

Tuomas Mäkipää
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Dear friends,

The Board of the Finnish Ecumenical Council commissioned one of the sub-committees – Faith and Order Committee – to explore the possibility for a reciprocal recognition of baptism between the members of the Finnish Ecumenical Council. This was a fascinating task for a committee which is made up of relatively young people – there are no bishops. It might tell you something that the chair of the committee was given to an Anglican priest – representative of the smallest of the member churches.

Another aspect to the work is that the Finnish Ecumenical Council has a rather unique group of Christian denominations as full members: Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland, Orthodox Church of Finland, Evangelical Free Church of Finland, Catholic Church in Finland, Swedish Speaking Baptist Union of Finland, Salvation Army in Finland, United Methodist Church in Finland (Swedish speaking), United Methodist Church in Finland (Finnish speaking), Mission Covenant Church (Swedish speaking), Anglican Church in Finland, International Evangelical Church in Finland.

From the very first meeting it was clear that the committee wishes to produce a paper which could be agreed and signed by every member church. But not only this – it was hoped that those churches, communities and congregation, which are not yet member, might find it possible to take part in the work of the committee. Thus, for example, the Seventh Day Adventist were invited to participate in the work. The representative of the Salvation Army has been active member of the group.

To whom?

One of the first tasks was to find an answer to the question about to whom we writing this document. The history of the BEM-document was clearly in our mind as we prepared to work.

Though confident in ourselves, we did agree that we perhaps do not have the time to reach a full agreement. On the other hand, anything less sounded not enough. This in mind, there was no point in writing a paper for churches. We knew well our position.

The recent events and experience of many was that the function of baptism was not recognized in the society so well any more. This had become very apparent in the public debate on conversion of asylum seekers to the Christianity.

So we wished to write to the public.

The form

Writing to the public is quite a different challenge than to write to the church leaders. The first thing is that the writing must be short. If you have to turn a page, the writing is too long already. So we hoped to condense the text on one page (using visible font size!). Another aspect is the language. We wished to use language which would be easy to read without explanation.

The churches are constantly trying to make sure the language they use is contemporary enough to resonate with those they attempt to reach. Ecumenical documents are not like that but are fully loaded theological text, loaded with nuances and carefully set phrases. Perhaps the worst, ecumenical texts are full of sub-notes and references. Imagine two big corporates merging and they would make an announcement of the merge by publishing the agreements prepared by their legal departments!

All are invited

It was agreed that the text should be missional, focusing on what we can agree and rejoice together – though we decided not to use words like ‘rejoice’ as these kind of words are likely to put people off! It was further agreed that there would be no point of underlining the differences in our theologies.

The fact that in the working group were denominations which do not practice baptism, or where the baptism is received only after the personal profession of faith, made the work hard. How to word a document about baptism when there are congregations involved which do not baptize? This was especially challenging as we did not wish to say anything about ecclesiology. So in the end we decided to break the rules we had set to ourselves by adding one sub-note saying that the view taken in the document was not to state anything new on ecclesiology.

What is the significance of baptism?

The foundation of our approach was the WCC document ‘One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition’. The Revd Dr Tomi Karttunen’s presentation to

group gave us much to think. Some of the ideas were unlocked after a visit from the Professor of Ecumenism, Dr Risto Saarinen, who encouraged us to keep focus on areas of unity and to try say to less about what separates us.

The first four points in our proposed mutual recognition of baptism:

The first speaks about Christ as the redeemed who has reconciled the world with the Father.

The second point states that we are called to proclaim the Christ's Gospel with our words and deeds in all places at all times. It states further that the deposition of faith has been interpreted in different ways in the course of history. All christian communities (ekklesia) are to follow Christ, to have him as the pattern of life and to call people into his presence. Baptism joins us with the church.

The third point refers to Jesus' command to baptise and teach. It states that baptism is administered by using water in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Rather than explaining the various traditions, the document briefly states that the forms and manners of baptism are determined separately by each denomination. To set the context, this point recognised immersion and pouring as the most commonly used methods of baptsim.

The fourth point is functioning as a bridge between what has been said earlier and what is about to be said in the following (the last) point. That as churches and Christian communities we acknowledge our responsibility to teach about Christ and nourish the faith and Christian life. It makes clear that we have the responsibility take care of not only those who are our members but all who come to us seeking the truth. This point ends with an expression we said we would avoid: Together we rejoice of the salvific work of God.

The fifth (and the final) point starts by rejoicing (there's that word again) of the gift of baptism. However, the grace of God is not limited by baptism. We worship the Triune God together with those our brothers and sisters whose communities do not practice baptism. This last point makes reference to the letter to the Galatians '*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*' (Gal. 3: 26–28.)

Final words

A credible testimony on baptism is important in our time as the societies at large have do not care about nuances and little theological details. There's been debate in Finland over the genuineness of conversion and baptism of some asylum seekers. At the same time, many Finnish parents question (or even worse: do not even ask any questions) the purpose of baptism. At the same time the wider society seems to recognize the place of Christianity in the society and value church membership.

It seems to me that perhaps more than ever we as Christian churches need to give a common testimony that even our practice and tradition might differ, we do recognize each others as followers of Christ.

All our churches do welcome new persons to joint to seek the truth of Christ. It ssems apparent that while not all Christian communities baptise, not even after a personal confession of faith, all Christian communities do use a certain form of initiation – a rite which marks the welcome and entering in to the life of a church or community.

One of the aim the mutual witness of baptism is testify that we take seriously our task to teach and support. Baptism or reception into the fellowship creates a bondage, unites us with Christ, which we should be able to recognize and to give common witness.