

**Bilateral conversations
between**

**The United Methodist
Church in Norway**

and

**The Norwegian
Baptist Union**

1999-2004

Joint Theological Statement

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On the basis of this joint theological statement, the two churches are preparing an agreement on future co-operation.

FOREWORD

Baptists and Methodists have worked side by side for several centuries in other countries, and from the middle of the 19th century also in Norway. In many places our two churches¹ have co-operated well in spite of what seem like decisive differences in theology and practice. In ecumenical fora in Norway we have agreed that we want barriers between the churches to be broken down. We feel that we must stand together and work for the unity that Jesus spoke of. We are one in Christ, and as a consequence we must try to express in words the unity that we seek.

At a global level conversations have taken place between representatives of different churches for many years. This has led to an increased understanding of one another's distinctive characteristics, but most of all to a rediscovery of all that we have in common and of the fact that theological divisions are not as great as they often seem to be. Bilateral conversations between Lutherans and Baptists in Norway resulted in 1989 in the document *One Lord, One Faith, One Church – and a Longing for One Baptism*, and equivalent conversations between Lutherans and Methodists resulted in *The Fellowship of Grace*, 1994. With these conversations in mind, the Methodist Church took the initiative for conversations with the Baptists. An invitation on 5th November 1997 received a positive response from the executive committee of The Baptist Union on 27th November.

The following persons have participated in the conversations:

For the Baptist Union in Norway:

Billy Taranger (delegation leader), Odd Arne Joø, Elsa Paulsen, Lena Lybæk, Per Midteide (from 2001);

For the United Methodist Church in Norway:

Arne G. Ellingsen (delegation leader), Lars-Erik Nordby, Solveig Meisted Hermansen, Ivan Chetwynd, Roar G. Fotland (from 2001);
Kai Tore Bakke, secretary.

The group has met 18 times from 9th September 1999 to 25th October 2004. The procedure has been that one of the participants has prepared a memorandum on a given topic. A participant from the other denomination has commented on this, and the memorandum has then been discussed by the whole group. Individual participants have the right to publish their contributions under their own name, but the final product belongs to the group as a whole and is approved by all the members. Only in cases where this is specifically mentioned in the document, has one of the delegations felt the need to specify its own views. We have tried to reach conclusions that both delegations and all participants can accept.

Both denominations have participated in conversations with The Church of Norway which have produced documents covering more or less the same topics, and some of the participants have taken part in both sets of conversations. The delegations have tried to be consistent in their statements in the two contexts. At the same time

¹ There are two Norwegian words for "church". *Kirke* is used of the universal church, a church building and – as here – a denomination (also called a *kirkesamfunn*). *Menighet* is used of a local church and occasionally of the universal church. *Menighet* is also used of a congregation gathered for worship. (Translator's footnote.)

we are happy to see a continuing growth in understanding both on the part of individuals and in our respective churches. This means that we can trace a development in our beliefs, especially when we seek to express important theological themes in a new way. When a group of theologians gathers with the intention of agreeing on as many assertions as possible, it is possible to make some progress.

We have also been aware of the so-called Lima document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.² The spring of 2004 saw the completion of the final document from conversations between the European Baptist Federation and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (CPCE – Community of Protestant Churches in Europe) where Methodist churches also participate.³ Although we do not repeat the contents of these documents, we do refer to them and try to be consistent with what has been agreed there.

This document is hereby delivered to our churches. We ask them to receive it and use it as a basis for an agreement on co-operation. The document is published in Norwegian and English, in the hope of contributing to the on-going ecumenical conversation.

Stabekk/Oslo, 25th October 2004

Billy Taranger,
General secretary/principal, The Norwegian Baptist Union, The Baptist Theological Seminary.
Arne G. Ellingsen,
District Superintendent/pastor, The United Methodist Church in Norway.

² *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order, Document 111, Geneva, 1982).

³ English and German versions of the document have been made available in the spring of 2004, but it has not yet been published.

THE NORMATIVENESS OF THE BIBLE

Methodists and Baptists agree that the Bible contains the basic norms for Christian life and teaching.

The content and function of the Bible

The Bible contains men's account of God's self-revelation and how this revelation has been received and understood in human history. This story is told in the light of the history and experience, first of the people of Israel and then of the first Christians. The story of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus is central to the Christian faith. In it, we find the basis for Christian faith and Christian life and the primary source for Christian preaching and worship. Through the Bible, God speaks to people today in order to lead them to faith and salvation.

Scripture and interpretation

The Bible depicts God's revelation as timeless and at the same time as speaking directly to the human situation in time and space. The origins and history of the Bible witness to the dynamic character of the content: Throughout history, the content and core of faith is continually interpreted and actualised in the situation of the community of believers. Because the content of the Bible is shaped by the time and worldview in which it was formed, it must constantly be interpreted by the community of believers. In this process, human experience and wisdom, understanding and conscience, appraise the content of the Bible.

The Bible's basic themes may be expressed in different ways, but they will at the same time always stand as a corrective to human understanding, conscience and experience on the one hand, and to the traditions of the church on the other.

Confessions and traditions.

Baptist and Methodist traditions both have roots in Anglo-Saxon soil, and both arose in relation and opposition to the Church of England. At different times in history both traditions developed new expressions of Christian faith and ministry, because they found it necessary for Scripture to function as a corrective to established political and ecclesiastical traditions. New traditions were formed in relation to given historical events and on the basis of new understanding.

Baptists as a denomination have wanted to emphasise biblical tradition without being bound by confessions of faith that are limited in time and space. They have claimed that the conscientious reading of Scripture by individuals and the community of believers will lead to a true interpretation of the Christian faith. The ecumenical creeds of the early church are expressions of this faith. Methodists understand the ecumenical creeds, The Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed and The Apostles' Creed, as binding summaries of the Christian faith. They are also guided by John Wesley's

sermons and the *25 Articles of Religion* – Wesley's revision of the *XXXIX Articles of The Church of England* - in their understanding of the Christian faith.

In bilateral conversations, the written and unwritten traditions of the respective denominations are important theological factors. Like Scripture, these are also shaped by the origins of the denominations and their historical development in different national settings down to the present time.

Scripture and ecumenical conversations.

The original concern of the ecumenical movement was to tear down barriers and bring denominations closer to one another through greater understanding of their respective symbols, traditions and confessions of faith. Ecumenical conversations have thus attempted to shed light on denominational differences in a theological perspective. Statements from international ecumenical conversations agree on the unique position of Scripture, while they vary in their emphasis on confessional documents and traditions specific for individual denominations.

Recently the ecumenical movement has been more concerned about the common responsibility of the churches in meeting challenges and problems that face the world community: climatic change, violence and racism, exploitation, poverty and hunger, globalisation and the economic world order. In the light of this new development, it is important to emphasise the understanding of the Bible as the basic norm for Christian life and witness. In ecumenical conversations, this will require an attempt to seek new interpretations and actualisations of Scripture in the light of the challenges that globalisation poses for the church.

HUMANKIND

The basis of our churches' understanding of humankind.

The basis of our churches' understanding of humankind is to be found in the Bible; primarily in the accounts of the Creation, of the Incarnation and of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The biblical accounts of the Creation and other theories of the origins of humankind.

As Christian churches, our understanding of humankind is based on the belief that human beings are created by God (Genesis 1:1-2:25; John 1:3; Colossians 1:15-20). This belief that humankind is created by God and is unique in his eyes is not necessarily in conflict with other theories of the origins of the world and of humankind. The biblical accounts of the Creation testify to God as the Creator and Sustainer of all that exists. They are not literal descriptions of how creation took place, but describe the nearness and fellowship between God and his creation.

Humankind created in the image of God

The accounts of the Creation in Genesis 1 and 2 relate that human beings were created in the image of God.

"So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27, NRSV⁴.)

This implies that men and women bear the image of their Creator in the same degree. We are created for fellowship with God and with one another, and together are entrusted with the stewardship of God's creation (Genesis 1:28-31). Genesis 3 tells how the first human beings fell into sin. The image of God in them was distorted and their relationship to their fellow human beings and to the rest of creation was damaged. Humankind was driven out of Paradise; out to the world that we all know.

The implications of the Incarnation for our understanding of humankind

In the birth of Jesus Christ, God approached us as a helpless creature, a new-born baby (John 1:9,14). God thus made himself one with our world and showed us what it means to be a true human being. In his life on earth, his encounters with his contemporaries and his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ shows us the true image of God (Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:15). In this way he sought to bring the kingdom of God to humankind (Luke 4:18-21). His aim was to bring people back to God (Colossians 1:19-20). "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he

⁴ All quotations from the Bible in this translation are taken from The New Revised Standard Version (New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989). (*Translator's footnote.*)

gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13):

Consequences of our churches' understanding of humankind.

Jesus met his contemporaries with respect, charity and trust. He welcomed children who came to him and declared that the smallest of them are an example for us. He had both men and women among his disciples. He healed the sick and the troubled, and included outcasts in his community. Jesus defied many religious and cultural norms, and was called "the friend of sinners". In this way Jesus revealed God's love for humanity and gave us an example to follow.

As churches we therefore consider it important to emphasise the infinite value of every individual human being in the eyes of God. This intrinsic value is not dependent upon the individual's relationship to God, his or her cultural or social background, or upon anything else that can distinguish us from one another. Human value and dignity is not dependent on a person's merits. It depends solely on the fact that we are all created by God and that God loves us so much that Jesus Christ died for us. We call upon our churches to strive to let this basic precept be put into effect in the structures of society and the church. In our social witness and in our worship we wish to emphasise the infinite value of every individual human being and the need to respect human dignity, irrespective of gender, age, sexual preference, ethnic origins, social status or physical capability.

We acknowledge with sorrow that both discrimination and oppression have been perpetrated in the past in the name of Christ, and that this still occurs today, with the words of the Bible as justification. We wish therefore to emphasise that all discrimination and oppression is contrary to the gospel. As followers of Christ we consider it to be our responsibility to do all that we can to prevent discrimination and oppression. In the world today we are especially called to efforts in the following areas:

- ❖ We acknowledge the responsibility of the church to work for peace and reconciliation at a personal, national and international level.
- ❖ We encourage dialogue between religions, so that persons with different beliefs and cultural backgrounds can meet and grow in understanding of one another. We regard it as a special challenge today to establish positive contacts with persons of Muslim faith.
- ❖ We challenge our churches to take a clear stance against all forms of violence and abuse. The exploitation of others, sexually, economically or in other ways must never be accepted.
- ❖ We express our concern over the HIV/AIDS catastrophe, which poses a serious threat to the world community and especially to the poorer nations. It is unacceptable that sick persons are refused access to necessary medicines because of their inability to pay for them or as a result of international monopoly regulations.

- ❖ We challenge our churches to continue to work for a more just distribution of resources in the world and in our own society.
- ❖ We commit ourselves, in an era of globalisation, to continue our efforts to enable the poor and oppressed to live a worthy life in which their basic needs are met.
- ❖ We insist on humankind's common responsibility for God's creation. The future of humanity depends on continuous efforts to maintain balance and diversity in the ecological environment.

We dedicate ourselves anew to the Lord who told us to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, to welcome strangers, to give clothing to the naked, to care for the sick and to visit those in prison. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:35-40.)

SAVED BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

A. Salvation

1. Salvation as communion with God

To be saved means at the deepest level to live in communion with God. To share fully in life in communion with God, each individual must bind his or her life to Jesus Christ, who is fully God and fully human. On God's side, the way to communion is open through Jesus Christ and the reconciliation that he brought. The individual has the responsibility to decide to accept the offer of communion through faith in Jesus Christ, and to bear the fruits that the life of faith produces. Salvation concerns this life and the continuation of life after death, when the communion that begins here will blossom fully as we leave the realm of time.

2. Salvation as Christian growth

Salvation can be thought of both as entering into communion with God – we can say that we "were saved" – and as living in that communion. When a person lives in communion with God, it is natural to use the meeting places or means of grace that God has provided for us. Those who live in communion with God are marked by it and grow in grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ, while at the same time their relationship to other people and to the whole of creation becomes more profound and increasingly influenced by God's love. "Sanctification" is a word that can be used to describe this.

3. Salvation as a gift of God

Salvation is by grace. This means that salvation is free and cannot be deserved or bought, but is given to us by God as a gift. This makes it plain that both being saved and living in salvation are given to us by God as a gift. Sanctification is God's gift and not a reward, but at the same time we have a responsibility to open ourselves for God's influence on our lives.

4. Salvation as discipleship

The grace of God reaches out to human beings from the moment of their conception, but if they are to live in communion with God, they must respond to God's invitation to communion. This response takes the form of putting their faith in Jesus Christ and following him.

B. Faith and baptism

Faith and baptism belong together. It is natural that where faith in Jesus Christ is present, baptism will be practised as the sign of belonging to Christ. Faith is a prerequisite for baptism. According to Baptist tradition, this faith is linked to the individual concerned. Each individual person's faith is therefore a prerequisite for baptism, which can be described as "believers' baptism". According to Methodist tradition, the faith of the church and of the Christian community is involved, in such a way that children of believers can be baptised, and the seed of faith sown in them can develop into a living and mature faith.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, faith arises through the proclamation of the gospel. Faith has many aspects. We will here mention some of these:

1. Faith as belief in the gospel

Faith can also mean accepting the message that the crucified Jesus is Christ, Saviour and Lord. The message must be proclaimed and heard, before a person can believe the gospel. Those who hear, believe the message about Christ and accept him as Saviour and Lord of their lives. The word of God is proclaimed, and by the grace of God it is received and becomes effective in the life of the believer.

Romans 4:24f.;10:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:8f.;2:13

2. Faith as trust

Faith can be understood as trust. Faith is a person's total surrender to God, trusting in God's care. Abraham's justification by faith can best be interpreted as trust, reliance. Abraham relied on God's promise that he would have a son, in spite of Sarah's high age. Faith as trust means that one relies on God's promises and on God's power to fulfil those promises. Faith clings to the grace of God in life and death, and places anxiety and need in God's hands.

Romans 4: 7,18,20;5:5;10:11; 2 Corinthians 1:9; Philippians 3:3

3. Faith as obedience

Faith can be described as obedience to the gospel. Paul says that his task is to lead all peoples to obedience, understood as faith and discipleship. The obedience of faith is realised both in the Christian fellowship and in personal discipleship.

Romans 1:5; 10:16; 5:18; 16:26;

4. Faith working through love

Faith that embraces the whole person creates concern. Jesus assumes in the gospels that those who want to follow him will live according to his word and obey God's commandments. In the Bible it is clear that love for God is inconceivable without love for one's neighbour, and that faith must necessarily result in works of faith as its fruit. Through these acts of love the believer bears witness to Christ, in the same way that he or she witnesses in words.

Matthew 7:24, 12:50, 16:24-28, 25:1-46. John 5, 9-10; Romans 10:9f; Galatians 5:6; Ephesians 2:10; Philippians 2:9-11; 1. John 3:16-17.

5. Faith involves the whole person

Faith in Christ involves the whole person. Paul puts it like this: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Faith is thus not just a matter of intellectual understanding or of holding certain historical events to be true, but is an all-embracing attitude on the part of the believer. We can speak of living as a believer.

The believer has a personal relationship with Christ. Belief in God is an I-Thou relationship, which manifests itself in the believer's daily life. Paul implies this when he speaks of being in fellowship with Christ both in life and in death.

Galatians 2:16,20; 2 Corinthians 1:20,24; 4:4-6; Philippians 1:21; 3:8-12; 4:13; 1 Timothy 3:13

6. The contents of faith

Faith must have a specific content. It is never a matter of abstract reflection unconnected with what one believes in. The message that faith proclaims is important. Paul makes it plain that we must know who it is that we believe in. The purpose of proclaiming the gospel is to create faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Faith is given a historical anchorage from which it can never be loosed. This is also expressed in the ecumenical creeds. The content of faith is at the deepest level Jesus Christ himself.

1 Corinthians 1:21-23; 2:2,4f; 15:3-5,11; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 1:13; Philippians 1:27; 2 Thessalonians 1:10; 2 Timothy 1:12

C. Faith as God's gift and our response

1. The necessity of preaching

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the content of faith, but at the same time it is the content that creates the faith. Because of this, proclaiming the good news is important. An example from the Bible is Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, when many responded to his preaching with faith. God reveals himself through the proclamation of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit creates faith. In the same way Paul confirms the necessity of proclaiming the good news when he says that "faith comes from what is heard."

Mark 16,15-18; Acts 2:22-24; 29-36; Romans 10,9-17; Galatians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

2. Faith as the gift of God

Since proclamation creates faith, the church's preaching can be regarded as a continuation of the creative word of God and the lifegiving words of Jesus. God is thus the origin of faith and the one who creates faith. Faith is God's work and the gift of God offered to humankind in grace. Jesus is called "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith". Faith can therefore neither be deserved nor bought, and no-one can boast of his or her faith.

Genesis 1; Matt 8:13 and John 11:43f; Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews 12:2.

3. Faith as human response

God takes the initiative when faith is created, but this does not mean that human beings are passive objects for God's actions. Their responsibility is to accept God's gift. Our "yes" to God's gift in Jesus Christ is faith. The paradox of faith is that it is wholly the action of God and wholly the response of human beings. Through the response of faith, individuals receive baptism to Christ and through the response of faith, parents bring their children to baptism.

Faith as response to the love of God is manifested when we follow Jesus day by day.

CHRISTIAN BAPTISM

Introduction

Theologically the churches have drawn nearer to one another in their understanding of the content of baptism (but see section 5, page 17 below). This can be seen from the Lima document, **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry** (BEM)⁵ and **Confessing the One Faith**⁶, and in Norway from **Trosbekjennelsen i vår tid**⁷ and the reports from bilateral conversations between our two churches and The Church of Norway: **One Lord – One Faith – One Church. A Longing for One Baptism**⁸ and **The Fellowship of Grace**⁹. Other documents can also be mentioned: in Swedish: **Gemensam väg**, 1968 and **Tecken om enhet**, 1991; and in Danish: **Vandet, som forener og skiller**¹⁰. The Methodist Church and the Baptist Union of Great Britain have published **Baptist/Methodist Agreement on Baptismal Policy within Local Ecumenical Projects**.

The differences between the churches are most noticeable in the timing of baptism. We wish to emphasise that baptism in our churches takes place in a local church context, where the local church is understood to be the fellowship of believers. An important challenge for our conversations is to remain faithful to what has been said in earlier bilateral and multilateral conversations while, if possible, taking the ecumenical dialogue one step further.

1. The institution of Baptism

Baptism has its basis in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and in his command to make disciples of all nations "baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20a). According to the New Testament baptism has been practised in the Christian church from the beginning (Acts 2:38ff;16:33). Baptism is carried out with and in water¹¹ in the threefold name of God.¹²

Passages in the New Testament that refer to baptism are Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:12-13,36-39; 9:18; 10:44-48; 16:15,33-34; 18:8; 19:3-5; 22:16; Romans 6:1ff; 1 Corinthians 1:11-17; 6:11; 10:1ff; 12:13; 15:29; Galatians 3:26-27;

⁵ Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (Geneva: WCC 1982), <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/faith/bem1.html>

⁶ Confessing the One Faith, *An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith as it is confessed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381)*, (Geneva: WCC 1991.)

⁷ Trosbekjennelsen i vår tid (*The Creed in our time. An ecumenical commentary on the Nicene Creed*, The Christian Council of Norway, 2001). This document is not available in English. In footnotes here it is referred to as "Nikenum".

⁸ One Lord – One Faith – One Church. A Longing for One Baptism. *The Report from the bilateral conversations between The Church of Norway and The Norwegian Baptist Union 1984-9.*

⁹ The Fellowship of Grace, *Report from the Conversations between Church of Norway and the United Methodist Church in Norway*, 1996.

¹⁰ Vandet, som forener og skiller, *Om dåbsforståelse og dåbspraksis i et økumenisk perspektiv*, 1997.

¹¹ BEM B17, One Lord... 17

¹² Nikenum 16

Ephesians 4:5,14; 5:25-27; Colossians 2:11f; Titus 3:5-7; Hebrews 6:1-6; 10:22-23; 1 Peter 3:20-21.

Many interpreters regard the following passages as referring to baptism: John 3:3-5; 1 Corinthians 7:14; 2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:30; 4:30; Colossians 1:13f; 1 Timothy 6:12-13; 2 Timothy 2:11-12; 1 John 2:20,27.

Accounts of the baptism of Jesus and of baptism in connection with his ministry are to be found in Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22 and John 1:32-34.

2. The meaning of Baptism

A. Scriptural basis

The New Testament passages show that baptism is understood both as an act of the grace of God and as a human response in the form of faith and a profession of faith. Romans 6:3-11; Colossians 2:11-12; Galatians 3:26-29 and other passages emphasise the initiative and grace of God. Acts 2:38ff; Mark 16:16 and 1 Peter 3:20-21, Galatians 3:2 and Acts 2:38 place baptism in a context where faith is a prerequisite for participating in the salvation that baptism encompasses.¹³ In passages such as 1 Peter 3:21 the idea of a covenant is incorporated in the understanding of baptism.

B. Repentance and the forgiveness of sins

Our two denominations have previously affirmed that they agree in accepting the contents of the Nicene Creed. When baptism is mentioned in the Nicene Creed, it is in close connection with the forgiveness of sins. The basic framework for baptism is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism involves participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, and we can therefore confess together that there is "one baptism for the forgiveness of sins".¹⁴

Baptism belongs together with repentance and a new life. It is not merely an outer cleansing, but involves the conversion of the heart and marks the beginning of a life of faith and obedience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Baptism is connected with faith and a profession of faith, and with the giving of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 1 Peter 3:21).¹⁶ These elements normally belong to the initial stages of the Christian life, but in practice have not always occurred at the same time.

C. Baptism in water

Both denominations agree that baptism as a sacred act should take place in faith and in connection with Christian preaching and teaching. The use of water in baptism makes visible the fact that baptism cleanses us from sin, creates us anew and lays

¹³ BEM B8, Nikenum 17

¹⁴ Nikenum 16

¹⁵ One Lord..., B4

¹⁶ Nikenum 17

the foundation for a holy life. Methodists and Baptists have discussed the various forms of baptism and agree that full immersion witnesses to a central biblical theme (Romans 6:1-11), even though the amount of water is not decisive. Baptists place special emphasis on identification with Christ, the burial of the old self, and the believer's new life after baptism in the power of the resurrection. They want therefore to stress full immersion as the appropriate form for baptism. Methodists argue that pouring and sprinkling water also uphold central biblical themes. Sprinkling signifies cleansing (Ezekiel 36:25-27) and dedication to the service of God (Exodus 29:21), while pouring testifies to the way in which the Holy Spirit is given to the believer and the church (Acts 2:1-4,17-18).¹⁷ Baptists accept sprinkling and pouring as exceptions.

D. Incorporation in the Body of Christ

From the beginning of the life of the church, believers have been made members of the body of Christ, the church, through baptism.¹⁸ Baptism is the gateway to Christian fellowship in the universal Church of Christ, and therefore also in the local church. In the Great Commission, baptism and teaching are Christ's instructions for the making of disciples. The church must therefore lead those who are baptised into Christian faith and life (Matthew 28:18-20). Baptism makes us all equally worthy members of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13) and creates one new people across the borders of social, ethnic and national divisions (Galatians 3:26-28). From a New Testament perspective, Christian baptism is therefore a basic expression of the unity of the church.¹⁹

Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life and is a once-and-for all event (see section 3, Baptism and faith). For both church families baptism is a seal and an effective sign that conveys the life of grace to the Christian community. In baptism God confirms his promises.²⁰

E. Baptism and the giving of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is at work in a person's life before, during and after baptism. This is the same Spirit that revealed Jesus as the Son of God (Mark 1:10-11) and equipped and united the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). God gives all who are baptised the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). He sets his seal on them and gives them the Spirit as a pledge of the inheritance they have as children of God. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in their hearts until the final deliverance takes place, when they will enter into full possession of their inheritance to the praise of the glory of God (2 Corinthians 1:21-22; Ephesians 1:13-14).²¹

That the Spirit is active and present in baptism can be expressed in various ways, as was the case in the first centuries after the birth of Christ – for example by the laying on of hands, anointing, making the sign of the cross and blessing. The use of such signs can enrich our worship.²²

¹⁷ *By Water and the Spirit. Making Connections for Identity and Ministry.* Studyguide by Gayle Carlton Felton (Nashville: 1997) side 20.

¹⁸ Nikenum C16

¹⁹ One Lord... II D 6

²⁰ The Fellowship of Grace 19

²¹ BEM B5

²² BEM B19

F. Baptism as consecration

God calls all who are baptised to service and equips them by the Holy Spirit for diaconal service, mission and worship. Baptism is the basic consecration, because by water and the Spirit believers are allotted their place as servants in the body of Christ, the church. By baptism the church is consecrated to spread the Kingdom of God in the world. All forms of service in the church belong to the priesthood of the baptised (1 Peter 2:1-10). In this connection, baptism should be understood in the light of Pentecost, where the Spirit was poured out on all believers. The laying on of hands at baptism is a sign of consecration to service in the church and for the world.

G. Baptism and grace

The relationship of baptism to grace raises the question whether it is possible to be saved without being baptised. Both churches regard themselves as being bound by the means of grace, but emphasise that human beings are surrounded by the grace of God from their conception.

The boundless grace of God in Jesus Christ takes care of those who are unable to hear the gospel and give their response in baptism (Romans 5:12-21) and it makes salvation possible also in cases where repentance does not lead to baptism. Both churches emphasise that this does not weaken the significance of baptism in the life of the church, nor imply any doctrine of sinlessness before baptism.²³

3. Baptism and faith

Faith is both a gift of God and our human response to that gift.²⁴ It is the ability and willingness to say yes to God's offer of salvation. Faith is an acknowledgement of our total dependence upon God, the surrender of our own will and a confident reliance upon God's grace. Baptism is a covenant between God and human beings. This covenant binds God, the community of believers and the individual Christian together (1 Peter 3:20-21).²⁵

Although our two denominations are agreed on this, there remains a fundamental disagreement as to whether baptism of persons who are not themselves able to affirm their faith is a genuine baptism.

Baptists argue that baptism can only take place when the individual is able to make his or her own personal response to the gospel. Each individual must therefore decide for him- or herself whether to be incorporated into the body of Christ by baptism. Baptism is valid only when it takes place in the context of faith, defined as a conscious experience. Baptists cannot accept that they practise rebaptism when they baptise persons who have previously been baptised as infants.

²³ One Lord... 12, Fellowship of Grace 20

²⁴ BEM B8

²⁵ By Water and the Spirit, page 408 and page 410

Methodists argue that baptism of persons of any age involves faith both as God's gift to us and our response to God. Faith is the ability and willingness to say yes to God's offer of salvation. Faith is an acknowledgement of our total dependence upon God, the surrender of our own will and a confident reliance upon God's grace. When the candidate for baptism is able to answer for him- or herself, he or she therefore answers yes to the following question: "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your saviour, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord in union with the church, which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?"²⁶ The difference between the baptism of adults and the baptism of infants is that the adult consciously confesses his or her faith. A baptised infant will confess his or her faith later in life, after fostering and teaching by parents or other adults in the believing community.²⁷ In this way an infant is baptised on the basis of the faith of the parents and the church.

4. Baptism as a sacrament and a means of grace

Baptism is a sacrament, a means of grace. The outward act not only depicts the grace of God revealed in Christ, but also the action whereby a human being is united with Christ and incorporated in his body, the church. This does not happen as a result of the act itself, but as a result of God's promises concerning baptism that are reported in the gospels.²⁸

The word "sacrament" should only be used of baptism and the eucharist, while the term "means of grace" has a wider application. The word "sacrament" is understood to mean the outward acts of baptism and the eucharist, through which God conveys his saving grace (Titus 3:4f; Ephesians 5:25f; 1 Peter 3:21). The grace of God is most clearly revealed in the incarnation and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The grace of God is revealed in Jesus Christ for the salvation of all who believe and are united with him. The sacraments belong within the context of the community of faith.

The expression "means of grace" is used to include more than the sacraments – for example, the word of God, the community of believers and prayer. This means that it is possible to receive Jesus Christ, come to faith, and thus be placed under the dominion of grace – the grace that is incarnate in Jesus Christ – also in situations where baptism and the eucharist are not available.

Baptism is also a sign. Those who are baptised are placed under the dominion of grace. We can speak of baptism as a comprehensive sign that expresses faith and fellowship and imparts salvation. It expresses the real content of what it portrays. We can also speak of baptism as an effective sign of the presence of God, mediated by the created world.²⁹

²⁶ The Methodist Hymnal, page 34, *By Water and the Spirit* page 408

²⁷ *Water and Spirit* page 413f

²⁸ See *Vandet som forener og skiller*, 24

²⁹ *By Water and the Spirit*, 20; *The Fellowship of Grace*, 16

5. Baptism as an ecumenical dilemma

In an ecumenical context, the sacraments are a dilemma because they divide the churches. Many churches do not recognise the ways in which the sacraments are administered in other churches. This is an unsolved problem on the road to greater co-operation and Christian unity.³⁰

Where Baptists are involved, this applies particularly to baptism. The decisive questions concern, on the one hand (for Baptists) the validity of infant baptism, and on the other hand (for Methodists) the corresponding question of the "rebaptism" of believers who are already baptised as infants. We agree in asserting that infants participate in the grace of God, but we draw opposite conclusions from this when it comes to the appropriate time for baptism.

BEM recommends that the churches work towards a mutual recognition of infant baptism and believers' baptism in the respective families of churches. Baptists do not agree among themselves about such a mutual recognition of each other's baptismal practice. *Most Baptist churches* in Norway would assert that a new baptism is necessary if persons who are baptised as infants wish to join a Baptist church.

Some Baptist churches would be able to receive Methodists who transferred their membership to their church. The reason would be that the two denominations recognise each other as genuine parts of Christ's church. Christ is One, despite differences in theology, tradition and practice. These churches would receive as members those who for example are baptised according to the Methodist tradition, provided they have a living Christian faith.

A few Baptist churches would on the one hand be able to accept transfers of membership, but even so, in certain circumstances would baptise these believers with total immersion, if they experienced problems with their conscience concerning the validity of their previous baptism.

Some Baptist churches – also here in Norway – receive members on the basis of their faith alone. Methodists would be able to be members of these churches on the basis of their faith.

Others argue that from a Baptist point of view, infant baptism performed within the fellowship of believers can be regarded as the beginning of the working of grace, of the responsible Christian life. In this perspective, the time of baptism is not the decisive question. Some Baptists would therefore be able to regard the whole of this process as pertaining to baptism and to life with Christ in the church, and would thereby be able to receive Methodists as full members of a Baptist church without a new baptism. Some would thus recognise baptism according to the Methodist tradition as a valid baptism and refrain from baptising these believers according to the Baptist tradition.

Methodists accept baptism of persons irrespective of their age, when the baptism is administered in water in the name of the Triune God.

³⁰ See *Confessing the One Faith*, page 93f

6. Strengthening baptismal instruction

In both denominations instruction in the Christian faith takes place both in the homes of believers and in the church. All children are related to the saving work of Christ (Romans 5:12ff; 1 Corinthians 7:14). In both denominations the aim of a Christian upbringing is to lead the child to membership of the church, to enable life in Christ to blossom as the individual's life is opened for Christ and for sharing in responsibility for the life of the church. At the age of 14 or 15 a period of instruction is concluded with an act of intercession in a service of worship. For the Baptists, the ideal aim is that the instruction should lead to baptism and membership of the church. For the Methodists, the natural consequence is that the individual professes his or her faith and is received as a confessing member of the church.

We recommend that our churches strengthen their instruction in the basic Christian truths. Such instruction is important both before and after baptism, linked to the question of incorporation into, and life and work within, the Christian community. This opens up for forms of co-operation in training for confirmation or membership, and is actualised in the Norwegian law on religious education, "Lov om trosopplæring".

THE EUCHARIST

Baptism and the eucharist belong together theologically and in practice, in that baptism administered in the name of the Holy Trinity involves incorporation in the body of Christ, while the eucharist is a manifestation of participation in that body, the church. Normally, one is baptised before one participates in the eucharist³¹, but in practice, everyone who wishes to follow Jesus Christ is invited to receive communion in our churches. The eucharistic fellowship has its origins in the fellowship within the Holy Trinity.

Introduction

In the introduction to the section on Baptism, we pointed out that the churches differ in their understanding of the sacraments.³² This is the case, not only with baptism, but also with the eucharist. Despite this, Norwegian protestants today practise joint communion across denominational boundaries.

Not even the eucharist, which ought to be the sacrament of unity within the body of Christ, is immune from division. Methodists have always received Christians from other traditions at their communion table. In the course of the past 50 years, Baptists have changed their practice from closed to open communion³³, with an emphasis on the real presence of Christ. Today, joint communion is practised in our two denominations without formal agreements. In this way our churches are approaching a eucharistic practice which follows the words of Jesus: "Do this."

Different names are used for the eucharist. The most common are *The Breaking of Bread, the Eucharist, Holy Communion, The Lord's Supper, The Table of the Lord and Mass*.³⁴

The eucharist is mentioned in the following documents:

Among **Baptists**: The eucharist is not discussed in the document from the conversations with The Church of Norway, *One Lord – One Faith – One Church. A Longing for One Baptism*, but there is a section on worship in the so-called "Berlin Declaration" from the Baptist World Alliance (1998) and in the statement on faith issued by the European Baptist Federation. Paragraph 5 there deals with the eucharist as fundamental for the church as the community of believers. In 1981 a working party among Swedish Baptists produced a study document, *När vi bryter det bröd...* ("When we break bread together...", edited by David Lagergren).

³¹ This Holy Mystery page 13

³² see page 13

³³ Closed communion: only members of the congregation concerned are admitted to communion, in some cases also others who were baptised as believers. Open communion: all believers are invited to participate.

³⁴ *Messe* and *høymesse*, "Mass" and "High Mass", are normal designations for the eucharist in the Lutheran Church of Norway. The most common term for the eucharist in Norwegian is *nattverd*, an archaic word for "supper". This is the term used in this document. It is translated as *eucharist*, since *eucharist* has become the English word most commonly used in ecumenical studies. (*Translator's footnote*.)

The **Methodists** now have a document stating the denomination's official view, produced after comprehensive consultations: *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (adopted by the General Conference in 2004).³⁵ The eucharist is also discussed in the Lutheran-Methodist document *The Fellowship of Grace* and in other national and international bilateral dialogues. In Swedish conversations between the Mission Alliance (*Misjonsforbundet*), Methodists and Baptists, there were no significant disagreements on the understanding of the eucharist.³⁶

In a Norwegian **ecumenical** context, the Norwegian Christian Council has published a protestant eucharistic liturgy.³⁷ This reflects what all agree can be said about the eucharist, shows a high degree of mutual understanding, and is authorised for use in ecumenical services.

1. Biblical texts

The institution of the eucharist is described in i 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; and Luke 22:14-20. The meaning of the eucharist is explained in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; and some verses in John 6 and 13 refer to the eucharist. Other relevant Bible passages are Luke 24:28-31; John 21:9-14 and Acts 2:42, 46.

2. The institution and practice of the eucharist

The eucharist was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper as a passover meal, and was observed by the first Christians both as a daily common meal and as a part of worship in house churches.

Important assertions for the understanding of the eucharist are the words:

- "This is my body" and "this is my blood"
- "This cup is the new covenant in my blood"
- "poured out for many"
- "do this in remembrance of me"
- "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes".

From the biblical accounts we understand that the eucharistic meal signifies...

- ...a promise of the *presence of Christ*. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus promised to be with his followers every day. This promise applies especially to the eucharist, where Jesus gives himself (his body and blood) and establishes a new covenant in his blood with believers. John Wesley emphasised that the believer, through doing this "in remembrance of me" is brought back under the cross at Calvary.³⁸

³⁵ Available online at <http://www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery/>

³⁶ See *Gemensam tro* ("Common Faith", 1995)

³⁷ *Økumeniske gudstjenester* ("Ecumenical services", Oslo 1999), page 27ff

³⁸ See John and Charles Wesley's *Hymn's on the Lord's Supper*, (London 1948), Hymn No 21, page 201:

Endless scenes of wonder rise
With that mysterious tree,
Crucified before our eyes.

The death of Christ is a sacrifice for the sins of humankind, bringing forgiveness, reconciliation and fellowship.

- ...that the eucharist has the form of a "memorial meal" (*anamnesis*) which sustains the work of Christ in the life of the believer.
- ...that when Jesus says, "*This is my body*" and "*This is my blood*" (Matthew 26:26-28) it means that he gives himself to his followers. This gives the eucharist its sacramental content, that which creates communion between the participants and their Lord. They are united in the body of Christ.
- ...that the eucharist is the sign of the new covenant which is established between Christ and his church.
- ...that the one bread signifies fellowship and unity.
- ...that the eucharist has an eschatological element. *We are to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes, not only in words, but in a tangible form.* From this we can also draw the conclusion that the texts regard life as a pilgrimage, that believers are a people journeying together in this world to a God-given destination, the kingdom of God. On this journey Christ empowers his church for Christian service in the world. As a sign of this service, our two churches have formerly taken up a collection for the poor at the eucharist.³⁹ Isaiah 58:10 was quoted: "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday". It is our opinion that this custom should be revived and seen in the light of justice and solidarity. The following prayer can be used:

"Lord, you who became an answer to our prayers and bread for our hunger: Help us to be your answer to those who lack what we have in abundance. Help us to hear the cry that you have heard, to understand the need that you have understood, and to serve those whom you have served. Reveal to us the secret of your table: One bread and one humankind."

3. The meaning of the eucharist

The eucharist does not belong to any denomination or to any one church tradition. It is the Lord's Supper, which he offers to his followers on their journey into the future

Where we our Maker see:
 Jesus, Lord, What hast thou done?
 Publish we the death Divine,
 Stop, and gaze, and fall, and own
 Was never love like Thine!

Never love nor sorrow was
 Like that my Jesus show'd;
 See Him stretch'd on yonder cross,
 And crush'd beneath our load!
 We discern the deity,
 Now his heavenly birth declare;
 Faith cries out, 'Tis He, 'tis he,
 My God, that suffers there!

³⁹ See *Den biskopelige methodistkirkes troeslære og disciplin av 1896 med et anhang* ("The teaching and discipline of the Episcopal Methodist Church, 1896, with an appendix", Kristiania: Norsk Forlagsselskabs Forlag 1898), where this is a central theme in the understanding of the eucharist.

that God has in store for them. This is why Baptists and Methodists can celebrate the eucharist together. Unfortunately, the divisions of the church are exposed in the understanding and practice of the eucharist in some other denominations. We look forward to the day when the divisions are healed and all believers can rejoice and give thanks together at a common table.⁴⁰

Baptists

have had an understanding of the eucharist that has traditionally been "non-sacramental" and has often been called symbolic in a Zwinglian sense: "The Lord's supper is an outer sign of participation in Christ and of fellowship with those who are constant in faith and love" (John Smyth, 1610). There have also been other traditions, some more calvinistic, characterised by the use of the English term "ordinance" for the eucharist, and some more sacramental,⁴¹ speaking of the spiritual presence or the real presence of Christ in the eucharist, as can be seen from this document. Today, Norwegian Baptists describe the eucharist as a "real symbol" or a "relational symbol", a symbol which conveys the real presence of Christ and the relationship between Christ and the believer.

Methodists

Among Methodists there has been a movement back to John Wesley's sacramental view of the eucharist. This is reflected in *This Holy Mystery*⁴² where the emphasis is on the real presence of Christ in the celebration of the eucharist.

The joint protestant eucharistic liturgy drawn up by a working party within the Norwegian Christian Council indicates that there is widespread agreement on the contents of the eucharist among protestants.

Here is the invitation:

*The crucified and risen Christ calls us in the eucharistic meal to communion with himself and with his worldwide church through all generations. This supper points back to the death of Jesus on the cross and it points forward to the final banquet in heaven. Jesus has given us a special promise to be present at the eucharist in a wonderful way, bringing forgiveness and restoration, hope and eternal life. All who wish to follow Jesus are therefore invited to participate at his table.*⁴³

Traditionally, the divisions between the churches in eucharistic theology have been over conceptions of how Christ is present. By emphasising both *anamnesis* og *epiclesis*, new approaches have been found, which have contributed to a more comprehensive theological understanding and have brought the churches nearer to one another.

We wish to emphasise together that the eucharist is:

a. In remembrance of Jesus Christ (anamnesis).

⁴⁰ BEM, E19-20 and 33.

⁴¹ See Anthony R. Cross og Philip E. T, editors: *Baptist Sacramentalism*. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

⁴² See Ole Borgen: *John Wesley on the Sacraments* (Zürich 1972).

⁴³ NKR, page 27

The eucharist is a memorial meal, but this means more than just remembering the work of Jesus, more than a subjective reminder of past events. It concerns the sacrifice of Christ for us on the cross, which is made real in the eucharist, and through it in our lives. Christ sacrificed himself once and for all. We present ourselves as a living sacrifice to our Lord, for service to our neighbour in love, justice and peace. The eucharist is also a foretaste of the kingdom of God that is to come.⁴⁴

b. Invocation (epiclesis).

By the Holy Spirit the presence of Christ is made real in the eucharist and in our lives. He meets us with spirit and power for life and service.

c. Fellowship (koinonia).

Jesus says that he gives himself for us, his body and blood. Through partaking of the one bread (1 Corinthians 10:16f) we have communion, fellowship with God and with one another. The congregation is the body of Christ.

d. The new covenant in the blood of Christ. (diatheke)

Our churches have their roots in English puritanism, which emphasised the covenant between Christ, his church and the individual believer. A new community is established, and the eucharist is the sign that we share our lives with one another. We wish to point out the value of the idea of the covenant that Christ establishes with us. It involves obedience in following Jesus and the equality of all believers, whether they are women or men, free or slaves.

e. A sacrament for the world

Together we wish to emphasise the relationship of the eucharist to the church as the communion of saints. By sharing bread and wine the believers who participate are joined together and in this way fulfill the commandment of Jesus in John 15:12ff to love one another. When this unity in love is put into practice as a result of the gift of God in the celebration of the eucharist, the church becomes a "sacrament for the world", in service of the world.

f. To be celebrated until he comes (parousia)

The eucharist is an act where we obey the word of Jesus: "Do this". The eucharist must point forward to the day when God comes and establishes his kingdom. In celebrating its fellowship, the church is given a foretaste of the glory of heaven (see also section 2).

g. Praise and thanksgiving (eucharisti)

The eucharist not only points back to the death of Christ for our sins, but is also a celebration of his resurrection. The resurrection shows us the meaning of the sacrifice of Christ. It is through this recreating and decisive event, death and resurrection, that Christ meets us and transforms us into new creatures, who can receive him in faith. This is the reason for our thanksgiving and praise. In the same way that the disciples who met the risen Christ on their way to Emmaus on Easter day could testify with joy, we can also receive strength to give thanks and praise and to testify, through participating in the eucharist as often as possible.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See BEM E 6.

⁴⁵ See. BEM, E24-26.

4. Celebrating the eucharist

The eucharist is not primarily an item of doctrine but a celebration in worship. The celebration can take many forms. Our churches have different traditions here, but this is not decisive for our understanding of the eucharist or for the possibility of joint celebrations.

The Methodists' celebration of the eucharist has its roots in the Anglican tradition, and in recent times has been influenced by the liturgical movement. All who desire to belong to Christ are invited. Communion has been received kneeling at the altar rail, but intinction is increasingly common. The communicants come forward, receive the bread while standing, dip it in the wine and eat. Some congregations in the USA traditionally receive communion sitting in the pews.

The Baptists also have an open communion table and invite all who believe and who want to follow Jesus to receive communion. The minister leads the ceremony and the distribution is accompanied by bible readings, with an emphasis on the memorial meal aspect: "Do this in remembrance of me!" Traditionally, the communicants sit in the pews, where the stewards distribute the bread and wine without repeating the words of distribution. In some cases the congregation is invited to come forward to receive the bread and wine.

In both traditions it has been the custom to take up a collection for the poor, in order to emphasise the solidarity aspect of the eucharist. This is a continuation of a custom from the early church, where bread left over after communion was distributed to the poor. We encourage our congregations to revive this former practice.

Recommendations and consequences

By joint communion we proclaim that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, that we belong together in the one apostolic, catholic, universal church. We are fellow pilgrims on our way to the kingdom of God. We therefore recommend that:

- joint celebration of the eucharist should take place in our churches, where the respective church's traditions for liturgy and practical arrangements are followed;
- our congregations consider more frequent celebration of the eucharist than is the case today, preferably every Sunday, so that the eucharist is a central part of every service, as was the case in the church in New Testament times;
- renewal and variation is encouraged in the celebration of the eucharist, while we at the same time warn against tendencies to privatise the celebration. We consider it inappropriate to divorce the eucharist from the worship of the church community and to experiment with more "everyday" substitutes for bread and wine.
- in the light of the understanding of the eucharist in this document, joint congregations are established where this is natural, so that the gospel can be proclaimed with greater force and the world may believe (John 17:21).

THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Introduction

Baptists and Methodists regard their own and each other's denomination as part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church which is the body of Christ in the world.

When Jesus left his disciples, the church did not exist. All that was left after his ministry was a little group of followers. He had left the inner circle with a commandment to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), but they were to wait first for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5), which took place at Pentecost. The day of Pentecost is regarded as the birthday of the church, when the first Christian community was formed in Jerusalem.

The news of the resurrection of Christ must have spread quite quickly. After a short while there were church groups in several places. To begin with these were linked to the church at Jerusalem, and were under its leadership.

When Paul came on the scene, there was a period of intense missionary activity directed both at Jews in the diaspora and at gentiles (pagans). At his death there were Christian churches in most of the leading towns of the Roman empire. It was also Paul who formulated the essential theological reflection on the nature and mission of the church.

Baptists and Methodists regard their conception of the nature and mission of the church as a development of the basic pattern fashioned by Paul and the other New Testament authors.

The nature of the church

A key concept in the understanding of the nature of the church in the New Testament is Paul's idea of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12). The church represents the presence of Christ in the world, it is his body, and each member of the church is a part of this body. A closer connection between Christ and his church can hardly be imagined. Each member of the church, by being joined to the body, belongs to Christ.

The church is both a spiritual entity, created by God through the work of the Holy Spirit, and a physical expression of the presence of God in the world.

Jesus did not use the word "church", except in Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17⁴⁶, but he spoke of the kingdom of God, or of heaven, which in his own person had drawn near.

On the one hand, the kingdom of God is present in the world in the person of Jesus Christ himself, and thereby also in the church. But Jesus also speaks of a kingdom of

⁴⁶ Many would say that this verse reflects a later practice within the church..

God that breaks the bounds of the life of the church. At the last supper with his disciples he says that he will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until the day that he drinks it with them "in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29).

The church is thus not the kingdom of God that Jesus speaks of, but the kingdom of God is the destination of the church. Whenever the eucharist is celebrated, the church is pointed forward to the kingdom of God that will come one day. This eschatological dimension, the expectation of the kingdom of God that will come one day, is part of the nature of the church.

The church is also called "the communion of saints". "The saints" here are those who have had their sins forgiven and who let their lives be formed by the sanctifying grace of God. The expression is not a description of the quality of the members' ethical standards, but an affirmation that they belong to the church that has been made holy by the cross and resurrection of Christ.

At the centre of the life of the church we find the believers gathered in worship.⁴⁷

Both Baptist and Methodist forms of worship have their roots in worship in the synagogue, with scripture readings, preaching, prayers and song, and in the New Testament descriptions of worship in the first Christian community, not least in the celebration of the eucharist.

In Norway, both Baptists and Methodists have been influenced by Norwegian low churchmanship, for example in that they have held services of worship on Sunday mornings and more informal meetings of a revivalist nature on Sunday evenings.

Both Baptists and Methodists seek to find a balance between, on the one hand spontaneity and informality, and on the other hand order and tradition. Both have been influenced by the 20th century liturgical renewal, which looks back to forms of worship in the early church, when the church formed its theology, its liturgy and its scriptures. Both the charismatic movement and a growing awareness of the place of children in the church have been renewing elements in services of worship in our two denominations. And customs are increasingly evaluated on the basis of their content rather than their origins, so that meaningful practices such as the lighting of candles and making the sign of the cross are no longer rejected solely on the grounds that they originated in other traditions than our own.

Structures⁴⁸

Both Baptists and Methodists emphasise democracy, but at the same time, both denominations have ministers/pastors who are ordained or consecrated. In addition the Methodist Church has ordained deacons. Both denominations consist of local churches that are linked to national and international bodies. Differences concern the relationship between the local church and the national and international bodies that it is linked to.

⁴⁷ See Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of Baptist and Methodist worship.

⁴⁸ See Appendix 2 for a more detailed description of structures in the two denominations.

The Baptists' structure is "congregational", that is to say that the emphasis is on the independence of the local church. The Methodists' structure is "connexional", with "checks and balances" between local, national and international bodies, between bishops and conferences, between employees and elected committees. In all elected bodies, the church seeks to secure equality between ordained and lay members.

Both denominations ordain both men and women, and seek to maintain a balance with regard to gender, age and geographic representation in their elected bodies.

The ecumenical community

Both churches have a tradition for ecumenical cooperation. Historically, the Methodist Church has had a stronger ecumenical profile than the Baptist Union, but our two churches have stood side by side in the struggle for religious freedom, both internationally and in Norway.

Representatives for our two churches participated actively in the ecumenical initiative that was called *Ekumenisk Krets* (Ecumenical Circle), both made significant contributions to the work of the *Dissentertinget* (The Dissenter Assembly), and both were important in the formation of *Frikirkerådet* (The Free Church Council). Finally, both our churches participated actively in the formation of *Norges Kristne Råd* (The Norwegian Christian Council) Both churches have participated in bilateral conversations, both nationally and internationally. In Norway this has resulted in a joint statement by the Norwegian Baptist Union and the Church of Norway and in an agreement between the Methodist Church and the Church of Norway, "The Fellowship of Grace", with mutual recognition of each other's sacraments and ministries.

Internationally, the Methodist Church is more actively involved in ecumenical fora, especially through participation in the World Council of Churches, where the Norwegian Baptist Union is not yet a member. Other Baptist unions are members of the World Council of Churches and/or of the Conference of European Churches.

Both churches participate actively in their own international church families, the Baptist Union in the European Baptist Federation and Baptist World Alliance, and the Methodist Church in the World Methodist Council. Methodist churches have become part of united churches, for example in South India, Canada and Australia.

The church in the world / the mission of the church

As a matter of principle, both churches are independent of the state. For Baptists, this has been a vital part of their ideological basis since the Reformation – it was in fact the very reason for the origins of the anabaptists. When Methodism was organised as a separate denomination, it went without saying that it was independent of the state.

This does not imply a desire to avoid social and political issues, rather that a free church is better equipped to comment on injustice in society and to participate in a constructive debate on important social issues. From the beginning our members have been active in political life. We regard it as a Christian duty to join with other churches in being a prophetic voice in the development of society.

We believe that the mission of the church in the world is to fulfill the command of Jesus to his disciples: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..." We consider the Great Commission to be an order to preach the gospel leading to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, he who is the Lord of the church. Baptism and the instruction of those who come to believe is part of the fulfillment of the commandment.

Members of the Christian community are also members of the body of Christ. As the body of Christ, the church must symbolise God's continued presence in the world. At the same time it must continue to serve as Jesus did, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Jesus said to (the disciples), 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'." (John 20:21-22)

The church is to be light and salt in the world. This requires words and deeds. In the Pauline section of the New Testament, the emphasis is on preaching the word. In the life and words of Jesus we see a greater emphasis on responsibility for those who are weak, the poor, the oppressed. If the church is to fulfill its function as the body of Christ in the world, it must also take seriously the challenge that Jesus gives his disciples in the gospels. Involvement in society cannot be a voluntary element in the task of the church, but is a central evangelical concern. Jesus outlined his task, which his disciples are to continue, in this way:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

God is on the side of the poor and the oppressed. That is where the church as the body of Christ must also be found. This applies both locally and globally. It means that each local church has a responsibility for those who are in need in the local community. It also means that the church must stand up and speak out for the poor and oppressed in confrontation with governments and oppressive institutions in the international arena.

Human rights and the struggle for human dignity are the task and responsibility of the church as the hands and feet and voice of God in a suffering world.

Appendix 1: Baptist and Methodist forms of worship

Traditionally **Baptists** have tried to come as near as possible to the form of worship described in the New Testament. In practice, puritanism, pietism and various revival movements have had an equally strong influence.

Services have been simple, with preaching as the central element. Scripture readings, extempore prayer and singing are other integral items in worship. The active participation of lay persons has shaped worship. The subjective element in songs and prayers has been characteristic, and spontaneous utterances have been common. A set liturgical framework has been shunned, the ideal has been "freedom in the Spirit".

The past 20 years have seen a greater variation in worship, with both liturgical, charismatic and modern forms, and the use of media and dance. Preaching still dominates, but the influence of more liturgical traditions makes itself felt, for example in that a number of Baptist churches now have candle globes⁴⁹ which are used in services at the intercessions. The choice of hymns and songs is more varied than before, and can include newer choruses of praise and hymns from the churches' common treasury.

The eucharist has also gradually been given a more important role in worship. It is celebrated monthly. Since Baptist churches do not have an altar ring, bread and wine are traditionally distributed in the pews. In some churches and on some occasions the communicants are invited to come forward and receive the elements while standing.

Methodist meetings were in the beginning a supplement to worship in the Church of England, and John Wesley forbade Methodists to hold meetings at the same time as services in the parish churches. Methodist meetings consisted of preaching, singing (mostly Charles Wesley's hymns) and extempore prayer. When he celebrated the eucharist, John Wesley always added extempore prayer and an invocation of the Holy Spirit (epiclesis). Otherwise he followed the practices of the high church "non-jurors", for example that the elements should be received kneeling before an altar. Wesley recommended that the eucharist should be celebrated every Sunday, and every day during the seasons of Christmas and Easter. The Methodist revival was to a great extent a eucharistic revival.

During the 19th century, Methodism was influenced by low-church revival practices, not least from America, but in the 20th century the eucharist has received more attention. Methodist churches internationally – though to a lesser extent in Norway – have been influenced by the liturgical movement, which finds inspiration in the worship of the early church, at the time when the church formed its liturgy, its theology and its scriptures.

Appendix 2 – Baptist and Methodist structures

Baptist structures

Baptists are organised in local churches in which a members' meeting makes all decisions that affect the life of the church. Baptist churches in Norway work together in the Norwegian Baptist Union, which organises joint activities on behalf of the churches. The general

⁴⁹ A common item of furniture in Norwegian churches: a freestanding metal frame shaped like a globe, with a large candle in the centre and holders for smaller candles in a ring around it. Churchgoers can light the smaller candles as an act of prayer. (*Translator's footnote.*)

secretary is the administrative leader of the denomination, but has an unclear mandate when it comes to spiritual leadership. The National Congress (*Landsmøtet*) is the highest legislative body in the denomination. Decisions at the National Congress are not binding for the churches, but have moral authority or an advisory function. The national executive and administration are bound by decision made at the congress.

Great emphasis is placed on the priesthood of all believers. The pastors, who are the churches' spiritual leaders, are consecrated (ordained) for their task or service by the laying on of hands and prayer, and the candidate makes a solemn promise to live and teach according to the word of God. Baptists have hesitated to use the word "ordination", because the term can be thought to imply that those who are ordained are placed in a qualitatively different relationship to God and the church than lay people, and this would weaken the concept of the priesthood of all believers. The term "consecrated for service" (*innviet til tjeneste*) has therefore been preferred. In spite of this reservation, most Baptist ministers will answer yes if they are asked whether they are ordained. Ordination is not dependent upon any specific theological qualifications, though most pastors have received basic theological training. It is *service* that is the basis of ordination, not some special training. In a similar way, missionaries are consecrated for service before being sent out to tasks in other countries.

The group that leads the local church is usually called the church council (*menighetsråd*), and consists of deacons and pastors (*diakonat og eldsteråd*). Some churches have both lay elders and deacons (members of the church council) each with specific tasks. These are elected by the members' meeting (*menighetsmøtet*), usually for a limited period of time. Members of the church council are consecrated for their service by a simple ritual.

All decisions concerning the life and teaching of the local church are made by the members at a members' meeting (*menighetsmøte*). Most issues are decided by a simple majority. Attempts to transfer significant decision-making to the pastor or a group of leaders, at the expense of the authority of the members' meeting, have not caught on in Baptist churches.

Democracy is deeply rooted in the Baptist tradition. All members who are present have the right to vote at the members' meeting.

Methodist structures

The founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, were clergymen in the Church of England. They accepted the ecclesiastical structures that had emerged during the Middle Ages with the pope as the head of the church, and the changes at the Reformation, when papal dominion was replaced by national church structures.

After his spiritual breakthrough on 24th May 1738, John Wesley was called to preach the personal aspect of Christianity, within the framework of the theology, liturgy and polity of the Church of England. Gradually, his loyalty to the structures of the church was weakened. Wesley was persuaded to be so "vile" that he preached in the open air and thus violated the parish structure and the authority of the parish priests – "The world is my parish", he declared. What he perceived as exceptional circumstances because of the revival, led him to accept both male and female lay preachers – but he strongly resisted moves by some Methodists to let lay persons celebrate the eucharist.

The decisive break with Anglican church discipline came when the lack of ministers to serve Christians in the USA after the War of Independence led Wesley to ordain Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey as presbyters and to appoint Thomas Coke, who was already ordained, as superintendent for the Methodist work in America. When they arrived in the USA, Coke was to ordain Francis Asbury and appoint him too as superintendent. But Asbury insisted that the conference of Methodists in America should elect both him and Coke, before they began their work. At the same time they took the title "bishop" for themselves, instead of

"superintendent", a move that Wesley protested strongly against. He had only acted as he did because he was convinced that clergy in the early church had the right to ordain others to the same rank as themselves in an emergency – but not to a higher office.

This account illustrates three important principles in the Methodist view of church order: respect for tradition, democracy and flexibility – which is to say that extending the kingdom of God comes before all other considerations.

Wesley built up a structure with small groups (classes or bands), local churches (societies) and a national conference. This structure was developed further after Wesley's death, when Methodism was organised as a separate denomination.

Internationally, Methodism has two main organisational forms. In Methodist churches with their origins in English Methodism, the annual conference in each country is the highest authority. In Methodist churches with their origins in American Methodism (The United Methodist Church), the highest authority is the General Conference, which meets every four years. Under this are episcopal areas with a Central Conference. Norway belongs to the Northern European area, consisting of the Scandinavian countries, the Baltic States and Russia. Each country has its annual conference, with superintendents, elders (ordained ministers) and ordained deacons; and each local church has its annual church conference, which among other things elects a church council. All the Methodist churches in the world, and all united churches that Methodist churches have become a part of, are represented in the umbrella organisation World Methodist Council.