

# The Society for Ecumenical Studies

## Baptism

A Baptist Perspective

*Faith Bowers, 27 April 1996*

### The Baptist Union of Great Britain

I represent a Union of interdependent, free, evangelical Baptist churches with a strong sense of the independence of the local church. Each local congregation has 'liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer Christ's laws'. This makes them very hard to represent! Our denominational structures depend on the will to work together, but we can only do that by the free decision of each local congregation to work in interdependence. The Union cannot *make* its churches toe a party line: if pushed too hard, they will simply leave the Union. Our ecumenical partners need to understand that this is always bound to affect the Union's response.

For us, the primary church unit is the local gathered community of believers seeking God's will together. This gathered community is usually a single congregation, although it may occasionally be a single church with two or more congregations meeting around the neighbourhood. Our baptismal practice is driven by our ecclesiology.

### Myself

Born in Croydon in 1939, I was baptized as a baby in the Church of England. A few months later, during the Battle of Britain, my mother and I were evacuated to Gloucestershire and into a Baptist household. Strange as my mother must at first have found those puritanical Baptist people, she experienced great kindness from them and spent the rest of her life in their church. So, apart from those first few

months, all my life has been spent in Baptist churches. I was baptized as a believer at the age of thirteen. Even then it did occur to me to wonder whether the infant baptism affected this and asked my minister. For him it was quite irrelevant. Later I discovered that some Baptist ministers would have been unhappy about such 're-baptism'. I understand about the offence Baptists can give in this. Yet I am glad that that minister did not jibe at baptizing me `again' as a believer. Without believer's baptism I should always have felt disadvantaged in the Baptist context. So I have a personal interest in this matter.

For many years I have been a member of Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in London. I am a Baptist historian, with a good understanding of Baptist principles, and theologically literate, though not a theologian. I am also much involved in Baptist work with the learning disabled. I have been a member of the Baptist Union Council since 1985, and am here today as the Secretary to the Union's Doctrine and Worship Committee.

### **The Context**

In 1893, when writing a *Manual of Church Fellowship*, intended for Congregationalists and Baptists, Silvester Horne tried to establish the Baptist interpretation of baptism. He recorded in his diary:

I visited Dr Clifford [a leading London minister] but could not get from him any manual that contained a statement of their view of baptism. I wrote to Dr Angus [principal of Regent's Park College] but received nothing more definite from him. My own Baptist deacons could not agree concerning it. Some thought it was an admission into the Church; some that it had nothing to do with the Church, but was simply an individual act. So I am left to try and make some principles for this degenerate denomination.

A century on we can provide something for our ecumenical partners to read. The Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain has recently produced a discussion paper, *Believing and Being Baptized* [52pp, £3-00, from BUGB, PO Box 44, Didcot OX11 8RT]. Most of what I have to offer today

is drawn from this booklet. Those who want the fuller reasoning of our theologians will find it there. I can only highlight some of the main points made.

Concerned about the offence we give by 're-baptizing' and unhappy with ecumenical calls to rally around mutual recognition of baptism, we examine the relation of the two rites, infant baptism and believer's baptism to each other, to salvation, and to church membership. For us the call to rally around recognition of baptism as a focus for unity is unhelpful.

### **The journey of new life**

Like other Christians we affirm that baptism involves interaction between the grace of God and human response in faith, and we see baptism as a very important part of initiation into the church. Candidates for believer's baptism will have first professed repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The relationship of grace between God and the believer precedes believer's baptism but it is deepened in this special moment of encounter.

Believer's baptism is a powerful witness to the effect of the gospel of Christ; it is an opportunity to testify to personal faith; it is a step of obedience to Christ; and, above all, is an encounter with God - older Baptist language spoke of a 'trusting place'. Whenever God meets us with his grace, personalities are transformed and relationships are given new depth. We associate various concepts with baptism: new birth, forgiveness and cleansing from sin, baptism in the Spirit, deliverance from evil powers, union with Christ, adoption as children of God, and membership of the Body of Christ. Immersion in water and rising out of it symbolizes especially death, burial and resurrection with Christ. It is a powerful multi-media event - and Baptist love it! It is hard to convey to those who have not experienced this form of baptism how emotive it is - and yet that is a factor in our response. Every baptismal service reminds us of our own baptism and is a time for renewal of our commitment to Christ.

Baptism is normally received near the beginning of Christian discipleship, either following conversion or marking a new, decisive step in a believing life. Thus for those who have grown up within the faith community it may mark the time when

we make our parents' faith our own and take on responsible discipleship for ourselves.

But salvation is a process. We have been saved - by Christ's work on the Cross; we are being saved - as we grow in relationship to God and in being conformed to the image of Christ; and we shall be saved - at the final appearing of Christ in glory. Baptism is a high point on that journey of salvation.

Let me offer an example of that high point. This description of believer's baptism was dictated by a young man with Down's Syndrome who finds various active roles in his church. He was asked to talk about what he liked about church and after a little thought surprised everyone by speaking of his baptism four Years earlier. It was still so vivid and important to him.

My church is a very nice place. I was baptized there four years ago, when I became like a Christian. My family all came to the worship of the church . . . I wore special clothes - white shirt and cream trousers and just feet. Maurice Johns led Barbara [the minister] into the water - it was open. Then he took me to the baptismal water. I go down the steps; Barbara was preaching. My hands together on my tummy. Barbara said `Father, Son and Holy Spirit take me', and I was baptized. Barbara tip me over under the water. My brother came in the water and helped me, wrapped me up to keep me warm. I changed my clothes. Afterwards all my family . . . and everyone helped celebrate of me - with nice cards and presents.

I am a member of the church. I like the communion service. I wear a little cross to show I am a Christian.

That young Christian is my son. We knew it had been an important occasion for him, but were fascinated all that time after to realize how significant it still was and how much he had understood about it.

In *Believing and Being Baptized*, we maintain that there should be no baptism without membership in a church which is a local manifestation of the universal Body of Christ. Some Baptists may be less clear about this, but Richard certainly makes that connection.

### **Can Baptists recognize an initiation rite for infants as baptism?**

Baptists have usually refused to speak of the baptism of a believer, who has previously been baptized as an infant, as re-baptism. From their earliest days English Baptists resisted the term Anabaptist, partly because of revolutionary Anabaptist activities on the continent but also because they did not see what they were doing as rebaptizing. With a growing realization that we need to be sensitive to others' feelings, our committee wrestled with this.

We considered three ways we might recognize infant baptism. First, the Lima Solution, recognizing both kinds of baptism as equally valid but expressing a different balance between grace and faith. Secondly, that believer's baptism is normative but infant baptism has a derived validity. Thirdly, that the infant rite may be recognized as true baptism but only when it is completed later by personal faith. We found none of these really satisfactory. We just do not find infant baptism sufficiently similar to believer's baptism to feel that we are repeating baptism.

We accept that infant baptism can involve and express some aspects of God's grace and human faith. We accept that it can be used by God as an effective moment within the journey of salvation. But we do not regard it as properly baptism according to our theological understanding; it follows that we do not see ourselves as rebaptizing.

Infant baptism is a *different kind* of baptism. Certain elements we find important are not there. The personal, faith of the person being baptized is missing. The sacramental drama is weaker. It is harder to deal with cleansing from sin in this context. The scope of the activity of the grace of God is limited. The infant is not yet ready to begin a new ethical lifestyle and receive the spiritual gifts for the ministry of the people of God. We find it hard to equate the two baptisms and so

do not feel that we are repeating baptism. Mutual recognition of baptism is therefore hard for us.

We can, however, share in mutual recognition of others as belonging to the Body of Christ. We can share in mutual recognition of spiritual realities which are associated with baptism. *Being in the Body of Christ, and not baptism itself, is the basis* for unity. I like the term for this recognition of fellow Christians coined by some early Baptists: 'treating saints as saints'.

Baptists recognize that infant baptism involves and expresses some aspects of God's grace and human faith. Many of us can recognize that the whole process of infant baptism, followed by confirmation as a sign of personal faith, marks initiation into Christian life and membership of the Body of Christ. We can affirm that God uses a variety of traditions to incorporate people into the Body of Christ. Similarly we can recognize the validity of Christian ministry in other churches and can embrace a common participation in the Eucharist without having to validate this through a 'common baptism'.

Ecumenical debate tends to go *from* the act of baptism *to* the nature of the Church and its ministry. Baptists tend naturally to think the other way, *from* the nature of the Church *to* the meaning of baptism. We believe that ecumenical discussion should begin from the nature of the Church, affirming the whole work of the Spirit of God in and through the church as the basis for our unity. We are happier with the recent work on *koinonia*.

As an aside, while on the infant rite, I want to register a slight protest at *Called to be One*, Appendix B 6 i, which says 'Baptists also have a ceremony of the presentation and blessing of infants which is sometimes only loosely connected with the whole pattern of Christian initiation'. Strictly this is true sometimes, but the inclusion of that phrase actually suggests it is more widely true, and B 6 iii does not mention that some infants' godparents may be lacking in faith. Our service of thanksgiving for the baby and dedication of parents and church to rear that child in the knowledge of the Lord does not have a long pedigree - only about

100 years - but for many Baptist parents, like myself, it is a solemn and significant occasion.

### **Implications for pastoral practice**

Baptist congregations will find it right in certain circumstances to baptize a believer who has already been baptized as an infant and we reject the term 're-baptism' for this. We think it needs to be openly admitted that we are living in a situation where there are two views of baptism. We should aim to work together with as much mutual affirmation about baptism as is possible. We want to share in the healing of a broken Church.

The Baptist Union advises churches to be sensitive about these issues and, in particular, to be careful about baptizing anyone previously baptized as an infant and later confirmed. We suggest offering alternative ways of renewing baptismal vows. But if the candidate persists in the request, we do not think that believer's baptism can normally be refused if the church meeting believes the request is made in good conscience in response to the Spirit of God.

We do not believe that churches should repeat believer's baptism.

While asking our ecumenical partners to try to understand why this baptismal issue is so difficult for Baptists, we also ask our own churches to tidy up their practice. We ask our churches with 'closed' membership to consider whether this takes sufficient account of God's work among all the Christian churches. We urge 'open' churches not to take into membership people who have never been baptized at all.

### **Local ecumenical partnerships**

Here Baptists favour the concordat approach, which normally recognizes different practices within the one congregation, using the appropriate form of baptism for the individual's particular denominational allegiance. If someone determinedly wants believer's baptism, then after careful consultation it may be agreed, provided that person moves to the Baptist roll. A Baptist/Methodist Concordat has

been operating for some time, and a similar agreement should soon be approved between Baptists and the URC.

In some cases, where such agreement proves impassible, Baptists in some LEPs may wish to exercise voluntary restraint and decline to baptize anyone previously baptized as an infant and later confirmed. The discussion paper suggests that, if a particular church wished to do that, the Union should still approve the constitution and baptismal policy. We ask ecumenical partners to understand that this kind of restraint could not be adopted as a general policy for LEPs. It is already an anomaly in Baptist practice that the Union has to approve local constitutions for LEPs - it does not happen for other Baptist churches!

### **Faith, not baptism, is essential for salvation**

Essential to being a Christian is the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. Those to be baptized as believers will already have come to acknowledge that. What really matters more than the mode is the Christological and Trinitarian centre of the acts of initiation. Baptism is not an optional extra, but it is secondary to faith.

### **One baptism for the remission of sins**

Although not happy about mutual recognition of baptism, which tends to push Baptists further to the margin ecumenically, we believe in one baptism despite diversity of practice. We recognize the validity of other denomination's initiation rites for them, and ask others to understand how difficult it is to deny believer's baptism to someone coming to faith, especially when they see their friends undergoing this dramatic rite, on the grounds that they have been there before. even if they have no memory of it. The ecumenically-minded minister may understand his refusal, but the potential candidate is more likely to feel excluded from something special.

Transcending all our imperfect perceptions and divisions, there is still one immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus through the Spirit, through which we share in union with Christ.



Initiation rites give difficulties, not least because of different understandings about the nature of membership in the Body of Christ. For Baptists, that term gives a sharp, clear focus of covenanted membership. And yet we know that our congregations always embrace a wider range of people. For us there is a significant difference between belonging in the sense of being part of the fellowship of the Body and belonging to the Body as church members committed to radical discipleship.

We may have difficulty in recognizing the initiation rites of other churches, but we can recognize brothers and sisters in Christ when we meet them.