

Consultation on Ecclesiology 29. - 30.10.2018
Finnish Ecumenical Council (SEN) / Council of Churches in Germany (ACK)
Recognition of Baptism: Response from a German Anglican Perspective
The Revd. Christopher Easthill

Introduction

I was not part of the last consultation in 2015. At that time, I gather you were interested in learning from our experience. But we too have continued to learn and review and reflect on our own experience with the – still incomplete – mutual recognition of baptism in Germany. We can now look back on just over 11 years of practice, 2015 the ACK held a study day to discuss what we can share and learn from one another in our baptismal practice, despite differences in understanding, and last year we used the 10th anniversary to listen to two reflections, one from a Catholic and one from a Free Church perspective.

It is a little difficult for me to give a “German Anglican” perspective, as there is no specific German Anglican theology of Baptism! Our Anglican churches in Germany cover the full range: we have Evangelical parishes and ones with a more catholic style of worship, and we have both Church of England and (US) Episcopal churches. But of course, as we live and worship and minister in Germany, the local circumstances and relationships play a role. Full disclosure, although I grew up in the Church of England, my perspective is particularly informed by Episcopal Baptismal Theology, that branch of Anglicanism into which I was ordained deacon, and then priest.

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Anglican Baptismal Theology

One criticism made of those churches that practice infant Baptism is that we don't take Baptism seriously enough. Nothing could be further from the truth. We take it very seriously indeed! Baptism is central to Anglican/Episcopal theology and always has been. Article 27 of the 16th century 39 Articles of Religion¹, the nearest thing we have to a denominational confession, says: "Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of the forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God."

[Our foremost 16th century theologian, Richard Hooker, wrote that Baptism "both declareth and maketh us Christians. In which respect, we justly hold it to be the door of our actual entrance into God's House, the first apparent beginning of life, a seal perhaps to the grace of election before received; but to our sanctification here, a step that hath not any before it."²]

The definition of our current Episcopal catechism echoes much of article 27: "Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God. ... The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit."³

In the Episcopal Church we refer not only to the three traditional orders of ministry: deacon, priest, bishop, but to four – the first order being the lay order conferred by baptism. One commentator calls the promises we make at our Baptism "the ordination vows of the priesthood of all believers."⁴

What are these vows? The candidates for Baptism, or their parents and godparents, renounce Satan, repent of their sins, and accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. All those present – candidates, sponsors and the whole congregation - recite the Apostles' Creed as a statement of faith. "Five questions follow the traditional recitation of the creed. (They) are intended to spell out the most important implications of living the baptismal life in our time and place."⁵

¹ http://anglicanonline.org/basics/thirty-nine_articles.html

² Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: Book 5*, Sect. 60.

³ *Book of Common Prayer*, (New York, The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 858

⁴ Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer*, (Church Publishing, Inc., 1991), 102

⁵ *Ibid*, 101

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1. Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers? (cf. Acts 2:43)
2. Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
3. Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
4. Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself?
5. Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

Our Canadian sister Church has added a sixth question: “Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God’s creation and respect, sustain, and renew the life of the earth?” I expect this to be added to our liturgy during the next revision.

While these questions are specifically Episcopal, though the Church of England has a shorter, optional form in their liturgy, they are nevertheless shared by all Anglicans in the form of our Five Marks of Mission⁶

We call these vows our “Baptismal Covenant.” It reflects our belief that Baptism gives expression to both divine grace and human responsibility. Baptism sets a person in a community with a mission. It makes each baptized person a sharer in that mission: the mission of God. As I said, we take Baptism very seriously indeed!

Critiquing the Mutual Recognition of Baptism

In one sense, the 2007 agreement recognising Baptism was not necessary, as according to our canons, my Church – the Episcopal Church – has for a long time recognised the baptisms of other Christian churches “with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” both as a requirement for membership or lay offices, and to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion.⁷ But it is not just about us. This is a mutual agreement and as Anglicans in Germany are very few in number, we have benefited enormously in our pastoral practice. It has become much easier for our baptised members to become godparents or to get married in other churches, or to work for church employers. Anything that requires a Baptism is facilitated.

⁶ <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/mission/marks-of-mission.aspx>

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

⁷ *Constitution & Canons*, (New York, The Episcopal Church, 2016), Canon I.17.1.a

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The 2007 agreement is also attractive in its simplicity, as it has just a few simple conditions:

“Accordingly, we recognize every baptism which has been carried out according to the commission of Jesus in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit through the symbolic act of immersion in water or through the pouring of water over the person to be baptized.”

Of course, it is now our responsibility to make sure that they are adhered to. Liturgical revision is a slow process in my Church, our current “new” prayer book dates from 1979. However, at our last general Convention in July of this year, we agreed to begin a process of revision and mindful of this agreement I authored an amendment to the resolution ensuring that any revision is “in accordance with our existing ecumenical commitments.” So, for example, the traditional Trinitarian formula must be maintained.

And as my final point on the positive side, I think there was a risk that the 2007 agreement could cement divisions between those churches that signed, and those who felt that it was a step too far. That this did not happen, is a result of the care that was taken, before my time, when the agreement was being prepared. Whenever we have discussed Baptism since, at the 2015 study day, when marking the 10th anniversary, or at many local and regional symposia, signatory churches, churches practicing only believers’ Baptisms, and churches without Baptism, have been invited to speak and present to ensure that it remains a genuinely ecumenical endeavour.

There are disappointing aspects too. On the one hand, the agreement is a huge step. In recognising any Baptism carried out in accordance with the agreement by whoever one of the other signatory churches authorises, whether ordained minister or lay person, we have accepted that all the benefits our own tradition associates with this Sacrament are granted by that other tradition. On the other hand, it was and is an incomplete step. Incomplete, because it does not include all the members of the Council of Churches in Germany, not even only those churches that baptise. And it is also incomplete, and is if we stopped mid step, as it does not include the invitation to partake in the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, in every Church that is a signatory.

Let me finish by taking a brief, but closer look at these two criticisms.

I am not always certain that the non-participating churches realise what a huge step those churches that with a high sacramental view of Baptism took in their willingness to recognise the others’ Baptism. I also think that the difference between “infant Baptism,” which while still the most common form in my Church is not actually normative, and believers’ Baptism is exaggerated. When we baptise infants, we expect and require their sponsors to support them by prayer and example in their Christian life. Our Prayer Book requires that “parents and

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godparents are to be instructed in the meaning of Baptism, in their duties to help the new Christians grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of his Church.”⁸ And the author Leonel Mitchell writes that “Christian initiation is more than simply a single event It is a process which includes both the liturgical rites and oral instruction of which the celebration of the sacraments is the focus.”⁹ It is our intention to form those who are baptised as infants into believers. The road to hell is paved, according to the proverb, with good intentions. This does not always happen. The families of some of the children I have baptised have never returned. But some have. And even those who did not come back, or not yet, were still instructed in the meaning of Baptism, in their duties to help the new Christians grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of his Church. And not every person who was baptised as an adult or young believer stays with their community either. I continue to hope and pray that the principle, ‘you do it your way, and I do it mine,’ to use a very untheological formulation, will one day apply more widely.

And that leads me to my second criticism. The recognition of Baptism is not complete until it includes the invitation to participate in the Eucharist, an invitation we already extend to all baptised Christians. These two “Gospel Sacraments” are just too closely connected to be separated for ever. To quote Mitchell again, “The participation by the newly baptised in the celebration of the eucharist is historically and theologically the climax and completion of the rite baptism.”¹⁰ Baptism is an ecclesial event. In my tradition, it takes place during the principal Eucharist of a Sunday, when a congregation is present because “the initiation of new members is the concern of the entire assembly.”¹¹ We baptise into the one Church, into the one body, not just into whatever denomination happens to be responsible for the ritual.

“Once for all in Baptism and week by week in the Eucharist, the Christian is united with Christ.”¹² In this case, my hope and my prayer is that I will experience the day when both Sacraments become outward signs of unity, or in the words of the Lima Document, that we hear the “call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship.”¹³

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, (New York, The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), 298

⁹ Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer*, 92

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 116

¹¹ *Ibid*, 99

¹² *Ibid*, 104

¹³ Convergence document of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, Baptism, 6