and its surrounding society.

We recognized further that this changed situation produces many perplexing pastoral issues in dealing with those who have some superficial link with the church or have been separated from a church with which they were related in childhood. The movement of individuals from one Christian group to another also poses questions which cannot easily be answered from our traditional theological positions.

These practical considerations enabled us to reconsider the classical Baptist and Reformed approaches to (A) ecclesiology, (B) baptism and (C) to reflect upon the relationships between mission, church and baptism.

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## **Reconsideration of classical Reformed and Baptist approaches**

### **A. Mutual questioning of our ecclesiologies**

Our probing of ecclesiological questions included such issues as: people of God (cf. I Peter), the new covenant; the status of children in the church; the "holiness" of children according to I Cor 7.14 ff.; the understanding of the church as mission; the boundaries of the church.

#### **1. The people of God**

It cannot be overlooked that "people of God" is one of the names or images characterizing the church in the New Testament. It underlines the continuity of God's purpose in the discontinuity of history and thus raises the question not only of the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament but also of the relationship between church and Israel. Where the designation occurs in I Peter, a diaspora situation and the mission of the church to proclaim the acts of God, who has brought his people to a new birth through the resurrection of Christ (I Peter 1.1; 2.9; 1.3), are envisaged. While the concept "people of God" as such does not contribute to the solution of the question "Volkskirche" versus "believers" or "gathered" church, it underlines the fact that also the believer under the new covenant belongs to a community of faith which is more than the sum total of individual believers.

## **2. The new covenant**

We agree in seeing the "newness" of the new covenant in Jesus Christ himself, in the eschatological significance of his person and work and in the eschatological gift of the Spirit (cf. Heb 3.10, I Cor 11.23-25, Acts 2.33-39). This "newness" in Christ is expressed in forgiveness, "law written in the heart" (Jer 31.33) and is a *kainè ktísis* (new creature/creation, II Cor 5.17).

We were not agreed whether *kainè ktísis* means primarily the "new individuals" or the "new mankind." Our different understandings of a text like this result in the Reformed emphasis on the community aspect of the church and the Baptist emphasis on "personalism."

## **3. The status of children of believing parents**

While the Reformed tradition, with its practice of infant baptism, includes children as members of the church, Baptists emphasize that a person is not "born into a church", i.e. cannot be brought into membership by the role of the parents; rather he/she becomes a member by personally appropriating the gift of God's grace in faith.

We have gained greater understanding and appreciation of our different positions: Reformed Christians face the fact that the best care of the church and the family for the child by no means guarantees the growth of the child into a committed Christian. Baptists need to consider more seriously the blessings of a Christian family for a child and the child's faith before baptism as well as the continued challenge to and growth in faith after baptism. Both traditions have to face the problems arising for Christian nurture from a general weakening of family life in many parts of the world.

## **4. The church as community of salvation (*heilsgemeinde*) and as mission**

Both Baptists and Reformed regard the church as community of salvation and as mission.

The Reformed tradition emphasizes the aspect of community of salvation and thus the thought of the church as also a mixed body (*corpus permixtum*, cf. Mt 13.24-30; 47-50). It understands mission as an activity pervading all realms of life and society by the gospel.

The Baptist tradition emphasizes the aspect of mission (cf. "every Baptist a missionary" - Johann Gerhard Oncken) and the thought of the church as "gathered believers" committed to the task of proclaiming the gospel to each individual (cf. Mt 28.16-20). We also need to explore the relationship within each tradition between the concepts of church, of mission, and of baptism.

We are agreed that these emphases are not mutually exclusive but need to be seen as complementary and that we need mutual correction.

## **B. Mutual questioning of our baptismal teachings: baptism, grace and faith**

Baptists and Reformed are in agreement as to the universal scope of the

purpose of God and his gifts, the priority of God's grace and the nature of faith as a gift of his Spirit.

However, while we agree that grace is prevenient, we differ in our understandings of its consequences for the practice of baptism: Baptists see the manifestation of prevenient grace in the cross and resurrection of Christ while the rite of baptism belongs to the process of the appropriation of God's gift through faith.

The Reformed tradition emphasizes prevenient grace as manifested in infant baptism. Of course, this infant baptism implies the challenge to Christian education (Eph 6.4) and Christian living (Rom 6). The acceptance of this challenge to Christian living in many Reformed churches is expressed in a special act of confession of faith and confirmation.

We realize that the relationship of baptism and faith is a question of great importance for our dialogue. We agree that baptism and faith are related, but disagree as to the prerequisite of personal faith on the part of the baptized at the moment of baptism.

Reformed churches see infant baptism as a sacramental expression of the grace of God, and therefore, if rightly practised, as a firm foundation for a growth to personal faith.

Baptists underline that the offer of God's grace in the gospel requires the response of personal faith and its confession in baptism (Acts 2.37 ff.), and are thus constrained by their understanding of the New Testament to set the challenge of the gospel before those who are able in response to seek baptism of their own volition, though this decision of faith may be greatly helped by Christian nurture of children within the family of the church.

From these positions we can arrive at a mutual respect for the intention of our varied practices, even though we cannot yet reach a common mind as to the right way of fulfilling our discipleship together in today's situation of mission. We shall need to explore further the implications of such mutual respect for church fellowship and cooperation.

### **C. The relationships between mission, church and baptism**

God's purpose for the world in Jesus Christ is his eternal will for the salvation of mankind. Therefore, from the perspective of Christian faith, it is possible to see this purpose at work in all the history and witness of the Old Testament. However difficult it is to determine the relation to Christ of specific aspects of the covenants, law or the priestly and prophetic ministries, we are agreed in tracing a continuing succession of faith from Abraham to Christ.

We see a preparation for Christ in all aspects of the vocation of Israel as the nation of priests, the people of God. When Christ came, he too in his teaching and ministry related God's purposes to every aspect of human life.

The New Testament writers are able to apply to the new community gathered from all nations titles originally given to Israel as the covenant nation. Nevertheless, the New Testament emphasized the "newness" of what God has done in Christ and faith as the mode of reception for this new act of grace.

In the light of this New Testament witness we are agreed that the life of the church and its practice and ordinances should be directed to the

bringing of men and women to the response of faith, as a mature and fully human reception of God's grace.

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## **Mission, church and baptism**

### **I. The church in the world today**

Throughout the centuries the church has had the obligation to fulfil its mission under Christ. We agree that the situation we face in the world today provides a new context for agreement concerning this mission. Large numbers of our contemporaries in every country, and on all continents, are alienated from Christian faith or have not been adequately confronted with its claims, or, more likely, are indifferent to it.

In this specific missionary situation we find different - sometimes extreme - approaches to, and visions of, mission. There are those who conceive of mission almost exclusively in terms of saving individual souls and of church growth, with little interest in seeking to pervade all realms of life and society with the gospel. There are also those who understand mission almost exclusively in terms of social involvement. There are, thirdly, those whom the relativism of our time has affected so deeply that, though they have not rejected the Christian faith totally, see their task only in terms of maintaining ethical values within a general religious context, at the expense of the uniqueness of the gospel.

But the churches today are struggling to find together a concept of mission which includes the individual, churchly and societal dimensions and proclaims the gospel in its uniqueness in a way properly responsive to the experience and convictions of our fellow men and women.

One of our chief difficulties is that it has become harder to distinguish between "believers" and "unbelievers." There are indeed those who declare their unbelief. There are also people who have not yet come to a point of full commitment in faith and yet may be called believers because of their relation to Jesus Christ through their traditional knowledge of him and the thought-patterns of their society. Such situations give us all, Reformed and Baptists, a special pastoral task.

### **II. Mission and baptism**

Both our Reformed and Baptist traditions show a variety of attitudes and approaches to the problems referred to in the last two paragraphs. It has become clear in our conversations that we must seek ways for our churches to work together in the common mission of Christ. That is why we have placed our study of baptism in the wider context of the work of Christ and the mission and nature of the church. It is in the light of conclusions about the wider context that we can best approach our distinctive baptismal doctrines and practices; for we are agreed that they must not be treated in isolation and that our distinctive attitudes and approaches are not derived only from them.

### **III. Christ and his church**

Christ is the head of the church, his body. The concept of the body of Christ implies an understanding of the church as the community of those who are included in Christ, i.e., those whose existence is determined by what has happened in and to the body of Jesus in the event of his cross and resurrection. It expresses the intimate unity of Christ and his church

without obscuring the distinction of the church from Christ, and its subordination under him (cf. *One Lord One Baptism, Faith and Order*, 1960, p.25). It is Christ who in his mercy takes the initiative, an initiative, however, which calls for the human response of faith. An objectivism which does not pay due attention to this human response is as objectionable as a subjectivism for which it is the only important factor.

Neither individually nor together are the existing denominations simply identical with the body of Christ. Nevertheless, there is a connection: it is in the empirical church bodies that the body of Christ becomes manifest.

#### **IV. Baptism: act of God and act of man**

God's gift of grace in Jesus Christ evokes the human response of faith. In baptism the merciful God and the believing and confessing man meet. God acts in baptism by laying hold of man, and man acts by responding to the claims and promises of God's grace: in baptism man suffers death with Christ and is raised to a new life under the power of the living God, who liberates from sin and constantly renews by the Spirit. In this sense we agree that baptism is a powerful sign and an effective means of grace: in baptism administered with water, God himself, by his Spirit, is acting. As we look at baptism as being both act of God and act of man, we affirm the unity of the rite and the spiritual reality which it signifies.

#### **V. Church and baptism**

As the body of Christ, the church embodies the community of salvation-in-Christ (cf. Acts 2.47). Baptism is the sacrament of incorporation into Christ and therefore into his body, the church. It is more than admission into the membership of a concrete church organization. On the other hand, this incorporation into Christ cannot take place without admission into such a membership. In baptism man is united with both Christ and his body. Hence, rather than emphasizing in a negative, exclusive sense the proposition *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church no salvation), we should affirm the positive content: "in the church salvation!" We can set no limits to the power of Christ: he is leading men to salvation in his own way. Yet this does not at all entitle us to hold baptism in contempt. It is not that Christ is bound to baptism as a means of grace, but we in our faith are. The Word became flesh (Jn 1.14); it is to proclaim and underline this fact, and as a consequence of it, arising from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus our Lord, that the church celebrates baptism as an outward, visible action. "God became man in Christ. God's revelation took place in history in a particular yet universally relevant event. The outward sign reflects this particularity" (*Faith and Order*, Louvain, 1971, p.42).

#### **VI. Baptism and faith**

As to the dilemma of believers' baptism versus infant baptism, the scriptures do not address themselves directly to that question. Furthermore, they are not a "code of law" but a book of proclamation. In fact and directly the New Testament only speaks about those who come to baptism out of their own volition, confessing their personal faith (e.g., Acts 2-38, 41; 8.38). This is to be seen in the light of the missionary situation in which men hear the gospel for the first time and assent to it.

Those who reject infant baptism feel compelled to do so out of the conviction that the act of God in baptism is such (cf. IV) that it must be met, at the time of baptism, by an undoubtedly personal response of faith

from the one baptized (cf. Rom 10.9 ff.).

On the other hand, the New Testament makes it equally clear that the believing individual is not detached from the environment of faith. The "household" references (e.g. Acts 10.46, cf. v. 2; 16.15, 33; 18.8, I Cor 1.16) neither prove nor disprove that children were involved in the so-called "household baptisms"; however, like other texts, they do show that an individual believer is always part of a believing community, and is supported in faith by fellow believers (cf. Mk. 2.5; I Peter 2.9).

It is this consideration that brings defenders of infant baptism to their point: they are convinced that the act of God in baptism (cf. IV) finds its response of faith not only from the one baptized but also from the community of faith, which includes a child's family; it is in this community, the church, that a child develops as a person to the point where, later in time, he or she personally appropriates the response of faith.

Modern patterns of life have weakened and often destroyed traditional family ties, with the result that sometimes the community of faith as a context of infant baptism is missing, thus making it in many cases problematic. The number of children brought to baptism has decreased, especially in urbanized areas. However, infant baptism, if rightly practised, does not intend to "sanctify" or "crown" natural ties, rather it puts them into another perspective, upon another basis. Where parents sincerely and faithfully wish their children to be baptized, a new sense of family solidarity and responsibility is established and grows.

The churches which are convinced that they are entitled only to practise believers' baptism should keep in mind that their practice should not result from a disregard for the priority of God's grace and of the receptive, and not creative, character of human faith, which has to be expressed and confessed, not once for all, but again and again. The churches which are convinced that they are entitled to practise infant baptism should keep in mind that their practice should not result from a disregard of the call for personal faith, which call is involved in God's prevenient grace.

## **VII. Baptismal practice in the future**

We find ourselves led, by our agreements so far, to confront the difficult question whether Christians of Reformed and Baptist convictions who are members in good standing of their churches could recognize one another as both occupying the position of those who have received and responded to the grace of God in baptism as this grace is understood in the New Testament. Such a mutual recognition could only arise from:

- (i) an agreed understanding that a complex of elements, including baptism with water in the name of the Trinity, public profession of faith and admission to the Lord's Supper, are all parts of the reception of and response to this grace of God;
- (ii) the acceptance (still problematic) that this complex of elements could find place in the life of any individual either contemporaneously in the act of believers' baptism, where profession of faith, water baptism and communion come together in time, or over a period of time, short or long, in which (infant) baptism, profession of faith "at "confirmation" as it is often called), and admission to communion follow one another as separable stages in a process.

We do not yet know how to answer fully this question that we are led to face. Furthermore, such a mutual recognition would still leave unresolved

many questions, such as: whether the division in the stages in time is, or is not, entirely in harmony with the New Testament; whether infant baptism in itself admits to membership in Christ; whether delay of baptism for the child of a Christian parent is in some way a failure to minister God's grace as he intends it for children of Christian families, and so on. Despite this agenda of questions, we consider that our own dialogue and the changing situation in some of our churches are leading us forward in a positive manner.

In this context Baptists consider it as a hopeful development that in several Reformed churches a so-called "double practice" of baptism (according to which believers' baptism is as legitimate as infant baptism) is being discussed or (e.g., in the French Reformed Church) even has been introduced.

Where in consequence of this "double practice" parents do not ask for the baptism of their newborn child, an act of thanksgiving and intercession on behalf of this child and its parents has a place in the context of Christian worship. It is important that such an act should not be so ordered as to give the impression of being a substitute for baptism. Where in a church of "double practice" infant baptism is chosen, the question arises why baptized children should not be admitted to the Lord's Supper, and this is actually the tendency in several Reformed churches. In the case of this admittance, however, the meaning and functions of "confirmation" need reconsideration, within the unity of the several stages of "initiation."

In the same context Reformed consider it as an important fact that many Baptist churches admit other Christians, baptized as infants, to the Lord's Supper on the basis of their personal faith in Christ and when they are in good standing with their own churches, a practice which is a de facto recognition of their Christian status. Cooperation in mission frequently involves a similar de facto recognition. Likewise, Reformed see it as a hopeful development that a few Baptist Unions have expressed and even consummated membership in a larger church fellowship which has adopted the "double practice" of infant and believers' baptism for a united church without imposing it upon the local congregation (e.g., Church of North India).

We see the question posed at the beginning of this section and the changing situations described in it as part of the continual challenge confronting our Reformed and Baptist traditions, which we believe, under God, demands of us that we seek ways of overcoming those differences which are still church-divisive between us. In the following concluding sections in thesis form we make our suggestions for this search and emphasize certain areas of concern in which further theological work is required.

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## **Theses: The Holy Spirit, baptism and membership in the Church of Christ**

1. Both in the Reformed and in the Baptist tradition, there has been emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing men and women to salvation and on baptism as the sign of this regenerating activity of God himself. Many questions have arisen concerning the work of the Spirit and the sign of baptism and their interrelation. Some, in both traditions, would say that baptism has, in the words of R.E. Neighbour, "utility simply as a beautiful and expressive symbol of certain basal facts in the redemptive mission of our Lord Jesus Christ" (quoted by Dr Beasley-Murray in Baptism

Today and Tomorrow, 1966, p.14). Others speak rather of baptism as sign and seal or effective sign.

2. In our discussions we have made progress in relating these two viewpoints by considering that a sign exists for the purpose of communication. We therefore asked ourselves to whom the sign of baptism is addressed. Our answer is twofold. On the one hand, it is addressed to man with good news from God, of incorporation into Christ and the benefits of his death and resurrection. On the other hand, it is addressed from man to God with a confession of faith, by the church in all cases and also by the baptizand in the case of believers' baptism. It is precisely this dual sign-character of baptism which leads us to affirm its character as action of God by his Holy Spirit; for it is only by the Spirit that Jesus can be confessed as Lord (I Cor 12.3) and it is only by the Spirit that man is enabled to perceive the meaning of Jesus Christ for him (Jn 16.13-14). This, we believe, is the reason why in the New Testament baptism is not presented as a "bare" or "mere" sign, a beautiful and expressive symbol and no more, but is intimately associated with such realities as the forgiveness of sins, union with Christ, and the reception of the Spirit (cf. Acts 2.38; 19.2; 22.16; Col 2.12; Rom 6.1-11). The sign is not to be separated from the thing signified.

3. Hence, Christian baptism is to be understood in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit. In baptism, administered with water, the Holy Spirit himself is acting, who, as the supreme agent of the baptismal event, imparts to man the benefits of Christ's atonement. Baptism is a door to the treasure house of all the gifts of the Spirit prepared for God's people. But the act of entering through this door is also made possible by the Spirit who gives faith and unites with Christ. If a man does not possess the spirit of Christ he does not belong to him. Hence baptism in the name of Christ cannot be other than baptism through the Spirit.

4. Baptism is a powerful sign of God's saving grace and, by virtue of the action of the Holy Spirit in it, an effective instrument of grace, actually imparting what it promises: the forgiveness of sins, union with Christ in his death and resurrection, regeneration, elevation to the status of sonship, membership in the church, the body of Christ, new life in the Spirit, the earnest of the resurrection of the body. The New Testament looks upon the operation of the Spirit in baptism as the application of the fullness of saving grace.

5. Because of the Spirit's action, baptism is effective through personal response. While affirming the priority of the Holy Spirit as the ultimate agent of baptism, we also affirm man's response, that is, his faith, his confession, his obedience, which, too, are works of the Spirit. We refrain from defining the interaction between the Spirit and man's spirit in terms that go beyond Rom 8.16 ("the Spirit of God joins with our spirit in testifying that we are God's children", N.E.B.) but we affirm that it is precisely because it is the Holy Spirit that is at work in baptism, that man's decision, his faith and confession, his submission to God's claim upon his whole being is indispensable. Baptism is not an automatic vehicle of salvation nor does the Holy Spirit act as a physical force. "An objectivism which does not pay due attention to this human response is as objectionable as a subjectivism for which it is the only important factor".

6. Our conversations about the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism have impressed us anew with the need for mutually understanding our specific traditions and for refraining from imputing unspiritual motives to each other. The Reformed praise of God's prevenient grace is quite other than a concern for perpetuating the crumbling "Volkskirche" structures, while the

Baptist insistence on personal decision is quite other than mere individualism, or the zeal of the servants in the parable to separate, before the harvest, the wheat from the tares. The Reformed emphasis on the priority of God's grace in baptism and the Baptist accent on man's active participation in the baptismal event are, in a sense, complementary and as such contribute to ecumenical rapprochement.

7. Our conversations have made us realize again that the ecclesiological and sociological context of baptismal practice must always be carefully considered. Where Christianity is a tiny minority, Christian identity is easier to define, and the dividing line between the church and the world, believers and unbelievers, is sharply drawn. Hence initiation into the Christian community is less complex in that situation than it is where traditions carry the rich heritage and also the ballast of two millennia, or where the process of secularization poses a challenge not only to the Reformed practice of baptism but also to the realization of the Baptist concept of a "gathered community" of believers. Baptismal practice is also affected by the fact that family life today has in many places been deeply changed by modern individualism and technological civilization.

8. While we affirm the New Testament view of baptism as a once-for-all incorporation into the church, the body of Christ, we propose to view baptism in the context of the Spirit's total action upon the total life of the individual and the Christian community. Baptism, at whatever age administered, requires Christian nurture in the spiritual fellowship of the Christian family and of the congregation. This Christian nurture is as much the work of the Spirit as is baptism. To the question how the work of the Spirit in baptism is related to the work of the Spirit in Christian nurture our respective answers are different.

The Baptists hold that the work of the Spirit in Christian nurture begins before baptism and that baptism should only take place when the Spirit has engendered the beginnings of an answer of faith, however immature that answer may be.

The Reformed recognize this as an appropriate order of events in the case of adult converts, but also believe that the Spirit's work of nurture can appropriately take place after his work in baptism for those who are brought to receive baptism within the community of faith.

It thus becomes clear that the remaining disagreement between Baptists and Reformed should be discussed not primarily in terms of the meaning of baptism and its relation to the work of the Spirit, but rather around the question of how and where it may, in faithfulness to the scriptural witness, be affirmed that the Holy Spirit is at work.

9. In this same context of the Spirit's total work, while the Baptists also envisage the Christian community of faith, including the family of the baptizand, as the appropriate climate for the growth of faith, the Reformed churches attach special importance to the new covenant which, they hold, encompasses believers as well as their children. With regard to baptism, there is no vicarious faith, and yet the faith of the church, which precedes that of the individual, is the soil in which the faith of the individual is rooted, because the work of the Holy Spirit pervades the whole life of the church. We propose to regard the children of believers - Baptist and Reformed - as being involved in a process of preparation for the full privileges and responsibilities of membership in the church of Christ: they are already within the operational sphere of the Holy Spirit. This statement is in no way intended to obscure the general offer of the gospel but rather to emphasize the blessings of a Christian family.

10. Those who hold that this process of preparation is consummated in a common rite of confession, baptism with water, admission to the Lord's Supper at one specific point of time and those who embody the significant elements of this process by way of a temporal differentiation between its successive acts and phases may jointly recognize that, in either case, the Spirit willing, the result is actual membership in the church of Christ in the full New Testament sense of the word "member".

11. We are thankful to God for this mutual recognition of each other's good standing as Christians and for the fact that many Baptist and Reformed churches practise mutual admission to the communion of the Lord's Supper. On the basis of such mutual recognition, including in many cases open communion, Baptists and Reformed are being led to take much more seriously each other's convictions concerning baptism. We have already noted on the one hand the discussion or introduction of a so-called "double practice" in several Reformed churches. On the Baptist side, while recognition and admission to communion is generally grounded not on the fact of (infant) baptism but on the profession of faith of the Reformed believer, we note statements by some Baptist theologians, arguing that baptism is not an appropriate way of receiving into membership of a Baptist church those Christians who have already made a public confession of faith in Christ and have entered into the privileges and responsibilities of membership in some other Christian community.

12. Our conversations have not produced any arguments or excuses for indiscriminate baptism or for the relaxation of baptismal discipline. Reformed churches in particular should do their utmost to extricate baptism from the maze of unbiblical notions, misconceptions and false expectations which, in our secularized societies, often tend to distort and obscure the meaning of the sacrament. The majestic meaning of baptism - dying and rising with Christ, transference and assignment to his Lordship, the duty of discipleship, and commitment to service - should be brought with uncompromising clarity before the candidates for baptism or the parents. It must also be made clear that the baptism of infants without careful Christian nurture in the family and in the Christian community is not only meaningless but also against the will of God. At the same time, the Reformed churches should make pastoral provision for the growing frequency of adult baptism - the natural practice in a missionary situation.

In matters of baptism, as in all the other tasks of Christian life, both Baptists and Reformed must seek to obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit who, in the midst of the upheavals of this era, may employ the means of grace in new and unaccustomed ways. With this thought in mind we now turn to consider the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ and the ministries in the church, local and universal.

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### **The ministry of the church of Jesus Christ and the ministries in the church**

1. Along with many other churches Reformed and Baptists agree that "the church as the communion of the Holy Spirit is called to proclaim and prefigure the Kingdom of God by announcing the gospel to the world and by being built up as the body of Christ." This requires a "variety of activities, both permanent and provisional, spontaneous and institutional. To fulfil these needs the Holy Spirit gives diverse and complementary gifts to the church. These gifts are given by God to individuals for the common good of his people and their service..." (Faith and Order Paper No. 73,

World Council of Churches, *One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognized Ministry*, p.32, paras. 11 and 12).

The particular ministry of preaching the Word and administering the sacraments is thus seen in relation to the apostolate, the furtherance of which is committed by Jesus Christ our Lord to the people of God as a whole.

2. Agreement between Reformed and Baptists likewise exists on the point that already in the New Testament out of the multiplicity of gifts and ministries particular ministries become prominent, whose function it is to gather the Christian fellowship together through the preaching and teaching of the Word, to build up the church, to lead and train for service. Also related to this function is the presidency at the celebration of the Lord's Supper and at the observance of baptism (administration of the sacraments).

According to biblical interpretation today, no one structure of the ministry of the church can claim to be the one New Testament pattern of ministry. But from the New Testament the general principles may be derived for the ordering of the life of the people of God according to the gospel for the furthering of the service of the Christian community in the world.

Both Baptists and Reformed are averse to the sacramental concept of a ministerial priesthood and rather put the emphasis on the functional nature of the pastoral office and of the particular ministries. Together they reject the doctrine that a particular understanding of spiritual office and succession in office, bound with the historic form of the episcopate, belongs to the being of the church and is therefore essential to it.

3. In both Reformed and Baptist traditions the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments belong usually to the ministry of the pastor. Neither family of churches however ties these acts of service exclusively to the ordained ministry.

In the majority of Reformed churches, when an exception is admitted to the usage stated in the first sentence of paragraph 3, such a decision is juridically affirmed in the relevant council or court of the church in which the ministers and elders participate. Among Baptists and Congregationalists what is required is delegation by the local congregation since the congregation has and exercises in principle responsibility for all ministries. Usually it entrusts its pastor with the discharge of these particular tasks, but they are also frequently entrusted to lay people.

4. The function of presiding over the affairs of the congregation is in Reformed churches usually linked with the office of the pastor. Among Baptists it may be entrusted to the pastor, and there are places where this system is customary. But in principle among both Reformed and Baptists the various ministries on which responsibility rests for the building up of the congregation are so distinct that they can be entrusted to different persons, according to the gifts of the Spirit.

A distribution of ministries is not only grounded in the pragmatic concern for the division of labour (Acts 6.1 ff.) but above all in the understanding of the nature of the whole church as the body of Christ, in which the work of the Holy Spirit and the service of the church cannot be separated from the other. All ministries in the church are charismatic in nature, and all spiritual gifts are given for the common good (I Cor 12.7), "to equip God's people for work in his service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (Eph 4.12, N.E.B.).

5. While the doctrine concerning episcopal succession is rejected by Reformed and Baptists, there exists among both Baptists and Reformed in particular areas a type of ministry which superintends a number of individual congregations; among Baptists this ministry is never designated by the title "bishop", nor does it have juridical authority.

For both Reformed and Baptists, encounter with episcopally ordered churches can usefully raise the question as to the beneficial role of the pastor *pastorum* (pastor of the pastors) in the life of the church for the encouragement of the ministry.

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### **The church - local and universal**

1. The one church belongs to the one Lord. It is built, assembled and sustained by him. The *ekklesia* is the one holy universal Christian church. It is not an idea which floats invisibly over earthly reality; for the Word which sustains it became flesh (John 1.14).

2. The church is first and foremost an event, rather than an institution; the church "exists" in that it continually "happens", namely where the Lord effectively exercises his rule and where it is recognized and accepted; i.e., where the Word is proclaimed and believed, where the sacraments are administered and received, where the communion with the Lord and with each other is celebrated and upheld, and where the church in the name and in the power of the Lord goes out in witness and service. The purpose of the institutional elements of the life of the church is to give form and continuity to the events of the Spirit.

3. The one holy universal Christian church becomes concrete in the local congregation. The local congregation is not a sub-department of the one church of Christ, but manifests and represents it. This is generally recognized today, as e.g. by the Roman Catholic Church at its Second Vatican Council: "The church of Christ is truly present in all local gatherings of believers" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, No. 26). The local congregation cannot be bypassed by those who want to belong to the church of Christ, for this is where the church "happens." In the New Testament *ekklesia* frequently is the designation of the local congregation and as such it occurs in the plural as well (e.g. Acts 16.5; Rom 16.4; 16; I Cor 7.18; Rev 1.4).

4. At the same time the local congregation is necessarily related to other local In itself, it is not the universal church of Christ. The local congregation which isolates itself from its sister congregations impairs the character of the true church, and becomes sectarian. The local congregation cannot monopolize the Lord for itself. Such isolation, moreover, would cloud its vision with regard to the world as the one great field of mission. This call for mission unites the local churches and make them interdependent. The New Testament makes clear how congregations were in contact with each other. The collection, for instance, which Paul organized for the church of Jerusalem, expressed the common ties which united the churches in Macedonia with the one in Jerusalem (I Cor 16.1-4; II Cor 8.1-9; Gal 2.9 ff.).

5. Thus the wider church relationships (area, national, regional, world-wide) have ecclesiological significance. Church "happens" not only where Christians gather as a congregation, but also where congregations meet as such or through their appointed representatives. There also the

one Lord builds his one church. It is obvious that, if the local congregation needs an institutional form, this also goes for the wider gatherings of congregations. Just as the local congregation is not simply a sub-department, the wider church relationships are not simply a sum of their parts. The local congregation may be the specific manifestation of the one holy universal Christian church, but it is not the only one. Local church life should be receptive not only of encouragement through the wider church relationships but also of criticism from their side, as in their turn local churches can bring encouragement and criticism to the wider church relationships.

6. Baptists have always emphasized the church as the local congregation. The Reformed, without disregarding the special significance of the local congregation, attribute to the "wider councils" (presbytery, synod) which represent the church on the regional and national levels, their own specific value. If the latter is stressed too much, there is the danger of centralism: general rules and arrangements might dominate local church life and stifle it. Encounter with Baptists can help them to recognize this danger and to avoid it.

7. The Baptists too know the wider relationships on various levels: the national union/convention, the world alliance, for the purpose of common service and witness. Common service and witness as such have ecclesiological significance, and yet Baptists tend to attach to the wider relationships only pragmatic importance. They fear ecclesial superstructures above the local level. This could cause a failure in the understanding and appreciation of the fullness of the body of Christ in the world and thus result in missionary colonialism and ghetto-like existence; there is the danger of isolation and thus of spiritual poverty and myopia; the danger of exchanging the Holy Spirit for a club-mentality. Encounter with the Reformed can help them to recognize this danger and to avoid it.

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We do not wish to end on a note of such mutual warnings of danger! We rejoice together in our membership of the one church of Jesus Christ and we close our report and our fourth and final meeting with praise and thanks to him for bringing us together and for showing us more of his gospel and his grace.