

Learning from one another – believing together

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4,5)

Convergence Document

of the

Bavarian Lutheran-Baptist Working Group

(BALUBAG)

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1. Introduction

The Bavarian Lutheran-Baptist Working Group (BALUBAG) is submitting this convergence document as its final report after six years of intensive theological dialogue.

The Working Group was appointed according to the decisions of the church office of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria (EKLB) and of the leaders of the Bavarian regional association belonging to the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG) and met for the first time on March 27th 2003.

The starting points were the good ecumenical relationships also at the level of the church authorities, the encouraging conversations between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF), as well as the mandate contained in the Charta Oecumenica for more regional inter-church encounters and doctrinal conversations. The Working Group was appointed in consultation with the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD), the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and the Presidium of the BEFG.

Traditionally, Lutherans and Baptists have been divided by their understanding of baptism and ecclesiology. These different conceptions have resulted in different ways of shaping the life of the church. The differences have resulted in tangible conflict in the past, especially when a person¹, who had already been baptised as an infant, requested baptism as an adult in a local Baptist church.

In order to deal thoroughly and appropriately with the traditionally controversial issues, we began by examining our understandings of the message of justification. On that basis, we then looked at the doctrine of ecclesiology and the forms of ministry and service. We discussed the doctrine and practice of baptism and holy communion on the basis of the degree of consensus reached at that point.

The report which follows documents the outcome of the processes of our dialogue and the possible consequences for the relations between Baptists and Lutherans.

After a careful examination of the doctrinal formulations, we were able to note *a fundamental agreement on the interpretation of the Gospel with regard to all essential questions*. By means of precise reflection on past conflicts over the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper, we were able to formulate proposals which led to achieving a *basic consensus on what the Gospel teaches about the forms of baptism and holy communion*.

We therefore *recommend to our churches that they should enter into pulpit and altar fellowship*.

¹ Wherever possible, gender neutral expressions will be used.

2. The hermeneutics of the Baptist-Lutheran dialogue

2.1. The foundation for the dialogue

Encounters between Baptists and Lutherans are made difficult by historical experiences which were marked over a long period by a mutual lack of respect in their relationships and by persecution of the Baptists. A dialogue to open doors for the future can therefore only begin with conscious recollection and mutual forgiveness.

The Working Group identified itself with paragraphs 103 and 104 of the “Report of the Joint Commission of the Baptist World Alliance and the Lutheran World Federation” (1990).

“(103) Lutherans recognize and deplore that the condemnations against the Anabaptists have contributed to discrimination against today’s Baptists, and they beg forgiveness. The situation requires continuing vigilance to prevent such violations of fundamental Christian fellowship.

“(104) Baptists recognize and deplore an attitude of superiority which overlooks the spiritual treasure God has produced within the Lutheran churches. There have been unfair and distorted depictions of other churches. And for this they beg forgiveness.”²

The condemnations in the Lutheran confessions do not reflect either the Baptist position of the past or that of today.

The Baptist teaching does not see itself as a direct descendant from the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century. Baptists – especially in Germany – have been much more strongly influenced by the revival movement of the 19th century.

As religious movements, the Baptists and the Lutherans were not originally immediate competitors or opponents; they evolved at different times in different centuries and each developed its own confessional expression. The direct counterpart to the Baptist movement in the 17th century was not Lutheranism but the Anglican state church.

As far as the condemnations in the Lutheran confessions are concerned, agreement exists that there is no direct theological or historical continuity between the Anabaptists of the 16th century and the Baptists of today. In this sense, it is inappropriate to judge Baptist teaching only on the basis of the condemnations from the 16th century.

2.2. The method of the dialogue

The Working Group began by agreeing on how it would work and the method it would use. It adopted a process which was new in ecumenical dialogues. One side continued to present the theological convictions of the other party until the party described felt that it had been rightly understood. In this way, each party entered into the linguistic and conceptual practice and sensitivities of the other tradition. This mutual adoption of approaches made it possible to discover and do justice to the strengths of the other tradition. In this way, distorted views and burdensome confessional misunderstandings were avoided to a large extent. In an atmosphere of respectful goodwill, each side was then free to perceive the specific characteristics of its own tradition self-critically as well. Thus confessional differences were also recognised as an

² Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II* (1982-1998), Geneva 2000, p.174.

enrichment of the Christian life and the participants were able to learn from one another. By listening together to the Gospel in the witness of Holy Scripture, all the participants discovered that they were profoundly related in their mandate to witness to this Gospel for the present and the future. That determined the process for the specific stages as the Working Group proceeded.

The classical controversial, theological positions were examined to identify their original concerns, contemporary significance and how their intentions influence practice.

For the concerns which one side considered essential theological equivalents or analogies were sought on the other side. The Working Group paid special attention to statements which drew clear lines of distinction between the parties and examined the intentions behind them. The aim here was to clarify whether the concerns in the lines of distinction could also be expressed in some other way.

The question of the contemporary importance of certain theological convictions revealed many points of similarity in doctrinal statements which had caused clear divisions in the past. In faithfulness to their origins, both traditions have undergone further historical development, always trying to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ anew for their particular historical situation. This historical examination of the different confessions deepened our mutual understanding.

The decisive recognition was that theological insights must not only be seen in relation to their concerns and their history; they also always relate to the interpretation and solution of practical problems. Therefore the Working Group investigated to which problems of church practice specific theological doctrines had responded in each case and how this had affected church practice. It then proceeded to ask how the other party saw the practical problems in theological terms. This approach also produced important new insights into the theological thinking of the other side. For this process, it proved extremely helpful that the theologians participating came from both the academic field and local church work.

As a result, the Working Group defined what its members were able to witness and state jointly. Then the Group examined the controversial points to see whether they should be considered church divisive in the light of this basic consensus. It then went on to seek concrete recommendations for how its joint insights could be applied to church practice.

2.3. The normative authorities for the dialogue

Holy Scripture witnesses to the gospel of Jesus Christ who loves all people, justifies and sanctifies them and calls them to follow him. Therefore Baptists and Lutherans base themselves on the Holy Scriptures alone as the source of the church's doctrine and practice.

In the Lutheran confessions, Lutherans find an appropriate formulation in the language and context of the 16th century of what, for them, constitutes the essence and core of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But, in doing so, the Lutheran side does not understand its confessions as a norm equal to the Bible but rather as a hermeneutical guide which repeatedly leads them back to the Scriptures and which is subject to Scripture (*norma normata*).

Baptists also have confessional writings but they do not understand them in the same way as normative reference documents but rather as a fundamental guide for Baptist belief.

By listening together to the witness of the Scriptures, Baptists and Lutherans come to understand their different traditions of faith and doctrine as interpretations of the same Holy Scriptures common to both.

2.4. The reception of previous dialogues in the framework of the present dialogue

The Working Group received previous dialogues with the aim of gratefully appreciating what had already been achieved and continuing the work critically on this basis.

The agreement on mutual recognition between the Waldensians, Methodists and Baptists in Italy (1990)³ provided the Working Group with helpful suggestions, e.g. the question of church fellowship developing in practical life contexts and that of the “nature of baptism” which becomes evident in its “fruits” irrespective of the form of baptism practised. We are grateful for the fellowship which has been achieved in Italy between the Waldensians, Methodists and Baptists and see this as an encouraging sign of what is ecumenically possible. In the approach described there of putting the “fruits of faith” in the place of baptism as a kind of “*nota ecclesiae*”, we nevertheless see a danger of inappropriately reducing faith to ethics in a way which does not solve the theological problems.

Along similar lines to the results of the dialogue between the VELKD and the Mennonites (1989-1992), there was also agreement on the following points.

Baptists and Lutherans “agree on the Reformation emphasis on the Pauline insight into the justification of the sinner by grace alone through faith. In this, they do not understand justification only as trusting God and receiving God’s judgement which declares them justified; they also relate God’s justifying work to the process of the renewal of the human being. Justification always also implies being made just and this liberates human beings to act justly.”⁴

On the question of baptism, we agree with some of the essential statements in the dialogue results: faith and baptism are inseparably connected and baptism is unrepeatable. Even though there are differences in the emphasis on the temporal sequence of promise and demand, we agree that the aim of baptism as God’s gift is the response by the person baptised. Baptism is incorporation into the body of Christ and into a specific local church.

In addition, the dialogue between the VELKD and the Mennonites offers the following recommendations for practice: baptism should not be granted if no connection exists or can be expected between the act of baptism and teaching or a congregation; the personal conviction about baptism of the candidate for baptism should be respected.

However, this shift towards subjectivity in the understanding of baptism is not considered by either Lutherans or Baptists to be a sufficient way to solve the problem. On the Baptist side, baptism is understood not only as a subjective public confession by an individual but also as God’s work.

³ Agreement on mutual recognition between the Waldensian, Methodist and Baptist Churches in Italy (1990), in: Cornelia Nussberger (ed.), *Wachsende Kirchengemeinschaft. Gespräche und Vereinbarungen zwischen evangelischen Kirchen in Europa*, Bern 1992, 155-167.

⁴ Report on VELKD-Mennonite Dialogue 1989 to 1992, in: *Texte aus der VELKD 53/1993*, 6.

3. Justification and discipleship

3.1. The sinful human being

The New Testament emphasises that all people are sinful and need redemption through Jesus Christ (Rom 3,23).

However, sin in this connection is not a moral category; it means separation from God. At the same time, it is a force which transcends the individual, in which all persons are entangled with their whole being and from which nobody can escape of their own strength.

Our traditions have different views on whether it is appropriate to explain or describe this situation by using the term “original sin”.

The matter at stake in the teaching about original sin, according to the Lutheran view, is that human beings have a radical need for redemption and are completely dependent on Christ.

The Baptists share the Lutheran concern but have greater reservations about the term “original sin” which has often led in the history of dogmas to an ontologising of the understanding of sin which they find problematic.

The Working Group noted that the conception of original sin criticised in this way does not reflect Lutheran teaching.

3.2. The justified human being

The gospel witnesses that human beings are justified without any merit of their own solely through God’s grace by virtue of the salvation wrought by Christ.

Clarification is needed on the question of the way in which we can speak of the capabilities of the justified sinner.

According to the Lutheran understanding, the justified sinner is “*simul iustus et peccator*” which means therefore that there is *no temporal sequence* from the sinful to the justified human being. It must be stated that this justified sinner as such always remains a sinner. However, *in Christ* the sinner is a new creature and is considered by God to be justified. The sinner belongs to God’s new world already now and enjoys the freedom of being a Christian.

The Baptist position, on the other hand, emphasises God’s creative work in justified sinners. “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (II Cor 5,17). Although the justified are still subject to “trespasses” because they are susceptible to temptation, they are no longer sinners because, even when they do wrong, they are no longer separated from God (Rom 5,8).

Together we affirm:

- The pardoned sinner never falls from justification. When a person is in communion with God, sin has no power to separate them from God. Nevertheless, “transgressions” (Gal 6,1) continue to be a painful reality for the justified as well.
- In this sense, the justified person is “*simul iustus et peccator*”. Christians are no longer sinners to the extent that it is God who has acted “by grace through faith in Jesus Christ” to overcome the separation once for all.

- Christians continue to be sinners in the sense that they repeatedly experience their infidelity in relation to God's fidelity.

3.3. Defining the relationship between justification and discipleship

In the New Testament, a person who is justified is equally a person called to discipleship. The expression "discipleship" contains something of the metaphor of the way found in the spirituality of the synoptic Gospels; it conveys the idea of imitating and learning from Christ.

In the Baptist tradition, this is expressed as a wish that Jesus may take shape in one's own life, influencing and perfecting one's own way through life. Faith can and should mature along this path.

The Lutheran side recognises the Baptist concerns in its own tradition as well, but rejects any ontological change brought about by faith, thereby underlining that people who have been justified remain dependent on grace. For this reason, Lutherans do not speak of growing in faith in order to avoid the misunderstanding either of a growing ontological change or of gradual salvation.

But the rejection of an ontological understanding of justification does not imply that the Lutheran side denies any process character of faith. However, Lutherans are unable according to their fundamental theological conviction to describe this process as "growth" because this term could imply a "higher development" of faith. The motivation for such a process is the recognition that the gift of faith has not yet been fully grasped and that even believers have not fully reached what is possible and are constantly "pressing on" (Phil 3,12). For Lutherans, too, the Christian life is a path along which it is important to entrust oneself increasingly to the justifying grace of God. Along this path, an "increase in wisdom and insight" is possible which makes the believers increasingly aware of their own needs but thus also that they are safe and secure with God.

The Baptist emphasis on the transformation ("new creation") of the person who has come to faith in Jesus Christ does not mean that this can only be understood as an ontological change. The change is brought about solely through and in the relationship reestablished by God through grace alone⁵, so it must be understood in relational terms.

Believers have the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. There is a consensus that the workings of the Holy Spirit should not be misunderstood to mean that the Holy Spirit becomes subject to human disposal when faith begins. On the contrary, the giving of the Holy Spirit is a divine activity beyond human control which imparts the assurance of salvation and comfort and on which believers continue to depend throughout their lives. In all that they say and do, believers can hope for the support of the Holy Spirit.

Together we note:

- Since Jesus Christ has done everything necessary for human salvation, the believers have been liberated to do what is necessary out of love in each situation. The assumption of an ontological change in the justified is not necessary for this new freedom.

⁵ "Relationship with God" or "relationship with Jesus" are central issues in Baptist spirituality.

“Good works do not make good people but a good person does good works,” (Martin Luther)⁶.

3.4. Consensus concerning the doctrine of justification

During the dialogue, both sides recognised that the concerns of the one side always also related to aspects on other side. This means that the common convictions about the doctrine of justification go deeper than the different formulations by the two traditions have led us to believe in the past.

Lutherans and Baptists agree that the salvation wrought by Jesus Christ is transmitted through the word of the gospel which promises the grace of Christ and forgiveness of sins. According to the biblical witness, this word expects a response of faith. However, in this respect, there are differences of emphasis between Lutherans and Baptists.

The Baptists underline the subjective dimension of appropriating salvation which takes place by receiving the word in faith and is expressed in a life lived according to the faith.

The Lutheran confessions set great store by the objective reception of salvation in the word of God that is proclaimed and brings about faith through its creative power, while the sacraments, as the bodily form of the word of God, are seen as providing assurance.

These different emphases, which reflect the classical issues of justification and sanctification, together with God's unique power to act and human freedom to decide, are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Lutherans affirm that the word which is proclaimed does not leave people unchanged and its aim is grateful acceptance which – provided infant baptism has been administered – will be expressed in such events as confirmation, baptismal renewal or other acts of conscious identification with and involvement in the local church.

Baptists affirm that no human glory is attached to salvation (I Cor 1,31) and honour is due to God alone who makes faith a reality in us (Rom 10,17).

So Lutherans can recognise that Baptist teaching does also not contain any one-sided concentration on the subjective, individual dimension of faith, nor does it practise a legalism which would obscure the doctrine of justification.

In a similar way, Baptists can recognise that the Lutheran understanding of justification also includes the fruits of the faith and that a living faith is a reality in Lutheran churches where the gifts of the Spirit are put into effect.

Together we therefore note that Baptists and Lutherans agree on the fundamental aspects of the doctrine of justification.

⁶ Martin Luther, “On the Freedom of the Christian”; quoted from Karin Bornkamm/Gerhard Ebeling (eds.), *Ausgewählte Schriften*, vol.1: *Aufbruch zur Reformation*, Frankfurt am Main 2 1983, 254. cf. Martin Luther, *Studienausgabe Vol.2*, Leipzig 2 1992, p.288 (Latin) and p.289 (German).

4. The Church

4.1. Criteria and norms for the doctrine of the church

In different churches and confessions, the understanding of the foundation and form of the Christian church has been strongly influenced by particular historical experiences and developments and by specific confessional contexts.

Together, Lutherans and Baptists confess that the doctrine of the church, like every Christian doctrine, derives its norms from Holy Scripture. However, in so doing it is important to perceive that, even within the New Testament, there is no uniform structure of Christian congregations, their functions or their ministries; on the contrary, these have taken different shape in the course of early Christian history in specific places as a result of particular challenges, in order to do justice to the one gospel of Jesus Christ when facing the demands of their particular situation.

In this respect, Baptists and Lutherans emphasise different aspects. The Baptist tradition has the living ideal of a “church according to the New Testament” which is guided by the concrete models and practice of the early Christian congregations. For Lutherans, following the New Testament implies that the fundamental gospel of the justification of the godless through proclamation, teaching and congregational practice must be a reality. Here, the outward form and structure of Lutheran churches has been more strongly influenced by history, especially the expressions that developed in the Reformation period, although the details can vary.

Lutherans and Baptists can come to a common mind if the Baptists can recognise that the guidance of Scripture as a source of constant renewal is a reality among the Lutherans as well, and if the Lutherans can recognise that the gospel of the justification of the godless through proclamation, teaching and congregational practice is also a reality among the Baptists.

4.2. The foundation of the church

Lutherans and Baptists confess jointly that the church is founded on the will of God, the Creator, to exist together with the human beings whom God has created. This will is demonstrated by the words addressed to humankind in paradise (Gen 2,16f; 3,9), in the calling of Abraham (Gen 12,1 ff) and in the election of Israel to be the chosen people in God’s possession (Deut 7,7) which was already broadened prophetically in the Old Testament to include all nations (Isa 2; 60,1 ff).

God’s universal will for salvation is taken up again in the New Testament when the Risen One sends his disciples out to preach to all nations (Mt 28,18-20), when the Apostle Paul spreads the gospel of the saving power of the cross among all nations (I Cor 1,18 ff; Rom 1,16f) and when Christ is confessed before the whole world as the saviour of the world by those who believe in him (John 4,42).

The goal of the salvation event is the eschatological communion of all the saved with the triune God under the perfected sovereignty of God (Rev 21; I Cor 15,28).

The gospel of Jesus Christ, as the message of reconciliation (II Cor 5,19), does not only lead the sinners pardoned by the forgiveness of sins to communion with the triune God but also into the “communion of saints”, into the “new covenant” (I Cor 11,23 f) which is rooted in the

saving death of Jesus Christ. The church celebrates this particularly in the Lord's Supper in grateful joy and in the hope of eschatological perfection. However much it may be true that God addresses individual persons and expects them to respond, God's saving will does not result in individualistic isolation but rather in communion in the body of Christ expressed concretely in worship, in the everyday life of the congregation, in the links between local congregations and in the relationships between Christians locally and world-wide.

4.3. The nature and mission of the church

The Church is *one*. Its unity is grounded in the one Lord who has called it and who directs it to the full sovereignty of God. As the community of those who believe in Jesus Christ, the Church is the one, undivided body of Christ (Eph 4,15f; cf. I Cor 12) of which all the members form a part. The unity of the Church transcends all barriers in line with the prayer and command of Jesus Christ (John 17,21). This unity is pre-existent in a wide variety of denominations and must therefore not first be created. Relying on this – despite all appearances – unity must be discovered, promoted and hoped for in its eschatological fullness.

With this common basis, different emphases exist between Lutherans and Baptists.

Whereas Baptists particularly emphasise that the congregation, as a “sign of God's new world”⁷, must become visible and prove – like the early Christian congregations – to be salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5,13-16)⁸, Lutherans maintain that the true Church always remains invisible in this world (*ecclesia invisibilis*) and can only be recognised unambiguously in the characteristics of the church, in the preaching of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments according to the gospel.

These two approaches are not mutually exclusive provided that Baptists also recognise that God alone knows the hearts of human beings and that God's grace and the state of a person's salvation cannot be derived unambiguously from outward signs, and provided Lutherans affirm that the church must take its stand in the world where it is called to witness in love and concrete discipleship of Christ.

The mission of the church is founded on the commission from Jesus Christ (John 20,22-23). In the power of the Spirit, the church continues the work of Christ by proclaiming the gospel in obedience to Christ's mandate, promising people the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins and witnessing to the love of Christ in word and deed (John 13,34). In this way, it shares in the *missio dei*, God's workings in and for the world.

According to the biblical witness and our common Christian belief, the church is the work of the Holy Spirit who equips and commissions Christ's witnesses for their missionary witness (Acts 2; John 20,21f), who is at work in the church through diverse gifts and services (I Cor 12; Rom 12, etc.), who is promised permanently to each individual Christian in baptism (Acts 2,37-41), who brings about the incorporation into the one body of Christ (I Cor 12,13) and is also at work in the life of Christians as the power of new life (Rom 6). So the church is the arena of the Holy Spirit in which believers experience and learn to live new life in Christ and from which they are sent into the world in the power of the Spirit.

⁷ Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden in Deutschland (ed.), *Rechenschaft vom Glauben*, Kassel 2004, Section 1.1.

⁸ *ibid.*, Section 2.1.

4.4. The form of the Church

4.4.1. The relation of the local church to supra-regional structures

As far as the concrete form of the church is concerned, the views of Lutheran and Baptist theology differ mainly because of the history of the two churches and less for dogmatic reasons. Whereas Baptist teaching starts with the autonomy of the individual, local congregation, the Lutheran understanding is traditionally marked by regional church structures. Both views can be explained essentially by reference to their particular historical contexts and the experiences connected with them.

However, they do not constitute mutually exclusive alternatives, neither in the New Testament nor in the development of Baptist and Lutheran teaching. Although it is not possible to find proof in the New Testament of any broader church structures, nevertheless the individual congregations were linked with one another, e.g. in the area of St. Paul's mission, and with other congregations by a network of mutual visits and the work of the apostle himself (cf. I Cor 1,2), so that it was possible for an awareness of the "church as a whole" to develop. The "Council of the Apostles" (Acts 15) was an early indication of decisions being taken by the whole church that were binding on all the congregations. At the latest, when the letters of Paul, the gospels and the other writings were compiled to form the later New Testament canon, there was evidence of a consensus transcending specific places and regions.

As Martin Luther understood it, the local pastor could be seen as the "bishop" of his congregation, although this naturally did not conflict with the necessity of a visitation practice on a more general level, nor with the requirement that the congregations themselves had the responsibility of discerning the spirits and keeping watch over scriptural doctrine.

The regional church structure of the Lutheran churches in Germany evolved historically from the historical dioceses via the intermediate stage of the worldly rulers' authority over the church. Their administrative structures with synodic, collegial and episcopal elements also involve non-ordained persons in the congregations, the deaneries and the church as a whole.

In the Baptist church from the very beginning – despite the value set by the autonomy of the local congregation – there has been an awareness of the need for wider relationships in a union of congregations. This applies both to representation to the outside and to the internal function of strengthening one another and facilitating their ministry.

In this context, the ministry of leadership (*episkopé*) resides in the gathered congregation and is exercised by its elected representatives including the pastors appointed. If there is a conflict, the organs of the union of congregations have a mediatory and advisory function.

The fundamental tension between charisma and institution is perceived in the two churches to have a different significance. However, the two approaches converge provided that the leadership structures in the Lutheran churches do not deny the competence of the congregations and their members, and provided that the Baptists ensure that the autonomy of individual congregations does not obliterate their common ecclesiological profile.

4.4.2. Mutual recognition of ministries and offices

For the Lutheran understanding, an orderly commissioning (CA XIV) to preach the word in public and administer the sacraments during worship is of decisive importance. This

particular ministry, which also has the unity of the local church in its mandate, must be distinguished from the priesthood of all believers because, in the Lutheran conviction, all Christians both men and women are called to witness in the family, their professions, society and the church.

For the Baptist tradition, the priesthood of all believers is a central issue which is also reflected in their form of worship. Here, the Baptists place special emphasis on an orderly calling to preach, both within the local congregation and with regard to their pastors, although there is no fundamental restriction of the mandate of proclamation, presiding over the Lord's Supper or of other functions to a particular group of authorised persons.

The calling to be a pastor (ordination) is carried out by the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG). When a person is appointed to a particular congregation (installation), the Union is also represented although the local congregation is the body which appoints. The BEFG and its pastors have a relationship of mutual faithfulness.

Lutherans recognise that the Baptist tradition has orderly congregational and supra-congregational leadership structures (*episkopé*) which serve the proclamation of the gospel. Baptists recognise that the Lutheran church also refers to the New Testament in connection with the form of its structures. For Lutheran and Baptist theology, a similarity or analogy between leadership structures is not a necessary condition for the recognition of other churches. Both sides recognise that, in the early church, there were already various congregational and ecclesiastical structures of leadership which also underwent changes in the course of history.

Together we note that the differences in the forms of the church's ministry do not constitute obstacles for mutual recognition.

5. Baptism and the Lord's Supper

5.1. Baptism

5.1.1. Introductory considerations

Against the background of our initial methodological considerations⁹, we were guided by the best form of the other confession as the starting point for our theological reasoning.

- We refrain from traditional arguments based on confessional polemics which can be traced back to misunderstandings or extreme positions in the other confession.
- We mutually respect the theological concern of each of our conceptions of baptism.
- We feel in each case that we are bound by and committed to our understanding of the gospel in our particular baptismal practice.
- We mutually recognise one another's right to have taken a decision of conscience in favour of one form of baptism in responsibility before God and the gospel entrusted to us.

⁹ cf. Section 2.2 of this report.

5.1.2. Coming closer to a common understanding of baptism

There are many references in the New Testament to baptism as a Christian practice (Acts 2,37ff; 8,14ff; 10,44ff; I Cor 1,10ff) and this practice was a reality throughout the church. The New Testament scriptures describe the meaning and significance of baptism by using various images which are complementary.

Together we can note the following.

The invitation to faith and to baptism is addressed to all persons. The forgiveness of sins and being children of God is promised to everyone.

When the Christian church baptises, it is carrying out the mandate of its risen Lord (Mt 28,18-20). Baptism was instituted by Jesus Christ for the sake of human salvation and its full meaning becomes evident only in reference to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6). In this sense, it has its place in the event of salvation through which the triune God reveals in Jesus Christ that God is a loving and saving God for all of humankind.

Baptism is dying and rising again with Christ (Rom 6). Because Christ died once for all for us and rose again, every baptised person can rely on the reality of the new life given once for all in Christ. Therefore baptism can only be performed once; as a divine promise, it can neither be made more intense, nor can it be ended or cancelled.

In baptism which is effective through faith, the living God witnesses that God receives all believers as God's children (Gal 3,26f), forgives them their sins (Col 2,12f), imparts to them the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2,38) and calls them to a life of loving service to their fellow human beings and to the world (II Cor 5; Rom 12,1). Hence, baptism is a "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3,5) for time and eternity.

Baptism creates a link with all of God's children who confess the triune God; it is also a link with the sisters and brothers who form a specific congregation in a particular place.

Baptism requires a confession of faith by the person baptised and it must be appropriated in faith throughout one's life. It comprises acceptance as a child of God and simultaneously sets the life-long process of discipleship in motion. God's valid promise becomes a reality when it is appropriated in faith by the person baptised. This faithful appropriation is also a work and effect of God's promise and of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So faith and baptism belong together (Col 2,12) but they may be separated in time. The connection between baptism, faith and confessing the faith is expressed in the conception of a process of Christian initiation¹⁰.

God's promise in baptism is nothing other than a symbolic assurance of the message of reconciliation for each individual person. The word of God which is proclaimed and symbolically assured simultaneously brings about what it promises. This visible word does not bring about "more" than the word proclaimed but operates in a different way. It assures people of this promise in a bodily, visible way. Baptism, as the symbolic assurance of the

¹⁰ cf. Wilhelm Hüffmeier/Tony Peck (eds.), *The Beginning of the Christian Life and the Nature of the Church. Results of the Dialogue between EBF and CPCE (Leuenberger Texte 9)*, Frankfurt a.M. 2005; cf. also Section 5.1.4. of this report.

good news for every individual, constitutes a gift of God to the community of believers which they receive gratefully and obediently.

The practical form of baptism is the responsibility of the community of believers but it must be administered in accordance with the gospel.

1. The gospel of the justification of sinners by grace for Christ's sake through faith must be clearly expressed in baptism.
2. The act of baptism must necessarily include the trinitarian baptismal formula, the use of water and God's word of promise.

5.1.3. Mutual questions about the doctrine and practice of baptism

The two sides emphasise different aspects of baptism. In each case, these aspects have a basis in the New Testament. While the Lutheran understanding places more emphasis on the promise of salvation, the Baptist teaching sets more store by the appropriation of salvation.

Lutherans understand baptism as the unconditional, prevenient promise of God to accept a human being as the child of God and to forgive his/her sins. This promise is aimed at human trust in faith and gives rise to it. Since God's word is true, this promise can only be given once. But the human being must and can repeatedly assure him/herself of this promise: by means of baptismal recollection, in the celebration of the Lord's Supper and by listening to the gospel.

When Lutherans baptise infants they thus express that divine salvation is beyond human control, that God's promise which supports and establishes the Christian life cannot be called into question by any human error but rather repeatedly gives rise to repentance and penitence. They rely on the person baptised responding to the promise received by gradually entering into the Christian congregation and confessing his/her faith so that baptism can thus become effective through faith.

On the Baptist side, baptism is also understood essentially as the promise of God's grace which is effective through faith, and as God's affirmation of the person baptised which the baptised accept and to which they respond with their own confession of faith. Baptism reflects the reception of God's grace through Jesus Christ and acts out this event in a ritual form.

When Baptists baptise only those who confess their faith, they thus emphasise God's sovereignty (faith is always beyond our control) together with the relational character of being a child of God. Human beings should and may contribute to this relationship by hearing ("obeying") and responding.

Both sides observe that the concerns listed are in line with the gospel and connected with baptism according to the New Testament witness; both sides endeavour to take account of the concerns of the other side also in their own church practice and to take the questions from the other side seriously.

The question which the Lutheran party must ask of the Baptists is whether in the Baptist conception of baptism sufficient attention is always paid to the unconditional nature of the divine promise which is free of prerequisites.

This concern is evident among the Baptists e.g. in the worship practice of dedicating children.

From the Baptist side, the question to the Lutherans is whether, in the Lutheran conception of baptism, sufficient attention is always paid to the close relation between faith and baptism as reflected in the New Testament witness.

This concern is reflected in the Lutheran tradition e.g. by celebrations recalling one's baptism.

Each side has learnt theologically from the questions raised by the other tradition.

Baptists recognise that the expression "mature confession of faith" can be understood in many different ways and cannot be delimited precisely. A mature response of faith cannot be directly tied to particular cognitive and emotional stages of a person's development.

Lutherans see the necessity of making a closer theological link between baptism and faith and gradually entering into the local church with church support, and of giving this clearer expression in practice. The responsibility for baptism of the congregation which baptises and of the parents needs to be made more visible. Lutherans must pay self-critical attention to ensuring that baptism is not practised in an "indiscriminate way"¹¹.

5.1.4. Towards a basic consensus on the question of baptism

According to the witness of Holy Scripture, baptism is an expression of the gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. So it is an event in which the person baptised receives God's gracious and eternally valid promise. Baptism is itself a gift of God's grace through which God promises once and for all the new life given in Christ and membership of the body of Christ (I Cor 12).

The Baptists and the Lutherans also agree that baptism with its ecclesiological implications always has a christological basis. An anthropocentric view of baptism, which sees it merely as a confession of faith based on an act of the will of the baptised or as a mere step of obedience, does not do sufficient justice to the witness of the New Testament and at most constitutes a partial truth (*particula veri*). This is the case when the central focus in the involvement of the person baptised is not on reception but on their active participation in the act of baptism. Over against this, we confess in accordance with Scripture that baptism is, above all, God's promise of salvation and that its true meaning can only be conveyed by this theological emphasis.

We also agree that baptism as an initiation rite belongs at the beginning of the Christian life. Whereas in baptism the Lutheran side mainly emphasises the permanently prevenient grace of God in human life and action as something which also accompanies a newborn child from the beginning of its life (*gratia preveniens*), Baptists place the emphasis more strongly on the grace of God which comes swiftly to the lost person (*gratia adveniens*).

As a consensus we note that our churches consider both aspects to be scriptural; they belong to baptism and are not mutually exclusive.

¹¹ cf. Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111, World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1982, p.6.

The difference in accentuation with regard to the aspect of grace in baptism is expressed in the choice of a different moment for its administration. Whereas Lutherans see an expression of the prevenient grace of God which precedes all human action and of the gift of both temporal and eternal life in the baptism of the immature infant which is to be confirmed personally at confirmation, Baptists underline the close link between faith and baptism by selecting a time following a decision of faith. In this way, God confirms that the person baptised has personally appropriated the gospel and opens up for this person the possibility of being called to give account of their faith. What the Lutheran tradition expresses in baptism and confirmation is combined into one for the Baptists.

In the mutual recognition of baptism, however, there is asymmetry between Lutherans and Baptists. Whereas the Lutheran side regards Baptist baptism as fully valid, recognition on the Baptist side is often refused with a reference to a “deficit of faith” in Lutheran infant baptism, because the personal, non-vicarious faith of the person baptised is seen as the prerequisite for baptism.

However, on the world scale Baptists adopt differing stands with regard to the question of recognising baptism ranging from tolerance and acceptance to rejection of infant baptism. Depending on their particular approach, efforts are being made to overcome a baptismal practice which could be interpreted by other churches as re-baptism or the baptism of converts and, when a person changes their denomination, Baptists do not always require them to undergo believer’s baptism. Within the Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG), the number of congregations is also increasing which, when a person has previously received infant baptism, no longer insist on “believer’s baptism” as a necessary requirement for full membership of the congregation and church.

On the way to a mutual recognition of baptism, it seems helpful to reflect on the nature of Christian initiation as the process of *becoming* a Christian. Both Church traditions are of the view that initiation into the Christian life should be understood not merely as an event at a particular point in time but also as a process – either between baptism and confirmation or between conversion and baptism. The initiation process is complete when, in the form of a personal response to the call of Christ to discipleship, the person also accepts responsibility for discipleship and the baptised person is prepared to openly declare their faith.

Whereas Christian baptism in New Testament times was by nature a baptism of conversion and transition from one religion to another, the character of baptism changed when Christian families came into existence whose descendants were in touch with the Christian faith from their earliest years. The specific point in time for initiation by means of a missionary baptism in the context of the mission to the Gentiles, as during the apostolic period, was replaced by the experience of an educative process over many years and by the gradual entering into the faith by children of Christian parents. In cultures marked by Christianity, therefore, the challenge of accepting the Christian faith is also a pedagogical process in which many factors can contribute to a decision for the faith. In view of the possibility of determining one’s confession oneself, it is hardly possible to list all the decisive biographical influences in detail which can lead to a decision of faith. “I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour” (John 4,38). So Christian initiation must certainly be seen as a complex, shorter or longer process of personal appropriation of the faith which can either begin or be concluded with baptism.

The lack of a personal faith preceding baptism need not make the baptism invalid when one considers that faith, also according to the Lutheran understanding, is related to baptism, and

God's word of grace which is spoken at baptism can be personally appropriated by the faith which comes later (e.g. at confirmation). The New Testament makes clear that an element of Christian initiation which was initially missing can also be effective at a later date and does not make an earlier baptism invalid (Acts 8,14-17).

Since Baptists nowadays also invite Christians from other denominations to the Lord's Supper, in order together to celebrate the visible union between them and with their Lord, they also recognise that unity is brought about by the Spirit and not by the structures of the congregation and that unity is really present in the common meal. "In the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body" (I Cor 12,13). Anyone who believes in the unity of the body of Christ brought about by the Spirit and confesses it before God in holy communion cannot abolish it or call it into question again by the regulations of a local church. A binding "believer's baptism" in order to acquire membership is thus obsolete because the unity of the body of Christ celebrated in the Lord's Supper and the fellowship of the local congregation cannot contradict one another.

However, it would be helpful for Baptists if they were sure that their Lutheran sister church consistently took account of the process character of Christian initiation in its baptismal practice. If children are baptised who are then, because of the family situation, deprived of the communion of believers and for whom neither Christian teaching nor introduction to the faith can be expected, this can obscure the nature of the baptism and make it questionable for Baptists.

As a result of these considerations, we observe that Baptists and Lutherans can recognise both understandings of baptism as different but legitimate interpretations of the one gospel. The certainty that one's own doctrine and practice corresponds to the gospel does not therefore imply that the different teaching and practice of the others must be condemned as inappropriate to the gospel, because one can see that the essential concerns of one's own interpretation are reflected in the other confessional tradition.

5.1.5. Ecclesial practice in the light of this basic consensus

The basic theological consensus reached in the working group is not yet fully reflected in the practice of the churches.

(1) The traditional case of conflict is seen in the desire for baptism of a person who has been baptised as an infant but has only been able to develop a conscious relation to the church and to faith in a Baptist congregation and would like to be baptised in a Baptist church because of this awareness of believing.

If this takes place, Lutherans understand it as a repetition of baptism¹². In such an act, they believe that God's unconditional promise is being questioned both by the person baptised and by the congregation that administers the baptism. If a Baptist congregation responds to such a desire for baptism, Lutherans understand it as transgressing a limit and thus endangering the fellowship desired between the churches.

¹² The term "anabaptism" was used in the 16th century in such cases. Referring to a baptismal practice which did not agree with the Lutheran conception, it was incorporated into the Lutheran confessional documents. This dogmatic condemnation was accompanied by defamation and persecution in the political and social realm which Lutherans remember with painful regret. Because the term "anabaptism" was used as a pretext for persecution and it also contradicts the way Baptists understand themselves, it will no longer be used in what follows. The situation as Lutherans see it will be described by the expression "repetition of baptism".

However, the basic consensus reached between the two churches is considered to be sufficiently firm for the Lutheran side to be able to imagine tolerating isolated cases of such baptisms for pastoral reasons, provided that this practice no longer constitutes the regular form of ecclesial action in Baptist congregations. The Baptist side can imagine conducting such baptisms in a way that expresses a recollection of baptism.

(2) The problem of repeating baptism can also arise for Baptists if someone has a radically subjectivistic understanding of baptism, e.g. if a person feels that his/her baptism at a mature age is no longer adequate because he/she doubts whether his/her faith at that time was sufficient.

Baptists and Lutherans agree that baptism is always also an act of the whole community of believers and must not depend on the subjective state of the individual.

The Baptists recommend to their congregations that they resist problematic requests for baptism which question the uniqueness of baptism as presented in the gospel.

On the Lutheran side, pragmatic considerations sometimes lead to baptism being administered first to unbaptised confirmation candidates in a way which makes confirmation appear to be the real celebration of the faith.

The Lutherans recommend to their congregations, in the case of a confirmation candidate who has not previously been baptised, that the link between baptism and confirmation should be liturgically expressed so that the central role of baptism is fully evident.

(3) We also agree that baptism, according to Romans 6, constitutes a rite marking a change in sovereignty which must not be transformed into a rite for changing one's denomination. This danger exists if Baptists make believer's baptism an absolute condition for the reception into a congregation of persons who have been believers for a long time.

The Baptist delegation recommends to its congregations to (further) develop forms of entry into the congregation which do not absolutely restrict to believer's baptism the desire of persons to join a congregation who were baptised as infants.

(4) There is agreement that children and parents need special attention in local church work and that parents must be supported in passing on the content of the Christian faith.

The Lutheran side reminds its congregations that, as a consequence of their baptismal practice, special emphasis should be given to working with children and young people to lead them to the Christian faith.

(5) Irrespective of the moment when baptism is administered, in both churches there is a necessity of enabling persons to experience an assurance of God's promise in ritual ways in the course of their lives. The closing service at the 1st Ecumenical Kirchentag in 2003 demonstrated that such assurance can also be expressed by using water without this implying a repetition of baptism.

Both sides wish to encourage the development of creative forms for implementing this suggestion in their liturgical practice.

5.2. The Lord's Supper

5.2.1. The Baptist understanding of the Lord's Supper

According to the Baptist understanding, the Lord's Supper (Holy Communion) is a ritual celebration instituted by Christ for his followers to give them a present realisation of the fundamentals of salvation history and of the eschatological goal of the communion of believers with their Lord and with one another. Communion confirms for each person who receives it in faith that they have been accepted by Christ and all their sins are forgiven through Christ's death on the cross.

The heart of the celebration of the Lord's Supper is the communion and unity of the believers brought about by Christ in which all social differences and divisions are overcome (Gal 3,28) and the coming kingdom of peace and its justice are anticipated. The presence of Christ as saviour and judge is believed and confessed, not only in the elements of "bread and wine" but also as a pneumatic presence in the liturgical conduct of the whole celebration of the meal.

Those who believe in Christ gather at his table in his name to share the bread and chalice as a sign that Christ himself gives himself to his followers. "We again experience our acceptance by the crucified and risen Christ. In the Lord's Supper, we experience communion with all the brothers and sisters whom God has called to the faith with us. We celebrate reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one another in adoration and with thanksgiving and intercession"¹³.

Baptists celebrate the Lord's Supper with everyone who believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since it is the Lord's Supper, the host is Jesus Christ and this constitutes the basis for practising ecumenical hospitality. Every person who has given their life to Jesus Christ is invited to share in the "sacrament of provision on the way" (cf. CPCE/EBF document)¹⁴, irrespective of their denominational affiliation.

In view of a divided Christendom, the visible unity of which still lies ahead, ecumenical hospitality simultaneously reveals the eschatological horizon of holy communion. "We celebrate the Lord's Supper in joyful anticipation of the second coming of Jesus Christ and the completion of his lordship by proclaiming the death of our Lord until he comes. We allow ourselves to be sent out from the Lord's table strengthened and filled with the courage of faith into a life with Christ in discipleship, witness and service"¹⁵.

The administration of holy communion is the responsibility of the persons duly appointed by the congregation. When an ordained pastor is present, he/she normally presides over the celebration of holy communion; however, other members of the congregation can also be authorised by the local church to conduct the Lord's Supper. As a symbolic expression of being gathered together as sisters and brothers and of belonging to the priesthood of all believers, the communicants pass the bread and wine to one another in Christ's name.

¹³ Rechenschaft vom Glauben, Section 4,2.

¹⁴ cf. The Beginning of the Christian Life and the Nature of the Church. Results of the Dialogue between the EBF and the CPCE, II/10, p.21 (cf. Note 10).

¹⁵ BEFG, Rechenschaft vom Glauben, *ibid*.

5.2.2. The Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper

According to the Lutheran understanding, Christ himself is really present at the Lord's Supper. Thanksgiving (*epiklesis*), the words of institution and the commemoration of God's saving acts (*anamnesis*) constitute the centre of the liturgical celebration.

The doctrine of holy communion in the Lutheran church includes a fundamental pastoral aspect. Everything depends on God's having entered into this world unreservedly and having become our brother. In holy communion we can experience that, here, the risen Christ unites himself with bread and wine. God comes to meet the human being as a whole, body and soul. "For you" describes the goal related to the innermost nature of holy communion. Christ's whole saving work is offered to us there: the forgiveness of all our sins, liberation from the power of evil and undying communion with God. This is why Lutherans insist on the words, "This is my body".

The "how" in this connection can remain a mystery provided that the presence of Christ is real. Christ gives himself to us bodily "in, with and under" bread and wine. Just as God and man are united in Christ, Christ's body and blood are united with the bread and wine in a sacramental unity. "Of the Lord's Supper they teach that the true body and blood of Christ are truly present under the form of bread and wine and are there communicated to those that eat in the Lord's Supper and receive" (CA X).

Lutherans do not teach that everyone who wishes to participate is invited to the Lord's Supper but rather all those who belong to Christ. Christ did not celebrate the last supper with the whole people but with his followers. The sign of belonging to Christ is found in baptism so only the baptised are invited to the Lord's Supper.

However, since baptism is not limited to one denomination but recognised ecumenically, according to the Lutheran view all the baptised are invited, including those from other denominations, provided that the latter baptise with water and invoke the triune God with the proclamation of the baptismal promise.

Indeed, the Lord of the meal is the Lord of baptism, Christ, and not the church. So Lutherans believe that baptism and holy communion are effective because it is Christ who acts in the sacraments. Therefore, the church cannot erect any barriers or exclude from holy communion members of another church which understands itself to be part of the *una sancta catholica et apostolica ecclesia* (one holy, catholic and apostolic church). The Lord's Supper is not an event of the church - because that would mean the believers lacked the assurance of salvation in holy communion - but of Christ himself. The church merely receives. It does not distribute; it promises. That is its task in the service of the gospel.

5.2.3. Consensus on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper

With regard to the Lord's Supper, we can jointly subscribe to Articles (15), (16), (18) and (19) of the Leuenberg Agreement¹⁶.

(15) In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thereby grants us forgiveness

¹⁶ The Leuenberg Agreement, in: Konkordie reformatorischer Kirchen in Europa, Frankfurt a.M. 1993, pp.39-40. (Article 17 relates directly to the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue.)

of sins and sets us free for a new life of faith. He enables us to experience anew that we are members of his body. He strengthens us for service to all men.

(16) When we celebrate the Lord's Supper we proclaim the death of Christ through which God has reconciled the world with himself. We proclaim the presence of the risen Lord in our midst. Rejoicing that the Lord has come to us we await his future coming in glory.

(18) In the Lord's Supper the risen Jesus Christ imparts himself in his body and blood, given up for all, through his word of promise with bread and wine. He thus gives himself unreservedly to all who receive the bread and wine; faith receives the Lord's Supper for salvation, unfaith for judgment.

(19) We cannot separate communion with Jesus Christ in his body and blood from the act of eating and drinking. To be concerned about the manner of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper in abstraction from this act is to run the risk of obscuring the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

5.3. Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs

It corresponds to the essence of the gospel that it reaches people in different ways: by means of the proclamation of the word, through baptism and through the Lord's Supper. Preaching, baptism and holy communion do not impart different things to people; they impart the same thing in different ways. Hearing the word of God in the sermon is supplemented by the physical transmission through baptism and communion so that people are enabled to see and taste and feel the gift given to them. Preaching and symbolic acts are designed to awaken faith in Jesus Christ and to strengthen it.

Lutherans emphasise that God's promise in baptism and the Lord's Supper is unconditionally valid. The believers can rely unreservedly on God's word and completely trust God's promise. Since the life of faith is subject to trials and doubts, believers need the reassuring promise and spiritual encouragement from God's word. Reflection on one's own way of living offers no firm basis; that can come only from God's promise of salvation in which we can believe unconditionally and reliably. But only when human beings trust and believe can God's promise of salvation change human existence by healing it. So the Lutheran emphasis on the validity of preaching, baptism and holy communion can be understood as a pastoral concern to comfort those whose faith is being tested. In order to underline God's unchanging faithfulness as well as the need for receiving in faith, the Lutheran tradition distinguishes between the unconditional validity of baptism and the Lord's Supper and their saving effects through faith alone. Precisely this Lutheran emphasis on faith thus implies that faith relates to God who is faithful and revealed himself in Jesus Christ for salvation and God's word is always true and permanently valid.

Baptists understand baptism and the Lord's Supper as symbolic acts instituted by Jesus Christ. The Baptist emphasis on human faith as the prerequisite for receiving baptism and holy communion should be understood pneumatologically. The congregation recognises the working of the Holy Spirit in the person who has come to faith and consequently administers baptism. According to this understanding, the Lord's Supper will have its effect, as the reassuring promise of the forgiveness of sins which has already taken place and as spiritual strengthening, only if the person already believes. Baptists reject the idea of a saving effect merely through the administration of baptism and holy communion, because such a conception questions God's sovereign power to act whenever and wherever he wills.

However, the emphasis on this theological reservation is not intended to give the impression of some incalculable, divine arbitrariness which could leave people in doubt about God's promise. On the contrary, the intention is to assure believers not only of God's promise in the reception of baptism and holy communion but also to make them aware of the seriousness of God's demands.

Baptists and Lutherans can affirm together that God's salvation is offered to the whole of humanity. God in his free self-determination has bound himself to his promise of salvation and in this way acts in both a sovereign and reliable way.

6. Looking back, looking forward and the consequences

After these six years of official doctrinal conversations, we as representatives of the Lutheran and Baptist churches stretch out our hands to one another as sisters and brothers. With this provisional conclusion of our dialogue, we note as representatives of the churches involved how enriching these conversations have been and sense that we have received a gift of deeper insight into the spiritual and theological bonds between our churches.

We have covered a considerable distance which has brought to light new understandings and insights that cannot form part of a final report although it must somehow bear witness to them. Some of the background, connections and concerns of our different ecclesiastical traditions were unfamiliar to our partners at the beginning of the conversations. So we are all the happier to have experienced how unfamiliarity and ignorance of our mutual theological convictions have given way, in the course of our six-year conversation process, to better mutual understanding and deeper appreciation which make it possible and encourage us to deal constructively with our differences.

Our aim was not to smooth over confessional identities which had evolved in the course of history and thus to deprive them of their justification. On the contrary, in addition to the visible differences which can, on closer examination, be described as related, similar or at least comparable, our intention was also to state the differences which remain between our confessional traditions. At the same time, we wanted to examine the extent to which the nature of these differences divides the church. We did so in the certainty that, despite different understandings of detail, we share in the same gospel of Jesus Christ which unites us in the body of Christ under the gracious lordship of God (I Cor 12,4-6; Mark 3,24).

It was clear to us from the beginning that the most serious differences between our churches were those of the understandings of baptism and the baptismal practice resulting from them. Nevertheless, we did not only focus in our conversations on the issue of baptism, nor did we start by discussing the different perspectives on its interpretation and their confessional roots; on the contrary, we started from a broader theological foundation. Beginning with the Reformation understanding of the doctrine of justification and with the fundamental ecclesiological concerns of both traditions, we endeavoured to identify the causes which had led to controversial conceptions of baptism. In the process, we discovered unexpectedly large areas of agreement on central issues of the faith.

We are convinced that this document indicates a feasible way for both sides to escape from the dilemmas of the different understandings of baptism that have been such a burden on our traditions and which points beyond the previous results in dialogue reports from both sides.

This also applies to the results of the dialogue between the European Baptist Federation (EBF) and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) concluded in 2004 and contained in the document “The Beginning of the Christian Life and the Nature of the Church”; this constituted a significant signpost for our reflections¹⁷. We took up the outcome of that dialogue and considered it in the context of our two churches. As a consequence of the broad theological basis of that dialogue and of the hermeneutical approach it adopted, on the one hand, and of the manageable national context, on the other, we were able to go beyond the bottlenecks noted there and to avoid clinging to supposedly irreconcilable positions. That applied particularly to the question of the understanding and practice of baptism for which the conversations between the EBF and the CPCE¹⁸ were not yet able to offer a solution because of the heterogeneous European context.

The Baptist representatives made it clear in the process that the Baptist identity is essentially related to the understanding of believer’s baptism according to which baptism follows and interprets faith. In view of their scriptural insights, Baptists insist on only baptising persons who have come to believe in Jesus Christ. But it is in no way essential to Baptist identity to judge the baptismal position of other Christians or the baptismal practice of other churches which feel committed to their understanding of the gospel. In order to preserve the Baptist identity and the basis for believer’s baptism, it is not absolutely essential to undergo a “later” believer’s baptism. So the Baptist practice of baptising exclusively persons who are believers does not constitute an obstacle to closer cooperation between our churches or to pulpit and altar fellowship, provided that infant baptism is not considered invalid *in principle* and provided the Baptists do not insist on a later believer’s baptism as a prerequisite for membership in Baptist congregations. In the opinion of both delegations, a “baptism on transfer” contradicts the gospel of the gracious acceptance of the sinful person by the triune God and can therefore be misunderstood as making baptism into a work of the law. In its theological dimension, baptism must essentially be described as God’s promise of salvation so it is more than a mere “step of obedience” by human beings. There was complete agreement on this between the two delegations after careful theological examination.

The members of the Lutheran delegation made it clear, however, that faith and baptism belonged together for them essentially in the same way as for the Baptists. Seen in the context of the Lutheran doctrine of justification, the baptism of infants is a clear expression of the unconditional grace of God. For the Baptists to accept this connection, it was helpful that the acceptance of the gospel was not only seen as a unique event, which could be understood as happening at a particular moment and was hence isolated, but rather within the biographical framework of a life of faith, so that it must be understood as having the character of a process¹⁹.

Our wish is to share with other Christians the profoundly satisfying and encouraging experience of surmounting views which had previously be seen as church divisive, without thereby questioning the confessional identities which have evolved in the course of history or challenging their justification – however limited that may always be.

¹⁷ cf. Note 14.

¹⁸ cf. *ibid.*

¹⁹ The inclusion of many different biographical experiences in the human experiences and decisions of faith does greater justice to modern insights from research into memories and cognition than the segmented view of one unique experience of conversion which takes no account of the specific social, biographical connections in each case.

We submit the results of our reflections with the convergences reached to our church authorities, our congregations and the ecumenical public asking them to examine these results carefully, to take steps towards one another in the name of Jesus Christ and to give concrete expression to the things we have in common “that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17,21).

Munich, April 20th 2009

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Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. The hermeneutics of the Baptist-Lutheran dialogue	3
2.1 The foundation for the dialogue	3
2.2 The method of the dialogue	3
2.3 The normative authorities for the dialogue	4
2.4 The reception of previous dialogues in the framework of the present dialogue	5
3. Justification and discipleship	6
3.1 The sinful human being	6
3.2 The justified human being	6
3.3 Defining the relationship between justification and discipleship	7
3.4 Consensus concerning the doctrine of justification	8
4. The Church	9
4.1 Criteria and norms for the doctrine of the church	9
4.2 The foundation of the church	9
4.3 The nature and mission of the church	10
4.4 The form of the church	11
4.4.1 The relation of the local church to supra-regional structures	11
4.4.2 Mutual recognition of ministries and offices	11
5. Baptism and the Lord's Supper	12
5.1. Baptism	12
5.1.1 Introductory considerations	12
5.1.2 Coming closer to a common understanding of baptism	13
5.1.3 Mutual questions about the doctrine and practice of baptism	14
5.1.4 Towards a basic consensus on the question of baptism	15
5.1.5 Ecclesial practice in the light of this basic consensus	17
5.2 The Lord's Supper	19
5.2.1 The Baptist understanding of the Lord's Supper	19
5.2.2 The Lutheran understanding of the Lord's Supper	20
5.2.3 Consensus on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper	20
5.3 Baptism and the Lord's Supper as effective signs	21
6. Looking back, looking forward and the consequences	22

