

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

⁶² *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 1 (1844), 95.

⁶³ *Bapt. Mag.*, 33 (1841), 682; 35 (1843), 76; *Baptist Hand-Book for 1887*, p. 114; *Bapt. Rep.*, 6th ser. 2 (1843), 345; n.s. 2 (1845), 72; *Bapt. Rec.*, 3 (1846), 287.

⁶⁴ *Bapt. Rec.*, 2 (1845), 77-78, 184-86, 332-33; 3 (1846), 73; *Bapt. Mag.*, 32 (1840), 697.

⁶⁵ Minutes, 21 Feb. 1843.

⁶⁶ *Bapt. Rep.*, n.s. 4 (1847), 210; *Bapt. Mag.*, 39 (1847), 406.

R. CAWARDINE.

Towards a Consensus on Baptism? Louisville 1979*

Introduction

The study of baptism has long ecumenical history. At the Faith and Order Conference at Lausanne in 1927, baptism, together with many other subjects, was tabled as that which both united and divided. In Edinburgh in 1937, the report contained a statement about the meaning of baptism which was agreed, and which in a footnote was accepted also by the Baptist delegates as an agreed meaning provided it was applied to the baptism of believers. At the Faith and Order Conference in Lund in 1952, there was inaugurated a study of baptism which sought to relate it very closely to the understanding of the Church and the eventual outcome was a report entitled 'One Lord, One Baptism', which was commended by the Montreal Conference on Faith and Order in 1963, as an illustration of "how wide is the agreement among the Churches with regard to baptism". These efforts, however, had aimed mainly at seeking to reach a common understanding of the meaning of baptism and had not seriously been applied to the question of the possibility of mutual recognition of each other's baptism on the basis of such agreement. It meant, therefore, that the time was ripe in the late 1960s for a new discussion on baptism and indeed on eucharist. A further reason for new initiatives

*A slightly amended form of an article appearing in the American journal *Midstream*, to the Editor of which we are grateful for permission to publish it here.

was the Second Vatican Council which made possible the participation of Roman Catholics in the discussions.

In the light of this, a study on baptism was begun in 1967 at a meeting of the Faith and Order Commission in Bristol, England. Several consultations followed, and in 1971 at Louvain in Belgium, the Faith and Order Commission had before it a statement entitled "Ecumenical agreement on Baptism". It was quite evident from this statement, that there was the possibility—if not of consensus—then at least of convergence, not only on the meaning of baptism, but also on the actual practice of baptism. Because of this sense of hope, it was agreed that member churches of the World Council should receive this document and comment upon it. After consideration of the responses received, the Faith and Order Commission in 1974, in Accra in Ghana, produced a document entitled, "One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognised Ministry" (hereafter referred to as B.E.M.). The document produced at Accra was the outcome of a new ecumenical process—that of consultation with Churches and response. The 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Nairobi in December 1975 agreed that this process should be further developed and so the Ghana document was sent to the Churches for further comment and response. Faith and Order called together a consultation in Switzerland in the Summer of 1977 to consider these further responses of the Churches, and tried to point a way forward. This consultation produced a document entitled "Towards an Ecumenical Consensus" (hereafter referred to as F.O.84, i.e. Faith and Order Paper 84). Amongst its recommendations was one which stated that the time had come for the Faith and Order Commission to initiate a consultation with Baptists "to explore the issues involved in the debate on infant baptism and believer's baptism which remain many and complex and need to be addressed at this time if we are to move forward in the agreement on baptism". This particular recommendation was an important recognition that one approach in seeking a way forward towards mutual recognition of baptism was to confront, in a positive sense, the two practices of baptism in a consultation to consider what might be the best way forward. So far as the present writer has been able to discover, there had never before been in Faith and Order circles a consultation between those practising infant baptism and those practising believer's baptism on, as it were, equal terms. It is important to recognise that it was not a question of tabling of differences that lay behind the calling of such a consultation, nor indeed simply of recording agreements as to the meaning of baptism, but the intention was to see, how far within the two practices, there was a possibility of converging towards consensus and mutual recognition. The proposed consultation on baptism took place at Louisville, Kentucky, March 28–April 1 1979, hosted by the Baptist Seminary there. The document Faith and Order 84 was the basis of the agenda. British Baptist participants were G. R. Beasley-Murray, J. F. V. Nicholson and W. M. S. West.

Questions set before the Louisville Consultation

F.O.84 suggested certain issues which had been raised in the responses of the churches to B.E.M. in connection with baptism, issues which clearly needed to be discussed in some detail. It may be helpful in understanding the outcome of Louisville to indicate what these issues were. In a paper that was presented to the Louisville consultation these matters were tabled, in fact, in the form of questions.

1. *The meaning of baptism*

F.O.84 suggested that there is a notable agreement concerning the meaning of baptism. It is very simply put in three sentences which are inter-dependent.

The central meaning of baptism is incorporation in Christ and participation in his death and resurrection.

In baptism, the Spirit of Pentecost both gives and is given, so that we are united to Christ and with each other.

Baptism is fundamental and constitutive for membership in the Body of Christ and cannot be conceived apart from faith, personal commitment and lifelong growth.

The question that the consultation had to face was whether agreement really existed on the meaning of baptism.

2. *Christian Initiation as a Process*

The idea that Christian initiation is a process which includes baptism in water in the name of the Trinity, instruction in the faith, confession of faith, activity of the Holy Spirit, reception of Holy Communion, has been canvassed much over the past 30 years or so. The argument is that, whilst there is a variety of order within the various Churches in their initiation processes, there is nevertheless a recognition that in an acceptable process all the elements are involved. What is different is simply the order of the various elements in the process. But it may well be that such an approach begs certain questions, notably that of the doctrine of the Church. It may be argued that those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believers baptism start from different "models" of the Church. Those practicing infant baptism see the Church as an ontologically given community into which a child is incorporated, whereas Baptists and those practising believer's baptism, view the Church as a community which is constituted by the activity of God on the individual who responds consciously and believes and so becomes a participating member of the community.

The possibility that ecclesiological differences lie at the heart of baptismal differences was again a question that the Louisville consultation needed to face.

3. *The Christian Catechumenate*

There is an important point noted in F.O.84 to the effect that every child and young person whether belonging to a church practising

infant or one practising believer's baptism is nurtured by each of the Churches in very much the same way. The child will be set within the catechumenate of the Church, nurtured in the faith, will find his or her way into the worshipping life of the Church, and will come to a point where he or she regularly receives the eucharist. In other words, the only difference as far as the experience of the child is concerned, will be the varying point at which the ceremony of baptism happens in that child or young person's experience.

The question thus needed to be faced as to whether this similarity in Christian nurture says anything about differences on baptism.

4. *Authority and justification for the practice of baptism*

A further point that obviously figures much in the discussion on baptism is the Biblical authority for the practice. By this is meant the dominical authority for baptism. There is an assumption that our Lord did institute baptism, but as early as the Edinburgh Faith and Order Conference in 1938 the question was raised in ecumenical discussion about the strength of evidence for the institution of the sacrament by our Lord. This question is raised more clearly today by recent New Testament Scholarship. Yet it is not only the dominical authority for the sacrament itself, it is also the justification for the various practices of baptism that require consideration. How does each of the Churches justify its practice of Christian initiation? In the context of Biblical authority this raises the question not only of believer's and infant baptism but also the justification for other elements within the Christian initiation process, e.g. the laying-on of hands in confirmation and in other ceremonies in various churches.

The consultation at Louisville needed to reflect, therefore, upon the justification each tradition claims for its particular practice of Christian initiation.

5. *The meaning of faith*

Another aspect of the baptismal discussion which was raised in the responses of the Churches to B.E.M. was the relationship between the faith of the individual and the faith of the Christian community. This may turn out to be another form of the discussion about the primacy of the individual and the primacy of the community. No-one doubts that there can be a corporate faith of the Christian community. But is the faith that is spoken of in connection with baptism rightly to be discerned as that of the faith of the community or are we talking about the faith of the individual or both? Can it be said that when the practice of infant baptism takes place, the faith that is evident in that liturgical setting is that of the Christian community or that of the infant? Can we speak of the community having faith on behalf of the infant? There are those who would wish to argue that it is impossible to deny faith of some sort to the individual infant, but that in turn raises the question about the definition of the word "faith" itself. Some would make a distinction between faith and personal

commitment and it may well be that there needs to be some clear conversation on the distinction between these two concepts as well as their similarity.

The question, therefore, of the meaning of faith in connection with baptism was another point for consideration at Louisville.

6. *The blessing of infants*

It was clear also from the Churches responses that there are important questions being raised about the growing practice of the blessing of infants. What is the theological significance of the blessing of infants which is increasingly practised in the Churches, including those which traditionally practice infant baptism? It is evident that in some of these Churches infant blessing is taking place and baptism is being delayed until later on in life. The service of infant blessing takes place within the act of Sunday Worship normally in the morning worship when the whole family of the Church is present. It is a service in which the parents publicly thank God for the gift of a child and the gathered community shares in the thanksgiving. It is an occasion when the parents dedicate themselves to the responsible task of Christian parenthood and in bringing up the child in the nurture of the Christian faith. In many Churches the congregation itself makes a commitment, together with the parents, in undertaking responsibility for the nurture of the child. History has shown that this particular sort of service is one which has grown up within traditions that have abandoned infant baptism as a response to pressure for some sort of ceremony for the infant. This happened in the early history of Baptists in England in the 17th century and it also happened, as a matter of interest, even earlier in the middle ages amongst, for example, the Paulicians.

The consultation at Louisville could scarcely ignore this development in the practice of the Church and needed to make some comment upon it.

7. *Contextuality*

Finally the question also needed to be faced of the contextuality of our practices of baptism. Each person will tend to find the question of baptism raised somewhat differently from within his or her own context. The responses to B.E.M. and the subsequent discussion in Switzerland illustrated vividly that questions about baptism and its practice sounded somewhat different in the context, for example, of South America, than it sounded in England. It sounded different again in the fast developing new Christian Churches in Africa than in, for example, the German Democratic Republic.

It was inescapable, therefore, that contextuality was an issue for the Louisville consultation.

Conclusion

The Louisville consultation was thus presented with a formidable agenda by the Churches! How far the consultation was successful the

reader can judge from the report of the consultation which is published elsewhere in this issue of the *Quarterly*. What is important to note however, is that the questions which emerged in the preparation for the consultation and summarized above, were judged to be the right questions. At the very least, this is a hopeful beginning, for in the discussion of any vital issue, the essential starting point is to be able to table the relevant questions. All the present writer can do, in conclusion, is to set down his personal re-actions and reflections on the consultation and its outcome.

1. *I believe it to be of relevance to comment that it is a matter of importance that the consultation was held at all.* At first sight, this may seem self evident, but as I have indicated earlier previous ecumenical discussions on baptism in various theological contexts have tended to be composed predominantly of those practising infant baptism, with the believer's baptism group present somewhat (though by no means entirely!) as an "awkward squad". The setting up of the Louisville consultation recognised that the question of baptismal practice is not to be decided, of course, by weight of numbers for each practice, but by recognition of the equal importance of considering each practice.

The spirit of the consultation was one of openness and genuine desire to understand each other and the reasons for the different practices. My personal hope is that the consultation will be seen as the beginning of a dialogue and not as an end in itself. Ecumenically the baptismal divide presents a major difficulty both in union schemes and also in the lesser objective of mutual recognition. The impetus given at Louisville for these bi-lateral conversations between the two groups practising different sorts of baptism should be maintained.

2. *There were certain areas where, it seemed to me, the consultation was not able to move very far into the issues.* This was true in the question of ecclesiology, where the report tends to state the major points of agreement rather than develop the implications of them and discuss the points of difference. It was, perhaps, disappointing that the difficult issue of so-called "re-baptism" was noted as a problem and not discussed further along the lines, perhaps, of recent developing and significant thinking about the renewal of baptismal vows. Similarly, the meaning and implication of the so-called service of infant blessing was not really reached in discussion and report.

3. *Nevertheless there were certain points at which useful clarification and, indeed, progress, seemed to be made. These may be noted as follows:*

A. So far as I recall there was no serious challenge to the agreement recorded by F.O.84 on *the meaning of baptism*. If this definition can be agreed then at least there is a firm foundation upon which to build.

B. The Louisville consultation report records five significant

points of agreement. It is of note that, on the matter of *authority and justification for the practices*, there is a stated agreement that the practice of believer's baptism is the most clearly attested practice of baptism in the New Testament. This is what has been argued by Baptists over the years. On the other hand, the consultation agreed that the development of infant baptism is not only explicable within the developing Christian tradition but clearly witnesses to valid Christian insights. In this connection, it is also of considerable importance to note the fifth agreement to the effect that indiscriminate baptism is seen as an abuse to be eliminated. This refers not only to indiscriminate infant baptism but also to indiscriminate believer's baptism. Linked with the question of indiscriminate baptism is an important comment made in the report that the consultation rejected the doctrine of "inherited guilt" as a valid motive for infant baptism.

C. The consultation made a serious attempt to *relate together the personal faith of the individual and the corporate faith of the believing community*. In the second significant point of agreement this relationship is spelt out and it is made clear that whether infant baptism or believer's baptism is practised, both the personal faith of the recipient and the corporate faith of the believing community play a part. There is the beginning of an attempt to show that you cannot in either practice separate absolutely personal faith and community faith.

D. The emphasis in the report on *Christian nurture and the Christian catechumenate* picks up the point made earlier in this article relating to the necessity of taking seriously the point that Churches, whether they practise infant or believer's baptism, tend to deal with the child in its growing years in a similar way. There is no doubt at all that all branches of the Christian Church would be helped greatly both in their own life and in their relating together by a re-emphasis, perhaps even in actual terminology, of the concept of the Christian catechumenate.

E. The consultation, drawn as it was from different parts of the world, and representing as it did, different cultures, *emphasised the importance of contextuality*, even more than had been done in the responses from the Churches. It may be that the section of the report on contextuality will be shown to be the most significant of all. The conclusion of this section contains within it a sense of challenge to all the Churches to re-think "both paedo Baptist and believer Baptist practices (including modes) in the perspective of the missionary nature of the Church. This may well involve the mutual acceptance of several different patterns of initiation."

4. *Finally, the impression gained from the consultation was not only a real striving to mutual understanding but a search for perhaps a new approach to bridge the baptismal divide*. Glimpses of this new approach perhaps appeared, particularly at points when the consultation did not start the discussion from the point of view of either infant baptism or believer's baptism but tried to move the discussion

into a different dimension. For example, when the attempt is made to approach the understanding and practice of baptism from the perspectives first, of God's activity in Jesus Christ initiating the Gospel, secondly, of the community of the people of God receiving and communicating that Gospel, and thirdly, the response of the individual within that community to the Gospel, then the issue of baptism, whether infant or believer's, looks rather different. Maybe the baptismal issue needs to be approached by all Churches in this overarching perspective of God, His community, and the individual responding within that community and world. Whether the guarded optimism of the Louisville report in its Preface is over-optimistic, time alone will tell. But, for the present writer, who has been involved in Faith and Order work since just before the Lund Conference in 1952, to have been at the consultation and to have been a participant there, was a refreshing ecumenical experience. I arrived at Louisville apprehensive. I left hopeful.

W. M. S. WEST.

Baptism: Report of the Faith and Order Consultation, Louisville 1979*

*Report of the Consultation with Baptists initiated by the Faith and Order Commission and held at the Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, from March 28-April 1, 1979.
To the Standing Commission of Faith and Order*

Preface

The participants in the Consultation at Louisville are grateful for the opportunity it afforded for a frank exchange of views on the issues raised by the Faith and Order Paper No. 84. The brief report which follows is intended to be a comment in response to that document and therefore a contribution towards the consensus process on Baptism.

Although the divide between paedo-baptist churches and the Baptists evidently remains, there are signs of bridge-building from both sides. Conversations revealed that for some from both groups the bridge is sufficiently complete to allow mutual recognition of each other's practices. For others the gap remaining has narrowed sufficiently to permit mutual respect and growing understanding of the reasons for the different practices.

*Reproduced here by courtesy of the Commission on Faith and Order, World Council of Churches, Geneva.