

DECLARATION II

Rapprochement on Baptism

A Declaration

Baptism can be considered the pre-eminent sacramental sign that binds Christian churches together. Nevertheless, the history of the theology and practice of baptism has also been one of severe tensions. Some continue into our time. It remains difficult to overcome differences between churches that only recognize the baptism of those able to profess their faith (adult baptism, or 'believer's baptism') and churches that practice, sometimes almost exclusively, infant baptism. This became apparent in the course of the Council of Churches' Baptism Exploration and Recognition Project talks. Nonetheless, we, the signatories to this declaration, representing churches on both sides of the debate, have come closer together.

Historical Background With regard to the biblical background: we endorse, following the statement on baptism of the Faith & Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, that 'baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents' (Lima 1982, §11). Certainly, from the earliest days of the Christendom, children were also baptised. Usually, an entire household was baptised alongside the one who had converted to the new faith and had undergone baptism. So it centred primarily on the faith confession and baptism of that convert. Only in the course of later centuries did infant baptism gain prominence: children could not be left under the curse of sin and death, and baptism was understood to be the sacrament of forgiveness and renewal. But also the self-evident connection between church and society in the 'corpus christianum' played a role therein.

And so infant baptism became the dominant pattern. The moments of baptism and of a personal confession of the faith became separate and distinct ones along life's path. Part of the Reformation movement, particularly the Anabaptists and Mennonites, wished to return to the 'best attested' biblical practice, baptism on the basis of a personal testimony. This was regarded as purer: baptism not as a standardized element of incorporation into the Church but as a validation of a personal, conscious choice for Christ.

Two traditions emerged alongside each other: that of infant baptism and that of adult baptism. What is more, they were often opposed each other, as practically mutually exclusive. This clash has caused much pain and embarrassment. How can we begin to overcome it? Rapprochement between these traditions begins with recognizing that we have a common problem, the bitter fruit of centuries of church history.

Growing Mutual Appreciation In our discussions it became clear that for both standpoints – adult baptism and infant baptism – much could be said.

Those who hold to 'believer's baptism' (Mennonites, Baptists, Evangelical Christians) accept that quite valid ideas underlie the practice of infant baptism. The thinking that it is God who chooses us and not we who choose God is attested in a ritual which precedes and anticipates the moment where one is capable of choosing for oneself. The desire to mark, in a powerful and sacramental way, that God has blessed a child, was deemed quite legitimate by those committed to adult baptism; equally, the desire of parents to give expression to their gratitude for the gift of new life. Therefore one sees, frequently in (Ana)Baptist circles, in

the place of infant baptism, another rite of 'entry' into life, the 'dedication of a child': a child is dedicated to God and receives a blessing; words of gratitude are spoken for this gift; the parents promise to raise their child with love and in the faith.

On the other hand, those who come from churches which (mainly) practice infant baptism recognize that baptism and the confession of faith are fundamentally related. This is made quite explicit in 'believer's baptism.' There is, of course, also a confessional quality in infant baptism: such a baptism presupposes the profession of faith of the parents and the faith community. Furthermore, a child's baptism anticipates subsequent steps of catechesis, confirmation and a conscious entry into church membership. Still, those who hold to infant baptism must admit that sometimes these 'subsequent steps' are never taken and that there is often little or no explicit affirmation of the infant baptism previously received. Adult baptism holds the aspects of baptism and profession of faith together in an enviable way! No wonder that in churches which practice infant baptism, members often express regret that they had no say in their own baptisms, and therefore request, on their own confirmation or entry into church membership, to be baptised.

Lifelong Growth Mutual appreciation of the relative merits of both baptismal practices is increasing. Moreover, on both sides there is a growing conviction that the baptism cannot be confined to any single moment, but is part of lifelong growth in Christ (Lima, §9). Infant baptism is the starting point on a pathway, upon which many steps follow, in the process of appropriating the faith. Adult baptism is associated with a definite confessional moment, but assumes a prior period of 'growth toward it', and also a continuation of growth in faith thereafter. This image of a lifelong faith journey puts the sometimes exaggerated contrast between the two positions into perspective. According to a report of the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church, the pattern of baptismal initiation involves three elements: catechetical formation, baptism with water, and participation in the life of the church. These elements are present in the lifelong process of becoming Christian (JWG, Eighth Report 2005, Baptism, §52).

Unrepeatable? In most churches, baptism is regarded as a sacrament of sign that a person can receive only once: it is unrepeatable. Occasionally, this unrepeatability is called into question. As noted above, some, in churches where infant baptism is the norm, regret that they could not make the conscious choice to undergo this most significant ritual of 'incorporation into the church of Christ.' The question of whether one can be baptised again repeatedly emerges when candidates prepare for confirmation or reception into the church. In contemporary western culture, where so much emphasis is placed on personal experience, such demands have grown in strength. Churches which hold to a single and unrepeatable infant baptism now seek to meet these concerns by giving greater attention to moments and rituals of baptismal renewal and remembrance. This effort is not about repetition of baptism but about recalling one's original baptism and being reminded again of its significance.

The request to be re-baptised is also, of course, regularly raised in the 'believer's baptising', or 'baptising' churches¹. It arises frequently when someone who was baptised as a child

¹ Though most Christian churches are 'baptising churches', in the sense that they administer baptism, whether primarily to infants or to those of age to profess faith, in this document we use 'baptising church' specifically to refer to those churches that (1) emphasize 'believer's baptism' of those of age to profess their own commitment to the faith and (2) sometimes engage in re-baptism of those baptized as infants. The Dutch term

becomes a member of such a church. Among the 'baptising churches' which took part in this exploration of baptism, there is an appreciation of how such re-baptism remains a sensitive issue for their sister churches committed to infant baptism. They therefore pledge to exercise prudence. The 'baptising churches' cannot and do not want yet to move to a general acceptance of infant baptism. But in a certain number of their congregations, if a person baptised as an infant joins, re-baptism is not required. In a number of congregations, belonging to these 'baptising churches', experience is being gained with a form of 'open membership': where membership had previously been strictly tied to a 'believer's baptism,' now those who had been baptised as children, but who have strong misgivings against being re-baptised, are allowed to be full participants in the life of the church communities. Further reflection on such forms of open membership seems of importance for the future.

In 'baptising churches,' sometimes the request for a new baptism is considered to be quite legitimate. When someone baptised as a child, upon transferring to a baptising church, expresses a desire to be baptised on their admission to a church, there may be pastoral reasons to grant this wish. A decision in such cases deserves thorough preliminary pastoral investigation. The 'baptising church' informs the church where the believer in question was a member, and so makes an attempt to corroborate whether a sincere, conscientious decision was made.

Is baptism necessary? 'Baptism can be considered the pre-eminent sacramental sign that binds Christian churches together': so we began this declaration. Most churches share the conviction that baptism is an indispensable seal upon one's belonging to Christ's Church. Churches that consider this virtually self-evident nonetheless recognize that there are faith communities that do not observe this sacrament and yet wish firmly to stand in the Christian tradition (the Salvation Army, the Society of Friends). There are also churches, such as the Remonstrant Brotherhood, which accept baptism as 'the sign of incorporation into the Church of Christ', yet nonetheless do not see it as a strict precondition for membership (here, too, we may speak of a form of 'open membership'). All this calls us to keep in mind that God's mercy transcends the sacrament of baptism alone.

One Spirit and One Baptism There is a marked rapprochement between churches, notably between those churches that practice infant baptism and churches of the (ana)baptist tradition(s). We, the faith communities involved in this process of exploring baptism, note this with gratitude and joy. We hope, through further broadly ecumenical or bilateral contact, to continue to discover, more and more, that it is the one Spirit that works in the various baptismal practices, with all their strengths and weaknesses, and guides us along old and familiar paths but also, sometimes, on new and surprising ones.

The churches that undersign this declaration commit themselves, on the basis of what is proposed above, to continue our conversation on baptism.

englische Übersetzung der Erklärung der Annäherung im Verständnis der Taufe zwischen Kirchen, die Kinder taufen, und Kirchen, die ausschließlich Erwachsene taufen

Quelle: Rat der Kirchen in den Niederlanden

<http://www.raadvankerken.nl/pagina/362/home>

'Dopers' translates mainly to 'Anabaptist' or 'Baptist', which, in English, are too specific to encompass the contemporary diversity of churches that hold to this baptismal practice and theology.