

Believing and Being Baptized

**Baptism, so-called re-baptism,
and children in the church**

**A discussion document by
the Doctrine and Worship Committee
of the Baptist Union of Great Britain**



Preface

During the first three years of its existence, the Doctrine and Worship Committee was asked to reflect on a number of themes and to produce reports which would aid reflection and stimulate debate both within and beyond the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

This document is the result of three years' work. The committee rightly reflects a range of theological opinion and experience across the Baptist community. We have listened to one another, searched the scriptures, explored the challenges of ecumenical engagement and sought to reflect theologically and practically on the subject of baptism.

This is no theoretical discussion, but a committed attempt to respond to urgent and sensitive matters to do with baptism, conscience, ecumenical fellowship and the way in which we understand children as *belonging* to the church.

The committee believes that it is called to *serve* the churches through theological reflection - both our own and that which we stimulate in the wider fellowship, as together we explore the issues raised here. We hope that both Baptists and our ecumenical partners will be able to comment on their reflections so that we might grow in understanding and develop guidelines which have theological integrity as well as pastoral sensitivity.

I would like to thank all the members of the committee for the way in which we worked together but especially Paul Fiddes for the substantial drafting work he undertook for this and our previous reports.

Please send any comments to the Revd Keith Jones, Deputy General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, at Baptist House, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxon, OX11 8RT by the end of 1996.

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A Historical Introduction

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Experiencing the life of the Spirit in company with other Christians has always challenged our theologies of exclusion. From the time of John Bunyan onwards there have been those who have argued that, *Differences in Judgement about Water Baptism* [are] *No Bar to Communion*, the title of Bunyan's famous 1673 defence of that position. For that reason there have always been Baptist churches which, with proto-ecumenical charity, have admitted believers into membership regardless of whether they have or have not experienced believers' baptism.

This position was reinforced at the time of the Evangelical Revival: Robert Hall, for example, found it impossible to separate at the communion table from those with whom he had shared in Spirit-authenticated mission, and was censorious about those who did. Only Baptists, he lamented, were in the habit of rejecting at Christ's table those whom the Lord of the Church had received, of refusing communion to eminently holy men and women on the basis of unessential differences of opinion.

Baptists, he rightly perceived, were in danger of excommunicating most of Evangelical Christendom, but he was wrong in his

denial that the baptism of believers was devoid of sacramental significance: 'while we acknowledge baptism to be a duty, we do not invariably demand it as a preliminary to church fellowship'.

The debates of nearly two hundred years ago have left a number of loose ends which press upon us with new urgency today. Most of our churches do in fact follow Robert Hall in practising open communion, and many are formed on some form of open membership, even though there was clear logic behind Joseph Kinghorn's position that valid baptism had to precede communion, and hence the closed-communion position. Our practice has changed but it is not clear that we have developed a theology to sufficient to justify such a charge.

The need to spell out that theology has existed for a number of years, but is more urgent today because of the ecumenical context to so much of our witness. Both our own practice and the working together with others require a more coherent addressing of this issue.

If we are not to follow Robert Hall in his reductionism with regard to baptism, how do we address the issue of the baptism of those with whom we share mission and with whom it would be now unthinkable not to share communion? What does a proper theology of the church demand that we say of the baptism of those whose commitment to Christ, his church and its mission require us to affirm his indwelling in their lives? These, it seems to me, have become unavoidable questions at that crucial point where experience challenges doctrine.

The problem that this paper addresses is thus a very real one that has too long been left unresolved. There are, in fact, no easy answers. As I ponder the dispute between Hall and Kinghorn I find myself sympathising with both sides. Hall was properly

alarmed about dividing the church and impoverishing its mission; Kinghorn was worried that open communion would lead to the devaluation of believers' baptism and the possibility that this would lead to the disuse of this witness to the gospel. In the event, however, it was Baptists, who, in failing to produce an adequate theology of open communion and open membership, themselves adopted reductionist views of baptism.

The difficulty of the issue should not dissuade us from thought and reflection. As these issues are considered it should be noted that the paper that is commended to the churches is sub-titled 'a discussion document' and contains models for action, rather than recommendations for action. Rather it seeks to offer a context within which our conscientious concerns as Baptists, as well as our recognition of the spiritual vitality of other traditions, can be in dialogue the each with the other.

As we engage in such a task, it is to be hoped that as we study what Christ has provided for us in the witness of scripture, in the experience of conversion and ongoing Christian nurture, in the fellowship of believers, and in one another as parts of the one universal Body of Christ, that faith and discipleship and the unity of the people of God will all be enriched.

I. The context of this document

1. In this century Baptists have produced a good deal of material on the theology of baptism, affirming that the fulness of baptism is expressed when the person baptized is a believer making a conscious profession of faith. But there remains a need to examine further the issues that arise when someone is baptized who has already been 'baptized'* as an infant. Is this 're-baptism', or baptism for the first time? Should it be encouraged, discouraged or even prohibited in an ecumenical situation? What is the relation of the two rites to each other, to salvation and to church membership?
2. The WCC Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order (Santiago de Compostela, Spain 1993) called for the churches to consider 'a way for the mutual recognition of each other's baptism'¹, and noted with regret that 'the admonition in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* against what might be interpreted as rebaptism still sometimes needs more effective implementation.'² Can we agree as Baptists to the recognition of a 'com-

* Please note that throughout this document the term 'infant baptism' is used to refer to the initiation rite administered to young children, since this is the form of expression used by other denominations in the Church of Christ. As the context should make clear, this does not necessarily mean that the document accepts that the act should properly be called baptism.

mon baptism', and do we think anyway that baptism is the 'focus of unity' for the church and for the world?

3. The issue of 're-baptism' is hindering the development of some Local Ecumenical Partnerships, though this appears to be limited to certain areas. By contrast, some Baptist churches have already entered local and regional covenants (eg in Wales) which are based on a recognition of common baptism. A theological assessment is needed to guide thought and action in these different situations.
4. In 1993 Churches Together in England commissioned a report on *Christian Initiation and Church Membership* as part of a series of study units within the *Called to be One* process. This has now (in 1995) been completed, and we hope through this present document to make some contribution to the discussion that will follow it.
5. The issues of baptism and so-called 're-baptism' can only be considered in the wider context of understanding the place of children in the Church. We aim through our report to contribute something to current thinking about this subject.

II. Baptism and the journey of new life: or 'Pilgrim's Progress'

6. We affirm that the grace of God as well as a human response in faith is active in believers' baptism. These two elements cannot of course be separated, since it is the grace of God that enables us to respond to him in faith at all. We suggest that we can best understand this interaction between grace and faith in baptism by thinking of our relationship with God as a 'journey', and this image is important not only for this section but the whole report.
7. Candidates for believers' baptism will have first professed repentance towards God and *faith* in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38, 16:31-33, Rom 6:2-3). Thus the act of baptism is a powerful witness to the effect of the gospel of Christ and an opportunity for the candidate to testify to his or her faith; it is also a step of obedience for a disciple who is following in the footsteps of Christ (Matt 3:15). But the act is much more than an occasion for a profession of faith and obedience, important though this is. As a person comes in faith to the baptismal pool, the triune God meets him or her with a gracious presence which transforms his or her life. Of course, a relationship between the believer and God has already begun before the moment of baptism, but this is now deepened in a special moment of encounter. Whenever God meets us with his grace,

personalities are transformed and relationships are given new depth. In this particular meeting place ordained by Christ, there is such a rich focus of life-giving that we can, with New Testament writers, apply to it the images of new birth or regeneration (John 3:5, Titus 3:5), forgiveness of sins and cleansing from sin (Acts 2:38, 1 Cor 6:11, Hebrews 10:22), baptism in Spirit (1 Cor 12:13, Acts 2:38, 10:47 cf Mark 1:9-11), deliverance from evil powers (Col 1:13), union with Christ (Gal 3:27), adoption as children of God (Gal 3:26) and membership in the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13, Gal 3:27-28). Baptism is thus administered in the name of the triune God who opens to us the eternal life that is shared among Father, Son and Spirit.

The immersion into water and emergence from water symbolizes death, burial and resurrection with Christ. This is certainly a *sign*, using water as a material of creation, which involves the whole person and all the human senses in a 'multi-media' event. But it is also a *symbol*, with the fullest meaning of something in the world which enables us to participate in the spiritual reality to which it points. In the event of baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 6:1-11, Col 2:11, 1 Peter 3:21). He has shared to the uttermost in our sinful death of judgement and estrangement from God, so that when we die to our selves with him we might rise with him to newness of life.

8. All this means that the act of baptism is *normally* to be received near the beginning of entrance upon Christian discipleship. For those who have come from *outside* the influence of the community of faith, baptism will thus take place relatively close to 'conversion' as a radical change of life. But since, even in this situation, conversion and baptism are rarely simultaneous, the relation of one to the other is to be understood in the context of understanding *salvation as a process or journey in life*. The New Testament gives us three tenses

for salvation: Christians *have been* saved, we are *being* saved (through continual growth in our healing relationship with God and in being conformed to the image of Christ), and we *shall be* saved at the final appearing of Christ in glory. Salvation begins far back in the mysterious purposes of God as by his grace he initiates a work in human hearts of drawing them to him, and it will be completed as he finally comes to dwell fully in his creation and transform it. Baptism then is a high point, a decisive moment, in the whole process of *being saved*, whenever the process of salvation actually began for us (cf 1 Pet 3:21).

Many who have been nurtured in a Christian family and in the fellowship of the Christian Church will have grown through various stages of trusting Christ, in ways which are appropriate to their experience as children. For them, baptism marks the decisive point within their whole journey of salvation; it provides a moment when, emerging from childhood, they can make it clear to themselves and to others that they are professing Christ personally as their Saviour and Lord and intend to follow him in the adult life which lies ahead; it provides a moment when Christian discipleship is willingly embraced with all its duties and privileges; and it is the moment which God takes to bestow his Spirit graciously upon them in a new way for new responsibility. Children can of course be believers; but baptism is for those believers who can be expected to take up the burden of responsible discipleship, at a point of development when they are able meaningfully to say "no" as well as "yes" to the invitation to be a disciple. These ideas are explored further below in section X on 'The Child and the Church'.

9. Baptism thus speaks of beginnings, though it will be a new beginning along the path of a journey already begun, since the ultimate beginning for each of us is hidden in the mystery of

God's prevenient grace. If someone is not already a member of a local Christian congregation, this baptismal beginning will include initiation as a member of the whole Church of Christ, since the Church is inseparable from the 'Body of Christ' into which the person has been baptized (1 Cor 12:12-13). **There should thus be no baptism without membership in a church which is a local manifestation of the universal Body of Christ.** In the few cases where someone who is baptized is already a member of a Christian church, we suggest (see section VIII below) that the act of baptism may be regarded as a renewal of membership, a new beginning in which the candidate is drawn by God's grace even deeper into identification with the Body of the Christ who is crucified and risen.

10. The image of baptism as a place of special encounter with God along the road of salvation, or as a high point on the journey of increasing wholeness, underlies the rest of this document. The immediate matter which presents itself is the question of so-called 're-baptism', but in dealing with this we shall find that the image of a journey of salvation illuminates wider issues about baptism as well.

III. Can Baptists recognize an initiation rite for infants as a 'baptism'?

11. Baptists have usually refused to speak of the baptism of believers as a 're-baptism' when the candidates have previously been baptized as infants, since they have usually declined to recognize a rite administered to infants as being baptism at all. This was one of the reasons that British Baptists in earlier times were reluctant to call themselves by the name of 'Anabaptists' or 'Re-baptizers'; it was not only out of a desire to distance themselves from the extremist political actions of some of the early Anabaptists on the European continent, though that no doubt played its part. Baptists have not generally thought they were practising 're-baptism', as they have tended to think only of believers' baptism as being a 'proper baptism'. Today, however, there is a growing realization that we need to be more sensitive to the way other Christians feel about this, and to the hurt that can unwittingly be caused by Baptist practice. Such awareness belongs to living and working in relationship with others. We must seriously ask ourselves how we shall respond to the request from our partner churches that we desist from actions that look to them like re-baptism. At the same time, we ask them to understand that for us the issue of 're-baptism' depends upon the prior question of whether infant baptism can be recognized as a form of baptism.

In response, therefore, to fellow Christian churches which challenge Baptist practice, the committee reviewed three different ways in which Baptists might be asked to recognize infant baptism as a valid kind of baptism:

- a) There is the 'Lima solution' (expressed in the statement *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, agreed at Lima in 1982).³ Here it is proposed that infant and believers' baptism are *equally valid* ways of expressing the combination of human faith and divine grace; but since the two kinds of baptism take place at different stages of Christian nurture, they are seen as expressing a different balance between faith and grace, appropriate to different points of growth. Those who commend this approach understand both kinds of baptism as reflecting scriptural truths, and they rely especially on the biblical portrayal of salvation not as a single point but as a process or a journey. While they fully recognize the need for baptism as an infant to be followed by personal faith later as a believer, they see infant baptism as an act complete in itself, sufficient on its own to incorporate the infant into the Body of Christ.
- b) Alternatively, it may be suggested that believers' baptism has 'normative status' as the *fullest* expression of the coming together of human faith and divine grace, but that infant baptism can be acknowledged to have a kind of '*derived*' validity. The understanding of salvation as a journey with 'stages of growth' might be appealed to in support of this approach. The issue here is the way doctrine develops over the years; those who baptize infants might accept that believers' baptism was the norm, but claim that the Church had been led by the Spirit to another form of baptism which was derived from it. Accordingly, Baptists might be cautious about making dogmatic denials of the work of the Spirit in history. Baptists might also think that it is not possible to

develop a baptismal theology at our stage in history without being sensitive to the situation that has actually come into being, and to the context of relationships with other Christians.

- c) A variation on the first view ('equal validity') would be that the infant rite can truly be called baptism *but only when* it is completed later by personal faith. Though grace and faith are separated by a number of years, they still make up one act just as they do in believers' baptism. The Lima text seems to hint at this approach,⁴ though it does not draw the explicit conclusion that the infant rite should then be called baptism only *provisionally*, or in *hope* that it might turn out to be truly a baptism.
12. In response to these approaches, we report that our committee showed the kind of diversity that might be expected of a representative group of British Baptists.

The majority of the committee declined to follow any of these three proposals, and refused to regard the rite called 'infant baptism' as baptism.

Several of the committee, however, wished to recognize infant baptism as **a form of baptism** on the basis of 'derived validity' (ie (b) above), though their views about this varied; some of them understood infant baptism to be a partial and imperfect expression of what was offered in believers' baptism, while others were reluctant to judge the relative values of acts that had developed within different cultural contexts. Only one member of the committee wished to adopt the 'Lima solution' (ie (a) above).

For various reasons that will appear in this report, it has become clear in discussion that there is a considerable amount

of common ground between the majority view, and that of the significant minority adopting a view of 'derived validity' (approach (b) above). For example, both groups are prepared, in certain circumstances, to commend the administration of believers' baptism to candidates who have already been baptized as infants. Again, both groups are unhappy about the concept of a 'common baptism'. *This report will therefore reflect the variety of view represented by these two groups*, in an attempt to mirror the diversity of views held among Baptists more widely, and yet at the same time to affirm what is distinctive about the Baptist understanding of baptism.

IV. Dimensions of believers' baptism not present in infant baptism

13. The members of our committee all recognize that the rite called infant baptism can involve and express *some aspects* of both the grace of God and human faith. We accept that it can be taken and used by God as an effective moment within the whole journey of salvation in human life. God can and will use any outward act in his gracious freedom. However, the majority of the committee feel that while grace and faith can be recognized as present at all stages of Christian nurture in different forms and proportions (and so far we are in agreement with the Lima document), this does not allow us to regard anything but believers' baptism as *baptism* in the proper theological meaning of the term. As we spell out in paragraphs 14-15 below, the infant rite cannot be truly regarded as 'baptism' because not enough of the New Testament understanding of baptism can be applied to it. It follows that, strictly speaking, we are not 're-baptizing'.
14. Those members of the committee - a significant minority - who *do* want to regard the infant rite as truly baptism on the grounds that it is a practice *derived* from believers' baptism, nevertheless think it important to make clear that there are significant elements of believers' baptism missing in infant baptism. Whether or not this makes infant baptism a less adequate kind of baptism, it clearly makes it *a different kind of*

baptism, emphasising a different balance of gospel truths. On this ground they also resist the use of the term 're-baptism'.

15. The dimensions of believers' baptism which are absent from infant baptism concern both faith and grace. In the first place, there is a crucial element missing in the dimension of faith. There is certainly the faith of the church community which witnesses the baptism, and an *anticipation in hope* of the candidate's own faith which will be expressed later in confirmation. But personal faith in Christ by the person being baptized is missing at the actual moment of baptism.
16. It is important in ecumenical discussion, however, to add that there is also a limitation in affirming the scope of the active *grace* of God when New Testament language about baptism is applied to young children.
 - a) 'Cleansing from sin' is strongly associated with baptism in the New Testament; but it is difficult to apply this description to children without implying a doctrine of inherited *guilt* as well as original *sin*. If infant baptism carries this meaning, then it stresses the undoubtedly fallen nature of creation, but at the expense of any sense of God's good gifts in creation. We notice that those who are uncomfortable with these implications often try to deal with them by removing from infant baptism any concept of 'cleansing' at all, and replacing it with other notions such as the place of children 'within the covenant'. This, however, reduces the key element of God's grace transforming the sinner within the event of baptism.
 - b) Grace is not a kind of supernatural substance, but the gracious drawing near of a Person to persons; this means that both partners in the encounter are affected by the deepening of relationship. Grace in *both* infant baptism and be-

lievers' baptism is certainly convenient to the believer; but in the latter, God as he draws near will be affected by the drawing near of the believer to him in faith, or the 'dying' of the believer in identification with Christ (Rom 6:1-3). Of course, we believe that God will also be affected in some way by the coming before him in worship of a very young infant with an undeveloped consciousness; God relates himself to us in ways that we cannot comprehend, and graciously opens his being to feel the pains and joys of his creatures at whatever age or mental ability. But the scope of the *mutual* relationship God has with a responsible believer is evidently different from that with an infant. So the characteristics of grace cannot be the *same* in the infant rite and in believers' baptism.

- c) In baptism, God takes an element in his creation - water - and uses it as a place where he meets us with his grace. The drama of believers' baptism is a multi-media event, engaging all the senses and involving the person as a whole. To call something a 'sacrament' means that God uses some material stuff of creation (water, bread, wine) as a means of grace, that is as a way of deepening his relationship with us. The 'sacramental impact' of believers' baptism, preferably by immersion into water as a symbol of death and rising from death (but not excluding the pouring of ample water over the head - see section VI.24), is necessarily reduced when the recipient is an infant with undeveloped consciousness, and when the amount of water used is minimal. What is signified and communicated by the symbol will therefore be different in the sprinkling of infants and the baptism of believers.
- d) The New Testament associates baptism in water with baptism in the Holy Spirit, or immersion into the realm of God's Spirit. In the book of Acts and the epistles baptism is nor-

mally 'the supreme moment of the impartation of the Spirit and of the work of the Spirit in the believer'.⁵ While we can affirm the operation of the Holy Spirit in a prevenient way deep beneath the surface of life and consciousness in the case of a very young infant, this cannot be the same kind of event as the receiving of new life through the Spirit by a believer. The new Testament images of regeneration (Titus 3:5) and new birth (John 3:6) make clear that this operation of the Spirit issues in a new ethical life-style and the receiving of spiritual gifts for the ministry of the people of God. We can discern a gracious operation of the Spirit in an infant and a believer, and a prayer for the coming of the Spirit may appropriately be offered on both occasions, but we will surely be asking for and expecting something different from the Spirit in the two events.

17. These differences between the apparent scope of God's grace in the different cases of infants and believers make it difficult to adopt the argument that the infant rite can be called baptism *in the same sense* as believers' baptism, even when it is completed in the personal faith of confirmation. To equate infant with believers' baptism relies on supposing that the elements of grace and faith that belong to baptism can be simply separated in time, so that the infant rite is *mainly* a moment of grace, to which confirmation later adds the dimension of faith; but this presumes that the character of the grace which is to be received in baptism is almost entirely prevenient and preparatory to faith.

Thus, while we recognize that salvation is a process and not a single point, and that baptism takes its place in a whole journey of Christian growth, we do not think that this simply validates the idea of a common baptism.

V. 'Mutual recognition' of baptism and 'common baptism'?

18. If we accept the ideas above, then it is hardly possible for Baptists to participate in a 'mutual recognition of baptism', at least if this is understood to mean the recognition of a 'common baptism'. Either the rite as applied to infants is not to be regarded as being baptism *at all* (the majority view of the committee), or it is to be regarded as a *different kind* of baptism from that of believers (the minority view). But Baptists can certainly share in a mutual recognition of spiritual realities associated with baptism at whatever age:

- a) Baptists can share in a *mutual recognition of others as being members of the Body of Christ*, regardless of the mode of initiation in their church tradition. Being in the Body of Christ, and not baptism itself, is the basis of unity. The work of the Holy Spirit, indwelling those who are in the Body of Christ, is recognized experientially in others through their exercise of faith and other spiritual gifts and by the production of Christ-like fruits of life, not by the evidence of having taken part in a particular ritual act.
- b) Baptists should also be able to share, at least partly, in a mutual recognition of *what is happening* in and through the act that is called baptism by different churches. That is, we

can as Baptists recognize that the rite called infant baptism involves and expresses *some* aspects of both the grace of God and human faith. We should also be able to recognize that the *whole process* of infant baptism followed by confirmation, as a sign of personal faith, marks initiation into Christian life and membership in the church as Christ's Body. While we believe that the *proper* place for baptism is at the moment of making personal allegiance to Christ, we can affirm that God freely uses a variety of traditions to incorporate persons into the Body of Christ.

- c) Baptists can recognize the reality of Christian ministry in other Christian churches, including the ministry exercised at the Lord's Supper/Eucharist, and can embrace a common participation in the Eucharist, without having to validate all this through a 'common baptism'.

19. With regard to this third point we observe that the direction in much ecumenical debate is *from* the act of baptism *to* the nature of the Church and its ministry. The hope is often expressed that once the baptism of *individuals* has been mutually recognized, it might be possible to proceed to what are felt to be the 'more difficult' matters of recognition of *ecclesial* realities, such as ministry and sacrament. Bafflement is often expressed as to why Baptists will not apparently take what is widely seen to be the 'easiest' step of recognising a common baptism as the basis for unity.

However, as Baptists our direction of thought is *from* the nature of the church *to* the meaning of baptism; it is because we understand the core of the church community to be committed disciples of Christ (though this does not exhaust the nature of the church - see below, section IX) that we understand baptism to be the seal of the Spirit for a believing and obedient disciple. At the same time, this means that we can recognize

the realities of church and ministry existing among others, regardless of the mode of baptism they exercise.

We believe that ecumenical discussion should begin from the nature of the church, affirming the whole work of the Spirit of God in and through the church as the basis for our unity, rather than beginning from the particular basis of baptism. We do recognize that a desire for a 'common baptism' is a healthy concern for unity among *people* rather than for a union of structures. But we think that this is better expressed in the recent focus upon *koinonia* in the work of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

VI. Implications for pastoral practice

20. If we had been able in our discussion so far to adopt the theological concept of a 'common baptism', this would of course have made anything resembling re-baptism an unacceptable practice. But in fact we have come to the conclusion that 'common baptism' cannot be a reality in the life of the Christian churches at present. Baptist congregations will believe it to be right, in certain circumstances, to baptize a Christian believer who has already been baptized as an infant, though for the reasons given above we reject the description of this as 're-baptism'. We think it needs to be openly admitted that we are living in a situation where there are two views of baptism, and where this is likely to be the case into the foreseeable future. Our aim should therefore be to live and work together with other Christian churches, as sensitively and with as much mutual affirmation about baptism as is possible. This is only possible at all because, as we have asserted, the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ does not depend upon a particular practice of baptism. We are dealing here with a 'penultimate' and not an 'ultimate'.

It is with some hesitation that we therefore now go on to draw some practical conclusions from the theological foundations we have laid, but we offer the following pastoral guidelines in difficult situations.

21. When people ask for baptism as a believer, with the desire to become members of a Baptist congregation, they will be coming from many different backgrounds and with different spiritual needs. Some will be at the very beginning of their lives as Christian disciples; others will be seeking a moment of spiritual renewal. Some will have thought a great deal about what is implied in asking for baptism, while others will hardly have begun to do so. Without attempting to type-cast people, we offer some examples of typical situations.

a) There will be the person who has come into Christian faith from a completely secular background. He has not received baptism as an infant in any Christian church. Not only will a minister gladly baptize him, but we urge that a congregation should not receive such a person into membership *except* through baptism. We are disturbed by evidence that, occasionally (though thankfully rarely), persons with this spiritual history become members of Baptist churches through confession of faith without baptism. We believe this to be totally inappropriate in the light of the theology of baptism expounded above.

b) Then there will be the person asking for baptism who has been baptized as an infant, but without any further involvement with a Christian congregation. She has not received Christian teaching there as she grew up, and has not sealed her faith personally in an act of confirmation. We think it right for a minister gladly to agree to baptize such an enquirer who has now come to faith in Christ.

However, the minister will still be prepared to discover, as he talks with the enquirer about her spiritual experience, that she may in fact discern the work of the Spirit of God in her life beginning at least from the moment of infant baptism, leading her into fulness of faith. On further reflection

she might then decide that she wants to allow the Spirit to complete this hidden work of God through an open act of profession of faith and laying on of hands, instead of through baptism. In this case we suggest that it would be quite appropriate to receive her into membership through this kind of act, with opportunity for personal vows of Christian discipleship to be made, and prayer offered for new endowment with the Holy Spirit of God. In this way we may offer to some an opportunity for the fulfilment of what has been hoped for in their infant baptism, even though they have received no obvious Christian nurture.

- c) An enquirer may come who has not only been baptized as an infant, but has subsequently been brought up in a Christian family and congregation, and has been enfolded in the nurture of Christian teaching and example. We suggest that the same kind of considerations as in the previous case would still apply, but that the emphasis will be different. The minister will probably want in this instance to *initiate* the question as to whether the enquirer can find any significance in his baptism as an infant, and urge him to consider whether he might want to affirm the work of God in his life so far by completing it in an act of laying on of hands rather than baptism. But if the enquirer is sure that he wants to receive baptism, the minister will respect his desire and baptize him.
- d) It may be that the enquirer who has been brought up in a Christian environment following infant baptism has also been 'confirmed' in her faith at an age where she could confess her own faith publicly in a meaningful way. Here we suggest that the minister would take an even stronger approach in encouraging her to find the work of God in her whole process of Christian nurture, and to find the sealing and filling of God's Spirit in her confirmation. He might properly offer a further act of laying on of hands for a re-

newal in the Spirit and deeper union with Christ at the moment of reception into membership. However, we do not think that baptism can normally be refused if the enquirer continues to request it as part of her spiritual renewal and growth in discipleship, and if the church meeting believes the request is made in good conscience in response to the Spirit of God.⁶

We think that there might be an exception to this exercise of individual freedom of conscience, where a local congregation as a whole has willingly and voluntarily accepted some restraint upon its baptismal practice in order to enter into an ecumenical partnership. Where demands of conscience - personal and corporate - conflict, there will of course always be pain, and we consider this further below (see section VII).

- e) Finally, a person may come requesting baptism who has already received believers' baptism. Looking back, she may find little meaning in the act, since she dates her coming to personal faith later on. We believe that it is nevertheless inappropriate for such enquirers to be baptized again. We expect that the minister would explain that baptism does not only involve the subjective faith of the believer, but the enabling grace of God. Whatever the degree of faith and trust the candidate might have, God can still use the act of baptism to begin to draw someone to himself, and a believer should be encouraged to look back and find that prevenient grace of God at work. We suggest that, sensitively, minister and congregation should decline to offer baptism, but instead encourage the enquirer to make a public confession of faith and receive laying on of hands for a new filling with the Spirit of God.

We do not think that this guideline is inconsistent with the previous three concerning the baptism of those who have

already received infant baptism. In the case of someone receiving believers' baptism there is at least the *potential* for exercising some personal trust in God, and looking back later a person may in fact judge the situation quite wrongly as 'empty' or 'meaningless' for him or her at the time. Moreover, when God offers his grace in the baptism of someone of responsible age, rather than a very young infant, he gives 'enabling grace' in the sense of helping someone to make personal decisions and to meet demands laid upon his or her life (see section III above).

22. We do not think that the openness about people's past baptismal experience expressed in guidelines 2-4 is in conflict with our belief that only believers' baptism is baptism in the fullest sense. We offer these guidelines *first* because we recognize different stages in the journey of salvation and affirm the freedom of God to use what outward acts he will to draw people to himself; *second* we want to share in the healing of a broken Church (see further IX. below).

This does, however, assume that Baptist churches are of the 'open membership' type, and we freely admit that we call upon all readers of this report to ask seriously whether a membership 'closed' to all except those baptized as believers takes sufficient account of the work of God's spirit among all the Christian churches. We recognize that some of our churches are bound by historical heritage and by the foundation trust deeds of their premises. At present some churches must, to satisfy the Charity Commissioners, insist upon believers' baptism as a requirement for 'full' membership, though it is quite usual to receive others into 'associate' membership; but we ask them to consider how they might find creative ways to reduce the effect of this distinction between kinds of membership, as far as is possible within legal constraints.

However, we also recognize that people will come to different answers to this question, and that some will be happy to accept much of this report without being able to follow the guidelines we present here. Within our Union of Churches, we recognize that each local congregation has 'liberty, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret and administer [Christ's] laws.' We commend a normative practice, but we also acknowledge that what is not freely accepted may have little spiritual significance.

23. However, these guidelines do not simply underwrite the practice of 'open membership' churches, as some congregations are so 'open' that they will accept candidates into membership on profession of faith who have received *neither* infant baptism *nor* believers' baptism. What had originally begun as a desire not to 'unchurch' others who had previously been members of other churches, has become a lack of conviction about baptism for the 'unchurched'. **We urge then that churches re-consider the place of baptism within Christian discipleship, and that they no longer accept without baptism those who have not as yet been initiated in any way into membership of the Church of Christ** (see the first guideline above). Nevertheless, as we recognize the freedom of the Christian conscience with regard to 'closed churches', so we recognize this also with regard to 'open churches'.
24. We are aware that Christian disciples sometimes hang back from baptism, and churches refrain from urging it, because age or infirmity or handicap makes the act of immersion physically difficult or even impossible. In such cases we must surely focus on baptism itself rather than the particular mode. While immersion into water is the normative form of baptism because it portrays a 'going down' into death with Christ and a 'coming up' in resurrection, sprinkling with water can also carry powerful symbolic meaning. It can, for instance, symbolize the pouring out of the Spirit or anointing with the Spirit.⁷

VII. Baptism and Local Ecumenical Partnerships

25. We have already indicated above that at least one pastoral guideline about baptism might have to be modified in the situation of a designated *Local Ecumenical Partnership* (previously known as a *Local Ecumenical Project*). We now wish to expand on this, by proposing three possible routes that might be travelled by a local Baptist church at the point where it enters an ecumenical partnership and when the particular form of the united congregation is being decided.

- a) We believe that the *Concordat* already established with the Methodist Church provides a way forward which is most in tune with this report. That is, someone asking for believers' baptism who has already received infant baptism should be given careful pastoral counselling to discover whether he or she can express newly-found or newly-renewed faith in a re-affirmation of baptismal promises (and, if confirmed, renewal of those promises also) rather than in the act of believers' baptism. But if the person persists in the request, he or she may receive baptism as a believer as long as he or she is subsequently transferred to the Baptist membership roll. We hope that other denominations of the Christian Church will be willing to follow the path of this Concordat. We recognize that it may cause pain within ecu-

menical relations, but believe that some pain is inevitable in the situation of a broken Church, and that facing up to this may become a means of healing and integrity.

Entering any ecumenical partnership will mean some restraint upon the freedom of the partners for the sake of the whole venture. When the Concordat is used, the Baptist partner accepts the restraint of working through a process of consultation and counselling, rather than immediately acceding to the request of the candidate.

- b) There is, however, another form that we think this restraint might take in certain circumstances. Part of mutual commitment to the life-style of an *Ecumenical Partnership* might be a voluntary restraint on the part of a participating Baptist congregation, in that it would decline to baptize those who have already received *both* infant baptism and '*confirmation*' in their faith at an age of responsibility within their own church tradition.⁸ Those who had not yet received confirmation, and so not yet professed their personal faith in this public way, might be baptized under the conditions of the Concordat and in accord with the other guidelines above.⁹ This kind of restraint would involve pain on both sides, and a commitment to live in unity-with-diversity in love under the rule of Christ.

This kind of restraint could not be adopted as a general Baptist policy for LEPs. We are simply proposing that if a particular local Baptist church *wished* to take it on itself, the Baptist Union acting through its Local Ecumenical Committee should still approve the constitution and baptismal policy. It might be a situation where it would be quite impossible to achieve a partnership on the basis of the Concordat, yet the church believed it was nevertheless being called by God into this particular venture and wanted

freely to take on this restraint for the sake of Church and Kingdom.¹⁰

We believe that the Baptist Union of Great Britain could approve an arrangement for a Local Ecumenical Partnership that included this kind of restraint, within the bounds of the *Declaration of Principle*. The second statement of principle declares the *nature* of baptism, stating that 'Christian baptism *is ...*' the baptism of believers. Neither the local congregation nor the Baptist Union would be denying this principle. Nor would they be denying the consequence of the principle - that it *can* be theologically proper for someone baptized as an infant and later confirmed to be subsequently baptized as a believer. The church meeting would simply be accepting a limit on its practice in this particular situation for the sake of the broken Church of Christ. It is hard to see why a church doing so would be any more in breach of the *Declaration of Principle* than a church which accepts members without any baptism at all.

- c) We consider that there could also be a 'middle way' between the two routes suggested above. A local Baptist congregation might enter a partnership, pledging *normally* to adopt the second kind of restraint. But in cases it believed to be exceptional, where it wanted to support a candidate who maintained his or her conviction after careful counselling, it could take the matter to the ministers and to the various church meetings (or their equivalents) within the partnership.¹¹ The candidate might be baptized as a believer despite having been already confirmed, if the minister(s) and church meeting(s) were in agreement. In this case the conditions of the Concordat would apply, and the candidate would be placed on the Baptist membership roll.

26. Much would depend upon our ecumenical partners, in being willing not to insist on the second kind of restraint as a matter of policy in *every* situation. They would have to understand that the Baptist Union could not (and would not want to) bind any local congregation to take this approach, and that different kinds of partnership would be needed if they really desired unity to be achieved widely. For instance, where a 'local covenant' has existed between churches without a formal commitment to found a new project together, or where separate congregations still exist, the Concordat approach would be more suitable. Ecumenical partners would also have to understand that future generations in a Baptist church meeting might want to reconsider the policy made by their predecessors; in fact, there is already provision in LEPs for a re-evaluation periodically.

VIII. Faith, not baptism, is essential for salvation

27. The flexibility of approach to baptism we have been commending within pastoral practice, as well as the theological basis we have presented for this, relies upon the belief that baptism cannot be claimed to be *essential* either for salvation or for membership in the Universal Church of Jesus Christ.

We think that this has been the historic Baptist position. It follows from the basic conviction that those to be baptized as believers will *already* have come to personal faith in Christ and be in the way of salvation. Essential to being a Christian is the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, and this takes priority over all symbolic acts, however much these acts are vehicles of grace (as the group insisted that baptism could be, though not as an automatic mechanism). Christian initiation is, it was suggested, a confused matter in terms of outward form, and what really matters is the Christological and Trinitarian *centre* of the acts of initiation; the borders may be fuzzy. In this context, it was noted that the World Council of Churches and the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland are willing to accept into full membership communities that do not baptize or celebrate the Lord's Supper, such as the Quakers and the Salvation Army.

28. Such a position does not mean that baptism becomes an optional extra for a believer. It is 'necessary' in the sense of being a part of *genuine discipleship*. This does not make it a matter of obedience alone, although the use of the term 'ordinance' alongside 'sacrament' in early Baptist language stressed the essential part obedience plays. But the obedience which belongs to discipleship is always to be set in the context of salvation, and salvation is to be seen as a process throughout the Christian pilgrimage rather than isolated within a single point (see above, section II). Baptism is a high point within the journey of salvation, a *rendez-vous* that God has himself provided for the deepening of relationship with him. To this place of meeting he calls disciples, to encounter their Saviour in a special way, at whatever stage in life it happens. Thus, even if conversion has been a long time before, baptism can still be a moment of renewal and growth in the Christian life. However, if someone has been baptized as an infant, then there are other factors of discipleship that have to be weighed against this, namely a concern for the oneness of the Body of Christ which is broken by disagreement on this issue, and respect for the way that fellow members in the Body of Christ have heard the call to discipleship. It is in an attempt to resolve these claims of discipleship, and not because baptism is thought to be unimportant, that believers' baptism should not be insisted upon.

IX. 'One baptism for the remission of sins'

29. Is it possible in the light of all this to affirm the phrase of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, that there is 'One baptism for the remission of sins'? The committee agreed that the latter part of the phrase presented no difficulty for understanding the nature of believers' baptism, as within the process of salvation we seek remission of sins every day, and baptism is a 'high point' within this process, drawing us in a special way deeper into relationship with the forgiving God. But can there be said to be 'One baptism'?

If we are to affirm this declaration, it must not be taken to mean that infant baptism and believers' baptism are simply the same act, or that someone cannot undergo both rites. It *can* be affirmed in the sense that transcending all our imperfect perceptions of baptism, our divisions, and whatever time gaps are involved in the process of Christian growth, there is still one immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus through the Spirit. This we understand to be the intention of the scriptural text, 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism' (Eph 4:5). It is in accord with Jesus' portrayal of his crucifixion as a baptism, as immersion into the dark waters of death (Mark 10:38-9); this is the baptism in which we share in union with Christ. There is therefore, we believe, one baptism despite diversity of practice, and this need not be reduced to a notion of 'common baptism'.

30. One reason usually offered by other Christian churches for regarding anything resembling re-baptism as a scandal, and a denial of the affirmation 'one baptism', is the connection of baptism with *entrance* into the Church. Becoming a member of the Universal Church as the Body of Christ can only happen once, and to baptize as believers those who have already been baptized as infants may seem to imply that they were not part of the Church before. It may also appear to 'un-church' those who have only received infant baptism.

This problem can only be met by pastoral sensitivity, using the guidelines outlined above (section VI). We may assure other Christians that we fully affirm the existing membership in the Church Universal of those who have been baptized as infants and whose baptism has been fulfilled in personal faith and public commitment later on. The very fact that we do not *insist* on baptizing them makes clear that we are not 'un-churching' them or requiring a re-initiation into the Church. This is also underlined by our welcoming them to the communion table whether or not they are baptized as believers. If we do baptize them, under the conditions mentioned above, then we understand this to be a renewal of their membership in the Church of Christ.

But we must also urge that in our understanding of the nature of the Church, 'membership' is not the only form of participation in the Body of Christ. Some people may be 'in the Body of Christ' in a different kind of way, before they are baptized as believers. Even before they become 'members' through believers' baptism or through confirmation in their faith, they need not be considered as excluded from the Body or outside its loving embrace. As we spell out in detail in the following section (X), incorporation into Christ may be understood as a process rather than a single moment of crossing a threshold.

31. The fact that we permit baptism, as believers, of those baptized in infancy (for those who request it) may well remain an offence, but it is an offence that derives from the sadly broken state of the Church Universal. We recognize the pain with which we all have to live in the difference of our baptismal practices. Ironically, while we are sometimes accused of 'unchurching' others, the more that a 'common baptism' is insisted upon as the meaning of 'one baptism', the more Baptists will find themselves pushed to the margins of the household of faith. We are aware that the discussion about re-baptism and un-churching is related as much (and probably more) to the practice of some *paedo-baptist* churches who re-baptize those baptized in other communions; but Baptists will find themselves caught if the situation is resolved through 'common baptism', and it is not going too far to say that Baptists are already beginning to feel the pressure.

X. The child and the church

32. We cannot consider the nature of baptism without at the same time working out its implications for the relationship of children to the church. Baptists over the years have tried to express their understanding of the acceptance of children within the fellowship-circle of the church, and to give occasion for marking the very important moment of childbirth, by developing an act of 'infant presentation'. This act has included both a prayer for the blessing of the child, and an opportunity for parents to offer thanksgiving, make promises and dedicate themselves to the calling of parenthood. The whole congregation is involved in this act, sharing in thanksgiving and making its own promise to surround the child with Christian nurture. It is not only the lack of use of water that leads Baptists to refuse to name this ceremony as baptism. In fact, many Baptists will regard the act called baptism administered to infants in other churches as actually having the same kind of meaning as infant presentation.
33. The refusal to name this kind of ceremony as baptism is rooted in the considerations we have already reviewed (see section III above), and also in the Baptist understanding of the relation of the child to God and his Church. It must be confessed that this has often been a vague understanding, and that it still needs a great deal of theological reflection and clarification. However, it relates to an understanding of baptism as mark-

ing a clear divide in a person's life in which personal faith plays a critical part. This has not been seen as appropriate for young children, partly because of a feeling - often ill-expressed - among Baptists that children are not in the *same kind of state* before God as a person who has reached an age of moral responsibility and moral choice.

Where there has been theological reflection on the special relation of infants and young children to God, there have been three main patterns of thought among Baptists.

- a) Some have believed that while children share the fallen and sinful *condition* of all human beings they are not reckoned by God to be *guilty* of sin until they reach an age when they can make truly moral decisions for themselves. This involves the theological judgement that while a doctrine of original *sin* can be found in scripture, a doctrine of original *guilt* was an addition made by Church theologians such as Augustine later on.
 - b) Others have affirmed that being 'in Adam' is not the only truth about human beings; they live in a world in which Christ as the New Adam has died and risen to new life for our reconciliation with God. Children may then be reckoned to stand within this saving work of Christ until they actively reject it or accept it for themselves through responsible acts and choices.¹²
 - c) Many Baptists have not developed any theological theory about the salvation of young children at all, but have appealed to the mystery of the love, justice and mercy of God, especially in the case of children who die in infancy.
34. In considering the particular relationship of the child to God, Baptists have not usually followed the kind of 'covenant' un-

derstanding of the family in which children have a privileged place in God's household simply by virtue of having believing parents. Rather, the new covenant in Christ is to be entered in due time through baptism as a believer. Children in a Christian family do, however, have the advantages of being surrounded by Christian teaching and example in home as well as church, and have opportunities for growing and developing in the way of Christ of which children of non-Christian parents are deprived. These are not only practical advantages, but opportunities that God can use to meet children in his grace and touch their lives. Acknowledging this must shape our theology of childhood, as long as we do not forget that God is also free to use other means outside Christian families.

35. Whatever the theological understanding of the state of children before God, we affirm that until the moment of personal faith and an acceptance of the privileges and obligations of a covenant community (whether or not by believers' baptism), a person cannot be said to be a '*member*' of the Body of Christ which is the Church'. Understanding the Church to be the making visible of the Body of Christ on earth, all its members must have made their own act of commitment to Christ and be actively cooperating with the mission of God. The term '*member*' focuses issues sharply for Baptists in a way that it does not for other churches who freely attribute the designation to young baptized children. For us it involves the painful path of discipleship, 'taking up one's cross daily', and so is an inappropriate burden to lay upon the shoulders of young children. There is, for example, something about the Victorian phrase 'little soldiers of Christ' that ignores the particular experience of childhood and thrusts adult duties and disciplines on them.
36. We suggest that we should be more creative in the use and interpretation of biblical metaphors, in order to point towards different ways of belonging to the community of the Church,

some of which are more appropriate for children than others. We might, for instance, play some variations on Paul's image of the Church as a body, by making a distinction between being '*in* the Body of Christ' and being '*members* of the Body'. **Children may certainly be said to be 'in the Body' in the sense that they are enfolded and embraced by it;** as a baby is enfolded by its mother's arms, so a child in the church is wrapped around by all the caring and the praying of the community. However, to be a 'member' or 'limb' of the body is an image that speaks of working in active coordination with other members, seeking together (especially in Church Meeting) the mind of Christ who is the head of the Body. This distinction does not mean that members cannot learn from those who are enfolded in the embrace of the Body, that these have nothing to contribute. The truth is quite other, as Jesus makes clear (Matt 18:14): but the members need to learn about the nature of the Kingdom from children in their dependency *as children*, not as merely potential adults.

This varied understanding of being 'part of the Body' is reflected in Colossians 1:17. As the cosmic Lord, all things and all persons '*hold together in Christ*' (Col 1:17), but he is also said to be the *head* of the Body which is the Church (Col 1:18). This indicates different ways of being 'in' Christ. We must also remember that the Kingdom of God is wider than the Church, and that someone can thus be in the sphere of the rule of God without being a member of the Church. This all gives a means of understanding the wider fellowship of the Church community, not restricted to its covenanted members. Every child is born into a world which holds together 'in Christ' as Lord of the cosmos, but as the child grows up he or she is to be drawn deeper into Christ through saving grace and personal faith. Those who are embraced in the body of the Church have special opportunities for growing in this way. Just as salvation is a process, so is belonging to the Church, with a developing

relationship that comes to a new stage in 'membership' of the Body of Christ.

To grow up in the fellowship of the Church surrounded by Christian example and Christian teaching is to be drawn continually more deeply into the reality of being 'in Christ' until the point of baptism or confirmation in faith as a believer is reached. This process of development is a complex one, and the use above of the metaphors of being 'enfolded' or 'embraced' must not be taken to mean that children are to be merely passive, or smothered by over-anxious parenting. The 'embrace' of the community provides a secure and accepting environment in which children as they grow older can struggle for maturity and independence on many fronts - physically, morally, spiritually, and intellectually. The aim of the church's nurture is finally to achieve a release from a dependence upon the faith of the community into a faith which the young person can own for him or herself, together with the responsibilities of a 'member' which this entails. This is the point when the enfolding world of the community can either be meaningfully rejected, or accepted in a new way with new responsibility for enfolding others. On the way to this point there will need to be the freedom for experimentation and the finding of identity. To do justice to this process of growth, perhaps we ought to think of moving boundaries between the states of being 'in Christ', 'in the Body' and 'members of the Body', and we ought not to be over-confident about drawing the lines of demarcation.

So we can develop the image of the Church as a Body, in order to understand the inclusion of children who are not yet 'members'. However, other New Testament images of the Church could also be developed similarly, to express various ways of belonging. We might, for example, think of the image of the 'household of faith', as *a space in which people can dwell* in different ways.

XI. Different ways of belonging

37. We cannot then follow the sequence of thought that is often presented like this: 1. baptism makes people members of the church; 2. children should not be excluded from being members of the church; 3. therefore children can be baptized.¹³ This seems to us to miss the different ways of belonging to the church; to say that children are not yet '*members*' of the Body of Christ' need not mean that they are *excluded* from the Body or outside Christ. Here, however, we are well aware that other Christian churches will give a different meaning to '*membership*' and so will express various aspects of belonging in a different manner from Baptists. For us there is a significant difference between belonging in the sense of being part of the fellowship of the Body (*koinonia*), and belonging to the Body as members committed to radical discipleship.
38. We have seen that the image of a body is one picture that enables us to think of children's belonging to the church in a different way from its '*members*'. But the picture also offers a means of understanding the various ways in which people of all ages, not only children, can be included or '*enfolded*' within the wider fellowship of the Church. The Church exists for mission, and at the heart of mission is a sharing in God's desire to open the fellowship of his own triune life to embrace the persons he has created. The members of the congregation engage in mission as they accept others into the church's life, and so

draw them deeper into Christ. The remarks above about a gradual process of growing into faith can therefore apply to adults as well as children. It is understandable, however, that during periods of persecution in Baptist history this sense of the 'embrace' of the fellowship has often been lost, and instead a sharp divide has been drawn between those who are 'in' and 'out'; perhaps something of this even persists in our church life today.

39. There is also some insight here on the situation of those who have severe learning disabilities, for whom it is often assumed that a theology of believers' baptism has nothing to say because it seems to focus on an articulate confession of faith. Those with such disabilities should be 'enfolded' within the Body of the Church in full acceptance, and the members of the congregation should be alert and sensitive in recognising any signs of trusting response to God in Christ; faith response need not be verbal or conceptual, and it will need spiritual insight to perceive it, but any such sign would make baptism and church membership appropriate for them. But if there is no sign like this, of course they go on being 'enfolded'. We do not think, that is, that baptism should be the *only* way that those who are severely disabled can be received and accepted within the Body, be affirmed as being in Christ, and be there for others to learn from.

XII. The meaning of the blessing of children

40. Earlier we recognized that the rite called 'infant baptism' could be an apt expression of the prevenient grace of God, but that it is not fully expressive of the grace which is offered in (believers') baptism. We would want to affirm the same potential in the act of infant presentation as it is practised among Baptists, and so we need to gain a clearer understanding of the effect of the *blessing* which is one important element of this act.
- a) In the first place, the act of blessing is a proclamation of the gospel; the child shares in the blessing of being brought into a world in which Christ is risen, and so a world in which the grace of God already abounds.
 - b) The blessing is a prayer for the child, that he or she will grow in the knowledge of Christ, and in due time come to a personal faith in him and be made a member of the Church through baptism as a believer. Such a blessing has the power which all intercessory prayer has; it provides a moment which God can use to bring about his purposes; it provides a channel for the grace of God to work. The blessing-prayer for children can also open up a range of awareness about the 'threats of the demonic' in life, the vulnerability of human beings and the need to be strengthened to resist evil.

- c) In uttering this blessing the Church accepts the child into the orbit of its influence. This is not just the practical matter of promising to teach and guide the child in the way of Christ, though this is of course essential. Since Christ makes himself present in his community, and embodies himself in the world through it, the child is also being accepted into this particular orbit of *God's* gracious influence. This is true for children of both believing and unbelieving parents, and therefore the act of blessing should not be restricted to Christian families. There will, of course, be limits to the promises that parents can make when they have no clear Christian commitment, and the wording should be adjusted in this case to lay emphasis upon thanksgiving and blessing.¹⁴
- d) Thus it can be said that the child's relationship to God is 'affected' through this act of blessing, not in any mechanical or magical way, but in so far as a new relationship is being made with the community of the Church in which God is at work through his grace. The love of God towards the child has not of course changed, as if it were not present before; the child is already within the orbit of the love of God through living in his world, but he or she needs to be positively accepted by the Church into the 'embrace of the Body' to deepen this influence. Here the young child is different from the adult who has slipped away from the offer of God's grace, but who can exercise a voluntary choice to enter the ambience of the church fellowship. The child must be brought, and in the very bringing of the child we can detect the work of the Spirit of God that goes ahead and before us in our lives: 'of such are the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 19:13-15).

XIII. Final hopes

41. As we come to the end of this document, to the conclusion of three years' work and to the eighth major draft, we offer it to others in hope. We hope that our sister churches in Christ may understand more clearly why Baptists often seem to be awkward ecumenical partners over the issue of baptism. Though we have had to say difficult and even hard things, we hope that our partners will share the vision of church and salvation that lies behind them. We believe that we may all affirm 'one baptism' in Christ, while openly facing the problems in the idea of a 'common baptism', and that we will be enabled to do this by seeing the place of baptism on the journey of the Christian disciple towards maturity in Christ. So we may deepen our unity in faith, life and mission. We offer this report to fellow Baptists as a contribution to Baptist identity, and as a step towards greater understanding of our partners who practice infant baptism. In particular, we make a plea for Baptists to think more seriously about the place of children in the church; we urge that the act of 'presentation and blessing of infants' among Baptists be understood more clearly as a part of a journey of growing relationship with God. We hope that all who read the report will be drawn more deeply into the fellowship of the triune God into whose name and life we are baptized.

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NOTES

- ¹ (Ed) T F Best and Gunther Gassman, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia. Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order* (Faith and Order Paper 166, WCC Publications, Geneva, 1994), p 252.
- ² Ibid, p 247.
- ³ *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982), p 4.
- ⁴ Ibid, p 16, paragraph 15.
- ⁵ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Macmillan, 1966), p 275.
- ⁶ If such a candidate has been associated in the past with other Christian churches in the neighbourhood, good pastoral practice will of course mean that a minister intending to baptize her will consult with the ministers of those churches, at least to explain her decision to them.
- ⁷ We are mindful that the *Declaration of Principle* of the Baptist Union declares that 'Christian baptism is the immersion in water into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost ...' This defines the normative mode of baptism, but where

this is impossible, another mode is surely better than no baptism at all. The guidebook *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* (Baptist Union, Oxford University Press, 1991) recognizes that pouring of water rather than immersion may be more suitable for believers' baptism in some circumstances (p 97).

- 8 This was substantially the recommendation made by a study group on Baptism and Re-Baptism which formed part of the Consultation on Local Ecumenical Partnerships held by Churches Together in England at Swanwick, 21-23 March 1994. The recommendations were subsequently published in *Pilgrim Post* (CTE).
- 9 In the case of someone who had been a member of the Anglican Church, it would probably be necessary to place him or her 'under the discipline' of the Baptist congregation *before* the act of baptism rather than after it.
- 10 At the same time, ecumenical partners who practise infant baptism might ask themselves whether a similar kind of voluntary restraint might be possible on their part - taking for example the ASB services of 'Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child' and 'Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion' as a more regular pattern.
- 11 Separate church meetings still exist in principle within the modern LEP in the UK context, since LEPs are not a 'united church' but congregations sharing a united life, worship and mission.
- 12 This was the view taken by the statement *The Child and the Church* received, but not adopted, by the Baptist Union Council in 1966. 'We recognize the infant, regardless of his parentage, to be a member of Adam's race redeemed in Christ. This is not because his parents are Christian but because he is a human being' (p14).

- ¹³ Though this may be recognized readily as a 'paedo-baptist' form of argument, it has also been presented in a document to which Baptists have made a substantial contribution: *Christian Baptism and Church Membership*, issued by the Commission of the Covenanted Churches in Wales (1990).
- ¹⁴ *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship* provides the alternatives of a Service of Presentation (including the *dedication* of believing parents) and a Service of Blessing (for others): see p 109.

