

# **INITIATION INTO CHRIST**



**Common Teaching and  
Ecumenical Reflections on  
Preparation for Baptism**

Commission on Faith and Witness  
Canadian Council of Churches  
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## **Introduction**

### **A History of the Project**

In September 1975, five Christian churches in Canada announced that they had reached an understanding through which any one church would recognize the validity of baptisms conferred according to the established norms of the other churches. This agreement reflected the growing ecumenical consensus evident in such documents as the World Council of Churches study of "One Lord, One Baptism" (1960), the "Report on Baptism" from Montreal Faith and Order Conference in 1963, and in the Second Vatican Council's "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (1965) and its "Decree on Ecumenism" (1964). From these and other texts of that time emerges an affirmation of the ecumenical significance of baptism and a conviction that baptism is conferred only once. This discussion led various councils of churches, episcopal conferences and joint working groups to issue statements about mutual recognition of baptism in the 1970s. A study by the British Council of Churches not only endorsed mutual recognition of baptism as a step on the path toward Christian unity, but also proposed a common form of baptismal certificate which would encourage mutual recognition and reduce the number of cases of conditional baptism or re-baptism.

In Canada, the request for an ecumenical study of baptism was brought by the Joint Working Group of the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC) and Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops to the Faith and Order Commission. In 1972, the Commission sent a report to the Churches with a two-part proposal:

1. that baptisms conferred with flowing water accompanied by the Trinitarian formula be accepted as valid;
2. that a common certificate of baptism be agreed upon and adopted.

Although the proposal was approved by United, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican and Roman Catholic churches in 1975, the churches subsequently were unable to agree on a common baptismal certificate and in 1980 the Joint Working Group recommended that this second aspect of the proposal be dropped.

With the publication of the WCC's Faith and Order study paper on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" (BEM) in 1982, ecumenical discussion of baptism was given new impetus. As many Canadian churches were considering their responses to BEM, the CCC's Faith and Order Commission planned a consultation on the pastoral and practical implications of recognizing in that document an expression of "the faith of the church through the ages." The consultation in November 1985 invited participants to examine questions from the perspective of operative as well as stated theological positions. Among its recommendations for the ongoing work of the Commission was the suggestion that, given the agreement achieved regarding the meaning and practice of baptism, it might be possible to develop a common catechesis on baptism.

In the spring of 1986, the Faith and Order Commission began work on this new project. As a first step, baptismal liturgies from eight member churches were compared to identify both common and divergent elements. Discussions developed to include reflection on experience, biblical interpretation, and points of theological agreement and difference. At the Triennial Assembly in

May, 1988, an outline of the project and sections of the draft text were reviewed in workshop groups. Comments and suggestions from the participants have been incorporated in the text which is presented here.

### **The Present Document**

This study presents common elements identified in the Commission's reflection on Scripture, theology, and experience which are pertinent in the preparation of individuals for initiation into the Body of Christ. The material is divided into five sections. Each unit includes a discussion of human experience, theological reflection, a consideration of the biblical witness, and questions for further consideration. In addition, a final section includes brief statements from members of the Commission on Faith and Witness, summarizing the distinctive perspectives on baptism and Christian initiation from their particular traditions.

### **Suggestions For Use**

This study has a variety of possible uses:

- with those people considering baptism for themselves or for their children, or those making a personal profession of faith
- as a resource for ecumenical dialogue and study within a community
- as a live-session study for congregational or other study groups
- as a reflective Lenten study
- as a unit on baptism in a confirmation or catechetical curriculum
- with persons preparing for renewal of their baptismal vows
- as a resource for pastors in pre-marriage and baptismal counselling
- as a resource for teachers of religious education programs at the secondary school level.

In many instances this booklet will be used as a resource for small group discussion. Here are some things to consider when working with adult groups.

Adults learn by associating new information with what they already know or do. They learn only what they can integrate with their present lives or their plans for the future. Therefore, the "Questions for Reflection" presented here ask people to reflect in a fairly intimate way on their past experiences, and their future hopes and expectations.

This pattern of learning by association also has implications for the shape of study groups.

First, it means that adults must have opportunity to make the association between the new information and their own experience. Lecture input, by itself, is not enough. Adults will learn better when they have opportunity for discussion in relatively small, confidential groups, where they can relate their own experiences and make connections with the new information that has been presented.

Secondly, many adults feel threatened by new learnings. If they have to integrate those learnings into their existing lives, the new understandings may upset some previous beliefs. Therefore, they learn best in a non-threatening environment, where each person's experiences and opinions are valued, not judged.

### **The Leader's Role**

The leader must set the example. That means, firstly, providing a non-threatening environment.

The opening of any group meeting is a critical time. People need to be set at ease. Sometimes this can be done by singing songs. Some use get-acquainted games or activities. Providing coffee or dessert often works well. Brainstorming sessions can involve people without risk or ridicule. Whatever method you use, remember that every group, as it is formed, will need some time to get at ease with its members including any smaller subgroups that people go to for discussion.

Setting an example is particularly important during a time of input, if there is to be a lecture or presentation of information. If the speaker hides behind abstract principles or generalities, or refers only to other people's experiences, the participants will follow the speaker's lead. They will be less likely to associate the message with their own lives. Therefore, it is essential that leaders take the time to reflect on their own experiences and be willing to share these with the group.

## **I. BEGINNING WITH THE WORLD: ITS GOODNESS AND ITS BROKENNESS**

### **Reflections on Human Experience**

#### **Conflicting Experiences of the World**

Daily life is filled with mixed, even conflicting, messages. On the one hand, the goodness of the world is displayed in the ever changing landscapes of natural beauty and enjoyed in the varying rhythms of music. Human relationships provide mutual love and comfort. Kind acts of a stranger offer encouragement. In all of this there is a sense of God's delight in the goodness of creation. On the other hand, ugliness and violence assert themselves. Toxic wastes choke the world, destroying its natural health and beauty. People starve amid plenty. Powerful regimes brutally repress those who call for freedom and justice. Homes are broken, women battered, children abused.

Any glimpse at history, current events, or the environment, makes it apparent that human beings have never succeeded at building a perfect community. The best of human endeavours do not sustain themselves. Projects begun with good intentions fall short of what they might be. Progress and goodwill have limits because of the human inability to persevere in ways that are truly generous. Therefore, in the midst of the good world that God has made, corruption persists, seemingly beyond repair.

#### **What Christians Believe about the World**

The Bible affirms the goodness of creation, but at the same time refuses to mask its painful distortions. The Scriptures describe the situation of humankind as having missed the mark, falling short of its intended purpose; as alienated from, or even hostile to, God and one another. This distortion of God's intention is called sin. Biblically speaking, sin is always more than the sum total of personal misdeeds. It has enslaving power in human life. However, human beings are more than victims of sin; they participate in it.

This is what the church has attempted to describe in speaking of original sin. Everyone born into this world enters a world made by God, intended to live for and through God, yet that same world is corrupted and disordered by sin. All suffer from the pervasive presence of sin in the world—from relationships which are less than perfect, from deprivation of various kinds, from participation in corrupt institutions. In a sense, even the newborn child is beginning to die.

However, Christian understanding of reality goes beyond a stating of the fact of sin. It says that God has identified with the condition of humanity and of this world; that in Jesus Christ God took on human suffering and defeated sin. God has entered the human plight and offers restoration to wholeness. Repentance is possible. People are called by God to turn from sin's enslavement toward God.

It is because of Christ that Christians believe the convulsions of the entire creation are not only the death throes of an old and tired order, but the birth pangs of a new. In Christ, the new creation dawns amid and against the most brutal evil. Believers find the strength in God to love, to seek justice, to care for this universe, eagerly anticipating the new world where divine justice will be complete and God will be fully manifest. God has established the Church as a community

in which new and right relationships may grow in hopeful anticipation of the new creation. Although the Church as a human institution shares in the corruption of the world, nevertheless as a community in Christ it also holds out a vision of mutual service and acts as a witness to the goodness of God in and for a broken world.

### **Questions for Reflection**

When have you experienced goodness or satisfaction in your life?

When have you experienced brokenness or conflict?

Do you approach God differently in times of trouble compared with times of well-being?

How do you share in or contribute to goodness in the world? Do you see any ways in which you encounter or contribute to evil or brokenness?

### **Considering the Biblical Witness**

#### **Hearing the Word: Life's Conflicting Realities**

Genesis 1 - the world is created good.

Genesis 3-4 - from the very beginning human beings choose to act against God's intention for them and for creation. Genesis 6 - human perversity continues.

Genesis 11 - human endeavours come to nothing because of ambition and divisiveness.

Psalms 14 - no human beings do good in themselves.

Psalms 31:10-16 - the isolation of the outcast.

Psalms 69:1-22 - the suffering of the innocent at the hands of the violent.

Job 7 - the agony of personal suffering.

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 - God's servant accepts suffering for the sins of many.

Romans 8:18-23 - hope from God in the midst of corruption.

#### **Telling the Story: In the Beginning**

In the beginning...there is God. But we cannot speak of those days before the worlds began to be; we must begin at that which is the beginning for us, the time when God began to create the building blocks of life. It is shrouded in mystery and no description can do this time justice. Perhaps poetry and song and story are the best we can do when faced by mystery. So in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, there are poetic stories about ...the beginning.

These stories say many things to us. They tell us God is in control of the processes of creation. They tell us that God made things and animals and, yes, people, "good." See how often that simple word is repeated in the first chapter of Genesis! Both because we are part of a good creation and because we, male and female alike, share what is called "the image of God," we were made in the beginning to be good (Genesis 1:26).

There is much to hear in these stories but before we leave them, let us note the role of water in them. In Genesis 1, brought perhaps by the ancestors of Israel from the flood plains of Mesopotamia, water is chaos. It must first be restrained by God so that creation may continue, and still it threatens life (Genesis 1:2, 6-10). The second chapter of Genesis contains another story. Perhaps this story, which many scholars think is even older than the first, was repeated by campfires beside desert oases. Here water is a necessity of life; it wells up from the ground in "Eden," and from the waters of Eden flow four streams (Genesis 2:6). Both life and threat of death are there from "the beginning" and both are linked to water.

The story continues, however; humanity does not remain in Eden. The sad tale of Genesis 3 is not about apples; it is about choices. The story tells us that from the beginning we human beings have made wrong choices. We pretend to be what we are not; we try to make ourselves into our own gods. What we choose makes us hide from God and distorts our relationship with one another (Genesis 3:5-8). We are separated from God and from the wonderful garden God made (Genesis 3:22-4). The story does not end there; wrong choices go on and evil spreads. There is murder, even of brother by brother (Genesis 4), vindictiveness (Genesis 5:17-24), vaunting ambition (Genesis 11), and wickedness of every sort, wickedness so great it makes God wish to destroy humanity itself (Genesis 6-8). All our relationships - with others, with the rest of creation, with God - are profoundly damaged.

The story of spreading evil comes on beyond the first 11 chapters of Genesis throughout the Bible. There is murder, theft, sexual immorality, oppression of every sort, even among the "righteous." (Consider, for example, the story of David and Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11-12, or the account of relations of the prophet Elijah with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, 1 Kings 16-22.) Moreover, the relationship with God continues to be damaged and humanity continues to set up idols of every sort, some of which are personifications of forces in nature, but some of which are, as in the beginning, merely representations and extensions of ourselves.

The story extends beyond the Bible as well. The daily paper brings us tales of every form of evil at work in our world. Some of it occurs by conscious choice; some of this evil now seems simply to well up within us. Nor is evil merely personal or individual. It infects all that we create and the systems by which we live. At this point we introduce that old biblical word "sin." We often think of sin as specific acts of wrongdoing but the Bible frequently uses the word to mean something much more fundamental. Sin sums up in a word that brokenness or disorder in all persons and societies which inevitably issues in wrong-doing. Sometimes, especially in the writings of the apostle Paul, sin is pictured as a power to which we are captive. (Romans 7 is worth considering in this respect.) Because we are human, we are all involved in sin, both as participants and as victims. We all experience the brokenness and the emptiness it causes. (See Psalms 14, 31, 69; Romans 1:19-3.)

In the end we see that the Bible presents an ambiguous picture of ourselves. On one hand it exclaims, "You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour" NRSV (Psalm 8:5). On the other hand, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless" (Romans 3:10-12, loosely quoting Psalm 14). To those who offer one-sided estimates of the human condition, we will always respond with both agreement and disagreement. To the optimist who believes in progress and sees in humanity only goodness and perfectibility, we will say "Yes, but..." To the cynical pessimist we will likewise announce, "Yes, but..." We know now that in humanity there is much that is good and much that is ill. The Bible recognizes both sides of what we are.

### **Questions for Reflection**

Do you tend to be pessimistic or optimistic about the people you meet, work with, etc. ? Why? Can you think of examples which suggest to you the "enslaving" power of sin?

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Where have you encountered the destructiveness of institutions or societies?  
Where have you seen signs of goodness and hope in the world?

## **II. GOD'S INITIATIVE IN THE WORLD: RECONCILIATION AND WHOLENESS**

### **Reflections on Human Experience**

#### **Our Yearning for Wholeness**

In the most devastating situations and unsettling of occurrences, a voice within seems to proclaim: this should not be! This indignant voice cries for justice, for comfort, for something or someone to ease the burden. In despair, people seek signs of hope; in death, possibilities of new life. This yearning for hope to rise out of despair is lodged in the very heart of human culture and experience. Most societies have age-old stories about the emergence of life even in the face of death. The seasons of the year are commonly associated with cycles of death and life, as spring awakens from the sleep of winter. Still, such yearnings for the new cannot obliterate the fear or agony caused by loss of the old.

The human experience of loss and brokenness would not be so profound if it were not for a deeper yearning for acceptance and wholeness. People continue to search for some sort of meaning, for a way of explaining experience in order to endure suffering and live in hope.

#### **The Christian Understanding of Wholeness: Grace**

Both the yearning for wholeness and the satisfying of this yearning are the work of God's grace. Beyond human fragmentation and isolation, God offers a new relationship of love, wisdom, and truth; a new beginning founded on forgiveness and reconciliation in Christ. Christians believe that God has identified with the human condition in Christ, suffering for us and with us. Thus, beyond all human experiences of brokenness, God extends the invitation of grace to turn and share in the divine life of the Trinity. Human beings cannot earn grace or demand it, only rejoice in it.

Christians recognize God's supreme gift, the greatest act of grace, in the person of Jesus, the Word of God, the Son of God. Jesus' entry into the conflicting realities of human life has overcome the forces of evil which corrupt it, and sets people free from the chains of oppression forged by sin. Christ gave himself in life and in death, pouring out his blood to reconcile us with God and strengthen us continually through the gift of the Holy Spirit. By this grace, believers turn toward the love of Christ and experience the welcoming acceptance of God.

The offer of God's gift of grace is often made through those who have themselves experienced this acceptance. The Church, as the community of repentant sinners, passes on stories of hope and faith, proclaiming the Good News of wholeness restored in many ways: through worship in the believing community, through study of the Word of God, and through personal witness drawn from experience. Each person is invited to become part of this community and share in the promises of the covenant it upholds. The Church is a covenant community: God has promised to be faithful; so the Church promises to be faithful to God. Even though believers fail to carry out their promises, God remains faithful and continues to offer strength and renewal to all those who have been freed in Christ.

#### **Questions for Reflection**

What do you long for?

What kinds of satisfaction do you seek?

What influences your desires and the choices you make about things you long for?

How does God satisfy your longings?

### **Considering the Biblical Witness**

#### **Hearing the Word: God's Initiative to the World**

Genesis 9:8-17 - God makes a covenant not to destroy creation by flood.

Genesis 12:1-3, 17:1-13 - God makes a covenant with Abraham and his descendants.

Deuteronomy 7:6-13 - God makes a covenant with the people brought out of bondage.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 - God promises a new covenant to be written in human hearts.

Ezekiel 37:20-28 - God promises a covenant to people in exile.

Matthew 26:26-28 - Jesus offers his own blood of the new covenant.

John 1:14-17 - Grace is given in Jesus, the Word made flesh.

Romans 5:6-21 - The free gift of grace through Jesus justifies us.

Ephesians 2:4-10 - By grace we have been saved.

Hebrews 9:11-15 - Jesus as priest and mediator of the new covenant.

#### **Telling the Story: God's Offer of Grace**

As we have seen, the Bible replies, "Yes, but," to both the one who is optimistic and the one who is pessimistic about the human condition. The hopeful "but" with which we respond to the pessimist comes from what we know about the nature and activity of God. We do not need to give up on the human race because God has never given up on us. Even in the early chapters of Genesis, which are the symbolic story of the spread of sin and its consequences through the world, there are signs of continued care by God. God "clothes" Adam and Eve to protect them, places a mark of protection even on the murderer Cain, and solemnly promises not to destroy the whole earth (Genesis 3:21, 4:15, 9:8-17). The story of God's gracious care takes a new turn in Genesis 12, however. Here God becomes involved with humanity in a particular way, making a solemn promise and agreement with a man called Abraham and his wife Sarah. These solemn promises and agreements are called "covenants." God will bless Abraham and Sarah for through them God intends to "bless all the nations of the earth" (Genesis 12:1-3).

The story of God's grace continues. The descendants of Abraham became a people; they found their way to Egypt and fell into slavery there. God heard their yearning cries of distress and sent Moses to rescue them. The people were brought through the threatening waters of the sea to safety. With this free people God again made a covenant, this time at Mount Sinai or Horeb (Exodus 19-20; Deuteronomy 7:6-13). This covenant differed somewhat in emphasis. While the idea of promise remains, one might also think of the word "treaty" or "contract." Whereas the covenant with Abraham was essentially a promise on the part of God, the covenant at Sinai is conditional; the people must live up to certain stipulations. One might consider the various laws of God, especially the "ten commandments," as the stipulations the people must carry out as their side of the solemn agreement (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:1-21).

Eventually Israel was brought to its own country, passing through the waters of Jordan to the promised land. But there a tragic history ensued. Repeatedly the people broke the covenant, violating all its stipulations both with respect to God and with respect to their neighbours. It was only their covenantal relationship with God that made them unique among the surrounding

peoples. When they broke the covenant they destroyed the relationship which alone gave them the strength to maintain their precarious place among the nations. Finally their national existence came to an end; they were taken into exile in far-off Babylon. While the people rejected God, however, God never rejected the people. God therefore renewed the promise. The people would return in peace and prosperity and God would dwell in their midst (Ezekiel 37:20-28). There would be a "new covenant," one not written in stone but in the hearts of the people (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Many of the exiles eventually returned and for generations the Jewish people continued to inhabit their ancient homeland. For the most part they lived under various foreign conquerors, regaining independence only briefly. Finally the land of Judah came under the sway of the Roman Empire. In those times word spread about a wandering teacher who taught with remarkable authority (Mark 1:22). It was reported that he also performed miracles and crowds flocked to see him. Some of his teachings and the manner of his life upset the standard religious patterns of doing things. He welcomed women among his followers (Luke 10:38-42). He insisted on eating with sinners and outcasts (Luke 5:27-32, 7:34).

In the end the authorities plotted to crush him, but the night before that came to pass, he reinterpreted the ancient symbols of bread and wine. Of the wine he said, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28). His blood was indeed "poured out" the next day, but soon the strangest report began to circulate. His followers, first the women, then the group called disciples, and then many others declared that they had seen him alive. They were so certain of this that they were willing to undergo great suffering, even death, for the sake of what they were beginning to call the good news or gospel. Many, particularly among the poor in society, believed the message and a new people dedicated to the worship of the God of Israel was born (Acts 4:32-37).

Some of them began to reflect anew on what their teacher had said and done, on his life and on his death. They used language and ideas with which they were familiar to explain who he was. They believed, as we do now, that in Jesus Christ, God was offering the free gift of an undeserved love and acceptance (Romans 5:6-21, Ephesians 2:4-10). They had seen in Jesus the priest and mediator of a new covenant relationship with God (Hebrews 9:11-15). In the end, they could only say that in Jesus, God was truly dwelling with them, as had been so long promised, to bring peace and reconciliation to the world (John 1:1-18, 2 Corinthians 3). The Church today joins in their proclamation: through Jesus the power of sin has been destroyed and the brokenness it causes made whole.

### **Questions for Reflection**

As you recall the many stories of Jesus, what draws you to him?

Which stories speak most powerfully to you?

Have you ever experienced forgiveness? How did that act of forgiveness affect you?

Do you ever find forgiveness difficult? When?

What examples of covenants between persons can you give?

What have you learned about how God keeps a covenant?

How will this insight effect how you keep your covenants?

### **III. FROM DEATH TO LIFE: TURNING TOWARDS GOD**

#### **Reflections on Human Experience**

##### **Experiences of Conversion**

For some people, there is one moment to which they can point that marks the critical time for them in their spiritual journey. They can say, "On this day, in this place, I had an encounter with the living God." These experiences are intensely personal and immensely important. For others, conversion is experienced as a process which takes place over many years. For them, there may be a series of moments of encounter with God, of developing awareness and challenge to past beliefs and behaviour. An awareness of the grace of conversion, whether sudden or gradual, is often characterized by feelings of acceptance and belonging. There is a sense of being liberated, set free. Thus, conversion is often associated with a time of cleansing and pardon. At the same time, there is also a sense of being summoned to take a decisive step away from evil towards God, so that one must make a choice.

God's summons may be perceived on the personal level with strong emotional conviction. Or it may be recognized in a new and thoughtful assent to God's truth. For all new believers, there is a challenge to renounce destructive attitudes or behaviours, and to follow a new path. The response to God's summons is variously described as faith, commitment, decision, taking a stand, turning. So compelling is the sense of newness that comes with turning or returning to God, people sometimes speak of having made a dramatic break with their previous life. Believers are liberated in hope, although they may not yet know what they will become.

##### **Conversion for Christian People**

Conversion marks the occasion when the grace that has been operating in someone's life from the beginning is acknowledged and consciously accepted by faith. Believers recognize that in the midst of their struggles, God is present with them in Christ to provide strengthening love. Conversion always carries with it an ethical imperative to follow Jesus and to reject sin. Turning to God requires repentance and a conscious turning away from evil. While the experience of conversion may not always include a recognition of this demand at the beginning, grace will make it clear. Repentance therefore continues throughout a life of faith, when faltering disciples renew their intention to pursue God's ways once again. Faith trusts that God's forgiveness is unfailing even when the struggle against sin seems overwhelming. Thus, conversion is not the end of one's spiritual journey, but the point at which God's call is accepted and undertaken.

Although conversion is often spoken of in personal terms, the Bible also speaks of the need for peoples and nations to turn to God. Conversion works itself out not only in individuals, but also in societies, institutions, and families, all of which can be transformed when they respond to God's call to justice and reconciliation. So each individual convert finds a place in the community of faith whose members together pursue life as the people of God, renewed by God's grace.

##### **Questions for Reflection**

Have you experienced a significant turning point in your life?  
Do you think about this time as a conversion?

Have you witnessed a conversion in another person or group?  
What choices were involved in giving up old ways for new ones?  
What are some ways you have experienced the presence of God?  
Which of those experiences are most important to you? Why?

## **Considering the Biblical Witness**

### **Hearing the Word: Perspectives on Conversion**

Isaiah 45:20-25 - All nations are summoned to turn to the Lord.

Isaiah 55:6-9 - God's call to return for pardon.

Jonah 3 - A whole community responds to the call to repent.

Malachi 4:5-6 - Luke 1:13-17 - John the Baptist fulfills Elijah's role to turn people's hearts to God.

Matthew 18:1-4 - Turn and become like children to enter the kingdom.

Luke 24:44-48 - The mission of the Church to preach repentance.

Acts 26:12-19 - Saul's dramatic experience of conversion.

### **Telling the Story: Call to Repentance**

As we have seen, there was a covenant relationship between God and the people of Israel. This covenant rested upon the faithfulness of God and demanded an answering faithfulness from the people. The people did not so respond, however. Speaking through the prophets of Israel, God again and again summoned them to repent. To us the word "repent" can mean merely to be sorry about the things we have done wrong. In the Bible, however, it means "to turn." The prophets called the people to turn from their sinful ways and to turn to God. This "turning from" and "turning to" is also called conversion.

The demand for repentance and conversion fills the writings of the prophets (see for example, Isaiah 1:10-20; 55:1-9; Jeremiah 18:1-12; Amos 5:10-15, 21-24). Sometimes the prophets did not speak only to Israel but also to the wider world (Isaiah 45:20-25; Jonah 3). Eventually the Christian Church would also reach out beyond the boundaries of the people of Israel and welcome the Gentiles (Galatians 3:28). Its preachers would carry with them the old prophetic message of repentance and conversion. The chief distinction was that the "turning to" must now include a turning to Christ in faith. Indeed, becoming a Christian is repentance and conversion. This is the message the preachers of the new church carried with them (for example, Acts 2:38-9; 3:17-26).

As the Gospel stories begin, we hear first of the work of a preacher named John who urged repentance in the most vigorous language possible (Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-14; John 1:19-28). As a sign of repentance and conversion, declared this preacher, people must be baptized. So insistent was this call that the preacher gained a nickname, John the baptizer, or as we usually put it, "the Baptist." Jesus himself was baptized by John, and so it appears were at least some of his disciples. Baptizing people did not form a prominent part of Jesus' own ministry (though one might so presume from the note in John 4:1-2). After Jesus' death and resurrection, however, the practice gained a new significance as a sign of commitment to Jesus himself as Lord. The Risen Christ commanded the disciples to baptize all people and there is considerable evidence that they did their best to obey this command (Matthew 28:19). They called for repentance like the prophets before them, and for baptism, as a sign of this repentance

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and of God's gracious acceptance of the person (Acts 2:38-39). Those who became followers of Christ were baptized, and received the powerful gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:26-40, 10:44-48, 16:16-40). One of the marvellous things to note about these passages is that not just the chosen people, the Jews, but despised Gentiles as well could receive Christian baptism. No one was or is beyond the reach of God's grace.

#### **Questions for Reflection**

Do you ever have difficulty starting something new? Why?

Why is it difficult for a group to make a new beginning?

How can a community help a person turn to a new way of life?

How does the Church encourage or support such new beginning?

## **IV. BECOMING GOD'S PEOPLE: INITIATION INTO THE BODY OF CHRIST**

### **Reflections on Human Experience**

#### **Incorporated into Christ**

Within the community of the Church, faith is fed by Word and by Sacrament. Believers share in the story of God's action in Christ, remembered and enacted, and are thereby nurtured. Baptism is both sign and seal of belonging to Christ, whose death and risen life are remembered in baptism. His people die to old ways and are raised to new life in him. According to the ancient traditions of the Church and the witness of Scripture, the act of baptism is performed with water in the name of the Trinity. Those who are incorporated into Christ's body, grafted to the tree of life, are nourished by the Holy Spirit and grow in grace. Baptism initiates one into the life of grace in the Body of Christ and begins one's Christian ministry in the world.

Believers are not left alone to struggle to keep their new commitment to God, but live in community with those who try, by grace, to model the life of mutual love. Joining the Church means becoming part of the people of God throughout history, joining the web of praise, prayer, and mutual concern raised by every generation, in time and beyond. Together, the whole people of God is enabled to strive toward faithful living which sees new values and possibilities through the eye of faith, illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

In some churches the practice of sponsorship is part of the event of baptism. The old terms "godmother" or "godfather" show that the newly baptized person enters a larger family in which those not related by blood are intimately connected with each other because of their relationship in Christ. The sponsor in baptism is more than someone who will vouch for a new member: he or she is an intimate companion on the journey of faith, a personal symbol of the truth that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

Baptism, then, is a rite of initiation into the community of God's people. However, different traditions within the Christian Church answer the question "When should a person be baptized?" in different ways. Some think that those who come to baptism should be professing believers of sufficient age to make a decision of faith in their own right. Others practice baptism shortly after birth, with parents or sponsors professing faith and trusting in the child's growth in faith under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the child matures. Still others consider infants of believers as persons who stand in such close relationship to the covenant community already that they too may appropriately be baptized. Those traditions which primarily baptize children within the community of faith also baptize adult believers who come newly to faith. Many of those traditions which do not baptize children mark their welcome into the community in some way. At whatever age baptism is administered, it is a sign or seal of what God has done and is doing in the person's life, as a mark of the repentance and conversion experienced by grace through faith.

Among the churches, there are some differences in understanding of how the rite relates to grace and faith. For instance, is there something new and different that God the Holy Spirit does in the act of baptism or is baptism a seal on the work God has already done? There is not yet an ecumenical consensus on this question. Still, in the recognition of each other's baptism affirmed in 1975, Canadian churches have demonstrated that they share a common intent to be faithful to

biblical teaching and to the command recorded in Matthew 28:19, to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Certain Christian groups do not practice baptism. The Society of Friends (Quakers) celebrates no sacraments, emphasizing inward change by the working of the Holy Spirit. The Salvation Army, for quite different historical reasons, does not celebrate a rite of baptism, but dedicates parents and children in God's service and expects that the more mature believer will profess faith within the community as a result of God's converting grace. These Christians share with their ecumenical partners faith in God's life-transforming presence in the lives of believers, assured in Christ, empowered through the work of the Holy Spirit.

In those churches which do baptize, the event of baptism draws its theological and personal significance from a wonderful network of symbols and actions, drawn from Scripture and the traditions of the Church. Whether one approaches baptism for oneself or for one's child, it is worth considering the spectrum of meaning which illumines the action of the Holy Spirit in baptism.

## **Considering the Biblical Witness**

### **Hearing the Word: Biblical imagery in Baptism**

#### **(i.) Water**

Genesis 1:1-10 - The waters of creation.

Genesis 6:11-19 - The waters of destruction.

Exodus 14:21-31 - The waters of salvation.

Psalms 46 - Water as both life-threatening and life-giving.

Ezekiel 47:1-14 - Water from God will renew life in a dead land.

John 4:7-15 - Jesus gives living water.

Revelation 7:13-17 - Purification by washing in the blood of the Lamb, and the living water which sustains the new life.

The best symbols make use of images that carry many layers of meaning. Water imagery is particularly effective. The Bible portrays the ambiguity of water in human experience. Water is at once chaos (Genesis 1:1-10) and necessity of life (Genesis 2). It is the agent of destruction (Genesis 6:11-19) and of new life (Ezekiel 36, 47:1-14). Through water the Israelites pass to safety; the Egyptians are destroyed by the same water (Exodus 14). In the Gospel of John, Jesus declares that he will give "living water" which will slake all the thirst of those who trust him (John 4:7-15; Revelation 7:13-17). In short, water brings both death and life (Psalm 46).

All these images of water come together in baptism. The water of baptism recalls the water of creation upon which the Spirit breathed, bringing life to all things. It is the means by which what has been soiled is cleansed. It is the living water which sustains us, but it is also the water of the flood which swept away sin and made a new order possible. God demands that we die to sin in order to live for righteousness. So the ways of the world are threatened, destroyed by the flood of God's grace that washes over us in baptism. Baptismal waters cleanse us with grace, washing away the sin of old ways.

**(ii.) Regeneration**

John 3:1-8 - We must be born anew by water and the Spirit.

Romans 6 - We have died to sin by being incorporated in Christ's death and have been raised to righteous living.

Titus 3:3-7 - the washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 1:3-5; 1:22-23 - We are born anew through the Word of God, and grow from infancy to adulthood in Christ.

1 John 5:5-15 - We are born of God because of our faith.

So great is the change which the Scriptures both promise and demand that one can consider, as God does, that the person who has been converted is an entirely new being (2 Corinthians 5:17). To change the imagery slightly, those who come to Christ are born again (John 3:16), or born anew through the word of God (1 Peter 1:23).

They are truly children of God (1 John 5:1-5). This new life, or "regeneration," as it is often called, is like a "washing" or cleansing and comes through the agency of the Holy Spirit. When we speak of "washing," the thought of water cannot be far distant, so it is no surprise to read that those who are born anew (or "from above," as the key Greek word also suggests) are "born by water and the spirit" (John 3:1-8). By this washing they are "saved" (1 Peter 3:18-22). By word, spirit, and water, Christians are born into a new life which death itself cannot destroy.

Baptism is the act of passing through the waters of death into life. The image of passing through water is linked to the passing through the water of natural birth, from which we emerge into a world of relationships. We drown in the waters of baptism to our old existence and way of living, and are brought into a new covenantal relationship. In this way, baptism is seen as rebirth or regeneration into the new life made possible through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Spirit raises us up to new life, free and clean.

**(iii.) Adoption and Incorporation**

Romans 8:9-25; Adoption as children and heirs, yet adoption still in some ways anticipated in hope.

Romans 12:12-13, (14-26) 27-30; All are baptized into one Body and have gifts to use within it.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17; Life in the Body is nourished by bread and cup.

Galatians 4:1-7; We are adult children adopted as heirs.

Ephesians 1:3-14; We are destined in love to be children with a promised inheritance.

Ephesians 4:1-16; The work of the Spirit in building up the Body of Christ and our growth towards maturity within it.

The language of new birth or regeneration might suggest a purely individual, internal and personal change in the believer. Such a conclusion would be inadequate. Life in Christ involves a whole new set of relationships. We are brought first into a new relationship with God and as a result, into a new relationship with all people in all times and places. The Apostle Paul has pictured this change in the image of "adoption" (Romans 8:9-25; Galatians 4:1-7; Ephesians 1:3-14).

The idea of adoption whereby an individual, almost always a child, is brought into a family and given a new identity is familiar from society. The ancient practice of adoption has a twist which

makes the imagery even richer. In Roman times a wealthy or prominent person, even an emperor, could adopt an adult as child and heir. Such a person would inherit the great person's wealth, rank and authority. It is this practice that Paul recalls when he speaks of new life in Christ.

The Bible also speaks of incorporation into a body of which the head is Christ. We are related not only to God in Christ but also to all other Christians. So close ought this relationship be that the Church is called the Body of Christ (Romans 12:4-9; 1 Corinthians 12:12-20; Ephesians 4:1-16; Colossians 1:15-23). The apostle Paul says quite explicitly that the point at which this incorporation into the Body occurs is baptism (1 Corinthians 12:13).

### **Telling the Story: Baptism in the Scriptures**

The Christian missionary about whom we know most, the Apostle Paul, did not himself baptize all his converts (1 Corinthians 1:14-16), but he could assume that all those who read his letters to the new Christian churches had been baptized (Romans 6:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Galatians 3:27-29). It is clear that by this very early point in the church history, baptism had become the regular and normal mark of initiation into the Christian faith.

We know little about the form of baptism in the New Testament period. No New Testament writer offers us a detailed account of a baptismal service or even a thorough theology of baptism. Questions such as who exactly was baptized at what age and with how much water have been debated at enormous length, sometimes with a great lack of Christian charity. What we can say with confidence is that baptism was enormously important to the early Christian as the initiation of a committed life. Its consequences stretched into every area of human life. (See, for example, the quotations from the writings of Paul listed above.)

### **Questions for Reflection**

How do you relate the experience of conversion or turning to God with the act of baptism? What place does baptism take in your spiritual growth?

Which of the images discussed above do you associate most closely with baptism and belonging to Christ? From the baptisms you have witnessed, what words or actions stand out most prominently in your memory? What do the various parts of a baptismal service communicate about God and about the life of those baptized?

How does the celebration of baptism in your faith community initiate life in that community? What is the relationship of baptism to participation in other sacrament(s) or ordinances?

If your church does not celebrate baptism, how did you mark the beginning of your life in Christ? How does your community welcome new members and mark the occasion of someone's incorporation into the Body of Christ?

How does your faith tradition speak about what happens in baptism? Have you ever attended a baptism in a Christian tradition other than your own? What differences and similarities did you observe?

Consult the appendix of statements at the end of the study guide, which offers perspectives on

*Initiation into Christ*

the distinctive theology and practice of baptism and/or Christian initiation in many different traditions as compiled by members of the Commission on Faith and Witness.

## **V. BAPTIZED BY WATER AND SPIRIT: CALLED TO NEW LIFE**

### **Reflections on Human Experience**

#### **Called to New Life**

Images of new birth and regeneration reinforce God's call to conversion and to radical newness which requires the death of old values and priorities. Believers respond to God's call by divesting themselves of old ways and "putting on" Christ, giving place to new Life which comes as sheer gift from God. This transformation gives meaning to all our experience, whether it predates, coincides with, or grows out of baptism. A Christian's calling is not to conversion or baptism as isolated events. It is to a new and on-going relationship with Christ within Christ's body, the Church. For some, the Eucharist is a sacramental embodiment of this relationship.

All who belong to Christ are called to live in a new way, in right relationships of justice and peace with all creation, faithful to others as God is faithful to us. Relationships in grace are not ends in themselves or means of personal fulfilment; rather they are sacramental opportunities, expressions of God's love and faithfulness, means of blessing. We are called to live for the Kingdom of God, expressing faithfulness, hope, and self-giving love in personal action and through our interaction.

Far from being a life of security, baptismal life is one of struggle, of commitment to take up the cross and follow Jesus, working in grace to put all that is evil and sinful to death and to bring what is good and holy to birth. Living out one's Christian calling, therefore, is demanding for individuals and for communities. A life of Christian discipleship can only be sustained by God's grace: through worship and prayer, through nurture by Word and Sacrament, through mutual care, through openness to the means of grace, and through the discipline of repentance.

#### **People with a Mission**

The Church takes on the mission and ministry of Jesus through the "apostolic living" of every disciple. Each newly baptized person can share in this mission by giving of time, talent, and treasure; and by praying for others. Every Christian has a vocation, a ministry appropriate to them. As each believer grows in relationship with God and in their self-understanding, they must learn to discern what particular vocation and which particular gifts of the Spirit are given to them to serve God and the world. Vocations may remain constant for life, but could also change as new situations reshape one's experience of God and perceptions of the world.

Through the community of believers, God offers the new covenant in Christ to the world. That covenant holds out the promise of wholeness restored, and of justice and right relations established within and among individuals, throughout the human community, between humankind and creation, reconciling God and the whole created order. Believers have a mission to proclaim that this new era has begun, and that all of creation will be restored by Christ through the Holy Spirit into the "Kingdom" or "reign" of God.

This mission of salvation and reconciliation is both a personal and a collective task. As individuals we try to be faithful to the way Jesus lived. We struggle to resist the temptation to be self-indulgent, cruel, possessive, or indifferent; we acknowledge the sins we commit and turn

again for healing and forgiveness. As the people of God, we seek healing for those who suffer, support justice for the poor, strive for liberty for those who are oppressed, announce forgiveness to those burdened by sin. We become good stewards of creation. In these and many other ways, we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, and bear witness to the meaning of his death and resurrection. For we are sent to make him known to this broken world until he comes again.

## **Considering the Biblical Witness**

### **Hearing the Word: The Call to Ethical Action**

Exodus 20:1-17; Freed from bondage, the Israelites are called to live in covenant with God and one another.

Romans 6:1-9; We die in Christ in order to walk in newness of life.

1 Corinthians 10:1-13; A warning not to give in to temptation, but to rely on God's faithfulness to help us resist it.

Colossians 3:1-17; Put to death destructive ways, and put on love.

Philippians 2:1-13; Have the sacrificial mind of Christ, the servant, among you.

1 Peter 2:1-10; Be build up as a holy priesthood to declare God's wonderful deeds.

### **Telling the Story: Beyond Ceremony**

We have seen that the Bible speaks of baptism in connection with new life and with incorporation into the Body of Christ. It is connected with the call of prophets and apostles for repentance. Each ceremony is not, therefore, merely a rite of passage marking either birth or entry into maturity, depending on our particular tradition. New life in Christ must be genuinely new. So it is no surprise that the key texts which speak about baptism do not speak primarily about ceremonies. They speak about the quality of life which baptism initiates. Paul, for example, states that in baptism we die with Christ so that we might live with Christ and like Christ (Romans 6:3-4). Sin can no longer rule in us; our lives are surrendered to God to be used for righteous purposes (Romans 6:12-14). Similarly we are incorporated in the Body of Christ by Baptism (1 Corinthians 12:13). Consequently, we must respect and value all other parts of the one body. In fact, the true mark of incorporation into Christ's body is overwhelming, self-giving love (1 Corinthians 13).

It has been said that the oasis of New Testament ethics is "Be what you are." In baptism we are assured that we belong to Christ and that our lives are lived in him now and forever (Colossians 3:3). This is what we truly are. The rest of our lives consists in living out the meaning of this reality. Thus, all the great ethical imperatives of the New Testament can quite naturally be connected with baptism (see, for example, Colossians 3:1-17; Philippians 2:1-13; 1 Peter 2:1-10; Matthew 5-7). Our baptism becomes visible in our lives when we live by the word of Christ to us. The consequences take a whole lifetime to work out.

### **Questions for Reflection**

What difference will your baptism and your Christian faith make to the way you live your life?

What things do you see in yourself and in others as gifts of God? How can God's mission use those gifts?

How would you express your calling or "vocation"?

How would you describe the mission of the Church? What is your part in that mission?

## **VI. DENOMINATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

Following are statements compiled by members of the Faith and Witness Commission outlining the teaching and practice on baptism and initiation into Christian life in the church they represent.

What part of the spectrum of meaning discussed earlier is highlighted in your tradition?

### **An Anglican Perspective**

The Anglican pattern of Christian initiation has been changing over the last few years. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1959) calls for the baptism of infants as soon as possible after birth, at a public service (normally Morning or Evening Prayer). Parents and sponsors make the baptismal promises on behalf of the child, whom they promise to educate in the faith and present to the Bishop for confirmation. (The age for confirmation is not specified, but is usually 11-14 years). After Confirmation in the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands, the young person is admitted to Communion and enters the adult life of the Church. Provision is also made for private, and for adult, baptism.

The *Book of Alternative Services* (1985) tries to restore the ancient unity of initiation, providing for the laying on of hands and receiving first communion at the same baptismal service (children as well as adults). A child so initiated might not be confirmed until adulthood. The BAS places baptism in the context of the main Sunday service (usually the Eucharist) and calls for careful preparation of the candidates and sponsors. It is usual to have 3 or 4 baptisms a year on particular festivals, with a 4-6 week preparation course beforehand.

According to both books, candidates are baptized with water in the name of the Trinity. After the pouring or immersion, they are signed on the forehead with the sign of the cross (optionally, with the oil of chrism, in the BAS) and again in the BAS, given a lighted candle (the light of Christ).

Baptism is a sacrament for Anglicans-the outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual grace of new life. Both rites speak of baptism as an event by which God gives rebirth, regeneration, membership in Christ and his Church, cleansing, forgiveness of sins, strengthening with the Holy Spirit, participation in Christ's death and resurrection, and the privilege of becoming inheritors of God's kingdom. (A. Barnett-Cowan)

### **A Baptist Perspective**

Perhaps because of their name, Baptists have been associated with baptism, performed at a time and in a manner some consider peculiar. Candidates are expected to be believers first, and on baptism, they are completely immersed. Ironically, while this "ordinance" may have a high profile, it is not considered as essential for salvation. It is observed as an act of obedience.

Baptism normally occurs in the presence of a congregation, and is thereby a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ. It is an external expression of an inward change, of repentance and spiritual rebirth. Baptism is also that time when the candidate takes an oath or pledge to live according to the ethical and moral standards of Christ. Associated with baptism are substantive conscious

decisions which require a high level of spiritual and intellectual maturity. For this reason Baptists do not practice the baptism of infants and young children who cannot conceive what it means to enter into a new relationship with God.

The standard mode of baptism is by immersion. This practice serves as a vivid symbol of death (as one is lowered below the water) and resurrection to new life in Christ (as one is lifted above the water). Baptists believe there is impressive evidence for believer's baptism by immersion in the New Testament and Early Church.

For the very young, who are below the age of accountability, a ceremony of "Presentation of Children and Dedication of Parents" recognizes that they are not excluded from the Christian family. (D. Sydney)

### **A Perspective From The Disciples Of Christ**

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada came into existence early in the nineteenth century as a movement to re-unite the churches. To achieve this union, Disciples have pleaded for the primacy of the authority of the New Testament in the faith and life of the Church.

Baptism is very important to Disciples who practice believer's baptism uniformly as an immersion in water. While only practising immersion, Disciples have come to accept the sincerity of other communions who practice another form and confer baptism upon infants. Disciples have a service of dedication for Christian parents and their infants and children.

In Disciple congregations it is the ordained minister who most often officiates at a baptism which takes place in an indoor baptistry. However immersions performed by lay people (men and women) are accepted as valid, even though there may be some variance in the spoken baptismal declaration. Disciples are moving toward a more uniform practice but dissimilarities of practice are bound to exist within a Communion where consensus is the closest approach to church regulation.

Disciples do not hold to baptismal regeneration but usually include baptism among the steps authorized by Christ relative to full obedience that eventuates in salvation. It is generally understood by Disciples that baptism precedes participation in the Lord's Supper, although the Lord's Supper is practised in a fully open manner. In general, Disciples believe that "through baptism into Christ we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God" (*The Design*, 1978). "Baptism creates a bond linking us to the whole people of God" (*Handbook for Today's Disciples*, 1981). (M.L. Breakenridge)

### **An Eastern Orthodox Perspective**

Baptism within the context of the Orthodox Church is not a sacrament which has validity apart from the life of the Church itself. Thus there are no valid sacraments outside of the Church. Baptism, furthermore, is part of the totality of Christian initiation within that Church. It exists within the development of rites which were to take their normative form by the fourth century and which were described by St. Basil the Great in his Treatise on the Holy Spirit.

Baptism is the washing with water, usually administered by the priest by triple immersion in the name of the Holy Trinity. The rite is preceded by exorcisms, including the turning of the candidate from the west toward the east, symbolizing the movement from darkness to light.

Immediately after the triple immersion, the candidate is chrismated with Holy Oil signifying "the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." This anointing is done with oil blessed by the bishop. Whereas the "laying on of hands" and the anointing became the Sacrament of Confirmation in the Western Church, the East clearly retained the unity of the two, seeing baptism as the forgiveness of sin (a washing with water) and incorporation into the body of Christ by a symbolic death. The chrismation effects as well as symbolizes the gift of the Holy Spirit. The integrity of the initiatory events is supported by the fact that the newly baptized and chrismated child or adult is always given Holy Communion directly after entry into the mystery of union with Christ.

Orthodox teaching on baptism was put classically by St. John Chrysostom, one of the great teachers of the Church, when he said:

God takes this nature of ours when it is rusted with the rust of sin, after our faults have covered it with soot and it has lost its beauty, put into it by God in the beginning, and He smelts it anew. He plunges it into the waters as into the smelting furnace but, instead of the flames, He sends forth the grace of the Spirit. Then He brings us forth from the furnace, renewed like newly-moulded vessels, to rival the rays of the sun with our brightness (*Ad illum. catech*, L3). (Fr. Basil Zion)

### **A Lutheran Perspective**

For Lutherans, baptism is the sacrament of initiation into God's community, the Church. Persons are baptized with water in the name of the Trinity. Baptism makes persons members of the priesthood of all believers, a priesthood shared in Jesus Christ.

The benefits of baptism are freedom and reconciliation. In baptism, God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe in God's promises. The baptized are joined to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, set free from sin and death. Although born children of a fallen humanity, in the waters of baptism we are reborn children of God to inherit eternal life.

Those baptized, their sponsors, and parents (in the case of infants who are baptized) will themselves be believing Christians, willing to profess faith in Christ Jesus, turn away from sins, and confess the faith of the church, and renounce all forces of evil, the devil, and his empty promises.

Lutherans recognize a twofold focus in the process of baptism. Baptism, through water and God's word, imparts faith. Water by itself is only water, but with the Word of God it is life-giving water which by grace gives new birth through the work of the Holy Spirit. Together with baptism the fourfold gifts of the Holy Spirit are given, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in (God's) presence.

Baptism then becomes part of the Christian's daily living. The believer's sinful self, with all its

wrongful deeds and evil desires, is to be "drowned" through daily repentance. Day after day, therefore, a new self can arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever. (D. Nevile)

### **A Mennonite Perspective**

The Anabaptist stream of reform in the sixteenth century focused on an understanding of the church as a covenant community to which persons chose to belong because of their new life in Christ. Those baptismal images which emphasize radical transformation become the theological basis for the practice of adult believers baptism. Baptism was a sign of death to sin, new birth, cleansing from sin and incorporation into the Body of Christ. Baptism by water included the readiness to follow Jesus' way of the cross, even if this meant accepting the baptism of suffering or even of death (Mark 10:38).

For Mennonites today, baptism is the church's and the individual's act of recognizing the Spirit at work calling for persons to identify with Christ and God's coming Kingdom. Baptism is a sign of obedience by which persons testify in a public way to God's grace in their lives and their desire to live as disciples in the world. Choosing to be baptized includes a readiness to participate in mutual admonition and encouragement within a visible community of service, love and peace. It also means involvement in service and ministry in the world.

Because of the indispensable relationship between faith, actions, and baptism, only persons who have reached an age of accountability and who can make responsible choices are considered ready to "own" the faith of the community, even if they have been a part of that community's nurture and care since birth. The actual practice varies but usually includes:

1. a time of preparation (for example, joining a class to explore the faith);
2. a time of decision-making (An individual decides whether to request baptism; the congregation hears the candidate's testimony and affirms their support and acceptance);
3. a worship service in which candidates make a declaration of faith and commitment before the congregation. This is followed by a baptism (pouring, sprinkling or immersion) in the Triune name and reception into membership of the local congregation. (L. Harder)

### **A Presbyterian Perspective**

By the power of the Holy Spirit, God acts through Baptism. It is the sacrament not of what we do but of what God has done for us in Christ. God's grace and our response to it are not tied to the moment of Baptism, but continue and deepen throughout life. Living Faith 7.6.3

Trusting in God's initiative of grace which embraces us and brings us to faith, regardless of our merits or the extent of our understanding, the Presbyterian Church in Canada baptizes infants as well as mature believers. By act of the General Assembly, at least one parent of an infant presented for baptism must profess faith in Jesus Christ. All candidates for baptism are received by act of Session, the group of elders in every congregation which determines when each Sacrament of Baptism will be celebrated.

Baptisms normally take place in Sunday worship as the gathered community upholds candidates in faith and prayer. The Sacrament begins with scriptural warrants and either personal or corporate confession of faith in Christ, followed by parents' vows to nurture their children in the

ways of Christ's people. The congregation pledges its support to all those to be baptized. Individual candidates are then called by name, baptized with a sprinkling of water in the name of the Trinity, and blessed in prayer and in the laying on of hands by the minister.

Baptismal vows made on behalf of infants are claimed by the individuals when they choose to make a public profession of faith. Adults and adolescents receive instruction in discipleship when they present themselves to make a new profession of their faith in Jesus Christ. At that time, individuals are expected to take up full responsibility within the community of the Church. (N. Cocks)

### **A Reformed Perspective**

The Reformed Church in Canada administers the Sacrament of Baptism both to believing adults and to the children of the faithful. It has always included children in this sacrament for it believes that both the Old and the New Testament teach that children are a part of the family of God. When God made His covenant with Abraham He made it known that children were included in that covenant. Both adults and children were the recipients of God's promises and both received the sign of the covenant, namely circumcision. Women were considered circumcised through the circumcision of their fathers or husbands.

The Reformed Church views Christian baptism in the New Testament as analogous to circumcision in the Old Testament. In both ceremonies, God extends his covenant promises to the children of the faithful. In the New Testament, where Christ represents the New Covenant, both male and female believers received the sign of the New Covenant, baptism.

Whether or not baptized infants claim these promises of God depends upon whether or not they come to the faith in Jesus Christ. Consequently, when the sacrament is administered a great deal of emphasis is put on the faith of the parents and the believing community. Parents promise to "instruct their child in the truth of God's Word and in the way of salvation through Jesus Christ." (W Kroon)

### **A Perspective From The Religious Society Of Friends (Quakers)**

For more than 300 years, Quakers have affirmed the spiritual nature of the believer's relationship with God. For most Friends this has led to a testimony against the outward use of sacraments, based less upon interpretation of scripture than upon continuing experience. The inward way of the Spirit is not dependent on outward rites, ceremonies or liturgical aids to worship. We believe that the presence of Christ in the midst can be a living experience to all who open themselves to the Spirit of God. Like George Fox, we believe that "Christ has come to teach his people himself," and that this reality cannot be improved through symbolic remembrances.

Entrance into the community of Christ's people requires no outward rite, being known only through trust, obedience, love, knowledge and commitment. To be a member of Christ's body requires an inner transformation of the whole self. Membership in the Religious Society of Friends is either birthright - on the application of parents who are members on behalf of the child - or by application of a convinced adult. The Monthly Meeting appoints a Committee of Clearness which meets with the applicant and reports its findings to the Meeting. If the application is accepted, the new member is informally welcomed at a subsequent Meeting for

Worship.

As Friends we are challenged to move from discussion of outward signs to live sacramentally and to learn a deeper sense of that dedication, incorporation and witness symbolized in the rite of baptism. (A. Thomas)

### **A Roman Catholic Perspective**

A concise statement of the meaning of baptism in the Roman Catholic Church is given in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*:

Can. 849 Baptism, the gateway to the sacraments, is necessary for salvation, either by actual reception or at least by desire. By it people are freed from sins, are born again as children of God and, made like to Christ by an indelible character, are incorporated into the Church. It is validly conferred only by a washing in real water with the proper form of words.

While asserting the necessity of baptism for salvation, the Code also makes reference to baptism by desire. This allows for the dual affirmation that Christ is the one mediator of salvation and that grace is universally available.

Following the Second Vatican Council, liturgical renewal has emphasized a more scriptural and patristic approach to baptism. A new rite of adult baptism has been prepared and the rite of infant baptism has been revised. In the *Ordo Initiationis Christianae Adultorum* (1972), the full initiation (baptism, confirmation, eucharist) of believing adults is presented as the theological and liturgical norm. The restoration of the catechumenate reinforces this perspective.

In the liturgy of baptism, candidates are presented first; then the litany of the saints is prayed. The baptismal water is blessed. A renunciation of Satan, an anointing and a profession of faith follow. The central symbol of baptism is the washing with water and the invocation of the Trinity. Non-verbally, the importance of this rite is communicated by the generous use of water and the care and solemnity with which either immersion or pouring is carried out. After the baptismal washing, additional rites further express the meaning of the sacrament: the presentation of a lighted candle, clothing with a white garment, anointing with chrism. (D. Geernaert)

### **A Salvationist Perspective**

"Of the great Church of the living God we claim, and have ever claimed, that we of the Salvation Army are an integral part and element—a living fruit-bearing branch of the True Vine." So their founders taught; so Salvationists claim today.

Sharing a common experience of spiritual renewal, many of those converted to Christ under the revivalistic ministry of William Booth united, in 1865, in a common mission of evangelism and service to those who had no conscious experience of God's love and grace. This resulted in the birth of The Salvation Army in 1878.

For Salvationists, the Church is composed of all who have responded to God's saving grace, have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord, and have experienced the life-transforming presence of the Holy Spirit. While most Christian fellowships signify entrance into new life through Jesus Christ and union with his people by water baptism, Salvationists do not observe this rite for historical and

theological reasons.

Their rejection by the Victorian churches largely excluded them from participation in the sacraments familiar to them. Their diverse views on the significance of sacraments, their acceptance of female leadership, and their total concentration on evangelism were contributory factors. Their personal appropriation of grace received as they responded to the gospel demonstrated to them that sacramental rites were not essential. Their reading of Scripture convinced them that neither Jesus nor the apostles intended to establish any specific rite as an indispensable means of saving grace.

Realizing the need to celebrate and nurture spiritual realities by appropriate symbolic acts, the first Salvationists signified their desire for conversion, commitment, and communion with God by kneeling in the presence of the congregation at a set place of prayer, as Salvationists still do. Following a period of instruction, the early Salvationists, like those of today, were publicly enrolled as soldiers, as a mark of discipleship, under a flag whose colours are symbolic of the redeeming blood of Christ, the refining fire of the Holy Spirit, and the purity of God. When true to this heritage, the worship of Salvationists is marked by simplicity and sincerity, for they believe that holy, sacrificial living is the essence of genuine spiritual worship in the Church of Jesus Christ. (W Wilson)

### **A Perspective From The United Church**

Baptism is one of the two sacraments in The United Church of Canada and is overseen by the elders and clergy of each pastoral charge. It has traditionally been the first of a three-fold initiation process of baptism, confirmation and first communion. While provision has always been made for adult baptism, the baptism of the children of believers has been more common. This emphasis recalls Jesus' acceptance of children, and signifies the participation of all in the blessings of the New Covenant. To this end, the congregation promises their support as collective sponsors or "god-parents" of the candidates at the time of baptism.

The *Report on Christian Initiation* (1980) and the liturgy, *Baptism and Renewal of Baptismal Faith* (1986), hold to our tradition of "ordered liberty" in worship and reflect current ecumenical understandings. Noteworthy features include:

1. more intentional baptism preparation for candidates and congregation;
2. the continued importance of celebrating baptism during corporate worship with congregational participation through profession of faith;
3. a generous and visible use of water;
4. baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
5. the laying on of hands with prayer for the Holy Spirit;
6. the expectation that one's baptismal vows issue in committed witness to the life and mission of the church, and liturgical reaffirmation of baptismal faith.

Increasingly, United Church practice includes the participation of children at the Lord's Table. This builds upon our long-standing commitment to an "open table," and affirms baptism as the primary rite of initiation. (S. Beardsall & W Kerwin)

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