

Study Guide for *Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church*

The Report of the Trilateral Conversations between Lutherans, Mennonites, and Catholics (2012-2017)

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A. Introduction

We are deeply grateful to the MWC delegates to the Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversations: †Alfred Neufeld Friesen (Paraguay), co-chair, Larry Miller (France/USA), co-secretary, Fernando Enns (Germany), Rebecca Osiro (Kenya), and John D. Rempel (Canada). We also thank Catholic and Lutheran participants who journeyed this path of unity in Christ together with them.

The trilateral conversations have offered Anabaptists/Mennonites an opportunity both to listen to and be listened to by church communions from whom they have been estranged for centuries. Baptism has been one significant factor in that estrangement. Even the designation “Anabaptist” (literally “re-baptizer”) witnesses to this fractured history. Opponents of Anabaptists revived an ancient label to accuse Anabaptists of “re-baptizing” those already baptized as infants, thereby rejecting God’s salvation of these children. Anabaptists saw themselves not as “re-baptizing” but as baptizing persons for the first time on their confession of faith, in effect declaring baptism of infants not to be baptism at all. Misunderstanding, distrust, and even persecution have marked the relationships between these communions and Anabaptists for centuries. This historic trilateral conversation and the resulting *Report*¹ are thus witness to a genuine desire to overcome this estrangement, as well as to take on a matter that goes to the heart of the identity and convictions of all three communions.

The trilateral conversations build on trust developed in two preceding dialogues Mennonites have had with these two communions. The first, with Catholics (1998-2003), resulted in *Called to be Peacemakers*². The second, with Lutherans (2005-2008), produced *Healing of Memories: Reconciling in Christ*³. It laid the groundwork for deeply moving moments of reconciliation, first in 2009 at the MWC Assembly in Asuncion, Paraguay, then at the Lutheran Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2010. Moved by those dialogues and the celebration of reconciliation, a three-way conversation was proposed in 2011 to address baptism. Readers will find references throughout the *Report* to both *Called to be Peacemakers* and *Healing of Memories*, as well as to the 1999 Catholic-Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*⁴.

Neither the trilateral conversations nor the *Report* attempted to settle deeply held differences over baptism. The purpose was, rather, to listen, to explain, to see oneself through the eyes of others, with openness to grow together into the unity of the Spirit in the body of Christ. All three delegations expressed the hope that each communion will be strengthened in

¹ The full *Report* is available at <https://mwc-cmm.org/resources/baptism-and-incorporation-body-christ-church>.

² <https://mwc-cmm.org/resources/called-together-be-peacemakers>

³ <https://mwc-cmm.org/resources/healing-memories-reconciling-christ>

⁴ https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2019/documents/190603-joint_declaration_on_the_doctrine_of_justification_20_anniversary_edition-en.pdf

1 faithfulness as it pertains to baptism. At the same time, they wished to remain open to surprises
2 the Spirit might bring to those desiring to walk together in the unity of the Spirit, including
3 openness to the possibility that differences need not only divide, but can enhance and enrich.

4 In that spirit that the Faith and Life Commission invites our global Anabaptist family to
5 carefully engage the findings and considerations in this *Report*.
6
7

8 **B. Purpose of the *Study Guide***

10 This *Study Guide* is an aid for member churches of the Mennonite World Conference to receive
11 and process the *Report* on the trilateral conversations on baptism. It is *not a replacement* for the
12 rich and carefully worded *Report*, but an aid to deeper consideration of the *Report*.

13 The structure of the *Report* is therefore retained in the *Study Guide*. After a Preface and
14 Introduction [§§1-6], Chapter One of the *Report* [§§7-54] focuses on the relationship of baptism
15 to sin and grace, Chapter Two [§§55-83] on communicating grace and faith in relation to
16 baptism, and Chapter Three [§§84-112] on baptism and discipleship. The Conclusion [§§113-
17 164] focuses on convictions, gifts, challenges, and considerations. References direct readers to
18 the numbered paragraphs in the *Report* (e.g. [§120]). Questions for reflection and testing in the
19 *Study Guide* are formulated to aid Mennonite readers in considering the *Report*, and are clearly
20 identified as such.

21 The *Report* sometimes uses “Anabaptist” to characterize the Mennonite positions. The
22 *Study Guide* thus sometimes refers to “Anabaptist/Mennonite” positions. It thereby recognizes
23 that some member churches of the MWC (e.g., Brethren in Christ) do not identify strictly as
24 “Mennonite.”
25
26

27 **C. Chapter One Baptism with Respect to Sin and Grace**

28
29 Whereas Mennonites might begin a discussion of baptism in relation to discipleship and
30 membership in the congregation, Catholics and Lutherans place sin and grace at the forefront of
31 the consideration of baptism.
32

33 **1. Catholic perspective on Sin, Grace, and Baptism** [§§8-21]

34
35 For Catholics “original sin” is a key component of the relationship of sin and grace to baptism.
36 Humanity is burdened from the outset by the sin of Adam (Rom 5:12). While Catholics
37 acknowledge this to be “a mystery that we cannot fully understand” [§19], infants “inherit” the
38 sinful and guilty state which estranges them from God [§19], and makes it impossible for
39 humans to seek God on their own [§13]. Only Christ as “mediator” [§15] can remove that
40 “original” sin and guilt and restore the divine-human relationship.

41 Baptism is an essential part of the “unconditional initiative of God in bringing about
42 human salvation” [§13]. It removes the inherited state of sinfulness, rendering the baptized,
43 whether adult or infant, fit for heaven [§15]. In baptism one is reborn into the body of Christ, and
44 thus participates in the salvation God has granted. Pope John Paul II put it memorably: referring
45 to infants, but relevant to all who are baptized, “they are truly baptized for the remission of sin,
46 so that what they contracted in generation may be cleansed by regeneration” [§15, n.22].

1 While baptized persons remain vulnerable to committing sins (“concupiscence”), grace as
2 experienced in baptism has freed them to decide against acting sinfully. When they do fail, the
3 Church offers to them the “sacrament of reconciliation” or “confession” [§15]. Catholics stress
4 that baptism is God’s gracious initiative, seeking to awaken the response of a life lived in
5 faithfulness to baptism [§16].

6 But what about those who, “without blame on their part” have not been baptized [§18]?
7 Here Catholics speak of the “baptism of desire” and the “baptism of martyrdom” [§17; see also
8 §159], where the desire for a relationship with the triune God brings about salvation. Catholics
9 cite the Vatican’s *Gaudium et spes*: “God brings about his salvific action through the sacraments;
10 but God’s salvific action is not confined by these special means entrusted to the Church. [...T]he
11 Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being
12 associated with this paschal mystery” [§21].

13
14 To sum up the Catholic view:

- 15 a. All persons are burdened with the effects of Adam’s “original” sin and carry that guilt
16 from birth.
- 17 b. Baptism washes away that “original sin”, providing salvation and new birth into the body
18 of Christ.
- 19 c. It is not only permissible, but in keeping with God’s saving initiative that through
20 baptism infants are brought into that realm of grace and benefit from the beginning of
21 their lives from the grace offered in the sacraments of the church.
- 22 d. Even so, God’s gracious and loving initiative to save is so strong that it is not limited to
23 those who through no fault of their own have not been baptized.

26 **2. Lutheran Perspective on Sin, Grace, and Baptism** [§§22-29]

27
28 Lutherans agree with Catholics regarding the deadly effect of Adam’s sin. But their focus falls
29 more on the “human heart,” that is, on the “inner” human nature of persons which is from the
30 very outset “without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupiscence,” that is, with the
31 tendency to sinful behaviour (quoting the Lutheran *Augsburg Confession*) [§22]. It is not so
32 much “sins” that need to be dealt with as the human incapacity to love God. Even good deeds
33 can be self-directed rather than God-directed, and thus sinful. “Only love for God and for God’s
34 sake makes our acting right” [§23]. Given the radical nature of sin, “the overcoming of sin
35 requires the dying and rising of the person: this happens in baptism” [§25].

36 Only God can raise to new life. Only God can justify. Only God can “promise” salvation.
37 The “word of promise” is given in the sacrament of baptism. This “requires faith,” since
38 believing the divine promise is what makes baptism effective as the communication of grace
39 [§27]. Nevertheless, baptism is *God’s* action, *God’s* gracious initiative to justify and renew.

40 In the sacrament of baptism the Holy Spirit “uses the word of promise, spoken in
41 proclamation or communicated through the sacrament, [and] begins to transform the person”
42 [§25]. Just as Catholics speak of the ongoing “concupiscence” of those who have been baptized,
43 Lutherans are aware that “transformation is never completed. [...W]e never get to the point of
44 offering our person in fullness to God, and this precisely is sin” [§25]. Hence Luther’s famous
45 claim that we are simultaneously just and sinner. At the same time, the Spirit of Christ continues

1 the transforming work of grace in the baptized, calling and enabling them to do good deeds. This
2 process requires the life-long “remembering” of this divine promise.

3 Lutherans conclude with the assertion that since baptism is *God’s* promise, it is valid
4 even if a person does not trust in it [§29], drawing on 2 Timothy 2:13 for support: “If we are
5 faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” Baptism is God’s act. Consequently,
6 “there is no basic difference whether a person is baptized as infant or adult” [§29]. A non-
7 Lutheran will sense an evident tension with the earlier assertion of the necessity of faith for
8 baptism to be effective [27].

9
10 To sum up the Lutheran perspective:

- 11 a. Human beings are born into a state of estrangement from God.
- 12 b. Their purpose is to love God wholly. They cannot do so on their own.
- 13 c. They therefor place their trust (faith) in God’s promise given in the sacrament of baptism,
14 a faith that is rekindled in life-long “remembering” of the promise.
- 15 d. Baptism opens the door for the Spirit to do the work of transformation, enabling a life of
16 faithfulness.

17 18 19 **3. *Mennonite perspective on Sin, Grace, and Baptism* [§§30-42]**

20
21 From the beginning, Anabaptists shared with others the belief in the “fallen nature of humanity”
22 [§30], and thus in “original sin.” Humanity is “infected” with sin. Without Christ humans are
23 without hope [§30].

24 However, Anabaptists did not and do not share the deep pessimism of the Reformers
25 regarding the “bondage of the will.” While there is an “inborn tendency” to sin, “original sin,”
26 “[o]nly conscious acts have the quality of obedience or disobedience, faith or sin [§34].

27 Mennonites thus speak of sin in several related ways: “inborn tendency” to sin, sins that
28 are deliberately committed as a result, and “structural sin” that manifests itself, for example, in
29 pervasive violence, which implicates persons in collective rebellion against the will of God for
30 human life [§39].

31 Anabaptists ascribe this capacity to make choices, either good or sinful, to God’s
32 “prevenient grace” bestowed on all humanity [§35]. But it is only through the resurrection of
33 Christ and the reign of the Spirit that full humanity has been restored. Believers participate in
34 that restoration, so that “although the inborn tendency to sin is never entirely overcome, they
35 have been set free to obey God (see Romans 8:10-13)” [§36].

36 In the Anabaptist understanding, justification means both a change in the person’s
37 “standing before God” and a “metamorphosis of the person in a moral sense,” (Romans 7 and 8;
38 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; 5:11-21, Ephesians 2:8-10) [§38]. Believers are forgiven *and* transformed
39 into persons who can follow Jesus and obey his teachings. Anabaptists speak of this aspect of
40 justification as “sanctification,” a conscious surrender to God’s promise and Jesus’ example
41 [§38]. They do so not on their own strength, which too often leads to legalism, but by the Spirit
42 at work within them [§38]. The recent focus on structural sin and systemic violence has moved
43 the discussion to include, in addition to an individual’s sinful acts, both conscious and
44 unconscious resistance to God’s will [§39].

45 The God-given ability to choose is evident in relation to baptism in the Anabaptist
46 *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527: “Baptism shall be given to all those who have been *taught*

1 repentance and the amendment of life, and who *believe* truly that their sins are taken away, and
2 to all who *desire* to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” [§40]. At the same time, when
3 Anabaptists describe dying and rising with Christ, becoming part of the body of Christ, and
4 receiving the Holy Spirit, they are describing the believer’s “conversion” through the Spirit
5 [§40]. Water baptism is not conversion per se but the “recapitulation” of that profound change. It
6 is an “outward and public testimony of the inward baptism of the Spirit” [§40].
7

- 8 a. Water baptism is *God’s* act in so far as it “represents” and “completes” the deliverance
9 and transformation in the believer’s life through the Spirit [§§40, 48].
- 10 b. Baptism is the *believer’s* act in that it is a “pledge,” “testimony,” or “witness” [§§40, 42,
11 48], a solemn promise to follow Christ as part of the body of Christ. “Baptism enacts a
12 believer’s renunciation of evil, repentance, forgiveness, and death to sin through grace”
13 [§40].
- 14 c. Lastly, baptism is the act of a local, “visible” *congregation* representing Christ’s
15 universal body as “the agent of the Spirit” [§§40, 48]. It tests the integrity of the
16 believer’s confession and change of life, and it administers baptism as “the testimony of
17 the Spirit” [§42].

18
19 There is no room in the Anabaptist framework for baptizing infants who are not yet able
20 to experience or express the “inner processes” of repentance, faith, or promise of following Jesus
21 [§48]. As to “how God’s grace embraces children” [§41], Anabaptists have generally held that
22 until children are old enough to discern and to be held accountable, they “remain innocent” and
23 are “heirs of salvation” [§41].
24

25 To sum up the Mennonite perspective:

- 26
27 a. Humanity, along with all creation, is “infected by sin” and burdened with a “tendency to
28 sin.”
- 29 b. To “sin” nevertheless requires a conscious choice or decision.
- 30 c. The idea of “structural sin” and pervasive violence helps to understand how choices
31 function within a larger context that influences those choices.
- 32 d. God’s grace makes it possible for humans to make bad choices, but also to seek God.
- 33 e. The Spirit of God collaborates with humans in their coming to faith, in their conversion,
34 in their experience of forgiveness, and in their decision to follow Jesus within the body of
35 Christ.
- 36 f. Baptism is a public sign of God’s work in the person’s life, of transformation, and a
37 pledge to faithfully participate in the life and mission of the church.

38 39 **4. *Common Perspectives and Differences***

- 40
41 a. All three communions agree on “original sin” as setting the scene for human sinning and
42 alienation from God. They also agree that the concept of “hereditary sin” was based on a
43 mistranslation of Romans 5:12, and thus should be discarded [§§43-45]. Paul’s original
44 Greek was translated in a way that implied that Adam passed on his own guilt to the
45 human family, incurred at birth. There is agreement that it is best translated as “just as sin
46 came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to

1 all because all have sinned” [§43]. All agree that “sin is a power before us, behind us, and
2 around us” [§44]. Recent understandings of structural or systemic evil point to individual
3 sinful actions having a larger context of alienation from the will of God.
4

- 5 b. While all agree that “sin can only be overcome by grace, by the divine initiative, by the
6 Holy Spirit” [§46], how that is understood varies. *Catholics* stress “human cooperation”
7 in salvation, while *Lutherans* stress “human passivity,” since they hold that humans are
8 incapable of participating in their salvation. *Mennonites* leave room for the “human role”
9 in coming to salvation [§46], since they believe that God’s grace enables human ability to
10 choose and to act.
11
- 12 c. All three communions agree that baptism plays a decisive role in communicating God’s
13 saving grace [§47]. That is one reason *Catholics* and *Lutherans*, while baptizing both
14 infants and adults, have historically stressed the importance of infant baptism. In baptism
15 God communicates or delivers forgiving and saving grace to the child or adult.
16 *Mennonites*, in contrast, view infants as innocent until able to choose. God’s grace
17 enables persons to seek God’s forgiveness and pledge themselves to faithfulness in
18 baptism. Baptism communicates grace in the sense of being a sign of what God’s grace
19 has already done. While the Bible gives a clear command to baptize (e.g., Matt 28:19-
20 20), none of the communions confines salvation to the baptized. All acknowledge that
21 God’s drive to save (1 Tim 2:4) goes beyond human understanding [§49].
22
- 23 d. All three communions agree on the connection between baptism, forgiveness of sin, and
24 the transformation of the baptized person [§§50-54]. They all agree that the struggle with
25 sin is an ongoing reality the baptized. All agree also, however, that baptism leads to a
26 transformed life expressed in “good works” (Eph 2:8-10) [§54]. This is explored more
27 fully in the third chapter focused on discipleship.
28

Questions for Reflection and Testing

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- 31
- 32 1. What do you appreciate in the Catholic and Lutheran understandings of baptism in
33 relation to sin and grace? Are there new insights that lead you to deeper understanding
34 of and respect for how Catholic and Lutheran sisters and brothers view baptism,
35 including that of infants, and why it is important to them? Are there insights from which
36 Anabaptists/Mennonites can learn?
37
 - 38 2. What do you find puzzling or even troubling in Catholic and Lutheran perspectives from
39 the perspective of your own convictions, beliefs, or reading of the Bible?
40
 - 41 3. The MWC is a global family. Some Mennonites come from generations raised in
42 churches with long established traditions. Others have been drawn into the community
43 only recently. Does the Anabaptist/Mennonite perspective presented in the *Report* reflect
44 your own background and experience of how baptism is taught and practiced, or of how
45 you have come to understand your own baptism?
46
 - 47 4. Does the *Report* reflect what you think Mennonite or Anabaptist teaching is on sin,
48 grace, conversion, and baptism?

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2
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5
5. What new light does the *Report* bring to your own understanding of baptism as it relates to sin and grace? Does it encourage you to deepen and strengthen your appreciation of your own baptism?
- 6
7

8 **D. Chapter Two Baptism: Communicating Grace and Faith**

9
10 Chapter Two builds on and in some measure reiterates Chapter One. But the focus now shifts
11 slightly”: first, to the relationship between baptism and a “life-long process of being a Christian;”
12 second, to how the three communions practice baptism, the role faith plays, and to incorporation
13 into the church; third, to the shared concern that theology is not nearly always matched by
14 practice [§55]. Importantly, differences that often have caused painful mutual condemnation are
15 fully acknowledged with the intention to more fully live into the unity of the body of Christ.

16
17 **1. The Place of Baptism in the Lifelong Process of Being a Christian**

18
19 All three delegations agree on the following [§§56-57, 62]:

- 20
21 a. All humans are sinners in need of redemption [§62].
22 b. God’s initiative is primary in baptism.
23 c. Community is centrally involved in both baptism and formation.
24 d. Baptism is part of a life-long process of discipleship, which culminates in “the fullness of
25 eternal life promised and accomplished by Jesus’ victory over sin and death” [§57].
26

27 When Catholics and Lutherans baptize adults, their convictions sound remarkably similar to
28 Anabaptist convictions [§§57, 62]. It is at exactly at those points of agreement, however, that
29 important differences emerge:

- 30
31 a. *Mennonites* view baptism as an “outward sign” of an “inner process” [§48] that *precedes*
32 the moment of baptism [§58]. Coming to faith, experiencing forgiveness, conversion, and
33 desire to join the body of Christ in a local congregation are a “precondition” of water
34 baptism [§62]. Anabaptists/Mennonites refer to this prior process as “the baptism of the
35 Spirit” [§58]. While in that sense God acts before and in baptism, baptism is also an act
36 by the one being baptized, who thereby gives a pledge in response to forgiveness and
37 conversion. The congregation acts in that it tests the integrity of this pledge, a pledge of
38 such gravity that it might cost the life of the baptized person, the “baptism of blood”
39 [§58].
40

41 *Lutherans* view baptism as “essentially an act of God, performed through human actions
42 and words” spoken by pastor and community [§59]. Faith, even in an infant, is trusting
43 that “word of promise” made visible in baptism.
44

45 *Catholics* agree with Lutherans on baptism as God’s act, the sacrament through which the
46 one baptized responds to the gospel. They see much of what Mennonites view as

1 discipleship and active participation in the life and mission of the church as a “principle
2 effect” of baptism [§60].
3

4 In short, what Mennonites see as *precondition*, Catholics and Lutherans see as *effect*.
5

- 6 b. *Mennonites* hold that baptism cannot be properly offered to those unable to experience
7 conversion and to make a conscious decision themselves to confess their faith and
8 commit to discipleship. That rules out infant baptism [§61].
9

10 *Catholics* and *Lutherans*, since they view baptism as first and foremost *God’s* act to save
11 and renew, hold that baptism of infants “is not only possible by required” by what the
12 New Testament teaches about the “universal offer of grace to all, including infants” [§61;
13 it is “needed for their salvation” (§49)]. Indeed, baptizing infants expresses clearly the
14 “absolute gratuity” of grace [§61]. To “re”-baptize someone already having experienced
15 the divine act of renewal as a child or infant is to deny *God’s* gracious initiative [§61].
16

- 17 c. *Lutherans*, *Catholics* and *Mennonites* agree that baptism is the first step in a life-long
18 process of discipleship. The community of parents and church is thus critical for
19 nurturing that embryonic faith. Despite their deep differences, the three communions see
20 this emphasis on the connection of discipleship to baptism providing an opportunity to
21 place the historic controversy between Anabaptists and Catholics and Lutherans in a
22 “new framework” [§62].
23

24 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**

- 25
- 26 1. Does the Anabaptist/Mennonite understanding presented here match your own
27 experience of baptism and what led to it, or how baptism is taught and practiced in your
28 congregation?
29
 - 30 2. Was your baptism preceded by your personal experience of forgiveness and conversion,
31 and did you understand that baptism was your pledge to surrender to Christ in
32 discipleship, regardless of cost?
33
 - 34 3. Does the Anabaptist/Mennonite identification of “baptism of the Spirit” as the work of the
35 Spirit leading to water baptism enrich your understanding of Spirit and water baptism?
36
 - 37 4. How much has your baptism motivated and oriented your discipleship?
38
 - 39 5. Can Anabaptists learn from Catholic and Lutheran understandings? If so, what would
40 that be?
41
 - 42 6. What do you think a “new framework” might look like?
43
44

45 **2. The Celebration of Baptism**

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47
48

1 All three communions fully agree that baptism goes back to Jesus' own clear instruction in the
2 Great Commission (Matt 28:19). They also agree that very early in the history of the church the
3 basic rite of baptism was celebrated in "relatively stable format" [§63]. Basic elements included
4 proclamation of Word, renunciation of sin, public profession of faith, and water baptism in the
5 name of the Trinity [§63]. Both differences and similarities emerge when the three communions
6 describe how they celebrate baptism.
7

- 8 a. *Catholics* celebrate baptism with numerous elements: sign of the cross on the forehead,
9 proclamation of the Word eliciting the response of faith, exorcism, anointing with oil,
10 invocation of the Spirit over the water, recitation of the creed, triple immersion or
11 pouring with the trinitarian formula, anointing with oil, clothing with white garment to
12 symbolize "putting on Christ," a candle signifying Christ as light of the world, the
13 "Ephphetha" prayer for the opening of ear and mouth, the Lord's Prayer, and a
14 concluding blessing [§64]. Most important is the profession of faith and the baptism with
15 water in the name of the Trinity [§65].

16 Baptism cannot be separated from the other two "sacraments of initiation,"
17 namely, confirmation and the Eucharist. When Catholics baptize infants, the sacrament of
18 confirmation acknowledges a process of growth in discipleship in which parents and
19 godparents have had and continue to play a critical role [§65].
20

- 21 b. *Lutherans* include many of these elements, but have added Martin Luther's "*Flood*
22 *Prayer*," which makes a connection between baptism and both Noah's flood and the
23 Exodus from Egypt. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 and Jesus' calling of children
24 in Mark 10 are typically read. Central is the emphasis on God's agency. It is not water by
25 itself, but the God's "word of promise" together with that water that creates the
26 sacrament. Faith is trust in that promise. In Luther's words, "it is not baptism that justifies
27 or benefits anyone, but it is faith in the word of promise to which baptism is added. This
28 faith justifies, and fulfills that which baptism signifies." [§66].
29

- 30 c. *Mennonites* have greater variety in the way they celebrate baptism. While modes of
31 baptism vary, it is always "believers' baptism" [§67]. A request to be baptized,
32 catechetical instruction, congregational testing and approval of the request *precede*
33 baptism. Of critical importance is that the request emerge from personal confession of
34 sin, personal experience of grace and forgiveness, commitment to Christ and
35 congregation, and an understanding that baptism is a response to God's gracious initiative
36 to save.

37 Importantly, the local congregation is "the manifestation of the Church universal,
38 the body of Christ" [§67]. It is before the congregation that the person being baptized
39 professes faith; it is the congregation that carries the responsibility to test, evaluate, and
40 affirm the fitness of the candidate. In a worship service in which the whole congregation
41 participates, Scriptures are read (e.g., Matthew 28; Romans 6; 1 Peter 3; 2 Corinthians 5),
42 and a pastor or designated person baptizes with water in the name of the Trinity. The
43 baptismal celebration concludes with the Lord's prayer, a blessing, and often
44 communion, serving as a welcome into the body of Christ [§67].
45

1 All three communions agree that *baptism cannot be repeated* [§68]. That agreement also exposes
2 one of the deepest disagreements:
3

- 4 a. *Catholics* believe that “it is Christ who baptizes; a human being cannot nullify the action
5 of Christ by ‘re-baptizing’ another.” Such an act can have no theological “reality,”
6 standing “in opposition to the action of Christ” [§68].
7
- 8 b. *Lutherans* view re-baptism as “distrust in God’s promise, [...making] God a liar” [§68].
9
- 10 c. Even though *Mennonites* have adopted “Anabaptism” (re-baptism) as a positive label,
11 they too hold that baptism cannot be repeated. By implication, infant baptism is not
12 recognized as baptism, since it is not preceded by personal profession of faith [§68].
13

Questions for Reflection and Testing

- 14 1. How is baptism celebrated in your setting? Were you baptized by immersion? By pouring
15 or sprinkling? Did that play a role in the symbolism you saw in your baptism?
16
- 17 2. Would Mennonite celebrations of baptism be enriched by greater attention to the
18 meaning of the components and elements of the rite of baptism?
19
- 20 3. Since all three communions agree that baptism cannot be repeated, do you see a way in
21 which the gulf separating them can be bridged?
22
- 23 4. There have been times when Mennonites did not recognize each other’s baptisms when
24 the mode of baptism was not acceptable or when persons were thought not to have
25 experienced personal conversion. Is that similar or different from not recognizing the
26 baptism of infants? Does the overcoming of such differences among Mennonites point to
27 a way the gulf dividing them from Catholics and Lutherans might be addressed?
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31

3. *Sacrament and/or Ordinance*

32
33
34
35
36 All three communions agree that “something happens” in baptism [§69]. That is easier for
37 *Catholics* and *Lutherans* to claim, given their understanding of baptism as “sacrament,” an act of
38 God that offers grace, forgiveness and new birth. When *Mennonites* speak of baptism as an
39 “ordinance,” they too speak of “something happening,” in that the believer gives public witness
40 to what has happened. But the believer also pledges faithfulness as now part of the body of
41 Christ, empowered by the Spirit to life-long discipleship. Baptism is a “sign” of what has
42 happened and what will happen.

43 The three communions also agree that there are three actors: God, the individual, and the
44 community.
45

- 46 a. *Lutherans*: The “efficacy” of baptism is premised on God’s promise, given through the
47 sacrament of baptism, “performed through human actions and words” [§69].
48

- 1 b. *Mennonites*: Baptism is not only a “sign,” pointing to the work of Christ and “inviting”
2 participation in the life of Christ. It is also the occasion for both the person baptized and
3 the community to experience “effectual change”. This change must be “verified,”
4 however, in the faith and life of both baptized and community [§§69, 70].
5
- 6 c. *Catholics*: It is Christ who baptizes, performed by the “Mystical Body of Jesus Christ,
7 that is, by the Head and His members.” Baptism “communicates” or bestows the grace of
8 Christ [§§69, 70].
9

10 *Mennonites* view baptism as a sign that is “expressive” of change that has taken place, is
11 taking place, and will take place. *Catholics* and *Lutherans* stress “the instrumental nature of the
12 sacrament” [§71, n82]. While they agree that a “tremendous change of life” occurs in baptism,
13 *Mennonites* would not agree that such change can happen for infants, nor would *Catholics* and
14 *Lutherans* associate that change with the rebaptizing of those previously baptized, whether as an
15 infant or as an adult.
16
17

Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. What do you think “happened” at your baptism? Or should something have “happened” that didn’t?
2. *Mennonites* prefer “ordinance” to “sacrament” when speaking of baptism. Might it help the communions to move closer to each other if there were awareness that “sacramentum” originally meant “oath,” which is very close to the “pledge” *Mennonites* associate with baptism? Do *Mennonites* stress the sacramentum (pledge) of the believer, whereas *Lutherans* and *Catholics* put the stress the sacramentum (promise) of God?
3. *Catholics* and *Lutherans* believe that in baptism God acts supernaturally to communicate grace and salvation. In your experience, do *Mennonites* see baptism as a supernatural event? Or is it a “natural” sign of the supernatural event of coming to faith and becoming part of the body of Christ?
4. Might a wedding be a useful analogy for what *Mennonites* believe “happens” in baptism? Marriage is the blessing of vows, of promises, that changes the status of those getting married—the two become “one flesh.” But the falling in love, the growing desire to share life, the testing of the decision, all precede the life-changing celebration. And the wedding ceremony is only the beginning of the marriage, which is to last a lifetime. It requires daily living out, as well as moments of intentional remembering and even renewal.

4. *Baptism and Faith*

1 All three communions agree that baptism and faith are “intimately and inseparably related”
2 [§72]. For Catholics and Lutherans who believe infants “can and should” be baptized as it is
3 “necessary for salvation” [§73], faith is important in the following ways:
4

- 5 a. *Lutherans* quote Martin Luther: “Without faith baptism is of no use, although in itself it is
6 an infinite treasure.” The see Mark 10:15, where Jesus says that it is children who inherit
7 the kingdom of God, as implying the even an infant has faith and trusts in God’s promise
8 [§74]. It is embryonic faith, to be sure, that needs to be nurtured by the faith of parents
9 and godparents, but it is faith. Is this a Lutheran way of seeing infant baptism as
10 “believer’s baptism”?
11
- 12 b. *Catholics* stress that baptism is a “sacrament of faith” [§74], in that the infant is born into
13 a community of faith in which its own faith is nurtured and formed by the faith of parents
14 and the Church.
15
- 16 c. *Mennonites* hold to “believer’s baptism,” and thus make faith central. They hold that any
17 notion of faith that does not have the person able to profess their own faith, and is not
18 able to realize the “basic meaning and implications” of their baptism, is therefore “not
19 acceptable” [§74].
20

21 Despite these “inherited differences” there is agreement on the importance of faith in relation to
22 baptism, and on the church being the context in which that faith is shared, nurtured, and grows.
23 There is also agreement that despite the import link between baptism and membership in the
24 church, the “inscrutable ways of the loving mercy of God” (Rom 11:33; 1 Tim 2:4) reaches those
25 who “through no fault of their own” have not been baptized [§75].
26

27 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**

- 30 1. Does the stress on faith in the Lutheran and Catholic positions point to some agreement
31 with Mennonites on the importance of faith? What are the similarities? What are the
32 differences? Can they be bridged?
33
- 34 2. A recurring point in the *Report* is the shared conviction that God’s saving grace extends
35 beyond the confines of the community of the baptized (see also [§49]). Does that reflect
36 your view, or of your part of the Mennonite church?
37

38 **5. Baptism and Community**

39
40 Baptism “establishes a relationship of communion” with both God and the members of the body
41 of Christ [§77]. The way baptism is understood to relate to the community of the church varies,
42 as we might expect from what we have already learned:
43
44

- 45 a. *Mennonites* understand baptism to be inseparable from church membership [§77].
46 Baptism is the believer’s “incorporation” into a local community of believers, which has
47

1 tested and affirmed the believer’s readiness for such a necessarily “free and voluntary”
2 step of joining the church, and participating in the ongoing relationship of mutual
3 accountability with other members of a congregation. At the same time, God’s grace is
4 fully acknowledged as enabling such a “deeply personal” life-changing choice.
5

- 6 b. *Lutherans and Catholics* agree on the link between baptism and becoming a member of
7 the body of Christ. Thus they view the newly baptized, whether adult or infant, as now
8 belonging to the Church. The principle task of the community is to “offer formation,”
9 which goes on throughout life. This is most obviously so in the case of infants, where
10 personal response and commitment comes after baptism [§77].
11
- 12 c. *Lutherans and Catholics* stress that this “sacramental bond of unity” extends even to
13 those who have been reborn by baptism but who are presently still divided from each
14 other [§§76, 77]. Indeed, it is baptism in the Triune God that establishes the basis for this
15 trilateral dialogue as members together of the one body of Christ.
16

17 While all three communions stress that every person baptized is called “to committed
18 participation in the life of the Church and that the faith of the individual is formed and matured
19 within the Church as a communion of believers” [§78], they part ways on how that relates to
20 baptism.
21

- 22 a. *Mennonites* stress the voluntary nature of those who have devoted themselves to
23 repentance and public profession of faith prior to being baptized [§78]. We might add
24 that Mennonites understand “participation in the life of the church” as discipleship,
25 nurture, and accountability within a local congregation.
26
- 27 b. *Catholics and Lutherans* stress the primacy of God’s grace given or bestowed in baptism,
28 and thus the “appropriateness of baptizing infants” [§78] into the Christian community.
29 Baptism is at the same time God’s “call” to a lifelong participation in the Church.
30

31 6. “Authentic approaches?” 32

33 The three conversation partners now ask themselves (and us!) important questions. Can they
34 recognize each other’s divergent ways of understanding as “authentic?” By “authentic” they
35 mean an approach “based on mutually recognizable biblical concepts of grace, faith and church
36 as they have been interpreted by each of the three communions” [§78]. The questions are best
37 quoted directly, albeit broken up into separate paragraphs:
38

- 39 a. “Might not *Lutherans and Catholics* acknowledge the decision of parents to foster a
40 mature faith in their children prior to the request for baptism that has determined
41 *Mennonite* practice [a likely reference to child dedication] as an authentic approach to
42 Christian initiation?” [§78]
43
- 44 b. “Might not *Mennonites* acknowledge that, given an assurance of familial and
45 congregational commitment to provide formation in faith and discipleship, the choice of

1 parents to request baptism for their young children, as practiced by *Lutherans* and
2 *Catholics*, is an authentic approach to Christian initiation?” [§78]

- 3
4 c. “Can we [*Mennonites, Lutherans, and Catholics*] acknowledge that the different concerns
5 do not contradict each other, and are grounded in basic aspects of the Gospel?” [§78]
6

7 Importantly, these are questions rather than assertions. The term “acknowledge” here suggests
8 not agreement so much as respect for the desire of those with whom we disagree to be faithful to
9 Bible and Gospel.

11 Questions for Reflection and Testing

- 12
13
14 1. Here we see the conversation partners reaching for a way of walking together in the
15 unity of the Spirit when they are unable to come to agreement. They ask respectful
16 questions rather than simply stating positions. They “acknowledge” a shared desire to be
17 faithful to Scripture and Gospel, even if they can’t agree.
18
19 2. Does such an approach provide a promising way forward?
20
21 3. What are the risks and benefits? Could such an approach result, for example, in
22 lessening the importance of the difference between infant baptism and baptism on
23 confession of faith? Is that good or bad?
24
25 4. Given the different understandings of baptism, how are infant baptism and infant
26 dedication similar or different?
27
28 5. Is disagreement on baptism an unsurmountable barrier to fellowship/communion?
29

31 7. *Tension between our Theology and Praxis*

32
33
34 All three communions see **repentance**, faith, and committed discipleship—core concerns of
35 Mennonites—as “necessarily” related to Christian life within the Church, in which baptism plays
36 an essential role. A number of tensions or even inconsistencies in their respective traditions
37 become evident at this point.
38

- 39 a. *Catholics* might surprise *Mennonites* in making it clear that some Catholic theologians
40 have come to see the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (i.e., adult baptism) as the
41 “normative” expression of initiation into the Church, the fullest expression of the
42 meaning of baptism [§79]. It was only in 1969 that the Vatican first published a rite for
43 the baptism of infants. Until then, while baptism of infants was the usual practice, infants
44 were essentially addressed as adults. Catholics make the point that “it is the rite for adults
45 that is the model of the baptismal process” [§79, n97]. “[T]he baptized, under the
46 irreplaceable assistance of the grace of the Holy Spirit, are meant freely to convert from
47 sin, have faith in Jesus Christ and embrace full, conscious and faithful participation in the
48 life of the Christian community” [§79]. Mennonites could not say it better. Is this a

1 recognition of the “cogency” of the Mennonite practice of baptizing only those who are
2 capable of freely embracing Christ, the Church, and discipleship?
3

- 4 b. *Lutherans* and *Catholics* wonder whether *Mennonites* sufficiently recognize the New
5 Testament teaching regarding baptism’s relation to salvation, the very reason why
6 Catholics and Lutherans believe it is “incumbent” on the Church to baptize infants [§80].
7 While the “logic” of the Anabaptist stance denies that infant baptism is truly baptism,
8 some *Mennonite* congregations have in practice recognized the faithful life of many who
9 have been baptized as infants, and have not “re-baptized” them [§80].
10
- 11 c. The conversation partners from all three communions share the conviction that the Spirit
12 is active in both baptized individuals and the communities supporting them. At the same
13 time, they acknowledge that for a significant number of persons this is not born out in the
14 way they live [§81]. Reasons for this might be materialism and consumerism, among
15 other societal factors. All three communions admit also to “ineffective” formation,
16 regardless of whether they baptize infants or upon confession of faith [§82].
17

18 Chapter Two ends by restating the questions raised earlier in the *Report* (see 6. *Authentic*
19 *Approaches?*). The three communions are again invited to look at their historically opposed
20 positions and to consider whether their agreement on the importance of the link between
21 baptism, faith, community, and discipleship might be an opening to an “acceptable diversity” of
22 “compatible ways of looking at the same reality.” If so, might that be the “unexpected fruit” of
23 ecumenical dialogue [§83]?
24

25 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**

26 Mennonites have found it easy to observe the “disconnect” between theology and practice in
27 communions that baptize infants, especially when virtually all infants in an area are
28 baptized. That was a major reason why the Anabaptist movement began.

- 29
- 30 1. What has the experience been in “traditional” Mennonite communities?
 - 31
 - 32 2. Is there a typical age of baptism in long established Mennonite churches? When youth
33 are baptized, have they always personally experienced the transformative process the
34 Mennonites describe in this *Report*? Do they connect their baptism with a changed life?
35
 - 36 3. What about the growing number of baptized persons in Mennonite churches whose
37 relationship to the church grows weak, or who leave the church altogether? If they come
38 back, are they rebaptized? If not, why not?
 - 39
 - 40 4. Are there differences in regard to this “disconnect” in different parts of our global family
41 of Anabaptist churches?
 - 42
 - 43 5. Are the answers to these questions different when persons come to faith as adults as
44 over against growing up in the church community?
45
46
47

- 1
2
3
4
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6
7
6. How has growing individualism and secularism affected the connection between baptism and commitment to and participation in the life of the church?

7. Do you see ways of addressing this problem?
- 8
9

E. Chapter Three Living Out Baptism in Discipleship

10 The issue of the relationship of baptism to discipleship has been mentioned already in the first
11 two chapters. While the dialogue partners differ on whether a personal profession of faith is a
12 “precondition” of baptism (Mennonites) or the divinely intended “effect” (Catholics and
13 Lutherans), they agree that baptism is an “important moment” in life-long discipleship, and that
14 God intends baptism “to enable and to unfold” such a life [§84].
15

1. Biblical teaching regarding the link between baptism and discipleship

16
17
18 At the very outset of the *Report* the participants emphasize that they regard “the revealed Word
19 of God as normative for the life and teaching of the Church” [§11]. The *Report* now provides a
20 long list of key passages that provide a biblical basis for the link between baptism and the
21 transformation of Christian life. The references for these passages appear below in the sequence
22 presented in the *Report*. Read them and the accompanying comments in §§85-88.
23

a. Explicit link:

- 24
25
- 26 i. Romans 6:3-4 buried and raised with Christ to “newness of life”
 - 27 ii. Romans 6:11 dead to sin and “alive to God in Christ Jesus”
 - 28 iii. Colossians 2:12-13 buried and raised with Christ
 - 29 iv. Galatians 3:27 put on Christ
 - 30 v. 1 Peter 3:20-21 baptism as appeal for a clear conscience
- 31

b. Non-explicit link:

- 32
33
- 34 i. 1 Peter 1:3, 23 “born anew”
 - 35 ii. 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 “new creation”
 - 36 iii. Romans 8:14-17 suffer with Christ so as to be glorified with him (Gal 3:26)
 - 37 iv. Ephesians 5:1, 2 imitate God and walk in love like Christ
 - 38 v. Ephesians 5:8-10 walk as children of light so as to please God
 - 39 vi. Philippians 1:27 live in a way that is worthy of the gospel
 - 40 vii. Philippians 2:5 have the mind of Christ
 - 41 viii. Philippians 1:21 to live is Christ
 - 42 ix. Matthew 28:18-20 make disciples and baptize them
 - 43 x. 1 Peter 2:21 the self-giving Christ is the example to follow
 - 44 xi. 1 Corinthians 12:3 Jesus is Lord!
 - 45 xii. Ephesians 4:12-13 grow into maturity and unity
 - 46 xiii. Luke 17:5 Increase our faith!
 - 47 xiv. John 15:4-5 abiding in the vine and bearing fruit

- 1 xv. Romans 7:14-15, 22-25 the struggle with sin continues
2 xvi. Galatians 5:17 Spirit and flesh at war in the lives of baptized believers
3

4 All three communions agree “that every baptized person needs to follow in the footsteps of Jesus
5 Christ as the way of living out his or her baptism. But this only takes place together with the
6 other members of the Christian community and, moreover, impels disciples to witness their faith
7 to the wider world outside the visible borders of the church” [§89]. Living out baptism thus has
8 *personal, ecclesial, and public* dimensions.
9

Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. Which of these biblical passages have played an important role in your own baptism, or in your understanding of the meaning of baptism and your pledge to follow Jesus?
2. Which of these texts are used in your congregational or denominational setting for teaching about baptism, or in celebrating baptism?
3. Which biblical texts would you want to add to this rich collection?

2. *Personal Dimension of Living out Baptism in Christian Discipleship*

25 All agree that a personal aspect of discipleship is joyful gratitude for saving grace and
26 communion with God received in baptism (Phil 4:4). They agree on the regenerating power of
27 the Spirit in a person’s “life-long process of repentance, conversion, and transformation” [§90].
28 There are, not surprisingly, distinctive ways of understanding this personal dimension.
29

a. *Catholics* [§91]

31 Catholics don’t think of the personal Christian life or of discipleship apart from the community
32 of faith. Baptism incorporates a person into the body of Christ, the Church. Baptism is the
33 “gateway” or “doorway” into not only the Church but to the sacraments it celebrates. Baptism,
34 confirmation and the Eucharist are the three “sacraments of initiation.”
35

36 Discipleship means, first of all, receiving those sacraments. Discipleship includes also the
37 sacraments of confession and anointing of the sick, which address the vulnerabilities of disciples
38 to sin and brokenness. Living out baptism means “preparing oneself, with the help of God’s
39 grace, to receive the sacraments in such a way that one is open to be transformed by their
40 divinely promised effectiveness.”

41 Secondly, Catholics stress the importance the “life-long endeavor” of “formation.” The
42 baptized are disciplined, taught, and formed in and through liturgy, preaching, Eucharist,
43 catechesis, Bible study, seminars, prayer groups, and pilgrimages. These enable believers to
44 respond faithfully to the “universal call to holiness,” what Mennonites call “sanctification.”

45 Thirdly, Catholics claim that “baptism associate[s] the baptized person with the *tria*
46 *munera* or threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. Living out baptism means,
47 therefore, witnessing to the word of God (prophet), offering one’s life as a spiritual sacrifice

1 (priest), and promoting in society the reign of God (king).” This implicates the disciple in the
2 mission of evangelism, both internally in building up the body of Christ and externally in both
3 speaking to the “ills of society” and in “inviting others to faith in Jesus Christ.”
4

5 *b. Anabaptists/Mennonites* [§§92, 93]
6

7 Anabaptists understand living out baptism in discipleship as “learning from and walking in the
8 way of Christ,” or “following Jesus” [§92]. While attention is often drawn to Jesus’ teaching in
9 the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7 [and Luke 6]), the *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527 already
10 made clear that this means to “walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ” with the “wish to be
11 buried with Him in death,” making clear the connection between discipleship and baptism.
12 Living out baptism means surrender to Christ, to his way and his teaching, to the point of giving
13 one’s life, the “baptism of blood.” “The goal of post-baptismal discipleship, rooted in ethical and
14 doctrinal teaching, is for believers to take the call of Christ so seriously that they would be
15 willing to face torture and death” [§93].

16 Echoing the Catholic emphasis on formation, Mennonites speak of “preparation” already
17 prior to baptism, so that candidates for baptism can be instructed in the meaning of salvation,
18 conversion, the Biblical story, the Anabaptist tradition, and especially what being a follower of
19 Jesus in the world. Candidates for baptism learn what it means both to receive and offer
20 congregational counsel and correction, and to practice mutual care for each other. Such
21 instruction is life-long, communicated through worship, Lord’s Supper, and other forms of
22 community life and celebration [§93].
23

24 *c. Lutherans* [§94]
25

26 The “promise of God’s grace alone” (*sola gratia*) shapes the Lutheran way of understanding
27 what it means to live out baptism in discipleship. It means, first, life-long listening for God’s
28 gracious word in sermon, study, and catechesis, and receiving grace repeatedly in the Lord’s
29 Supper. Grace cannot be earned, but it is the “source of good works by which the believer
30 responds to the love of God and serves God and the neighbor without the self-centered intention
31 of earning grace and righteousness” [§94].

32 Notably, the Ten Commandments figure prominently in Lutheran catechisms, obedience
33 to which is the “fruit of faith.” This exceedingly high standard of behaviour serves to confront
34 the believer with the need to return again and again to the grace first offered in baptism.

35 Like Catholics and Mennonites, Lutherans speak explicitly about the priesthood of all
36 who have been baptized, which means that the baptized engage in bringing the gospel to others,
37 and in bringing the concerns of others to God in prayer. As for Catholics and Mennonites, living
38 out one’s baptism may involve the sacrifice of both time and life.
39

40
41 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**
42

43 Among Mennonites discipleship refers to faithful behaviour as baptized believers. For
44 Catholics and Lutherans it leans more toward “learning,” being disciplined in what it means to
45 live out baptism in one’s personal life.
46

1. Do you see aspects of Catholic “formation” or Lutheran “remembering the promise” Mennonites might learn from?
2. How much does Mennonite preparation in catechism and teaching, both before and after baptism, include learning about the patience, forgiveness, and suffering love required for living in the body of Christ?
3. Does the early Anabaptist emphasis on the “baptism of blood,” that is, the potential cost of one’s life for following Jesus, ring true for your setting and your experience of baptism? Do you observe such sacrifice among Christians elsewhere in the world?
4. Did your baptismal preparation include the sense that you were not only pledging yourself to discipleship and to the church, but also to participation in the mission of the church?
5. What do you think has been the biggest and potentially most costly challenge you said yes to at the time of your baptism?

3. *Ecclesial Dimensions of Living out Baptism*

All three communions view the body of Christ to be the place and context in which baptism is lived out. This happens through discipleship nurtured by rites (sacraments/ordinances), teaching and preaching, and by mutual accountability and correction the community provides [§95].

All three communions also admit humbly that there is often a lamentable “gap” between theology and practice [as explored already in §§79-82]. The “ecumenical imperative” of working towards reconciliation and unity of communions—the drive behind this trilateral dialogue—is an expression of this humility and repentance.

a. Anabaptists/Mennonites

For Anabaptists the “rule of Christ” in Matthew 18:15-20 has played a central role in the discipleship nurtured in the congregation of believers. When Mennonites insist on an “ecclesiology of the visible church” it is to that tangible community of mutual accountability they point. Particularly relevant in a time of migration, racism, and struggles over diversity, baptism initiates a believer into a “new people” that transcends nationalism, gender, and social status, among others. [§96].

In order to emphasize the importance of the communal nature of discipleship growing out of baptism, Mennonites make a stark claim:

[T]here is no private salvation; it happens in the fellowship of believers. The vertical and the horizontal dimensions of salvation do not exist independently from each other. There is no peace with God without peace with sisters and brothers, no fellowship with God without sharing of possessions, no divine forgiveness without willingness to forgive human offenders. [§97]

1 Whereas mutual accountability can at times seem punitive, and while it might find
2 expression in exclusion, “[t]he purpose of accountability is to heal and restore through
3 repentance and not punish or condemn” [§97].
4

5 **b. Lutherans**
6

7 Perhaps the most important “living out” of baptism is trust—faith in the One who offers the word
8 of promise and gives himself in baptism. But to learn who that One is requires the nurture of
9 godparents, catechetical instruction, and participation in worship. These serve to lead the child to
10 being able to confirm their trust and commitment to living out that faith within the life of the
11 church. The rite of confirmation, introduced in the 18th century, serves as that mile stone [§98].

12 Once confirmed, baptized persons are able to receive Holy Communion, and are also
13 eligible to serve as godparents and in the *presbyterium* (as an “elder”) of congregation and
14 synod. In order to fully participate in that “priesthood of all,” there should be “continuous
15 formation,” so as to “become knowledgeable about right preaching and the administration of the
16 sacraments, and about the right practice of *diakonia* and pastoral care in the church” [§99].

17 Lutherans recognize, as do Mennonites and Catholics, that to be confirmed to such a life
18 can have “far-reaching consequences,” as it did, for example, for those who chose confirmation
19 over membership in youth movements during the Hitler or East German communist eras [§100].
20

21 **c. Catholics**
22

23 Baptism takes place within the “catholic” (universal) community of the Church, founded by
24 Christ. This community is led by the successors of the apostles Christ chose, in turn led by the
25 successor to Peter, the pope. Baptized persons practice or live out baptism within that community
26 in a variety of ways.

27 First, “[a]bsolutely essential for living out one’s baptism” is regular participation in the
28 Eucharist, “the source and summit of the life of the church” [§101].

29 Second, giving further structure and vibrancy to Catholic life is liturgy more generally,
30 including the liturgical year in which the communion of the saints is recalled for inspiration and
31 direction.

32 Third, formation is critical for the living out of baptism, whether in the family as
33 “domestic church” or in the “pouring out of the Spirit” in confirmation. This includes the official
34 teaching of the bishops and participation in synods or gatherings for strengthening of faith.
35 Catholics recognize in believers the “*sensus fidei* or *supernatural instinct*” [§101], a gift the
36 Spirit gives believers in order to participate in the “discernment of the direction in which the
37 Church is called to advance” [§101]. (Mennonites will recognize something akin to their idea of
38 the “community discernment” or “hermeneutical community.”) Lastly, discipleship means
39 participation in the internal life of the church, but also in its outreach.

Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. Mennonite reflections on “ecclesial dimensions” restrict themselves here mostly to the mutual accountability captured in Matthew 18:15-20.
2. What in your experience of both baptismal preparation and congregational living out of baptism resonates with your experience and conviction? Are there dimensions missing from the Mennonite presentation?
3. Does the insistence that for Mennonites there is no “private salvation” ring true in your experience?
4. Given what you see in reflections of the other two communions, are there aspects that could deepen and enrich Mennonite understanding?

4. *Public Dimensions of Living out Baptism*

All three communions recognize the connection between baptism and Jesus’ proclamation of the “kingdom” or “reign of God” (Luke 4). The public dimension of discipleship means

participating in the mission of reconciliation, justice, and peace inaugurated by Jesus, inviting our contemporaries to come to know Jesus Christ and experience the joy of faith in him and in his message. It means witnessing, by word and action, to the truth and goodness of the Gospel in the public square. [§102]

There is increasing awareness in all three communions that this includes care of creation. It also includes awareness that public witness to and participation in God’s kingdom might well be met by sometimes fierce resistance (Matt 5:10-12), which might well lead to the “baptism of blood,” experienced by all three communions. We might thus speak of an “ecumenism of the martyrs” who serve as a summons to ever deeper unity within the suffering body of Christ [§102].

Such agreement notwithstanding, there are distinct emphases each communion brings which have at times been major sources of controversy and division.

a. Lutherans

Lutherans view the Christian life as lived out in “three estates of society: family, government, and church” [§104]. Luther famously defined the relationship between church and state in his doctrine of the “two kingdoms” or “two realms.” He was motivated by the desire to free the church to fulfill its specific calling to serve the world, namely, through preaching the gospel. The state, also an “instrument of God’s love and providential will, [...] is responsible for safeguarding order, peace and justice in society. The two realms are not opposed, but complement each other” [§105]. These have been balanced in various ways since the Reformation.

Lutherans recognize that a rigid application of this doctrine has led to “unconditional adoption” of political conditions and demands of the state, with sometimes terrible consequences, especially in the 20th century. They point out, however, that even the *Augsburg*

1 *Confession* places the call to obedience to magistrates and laws alongside Acts 5:29 (obeying
2 God rather than human authorities when they are in conflict) in order to identify the limits of
3 such obedience [§106].

4 Lutherans point out that the Lutheran World Federation was established in 1947 in the
5 aftermath of WWII precisely to set a new tone as a global communion. The Federation sought to
6 address the call to discipleship in the public sphere and to join the proclamation of the gospel
7 with advocacy for justice and peace [§104].

8 9 *b. Catholics*

10
11 Drawing on a growing body of social teachings since the 19th century, including recent Vatican
12 documents, Catholics stress the importance of the relationship between baptism and public
13 engagement. Discipleship means solidarity with all of suffering humanity. “Basing these
14 principles on the dignity of each person, [Catholics] emphasize the importance of fostering the
15 common good and the universal destination of goods which have been bestowed upon all of
16 humanity by the creator” [§107]. In addition to “solidarity,” they speak of “subsidiarity.” This
17 means that how solidarity is lived out in discipleship is to be decided at ground level by disciples
18 engaged in the various spheres of public life. They point to Pope Francis’ attempts to shift from
19 being a powerful institution to become a “church of the poor.” He speaks of the church as a
20 “field hospital,” caring for the poor and wounded [§107].

21 This teaching has found expression in countless individual acts, but also in groups and
22 movements, schools, and hospitals, both local and global. This does not obscure the failures to
23 live up to the rich tradition of social teachings.

24 25 *c. Anabaptists/Mennonites*

26
27 Mennonites stress the way in which the church is to be a “new community” that models God’s
28 intended future in and for the world. The church is not an end in itself, but a divine creation to
29 serve the *missio Dei*, the “mission of God” to renew the world. While membership in the church
30 is “the gift of belonging given in baptism,” members become a part of this peacemaking mission
31 of God [§108].

32 The historic stance of nonresistance and nonviolence is to be placed into this context. “It
33 is part of the new way of ordering human relationships under the new covenant. [...T]he
34 missionary function of the church is to extend forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing beyond
35 itself. [...] The pursuit of peace is an eschatological anticipation of the kingdom” [§108]. To quote
36 from one of the Mennonite confessions,

37
38 peace with God includes a commitment to the way of reconciliation modeled by the
39 Prince of Peace. [...] The people of God join in the struggle for justice, yet are prepared
40 to suffer persecution, knowing that sin, guilt and death will not prevail. [§108]

41 42 43 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**

44
45 Lutherans stress the doctrine of “two kingdoms” or “two realms” of church and civil authority
46 as both blessing and historic challenge not to let the church slip into subservience to the
47 state. Catholics stress the growing tradition of social teaching, pushing the Church toward

1 the poor and the marginalized. Mennonites stress the call to reconciliation and
2 peacemaking.
3

- 4 1. Is there a difference in the basis each of the communions has for its convictions and
5 practices? Historic teaching, doctrines, Bible?
6
- 7 2. What have Mennonites learned from the other traditions for their own living out of
8 baptism in the public sphere? Which persons or movements have they learned from or
9 been inspired by? Where have they have they worked together with Catholics and
10 Lutherans?
11
- 12 3. Are there ways in which Mennonites have fallen short in their presence and witness in
13 the public sphere, as the Lutherans readily confess about themselves?
14

15 16 17 **5. Differing and Diverging Emphases** 18

19 While all three communions agree that baptism must find expression in faithful public
20 engagement, they do not always agree on what such “authentic discipleship” or “following
21 Jesus” means practically. All three also agree on the importance of a conscience “formed in
22 fidelity to the Gospel” [§109]. But the “ecclesial discernment of our churches,” that is, the long
23 traditions of interpreting the relationship of the church to the world, have resulted in
24 “incompatible conclusions” [§111]. In addition, many members of all three communions do not
25 live in accordance with the “ecclesial discernment” of their own traditions [§110].

26 Most glaring are disagreements on whether the church should adopt strict pacifism in all
27 circumstances, or whether the church should sanction same-sex unions [§111]. To be sure, these
28 disagreements, especially the latter, are perhaps greatest within communions rather than between
29 them. Addressing these specific matters was not part of the mandate of this dialogue, but the
30 Report asks whether there might be ways forward other than agreement on them:
31

- 32 a. Can churches seek ways to collaborate where they do find agreement?
33
- 34 b. Can churches acknowledge that those they disagree with are nevertheless attempting to
35 seriously live out their baptism?
36
- 37 c. Is there openness to consider that some differences might be a God-given diversity,
38 intended to enrich the body of Christ? [§112]
39

40 The conversation partners conclude this chapter with hope that the diverse ways of living
41 out baptism, rooted in a shared faith in Christ, and aided by the Spirit, might lead to an
42 “exchange of gifts.”
43

Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. Can you as an Anabaptist Mennonite say “Yes” to these questions?
2. As one committed to nonresistance and nonviolence as faithfulness to Christ can you see the taking up of arms or obedience to the demands of the state as part of God-given diversity, as an “authentic” form of discipleship?
3. Might you say yes to the questions the *Report* poses above, but still wish to keep open a loving and respectful dialogue on differences that need to be wrestled with? Might that honour the differences within the communions on the matter of arms-bearing, for example?

F. Conclusion

The *Report’s* “Conclusion” is really a chapter that could have been given the title “Convictions, Gifts, Challenges, and Considerations.” Having listened carefully and respectfully to each other, Mennonite, Catholic, and Lutheran participants in these conversations restate their convictions and acknowledge both the gifts and the challenges they have each received from the others, concluding with matters they wish to put to their own churches “for consideration.”

“Only our churches themselves can determine whether and how their theology and practice of baptism may call for renewal and have an impact upon the ultimate goal of responding to the Lord’s will for unity (see John 17:21).” [§114]

This is important. The conversation partners do not understand their task to “solve” or “settle” differences, nor to determine direction for the future. Instead, they are putting forward the fruit of their conversations for testing and evaluation by each of the communions. While the *Report* itself is quite succinct, here is a summary in point form for ease of oversight.

1. Concluding Mennonite Reflections

a. Convictions Held

We believe that —

- i. the church is a “hermeneutical community,” receiving the wisdom of the Spirit, interpreting the Scripture together as those without political power [§116];
- ii. the church is a “web of relational communities,” congregations where mutual accountability and ministry happen and baptism is lived out [§117];
- iii. baptism on confession of faith is the biblical and apostolic norm [§118];
- iv. the Sermon on the Mount gives guidance for private, ecclesial, and public living out of baptism;

- 1 v. Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God which makes such discipleship possible with
2 the sustaining power of the Spirit. Nonviolent peacemaking is seen by most
3 Mennonites as “essential to grasping and living this new reality” [§119].
4
5

6
7 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**
8

- 9 1. Do these statements capture your sense of what Anabaptists/Mennonites believe with
10 respect to baptism and its implications?
11
12 2. Do they reflect Mennonite convictions of what happens in baptism?
13
14 3. Does singling out the Sermon on the Mount reflect Mennonite theology and ethics in
15 your church setting?
16
17 4. Does highlighting nonviolent peacemaking as “essential” risk marginalizing evangelism
18 and church planting?
19
20 5. What does your church consider “essential” to living out baptism? Are “Anabaptist”
21 emphases among these essentials?
22

23
24
25 *b. Gifts Received*
26

- 27 i. Gratitude that dialogue has been possible and fruitful through the gifts of trust and
28 patience [§120].
29 ii. Realization that many historic prejudices were never or are no longer true [§121].
30 iii. Realization that we share a Trinitarian and Christocentric faith and its expression in
31 discipleship [§121].
32 iv. From Catholics the indispensability of the recipient’s faith for the fruitful reception of
33 a sacrament, and that the saving power of the Spirit is not limited to baptism [§122].
34 v. From Lutherans to see discipleship as grateful response to grace [§122].
35 vi. Shared emphasis with Catholics and Lutherans on the primacy of the Bible [§122].
36 vii. Deep understanding among Catholics and Lutherans of the relationship of tradition to
37 Scripture [§122].
38 viii. Shared hope regarding the nurture and instruction of children expressed in Mennonite
39 child dedication and instruction in church and home, and in Catholic and Lutheran
40 baptism of infants and their ongoing nurture and formation [§123].
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Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. For which “gifts” are you especially grateful?
2. What have you learned in studying this *Report* that you would want to add to this list of gifts?

c. *Challenges Accepted*

Mennonites are challenged to —

- i. see commitment to unity as integral to church and mission, rather than as a threat to faithfulness [§124].
- ii. recognize the pain of infant-baptizing churches when Mennonites baptize those already baptized as infants, which they take as invalidating that baptism [§124].
- iii. learn what a faithful practice of “reconciled diversity” means in practice, that is, holding “divergent realities” in unity, such as deeply held but divergent views of baptism [§125].
- iv. acknowledge that baptism of infants is not tied to the rise of the state church, and that baptism upon confession of faith remained “dominant” long after the establishment of a Christian social order, often practiced alongside infant baptism [§126].
- v. strengthen our understanding of the relationship of conversion and baptism [§127].
- vi. not allow the Anabaptist emphasis on human participation in conversion and baptism “overshadow” the divine initiative of grace [§128].
- vii. give greater and deeper attention to preparation of persons for baptism and to make “remembrance” of baptism central to life-long discipleship [§129].
- viii. formulate a fuller theology of the child, which would enrich child and parent dedication and subsequent nurture [§130].

Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. Which on this list of “accepted challenges” is most important in your experience?
2. Which challenges would you be most cautious to “accept?”
3. Might one challenge be for Mennonites, who have placed great emphasis on the local congregation, to more fully see themselves and others as parts of a highly diverse universal body of Christ?
4. Might another challenge be to acknowledge that Anabaptist/Mennonite convictions regarding baptism have often been betrayed by Mennonites themselves in various ways—not recognizing other modes of baptism, treating it as a rite of passage for young people, etc.?
5. What challenge would you want to add to this list?

1
2 *d. For Consideration*
3

4 For most of the churches in the MWC, this may be the most challenging section of the *Report*.
5 The Mennonite representatives to the dialogue begin with a number of affirmations:
6

- 7 i. Affirmation of “historic belief” that baptism of believers is the New Testament norm
8 [§131].
- 9 ii. Respect for the theology that links infant baptism “integrally” to personal confirmation
10 of faith and continuing life of discipleship [§131].
- 11 iii. Affirmation of the oneness of “the body of Christ in Trinitarian faith lived out through
12 trust in and obedience to Jesus Christ,” a oneness greater than disagreements over
13 baptism [§132].
- 14 iv. Based on the affirmations above, Mennonite representatives invite our churches to
15 “consider” the following points.
16 (They are succinctly stated and given here exactly as they are in the *Report* [§133],
17 except that they are numbered rather than bulleted for ease of reference.)
18

19 Churches are asked to consider —
20

- 21 1. *receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their*
22 *confession of faith and commitment to discipleship without repeating the*
23 *water rite. If the candidate requests rebaptism a process of discernment prior*
24 *to her/his reception should include conversation between the candidate, the*
25 *church of origin, and the receiving church in respect for one another and*
26 *unity in the body of Christ;*
- 27
- 28 2. *honoring the nurturing that candidates received toward Christ in their*
29 *church of origin (where that is the case);*
30
- 31 3. *asking all members, including those now being received, 1) to affirm our*
32 *theological-ecclesiological interpretation and practice of baptism and 2) to*
33 *respect those churches which practice baptism into a life of faith and*
34 *discipleship differently as brothers and sisters in the one body of Christ;*
35
- 36 4. *enriching (or developing) practices of thanksgiving and blessing of newborn*
37 *children and their parents as well as committing local congregations to*
38 *nurture and care for them;*
39
- 40 5. *providing occasions for all members to “remember their baptism” and renew*
41 *their baptismal commitments in both congregational and interchurch*
42 *settings;*
43
- 44 6. *calling for collective and individual soul searching as to why it has been so*
45 *difficult for us to hold together the quest for purity and the quest for unity,*
46 *among ourselves and with other churches.*

1
2 Mennonite reflections conclude with the prayer that all three communions might experience
3 greater integrity and faithfulness in living the “whole gospel in a broken world” [§133].
4

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6 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**
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1. What is your experience with accepting persons into a Mennonite congregation without baptizing them if they have already been baptized as infants? Does your Anabaptist/Mennonite congregation or denomination allow that? If so, on what basis? If not, for what reasons?
 2. Given the clearly stated Anabaptist convictions about baptism in this *Report*, what makes it acceptable for some Mennonite congregations not to “re-baptize”? Does the fact that baptism is for Mennonites not a sacrament but an ordinance, expressing what is already real, play a role?
 3. Do you think it is a good idea to talk to the “church of origin” of someone requesting baptism upon confession of faith when they were baptized as infants? What might make this difficult, perhaps even impossible, in some cases?
 4. Catholics and Lutherans consider the response of faith to God’s grace given in baptism expressed in a life of faithfulness a “necessity” [§62]. Might they recognize the baptism on personal confession of faith of one already baptized as an infant as itself “necessitated” by the actual experience of the believer? Does the role of confirmation in their traditions provide an opening for this? Might that be part of the “new framework?”
 5. How are infant baptism and child dedication similar or unlike each other? Anabaptists/Mennonites emphasize the believer’s personal choice and decision in coming to baptism. They see their dedication of children largely as the dedication of their parents and congregation. There is overlap with Lutheran and Catholic emphasis on the role of parents and community in nurturing the child, but they view the child when baptized as already part of the Church, and not, as in Anabaptist churches, being nurtured toward such a choice.
 6. How are you helped, or how could you be helped to “remember your baptism” in such a way that it strengthens you for a lifetime of discipleship?
 7. The last item on the list of proposed considerations raises an important challenge for Anabaptists. Separation for the sake of faithfulness has marked our relations with other communions but also with each other. Have we betrayed Jesus’ prayer for unity? Can we make unity a core aspect of our discipleship, and see baptism as a foundational moment for such a commitment?

2. *Concluding Lutheran Reflections*

a. *Convictions Held*

- i. Lutherans reiterate their belief that baptism is the “great promise of God, given once and for the whole life, to receive a human being into communion with the Triune God” [§134].
- ii. Faith in that promise is itself an enlightening of the Spirit, who calls the believer into faithfulness. Those who have been so enlightened and renewed “desire the good” and “delight in the law.” Thus the believer does the good “spontaneously,” acting out of the “new powers and gifts” of the Spirit [§§135, 136]

b. *Gifts Received*

- i. From Mennonites the gift received is reconciliation. The most dramatic expression of this was that after nearly five centuries of broken relations, expressed in the condemnations of Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession and sometimes lethal persecution in the 16th century, Mennonites and Lutherans were able to reconcile through confession and forgiveness, culminating at the Lutheran Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, in 2010. These trilateral conversations are a continuation of this new path of “brotherly and sisterly relations and cooperation,” or “keeping an eye on one another” [§137].
- ii. From Catholics the gift received is the experience of having been able to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation together with Lutherans, a “highly complex reality” also brought gifts to the whole church. Doubtless the 50 years of ecumenical dialogue between the two churches (see especially the 1999 *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*) paved the way for this gift [§138].
- iii. With respect to baptism specifically, Lutherans have come to value the Mennonite emphasis on the congregation as a communal space for living out baptism, as well as the tie Mennonites make between baptism and peacemaking. Lutherans have come to value the Catholic highlighting of the family’s role in baptism and the faith of the church into which the person is baptized, as well as the presence of the universal church in each baptism [§139].

c. *Challenges Accepted*

Lutherans are challenged to —

- i. develop a theology of the child, especially the state of unbaptized children regarding salvation [§140].
- ii. address the reality that many do not take their own baptism seriously. For that reason, “whoever baptizes infants has the obligation to do mission, catechesis and make all attempts so that the baptized appreciate their baptism and rejoice in it in faith” [§141].
- iii. seek ways to commemorate baptism so that members are aware both of the gift and challenge of baptism [§142].

- 1 iv. address the absence too often of awareness of the dimension of the universal church
2 [§143].
3

4
5 **Questions for Reflection and Testing**
6

- 7 1. The Lutheran comments on “gifts received” show this dialogue on baptism to be the
8 direct result of gifts received from Mennonites and Catholics. Can this dialogue serve to
9 make us hungrier as Anabaptists to experience unity with other members of the body of
10 Christ?
11
12 2. Would you as a Mennonite have liked to see some items “for consideration” put to their
13 communion by the Lutheran delegation regarding the baptism of adults already
14 baptized? What might they have been?
15

16
17
18 **3. Concluding Catholic Reflections**

19
20 *a. Convictions Held*

- 21
22 i. The church is founded by Christ as “the universal sacrament of salvation,” a “sign and
23 effective instrument to bring about communion with God and among human beings”
24 [§144].
25 ii. The Church is the “pilgrim people of God.”
26 iii. “The Holy Spirit is the principle of unity of the Church.”
27 iv. Baptism is the beginning of Christian life, the “doorway” to the other six sacraments.

28
29 Baptism frees from sin, gives one new birth as a child of God, incorporates
30 into the body of Christ the Church, calls and equips one to strive for holiness,
31 and impels one to participate in service both within the confines of the
32 Christian community and in the church’s evangelization and service to the
33 world. [§144]
34

- 35 v. Baptism is related to the world-wide community of the Church, the local community of
36 the Church, and to the “smallest expression of the Church,” the family as “domestic
37 church” [§145].
38 vi. Infant baptism is predicated only upon the “confidence in parents” to provide for
39 formation [§145].
40 vii. Alongside the importance of baptism for salvation, and Christ being the one and only
41 saviour (Acts 4:12), there is “firm belief in the unconditional love of God” and God’s
42 “universal will of salvation” (1 Tim 2:4), and thus hope for the unbaptized “in the
43 paschal mystery” of God’s grace in Christ [§146].
44

45 *b. Gifts Received*

- 46
47 i. Hope for Christian unity [§147].

- 1 ii. Mennonite willingness to consider the reasons for Catholic practice of baptizing infants
- 2 with possible revisiting of past evaluations of that practice [§148].
- 3 iii. Mennonite courage to remember the past in a way that is open to healing of memory and
- 4 reconciliation [§148].
- 5 iv. Lutherans taking the power of sin seriously [§149].
- 6 v. Worship with Mennonites and Lutherans, especially prayer and the experience of the
- 7 presence of the Spirit [§150].
- 8 vi. Sharing of commitment to peace, mission, and community life [§151].
- 9 vii. Importance of Bible for Lutherans and Mennonites [§152].
- 10 viii. Common challenges greater than “traditional frontiers and barriers” [§153].

11
12 *c. Challenges Accepted*

- 14 i. In light of the usefulness of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* for
- 15 this dialogue on baptism, more church communions should be invited to associate with
- 16 that document [§154].
- 17 ii. Need for greater help for Catholics to appreciate the value of their baptism, and what it
- 18 means to live it [§§155, 157].
- 19 iii. Value of devising “a common ritual for the welcoming into our Church believers who
- 20 have been baptized in other communities” [§156].
- 21 iv. Need for more effective linkage between baptism and mission [§158].

22
23 *d. For Consideration*

24
25 Catholics offer for consideration potential future dialogues on —

- 27 i. the relationship between baptism and profession of the creed;
- 28 ii. means of fostering fuller commitment so as to resist fracturing within communions;
- 29 iii. links between baptism, baptism of the Holy Spirit, “baptism of desire”, and “baptism of
- 30 blood” (martyrdom) [see also §17] to broaden understanding of baptism and its relation
- 31 to participation in the life and death of Christ in various contexts and roles of life;
- 32 iv. further study of theology and practice of confirmation [§159].

Questions for Reflection and Testing

1. What can you as an Anabaptist affirm in the Catholic rehearsal of core convictions?
2. Can Mennonites identify with respect to their own communion with the Catholic concern about those who do *not* value their baptism?
3. Could a “common ritual” include those who were once baptized as infants and were then baptized on confession of their own faith? What would that demand from both Catholics and Lutherans in relation to Mennonite practice?
4. Catholics call for a greater link between baptism and mission. What would that mean in your part of the global Mennonite family? What is the mission? And does the mission bring conflict precisely over those already baptized as infants?
5. Anabaptists speak of the baptism of water, spirit, and blood. Catholics speak of baptism of water, baptism of the Holy Spirit, baptism of desire, and the baptism of blood. Is there a promise for mutual understanding in this depth of symbolism?
6. Might further conversation around infant baptism and child dedication be accompanied by conversation regarding the relationship between baptism upon profession of faith and confirmation?
7. Might Catholics (and Lutherans) think about, given their sacramental understanding of baptism, whether to baptize infants imposes membership in the Church on them, leaving them no choice in the matter?

4. *In Thanksgiving for our One Baptism*

The *Report* concludes with drawing attention to the centrality of unity in the prayer of Jesus in John 17 and to the well-known unity text in Ephesians 4:4-7 that speaks of “one baptism.” Dialogue partners speak in this *Report* not of agreement so much as of having rediscovered each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. This bond, forged over past dialogues already, has made it possible to take up the difficult and divisive topic of baptism [§160].

The conversations over five years focused on “foundational matters” related to theology and practice of baptism, attempting to overcome stereotypes and misunderstandings of each other. While still differing in significant ways, participants

learned that when considering baptism as it relates to the justification and sanctification of the sinner, as it entails entrance into the faith and life of the Christian community, and as it calls for a daily cooperation with the grace of the Holy Spirit so as to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we have many convictions in common. [§161].

They wonder whether some differences are “acceptable variations of perspective,” or “complementary, even mutually enriching” [§161].

1 The conversations raised a number of related matters that might be fruitful topics for
2 future trilateral conversations:

- 3
- 4 a. How does “authentic living out of baptism” relate to war and sexuality? How do churches
5 search for consensus and unity midst deep disagreement?
 - 6 b. How does one reconcile the confession that Jesus is the one and only saviour with the
7 reality of countless persons either rejecting or not knowing the Gospel in light of God’s
8 desire that all might be saved? How does affect our various approaches to evangelism and
9 mission?
 - 10 c. The last suggestion is ecclesiological: might the recent work of the Catholic/Lutheran
11 commission on the Eucharist be enriched by drawing on Anabaptist understandings?
12 [§162]
- 13

14 Given the value of having three communions meet in conversation, the participants
15 propose reading and discussing the *Report* together with members of all three communions
16 where possible [§164].

17 They also suggest a process that would result in a “prayer service” to celebrate the “one
18 baptism” (Ephesians 4) we share, as well as to renew together our baptismal commitment to life-
19 long discipleship. This could aid in bringing Christians together in reconciliation and shared
20 commitment to follow Jesus daily [§164].

21 The *Report* ends where it began [see **Preface**] with a restatement of purpose and hope: to
22 help each other grow in faithfulness to Jesus Christ, specifically in how we understand, celebrate,
23 and live out our baptism [§164].

24
25
26

Questions for Reflection and Testing

- 27 1. What is your overall response to the *Report*? Could it lead, as the participants in this
28 dialogue hope and pray, to the deepening of Mennonite theology and practice of
29 baptism? Will it lead to greater unity in the global multi-denominational body of Christ?
 - 30 2. What would you have wanted to say if you had been part of the trilateral conversations?
 - 31 3. Does this *Report*, and the conversations it capsulizes, help each of our communions
32 grow in faithfulness, in living out our baptism in discipleship? What have Mennonites
33 been able to contribute to the body of Christ walking in unity?
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