
Baptism into the body of Christ – An exploration of its ecumenical implications¹

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Abstract:

This article takes its starting point from the fact, that among the churches the often quoted notion of “baptism as bond of unity” is still questioned. Especially from those churches which practice believers’ baptism there are doubts, whether we can talk about one baptism. And from the Orthodox churches this notion is questioned, because their requirements for unity are going beyond just baptism. Going back to the biblical idea of ‘one baptism’ in Eph 4 the article shows, that one of the problems is the different interpretation the ‘body of Christ’ and therefore the ecclesiological differences. In order to find a new approach, the author reminds churches, that parts of Eph 4:4-6 can be agreed upon by all, which is ‘one Lord’ and ‘one Spirit’. Practically all churches have reacted to the contradiction that they confess one baptism, but in reality Christians are baptized in different churches. Consequently they are all saying, that the respective others are not totally deprived of God’s grace, but indirectly this means still, that each church is of the opinion, that the others are not quite right. In order to overcome this situation, the author is proposing to read Eph 4:4-6 in the context of the whole paragraph Eph 4: 1-6. Then it becomes clear, that for the apostle unity is closely connected with peace. And peace is based on the four attitudes humility, gentleness, patience and love, which are major virtues of Christian life, as Jesus Christ himself has shown. To live these virtues in the relationship between churches would mean mutual acceptance of the others in their otherness, but also the willingness to learn from the others and to change.

I. One baptism or different baptisms?

„Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity.”² – This is a very bold statement, made about 30 years ago by the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches in the document “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry”. It is a statement, which is meant to describe a so called ‘convergence’, a statement which - according to its authors-, all the churches should be able to say together.

This kind of statement has been repeated very often after the publication of BEM. And it is this conviction which is also expressed in statements like the following made by Cardinal Walter Kasper: “Through common baptism already now a fundamental unity is given. The reflection on the common baptism and on the baptismal confession, which we repeat in every Easter Vigil, is the starting point and the reference point of ecumenism of life.”³ In all these statements we hear about a ‘common baptism’. But before I reflect more on the implications of such ‘common baptism’, I first would like to test and to question this idea. The question we first have to ask, is therefore: Can we really speak of a ‘common baptism’? Would all the churches agree on this?

In order to find an answer to this question, I studied the official responses to BEM once more, with this specific question in mind. And the result is actually rather disturbing: Many

¹ This is a slightly reworked paper given at a colloquium on "La Parole de Dieu appelle à l'unité: Oecuménisme spirituel et responsabilité des Eglises" from 2-3 September 2010 at the monastery of Chevetogne (Belgium).

² BEM, Baptism 6

³ Kasper, *Ökumene des Lebens, Vortrag auf dem Katholikentag 2004 in Ulm. Published under www.foerderverein-unita-dei-cristiani.com/deutsch/index.htm, p.2.* “Durch die gemeinsame Taufe ist schon jetzt eine fundamentale Einheit gegeben. Die Rückbesinnung auf die gemeinsame Taufe und auf das Taufbekenntnis, das wir in jeder Osternachtfeier wiederholen, ist der Ausgangspunkt und der Bezugspunkt jeder Ökumene des Lebens.“ (translation into English DH).

churches seem to affirm the above mentioned statement, although, I have to say, only few churches explicitly mention this paragraph. For the majority of the churches their general positive consent to the whole part of BEM on baptism seems to include also the idea, that through baptism there is already a bond of unity existing between the churches.

But just to give you some examples: Paragraph 6, which I quoted in the beginning, is explicitly mentioned positively in the response of the North Elbian Ev. Lutheran Church (I,41), of the Church of Scotland (I,86), the Disciples of Christ (I,115), the Scottish Episcopal Church (II,51f.), the American Lutheran Church (II,81), the Lutheran Church of Australia (II,88f.), the Church of Norway (II,110), the Church of Sweden (II,126), the Church of England (III,65), the Church in Wales (III,82), the Church of the Province of Southern Africa (III,101), the Ev.-Luth. Church of Finland (III,118), the Missouri Synod (III,134) and the Roman Catholic Church (VI,11) (although it seems to me, that it is not as positive, as Cardinal Kasper in the earlier stated quotation). The Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church stresses even, that “the conception that the unity of the church is created through our common sacrament of baptism (§6) is not accentuated enough” (IV, 43). If we look at this list, we note, that – with the exception of the Roman Catholic Church - these are mainly churches from the Anglican tradition and from the Lutheran tradition.

In order to complete the picture, we also need to note, that there are some important negative responses to the issue of baptism as bond of unity: An Inter-Orthodox Symposium points out, that “the relationship between the unity of the church and baptismal unity” (I, 125) needs further clarification. A similar request we find in the response of the Patriarchate of Antioch (III,2) as well as of the Orthodox Church in America (III,15). And the Romanian Orthodox Church writes: “...the document should...state clearly the relation between church unity and the so-called ‘baptismal unity’, as the Orthodox teaching understands unity in the fullness of the faith and of the seven holy sacraments” (III,6).

On the other hand not only Orthodox churches, but also churches with a believer baptism background have reservations: The Mission Covenant Church of Sweden finds itself “challenged by the emphasis of the document....that Christians through baptism are united with one another and with the church” (II, 318). The Baptist Union of Scotland (III,234f.) is saying: “We have difficulties over §6 (which is the one I quoted in the beginning, DH) where the report naively supposes that there is ‘one baptism’ which forms the basis of the call to unity”. A similar statement we find in the response of the Baptist Union of Denmark (III,248) and also the Baptist Union of Sweden is asking: “Can we earnestly talk about ‘our one baptism’ as long as baptismal practice in a decisive way divides us?” (IV,201).

In summary we can say, that there are two slightly different reservations against the statement of BEM. The Orthodox are questioning it, because in their understanding, unity cannot be based just on baptism. Unity involves the “fullness of faith”, as they say, the consent on the seven ecumenical councils of the first centuries. The Baptists and other churches which practice believers’ baptism on the other hand question the idea, that we have ‘one baptism’, because there are different baptismal practices.

This result is, maybe, not surprising. It confirms, what I have said more than 10 years ago also here in Chevetogne, where I pointed out the different confessional positions towards mutual recognition of baptism. We know about the different practices of infant and believers baptism and we know about the reservations from the side of the Orthodox churches to recognize baptism which is performed outside the borders of the Orthodox Church.⁴ In this sense it is

⁴ Cf. my article Dagmar Heller, *Le baptême, fondement de l'unité des Eglises*, in: *Irénikon* 72/1999, pp.73-93 (reworked German version: “Die Taufe - Grundlage der Einheit oder Ausdruck der Spaltung?” in: *Una Sancta* 2001, pp. 35-44)

not surprising that the negative answers come from those churches, which have in general difficulties to recognize the baptism of other churches. But what might be new, or in other words: what has not been discussed so much until now, is the relationship between baptism and the unity of the church as well as the fact, that the idea of common baptism as a bond of unity is not accepted by all churches.

When we are talking, therefore, about the implications of our common baptism we need to take these reservations serious. For this reason I would like to look at them in more detail.

1. The biblical foundation of 'one baptism'

First of all we need to note that the idea of the one baptism as a bond of unity of the church is not an invention of the ecumenical movement, it is an idea of the Apostle Paul. The two basic texts in this regard are 1 Cor 12:13: "For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we are all made to drink of one Spirit." And Eph 4:4-6: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

The whole chapter of 1 Cor 12 is the famous text, where Paul talks about the many gifts, but one spirit, which he develops then in the image of a body with many members. He stresses there the interrelationship of the different members, each of which has its own task in the whole organism. In verse 13 he mentions baptism as the bond, which makes us all members of this one body. There are obviously different groups existing in the community, and Paul is admonishing them to keep unity (cf. 1 Cor 1:10).

The text in Ephesians has a slightly different context. Historically this text talks about the end of the enmity between Jews and Gentiles, and shows, that both belong together in the church. As Walter Kasper says, since this is the first schism, from which all the later schisms followed, this text can also be understood in reference to the separations among Christians into different confessional traditions: The walls of enmity are taken down.⁵

While 1 Cor is saying in a general way, that through baptism the baptized are united in one body, Eph is saying the same, but grounding this fact even more on the one Lord. In both texts the "body" is not defined directly as the 'body of Christ'. Only from the wider context of both letters, it becomes clear that "body" means the "body of Christ" and thus the church: cf. 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:23; Eph 3:6; Eph 4:12.⁶ In this sense we can say: It is a given, that there is one baptism, which unites believers in the body of Christ, which is the church.

What does it mean then, that some churches question, that we have a 'common baptism' or 'one baptism' and that this would bind us together? The answer is relatively simple: This can only be explained by the fact, that the churches identify just their own ecclesial body with the body of Christ. And this identification is linked with different interpretations of the expression 'body of Christ' in the biblical texts.

2. Different interpretations of the 'body of Christ' in relation to the church

I would like to show these different understandings with a few observations: Orthodox are in general hesitant to give a dogmatic definition of the church⁷ except the formulation in the third article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed: the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. For them the church needs to be experienced. But nevertheless there are some basic lines of Orthodox ecclesiology which give an idea of how Orthodox understand the body-of-Christ-image. One of the first answers Orthodox give when being asked, 'what is the church?' is: the church is a mystery, 'mysterium'. It is a theandric organism. And just to quote

⁵ Walter Kasper, a.a.O., p.1.

⁶ In addition: Texts: Col 1:18: Christ is the head of the body; Eph 5:23

⁷ Anastasios Kallis, Art. Kirche V. Orthodoxe Kirche, in TRE 18, S.252-262.

Anastasios Kallis, a Greek theologian: „Among the images, which the early church used for the explanation of its self-understanding the body-typology of Paul, according to which Christ is the head of the church while she is the body, is the one corresponding best to the mystery of Christian existence...As body and ‘pleroma’ (fullness) of Christ the church represents the continuance of the incarnated logos; she is Christ himself in his fullness, which comprises everything.(...)”⁸ Kallis points out, that this is not just an abstract reflection, but has its basis in the eucharistic experience of the local congregation. Especially the idea, that the church is “the continuance of the incarnated logos” shows, that there is practically an ontological unity between Jesus Christ and the church.

In the Roman Catholic teaching, the church is also understood as „mystery“. It is not just by chance that the first chapter of “Lumen Gentium”, the dogmatic Constitution of the Church at the Second Vatican Council is titled “The Mystery of the Church”. But this mystery is in the first place not described as the body of Christ, but as the “people of God”: “Thus, the Church has been seen as ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’.”⁹ Consequently, the whole second chapter of LG is dedicated to the idea of the ‘people of God’, before the text goes on to more practical questions like the hierarchical constitution of the church, the lay people etc. The image of the body of Christ is one of several biblical images for the church and is therefore explained together with other biblical images with the focus of the believers “being molded in the likeness of him”.¹⁰ What is important, is that “by communicating His Spirit, Christ made His brothers, called together from all nations, mystically the components of His own Body.”¹¹ The church is the mystical body of Christ, created by the Spirit.

A Protestant answer to the question “What is the church?” is a bit more difficult, because there is not just one dogma, but a Lutheran answer would normally refer to Confessio Augustana, Art. 7: “Est autem ecclesia congregatio sanctorum, in qua evangelium pure docetur et recte administrantur sacramenta”. Important is here the starting point which is the “congregatio sanctorum” (in the German version it is the assembly of the believers). Concerning the body-of-Christ-image we find a typical interpretation in the “Dogmatik” of Wolfgang Trillhaas, a German theologian of the mid-20th century: “That the church is one, this follows from the idea of the body of Christ, which is represented by the congregation (1 Cor 12:12ff, esp. 27; Rom 12:4ff.). The Christians are as congregation one body, as individuals members. One must not read more into these statements on the ‘mystical body of Christ’, than what they really contain. Their proper meaning is a parenetic one and not a speculative one: the congregation shall recognize the serving character of the many gifts, given to her.”¹² In other words: the body of Christ is just an image, which has the function to illustrate Paul’s concern about the life of a community. Other Protestant theologians emphasize

⁸ Anastasios Kallis, Art. Kirche V. Orthodoxe Kirche, in TRE 18, S. 252-262, p. 254: „Unter den Bildern, die die Urkirche zur Darlegung ihres Selbstverständnisses verwendet, entspricht dem Mysterium christlicher Existenz am ehesten die paulinische Leib-Typologie, nach der Christus das Haupt der Kirche und sie seinen Leib darstellt (...). Durch diese Parallele erscheint die Kirche eher als Organismus, denn als eine Organisation....Als Leib und ‚Pleroma‘ (Fülle) Christi stellt die Kirche die Fortdauer des inkarnierten Logos dar; sie ist Christus selbst in seiner Fülle, die alles umfasst (...).“ (Transl. into English DH)

⁹ Lumen Gentium, Chapter 1, Art 4.

¹⁰ Art.7

¹¹ Art 7 „tamquam corpus suum mystice constituit.“

¹² Wolfgang Trillhaas, Dogmatik, Berlin/ New York, Walter de Gruyter, 1980, p. 506: „Dass die Kirche eine ist, das ergibt sich aus der Vorstellung vom Leib Christi, den die Gemeinde darstellt (1 Kor 12, 12ff., bes. 27; Röm 12,4ff.). Die Christen sind als Gemeinde ein Leib, im einzelnen Glieder. Man darf in diese Aussagen über den ‚mystischen Leib Christi‘ nicht mehr hineinlesen, als was sie tatsächlich enthalten. Ihr eigentlicher Sinn ist ein paränetischer und kein spekulativer: die Gemeinde soll den Dienstcharakter der ihr verliehenen vielfältigen Gaben erkennen.“ (translation into English DH).

more the fact that the church is the body of Christ¹³, without explaining though, how this has to be understood.

Baptists say, that the church is „the holy society of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, which He founded, of which he is the only Head, and in which He dwells by His Spirit, so that, though made up of many communions, organized in different modes, and scattered throughout the world, it is yet one in Him.“¹⁴ In the explanation of this given by Henry Cook, it becomes clear, that the body of Christ is understood as “picture of the Church”¹⁵, in order to show, that the members with different functions are kept in unity through “the personality that indwells it, co-ordinating, directing and using all the varied members for the fulfillment of the one definite end it sets before itself.”¹⁶ And a Mennonite expresses it in the following way: “The church is first and foremost the gathered community of believers who, on the basis of their personal confession of faith in baptism, have announced their voluntary entrance into the community. As a visible community of disciples, they form the body of Christ.”¹⁷ I think, it is important to note here: It is not the body of Christ, into which the believers are integrated, but they, with their behavior, with their doing or not doing form the body of Christ. This becomes even clearer in to further explanation of the same author: “The congregation is the church’s actual basis and germ cell. No overarching church or state authority is needed. The strongest guiding document is the rule of Christ in Matthew 18:15-20 (this is the text, which speaks about how to admonish a person that has sinned against someone)...It makes obvious the connection between the assembled church and Christ’s presence. This presence is found neither in the sacraments nor in the proclamation of the Word, but is realized in the ethical-practical realm of life. The very being of the community depends on the linkage between the lordship of the head of the church (Christ) and the obedience of the members. The will of Christ is revealed in the assembled community.”¹⁸ Following Christ even in suffering becomes a mark of the church.¹⁹ “If the church is indeed the ‘body of Christ’, then she is the collective expression of the redemptive, self-sacrificial agape of its head.”²⁰ The vision of oneness is expressed in a recent document *Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches*²¹: “The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class. The head of this body is Christ. The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world. The church exists as local bodies of believers and as a worldwide community of faith.”

What seems to me interesting here is the focus on the church as mystical body of Christ in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic understanding, with the nuance, that the Roman Catholic Church seems to understand the notion ‘people of God’ as a clearer description of ‘body of Christ’. Protestants would understand the body of Christ as an image, which is meant to explain on the one hand the differences which exist in a community, on the other hand the close connection of the church, the believers and Christ. In the Mennonite conception, the

¹³ Evangelischer Erwachsenenkatechismus von 1989: “Wenn Paulus die Gemeinschaft der Christen einen Leib nennt, dann ist das nicht bloß ein Vergleich. Die Kirche *ist* wirklich der Leib Christi, die Christen stehen mit Christus in einer realen Lebensgemeinschaft.“, p.900.

¹⁴ Reply of the Baptist Union to the ‘Lambeth Appeal’, 1926, quoted in Henry Cook, *What Baptists Stand for*, The Carey Kingsgate Press: London, ²1953, p.31.

¹⁵ *Ib.*, p.34.

¹⁶ *Ib.*, p.35.

¹⁷ Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community. Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence*, Pandora Press and World Council of Churches Publications, Geneva 2007, p. 102.

¹⁸ *Ib.*, p.103.

¹⁹ *Ib.*, p.154.

²⁰ *Ib.*, p.160.

²¹ Winnipeg MB Canada & Hillsboro KS USA: Kindred Productions, 1999, Art. 6.

perspective is clearly focused on the local congregation. In contrast to the Roman Catholic view, it is not Christ who forms the body, but the believers form the body of Christ.

This leads to a further, interesting difference: Protestants and to a certain degree Catholics, who understand the body of Christ more as an image for the different functions and their belonging together within an organism, distinguish between the visible and the invisible church. I.e. the visible church, existing on earth is not totally identical with the invisible church. On the other hand there is a certain parallel between the Orthodox tradition and the tradition of believers' baptism churches: Both understand the body of Christ as – if I may say so – ontologically present in their respective church. The difference is, that for the Orthodox this is visible in the sacraments and in the structure of the church, for the Mennonites f.ex. it is visible in the ethical dimension of the life of the believers. The church and its unity, therefore, is something visible. Both the Orthodox as well as the Anabaptists of the 16th century reject the notion of 'invisible church',²² which includes the danger of a certain exclusivism.

This was just to show briefly, that there are different understandings of the body of Christ in relation to the church. Consequently the understanding of the relationship between baptism and the church are also different. For some baptism into the body of Christ means the incorporation into Christ in a mystical way, which means, the believer is beginning a journey of 'deification', theosis, becoming more and more like God. For others baptism into the body of Christ means becoming a member of the community of believers. And again for others baptism into the body of Christ means a personal decision and confession, that one wants to become a member of the community of believers.²³

Thus the question, whether baptism is a bond of unity is closely related with ecclesiology. And I think, I don't need to go deeper into the ecclesiological differences, because it is well known, that in ecclesiology we find the crucial obstacles in the ecumenical discussions. But I would like to remind us briefly: In summary we can say, there are mainly two different types of ecclesiology. Some distinguish between visible and invisible church. In this case the borders of the body of Christ are wider than the borders of a particular church. For others, this differentiation between visible and invisible church does not exist. Therefore they identify themselves exclusively with the body of Christ.

II. Towards Mutual Recognition

1. Achievements of the Ecumenical Movement

Latest with the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement in the 20th century the churches discovered, that there is a contradiction between the fact that they confess the One church, but that in reality there are many churches existing. In other words: it is the contradiction that all the churches believe and teach, that baptism is the incorporation into the body of Christ, but in fact we baptize in different confessional churches.

We can say that in the past to a certain extent practically all the churches somehow identified just their own church with the body of Christ. But with the growing co-existence of different Christians in one and the same place, this situation is raising serious questions. All the

²² Cf. for the Orthodox: Basic Principles of the Attitude to Non-Orthodox, Par. 2.4, www.mospat.ru/en/documents/attitude-to-the-non-orthodox/ii/ For the Anabaptists: Walter Unger, The Church "Without Spot or Wrinkle": Testing the Tradition, www.directionjournal.org/article/?1329: "Anabaptists rejected the concept of an invisible church, teaching that the body of Christ is made concrete in the visible, localized community of faith..."

²³ I deliberately did not identify these different understandings of baptism with confessional positions, because they are not always clearly to be identified with only one position.

churches in the ecumenical movement are struggling with this problem. I would like to give you a rough overview, on how they try to solve it:

- Orthodox: From the Orthodox Church in general the answer is, that the question, in how far non-Orthodox churches are related to the body of Christ is a question which can only be solved by an Ecumenical Council. Therefore there are no clear statements, whether f.ex. Protestant churches are churches or not. As the Russian Orthodox Church stated in a document in the year 2000 "The Orthodox Church is the true Church of Christ established by our Lord and Saviour Himself..."²⁴ Consequently "salvation can be attained only in the Church of Christ (i.e. the Orthodox Church, DH)."²⁵ But "at the same time however, communities which have fallen away from orthodoxy have never been viewed as fully deprived of the grace of God. Any break from communion with the Church inevitably leads to an erosion of her grace-filled life, but not always to its complete loss in these separated communities. This is why the orthodox Church does not receive those coming to her from non-orthodox communities only through the sacrament of baptism. In spite of the rupture of unity, there remains a certain incomplete fellowship which serves as the pledge of a return to unity in the Church, to catholic fullness and oneness."²⁶

- For the Roman Catholic Church it is the Second Vatican Council which dealt with this question in the Decree on Ecumenism. There we read in the first chapter "...men who believe in Christ and have been truly baptized are in communion with the Catholic Church even though this communion is imperfect. But differences that exist...do indeed create many obstacles...to full ecclesiastical communion... But even in spite of them it remains true that all who have been justified by faith in Baptism are members of Christ's body, and have a right to be called Christian, and so are correctly accepted as brothers by the children of the Catholic Church."²⁷

- Protestants distinguish the visible and the invisible church²⁸, which gives the opportunity to understand the borders of the church as wider than the borders of the own confessional church. Article 7 of the Confessio Augustana, which I quoted earlier already gives the basis for an understanding of the church being everywhere, "where the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered". Presently most Protestants –at least in Europe – would see the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe, the former Leuenberg Fellowship as their model for unity, which means that they would expect other churches to join this model.

- For the churches which practice believers' baptism I would like to quote the following: "The oneness of the Church is a matter of importance for Mennonite churches' self-understanding. The Apostle Paul's appeal to the churches to "mak[e] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*Eph* 4:3) is understood by Mennonites to apply first and foremost to a spirit of unity within each local church. This entails the personal aspiration of peace with God as well as mutual love and care for one another in the community of faith. The universal calling - to affirm and confess "one body," "one Spirit," "one hope," "one Lord," "one faith," "one baptism," and to worship "one God" with singular devotion (*Eph* 4:4-6) – remains a challenge that Mennonite churches aspire to and desire to take seriously. While in Mennonite

²⁴ Basic Principles of Attitude to the non-Orthodox, www.mospat.ru/en/documents/attitude-to-the-non-orthodox/i/ Par. 1.1

²⁵ *Ib.*, 1.15

²⁶ *Ib.*

²⁷ Decree on Ecumenism, Art. 3.

²⁸ Cf. f.ex. the document of EKD "Kirchengemeinschaft nach evangelischem Verständnis, EKD-Texte No. 69, 2001, chapter 2.2.

practice the unity of the Church centres initially on relationships within the local church, a spirit of oneness and mutual communion is also fostered between congregational units and within the larger body of Christ (regional and national churches, conferences, assemblies, Mennonite World Conference). In many sectors of the MWC family of churches there is today a widening quest for oneness with other denominations and world communions.²⁹

Thus we can state, that all the traditions realize, that other churches are not just outside of the body of Christ, although the connection is incomplete.

At the same time, looking at this overview, we realize that there is still a big problem in these statements about the respective other churches. They are very vague about the ecclesial status of the others. And it seems that each of these statements still is focusing on the respective own church as the 'right' one. So the question remains: What about the others?

2. Starting point: One Lord – One Spirit

I would like to propose a way forward by looking again at Eph 4, 4-6:

If we read this text together, we could say the following: There are maybe doubts, whether we really have only one baptism, and whether baptism is the basis of unity. In practice we baptize into confessional churches. Thus the question is, whether there is only one body of Christ. But there is no doubt, that we refer to one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, whom we know from the Scriptures of the New Testament, in other words through the witness of the apostles and disciples. Although we might have different understandings about how the 'body of Christ' is to be understood, we all confess, that that we are baptized into this body. And all understand that this means a close connection with Jesus Christ. The faith in Christ as our Lord is, therefore, an important starting point. And I would even say: If we cannot recognize, that we all are named Christians, then we should stop the work in the ecumenical movement.

But referring to Eph 4 again, we see, that the text does not speak only about Christ as the one Lord, but also about one Spirit. If we can agree on the link between Christ and all those, who call themselves Christians and therefore refer to this one Lord, then we should also be able to accept, that Christ with his Spirit is working within Christians. The question, which all the churches have to ask themselves, is therefore: Can we see, that the Spirit is at work also in other churches? One Lord and One Spirit – this means, that there is a possibility of the Spirit's work, which is independent from our thoughts, which might be different from our thoughts. In a way the beginning of the ecumenical movement has to do with the fact, that churches and individuals started to understand, that the Spirit is also working in other churches. The ecumenical movement itself is a movement of the Holy Spirit. Here I just would like to quote H.H. Aram I., Catholicos of the See of Antelias of the Armenian Apostolic Church: "I used to participate ...in the various activities related to *The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity*". For the first time in my life I came to witness how people from different churches gather to pray and reflect together, and seek together the unity of the church. This very fact of togetherness struck me profoundly...Nobody had to tell me that the ecumenical movement was a movement of the Holy Spirit. I discovered it myself through my own experience."³⁰ Christ and his Spirit are at the beginning of the ecumenical movement.

²⁹ This is from a text of a Mennonite delegation "addressed to the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the occasion of a church-to-church visit." See www.mwc-cmm.org.

³⁰ Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia, In Search of Ecumenical Vision, Antelias, Libanon: Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia 2000, p.3.

3. Baptism – a life-long process

After these more general ecclesiological and theological reflections I would like to come back to the specific issue of baptism.

If we are talking about baptism into the body of Christ, we are in danger of staying with a static idea, as if there was the body of Christ – the church – and through baptism another member is added to it. In the ecumenical movement in the discussions about baptism we have made a step forward. We have learnt to understand baptism as a process. As BEM has pointed out, baptism should be understood as a life-long process.³¹ But in the responses to BEM there is not much echo to the idea of baptism as life-long process.³² Therefore Faith and Order began to explore and develop this idea further. The report of a consultation in 1997 says: “An important ecumenical question is, ‘What are the criteria for mutual recognition of baptism?’ In the past many have proposed theological criteria for such recognition. But baptism is more than doctrine alone. In this consultation we have sought to identify criteria which arise from baptism as rite and pattern of life. This way of thinking we call *ordo*, by which we mean baptism as call to life in Christ and map for pilgrimage to Christ’s new creation.”³³ And this ‘ordo’ is explained in the following way: “By *ordo* is meant ‘the undergirding structure which is to be perceived in the ordering and scheduling of the most primary elements of Christian worship’, an ordering ‘which roots in word and sacrament held together’.”³⁴ Applied to baptism, “this *ordo* of Christian worship includes the great outline of baptism, understood as ‘formation in faith and baptizing in water together, leading to participation in the life of the community.’”³⁵ Or in the words of the Lutheran theologian Gordon Lathrop: “The baptismal ‘ordo’ includes “two things, ‘formation in faith’ and ‘water-washing’, side by side, leading to a third thing, ‘participation in the life of the community’.”³⁶ “These linked actions of baptism are seen by that report as part of the ancient yet ever-new patterns which the churches already possess, which they are invited to recognize in each other and renew in themselves.”³⁷ The idea is, that, focusing on the basic common pattern, called ‘ordo’ churches would be able to recognize each other’s baptism, because this ‘ordo’ makes clear, that the three elements are so closely interlinked, that they cannot be lined up in a specific ordering, but that there is a flexibility in whether the water rite comes at the beginning, in the middle or even at the end of the Christian life, because it cannot be separated from the other two elements, i.e. the formation in faith, which goes on during the whole life-time as well as the participation in the life of the community, which begins in fact before the water event.

The idea of baptism as life-long growth was then further explored in 2008 in a study text, which so far is only published in the minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order under the title “One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition. A Study Text”³⁸. The text says: “Within this diversity the churches have discerned three elements which encompass the

³¹ BEM, Baptism Par.9

³² Positive responses from North Elbian Evangelical Lutheran Church, (I,41); Church of England (III,35); Baptist Union of Scotland (III,236): “We need to explore the lifelong implications of baptism and not to treat it as a one-off historical event in a believer’s pilgrimage.”

³³ Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of our common baptism. Report of the Consultation, in: Thomas F. Best/Dagmar Heller (eds.), Becoming a Christian, Geneva: WCC Publications 1999, pp. 74-97, p. 76.

³⁴ *Ib.*, p.78

³⁵ *Ib.*, p.78.

³⁶ Gordon Lathrop, The Water that Speaks, in: Thomas F. Best/Dagmar Heller (eds.), Becoming a Christian. The Ecumenical Implications of our Common Baptism, Faith and Order Paper No. 184, Geneva: WCC Publications 1999, p. 13-29, p. 17.

³⁷ Becoming A Christian. P.78.

³⁸ This text has been finalized by the Standing Commission on Faith and Order only in 2010, but the final – slightly revised version is not yet publishes. Therefore I refer to the previous one it in this paper, in order to show the ongoing discussion in Faith and Order.

believer's full incorporation into Christ: (1) formation in faith, (2) baptism and Christian initiation..., and (3) participation in the life of the Christian community, fostering life-long growth into Christ."³⁹ It is important to note here, that the three elements are deliberately not understood as three events that would follow each other, but especially formation in faith and participation in the life of the Christian community are related to the whole life of believers. The water event as a single event can happen at any stage of life, but it is liturgically referring to all the three. Therefore the text says: "Formation includes preaching and teaching about the faith of the church, and the appropriation of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of the Christian life before and after the act of baptism."⁴⁰ The water rite is described as "the central symbolic act within the whole process of Christian initiation..."⁴¹ It means that "the newly baptized are fully integrated into Christ and the church, and set to continue on their process of life-long growth into Christ."⁴² "The act of baptism is a new beginning; it marks a particular point on the journey with Christ and into Christ....The baptized...must seek above all to grow in faith, and to become what they are: the children of God (...). The reality of baptism needs to be lived out as a daily experience;..."⁴³ The text is speaking of "nurture in faith", that has to be provided by the local church. This includes not only Sunday schools or other education programmes, but is understood as a "function of the whole worshipping assembly".⁴⁴

On this background mutual recognition of baptism is seen as an "acknowledgement of apostolicity in the other"⁴⁵. "Thus recognition of baptism involves: 1) discerning the apostolicity of the rite itself. The elements of the rite - proclamation, profession of faith, thanksgiving, the use of water, the triune name – function as signs of the *common faith* which Christians through the ages share. In particular, the use of water and the triune name of God as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is regarded by many if not most communions as the heart of the baptismal rite. ...

2) discerning apostolicity in the larger pattern of Christian initiation. In many Christian churches there is a rich pattern of initiation which includes formation in faith, baptism in water (and in some cases chrismation and/or the laying on of hands), leading to eucharistic communion.

3) discerning apostolicity in the ongoing life and witness of the church which baptises and forms the new Christian."⁴⁶

But Faith and Order in this text also recognizes the still existing difficulties: "Baptism, however, always occurs in a particular local church which shares in a specific confessional identity...But the local churches are, in too many cases, not in full communion with one another. This results in a paradox: while baptism brings Christians into the unity of Christ's body, which is one, the location of baptism within a specific confessional body means that the baptized experience disunity with many other Christians....In some cases churches recognize a Christian from another tradition as a baptized person, but recognize neither the baptism of the person's church nor the church itself. The question poses itself: is this possible ecclesologically, given that we are always baptized not only into Christ, but in a particular church?"⁴⁷

³⁹ Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order in Cairo, 2008, Faith and Order Paper No.208, pp.72-101, p.84, par. 42.

⁴⁰ *Ib.*, § 43, p.84.

⁴¹ *Ib.*, §44, p.84.

⁴² *Ib.*, § 47, p.85.

⁴³ *Ib.*, §49, p.85.

⁴⁴ *Ib.*, §51f.

⁴⁵ *Ib.*, § 14.

⁴⁶ *Ib.*

⁴⁷ *Ib.*, §58f., p.87.

III. Final Reflections

During this paper I tried to focus on the text of Eph 4, which I quoted in the beginning as one of the important biblical texts combining baptism and unity. Cardinal Kasper says: "If we take the letter to the Ephesians seriously, we cannot imagine, easily to be able to jump over these walls and ditches or to be able to pretend, that they are not existing. We only can overcome them in the power of the Spirit of Pentecost. We will make progress in ecumenism only if we unfold the new life which was given to us in baptism, to let it grow and ripen."⁴⁸

With this in mind, I would like to offer some more reflections on The Ephesians text. Normally in the context of ecumenical discussions we tend to take only Eph. 4:4-6. But it is worthwhile to take the whole passage of vv. 1-6, which belong together:

"I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

These words of Paul are an appeal and an admonition "to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (v.1). The question is: Can we understand this as an appeal to us today? Under this aspect I would like to try to interpret this text in the following way:

Central in this appeal to live a life worthy of your calling is "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace". Unity, thus, belongs centrally to the calling of Christians. And central for unity is peace. How to live in peace? For Paul, peace is not just an abstract idea, but something very practical and concrete. Peace can be achieved, according to him, through humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (v.2)

In the discussions on unity within the ecumenical movement and the discussions on how to achieve unity we discuss normally dogmatic questions on how to understand the eucharist, or the two natures of Christ, or the church. We concentrate on vv. 4-6, which are, according to exegetes, a kind of acclamation.⁴⁹ But if we read them in the context of the whole passage, we realize, that the content of the one body is peace, and that peace is possible through humility, gentleness, patience, love. It seems to me, that these four 'virtues' describe what it means to be a Christian, or in other words, they describe the ethical consequences of baptism.

We need to explore, therefore, what these four attitudes mean for the search for unity, for the ecumenical dialogue. Here I can only give some hints, limited to two of the four 'virtues':

- We know, that love is a central category for Christian life, and that the commandment of love is central in the Gospel. Love in the Gospel is not related to sentimentality. Love means to take the other serious, to be engaged in a relationship with the other, to care for the other, but also to accept the other as he/she is. What does this mean for the theological dialogue in the search for unity? Would it not mean in the first place to accept the other despite the differences? Would it not mean to take the others serious in their different way of thinking and believing? But, it would also mean, to discuss the differences in an open and honest way.

⁴⁸ Kasper(S.2) Wenn wir den Epheserbrief ernst nehmen, können wir uns nicht einbilden, diese Mauern und Gräben

leicht hin überspringen zu können oder so tun zu können als gäbe es sie nicht. Wir können sie nur in der Kraft des Geistes von Pfingsten überwinden. Wir kommen in der Ökumene nur weiter, wenn wir das in der Taufe geschenkte neue Leben zur Entfaltung bringen, es wachsen und reifen lassen.

⁴⁹ Cf. Joachim Gnllka, Der Epheserbrief, HThKNT, Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, ³1982, p. 200.

- The other important notion is 'humility'. Humility is also a central category in the Gospel, as it is expressed in the best way in the letter to the Philippians: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus: who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross." (Phil. 2: 5-8) What does this mean for the theological dialogue in the search for unity? Would it not mean to reckon with the possibility that the same Spirit is at work also in other churches? Would it not mean, to reckon with the possibility, that the others with their different understanding of baptism, of church etc. could also be true?

I am aware of the fact, that this may sound a bit naïve as if every group and sect should be accepted and recognized. But this is not, what I mean. I am not calling for an ecumenism where people are just friendly with each other. I am calling for an ecumenism, which takes serious the specific Christian values, which we learn from Christ himself, such as humility, gentleness, patience and love, all of which are not meant in a sentimental sense.

It seems to me, that these four 'virtues' are at the same time criteria. Sects, for example, are groups, which are exclusive. Exclusiveness does not go together with Christian love and humility. In other words: It might be worthwhile to explore the possibility of criteria, which are not just specific dogmatic statements and specific formula – always on the common ground of the One Lord and the One Spirit as we have it in the Scripture and confess it in the Creed – but criteria which are related to the specific Christian attitude towards the others.