

SWISS COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

MUTUAL RECOGNITION OF BAPTISM (RIVA SAN VITALE DECLARATION)

1. Historical Introduction

In 1971, the Swiss ecumenical dialogue commissions (the Reformed/Roman Catholic commission and the Old Catholic/Roman Catholic commission) produced a study document entitled "The Problem of Baptism today." It accompanied a brief text produced in the summer of 1973 in which the three national churches (together with the Evangelical-Methodist Church) declared their mutual recognition of baptism, which has now become normal practice among them.

In the meantime, the ecclesiastical situation in Switzerland has changed and become more diverse. Migration has led to various eastern churches becoming part of the ecumenical landscape. In addition, other Christian traditions from the broader area of the Reformation have strengthened their presence and their ecumenical participation in Switzerland. This takes place primarily through the Swiss Council of Churches (Arbeitsgemeinschaft christlicher Kirchen in der Schweiz / AGCK), which currently comprises ten member churches.

In 2008, the AGCK initiated a progressive dialogue to clarify whether, in the light of their own perceptions of baptism, their own practices and their ecumenical insights, its member churches are able to recognize each other's baptism.

The AGCK's executive committee consequently set up a commission composed of members of those churches which had declared their mutual recognition of baptism in 1973. This commission has produced the text below after several sessions and in consultation with representatives of other church traditions represented in the AGCK. It finally became clear that for different reasons, not all member churches could agree to the Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism. Paragraphs 4 and 5 of this document give details of this.

The following AGCK member churches have affirmed their agreement to the Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism: the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, the Swiss Roman Catholic Church, the Swiss Old Catholic Church, the Evangelical-Methodist Church in Switzerland, the Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Switzerland and Liechtenstein, the Church of England Archdeaconry of Switzerland.

These churches have signified their agreement at a formal signing ceremony during an ecumenical celebration of Vespers at Riva San Vitale on 21 April 2014.

2. Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism (Riva San Vitale Declaration)

On 21 January 2005, the churches comprising the Swiss Council of Churches (AGCK) signed the European "Charta Oecumenica" of 2001. They there declare that they are "called together to unity in faith" and even if "fundamental differences in faith are still barriers to visible unity", they commit themselves

"- to follow the apostolic exhortation of the Letter to the Ephesians and persevere in seeking a common understanding of Christ's message of salvation in the Gospel;



- in the power of the Holy Spirit, to work towards the visible unity of the Church of Jesus Christ in the one faith, expressed in the mutual recognition of baptism and in eucharistic fellowship, as well as in common witness and service."

In accordance with this commitment which the churches have entered into with the Charta Oecumenica, the AGCK member churches listed above expressly declare their mutual recognition of baptism in the following text:

"In baptism, people are so united with Jesus Christ, the Son of God and revealer of God's love, that they live in a new reality. In this new birth through God's Spirit the remoteness and separation from God of the sinner is overcome. Having become by grace sons and daughters of God, the baptized are called to show forth and bear witness to the reconciliation of all humanity (cf 2 Cor 5:17-19) which they have experienced. Through participation in the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus, they are incorporated in the church, the fellowship of the body of Christ, in which the baptized of all times and places are united.

As Jesus commanded, baptism is effected in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19-20), accompanied by the sign of immersion or pouring of water. For the individual, it is unique and unrepeatable.

We share this basic understanding of baptism, notwithstanding significant differences in baptismal practice. These arise from the fact that in some churches baptism effected by water and word constitutes the complete liturgical initiation and reception into the community of the church, whereas in others it is only the first part. Further, the need for a personal confession of faith, which a baptismal candidate makes in immediate connection with the rite of baptism, is perceived differently in the individual churches. In some, only those who can make this confession on their own behalf can be baptized; others also baptize small children, who confess through sponsors, parents and godparents. In both cases, the personal confession of faith relates to the confession of faith of the universal church, which is understood as a response to the salvation granted in God's word.

The mutual recognition of baptism is also a recognition of the bond of unity which is grounded on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:4-6). Despite continuing differences in our understanding of church or on questions of faith, baptism binds us into a fellowship (though still imperfect) in the one church of God. In this sense, we express joy for every person who is baptized.

A practical consequence of this is that people who have been baptized in one church should not be rebaptized on joining another one.

In accordance with the universal Lima Declaration of 1982, the participating churches affirm that "our one baptism into Christ constitutes a call to the churches to overcome their divisions and visibly manifest their fellowship."

The subscribed AGCK member churches are invited to note on their baptismal certificates that they have agreed to the 2014 Riva San Vitale Declaration on the mutual recognition of baptism.

3. Commentary

In the ecumenical movement of recent decades, baptism has increasingly been seen as something



that is a basic expression of the visible unity which the churches seek. This is primarily because it is easier to formulate a common understanding of the different church traditions by looking at baptism than by looking, for example, at the church, church ministry or the Lord's Supper. With these, there is still to some extent scope for investigating historical differences, and for questioning whether these differences continue to have sufficient importance to divide the churches. This is less the case with the understanding and practice of baptism. However, the following points can still give rise to questions and differences of opinion, particularly if a person moves from one church to another (3.1-2) or if a child is born (3.3).

3.1 In the current ecumenical context of this country, it should be noted that in certain church traditions, baptism is administered within the context of a church service which goes beyond the rite of water and the accompanying words (the baptismal formula, and often also a confession of faith, which may be in question and answer form or in the form of an affirmation, etc), and which includes a laying on of hands and anointing associated with an invocation of the Holy Spirit, and which concludes with the reception of Holy Communion. This form of initiation, which conforms to a widespread practice of the primitive church and is sometimes referred to as baptism in a wider sense, is found in the traditions of the eastern churches (even for small children) and in the Roman Catholic church (more recently, for adults). Protestant churches also know the practice of adults receiving communion in the same service as their baptism and so completing their incorporation into the church.

Where the sacraments of initiation (or elements of incorporation into the church) of baptism (in the regular, narrower sense), confirmation and first communion are not received at a single service, they are nevertheless regarded as a series of connected and successive steps towards incorporation into the church. Under certain circumstances, it is hence possible that joining another church, while not involving rebaptism in the sense described above, requires elements from the wider initiatory context for full membership of the new church.

The question remains open as to how the teaching of individual churches is connected to the baptismal service in practice or to the wider issue of initiation.

The only requirement is that baptism should be a precondition for participation in the Lord's Supper.

3.2 Within reformed Christendom the question has been repeatedly raised as to whether the biblical view of baptism is compatible with the baptism of small children, who cannot show their turning to the Gospel by a personal act of decision and faith. This does not necessarily challenge the character of baptism as a sacramental gift of God, but rather the compulsory character of membership of the people of God in contrast with the sometimes ineffectual baptismal practice of the major churches. In this respect there is increasing agreement on and recognition of the urgent necessity for catechesis, by the church body or in the case of a child by the parents and godparents, to accompany baptism.

When someone who has been baptized (generally as a child) is received into another church, especially when this reception is in connection with an experience of coming to faith, some other ceremony than baptism should be used.

3.3 Those churches in Switzerland which are and wish to remain national churches (Volkskirchen) recognize the fact that baptism is inseparable from a faith which shows itself in personal practice.



This is not questioned or disputed in the case of baptizing people who have taken the decision for themselves. It is otherwise in the case of small children, especially new-born babies. In the theology of creation, the birth of a child is an event which understandably awakens a desire for God's blessing. The churches remain charged with the task of finding ways of accepting and supporting the associated expectations of the parents and the wider family without diluting the confessional aspect of baptism and its implied consequences for living. Primitive Christianity can teach us anew that baptism and catechuminate go hand in hand; these insights should bear fruit in our current social situation.

3.4 The differences we have noted in the understanding and practice of baptism will not be surmounted from one day to the next with the acceptance of the Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism. However, they will lose their foreign or even divisive character if the churches see initiation and incorporation into the church as something representing a lifelong process and requiring a deepening of faith depending on age and life history and a corresponding growth into the love demanded by Jesus Christ.

From this perspective, the churches can each recognize new aspects for their own understanding and practice of baptism, and thus learn from each other. This will also lead to converging ways to a reform of baptismal practice in the broadest sense.

4 Position statement from the Swiss Baptist Union and the Salvation Army

4.1 Baptists recognize neither a teaching authority nor a set of documents binding on the whole church. They are a congregationalist movement rather than a hierarchically-structured church. Each individual community is ultimately responsible to God and to Holy Scripture. Thus there may be individual Baptists who agree with the above Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism, but there is far from a consensus.

Baptists can agree to the Declaration to the extent that it affirms the relation of conversion and faith to baptism. They cannot reconcile a sacramental understanding of baptism administered to immature children with their understanding of baptism in the New Testament. The former lacks the essential elements of conversion, faith and responsible decision.

However, Baptists respect all who wish to join their church and who regard their baptism as infants as valid. They also recognize the request of anyone who, despite being baptized as a child, requests baptism as an acknowledgement of their faith. For Baptists, this is not a repetition of baptism, no "rebaptism", because according to their conviction a baptism without conversion and faith lacks the determining conditions of New Testament baptism.

A common faith in Jesus Christ unites them, however, beyond a differing understanding of baptism, enabling them to live out a common witness and service in the world. Differences are a salutary impulse to seek together a deeper understanding of the Bible.

At this point in time the Baptists are unable to subscribe to the Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism, but they strive in the ecumenical forum to continue working for the visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ.

4.2 The Salvation Army recognizes the significance of the act of public identification with one's



spiritual family and acknowledging oneself as a member of the people of God. To this end, the Army practises the blessing of young children and the reception of new members. The Army differs from most churches by having no sacraments. It nevertheless respects all who use the sacraments, while holding the conviction that special rites and ceremonies are not necessary for salvation.

Salvationists (members of the Salvation Army) rejoice at the fact that all who belong to Christ are baptized in the Holy Spirit "into one body" (1 Cor 12:13).

The Salvation Army does not subscribe to the Declaration on the Mutual Recognition of Baptism because it does not use this ritual. It nevertheless strives in the ecumenical forum to continue working for the visible unity of the church of Jesus Christ.

5 Situation of the Orthodox Churches in Switzerland

For canon law reasons, the Orthodox Churches of Switzerland, who were involved in the formulation of the Declaration, are not in a position to subscribe to the mutual recognition of baptism. They support the "practical consequence" of a mutual recognition of baptism described above.

Further texts:

- One baptism. Towards mutual recognition. A study text (Faith and Order Paper No. 210), Geneva 2011.
- Taufe. Eine ökumenische Arbeitshilfe. Hg. vom Johann-Adam-Möhler-Institut für Ökumenik in Paderborn und dem Konfessionskundlichen Institut des Evangelischen Bundes in Bensheim, Speyer 2009.
- Ekklesiologische und ökumenische Implikationen einer gemeinsamen Taufe. Eine Studie der Gemeinsamen Arbeitsgruppe der Römisch-Katholischen Kirche und des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen [2004]. Achter Bericht 1999-2006, Genf/Rom 2005, 53-84 [wiederabgedruckt in: Dokumente wachsender Übereinstimmung, Band IV, Paderborn/Leipzig 2012, 1235-1270].
- Die Taufe in evangelischer Perspektive. Hg. vom Schweizerischen Evangelischen Kirchenbund, Bern 2010 / Le baptême selon la vision protestante, éd. par la Fédération des Eglises Protestantes de Suisse, Berne 2010.
- W.Hüffmeier / T.Peck (Hg.), Dialog zwischen der Europäischen Baptistischen Föderation (EBF) und der Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE) zur Lehre und Praxis der Kirchen (Leuenberger Texte 9), Frankfurt a.M., 2005
- M.Beintker u.a. (Hg.), Taufe im Leben der Kirchen. Dokumentation eines orthodox-evangelischen Dialogs in Europa (Leuenberger Texte 12), Frankfurt a.M., 2011
- Bemerkungen des Theologischen Arbeitskreises der Kommission der Orthodoxen Kirche in Deutschland (= KOKiD) zur praktischen Umsetzung der [Magdeburger] Erklärung über die Taufe [<http://kokid.w-srv.net/download/taufanerkennung.pdf>]
- W. Haunerland / E. Nagel (Hg.), Den Glauben weitergeben. Werkbuch zur Kindertaufe, Trier 2008.
- J. Bärsch / A. Poschmann (Hg.), Liturgie der Kindertaufe, Trier 2009
- Arbeitsheft Taufe. Ich bin getauft in eine weltweite Kirche. Vier Ideen zur Vorbereitung und Weiterführung der Taufe, herausgegeben von mission 21, Evangelisches Missionswerk Basel.



Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen der Schweiz (AGCK CH)

Die AGCK CH besteht aus folgenden Mitgliedskirchen:

- Schweizerischer Evangelischer Kirchenbund SEK,
- Römisch-katholische Bischofskonferenz SBK,
- Christkatholische Kirche in der Schweiz,
- Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in der Schweiz,
- Bund Schweizer Baptistentengemeinden,
- Heilsarmee,
- Bund Evangelisch-Lutherischer Kirchen in der Schweiz und im Fürstentum Liechtenstein,
- Orthodoxe Diözese der Schweiz des ökumenischen Patriarchats von Konstantinopel,
- Serbisch-orthodoxe Kirche in der Schweiz,
- Rumänisch-orthodoxe Kirche in der Schweiz,
- Anglikanische Kirche in der Schweiz/ Church of England Archdeaconry of Switzerland.

Gaststatus:

- Freikirche der Siebten-Tags-Adventisten

Die AGCK CH vertritt die christliche Ökumene auf nationaler Ebene in der Schweiz. Basis ihrer Arbeit ist die Charta Oecumenica, die die Mitgliedskirchen 2005 unterzeichnet haben.

Das Präsidium besteht aus kirchenleitenden Personen der Mitgliedskirchen. In der Plenarversammlung kommen zweimal jährlich Delegierte aus allen Mitgliedskirchen zusammen um die Brennpunkte der Ökumene zu diskutieren und gesellschaftspolitische Themen aus christlicher Perspektive zu reflektieren.

Weitere Informationen: www.agck.ch

Das Baptisterium in Riva San Vitale

Das Baptisterium ist das älteste christliche Bauwerk der Schweiz. Es stammt aus dem 5. Jahrhundert und ist Johannes dem Täufer geweiht. Der Innenraum ist ein Oktogon/Achteck. Heute ist dort die mittelalterliche Malerei zu sehen. Sie zeigt Szenen aus dem Leben Jesu.

In der Mitte des Baus befinden sich die beiden Taufbecken. Sie sind übereinander angeordnet: Das erste achteckige Becken ist in den Boden eingelassen. Dieses wurde für die Erwachsenentaufe benutzt. Das zweite runde Taufbecken wurde auf das erste gesetzt. Es ist romanisch und besteht aus einem Monolithen des Serizzo-Steins.

Die Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in der Schweiz AGCK hat dieses Baptisterium bewusst zur Unterzeichnung der gegenseitigen Taufanerkennung ausgewählt. Die verschiedenen Taufbecken aus unterschiedlichen Epochen der Kirchengeschichte bezeugen die Entwicklung der Taufpraktiken während der Jahrhunderte, wie sie sich auch in den Mitgliedskirchen der AGCK niedergeschlagen haben.

