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## Baptism

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# Oxford Handbooks Online

## **Baptism**

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## **Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter surveys commonalities and divergences with regard to the theology and practice of baptism that are reflected in the World Council of Churches convergence document on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, and considers in particular the Anabaptist, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Quaker, and Reformed traditions. Major topics treated include: the role of faith with regard to baptism, interconnections between baptism, faith, and justification; the relationship between baptism and patterns of initiation in various traditions; and elements of the ancient catechumenate in contemporary rites. The chapter argues that in the expansive theology of baptism in the catechumenal tradition baptism is understood to be transformative and regenerative, eucharistic in orientation and meaning, eschatological in orientation, and ecclesial in context. The chapter finally summarizes the achievements of ecumenical dialogue and identifies remaining issues.

Keywords: baptism, Catholic, catechumenate, faith, initiation, justification, Lutheran, Methodist, Orthodox, Reformed

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## **Introduction**

Although substantial convergences on the theology and practice of baptism exist among various Christian traditions, not a single point remains uncontested by one group or another. While most share substantial agreement on the manner and once-for-all character of baptism, disagreement exists on whether baptism in certain traditions is truly baptism. Most Baptists do not regard infant baptism as being baptism at all, and so do not regard later adult baptism of those baptized in infancy as a repetition of baptism.

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From an entirely different perspective, some Orthodox have baptized Catholic converts to Orthodoxy, believing that sacraments can only be validly administered by the true church—that is, the Orthodox Church.

Most traditions agree that baptism is administered with water and the words ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the the Holy Spirit’, although this does not exclude a variation of words in the Eastern liturgies where the catechumen turns towards the East and the priest says: ‘The servant of God, N., is baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.’ Even the traditional invocation of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Spirit is contested today when some ministers change it to gender-neutral language such as ‘creator, redeemer, sanctifier’. In 2008, the Catholic Church’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), with the approval of Pope Benedict XVI, declared the formulas, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Creator, and of the Redeemer, and of the Sanctifier’ and ‘in the name of the Creator, and of the Liberator, and of the Sustainer’ to be invalid, and required persons baptized with those formulas to be baptized ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the the Holy Spirit’ *in forma absoluta*, that is, with no conditional acknowledgement of the previous ceremony (CDF 2008).

Most traditions practise water baptism either by immersion or by effusion (pouring water so that it flows over the candidate’s head). However, Quakers emphasize the activity of the Holy Spirit and reject water baptism (Scott 2008, 81–88). The Salvation Army considers its ‘enrolment’ or ‘swearing-in’ procedure for Salvation Army membership as equivalent to water baptism (Robinson 2008, 173–180). Many traditions agree that immersion in water is the mode that is most expressive of the meaning of baptism, signifying participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, even if they do not require it. Baptism by effusion was practised by General Baptists from 1609 until approximately 1630, and even today many Baptists, while regarding immersion as the normative practice, still recognize the baptism by effusion of a believing disciple.

The major ecumenical convergence document on baptism is *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), published by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1982. The text presents a theology of baptism in ten paragraphs under three headings: ‘The Institution of Baptism’; ‘The Meaning of Baptism’; and ‘Baptism and Faith’. ‘The Meaning of Baptism’ includes paragraphs on participation in Christ’s death and resurrection; conversion, pardoning, and cleansing; the gift of the Spirit; incorporation into the body of Christ; and the sign of the kingdom. Convergence is principally achieved through reference to biblical texts citing the origin of baptism in the dominical command (Matt. 28:18–20) and its meaning as ‘participation in Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Cor. 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a re-clothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Pet. 3:20–21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor. 10:1–2) and a liberation into a new humanity in

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which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27–28; 1 Cor. 12:13)' (Faith and Order 1982, Baptism, n. 2).

Faith is required for the reception of the salvation embodied in baptism (Faith and Order 1982, Baptism, n. 8) and baptism 'implies confession of sin and conversion of heart' (n. 4). Baptism brings Christians 'into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place' (n. 6) and 'gives participation in the community of the Holy Spirit' (n. 7), who is 'at work in the lives of people before, in and after their baptism' (n. 5). The baptized receive a new ethical orientation (n. 4), and responsible membership in the body of Christ requires personal commitment (n. 8). The eschatological orientation of baptism is evident in the hope that in being buried with Christ and raised to a new life the baptized will 'ultimately be one with him in a resurrection like his' (n. 3), and in baptism's anticipation of 'the day when every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father' (n. 7).

The union with Christ forged in baptism has important implications for Christian unity since there is "'one baptism, one God and Father of us all" (Eph. 4:4–6)' (Faith and Order 1982, n. 6). Baptismal unity within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church witnesses to the healing and reconciling love of God and calls the churches 'to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship' (n. 6). As noted in the accompanying commentary to paragraph 6 of the text, 'The inability of the churches mutually to recognize their various practices of baptism as sharing in the one baptism, and their actual dividedness in spite of mutual baptismal recognition, have given dramatic visibility to the broken witness of the Church.' Thus, the need to recover baptismal unity is identified as being at the heart of the ecumenical task.

Attending to what is said and to what is left unsaid, a certain ambiguity can be discerned in the text with respect to the effect of baptism, on account of the text's incorporation both of the language of sign and of verbs indicative of baptism effecting change in the baptized. The effects of baptism are described as 'images' rather than as realities occurring in baptism. For instance, the first sentence of the section on 'The Meaning of Baptism' says: 'Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ' (Faith and Order 1982, Baptism, n. 2). It refrains from saying something stronger, such as that baptism creates new life through Jesus Christ. Baptism is also 'a sign of the Kingdom of God and of the life of the world to come' (n. 7) and 'a sign and seal of our common discipleship' (n. 6). However, the document does speak of 'participating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' and of Christians being 'immersed in the liberating death of Christ where their sins are buried, where the "old Adam" is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken' (n. 3). It specifically calls baptism 'an act of justification (Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 3:21; Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11)' such that 'those baptized are pardoned, cleansed and sanctified by Christ' (n. 4).

While the text asserts that 'Christians are brought into union with ... the Church of every time and place' through baptism (Faith and Order 1982, Baptism, n. 6), it says nothing about the relationship between actual church membership and baptism. It remains silent

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concerning the manner of baptism, the formula for baptism, and the age at which one should be baptized, although it speaks of the need for personal commitment for 'responsible membership in the body of Christ' (n. 8). The methodology of achieving convergence through the citation of biblical texts raises the possibility that divisions among Christians regarding baptism result not only from differing traditions of baptismal practice but also from differing interpretations of the Scriptures.

## Baptism, Faith, and Justification

Major differences in the theology of baptism centre on the effect of baptism, specifically whether justification occurs through baptism, and if so how this is related to justification by faith. This includes the issue of whether or not conscious, adult faith is required for baptism, and thus whether the baptism of infants is truly baptism. Although the issues of disciple baptism and whether justification occurs within the baptismal event are interrelated, they do not exactly coincide, for some confessional groups would deny a justifying effect to baptism regardless of the faith which accompanies it, while other groups would attribute justification to baptism without explicit, adult faith.

### Faith

All Christian traditions consider faith to be necessary for baptism. They disagree as to whether the faith of a disciple making a conscious and mature commitment, ready to share God's mission in the world, is necessary, or whether the community can profess faith on behalf of an infant. For example, Baptists require that every baptism include a personal profession of faith by those being baptized and that the baptized be believing disciples, of an age to assume responsibility for bearing witness to the faith.

In the conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and Lutherans (1986–1989), Baptists declined 'to regard the baptism of infants and baptism of adults as two forms of the same baptism' (B-L 1990, n. 90). While the Lutherans claimed that 'God's gracious action in baptism remains valid even without faith', Baptists asserted that they could not recognize a biblical foundation for 'such an interpretation of baptism as a visible word of prevenient grace' (nn. 39–40). Many Baptists understand baptism to be a sign of the benefits of salvation that have already been received. For them, baptism is an opportunity to profess faith in response to the gift of salvation that God has already given. While baptism may be a moment for receiving God's blessing and for renewing faith, such Baptists do not understand this divine act as possessing any saving effect. Other Baptists, however, emphasize the extended nature of the process of initiation and of 'being saved' (see 1 Cor. 1:18) and so believe that Christians are drawn further into God through baptism, as part of a whole process of being transformed by the saving grace of God. Initiated by the grace of God, this process continues in conversion, profession of faith,

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and baptism. Although considering baptism to be part of a salvific process, these Baptists also hold baptism, as an isolated event, to be insufficient in and of itself for salvation (C-B 2010, n. 95).

The various Baptist views on the effects of baptism relate to how Baptists envisage the relationship between baptism and the work of the Spirit. Those for whom baptism is only a sign of a previous salvific event and who identify 'baptism in the Spirit' with that earlier moment of regeneration believe that Spirit-baptism must always precede the sign of water-baptism. Those Baptists who envisage baptism as part of a whole process of being saved think that baptism in water usually coincides with baptism in the Spirit. They understand 'baptism in the Spirit' to occur at the time of water-baptism and to be a deeper reception of the Spirit who has already been given at the moment of conversion.

Martin Luther (1483–1546), John Calvin (1509–1564), and Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) defended the practice of baptizing infants and engaged in polemics against the Anabaptists (who rejected it) with the argument that just as infants were not excluded from the covenant sign of circumcision, neither should they be excluded from baptism since they are already part of the covenant. At times, Luther argued that an infant can be capable of receiving faith as a gift from God (Huovinen 1997). As indicated by his 1528 sermon 'On Baptism', Luther also thought that Christians baptize on the basis of God's command with the intent, hope, and prayer that the infant may believe (Luther 1959, 187). Calvin held that baptism is administered to infants not that they might become heirs of God, but because they are already reckoned as such by God. Infants are baptized because they are included in God's covenant (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV, xvi, 5; Calvin 1960, 1327–1328).

Catholics, along with many traditions issuing from the Reformation, also believe that faith is necessary for baptism, but allow the community to profess faith for an infant if the parents indicate that it is their will that the child be baptized and if they have the intent to raise the child in the faith of the church. By its very nature, infant baptism requires a post-baptismal catechesis of instruction and growth in faith. The whole ecclesial community bears a responsibility for the nurturing of baptismal faith (Catholic Church 2000, nn. 1253–1255).

Christians generally agree that the act of baptism is an affirmation of faith in the triune God in whose name Christians are baptized. The rite of baptism includes a profession of faith in the triune God either by the person being baptized or by the parents and godparents. Baptism involves the faith of the community into whose faith a person is baptized—the community that directly supports the faith of its members. The act of being baptized in the midst of the public prayer of the church is a powerful sign that the baptized live out their faith in the context of the faith community that receives them. Regardless of the age at which one is baptized, the faith that one brings to baptism is not a mature one, but a faith that needs to grow and to develop. Even for traditions that baptize infants, baptism most fully expresses its meaning in the profession of faith by a believing disciple. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, restored in the Catholic

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Church after the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and subsequently also implemented in a number of Protestant traditions, witnesses to the normativity of adult faith for baptism, even though statistically more infants than adults may be baptized in those traditions (Catholic Church 1988).

## Justification

Although baptismal practices have varied among ecclesial traditions, a major obstacle to the mutual recognition of baptism being the recognition of infant baptism by some traditions, the major divisive issue of the Protestant Reformation was the doctrine of justification. The relationship of baptism to justification received surprisingly little attention, perhaps due to the different historical contexts of the discussion of the respective issues. The sixteenth-century material on baptism refuted the Anabaptists, and resulted in an emphasis on the connection between word and water in the Lutheran documents, which assert, 'Baptism is nothing other than God's Word in the water, commanded by God's institution, or, as Paul says, "washing by the Word". Moreover, Augustine says, "Let the Word be added to the element, and a sacrament results"' (Smalkald Articles, III, V; Kolb and Wengert 2000, 319–320). This material also supported infant baptism. Lutheran texts on justification engaged the polemic regarding faith and works rather the relationship between baptism and justification.

Two principal ecumenical issues remain: whether baptism justifies, and the relationship between the salvific character of baptism and justification by faith. Some traditions clearly teach that baptism is a justifying sacrament. Baptismal texts incorporate the language of 'rebirth', 'new creation', 'rising', or 'resurrection'. The transformational language of regeneration and new birth was retained in the Lutheran baptismal liturgy in its initial form in 1523, in the more radical revision of it in 1526, and in the 2006 rite in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. However, in most cases the transformational language with respect to baptism has not transferred over to transformational language with respect to justification.

Baptism and justification are rarely associated with each other in Lutheran confessional documents. The word 'justification' does not occur in the texts dealing with baptism in either Luther's *Small Catechism* or his *Large Catechism*, both published in 1529 (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 345–375, 377–480). Conversely, texts in the confessional writings on justification, such as 'How a Person Is Justified and Concerning Good Works', Article XIII of the Third Part of the Smalcald Articles (1537), contain no reference to baptism (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 325). Texts on baptism do not mention the words 'righteous' or 'justification', even though Article IX of the Augsburg Confession (1530), 'Concerning Baptism', affirms the necessity of baptism for salvation (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 43). One exception occurs in Article IV of Philip Melancthon's 1531 *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, which states, 'But those who are righteous have it as a gift, because after the washing [of baptism] they were justified' (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 138). Within a discussion of intrinsic righteousness in his 'Sermon on Threefold Righteousness' (1518),

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Martin Luther identified baptism as conferring the righteousness of grace (Luther 1518). This position may have been modified in the more Reformed theology of justification of his 1519 sermon, 'On Twofold Righteousness', where first righteousness is the alien righteousness of Christ that is infused from outside, and the second, the Christian's own righteousness, is the fruit of that first righteousness (Luther 1957). The third article of the Formula of Concord (1577) incorporates the teaching on twofold righteousness (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 494-497).

Reformed baptismal theology tends towards either a more Zwinglian or a more Calvinistic interpretation. Zwingli's sacramental theology was formulated in opposition to Catholics, Luther and his followers, and the Anabaptists. He denied that sacraments are 'signs of such a kind that, when they are applied to a man, the thing signified by the sacraments at once takes place within him' (*On True and False Religion*, XV; Zwingli 1981, 183). For Zwingli, the Creator and the Spirit are not bound by the material agency of the sacraments: 'What men can give is only outward baptism, either by external teaching or pouring or dipping in water.' '[O]nly God can give the baptism of the Spirit ... and he himself chooses how and when and to whom that baptism will be administered' (Zwingli 1953, 133). For Zwingli, external baptism does not confer salvation, justify, wash away sin, or confirm faith.

Calvin upheld the objectivity of God's promise, but did not want to detach it from faith. Thus he tried to steer a middle course between Catholics, who in his view conflated the reality and the sign, and Zwingli, who separated the sign from the reality it signified. For Calvin, baptism is a sign of the covenant and a seal of God's promise to strengthen Christians' faith and convey Christ to the believer. It is not a seal of one's personal faith. Baptism is efficacious insofar as believers encounter Christ and his benefits in the sacrament. The effect consists in truly conveying the promise, that is, the Word, through the materiality of the sign: 'any man is deceived who thinks anything more is conferred upon him through the sacraments than what is offered by God's Word and received by him in true faith' (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, xiv, 14; Calvin 1960, 1290). This effect, however, depends on the faith with which baptism is received and whether the person baptized is numbered among the elect. Sacraments do not bestow any grace of themselves, but their efficacy lies in God truly executing whatever he promises and represents in signs and in believers receiving the promise—offered through the material instrumentality of a sacramental sign—with faith (*Institutes*, IV, xiv, 17; Calvin 1960, 1292-1294). The cause of justification and the power of the Spirit are not enclosed within the elements of the sacrament, but the elements as sign and seal attest to the work of God as promised, a work only truly perceived and received in faith.

Baptism is mentioned in the third, fourth, and seventh of the sixteen chapters in the *Decree on Justification* (1547) of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Baptism and justification effect an interior transformation in Christ. Christians are made righteous and interiorly healed of the wounds of sin. The Council speaks of being justified by being 'reborn in Christ' (chap. 3; Denzinger 2012, n. 1523). The transition from the state of the first Adam to adoption in grace through the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, is effected



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through the laver of regeneration or desire for it. The Council identifies baptism as the instrumental cause of justification and names it as ‘the “sacrament of faith”, without which [faith] no one has ever been justified’ (chap. 7; Denzinger 2012, n. 1529).

In Catholic doctrine, baptism is the instrumental cause of justification, the tool used by God for the work of justification. It would be false to say that ‘salvation is in the water’ or that baptism justifies apart from Christ, or that justification is the result of a human act. An instrumental cause cannot function apart from the justice of God by which believers are healed, the glory of God for which they are baptized, the merciful God who washes and sanctifies, or Jesus Christ who ‘merited for us justification by his most holy Passion on the wood of the cross and made satisfaction for us to God the Father’ (Denzinger 2012, n. 1529). The Catholic Church teaches that Christ is the principal actor in the sacraments and the one who baptizes through the ministrations of the church (Catholic Church 2000, n. 1127).

Protestant sacramental theology was generally directed against the scholastic teaching that the sacraments confer grace *ex opere operato* (literally, by the work done). Contrary to their suspicions, the concept of *ex opere operato* in no way intends a magical or mechanistic interpretation of sacramental efficacy apart from faith, but rather protects the objectivity and primacy of God’s own action in the sacrament with respect to the minister’s action, by assuring Christians of God’s sovereign and gratuitous intervention in the sacraments. The principle expresses that ‘the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God’ (Catholic Church 2000, n. 1128, quoting St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, 68, 8). In Catholic teaching, the reception of the grace of the sacrament depends on the disposition of the one receiving it, on the absence of obstacles to God’s grace, on the presence of faith, and on the minister’s intention to ‘do what the Church does’ (Catholic Church 2000, n. 1256) and to fulfil what is essential to each sacrament. God grants the gift, and human freedom accepts it by cooperating with God. The final effect of the sacraments in each person is always the result of a union between the objective and the subjective, the gift of God and the personal disposition of the receiver of the gift. The sacramental objectivity or sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato* does not cancel human freedom, but neither does the human response give objective validity to the sacraments, which would limit God’s freedom to act in the sacraments.

## Ecumenical Achievements

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), signed on 31 October 1999 by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, and subsequently affirmed also by the World Methodist Council on 23 July 2006 and by the World Communion of Reformed Churches on 5 July 2017, represents a major ecumenical achievement and a basis for reconciling teaching on baptism with the doctrine of justification. The section on the biblical message of justification states that justification ‘occurs in the reception of the Holy Spirit in baptism and incorporation into the one body

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(Rom. 8:1f, 9f; 1 Cor. 12:12f)' (L-C 1999, n. 11). A common confession asserts: 'By the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism, [sinners] are granted the gift of salvation, which lays the basis for the whole Christian life' (n. 25). A further significant passage occurs in the section on the justified as sinner: 'Despite sin, the Christian is no longer separated from God, because in the daily return to baptism, the person who has been born anew by baptism and the Holy Spirit has this sin forgiven' (n. 29). These texts reinforce the theology that baptism and justification are God's action rather than being a human work of the church or a form of self-justification. The JDDJ connects the idea of justification as transformation with teaching on being justified and yet a sinner, the traditional Catholic claim of being 'made' righteous with the traditional Lutheran claim of being 'declared' righteous (L-C 1999, Appendix, 'For 4.2'). It circumvents the traditional obstacles to agreement on the doctrine of justification by situating justification within the context of an interpersonal relationship with Christ established in baptism (L-C 1999, nn. 27, 38, and Appendix, 'For 4.7'). The interior transformation in the justified person occurs as a result of their new identity as a Christian. The change in state of being is ultimately relational as the baptized person participates in a new communion of interrelationships with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

While the JDDJ represents a certain synthesis of the doctrine of baptism and the doctrine of justification, only Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and Reformed have ratified this document. Furthermore, the agreement is still only in the early stages of reception in terms of being included in catechetical materials, preaching, and the general life of the churches. Not much explicit attention has been given to the relationship between baptism and justification in the document. Thus it would be an exaggeration to say that it resolves the issue of the relationship between baptism and justification.

## Baptism and Patterns of Initiation

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Traditions differ not only regarding baptismal doctrine but also in their manner of baptizing, even though at the most fundamental level they all intend to do what Jesus commanded. There was actually a great diversity among early initiation rites, with no one standard or normative pattern (Bradshaw 2002, 169). The major differences concern the formula of baptism, whether baptism is by immersion or effusion, whether baptism occurs within a more comprehensive catechumenal process, and whether elements of a catechumenal process are incorporated in shorter rites for infants or adults, e.g. in a compressed Lenten catechumenate, or simply in the baptismal ceremony itself.

Some Christians, such as Baptists, practise baptism by immersion in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In some Baptist churches this may be followed by a laying on of hands, reception to membership, and admission to communion. However, this pattern is very fluid, the diversity reflecting the autonomous and independent character of each local church, which allows the minister liberty in the administration and interpretation of Christ's command. Other evangelical churches, the Orthodox, and some Catholic and Protestant congregations also practise baptism by immersion. Other Catholic and Protestant congregations baptize by effusion, pouring water over the head of the person to be baptized so that it flows, while pronouncing the baptismal formula.

Some traditions limit the rite to immersion or effusion and the recitation of the baptismal formula. For example, beginning with Luther's revised Order of Baptism in 1526, in contrast to his *Little Book of Baptism* of 1523, Protestant services eliminated the accompanying explanatory rites, in an effort to keep the purity and literalism of the dominical command. Other traditions, on the basis of a more typological reading of Scripture, add explanatory rites such as clothing with a white garment representing new life (Rev. 3:5) and presenting a candle representing the light of Christ (John 8:12). The Orthodox practise a unified rite of baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist regardless of the age of the initiate. Catholics separate the baptism of infants from the other sacraments of initiation, but have a unified rite of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist for adults who participate in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

When agreement on the doctrine of baptism proved difficult to achieve, the ecumenical movement turned to the idea of there being a common process or pattern of initiation, in which baptism is one moment. A consultation on the role of worship in the search for Christian unity held in Ditchingham, England, in 1994 emphasized the ecumenical significance of the basic pattern of eucharistic celebration that 'has come to all the churches as a common and shared inheritance', and suggested that baptism also has an order and pattern that is increasingly recognized among the churches (Faith and Order 1995, nn. 4, 11). A subsequent consultation on baptism in Faverges, France, in 1997 developed the Ditchingham emphasis on order and pattern with reference to baptism. Such an approach compares the deeper structures of initiation rather than simply the liturgical rites of baptism taken in isolation. These deeper structures include elements within the process of making Christian disciples such as proclamation/evangelization,

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conversion, professions of faith, the water bath, the meal, and Christian formation and life in community (Faith and Order 1999, nn. 4, 19–20).

The *ordo* or pattern identified by the Faverges consultation is discernible in Acts 2, where as a result of Peter's preaching those who believe are baptized and henceforth live in community where they devote themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2:42), and to the distribution of goods to those in need (Acts 2:45). Similarly, in the First Letter of Peter, the proclamation of the resurrection and teaching about new life (1 Pet. 1:2–2:2) lead to purification and new birth, eating and drinking God's food (1 Pet. 2:2–3), and participation in community as the royal priesthood, the new temple, and the people of God (Acts 2:4–10) (Faith and Order 1999, n. 20). Thus baptism is embedded within an expanded rite of initiation, which in turn lies within a still larger pattern of Christian living.

Unfortunately, as the Faverges report notes, these elements have become separated. Baptism in most traditions has become separated from the Eucharist as well as from perceived responsibility for an ethical life. Different traditions stress different aspects of the *ordo*, some focusing on teaching and making disciples, others embodying a rich tradition of liturgical symbolism, and still others stressing the growth of a Christian post-baptismal life. The report suggests that a renewed appreciation of this *ordo* of Christian initiation can serve as a source for the interpretation and renewal of the practices of the churches and an aid for the recognition of the baptismal practices of other churches (Faith and Order 1999, nn. 66–67).

One example of an expanded *ordo* is the first full direct description of initiation given in Justin's *First Apology* (c. 150–155). The pattern of initiation in this account includes teaching the faith and enquiry about the conduct, prayer, and fasting of the candidates and the community; procession to the water; washing in the name of God, the Father and Lord of all, and of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit; procession to the place of community prayer; Eucharist; and sending food and support to the poor (*First Apology*, chaps. 61–67; Justin 1948, 99–107). The catechumenate is such a process of initiation in stages that forms Christians for discipleship and, in doing that, also forms the Christian community that receives the newly initiated. This pattern is also evident in the *Didache*, generally considered to be a Syrian document of the late first to the early second century (*Didache* 7.1–7.4; Milavec 2003, 62–64, 108–109; Johnson 2007, 45), as well as in the West (Tertullian, *On Baptism*, c.198–200), with possible evidence from third-century Rome (*Apostolic Tradition*, chaps. 17–27, attributed to Hippolytus, though that attribution is now contested; Johnson 2007, 103ff.). A turning point occurred in the fourth century with the Peace of Constantine (313). During the fourth century the catechumenate received its most definitive form, but it eventually disappeared due to the great increase in infant baptisms (Johnson 2007, 119) and was no longer in use during the Middle Ages (Johnson 2007, 246, 267).

## Elements of the Catechumenal Tradition in Contemporary Rites

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Today the Catholic and Orthodox Churches use rites based on the ancient catechumenate and many Protestant churches are retrieving elements of it in their own processes of initiation. The Second Vatican Council instructed that the catechumenate was to be renewed so that initiation would be broken up into several stages, each celebrated by liturgical rites throughout the time of preparation for baptism (Second Vatican Council 1963, n. 64). Subsequently, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) was published in 1972 (Catholic Church 1988). The National Conference of Catholic Bishops approved national statutes for the catechumenate in the USA in 1986, and in 1988 mandated its use whenever an adult or anyone of catechetical age is prepared for baptism in the USA. The RCIA, a process of conversion involving the participation of a faith community, culminates in a unified rite of initiation including baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. The rite is now normative for a Catholic understanding of baptism, even though most Catholics continue to be baptized as infants. The full, conscious, faithful participation in the baptismal rite by an adult constitutes the fullest expression of the meaning of baptism for Catholics.

The various stages include inquiry and initial conversion leading to the desire to become a Christian, culminating with the rite of acceptance into the order of catechumens; the catechumenate proper, a period of catechesis which is both doctrinal formation and formation in a Christian way of life, culminating in the rite of election; a time of enlightenment and purification, ordinarily coinciding with Lent; and the celebration of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist at the Easter Vigil, the joyful commemoration of Christ's paschal victory over sin and death. The baptismal liturgy begins after the homily with the presentation of the elect, the litany of the saints, and the blessing of the water. The elect renounce sin, profess their faith, and are baptized. The baptized are then clothed with a white garment and given a lighted candle. The sacrament of confirmation by prayer to the Holy Spirit, the imposition of hands, and anointing with the oil of chrism follows. At the conclusion of the rite the celebrant offers the greeting of peace as a sign of welcome into the church. The eucharistic liturgy continues and the neophytes duly receive the Eucharist for the first time together with the congregation. The RCIA concludes with a period of post-baptismal catechesis called 'mystagogia' as the neophytes take their place in the Christian assembly and live out their commitment in the life and mission of the church.

Ritual elements in some Protestant celebrations of baptism reflect the ancient catechumenal tradition, particularly with respect to prayer over the water, but also including explanatory symbols such as a baptismal garment and candle. The prayer over the water frequently incorporates biblical typology and references to creation; some prayers include an epiclesis invoking the Holy Spirit to bless the baptismal water.

## **Baptism: Transformational, Eucharistic, Eschatological, and Ecclesial**

## Baptism

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Within the expansive theology of baptism represented in the catechumenal tradition, baptism is transformative and regenerative, eucharistic in orientation and meaning, eschatological in orientation, and ecclesial in context (Wood 2009, 115–120). Language of a new creation and new birth generally points to a transformative theology of baptism as a sacrament that regenerates, renews, purifies, justifies, and sanctifies. Ultimately, this is a relational transformation resulting from being grafted into Christ. The baptized literally ‘put on Christ’ (Gal. 3:27). The language of the liturgy, more biblical and existential than ontological, reflects the theology of Titus 3:5 (‘[God] saved us ... through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit’) and John 3:5 (‘no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit’). The emphasis on birth imagery was the dominant interpretation and paradigm of initiation prior to the fourth century, after which an emphasis on baptism as death and resurrection in Christ (see Rom. 6) became prominent (Johnson 1997, 42).

Within the catechumenal tradition, baptism is orientated to the Eucharist. In the early church, the sequence of initiatory events included proclamation of the Gospel, profession of faith, baptism, life in community, and participation in the Eucharist. For example, in Acts 2:16–42, in response to Peter’s proclamation that God had made the Jesus who had been crucified both Lord and Messiah, the people ask: ‘Brothers, what should we do?’ (v. 37). Peter replies: ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (v. 38). Those who welcomed his message were baptized (v. 41) and ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship [*koinonia*], to the breaking of the bread and the prayers’ (v. 42). Baptism leads directly to life in community and to participation in the Eucharist.

The Orthodox, as already mentioned, have a unified rite of initiation including baptism, chrismation, and the Eucharist. The Catholic RCIA culminates in the neophytes communing along with the congregation. As early as the *Didache*, the requirement of being baptized in order to receive the Eucharist was clear (chap. 9.5; Milavec 2003, 33). Theologically, baptism and the Eucharist are intrinsically related because both sacramentalize an individual’s incorporation into the body of Christ and into the church. Both bear a markedly paschal character since baptism is the first sacramental immersion in Christ’s dying and rising (Rom. 6) and the Eucharist is the *anamnesis* (memorial) of Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Cor. 11:23–26). In the Eucharist, Christians are incorporated into the body of Christ in union with all those who also commune (1 Cor. 10:16–17).

Baptism is also eschatological in its orientation since those who have been buried with Christ through baptism into his death will also be united with Christ in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:3–11). As the Eucharist anticipates the messianic banquet (Luke 22:15–16), so too does baptism anticipate the final resurrection of those who die in Christ. Thus baptism is a powerful sign of Christian hope.

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Finally, baptism is ecclesial in context. It is ordinarily celebrated by an ordained minister in the midst of the faith community, which shares the responsibility for receiving and nurturing the newly baptized. As just seen, beyond simply belonging to the church as an organization, the baptized are literally incorporated, that is 'embodied', into the church, identified as the ecclesial body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13). They have membership in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church of Christ through incorporation into a visible local community of Christians. Not all traditions agree, however. In the Baptist tradition, for example, the relationship between baptism, church membership, and admission to communion is not fixed, resulting in a variety of practices and sequences. For Baptists, church membership generally requires an action distinct from baptism.

### Protestant Critiques of Catechumenal Elements in the Baptismal Rite

Some Protestant traditions incorporate elements of the ancient catechumenate in their baptismal rites, but the incorporation of explanatory symbols is interpreted by some as introducing human elements that detract from baptism being entirely God's action. Writing from within the Reformed tradition, John W. Riggs cites discrepancies between the RCIA and Reformation principles, such as the contrast between the Catholic emphasis on liturgy as constitutive of the church and Calvin's emphasis on God's election as constitutive of the church, as well as the contrast between the Catholic view of the visible, historical church as the body of Christ engrafted into the paschal mystery and the Reformation emphasis on an invisible church as the body of Christ (Riggs 2002, 11-15). Riggs critiques the *Lutheran Book of Worship* for departing from the emphasis on fiduciary faith—a trusting faith that 'lays hold of and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy gospel' (Kolb and Wengert 2000, 564)—that he finds dominant in Luther's baptismal rites of 1523 and 1526. He considers that the language of the Thanksgiving Prayer 'diffuses the personal divine address and human response by referring to divine activity with matter (water), which we must then interpret' (Riggs 2002, 111). He observes the rare occurrence of covenant language in the rite and notes that it is not clear whether baptism effects one's entrance into the covenant or whether baptism is the seal of the covenant already established, as Reformed theology holds.

Similarly, James F. Kay (Presbyterian) criticizes the renunciations of evil in the Reformed liturgy, on the basis that children of a believer are not 'unclean'—as children of believing parents they are included in the covenant and therefore are holy (Kay 1999, 205). He rejects the introduction of signing with oil into a Reformed liturgy on the basis that no promise is attached to this sign and the Lord himself was not anointed with oil but with the Holy Spirit at his baptism (Kay 1999, 211). Parents do not take vicarious vows as proxies for their children in the baptismal promises, but 'confess with the congregation the apostolic faith of the Church catholic into which the children are being baptized' (Kay 1999, 204). Finally, he considers the renunciation of 'the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God' in the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (1993) as heretical, since nothing can separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:39). In his view, the adoption by

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Protestants of the fruits of the post-Vatican II ecumenical liturgical renewal represents 'a wholesale repeal of the Reformation' (Kay 1999, 212).

These criticisms of the inclusion of catechumenal elements in Protestant rites of initiation highlight the inherent link between liturgical prayer and doctrine. While ecclesial traditions may be experiencing an ecumenical convergence with respect to baptism on the basis of liturgical convergence, if the liturgical adaptations are not considered to be faithful to Reformation principles then this indicates that ecumenical dialogue must once again take up the doctrinal issues, despite the difficulties this poses. However, the deeper question is not whether the ancient form of initiation from which many of these liturgical elements derive is compatible or not with Reformation principles, but whether these liturgical forms are compatible with Scripture, taken as a whole, and with the tradition of the apostolic church. The Reformation movement itself was driven by a desire for biblical and apostolic authenticity.

## Achievements and Remaining Issues

More than three decades after BEM, many of the ecumenical issues regarding baptism largely remain the same, although there have also been advances. Traditions can agree on the biblical witness concerning baptism, but differences persist as to how strongly some of those texts are to be interpreted regarding the change effected in the baptized. Perhaps the greatest breakthrough on the meaning of baptism is indirectly present in the JDDJ on the part of Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and Reformed. However, the relationship of justification to the doctrine of baptism is generally far from the consciousness of the members of those churches.

Significant ecumenical progress has been made in terms of situating baptism within a larger pattern or *ordo* of initiation, leading to deeper agreement on the process of initiation, although the Pentecostal-Catholic document, *On Becoming Christian* (2007), for instance, qualifies this consensus, saying: 'The present phase of dialogue has recorded some degree of convergence about the need for water baptism and for participation in the Lord's Supper as part of the full meaning of becoming a Christian' (P-C 2007, n. 281). Within a broader process of initiation, traditions still differ on the doctrine and manner of baptism itself. The doctrinal division centres on whether baptism effects a change in the baptized and mediates justification or whether it is a sign of a prior justifying event. Disagreements over the manner of baptism include whether effusion is an acceptable method of baptism and, increasingly, whether gender-neutral baptismal formulae invalidate a sacramental baptism. Finally, while all traditions affirm the necessity of faith for baptism, they differ on whether this must be a profession of faith by the person being baptized or whether the parents and godparents can profess faith on behalf of an infant with the understanding that the infant will be raised in the faith and receive post-baptismal catechesis.



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