

United and Separated in Baptism: Points for Consideration in the Further Process

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To me fell the honour and responsibility of concluding the seminar. Hence, I have attempted to summarize the gist of the deliberations and insights of those two days, the challenges ahead and possible ways towards meeting them. Naturally, although I have endeavoured to reflect the views of the seminar rather than my own, the selection of which aspects to emphasise and the inferences drawn from them, is solely my own responsibility.

A crucial issue – Mutual respect is fundamental

It is sometimes claimed that “Mission is the mother of theology”. At least, the reflections on the situation in Mali showed that important issues are involved. Christians still struggle for a common understanding of theological questions such as:

- What happens in baptism?
- Who acts in baptism?
- What is faith?
- Is faith mainly cognitive in character, or is it basically relational?

- What is the relationship between faith, baptism, and the Holy Spirit?

From the deep and lasting divisions within the church, it may be deduced that there is more than one way to understand the Scriptural material. There is no reason to suspect that adherents of one view are less sincere or diligent in their Bible studies than others. Thus, mutual respect is fundamental:

Proponents of believers' baptism need to accept that infant baptism is valid for many. Implicitly, this is done by the very act of recognizing churches practicing infant baptism as Christian churches. Still, by baptising people who were baptised as children, that recognition is rejected. The practice is understandable and logical, given the premises, but it might be questionable whether it is in accord with the empathy recommended by St. Paul.

Proponents of infant baptism need to accept that infant baptism is invalid for many. Thus, the same call for empathy might imply refraining from using terms like "re-baptism" when someone decide for baptism, although having been baptised as an infant. Even though, once more, given the premises, the use of the term is correct and logical, it disregards that the act is perfectly valid from another point of view. If infant baptism is invalid, it is no re-baptism, merely baptism.

Baptism makes a difference

There is a reason why the New Testament repeatedly narrates that people are receiving baptism and emphasises the need for believers to be baptised. Christians from various traditions would agree that something happens in, or in connection with, baptism. Regardless of how baptism is viewed, most Christians would agree that there is a difference between "before" and "after" baptism; that not everything remains just the same.

Lutherans and Baptists both enjoy referring to 1 Pet 3:21: "And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience." (NLT) However, while Lutherans would cite the first half of the verse, about salvation in baptism, Baptists would proclaim the second half, of the response – or confession

– from a clear conscience. What if both parties agreed on reading the whole versed together, and jointly reflected on its theological and practical implications? Is it possible to go one step further than what I said above? Would it be conceivable that proponents of differing views on baptism agreed on seeing and describing baptism as an act of God on the one hand, and as a confession of faith on the other?

There is a need for a Christian anthropology on children

Questions concerning the nature of faith play a vital role for the disagreements on baptism. Still, differing views on children and their relationship to the Kingdom of God may be of equal importance for the conflicts. Little has been accomplished towards the formulating of a Christian anthropology on children. Thus, disagreements on baptism may stem from differing views as to whether children are able to believe in God, whether or not children need salvation, and, if children already are God's children, why and when they cease to be so.

Seen from a Lutheran perspective, it appears that the practice of infant baptism has served as a corrective to a solely cognitive understanding of faith, and the assertion that children belong to God showing evidence of a shallow understanding of sin. Seen from a Baptist perspective, though, infant baptism is being imposed on defenceless children. Would it be advisable to begin from a new angle, jointly reflecting on a Christian anthropology on children, and use those findings to illuminate the question of baptism?

Europe is an exception, not a rule

The European impact on the history of the Christian church is considerable, and the heritage significant. That does not mean, however, that its influence necessarily is benign, nor that the European brand of Christianity should be regarded as the universal norm. Rather, considering global Christianity, the particular European combination of Constantinian Christendom and the Enlightenment, with its ensuing folk church tradition, nominal believers, secularization and privatization of religion should be regarded as an exception rather than the norm.

We have exported our differences, and have a responsibility

for the consequences. The denominational differences are largely of European making. Although the reasons for schisms may have been perfectly valid, their roots nevertheless are found in the specific European historical context, and should not be regarded as an unavoidable part of today's Christianity.

Each tradition needs to self-critically assess their beliefs and practices

Regardless of which church we belong to and which position we take on the issue, a critical assessment of our beliefs and practices is overdue. Although it always is easier to solve the problems of others, I prefer here to limit myself to one particularly problematic aspect of my own Lutheran tradition, that of the discrepancy between baptismal frequency and church attendance, leaving the problem of others to be dealt with by their own self-examination.

In Norway, baptised members of the State Church comprise more than 80 % of the population. Still, average church attendance on any given Sunday hardly exceeds 2-3 %. The realization and regret of this sad paradox is nothing new; it was strikingly expressed as early as 1765 by Brorson in the hymnal "O Fader, la ditt ord, din Ånd hos oss få overhånd" ("Oh, Father, let your word, your Spirit prevail among us"): "Baptised people exist in multitudes, but an ardent faith is scarcely found" ("Av døpte vrimler stad og land, men hvor er troens brann?"). It is no easy task to reconcile the biblical teaching on baptism with the actual practice of the church. The discrepancy between statistics and practice represents a scandal, not only in the eyes of those Christians who reject the validity of infant baptism.

Learn unity in diversity – The ancient church as a possible role model

Disagreement on baptism is not a recent phenomenon. The debate dates all the way back to the ancient church. However, while Church Fathers like Tertullian deplored the practice of infant baptism, we have no evidence suggesting that the variations in outlook and practice were seen to be of such a fundamental nature that continued church fellowship was rendered impossible. Hence, although it would be far from ideal, it should be possible to have two baptismal practices within the same church.

Sharing a common understanding is more important than having a common view. There is no contradiction between working towards a common view and learning to live with differences. The local Christians will sooner or later be confronted with differing views on baptism, and will need to know why they exist, what the issues are and how they are argued, in order to have a solid base on which to found their own convictions and practice. Through this process, the members of the emerging Fulani church will build competence for living in a pluralistic society.

Where do we go from here?

The decision of the baptismal theology and practice of the Fulani church ultimately rests with the Fulani Christians themselves. Unfortunately, no such body exists yet. However, the founders of the church, the pioneer missionaries, set the pattern for the future development. It is impossible to reverse the clock, pretending that the future Fulani church will be able to start with “blank sheets” when considering the issue.

In the era of Christendom, denominational divisions were a grave problem, but could still be tolerated. In today's pluralistic society, with the church losing its dominant status and former privileges, the division of the body of Christ becomes intolerable. Hence, European churches acknowledge the need to cooperate over denominational borders. Indeed, in several countries in the world, Protestants have been forced to unite, and appear to be grateful in retrospect.

To return to a situation with denominationally defined churches in the Fulani situation would not only negate the unity in Christ, but even leave the Fulani Christians with an intolerable dilemma, deciding which mission to join and which to reject. Although I cherish the Lutheran tradition and am convinced of the biblical validity of infant baptism, I question whether it might be preferable to refrain from exercising the practice of infant baptism in the Fulani context. If the alternative to a moratorium on infant baptism is to abolish the current cooperation between African Baptists and Norwegian Lutherans, I find the moratorium as the lesser evil. If such a moratorium on infant baptism were to be enacted, the Fulani practice of blessing infants may serve as a fru-

itful model for an alternate rite, acceptable for Christians of both convictions.

My preference, though, would be that both sides would co-exist within the same structure, continuing to live according to their convictions. By acknowledging that disagreements exist, by jointly studying Scriptures and seeking agreement, by refraining from interfering with the practices of the others, the unity in Christ transcending all human boundaries will be visibly and beautifully expressed. It may seem merely a dream, but even dreams may one day become reality.

Noter

This is an amended and enlarged version of my conclusive comments, called "10 points for the further process", delivered at the seminar on mission in a post-confessional context, September 7, 2007.

For more on the actual situation in Mali, see the articles above by Johansen and Bergh.

Brorson, Hans Adolph, "O Fader, la ditt ord, din Ånd hos oss få overhånd", Verse 2, 1765, in Norsk salmebok, Oslo: Verbum, 1985, No. 530.