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Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation Reconsidered

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Abstract: In ecumenical conversations between 2000 and 2010, representatives of the Baptist churches proposed that baptism should be understood as one element – though essential – in a longer process of Christian initiation. The paper recalls the reason for this proposal and then revisits it by considering its relevance to two recent issues: the rite of renewal of baptismal vows through immersion in water in Anglican churches and the “synodal pathway” in the Catholic Church.

Zusammenfassung: In ökumenischen Gesprächen zwischen 2000 und 2010 schlugen baptistische Vertreter vor, die Taufe als *ein* Element, wenngleich ein unverzichtbares, in einem längeren Prozess christlicher Initiation zu verstehen. Der Aufsatz ruft die Hintergründe dieses Vorschlags in Erinnerung und untersucht danach seine gegenwärtige Bedeutung im Lichte zweier jüngerer Fragestellungen, nämlich des Ritus der Tauferinnerung durch Untertauchen in anglikanischen Gemeinden und des „Synodalen Weges“ in der römisch-katholischen Kirche.

1 A Story of Conversations

In a series of ecumenical conversations between 2000 and 2010, representatives of the Baptist communion of churches consistently put forward the idea that baptism should be understood as one element – though the central one – in a longer process of Christian initiation. Baptism, they urged, should be seen as one stage in a “journey” of initiation. Consistently too, this proposal was well received by ecumenical conversation partners, and all those engaged in dialogue were agreed that this understanding of initiation had a greater potential for achieving unity between the believer-baptist and infant-baptist traditions than the language of “common baptism”. Such conversations included those held between the Baptist World Alliance and the Anglican Communion, the Baptist World Alliance and the Catholic Church, the European Baptist Federation and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, and the Baptist

Union of Great Britain and the Church of England. In all of these I was personally involved.

Now, in this paper, I have been invited to “reconsider” this idea more than a decade after that series of dialogues. My intention in this paper is to recall the reasons for taking this approach, to mention some appeals to it in more recent conversations, and then to consider the contribution it might make to two situations which are current today, and where it might contribute in ways that were not fully considered in the decade from 2000 to 2010. So the place to start is with the relation of baptism to initiation itself.

2 Baptism and Christian Initiation

The basic proposal made by Baptist conversation-partners was, and is, to place baptism in a wider context, or a longer journey, of initiation. If we envisage the whole Christian life as a journey of discipleship, then “initiation” or Christian beginnings is the first section of the journey, not just a single starting point. This phase will include not only baptism but Christian nurture, or catechesis, an opportunity to confess one’s own faith, and first communion. Underlying all this is of course the grace of God which precedes and empowers every human movement. This is a process that will take different forms in different Christian confessions. A journey that is familiar to Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, or Reformed Christians would be from infant baptism and the initiating grace of God, through Christian nurture in childhood, to public profession of faith, and laying on of hands in confirmation for gifts of the Spirit, to be used in ministry in the world. Another journey, the Baptist experience would be from blessing as an infant, through Christian nurture in childhood, to believers’ baptism, laying on of hands for gifts of the Spirit, and then increasing use of those gifts in ministry in the world. In either journey, first communion might come at different points on the way, before or after confirmation or believers’ baptism. In an increasingly secular society, where new believers come from unchurched backgrounds without either infant baptism or blessing, a journey that can be found in all churches would be from hearing the story of Jesus for the first time as an adult, repentance and conversion, to believers’ baptism, laying on of hands, and consequent serving. This third kind of journey, which

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is familiar to all churches, underlines the fact that initiation is always a process, since in this case of adult conversion there *has* to be some kind of process between the moment of conversion and baptism.

In any case, the believer-baptist view will be that the process of initiation has not come to an end until a baptismal candidate exercises his or her own faith in Christ. If this cannot be found within the event of baptism itself, as in the case of the baptism of infants, then initiation will have to be “stretched” in some way to accommodate it. Traditionally this moment has been located in *western* churches within confirmation, but whether or not it takes this particular form, Baptists will expect personal faith (arising of course from divine grace) to be a part of Christian beginnings.

This theological-sacramental idea was in fact first proposed by the Faith and Order Paper of the World Council of Churches (WCC) *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM)*, published in 1982. This paper is usually remembered for its expression “our common baptism”, but this was not *all* it had to suggest about an agreed approach to baptism. The paper raises the question about *how* baptism can be mutually recognized between churches, and observes the following:

Churches are increasingly recognizing one another's baptism as the one baptism into Christ when Jesus Christ has been confessed as Lord by the candidate or, in the case of infant baptism, when confession has been made by the church (parents, guardians, godparents and congregation) *and affirmed later by personal faith and commitment*.¹

This is how, it suggests, mutual recognition is possible, *when* baptism is part of a whole journey into faith. What can be recognized by those practising believers' baptism, it suggests, is infant baptism plus a confession of personal faith. The commentary also spells out this mutual recognition of whole patterns or processes of initiation, stressing that both forms of baptism (infant and believers') require to be set in the context of Christian nurture, in which the baptized person – at any age – needs to grow in an understanding of faith. It reads:

In some churches which unite both infant-baptist and believer-baptist traditions, it has been possible to regard as equivalent alternatives for entry into the Church both a pattern whereby baptism in infancy is followed by a later profession of faith and a pattern whereby believers' baptism follows upon a presentation and blessing in infancy.²

The article then urges *all* churches to consider whether they, too, can follow this path marked out by churches which practise both forms of baptism. It asks whether they might “recognize equivalent alternatives in their reciprocal relationships”.³ These equivalent alternatives are not simply different forms of baptism: they are whole patterns of initiation, and this is made clear by the “clarification” of this clause offered by the official report on the responses made to *BEM* (1990). The report notes:

Some churches ask what is meant by “equivalent alternatives” [...]. It is not the act of “infant baptism” and the act of “believers'/adult baptism” in *themselves* that are there proposed as “equivalent alternatives”, but rather two total processes of initiation which the text recognizes.⁴

It is rather startling that this approach of *BEM* is usually ignored when churches practising infant baptism appeal to it. The phrase “common baptism” appears in *BEM* only once in the context of its idea of equivalent processes of initiation, and it might have been better for *BEM* to have used the phrase “common initiation”. As it is, the expression “common baptism” has simply been taken to mean that all baptisms are equivalent, the same thing, and those who practise the baptism of believing disciples, able to confess faith for themselves, have not been able to accept a “common baptism” taken out of context.

Those in the believer-baptist tradition, beginning with Anabaptists, and now embracing Baptists, Pentecostals, and other Free evangelical churches, find that the idea of “common baptism” simply collapses two different sacramental events into one. This critique may come from one of two perspectives. The first does not recognize the validity of infant baptism at all. In this view, there is no common baptism because the rite with infants is just not baptism. The “one baptism” is *only* the baptism of believers – that is, Christian disciples who can make their own profession of faith. In the baptism of an infant, of course, that profession is made on their behalf by sponsors in the family or the church.

But there is another Baptist view, and this is one I take myself. It recognizes infant baptism as a valid form of baptism, though it is seen as a practice *derivative* from believers' baptism, which is the *normative* form attested in the New Testament. It is valid as a legitimate derivation from the norm that has emerged in the history of the church after the New Testament period. The re-baptism as believ-

¹ WCC, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982), 6 (para. 15, my emphasis) (henceforth *BEM*).

² *BEM*, 5 (commentary on para. 12).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ WCC, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982–1990: Report on the Process and Responses*, Faith and Order Paper 149 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 109.

ers of those already baptized as infants should therefore be avoided,⁵ and forms of re-affirmation of baptismal vows should be used instead. From this standpoint, nevertheless, there is still a difficulty for believer-baptists with the idea of “common baptism.” This implies that the baptism of an infant is simply *equivalent* to the baptism of a believing disciple. The believer-baptist sees something fundamentally different about the two forms. Baptists are very diverse in their understanding of the meaning of baptism, but there is at least this agreement between them: that the baptism of believers, bearing witness to their own faith, has substantial differences from the baptism of very young children.

The difference is *not* that infant baptism is all about the gift of God’s grace, while believer-baptism is all about the faith of the candidate. That would be a travesty of the situation, though the difference is often assumed to be such. In both rites, infant and believer, there is an intersection, a meeting, between the grace of God and human faith. Both grace and faith are at work in both forms, and yet not in exactly the same way. Grace and faith are not just blank counters standing for divine and human acts – as relationships between persons and a personal God they have a particular context and are shaped by the circumstances in which they happen. In the case of a young infant, faith is being expressed vicariously for the child by the family and the church gathered for baptism, with the expectation that the child will come to exercise that faith for himself or herself in due time. There really is faith being involved, but it is not the identical kind of faith to that which is expressed by a believer making a confession for himself or herself, a faith that has arisen out of a history of encounter with God, perhaps over several years prior to baptism.

Again, in the case of a young child there is grace in the event of baptism. Grace is not a kind of divine fluid but God’s own gracious personal coming; in an infant baptism God comes in prevenient grace, initiating a relationship that will grow and develop over the coming years. In believers’ baptism, God comes graciously to continue a relationship that has already begun, and the Spirit of God gives the believer gifts that he or she is going to use in mission for God in the world; baptism is in fact a commissioning for the ministry of the whole people of God. Of course, we can say that the Holy Spirit comes to a very young child to seal the event of baptism, as in the Orthodox doctrine of chrismation. But we can hardly say that this moment equips the

child to begin sharing in God’s mission in the world. That is a responsibility that should not be laid on young children but only on disciples who willingly assume it.

For all these reasons, a believer-baptist will recognize a different kind of interweaving of grace and faith in the baptism of a young infant, so that the one baptism cannot be simply a common baptism. Here is where the suggestion of *BEM* is so valuable, about equivalent processes of initiation, including baptism. Baptists in ecumenical dialogues with other churches have consistently pressed the desirability of comparing, not one isolated moment of baptism with another, but the whole sequence of events which mark the beginning of the Christian life and discipleship.⁶ For example, there is the agreed statement of the Baptist World Alliance and the Catholic Church in 2010 which reads: “Initiation into Christ and his church is a process wider than the act of baptism itself.”⁷ The report goes on to explain:

In conversations with other Christian communions, Baptists have recently been speaking of a process of initiation, or a “journey of Christian beginnings.” In strikingly similar terms the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “becoming a Christian has been accomplished by a journey and initiation in several stages” [para. 1229]. [...] [This] “journey of initiation” as described above can include the baptism of young infants; although the sequence of stages will be different from that which happens with adults, all the elements of the journey will be present. [...] Baptists and Catholics can both recognize that the processes of initiation, taken as a *whole* in both communions, are aimed at the making of Christian disciples and the deepening of each disciple’s relationship with the triune God.⁸

The section concludes, significantly:

We thus think that in relations between Baptists and Catholics it is more fruitful to work together towards a mutual recognition of *initiation*, rather than attempt to make an affirmation of “common baptism”.⁹

⁵ It is impossible to make this uniform among Baptist churches because of the freedom of the local congregation, but good practice can be encouraged. Renewal of baptismal vows through immersion in water (see section 5 below) is one such practice that may achieve an ecumenical convergence.

⁶ The Doctrine and Worship Committee of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Believing and Being Baptized* (Didcot: Baptist Union, 1966), 28–33; Paul S. Fiddes, “Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation”, *ER* 54.1 (2002), 48–65, here 56–58; Mark Heim, “Baptismal Recognition and the Baptist Churches”, in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 156–159, here 162–163; George R. Beasley Murray, “The Problem of Infant Baptism: An Exercise in Possibilities”, in *Festschrift Günter Wagner*, ed. Faculty of Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschtikon (Bern: Lang, 1994), 11–14, here 12–13.

⁷ “The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance 2006–2010”, *ABQ* 31 (2012), 28–122, para. 101.

⁸ “The Word of God in the Life of the Church” (see n. 7), paras. 102–103.

⁹ *Ibid.*

I should say, looking back, that Baptist participants in ecumenical conversations have not so far adopted the *exact BEM* language of “equivalent processes”, though individual Baptist theologians have. In conversation Baptists have used expressions that come *close* to equivalence and even imply it, without committing to it. In conversation between the Baptist World Alliance and the Anglican Communion the agreed statement expressed the hope that “each communion might be able to recognize that members of the other *have made the same journey*”.¹⁰ The report of conversation between the European Baptist Federation and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe notes that “many Baptists will want to *recognize the initiation* of other Christians into Christ and the church, regardless of the form of baptism”.¹¹ The recent conversation between Lutheran and Baptist churches in Germany suggests that despite differences in elements and sequence “both sides can recognize these paths towards believing as mutual (or reciprocal, *gegenseitig*)”.¹² The common statement of the Baptist World Alliance and the Catholic Church in 2010 makes this hope even clearer. One clause reads:

We can work towards a *mutual recognition of the different forms that initiation takes among us*, as an entire “journey” of faith and grace.¹³

My own hope is that Baptists will be willing to take up the language of *BEM* and speak clearly about “equivalent” processes of initiation and “common initiation”. But at least all ecumenical conversation partners have agreed with Baptists that initiation is more comprehensive than baptism alone. This includes the Anglican Communion,¹⁴ despite the influence of the Toronto Statement on “Christian Initiation

in the Anglican Communion” (1991),¹⁵ this had declared that “Baptism is complete sacramental initiation”. While this view is still often voiced, a different Anglican tone sounds in the response of the Church of England to *BEM*. It approved “the insistence on the process of initiation” and determined “to deepen our understanding of the different stages in the initiation process”.¹⁶

3 Initiation and the Life-Long Journey of Discipleship

In Eastern Orthodox churches there is no point of confirmation later than baptism, but there is a compressed process of initiation of the young infant, with baptism, chrismation, and first communion. This, in fact, is precisely the process that Orthodox churches have drawn attention to in *their* response to *BEM*. The Orthodox have objected that we ought not to be looking at baptism in isolation from the three initiating mysteries.¹⁷ Now, Orthodox will also expect this early process to be extended into Christian nurture and an appropriation of faith by the believers for themselves. Some will probably not, however, understand this longer process to be part of *initiation* but simply part of the Christian life that *follows* initiation. Of course, the whole of the Christian life is a baptismal journey, recalling and repeating baptismal dying and rising with Christ each day.

This is the kind of thought that appears in the Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversations 2012–2017. While the report concludes that “it has been helpful to consider together the larger process of initiation into Christ, the church, and discipleship,¹⁸ throughout the report “process” refers not to initiation itself but to the life-

¹⁰ *Conversations around the World: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2005), 46 (para. 42) (my emphasis).

¹¹ Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – Leuenberg Church Fellowship, *Dialogue between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF) on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism*, Leuenberg Documents 9 (Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck, 2005), 22–23 (my emphasis).

¹² “Kirchengemeinschaft auf dem Weg: Abschlussdokument zu dem Lehrgespräch zwischen der Vereinigten Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche Deutschlands (VELKD) und dem Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in Deutschland – Baptisten (BEFG) 2017–2023”, *TVELKD* 194 (2023), 30.

¹³ “The Word of God in the Life of the Church” (see n. 7), para. 101 (my emphasis).

¹⁴ *Conversations around the World* (see n. 10), 45.

¹⁵ David R. Holeton, ed., *Christian Initiation in the Anglican Communion: The Toronto Statement “Walk in Newness of Life”; The Findings of the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Toronto 1991*, Grove Worship Series 118 (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1991).

¹⁶ “Church of England”, in *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” Text*, ed. Max Thurian, 6 vols. (Geneva: WCC, 1986–1988), 3.30–79, here 40 and 41.

¹⁷ See “Russian Orthodox Church”, in Thurian, *Churches Respond to BEM* (see n. 16), 2.5–12, here 8; “Finnish Orthodox Church”, *ibid.*, 24–29, here 26; cf. “Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople”, *ibid.*, 4.1–6, here 4.

¹⁸ Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Dialogue Commission, “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church: Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversations 2012–2017”, July 2020, 76 (para. 123), http://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/trilateral_report_baptism_and_incorporation_into_the_body_of_christ_the_church_1_0.pdf (last access to all internet sources in this article on 10 June 2024).

long journey of discipleship: so we read that “All three of our communities understand the celebration of baptism as one moment *within a lifelong process* that has various stages and dimensions”,¹⁹ and “Christian discipleship is a life-long process and [...] baptism is one of the important events within this process”.²⁰ The recent conversation between Lutherans and Baptists in Germany does, by contrast, understand initiation itself as a process, a “becoming a Christian”, which leads to the longer process of *being* a Christian: we read: “*Becoming* a Christian is a process which continues in *being* a Christian. The concept of ‘initiation’ is applied in what follows for the path towards being a Christian.”²¹ This accords with the WCC Faith and Order paper of 2011 *One Baptism*, which distinguishes between the process of initiation and the larger process of life-long discipleship, and places the first within the second:

Christian initiation refers to a process that begins with hearing the Gospel and confessing the faith, continues with formation in faith (catechesis), leads to baptism, resulting in the incorporation of the baptized into the Christian community, marked by the sharing of the eucharistic meal [...]. This study text places the event of baptism within the broader context of Christian initiation, and places *both* within the context of the believer’s life-long growth into Christ. This life-long process is marked by ongoing nurture within the Christian community [...].²²

A believer-baptist will want to stress that initiation itself and not only life-long discipleship is a process. This is because the *section* of this journey at the beginning of the Christian life, which is to be called *initiation*, is not completed until a personal confession of faith. There is no implication here that baptism in itself is incomplete; it is initiation that is not completed, and it is the promise in baptism that has not yet been fulfilled.

4 “One Baptism”

There is another aspect of the parallel journeys of initiation which has had a place in the ecumenical conversations which I have mentioned. As well as the phrase “common baptism”, *BEM* refers to “our one baptism”, and this is a more biblical phrase, echoing Ephesians:

There is one body and one Spirit [...], one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:4–6)

Unlike “common baptism”, we can affirm “one baptism” within a journey of initiation. In our ecumenical conversations, Baptists have been stressing that the “one baptism” is our baptism into Christ. Whether infant or believers’ baptism, this act is identical with the baptism of Christ. This does not only mean his baptism in the river Jordan. That event, when the heavens were opened and the voice of God declared “you are my beloved son” was a moment in a larger baptism that involved the whole life of Christ. Immersion into the waters of baptism, especially the baptism of a believer, depicts a going down into death and then a rising up into a new life. Jesus promises his disciples, “You will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (Mk 10:39). His baptism was thus his humble coming down low into human existence through his ministry and his sacrificial death, and then his rising to new life in the resurrection (Rom 6:3–4). It is this baptism that we share in our baptism, dying, and rising with Christ.

We are reborn to a new life through the death and resurrection of Christ. All who share in the baptism of Christ can hear the voice of the Father saying to them: “You are my beloved son, my daughter, today I have begotten you” (cf. Mt 3:17). This understanding of the “one baptism” was agreed in the dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church as follows:

Recalling the words of Jesus, “You will be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized” (Mk 10:39), we understand the “one baptism” of Ephesians 4:5 to be *in the first place* an immersion into the one Lord Jesus Christ (“One Lord, one faith, one baptism”), not a reference to a unified act of baptism among all Christian churches.²³

The same understanding was central to the dialogue between the European Baptist Federation and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (2005), again conversations between believer-baptizers and infant baptizers. There we read:

This baptism [of Christ] was unique in that Christ alone achieved our salvation through it. The baptism of Christians, however, in the New Testament is to be understood as sharing in this act; we die and are buried with Christ “so that as Christ was raised from the dead [...] we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–4). [...] [D]ifferent forms of baptism in water might be understood to

¹⁹ “Baptism and Incorporation” (see n. 18), 36 (para. 56) (my emphasis).

²⁰ “Baptism and Incorporation” (see n. 18), 39 (para. 62).

²¹ “Kirchengemeinschaft auf dem Weg” (see n. 12), 30 (my emphases).

²² WCC, *One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition*, Faith and Order Paper 210 (Geneva: WCC, 2011), paras. 3a and 10.

²³ “The Word of God in the Life of the Church” (see n. 7), para. 94.

relate to the one “baptism” of Christ in his life, death and resurrection.²⁴

Again, after conversations between the Baptist Union of Great Britain and the Church of England, the report affirmed:

Baptism has an essential place within the whole process of initiation [...]. Baptism, understood in this way, is a *sharing in the one baptism* which is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Anglicans and Baptists can thus recognize in each other that they have truly made a journey through the beginning of the Christian life.²⁵

5 Reconsidering the Process of Initiation: In the Renewing of Baptismal Vows

Having reminded ourselves what it means to situate baptism in a whole process of initiation, we can usefully revisit it in the light of two recent issues. The first is the growing practice in Anglican churches of renewing, by immersion in water, the baptismal vows made by sponsors on an infant’s behalf. Young people who have been baptized as an infant may feel that even their confirmation was a formal ceremony which meant little to them at the time. They have come to a renewed and more vital faith, and they want the opportunity to make a more public declaration of their following of Christ, and to experience the drama of becoming a disciple through immersion in water. While such people tend to put the stress on their profession of faith, they may also want the opportunity of a deeper encounter with Christ and a reception of his gifts of the spirit – or they may be helped to see this dimension.

There is, of course, a long tradition of affirming faith and renewing the vows of baptism through being *sprinkled* with water, especially at the Easter eucharist. But to meet the particular need of young people, without repeating baptism, the practice has grown of offering the opportunity to confirm or renew vows through full immersion in water. The practice first appeared among congregations of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1970s,

and so is often dubbed “the New Zealand rite”.²⁶ Many Anglican churches in the UK and in the USA now offer this opportunity, especially evangelical Anglican churches influenced by the charismatic movement.

This has, however, given rise to a problem which the Liturgical Commission of the Church of England has tried to meet. There is rightly an anxiety not to confuse this event with baptism, as baptism cannot be repeated. In fact, a number of evangelical Anglican churches *do* simply call it “baptism”, and do not differentiate between candidates who have not been baptized as infants and those who have. Trying to meet this problem, the Liturgical Commission legislates that the action of immersion must be that of the candidate himself or herself. Its instructions read as follows:

This provision responds to requests for more vivid recognition of post-baptismal experiences of personal renewal and commitment [...]. The possibility of candidates signing themselves with water from the font or being sprinkled with water by the bishop or president picks up practices common in some sections of the Church and enables a stronger ritual sign to be used without giving any appearance of a second baptism. If candidates use significant amounts of water with which to sign themselves (*or even dip themselves*), it is important to remember that however significant for the person, this is a personal reminder of the baptism that has already taken place, and that no words are used.²⁷

The rubric thus instructs that candidates for affirmation of baptismal faith may “dip themselves” but are not to be immersed in water by any officiating minister, despite the fact that a minister is permitted to *sprinkle* them. Further, although there is a liturgical dialogue between minister and candidate about confessing faith before the act with water, as when the water is used the Liturgical Commission stipulates that there are to be no words spoken.

In a concern not to confuse the act with baptism, it has been stripped down to a bare minimum and largely de-sacralized. This has led to some inappropriate attempts by local churches to fill the gap.²⁸ It is a situation, I suggest, where an understanding of the place of baptism within a whole process of initiation would be illuminating. In the case of some people, the phase of initiation could be seen as extending beyond confirmation to this event of “affirma-

²⁴ Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, *Dialogue* (see n. 11), 9 and 21.

²⁵ *Pushing at the Boundaries of Unity: Anglicans and Baptists in Conversation* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), 73 (my emphasis).

²⁶ See Samuel J.D. McCay, “Celebrating Renewal and Appropriation of Baptism by Immersion”, in *Infant Baptism? The Arguments For and Against*, ed. Adrio König (Roodepoort: CUM Books, 1984), 125–138.

²⁷ Commentary in *Common Worship: Christian Initiation (Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England)* (London: Church House Publishing, 2018), 349–350 (my emphasis).

²⁸ For an example, see Paul S. Fiddes and Pete Ward, “Affirming Faith at a Service of Baptism in St Aldates Church, Oxford”, in *Explorations in Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Christopher B. Scharen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2012), 51–70, here 68–69.

tion of faith”. It could be recognized that, through deficiencies in the way that confirmation was received, or through personal circumstances, initiation was not yet complete in the life of this particular disciple. This person had not yet been commissioned to share in God’s mission in the world. Recognizing this would not deny the activity of God’s grace in his or her baptism and confirmation; in fact the working of God’s grace has brought this person to the point when he or she wants a further step in discipleship. For many people, baptized as an infant, initiation will be complete in confirmation and first communion if it follows confirmation. But for some there is a further stage.

In the light of this process, let me suggest some words that might be appropriate for this event. The candidate has re-affirmed baptismal vows and affirmed his or her faith. The minister immersing the candidate might then say: “On the confession of your faith we immerse you to share more deeply each day with Christ in his death and his resurrection”; or “On the profession of your faith, now enter more deeply into the life of Christ and be filled with the Spirit”. Such words recognize that this rite is part of initiation, without supposing it to be baptism. It is not possible, we see, to conceive a form of words here without some idea of the activity of the triune God in this event. This is not just a profession of faith, any more than baptism is. It must be an effective sign of an ongoing “baptismal life” of dying and rising with Christ and receiving gifts of the Spirit.

6 Reconsidering the Process of Initiation: On the Synodal Way

A second current situation where an understanding of the process of initiation has much to contribute is the “synodal” process within the Catholic Church. This has not essentially been concerned with the conduct of synods, or meetings of bishops, though it affirms that “Synodality” must take this form of expression periodically. Rather, as framed by Pope Francis I, the process has been about a “style” of life and mission which listens to and learns from the whole diverse range of faithful disciples within the church. As the Synthesis Report of the recent XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome (popularly called the “Synod about Synodality”) puts it, “the purpose of the synod path is to involve all the baptized” in “a joint journey of the People of God”.²⁹ Synodality is defined as “Christians

walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity”, and the report stresses that “If becoming synodal means walking together with the One who is *the* Way, a synodal Church needs to put those experiencing poverty at the centre of all aspects of its life” (1h, 4h).

The synthesis document of the Rome synod situates initiation in a prominent place and makes clear that this is a journey in several stages. It insists that “The Sacrament of Baptism cannot be understood in isolation or outside the logic of Christian initiation, nor can it be understood in an individualistic way. Therefore, we need to explore further the contribution that a more unified vision of Christian initiation can make to the understanding of synodality” (3g). In fact, it proposes that the journey of initiation, when it is not restricted to baptism, can be a paradigm for the “walking together” of believers within the Christian community and for their mission in the world. The document states:

Christian initiation is the journey by which the Lord, through the ministry of the Church, introduces us to Easter faith and draws us into Trinitarian and ecclesial communion. This journey takes a variety of forms depending on the age at which it is undertaken and differing emphases characteristic of Eastern and Western traditions. However, listening to the Word and conversion of life, liturgical celebration and insertion into the community and its mission are always intertwined. Precisely for this reason, the catechumenal journey, with the gradualness of its stages and steps, is the paradigm for every ecclesial experience of walking together (3a)

The writers observe that during the journey of initiation, a person learns to walk together on the Christian way with ministers of the church and other church workers, teachers, and those with a Christian vocation. Moreover, these guides learn to listen to the catechumen, and as they respond to his or her doubts and questions, they are “enriched by the newness that each person brings through his or her history, language and culture” (3b). During this journey new believers develop the *sensus fidei*, the “instinct of faith”, that will enable them to share later in the decision-making of the church about what it means to live in the world of today. A listening to many voices within the church is thus a key part of initiation, and the report suggests that this listening and walking together should then be carried through into a later life of discipleship.

_____ Mission”, Introduction, www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/assembly/synthesis/english/2023.10.28-ENG-Synthesis-Report.pdf (numbers and letters in parentheses in the following text above refer to paragraphs of that document).

_____ ²⁹ XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, First Session (4–29 October 2023), “Synthesis Report: A Synodal Church in

Confirmation plays a key role in this process, as the moment when “the grace of the Spirit articulates the variety of gifts and charisms in the harmony of Pentecost” (3i). The document suggests that the event could be made more fruitful if attention were given to the particular experience that the person being confirmed has had within the church during the period of initiation. This preparation will, the document suggests, “awaken in all the faithful the call to community building, mission in the world and witness to the faith” (ibid.).

For those in the Anabaptist, and later Baptist, tradition, this association of initiation with learning to “walk together” has particular resonance. In fact, the very phrase “walking together” was characteristic in history of congregations that understood the making of a church to be a coming together into covenant with each other and with God.³⁰ In a traditional formula, they covenanted to “walk together and watch over each other”, and it is in their congregational life that most of the earliest uses of the phrase “walking together” can be found. It is as if Pope Francis has taken his key-phrase out of the Anabaptist/Baptist heritage, though I doubt that he recognizes this as a conscious debt. The point I want to make here is that in *that* tradition, initiation is extended into becoming a part, for the first time, of the meeting of the local church for discernment about its life and mission. The baptism of a believing disciple includes the features of confirmation as the synthesis report describes it – receiving gifts and charisms for sharing in the mission of God in the world. But this is then immediately followed by becoming part of a congregational meeting in which members seek to find the purpose of Christ for them in working with God for the coming of God’s kingdom.

Of course, in infant baptism the baby baptized is received into the church, and an infant in the Baptist tradition is blessed and received into the life of the congregation. But it is with baptism as a disciple that a person can add their *voice* to the process of discernment and decision-making of that congregation. If the church meeting is working properly, it should be listening to all voices, and especially those of the poor, or marginalized, or those in an ethnic minority.

The synthesis document sets out the way that the journey of initiation can be marked by this listening to many voices, as a paradigm for such a listening in the whole life of the church. This insight could, perhaps, have had more

impact on the section of the document about ecumenical learning. There is a generally encouraging chapter named “On the Road towards Christian Unity” (7), but, disappointingly, it has nothing to say about learning from practices of discernment *on the local level* in other churches and ecclesial communities. The chapter is largely concerned with learning from the place that the college of bishops and primacy holds in both discernment and governance in the Eastern Orthodox tradition (7h).³¹ The synod itself, in its very process of mutual listening, did exemplify the aim that local churches (i. e. dioceses) should “experiment with and adapt conversation in the Spirit, and other forms of discernment” (2j), but no examples of good practice are drawn from ecumenical engagement.

Not only the Anabaptist/Baptist tradition, but the Congregational, Quaker, and Pentecostal traditions could all contribute insights into the way that “conversation in the Spirit” can happen at the level of the local congregation. But what the synthesis document *has* done is to highlight, in a quite extraordinary way, the place that the journey of initiation has within a synodal pathway of walking together.

7 Conclusion: A Journey of Salvation

In conclusion, we should observe that underlying this journey of initiation is a journey of salvation, and not just one moment of salvation. This is the basic theology underlying what may otherwise seem merely a practice. Salvation begins not with a human event but in the initiative of God, and it continues through a life-long (possibly an eternal) process of “being saved”, being transformed into the image of God which is visible in Christ. The period of initiation extends over one section of the whole life-long journey of salvation, a phase that we call “the beginning”. There is no one definitive event that demarcates the ending of this phase of the journey, bringing initiation to an end. For some it may end with confirmation, for others with a first communion, for others with an affirmation of faith by immersion in water even after confirmation, and for many with speaking for the first time at a church meeting. It cannot be a matter of *salvation* having been finished. Questions such as “Is Baptism sufficient for salvation, or is some other rite needed alongside it?” or “Is a believer saved before or in baptism?” are altogether then on the wrong track. There is

³⁰ See Paul S. Fiddes, “Walking Together”: The Place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life”, in *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 21–47.

³¹ Cf. Paul McPartlan, “Serving Communion: Re-thinking the Relationship between Primacy and Synodality”, *Ecclesiology* 16 (2020), 3–11, here 5–8.

salvation before, in, and after baptism. The section of the journey of salvation which is called “initiation” is about *becoming* a disciple, about responding to the call to be a disciple and first taking up the responsibilities of a disciple. Then there is a lifetime of living in a baptismal style of dying and rising with Christ each day.

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