

Baptism – Life by Drowning¹

This paper was prepared to resource the conversation and decision-making of the National Working Group on Doctrine (Uniting Church in Australia's National Assembly) meeting 21-22 November 2004. Three members of the Working Group were asked to prepare a draft paper on baptism, but the more we thought about it, the more some background issues needed sorting out first. The paper therefore discusses some of the background issues to our theology and practice of baptism.

1. The issue

The presenting issues for these thoughts are:

- a. The matter of membership remained unresolved by the Tenth Assembly; and
- b. We need an undergirding theology for the work on reviewing the specified ministries.

Both tasks were referred to the Task Group on Specified Ministries (TGoSM) convened by Colleen Geyer. The National Working Group on Doctrine (NWGoD) was asked to prepare a readable paper on the theology of baptism by the Task Group. The NWGoD in turn asked Wes Campbell, Chris Budden and me to prepare a draft for its consideration.

There are, however, much deeper issues which may determine the shape and wording of such a paper. I suspect that it is useful for the NWGoD to spend some time discussing these, to help ensure that we draft the most useful document we can for the Uniting Church.

Emerging from the Christendom era, when Christian faith and citizenship were closely entwined, the Christian church now has the opportunity to find its own particular identity as people who are deeply formed by God in the central stories of the gospel. This means rediscovering what God has done in Jesus, what the church is, and the nature of costly discipleship in the current context.

My thesis is that this task of ecclesiastical renewal and theological rediscovery is best (can only be?) grounded in a renewed theology and practice of baptism.

But is the crisis one of baptism, or is it one of identity? Do we need to be clear about our Christian identity, so that our theology and practice of baptism falls into place, or do we clarify what baptism is all about in order to discover our identity? Or do they go hand in hand?

2. Tensions

To embark on a renewed theology of baptism is to enter a minefield. Baptism has been the second most controversial issue in the life of the Uniting Church. As one indication of this, the list of Assembly and ASC resolutions between 1977 and 2003 on baptism runs to 45 items. They include matters to do with:

- infant baptism
- rebaptism
- relations with other churches
- the responsibilities of Ministers, Elders and Church Councils

¹ I am grateful to the following people who were kind enough to read an earlier draft and make comments: Craig Thompson, Garry Deverell, Chris Budden, Ian Gillman and Wes Campbell. The paper has been significantly reshaped in the light of their helpful comments.

- church architecture
- naming and blessing ceremonies and their relation to baptism
- ministerial discipline
- the form of baptism (immersion, pouring or sprinkling)
- baptism and confirmation
- lay presidency
- the use of water in the recollection of baptism
- the relation of baptism to holy communion
- the relation of baptism to membership
- the relation of baptism to ordination
- the catechumenate
- baptism in schools

and more! A number of booklets have been produced as well as some hundreds of pages of reports, documents and position papers.

In re-reading this material I conclude that the official position of the Uniting Church is not in question (indeed, we hold this in common with most of our ecumenical partners), but rather that some members and ministers (and sometimes presbyteries and synods) find themselves at odds with the official position of the church. Furthermore, I also gain the impression that the matters have not really been resolved; there appears to be no widespread consensus about core issues, least of all about the centrality of baptism in the Christian life! As the responses to the discussion paper prior to the Tenth Assembly indicate (on the matter of membership), there is still a strong undercurrent of dissent and simmering unrest.

In his useful little book, *Baptism and Conversion* (1964), John Baillie quotes Stephen Neill who characterises two views of conversion:

- a. One group sees conversion as beginning when one personally encounters Jesus Christ, repents and accepts God's gift of salvation through faith. (The church is then the sum total of individuals who have passed through this experience.)
- b. Another group sees the Christian life beginning at baptism, when the grace of God, operating through the church, takes away sin and the divine life is sown as a seed in the person's life. The person needs to recognise the reality of what God has done and to take that seriously.

We have both these positions in the Uniting Church, and we seem to be each shouting our convictions across a chasm with little impact on the other group. (Baillie helpfully goes on to explore the teachings of various Christian traditions on baptism and conversion and states his own view.)

What this says to me is that we still need to articulate clearly the core issues of our faith and how these shape our identity in ways that are convincing, not just by way of producing an elegantly argued academic paper, but which offers people a new vision of what God has done, and the joyous, gracious call to costly discipleship. We can then demonstrate that baptism is the sign of that. As Garry Deverell said,

Baptism ought to be at the centre of both our personal and ecclesial identities because it is the *primary scriptural symbol* of the conversion of these identities within the salvific maelstrom of Christ's life, death and resurrection. (Pers. com. 28.10.2004; emphasis in original.)

Can we avoid the treadmill of rehashing the old arguments by looking at baptism in a fresh, clear way so that all the other issues which surround it are thrown into a new perspective and fall into place? My hunch is that, as we emerge from Christendom, ***the church must find a new identity as God's peculiar people and again***

placing baptism at the heart of church life. This needs to be expressed in clear, energising theology, practised in life-changing rites and accompanied by careful, sensitive catechumenal processes.

As one participant at the Becoming Disciples consultation in Adelaide in August 2004 said afterwards:

Who'd have thought that reforming the church was through the processes that we have had, and then lost, as part of our Christian tradition? As simple yet as difficult as rescuing baptism from some saccharine sweet moment in any Sunday in the year to the whole body drama that is competent to symbolise the most significant experience in our life – giving our life in discipleship to Jesus Christ. (Tom Stuart)

If my hunch is correct, then other practices we think will renew the church (from new forms of worship and sociological surveys to witty quips on church notice boards and brewed coffee), whilst not unimportant, really need to be rethought in terms of our fundamental identity as a baptised people.

It may well be that one of the most important and far-reaching comments ever made to Assembly Standing Committee is tucked away on page 12 of the report of the “Water that Unites” Task Group to the ASC in September 1993:

The Assembly must be willing to accept nothing less than a long term commitment to the renewal of the sacrament of baptism in the Church. The establishment of a practical catechumenate or time of preparation for baptism may well be considered by the Uniting Church at this time ...

3. Where to?

3.1 Research and reflection

Clear thinking always helps. In working through to a helpful, empowering theology of baptism, we would do well to consider:

- What have been some of the fundamental affirmations on baptism held dear by the Christian church over two millennia?
- How did the New Testament writers see it?
- How did the church fathers, prior to Christianity becoming recognised under Constantine, see it? How did the theology and practice change after recognition?
- What have the great medieval theologians and the councils of the church taught? To what extent were these responses to presenting issues, and what abiding truths do they convey?
- To what extent was baptismal theology rethought by the Reformers and Wesley?
- What aspects of baptismal theology have received attention in recent centuries?
- What have we said we hold in common with other churches?
- What has the Uniting Church affirmed? What have been the points of contention? What underlies the unrest and dissatisfaction of some Ministers and Congregation?
- How does the post-Christendom, post-denominational, post-modern, multi-faith context help us to gain a new perspective on baptism and the Christian life?
- In addition to these historical arguments (which may, or may not convince), the issue may also be grounded in incisive analyses of the human condition and demonstrations of how our theology addresses that condition.

3.2 Developing strategy

A strategy may well include such steps as:

1. Prepare for the TGoSM a clear statement on the centrality of baptism which is worded in a way that offers the church an energising, life-giving vision of what God has done and calls the church to discipleship as baptismal living. Such a statement does not need to deal with the contentious issues (even though these will probably be raised in response!), but rather articulate the core of our commitments. Furthermore, it needs to argue convincingly that, in the current context, our peculiar identity as Christians whose primary allegiance is to God in Jesus Christ and whose lives are shaped by the coming reign of God is best understood as baptismal identity.
2. Ensure that a church-renewing theology of baptism forms the heart of the Becoming Disciples process (the catechumenate).
3. Prepare readable articles on some of the issues listed in the section on “research and reflection” (above) for *Uniting Church Studies* and/or *Pacifica* and perhaps produce some of this in more “lay” terms for the church press.
4. Revamp the Doctrine section of the Assembly website to express the centrality of baptismal theology and work clearly and simply state the official position of the church, and why the church holds these positions.
5. Resource congregations, presbyteries and synods for conversations on core issues of baptismal living etc.

4. Key points in a theology of baptism

Some of the key points which need to be made over and over again (and may well form the basis for the paper for the TGoSM) include:

4.1 A gift of grace

Baptism is a gift of God’s grace to the church. It is (very likely) instituted by Jesus to mark a person’s entry into the new covenant with God and with God’s people.

4.2 An effective sign

Baptism is the sign of all that God has done for us in creation, covenant, Christ, church and coming Reign of God. It dramatises our central story, tells us who we are, calls us to repentance and plunges us [pun intended] into discipleship. The New Testament images surrounding baptism (death/resurrection, recloning, washing etc) speak of new life in Christ. Baptism is the sign of the person’s pardoning, cleansing and receiving the Holy Spirit. As such, baptism is a sign of the coming reign of God in our midst. It is not, therefore, primarily about how we *feel*, but it goes much deeper, to who we *are*, and whose we are, to the marrow of our being, the depths of our soul. It makes us new people in Christ.

Furthermore, it is a sign which actually accomplishes what it signifies; it is an effective sign. In theological terms, baptised persons are related to God in a new and different way; they are newly created, they recommence the Christian story in the way it was meant to go. In psychological terms, baptism ought to be celebrated with powerful symbolics and psychic costliness. In sociological terms, baptism ingrafts the person into God’s people. As such, it creates the community. What defines the Christian community is not, in the first place, ideology, or common feeling, or polity, or even agreement on points of theology, but engagement with God, death and resurrection, forgiveness and hope.

4.3 Baptism reshapes the person and the community

Baptism, whilst a gift of God, transforms the one being baptised and brings about obedience and life-long growth in personal maturity, witness and service. It produces a life centred on nothing other than the worship of the Triune God. The baptised life is one of submission to being reshaped by the Spirit into the likeness of Christ. It drowns the old personality, so that out of what has been killed, a new person can grow. We have a new character, a new identity – we are literally new creations.

The baptised life is therefore the cross-bearing life. As Christ is one with the hungry and poor and wretched of the earth, so are those who have been baptised into his life.

To nourish us, Christ's baptised people are constantly fed by word, bread and wine. The eucharist recapitulates the baptismal covenant. It continues to transform us in the likeness of Christ, as we feed on his murdered body and drink his blood and thus participate in his risen life.² Consequently, the baptised life is never static, but always being refashioned and remade into Christ-likeness.

4.4 God's gift to the church for the world

Baptism is a gift to the church and administered within the church. While baptism and eucharist are not for the world, but for the church, like all God's gifts, baptism is given for the sake of the whole creation. Richard Norris puts it well:

The Church is the community which lives out the life whose seed and beginning is Baptism; it is a social explication of the meaning of Baptism, a meaning that is enacted and so reiterated weekly ... in the sacred meal. (1990:28)

He goes on to say that the church is a community

whose business it is constantly to rehearse a divinely authored play whose first actual, full performance will occur in the Age to Come (1990:29)

A renewed theology of baptism is therefore inevitably a renewal of the mission of the church. Christ commands the church to make disciples and baptise, and thus to participate in the renewal of all creation. Could not a renewal of baptismal identity help us to overcome our embarrassment about being Christian, our loss of public language about the faith, our failure (unlike people of other faiths) to express our allegiance in identity markers and regular practices?

Questions:

- 1. Will we simply restate the church's position so as to stir up the same old issues, arguments and resentment?**
- 2. To what extent does the language of sections 6-8 of the Basis of Union adequately address the issues of the twenty-first century?**
- 3. Will we assume that if it stated clearly enough and convincingly enough that some or most will be persuaded to the official church point of view?**
- 4. Will some people be happier if we state the official position in language they can relate to, or is it better to make our case in fresh language – even though it will pass many people by?**

² I am grateful to Garry Deverell for helping me to reshape this section, although I am not yet convinced that I have done justice to his thinking.

5. *Will it help if we acknowledge that the official position was part of the Christendom context which is less and less applicable, and so by-pass some of the old fights? (E.g. if we agree that it only makes sense to baptise infants for whose nurture the church can make provision, - indiscriminate baptism without preparation cannot be said to be an effective sign etc.)*
6. *In the Becoming Disciples process, we urge congregations to do careful and lengthy preparation for baptism and discern carefully the person's readiness for that by evidence of conversion. Does that help to overcome the evangelical v. official divide?*

5. A new perspective

While these points reflect time-honoured affirmations of the Christian Church, they become all the more pertinent in the twenty-first century context.

5.1 Congregational practice

Firstly, we need to acknowledge that the gap between our stated position and our practice in congregations is often huge. My impression is that most Ministers agonise over the issue and take pains to explain patiently to people bringing infants for baptism what the church's understanding is. Parents then acknowledge what has been said, agree to make the vows, but more often than not, demonstrate by their subsequent actions that the theology and liturgical actions have made little impression on them. Consequently, baptism does little more than bless the *status quo* – and so is a travesty of all that the sacrament is meant to do and say. As one Minister puts it:

In my current Uniting Church placement ... I am finding that baptismal theology and practice is largely pagan in character. It invokes the blessing of a very tame and harmless "God", who has not yet become incarnate in the living of a particular kind of life – a costly life of love and radical trust towards God as Father." (Deverell 2004, pers. com.)

5.2 The post-Christendom context

Douglas John Hall has helpfully written:

[A]s the Christian religion emerges out of the constantinian cocoon in which, throughout most of its history, it has been so tightly enclosed, Christians find themselves relieved of the burden of assuming, as the *raison d'être* of their movement, custodianship of the random religious sentiments and moral codes that have clustered about the corpus Christianum. In short, we are free, insofar as we are courageous enough to undertake it, to contemplate and to enact in concrete ways the only biblically and theologically sound reason we have for calling ourselves Christians--which is to say our confession of Jesus as the Christ. As long as Christianity had to play--or allowed itself to play--the role of Western culture-religion, the nomenclature "Christian" was obliged to stand for all sorts of dispositions extraneous or tangential in relation to biblical faith. In the post-Christendom context that has been in the formation since the 18th Century and will be the normal situation of the church in the third millennium, Christians are required to become knowledgeable and articulate about the christological basis of their belief. We are Christians, not because "we are (or think we are) good, or right, or just, or 'concerned' – and certainly not because we are 'nice' – though hopefully we are (as Reinhold Niebuhr once said) 'as decent as ordinary people.'" We are Christians because we believe in God as God is made known in Jesus Christ through the divine Spirit and the testimony of Scripture. (1999)

In the early church (second to fourth centuries), the initiatory process took at least three years. The congregation took upon itself the serious and joyful task of refashioning the new Christian into the likeness of Jesus. It welcomed her, embraced her and loved her enough not to leave her floundering to find her own identity, or to do her own work of allowing the faith to transform her worldview and every corner of her life. It showed her hospitality, it carefully explained the story, the church provided her with a companion, it prayed for her, agonised with her, fasted with her, helped her find a new vocation. And only then did it baptise her and admit her to the holy meal. The reshaping of the identity is no light thing.

Once Christianity became the established religion in Europe, infant baptism became more the mark of citizenship. To be a citizen was to be a Christian and vice versa. Jews were not fully citizens. Pagans were on the outside of the Empire threatening Christendom's fabric – the Muslims. Christians were no longer differentiated from others in society. Baptism was no longer a mark of cross-carrying, of living by alternative loyalties, in an alternative society with alternative values; baptism largely degenerated into being simply a naming ceremony marking a rite of passage for a family which was now a bit different because it had a new member. Alongside of this developed the superstition that the sprinkling with water in a liturgical context was to purchase a ticket to heaven, and fire insurance against the other place.

In the post-Christendom context, we can no longer rely on shared cultural understandings about basic beliefs, ethics or spirituality – these are, to a considerable extent, no longer Christian, if they ever were. These have to be inculcated carefully and thoroughly. We therefore find that the inspired wisdom of the early church about the making of Christians needs to be recovered and adapted to our contemporary situation.

In the post-Christendom context, Christians can again be assured of their unique identity as, what Willimon and Hauerwas, following 1 Peter, called, “resident aliens”:

- people who, in theological terms, have been accepted by the Father because of the life, death, resurrection and glorification of the Son in the power of the Spirit;
- people who, in psychological terms, have been reborn, enlightened, refashioned, remade into the likeness of Christ;
- people who, in sociological terms, have now received their naturalisation certificate, or better, their adoption papers into the reign of God and are full members of God's forgiven but yet imperfect people – the Church, and who therefore live lives of costly discipleship.

We are, by God's grace, a converted people, a transformed people, a distinctive people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.... once you were not a people, but now you are God's people” (1 Peter 2:9,10). Our primary loyalty is not to Australia, but to God. Our primary community is not our family, but God's family. Our values are informed, not by some insipid middle-class standards of respectability, but by the reign of God as announced, lived and proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles. We are a people shaped not by some mediocre consensus of society, but by Word, water, bread and wine. We are a reborn people, a people who know our identity. As William Willimon writes:

When you ask in desperation, “Who, in God's name, am I?” baptism will have you feel water dripping from your head and the oil oozing down your neck and say, “You are, in God's name, *royalty*, God's own, claimed and ordained for God's serious and joyful business.” (1980:27/28)

5.3 Birthing new Christians

The church looks towards the Reign of God, waits for it, proclaims it and makes pilgrimage towards it. The church is an anticipatory sign of the Reign of God. (Küng 1968/2001:90-96). In short, the church's duty and call is *to serve the reign of God* as its herald, witness, demonstrator and messenger. The church is not the goal of the Gospel; but is called to be its "instrument and witness" (Guder 1998:5)

Evangelism is best understood as "that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time" (Abraham 1989:95). A key component of that is birthing new Christians, as the Spirit gives new life. This is not a task to be undertaken easily or simply. Whatever the benefits and compromises of Christendom, it is no longer with us, except by way of a few anachronistic vestiges – such as indiscriminate baptism, baptism on demand and baptism without discipleship.

This birthing of Christians is a primary function of the church

It is, then, Baptism in which the mother, the Church, gives birth to these children – that is, to newborn children of God, who share the status of the Son of God and gladly accept the training, the *paideia*, that their much elder sibling lavishes on them (Norris 1990:24).

Given the radical transformation that the person undergoes in the conversion process, we cannot take this lightly. A few conversations with the minister, or a half dozen "confirmation classes" no longer cut it for people who have little or no knowledge of the Christian story, who have no comprehension of Jesus or the reign of God he inaugurated, who have little understanding of the church as an alternative society, who have little idea of practices to sustain the Christian life. We are again like the early church in the situation where we need to love people enough to initiate them carefully into the reign of God, to help them experience the Christian liturgy and to plumb its depths, to allow time for the Holy Spirit to do her transforming work so that people will indeed be "new creations". In other words, we need a renewed catechumenate which draws on the wisdom of the ancient church, but adapts it for the current context.

Only then will we have a church of disciples rather than consumers, a church of which offers a genuine robust alternative to the death-dealing practices and values of what Walter Wink has called "the domination system" (1998), a church which witnesses to none other than Jesus the Christ.

Such catechesis needs to include:

- a. learning the Christian story. Narrative shapes world view. It also shatters and reshapes old ones. Jesus knew the power of stories and told them masterfully. The sermons we have in Acts are largely narratives of God's doings.
- b. learning the basics of Christian theology. Who is Jesus? What are the key beliefs which the Church holds in common and distinguishes us from other faiths? How are we to understand the creeds within a present-day world view etc?
- c. learning the Christian ethic. Forgiveness, care for the needy, justice, treating all people equally, sharing – these do not come naturally and need to be acquired and supported within the community.

- d. learning Christian practices. Learning to live a life of praise, worship³, personal Scripture reading and prayer, fasting, tithing – these also do not come naturally and have to be learned.

5.4 Catechesis before theological education

I have argued that it is the congregation's central task to make new Christians, which entails detailed, and sometimes lengthy catechesis. Unfortunately, we have lost the art and it does not come easily to us. The church will need to be converted before we can begin to convert others. In our current situation, instead of catechising someone whose life has been turned upside down by the gospel, we don't know what to do with them, so we send them off to theological college. We thus confuse catechesis with formation for ministry, and baptism with ordination, and the Christian life with pastoral ministry.

Responsible catechesis is nothing more simple and more complex; more joyful and more demanding than:

1. helping the new convert to reassembly his or her personality and life around the new centre of gravity, which is God revealed in Jesus Christ;
2. seducing the convert's initial subjective, and largely incommunicable experience of faith into the public domain;
3. instructing the convert in basic discipline for Christian living (cf. Kavanagh 1990:39, 40).

Catechesis is a time for establishing habits and gaining an initial grounding in Scripture. It is only after this process is well advanced, and the person has some years of experience at living the Christian life that they may be considered for theological education.

6. What might be some implications?

... for our conversations

Clearly all doctrines of the church (creation, covenant, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology) are related to our understanding of baptism. If it is helpful to place baptismal theology much more at the centre of our life together, then these links need to be made explicit time and time again.

... for Congregations

Members of the church need to be helped to see the connections between their baptism and their life at home, at work and in the community. Such conversations can be at the heart of congregational life.

The Tenth Assembly commended the Becoming Disciples process to congregations and faith communities. It deserves to be vigorously promoted and carefully implemented.⁴

³ For an eloquent exposition of how worship shapes personality, see Ramshaw 1990.

⁴ We may well want to strategise about how best to implement the catechumenate. Do we encourage as many Congregations as possible to register, or is it better to work

... for Presbyteries

Presbyteries would do well to have sessions of theological reflection on baptism and encourage common pastoral practice, in line with the church's doctrine. The matter needs to be constantly raised in reviews of congregational life. How do we resource Presbyteries for this?

... for Synods

Synods in session need empowering conversations about the theology and practice of baptism. Again, how do we resource Synods for this?

The matter of baptismal identity can be at the forefront of conversations leading to the selection of candidates.

Issues of baptismal identity are clearly central to the formation of candidates which we entrust to theological colleges and lay training centres.

... for Assembly

The Assembly has "determining responsibility in the area of doctrine". The fact that there is widespread unrest in the life of the church on a core matter of doctrine must be a matter of considerable concern. What strategies need to be put in place, not just to persuade people we might regard are in error (although that is important also), but to grasp to opportunity for the renewal of our core identity, to energise the church for its mission, to help a sometimes dispirited and declining church to lift its vision?

A recovery of the doctrine of baptism will also put into perspective the unresolved matter of how we regard membership in the church, as well as work through where we go with the six specified ministries.

... for Theology and Discipleship

The National Working Group on Worship, in preparing *Uniting in Worship 2*, has, with inspired wisdom, placed as the first section of the new book, a set of services headed "Paths to Discipleship", which offers the church its baptismal order and related catechumenal rites.

The National Working Group on Doctrine may well consider making issues surrounding the doctrine and practice of baptism a key focus of its work for the next few years.

The National Working Group on Missiology is preparing resource sheets on aspects of discipleship in the twenty-first century. These need to be seen as resourcing the church for expressing who we are as a baptised people.

The National Working Group on Evangelism is the lead group for the Becoming Disciples process.

The National Working Group on Gospel and Gender may well want to consider how being a baptised people inevitably makes us an inclusive people.

intensively with a few Congregations for a few years and let them teach others? But that is beyond the scope of this paper.

The National Consultant may well want to spend a considerable portion of his time in resourcing the church to recover its core identity and thus resourcing the church for the Becoming Disciples process.

Questions

1. ***What can you affirm in what is said here?***
2. ***What seems to you to be misguided, or is wrongly emphasised?***
3. ***What else needs to be said?***
4. ***What core affirmations about baptism might offer some theological foundations for the reflection we need to do about church membership and the specified ministries?***
5. ***How should it be said?***
6. ***How will the church be resourced for all this?***

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