

## **BAPTISM BY IMMERSION – MORE THAN INITIATION: A RESPONSE TO THE REPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE AND THE WORLD METHODIST COUNCIL**

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The recent Report of the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council, titled *Faith Working Through Love*, provides some very helpful insights into the Baptist understanding and practice of baptism, but equally raises some challenging issues.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with a brief summary of the relevant sections of the Report, we will examine the significance of baptism by immersion as the formation of Christian discipleship, not just as a single event but one that has a continuing effect on the life of the Christian disciple. The specific contributions of this Report will be set within the wider Baptist discussion of baptism, particularly the interest in a sacramental view and the recovery of a covenantal perspective. Baptism is not only to be understood as Christian initiation but is the effective incorporation of members of the body of Christ. It is vital to emphasize, equally, the inter-relationship of baptism and the Lord's Supper, each of which both expresses and effects the spiritual life of those who are 'in Christ'. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper re-member the body of Christ and enable Christians to participate in the life of God.

### **THE REPORT**

The Report is very helpfully structured in sections and numbered paragraphs. Beginning with an outline of its process and a sketch of the history of each denomination, it then presents three main sections: Church, Authority, and Salvation; Baptism and Christian Initiation; and Worship and Witness. The Report concludes with recommendations for continuing fellowship and dialogue. Our particular interest is the section on Baptism, which comprises paragraphs 66 to 92. It is interesting that most of the specific and substantive recommendations concern baptism and these will provide a basis for the discussion which follows.

Paragraph 66 claims that Methodists and Baptists hold many things in common, though it also notes some significant disagreements. The situation is complicated by diverging practices within each denomination and by the fact that the same language may be used but with different meanings. The consensus statement in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (WCC, 1982) provided a helpful starting point for

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<sup>1</sup> *Faith Working Through Love*: Report of the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council, 2018. Hereafter the title will be abbreviated in the text as 'The Report', indicating relevant paragraph numbers. The full report can be found at <http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/resources/ecumenical-dialogues/>. An immensely helpful study guide has been produced for the Report also: Valerie Duval-Poujol and Ulrike Schuler, eds., *Faith Working Through Love: Study Guide accompanying the Final Report of the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council*, 2018.

dialogue (Paragraph 67). After noting the basic practices of each community, the Report then affirms the mutual objective of baptism:

Though the practices of our churches may differ, Baptists and Methodists are committed to the historic Christian tradition of baptizing with water, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and *to the end of making disciples*. God's mission calls us to introduce people to Christ and work with them *towards the goal of full Christian maturity*. (Paragraph 69, emphasis added.)

Both churches here affirm, as indicated by the phrases in italics, the role of baptism as foundational to Christian life and discipleship. We shall return to a discussion of baptism in the name of the triune God.

Having begun with this strong mutual affirmation, Paragraph 69 concludes, however, with the observation that 'the typical baptismal practices of our churches are divergent and seemingly incompatible, but we also recognize that through one another's practices true disciples are made'. What is noteworthy here is not only the acknowledgement of 'seeming incompatibility' but the shift of focus onto making 'true disciples'. This focus leads to the main element in this section of the Report, a comparison of two approaches to Christian initiation. This is both helpful and, I shall argue, also unfortunate for Baptists at least, as it has the potential to minimize the significance and power of baptism to a distinct event, largely characterised by the time and place and the specific local community of faith. Whilst all of these elements are important for Baptist ecclesiology, they are dependent upon a more profoundly theological understanding of baptism as the spiritual incorporation of the believer into the body of Christ and thus the life of God in the world past, present and future.

Paragraphs 71 and 72 note the *covenantal* basis of baptism, describing the church as a covenant community and baptism as "a sign of God's covenant that binds us to God and God's people through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Unfortunately, while the next sentence mentions 'covenant-making' and 'covenant renewal' no further details or explanations of these aspects are offered.<sup>2</sup>

The Report then notes that recent developments in ecumenical dialogue concerning baptism have found it helpful 'to speak of baptism within a process of initiation or a journey of Christian beginnings'. This Report follows that pattern, suggesting that "Baptists and Methodists might understand their divergent approaches as alternate patterns of the process of Christian initiation" (Paragraph 74). The Report then sets out this table of two patterns of Christian initiation:

**Pattern 1**

- (a) Infant Dedication
- (b) Christian Nurture and  
Catechetical Instruction
- (c) Repentance followed by Baptism  
and Confession of Faith, including

**Pattern 2**

- (a) Infant Baptism
- (b) Christian Nurture and  
Catechetical Instruction
- (c) Repentance and the Confession  
and Confirmation of Faith,

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<sup>2</sup> The character of baptism as participation in a covenant with God and the church, and whether these aspects imply a sacramental view of baptism, has been explored in a significant work by Brandon C. Jones, *Waters of Promise: Finding Meaning in Believer Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012).

|                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| the Laying on of Hands             | including the Laying on of Hands               |
| (d) Reception into membership      | (d) Reception into membership                  |
| Participation in the Lord's Supper | Participation in the Lord's Supper             |
| followed by life of Discipleship.  | followed by life of Discipleship. <sup>3</sup> |

What is significant here is the concluding phrase 'followed by life of discipleship', which can be taken to mean that discipleship *follows* baptism, reception into membership and participation in the Lord's Supper. This suggestion clearly arises from a focus on initiation, understood as an originating or foundational *event*. The difficulty here is the implication that the baptised person is not yet a disciple, whereas I shall argue for the view that those who are baptised are already disciples—by definition those who are not yet fully formed in faith and witness but who, nonetheless, have come to see that their lives are gathered into the creative, life-transforming presence and mission of the triune God. Baptism is, according to this view, an enactment and outworking of the immersive reality of conversion, a confirming means of grace and a prolepsis of the hope of resurrection with Christ.

Subsequent paragraphs in the Report explain each of the elements listed in the table above, including the Methodist understanding of Confirmation and some discussion of enhanced symbolic ritual aspects of baptismal practice. There is an acknowledgement that Baptists "have not always been faithful in and effective in making disciples of those whom we baptize, calling us to give greater intentionality to the instruction in holiness," while Methodists affirm that their trust in the lively faith of a congregation, or of parents, has not always been well founded' (Paragraph 79). Both churches oppose indiscriminate baptism and commit themselves to more effective nurture and catechesis. The remaining paragraphs of this section explore the relationship of baptism to discipleship and growth in grace.

It is here that significant differences emerge. It is worth quoting the rather complex opening sentences of Paragraph 82, which names these differences:

We recognize that there are different emphases in talking about what Methodists and Baptists call 'means of grace' and 'growth in grace,' through preaching and teaching, both pre- and post-baptism. We detect some apparent polarities in the faith of the candidate/faith of the church, human response/God's action, baptism in water/baptism in Spirit, and faith/baptism, but we want to affirm that it is a case of both/and rather than either/or in all of these cases.

The paragraph that follows offers a basis for affirming these 'both/ands'—a common affirmation that baptism "bears witness to regeneration or rebirth," albeit that this reality is understood differently. Thus, Baptists see baptism "as a witness to and seal of the divine work of regeneration, and so see it as properly following repentance and awakening of faith." As such, baptism is the rite of entry into the church, which 'protects the character of the church' as a community of believers. Whereas Methodists also celebrate

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<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the patterns of initiation as outlined both seem to imply a non-missionary context. That is to say, they envisage people coming to baptism from within a Christian family, within a Christian community. There is no clear indication of what might be the pattern in a situation where people come to a conversion experience as adults, nor any suggestion that this might be a genuinely desirable and common occurrence.

God's work of regeneration, and are committed to regenerate church membership, "they do not see restricting baptism to believers only as the way to protect these gospel truths. Methodists understand baptism to be a sign of God's grace at work in the life of the child born into the family of faith long before being capable of making a personal response" (Paragraph 83).

It is here, and in the recommendations at the conclusion of the Report, that we see some helpful indications for Baptists to reflect more deeply and clearly on the biblical and theological meaning of our practice. The fundamental question is what baptism is and how it has continuous significance for Christian life. Most helpful here is Recommendation 6, which encourages Baptists and Methodists to "remember, reaffirm, and rejoice in their own baptism regularly." The sentence that follows is immensely important: "We believe that greater attention needs to be given to liturgies emphasizing active remembrance (*anamnesis*) of our own baptism, and providing opportunities for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows."

In what follows, I shall draw upon current Baptist scholarship about baptism to offer some response to the challenges of this Report. One vital concern is the continuing question of the nature and meaning of baptism. From these reflections, I shall argue for the need for a much closer understanding of the relationship between the Lord's Supper, which is the primary focus of Christian *anamnesis*, and the life of the baptised. Here we celebrate and participate in the one life in communion with the whole body of Christ and are *re-membered* and sustained in that life. We receive and affirm the life in which we are immersed.

## **BAPTISM AS IMMERSION IN GOD**

Baptism is not primarily about immersion in water. It is about being immersed in God. It is the sign of this creative, continuous reality to which one has come alive. This transformation at the heart of the Apostle Paul's own experience and teaching gave rise to images such as a new birth or waking up from a deadness. It is what he meant by being 'in Christ'.<sup>4</sup>

The commandment of Jesus, commonly called the Great Commission, urges his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, 'baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Matt. 28:19-20). An interesting rendition of this commission is offered in the *Complete Jewish Bible*, a translation by David H. Stern for the Jewish New Testament Publications group: "Therefore, go and make people from all nations into *talidim*, immersing them in the reality of the Father, the Son and the *Ruach HaKodesh*."<sup>5</sup>

Immersed 'in the reality of God': this rendition evokes the idea that Christian faith is participation in the eschatological reality of God's presence, transforming this world into God's promised celebration of *koinonia*, life together, a new creation demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth,

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<sup>4</sup> James D. G. Dunn argues that the expression 'in Christ' (occurring 83 times in the undisputed letters of Paul, together with many other related forms) is a distinctively Pauline way of understanding Christian identity. Participation in Christ is the basic character of Christian life and is also the direct meaning of Christian baptism. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). See particularly Section 15. 1.

<sup>5</sup> David H. Stern, *Complete Jewish Bible* (Clarkville: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1998).

and remembered at the Lord's Table. It is this life and this reality into which Christians are 'initiated'. Baptism, then, is a symbol and a means of this life. Here I draw upon Paul Tillich's explanation of a symbol as a sign which participates in the reality to which it points.<sup>6</sup> Baptism itself is not the reality of God's life but is powerfully symbolic of that life and as we are immersed in water we enact and symbolise that reality to which we have come alive. In order to explore these wider implications of baptism, we will consider the current discussion amongst Baptist scholars about baptism as a sacrament or a living sign. First, however, we need to address the more traditional translation of Matthew 28:19 and the historic practice (affirmed in the Report by both Methodists and Baptists) of baptising 'in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.'

### **BAPTISED 'IN THE NAME'**

There has long been discussion surrounding the baptismal formula, 'in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' There are two matters for consideration here: first, *which* names are to be invoked when someone is baptised and secondly the significance of the *name* as such.

In the last century a movement has developed, particularly amongst Pentecostal Christians, towards baptism in the name of Jesus (only), though this practice has considerable historical precedent. It is not difficult to draw from the New Testament the inference that the first Christians baptised in the name of Jesus, or perhaps Jesus Christ. At Pentecost, the new believers were urged to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts. 2. 38). Similarly, when Philip had preached to some Samaritans 'the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ' they were baptised. Interestingly the Revised Version (published in the late 19th Century) adds 'into the name of the Lord Jesus' after the word 'baptised,' a stress which is not supported by the standard Greek texts (Acts 8:12). Nevertheless, the practice of baptism in the name of Jesus continues in the Acts narratives: Cornelius is baptised in the name of the Lord, with the clear implication that it is Jesus who is Lord. Indeed, some versions of this story, including the Vulgate, make it clear by rendering it 'in the name of Jesus Christ' (Acts 10:48). Believers at Ephesus also were baptised 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts. 19:5).

Similarly, Paul's own reference to 'all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus' (Romans 6:3) may be understood as being baptised into or with the name of Christ. The same expression is used in Gal. 3:27, where Paul says that those who were baptised 'into Christ' have clothed themselves with Christ. The imagery here, as in Romans 6:3-4, and Col. 2:12, clearly links the identity of the baptised with Christ, such that even where the word 'name' is not explicitly used it may be taken to be implied.

Something of the significance of this formulation, baptising in the name of Jesus Christ, can be seen when we consider the wider biblical idea of 'calling upon the name of the Lord'. Joel D. Estes has helpfully traced the significance of this idea throughout the entire Bible, noting the cultic context of many such

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<sup>6</sup> Tillich sought to explain religious symbols in a number of places, but most succinctly in Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 41-54.

usages.<sup>7</sup> Whilst the broader aspects of this study are beyond our current subject, the critical issue concerns the idea expressed in Romans 10:13, ‘Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.’

Clearly ‘the name’ here is more than a word or a label. Rather, in the words of Martin Vincent’s classic word study, the name of the Lord is “the expression of the sum total of the divine Being; not his designation as god or Lord, but the formula in which all his attributes and characteristics are summed up.”<sup>8</sup> To call upon the name of the Lord is to bear homage to and to align oneself with the Lord, in trust and hope. This is a very strong theme throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In particular, Romans 10:13 has very direct resonance with Joel 2:32.

Two points from Estes’ study are of specific relevance here. First, from his study of this section of Romans 10 he asserts in summary that to call upon the name of the Lord is not exactly the same thing as to believe, as some have suggested, though the two elements are inseparable.<sup>9</sup> This supports the broader conclusion that confession of Jesus as Lord was “rather well fixed within early Christianity.” The suggestion here is that this confession was not so much a response to persecution (though it may still have been used in that context) but arose within a liturgical life, a life of worship and (specifically) baptism. Indeed Estes concludes that “the NT consistently uses the expression ‘call on the name of the Lord’ to denote the worship of Jesus, which he suggests was a defining characteristic of early Christian communities.”<sup>10</sup>

Second, Estes notes the extraordinary character of this development. “At no point is the phrase [call upon the name of the Lord] used among pre-Christian writers to refer to any figures (angels, divine mediators, etc.) other than YHWH, the God of Israel. However, in the New Testament this situation is reversed.”<sup>11</sup> It is startling, Estes observes, that the phrase is never applied to God, but only to Jesus. This he sees as ‘a singular innovation’ of Christian worship. It indicates the fundamental development of a Christian theology, reaching first in worship and later in doctrinal formulation to the affirmation of Jesus as Lord and God as Trinity.

Given this well-established worship of Jesus as Lord, it may seem surprising that within a very short period of time the Didache instructs that Christians are to be baptised in the triune name. Didache 7 instructs that as baptism is administered, the name of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is to be invoked.

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<sup>7</sup> Joel D. Estes, “Calling upon the Name of the Lord: The Meaning and Significance of *ἐπικαλεῖσθαι* in Romans 10:13” *Themelios* 41.1 (2016): 20–36.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, (originally published 1887), comment on ‘in the name’, occurring in Matthew 28:19. My reference is to the Amazon Kindle Edition, Copyright Bart Byl, 2013, Location 2241. The close association of the name of Christ with God, or the name of God, is affirmed in the detailed study found in Gerhard Friedrich (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967). The article on the word ‘name,’ *ὄνομα* includes the statement, “In the NT the name, person and work of God are—with various differentiations—inseparably linked with the name, person and work of Jesus Christ” (271).

<sup>9</sup> Estes, “Calling upon the Name of the Lord,” 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 32–33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

This practice draws its inspiration from the instruction of Jesus in Matt. 28:19 and clearly reflects the understanding of Christ as Lord within the developing trinitarian theology.<sup>12</sup>

It seems that the two practices, baptising in the name of Jesus Christ and baptising in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, continued throughout many centuries. Indeed there is a long history of commentary upon the former. For example, in his Epistle 72, Cyprian engages in extensive and sometimes tortuous critique of the baptismal practices of various ‘heretics.’ Can these baptisms be valid and people so baptised be admitted to the Church? Cyprian affirms that those baptised in the name of Jesus (only) have indeed been validly baptised since that baptism is implicitly baptism in the name of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>13</sup> Ambrose made a similar judgment, while (much later) the Baptist Standard Confession of 1660 affirms baptism of believers either in the name of Christ or in the Triune name.<sup>14</sup> For his part, Martin Luther regarded baptisms in the name of Jesus (only) as acceptable provided they were carried out in good faith, and he considered the ‘anxious disputings’ over the wording—the names used in the rite—were mere ‘pedantry’.<sup>15</sup>

This latter comment, however, raises the question of whether it is simply a matter of wording. Surely not. As already noted, a name so invoked is far more than a label or designation. To act ‘in the name’ of someone is to act upon their authority or in concert with their purposes. This is what is signified when Jesus invited his followers to ‘ask in my name’—and what is in accordance with his will and purposes will be granted (John 14:13-14; John 16:23-24; cf. Mark 11:24, Matt. 21:22).

If, then, the name has such significance, does it make a difference whether people are baptised in the name of Jesus only, or in the triune name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? For some, to follow the trinitarian formula is to follow the instruction of Jesus, as indicated in Matthew 28:19. Those who emphasise the notion of baptism as an *ordinance* draw significance from this verse, as a direct instruction from Jesus. Those who practice baptism in the name of Jesus (only) may also appeal to many New Testament verses. It is not possible to determine one direction or another by appeal to Scripture alone. Perhaps the only resolution to this question is the affirmation that to confess Jesus as Lord is also to affirm the one God, who is known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The difference in words here is not a difference in the identity of God, but rather indicates ways of seeing and knowing God. Christians affirm that we know the triune

<sup>12</sup> Beasley-Murray argues that possibly the original words of Jesus, the command to baptise in the name of Lord Jesus (as evidenced by the practice of the Apostles), were “later conformed to Church terminology.” George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1963), 82–83.

<sup>13</sup> Cyprian, Epistle 72, addressed to Pope Stephen. “Cyprian and Other Bishops at the Council of Carthage to Stephen,” In *Letters (1–81)* The Fathers of the Church, Volume 51, 265–68 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1964). Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt284z4s> [accessed October 2, 2018].

<sup>14</sup> St Ambrose: “So those baptised in the Name of Christ are held to be baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, if, that is, there is belief in the Three Persons, otherwise the baptism is null.” St Ambrose, *On the Holy Spirit*, Book 1, Chapter 3. Available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/34021.htm>. [Accessed October 2, 2018]. The Baptist Standard Confession, made at London in 1660, affirms in Paragraph XI that the church is “to Baptise (that is in English to Dip) in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Available at [http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/Standard\\_Confession\\_1660.pdf](http://www.baptistcenter.net/confessions/Standard_Confession_1660.pdf) [accessed October 2, 2018].

<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *Prelude on the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, First published 1530; Project Wittenberg Online Electronic Project Edition, <http://www.projectwittenberg.org>. Chapter 3, ‘The Sacrament of Baptism’. Paragraph 3.14 [accessed, October 2, 2018].

God through knowing and confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. It is the Spirit of God who enables us to know him and to make this confession (1 John 4:2-3; Romans 8:12-17.) To confess Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge the One who sent him into the world, his Father. In this way, then, to 'name' Christ as Lord is to acknowledge the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To be baptised into Christ is also to be baptised into the reality of the triune God.

The power of 'naming', a creative mystery shared by the Creator with humans according to Genesis 2:19, is a vital part of the drama of baptism and in many traditions the 'Christian name' is given to a person at their baptism. From the beginning, baptism has been known as a mystery, part of the original sense of the word 'sacrament.' There has been much discussion among Baptists around the idea of 'sacraments,' with some strongly resistant to the notion and others, particularly British scholars in recent decades, affirming a 'sacramental Baptist' position. While it not possible to rehearse all of the issues here, it is pertinent to identify several key aspects.

### **BAPTISM AS A LIVING SIGN**

Richard Kidd explores the idea of 'living signs' as a way of understanding baptism. His essay, "Baptism and the Identity of Christian Communities" begins with a characteristic recognition of 'a muddle.' He notes not only the divisions between different Christian communities and their baptismal practices but also the diversity of practice within his own Baptist tradition. How should baptism be understood within "a plural society, where no one cares whether we are Christians or not"?<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon a linguistic theory of signs, Kidd explores the idea that baptism is a living sign, which forms and shapes not just individual Christians' identity but also the identity of communities engaging in those baptismal rituals. He argues that living signs may be 'cut free' from an originating context and acquire different meanings as they are used in various ways by other communities. This insight helps to explain the 'muddle' about baptism:

The sign we call 'baptism' does not simply carry a pre-given meaning, nor is it uniquely tied to a ritual. It does not have its whole meaning lurking below the surface that can be pierced by a technique such as biblical study or historical reconstruction. Because it 'lives', the sign we call baptism has already generated many independent histories; each points beyond itself, and each bears meaning only in relation to other signs with which it connects.<sup>17</sup>

Richard Kidd's essay is one of the many insightful contributions to the collection *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers*. In that same volume, Christopher Ellis writes of baptism as a sacrament, arguing specifically from the freedom of God, made known in Jesus

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Kidd, "Baptism and the Identity of Christian Communities" in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 1996), 85–99, 90.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 91. Later I shall return to this important suggestion that baptism bears meaning in relation to another vital Christian 'sign,' namely the Lord's Supper.

Christ especially as one who is active in the world for the salvation of human beings. Ellis combines the idea of baptism as an 'ordinance' with this particular understanding of God's sacramental activity:

In baptism the one who is baptized is seen to be following the example of Christ, and yet this is an inadequate explanation. The person moves beyond following an example to being united with the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit—united with Christ in his baptism, in his death on the cross, and in his resurrection. Thus the believer rises from the water to live the resurrection life in the 'in-between time.'<sup>18</sup>

Ellis goes on to describe baptism as a sacrament of proclamation, partnership, presence, prophecy and promise, all made possible through 'the sacramental freedom of God'.<sup>19</sup>

Central to the possibility of this sacramental or 'living sign' understanding of baptism, however, is an understanding of creation as itself a medium of God's presence and action. Thus in his essay "Baptism and Creation" Paul Fiddes identifies the vital linkage between the believer, the community of faith and the created order.

In baptism, then, the candidate *and* the community find themselves involved in a deeper way in God's relationships with church, human community, and cosmos. The water as an element of creation enables that participation to take place, evoking such experiences as birth, cleansing, conflict, journey, and renewal. These motifs are planted deeply in the human awareness of the natural world, but they also belong to the story of God's pilgrimage with His people through history and are finally focused in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the same volume, Hazel Sherman picks up this idea of baptism as participation in God, linking it as we have done, to the notion of baptism in the triune name. "What's in a name?" she asks. "There is a connection between identity and name that we can recognize as a distant relation to the passionate conviction that name and nature are intertwined, that in fact there is everything in a name. Christian baptism is baptism into the very life of God, named not in the stark otherness of 'God' but in threefold relationship."<sup>21</sup>

There is much in the New Testament to ground these ideas of the life of the baptised as participation in the life of God, as we have seen more generally described as life in Christ. Perhaps the most powerful New Testament image of this baptism into a new life in God is the Pauline concept of dying to an old way and being raised to live in the Spirit, to be 'in Christ'. The opening verses of Romans 6 use the physical drama of baptism as a picture-sermon on the meaning of baptism as new birth. In addition, there are

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Ellis, "Baptism and the Sacramental Freedom of God" in *Reflections on the Water*, 23–45; 27.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. "Baptism," 35–41.

<sup>20</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, "Baptism and Creation," in *Reflections on the Water*, 47–67; 65.

<sup>21</sup> Hazel Sherman, "Baptized—in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" in *Reflections on the Water*, 101–116; 110.

numerous passages where Paul writes of Christians as being dead to sin or to the former life, and now *alive to Christ* and the way of salvation. 2 Corinthians 5:17 refers to this life situation as ‘a new creation.’

It is helpful to identify some of the positive characteristics of this new life of the baptized. It is intrinsic to this conception that those who are baptised are not isolated individuals. They are inherently members of the ‘body of Christ.’ Though they are each baptised, they are never alone in this process. In most forms of this ritual, a person is brought to the baptismal pool by others and welcomed by the community as new members of the local church. Most importantly, Christ is the head of this new baptismal, resurrection body. This is another way of saying that Christ is Lord, which was most likely the earliest baptismal confession.

Second, this new birth image implies the need for growth. Disciples begin as ‘little ones’ growing into Christ. The Spirit enables and directs this growth, as Ephesians 4 suggests, so that the whole body grows together into the maturity of Christ and ‘into Christ.’ It is not an individual growth but growth as members of the body of Christ. It is growth into the very likeness of Christ, which is the same as saying that the community becomes the garden of the Spirit, where the fruits of the Spirit emerge.

All of this reflects Jesus’ own proclamation of the reign of God. To be alive ‘in Christ’ is to be drawn actively into the drama of God and gathered into the movement of God’s purposes in the world. Baptism is thus the re-orientation of the person towards the future of Jesus, not simply to follow his example from the past but to engage now in his mission towards the fulfilment of his mission, the promised reign of God. Jesus’ own baptism meant a commitment towards ministry, cross and resurrection. For Christians too, baptism means a re-orientation of existence towards a ‘new world,’ as was disclosed in that same life, death and resurrection. Jürgen Moltmann summed up these aspects in the pithy sentence, ‘Christian baptism is eschatology put into practice’.<sup>22</sup>

It is precisely here that it is crucial to maintain a clear and strong link between the two sacraments or ordinances, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, as both invite us into the past, present and future of Jesus Christ.

## **BAPTISM AND THE LORD’S SUPPER: LIFE AS THE BODY OF CHRIST**

In his immensely significant offering of a ‘Catholic Baptist’ ecclesiology, Barry Harvey details some of the critical elements we have already noted, particularly in a chapter entitled “Sacramental Sinews: Liturgy and the Remembering of Christ’s body.” Harvey contends that we need to recover a deeper sense of what is happening when the “sacramental signs instituted by Christ” are “properly performed.”<sup>23</sup> In this one sentence Harvey combines an appreciation for *sacraments*, a recognition of the essential emphasis on their

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<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohn (London: SCM Press, 1977), 235.

<sup>23</sup> Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live? A Catholic Baptist Engagement with Ecclesiology, Hermeneutics, and Social Theory* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 201. By ‘we’ Harvey means not only Baptists, though he certainly does address his own community.

having been instituted by Christ—they are thus *ordinances*—and a reference to the Reformation stress on the *right administration* of these rituals.

Harvey then asks, in common with several of the scholars already mentioned, how these signs work. He refers to sacraments as ‘apocalyptic actions’, drawing upon the proper sense of apocalypse as revelation: what takes place in baptism and the Lord’s Supper is the epiphany of the new creation. Here there is a vital link with the theology of creation. Harvey’s purpose, though, is to explain in more specific detail the ‘discipline’ needed to perceive and receive these gifts of God. The church has a ‘cosmical and eschatological vocation’ to receive the power to become what it is, namely *the* sacrament in Christ of the new creation.<sup>24</sup>

The theological basis of this possibility requires that we address the secularist and largely functionalist ethos of our broader culture. How can ‘mere things’ relate us so directly and intimately to God? This is only possible if we affirm a sacramentality in creation itself. Here I find a most interesting resonance with the view explored long ago by Donald Baillie in his excellent study of *The Theology of the Sacraments*. Baillie asked whether the idea of God acting through particular acts, rituals or elements—bread, wine, water—is something entirely unique to those acts and those rituals or is it more like a concentration or special focussing of what is more general in the whole universe. Is the ‘sacramental’ capacity entirely in the Word preached, enabling those elements to become special agents of God’s presence, or does that Word bring into focus something inherent in the material structures of the universe far more generally? <sup>25</sup>

For Baillie there is a necessary linkage between a theology of sacraments and a theology of creation. He expresses the connection as follows:

[W]hen Christianity took the common elements of water and bread and wine and made sacraments of them, it was because this universe is the sacramental kind of place in which that can fitly happen; because these elements, these creatures of God, do lend themselves to such a use; and because we men and women, who are another sort of God’s creatures, do require in our religion such a use of material things and symbolic actions.<sup>26</sup>

What is crucial here is the description of the elements of water, bread and wine as ‘creatures’, parts of God’s creation, and the analogous description of humans as fellow-creatures, and then the idea that these action-pictures are things we need. It is part of our created nature to need such things; they help us to know and see God. It is on this basis that we argued above that the action-picture of immersion in water enables us to see that we are immersed in the reality of God. In rising from the water we come alive to this ‘new creation’ already given to us, now to be lived into.

Baillie was intrigued to find that Calvin had such a wider view of nature: “he bases the Christian sacraments on this broader basis of nature, recognizing that God can take any one of His created elements

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 202.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), see especially 42–47, ‘A Sacramental Universe.’

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 44.

and use it sacramentally, apart from the sacraments in the narrow and proper sense.”<sup>27</sup> Calvin uses the example of the rainbow, which God uses as a pledge to Noah: and he asks the serious question how can the refraction of light really be a pledge of the faithfulness and goodness of God? While we can explain the physical data in what we might call a scientific way, nonetheless it is stupid to deny that such physical realities can also be used by God ‘for the promotion of His own glory’ and he explains that the Word of God can so impress us that what were previously seen as ‘mere elements’ can now become sacraments.

Again we note the need to learn to perceive this sacramental dimension of the world around us. While Calvin stresses the word of God as the primary influence here, Harvey follows Dietrich Bonhoeffer in stressing the revelatory role of baptism and the Lord’s Supper: “It is at the baptismal font and the table of the crucified and risen Lord, then, that men and women have most directly and insistently to do ‘with the realization of the Christ-reality.’”<sup>28</sup>

The ‘realization of the Christ-reality’ here has the double meaning of that reality coming into awareness and that women and men come to be that reality—the body of Christ. This is the critical insight Harvey has to offer us here. The baptised and communicating people become parts of the new creation. Baptism is ‘the sign and seal of this new regime.’

It should not be imagined, however, that the new creation has come in its fulness, in some special sub-section of humanity, the church. The concept of the body of Christ has to be understood as having at least three different aspects: the historical body of Jesus; his mystical, resurrection body; and the ecclesial body. The critical idea for our current discussion is the role played by baptism and the Lord’s Supper in evoking and maintaining the reality of the ecclesial body. Harvey uses the term ‘constitute’ here: “Together the Eucharist and the church community constitute the contemporary performance of the historical body, the unique event of Jesus.”<sup>29</sup> This is not to say that the church as an institution is the continuation or the extension of the historical ministry of Jesus. Rather, that exceptional reality to which we refer as ‘the Incarnation’ is something that God continues to do in a different way, now in a community of persons, who are *re-membered* continually as the body of Christ. As food and wine are shared, the Spirit of God re-members the body of Christ.<sup>30</sup> In a world which constantly dismembers us, separating us into individuals and dividing each of us into disjointed aspects of life—work, home, feeling, thinking, bodily activity, etc.—this notion of a creative recovery of our personal and communal unity is an astonishing gift, to be perceived only through the gift and activity of the Creator Spirit. Roger Haight, in a recent exploration of how we might most helpfully think of God’s presence and action in the world, suggests the notion of ‘transcendent presence.’ We should not think of God as ‘intervening’ in the world, in evolution or in historical events, because the world is not a ‘closed system.’ God is already present to and active in this finite world. We can

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 45. The reference is to John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV.xiv.18, The Library of Christian Classics, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:1294.

<sup>28</sup> Harvey, *Can These Bones Live?* 212. Harvey’s reference here is to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6, Trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 58.

<sup>29</sup> Barry Harvey, *Can These Bones Live?* 214.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 215.

learn to perceive and participate in the activity of God in the world precisely because the world is indwelt by the transcendent creator-God.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We return, then, to the Report of the International Dialogue between the Baptist World Alliance and the World Methodist Council. In response to a section of the Report, it was suggested above that the discussion of baptism in terms of patterns of 'initiation' has both positive value in enabling ecumenical understanding and some important limitations and difficulties. What we have considered in this paper is the character of the life of the baptised Christian, a life immersed in the reality and presence of God, 'alive' to God in Christ and growing into Christ. We have identified a number of biblical and theological ideas which give further character to this concept: what it means to be baptised *in the name* of Jesus, or of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we have considered the nature of baptism as a *living sign*, made possible by the character of the created order, and ourselves as human participants in this creation, in which God continues to be both present and active. Finally, we have identified the activity of God re-membering the body of Christ, thus evoking that vital New Testament notion of anamnesis, a remembrance in which Christ is present.

All of this suggests that the concept of 'initiation', found to be a helpful basis for ecumenical conversation has both significant benefit and some major limitations. If an initiation is understood as a single event, after which follows a life characterised by other activities and processes, then this is too limited an idea of baptism. Baptism itself encompasses and is characterised by the life that it reveals and makes possible. It is far more than an initiation in that sense. But if by initiation we allow that continuing character of baptism, which is renewed and enabled by regular participation in the Lord's Supper, then we may see in it the evocation of a life from and with God, eschatological in its nature, already although not yet the fullness of the new creation.

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<sup>31</sup> Roger Haight, "Spirituality, Evolution, Creator God," *Theological Studies* 79, no. 2 (June 2018): 251–73.