Uniting the Waters of Baptism
by Nick Hawkes

The Uniting Church’s teaching on baptism has alienated a number of our members whilst others have felt confused by what is being suggested by its theology (1). Certainly, there has been very little progress regarding the impasses that have surrounded the subject. This paper seeks a way ahead.

What in the world is happening?

Most Australians feel alienated by church culture. Some, with a nominal belief, may still bring their children for baptism but this probably only reflects the lingering ties of their grandparents’ faith which persuades them to have their children “done”. As time passes, the number of people wanting their children “done” will recede as the faith of their ancestors fades into history and has less and less claim on the current generation.

Loren Mead’s book The Once and Future Church, describes the changing dynamic between church and society (2). Mead describes the early church as being mission orientated in an antagonistic world. In this context, believer’s baptism was particularly appropriate. There was a clear sense of being either inside or outside of God’s church.

After the conversion of the Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 313 A.D. Christianity became the official religion of the Empire. Christianity became the norm. To be a good Christian was to be a good citizen. To be born within the parish boundaries meant by definition that you became part of the community and the church. In this context, infant baptism made sense. It announced your citizenship to the community as much as to the church.

Now, however, the Western church has moved into the post Christian era. The world, if not hostile, is certainly ambivalent about Christianity. The choice of being either in or out of the church is becoming increasingly stark. We are moving from a tradition of being a Christian, to requiring a decision to be a Christian. In this context, responsible believer’s baptism is becoming increasingly significant.

Whilst the Uniting Church has made provision for both infant and adult baptism, it has been dismissive of those wanting to claim membership of the church through infant dedication and dismissive of people’s preference for responsible believer’s baptism (3). The 1979 Assembly minutes record:

If some service of dedicating the children to God’s care were devised, this would seem likely to undermine the decisive significance of baptism as well as underlining the division between the baptised and unbaptised children themselves. This
is something which the UCA could not accept and it may be that people who really want such a pattern should be directed towards some Church which does not practice infant baptism at all"

(Minutes p.38)

However, others suspect that the significance of paedobaptism is being "undermined" by its own deficient theology and note that the existence of baptised and non-baptised children in our churches is already a present reality that is causing no division at all. Certainly, the suggestion that the UCA should shed itself of those preferring responsible believer’s baptism is tragic.

We need to remember that denominational loyalty was unimportant to sixty one percent of people surveyed in the first National Church Life Survey. People are going to those churches which meet their need, irrespective of denominational orientation. Twenty two percent of those in our congregations come from non Uniting Church backgrounds (4). As such, it is perhaps unwise to insist on a narrow understanding of baptism that does not reflect the theological diversity of our congregations.

**Two ceremonies**

Two ceremonies are particularly important rites of passage for faith. The first is a ceremony which officially welcomes infants into the life of the church. The second is a ceremony that formally celebrates the fact that a person has freely decided to be a disciple of Jesus and is of an age to understand the consequences of this choice.

The difficulty is in deciding which of these two occasions we should call baptism.

My proposal is that we allow both. Let us make sure that ceremonies are available for the options of baptism followed by confirmation; AND dedication followed by baptism. The Basis of Union certainly allows it:

"The Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility" (Basis of Union Para.7)
Proposed options in the Uniting Church

**Option 1**
Infant baptism and membership of the church

**Option 2**
Infant dedication and membership of the church

Confirmation

Responsible believer’s baptism (which includes the rights and privileges of confirmation)

It is suggested that the term "responsible believer’s baptism" be used to describe the baptism of someone who has freely and responsibly accepted faith in Christ. Using the term "believer’s baptism" is not very satisfactory as it may imply that children who have faith are not real believers.

Whether the option of infant baptism and confirmation is chosen or dedication and responsible believer’s baptism, it will be important that there be a strong link between the two faith stage celebrations. There needs to be an expectation that the second event fulfills the purpose of the first. Karl Barth says plainly:

"Infant baptism is a complete baptism only when ...profession of faith ...consummates it." (Karl Barth) (5)

Too often, there is no sense that confirmation is something to aim for, something that completes a decision to be a Christian. Confirmation is sometimes reduced to being a routine to which all young teenagers are subjected. No wonder it has been perceived as being inadequate by those wanting to celebrate the joy of new faith. No wonder they look towards rebaptism instead.

My hope is that by making confirmation and responsible believer’s baptism as similar as possible the question of rebaptism will cease to be such an issue. Both provide a worthy and similar ceremony.

Making infant dedication and infant baptism as similar as possible should encourage the same level of expectation that the child should grow up to "own" the faith for themselves and to celebrate this later with an appropriate ceremony.

It is therefore of key importance that alternative ceremonies for each faith stage be as similar as possible, both in practice and theology.
The World Council of Churches, in its 1982 *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* paper, challenges both paedobaptists and believer baptists to "reconsider...their practices" (6) and take account of the doctrinal strengths of both positions.

Let us dare to take up the challenge of BEM and be the first to embrace a baptismal theology that is well founded but which also allows choice. If the Uniting Church intentionally embraced both infant baptism and infant dedication, it would certainly be in a unique position to mediate and define the next step forward in debate on the issue within the World Council of Churches.

Gregor Henderson, General Secretary of the Uniting Church, sees the resolution of the baptism issue as one of the main issues facing the church and points us to the hope of those founding our denomination that we be a church open to change (7). Bernard Thorogood is another who speaks of the coming inevitable breakthrough of the current impasse over baptism - the solution being to allow both options (8). Perhaps it is time to make this inevitable breakthrough a present reality.

**The term "dedicate"**

There is a need for church commissions to listen to the language spoken by our people in the church. To insist that the term "dedication" be reserved for "things" rather than people is to impose a theological subtlety that is lost on ordinary people. It is they who are using the term dedication - and they who know what they mean by it.

In his paper entitled "Infant Baptism Reconsidered," Mark Searle makes the comment "practice is invariably a step or two ahead of theology" (9). This is true. Theology is always the second act. Good theology is done from the bottom up and results from the "consensus of the faithful" upon their experience of truth which they check against biblical principles.

It is true that the word "dedication" is primarily used in the Bible in reference to material things, eg. the altar (Numbers 7:84,88; 2 Chronicles 7:9); the temple (2 Chronicles 2:4; Ezra 6:16-17) and gifts (1 Chronicles 28:12). However, Numbers 18:16 refers to the Levites being a gift "dedicated to the Lord". Paul, writing in 2 Timothy 2:21 also uses the analogy of us being made as instruments "dedicated" to God's service (10).

The root meaning of the Greek word for "dedicated" is *hagios* meaning to separate from common use, to be consecrated" (11). When applied to people, it is translated "saints," a favourite appellation used by Paul when writing to his friends in the various churches. Therefore, we should not impose too tight a restriction on the word "dedicate," particularly as language is a fluid thing.

It is therefore suggested that the Uniting Church adopt the word "dedication" for the first ceremony of a child entering the church if they are not being
baptised. This is because it is already in common use and because it means much more than that which is currently celebrated by the "service of thanksgiving for the birth of a child". This thanksgiving ceremony only covers the "thanking God" aspect and ignores other aspects people are looking for in a dedication service. Because a thanksgiving service is different, it should be retained and used by those who want to thank God for the birth of their child but who don’t yet want to make any further commitment to the church.

**What does it mean to dedicate?**

It is important to understand that dedication (and infant baptism) serves a number of purposes. What are they?

1) Dedication proclaims God’s call on the life of a child. Whilst God calls everyone and doesn’t want anyone to be lost, (2 Peter 3:9) God’s call on the child presented for dedication is specifically and gratefully acknowledged.

2) The act of dedication proclaims that children are precious to God (Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 18:2-6).

3) At an infant dedication, the church proclaims again Christ’s death and resurrection which makes it possible for a child to be called by God. It celebrates the grace of God to us.

4) It formally proclaims that a child belongs to the church, within which he/she is encouraged to grow in faith and within which the child is expected to discover and use his/her gifts in ministry.

5) Infant dedication allows the parents to thank God for their child and to offer their child back, inviting God to work out God’s purposes for the child. (Exodus 13:1-12; Luke 2:23).

6) Dedication allows the parents to promise to bring the child up in the faith of the Church.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children..."

(Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

7) In that both the parents and the congregation promise to nurture the child in the love of God, dedication formally marks the start of the child’s spiritual journey.
8) At a dedication, the parent/s or guardians and the church acknowledge the Holy Spirit’s partnership in bringing the child to a point when he/she comes to faith themselves.

9) Finally, dedication allows everyone to pray God’s blessing on the child (Genesis 48:11,15-16).

From this, it can be seen that the act of dedication is identical with that of infant baptism (if the contentious claim that infant baptism somehow confirms salvation on a child is discarded).

What is baptism?

Baptism is Jesus’ gift to the church. It celebrates the union between God and God’s people. Ideally, this symbol should identify and unite all Christians. Sadly, we have made this gift a contentious issue. The clash of deeply held convictions on baptism has even led to bloodshed (eg. of the Anabaptists in the 16th century).

"the inability of the churches mutually to recognise their various practices of baptism as sharing in the one baptism have given dramatic visibility to the broken witness of the Church."

BEM(12)

Baptism celebrates a restored relationship. God’s will for humankind is not realised until God and humankind each become the object of the other’s love. Both God and ourselves must be able to freely CHOOSE to love each other if an authentic relationship is to occur.

The act of baptism celebrates the occasion when this relationship between humankind and God is freely and responsibly chosen.

To suggest that baptism celebrates the grace of only one partner, ie. God, is to celebrate an incomplete relationship. This is not to deny that the relationship exists only by God’s grace and initiative. It is important to make this clear, otherwise we risk adopting the semi-Pelagian heresy which teaches that the first movement towards God is made by human efforts, unaided by God’s grace. This is not what is being proposed. Whilst God and humankind are the two AGENTS necessary in a love relationship, only God supplies the MEANS to allow it to happen. In that Jesus died in order to allow a broken relationship to be restored, it is quite proper to speak of salvation by God’s grace alone. Nonetheless, a relationship does not exist without the response of the human agent. The World Council of Churches affirm that: “Baptism is both God’s gift and our human response to that gift.” (13)
Does something happen at baptism?

Those claiming that the Holy Spirit starts something at the precise point of baptism need to fall back onto terms such as "miraculous" or "mysterious". This can make the honest inquirer nervous, particularly when the fruits of that miracle are impossible to see.

The problem with suggesting that we become Christians through the act of baptism is that baptism becomes a ceremony through which we "switch on" God's saving activity. This is perhaps presumptive.

"Baptism is not a human manipulation, a secret procedure through which a man may appropriate something hard to obtain." (Rudolf Schnackenburg) (14)

The Westminster Confession of 1647 sees baptism as a "SIGN and SEAL of ingrafting into Christ". This has led to confusion. Whilst it is a sign, the description "seal" seems to guarantee something that is exclusive to those being baptised. Because the term seal is finally reducible to a form of "baptismal regeneration", (miraculously becoming a Christian at the instant of baptism), it is perhaps better to avoid it.

"So far as I know, there is no teaching about Christian baptism which would directly contest the view that water baptism itself is ...primarily to be understood as a symbol...." Karl Barth (15)

With any debate on a contentious issue, truth is often found in the middle ground. BEM alludes to the hope that this be found.

"In order to overcome their differences, believer baptists and those who practise infant baptism should reconsider certain aspects of their practices. The first may seek to express more visibly the fact that children are placed under the protection of God's grace (16). The latter must guard themselves against the practice of apparently indiscriminate baptism and take more seriously their responsibility for the nurture of baptised children to mature commitment to Christ." (17)

Michael Green is one who has tried to find the middle ground. He likens baptism to receiving "the title deeds to the kingdom of heaven" (18). The obvious question that follows is who is it that God is not holding out the title deeds of heaven to? Green does not answer this perhaps because he also wants to say clearly that infant baptism does not make any child more or less likely to become a Christian.
Green also describes baptism as a seed that “is implanted which only germinates when it encounters the water of repentance and the sunshine of faith”. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for such a seed being placed by the act of baptism. The unbaptised children of Baptists are no less likely to grow in faith than the baptised children of Anglicans.

It is important to say that a link does exist between the faith of children and the faith of their parents. It is a statistical fact that children are much more likely to have faith in God when both parents are practising Christians. It is the faith of parents rather than an act of baptism that calls strongest to children.

**Baptism and community**

Loren Mead says,

"Without a biblical theology of the spiritual power of the corporate, modern church people are at the mercy of a shallow individualism that is cultural and not scriptural." (19)

God meets us not as isolated beings but in community. The baptism of children upholds this truth. An African proverb says "It takes a village to raise a Child". Not only does a child’s faith reflect the faith of parents but it also reflects the faith of the local church community.

However, whilst we must not undervalue community, neither should we understate the importance of individual choice. John the Baptist was scathing of people who relied on blood ties to indicate they were God’s people (Matthew 3:7-9). Jesus clearly challenged individuals to be his disciples. It was only when an individual became a disciple that he/she became a member of an interdependent faith community.

It is right to reject the extreme Anabaptist position that suggests that a child is not a Christian until they are baptised. A child growing up in a faith community is (we hope) steadily growing in their faith. However, almost all church traditions, tribes and social groups celebrate a stage when a person is considered to be mature and responsible for their faith or actions within their community.

Of course a child has always been a member of the community and enjoyed its nurture and identity, but a rite of passage that celebrates faith and responsibility independent of parental control is still significant. It is this which is celebrated in confirmation or responsible believer’s baptism.

The fact that baptism is withheld from children until they are old enough to freely and responsibly accept faith for themselves in no way implies that children are considered less important to God than adults. Futhermore:

"That Jesus ...let children be brought to Him, prayed over them, and put his hands on them, and
...finds praise from the mouths of babes and sucklings well-pleasing is ...no proof that such children are to be baptised without question." Karl Barth (20)

The Apostle Paul’s understanding of baptism

For Paul, faith and baptism were inextricably linked. Paul expected those who came to faith to be baptised. One signified the other. Because of this, Paul would probably not cope with baptising infants only in the reasonable expectation that they would be nurtured towards personal faith.

It must be remembered, however, that Paul’s church was a missionary church and the issue of whether to baptise the children of believing parents may not have featured.

It should also be remembered that the early church was quite diverse. Paul’s understanding of baptism was probably not the same as Luke’s.

Baptism as an analogy of circumcision

Some have sought to baptise infants because of its analogy with circumcision in the Old Testament. However, a direct link between the two was not made until 251 A.D. when Bishop Fidus proposed that baptism occur eight days after birth in order to bring it into line with circumcision (21).

The two New Testament passages that allude to circumcision are Colossians 2:11-13 and Romans 2:28-29. The teaching of these passages links circumcision/baptism with "putting off" old ways and having a change of "heart". As these concepts apply to people old enough to do these things, these verses are not supportive of infant baptism.

Paul’s passage in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 is another some have used to support the idea of infant baptism because it suggests that the belief of a parent makes their children "holy". However, it also says that the faith of a spouse will make their unbelieving partner holy, yet no one seriously suggests that unbelieving spouses be baptised. Paul’s main concern in writing this passage was to encourage harmony in the home of someone who had become a Christian.

What is the earliest evidence of infant baptism?

The Greek word "oikos" (meaning "inhabited house") is used to describe households that were baptised in the New Testament. Nowhere in Hellenistic or Jewish literature is this term restricted only to adult members of a family (22). However, it must be remembered that the Jewish household was patriarchal and that the faith of the father generally determined the faith of the entire family (23).
"Despite this, there is no firm evidence that infant baptism was practised in the New Testament church. In fact, there is no direct evidence for the baptism of children before the third century.

While the possibility that infant baptism was also practised in the apostolic age cannot be excluded, baptism upon personal profession of faith is the most clearly attested pattern in the New Testament documents."

BEM (24)

We first hear about the baptism of infants in a written instruction from Tertullian (203 A.D.) recommending people to stop doing so (25), (obviously, indicating that infant baptism was occurring in the third century). Tertullian wrote this because he didn’t want children to accumulate too much sin after baptism. He believed that sin was removed at the point of baptism and thereafter it could accumulate again. This view is no longer widely held. Tertullian also wanted those being baptised to be old enough to know Christ.

"Let them become Christians when they are able to know Christ."
(De baptismo 18:5).

Infant baptism became commonplace when the doctrine of "original sin" was popularised by Augustine (354-430 A.D.), (a change that greatly reduced the early church’s practice of preparing catechumens for baptism). Augustine taught that inherited sin was passed on biologically through sexual procreation, as such, baptism of infants to remove sin was appropriate. Both Luther and Calvin brought a necessary correction to this understanding and taught that sin was all pervasive because of the perversity of human nature rather than biological transfer.

**Baptismal ambiguity among the reformers**

Despite his later eulogising on the significance of baptismal water, Luther had declared in his early years:

"A man may believe even if he is not baptised; for baptism is no more than an outward sign that the divine promise ought to admonish us. If a man can have it, it is good, let him take it; for no one ought to despise it. But if a man cannot have it, or is refused it, he is not condemned, so long as he believes the Gospel." (De civ. Dei, XIII, 7)

Calvin also had his ambiguities. He wrote that baptism consists not only in our receiving the symbol of grace but in the public affirmation of faith. (Institutes
IV 15, 13). However, in the next chapter he defends infant baptism without decision and confession (26). In seeking to explain this, Beasley-Murray says that Calvin did not appear much interested in the New Testament texts on baptism but drew his theology from elsewhere. This was why Calvin said of infant baptism: "We are in the presence of a new sacrament; Truly, a new sacrament has been invented (Le Baptême chrétien, pp.69 ff.) (27).

Zwingli, in the earlier years of his ministry, was particularly unhappy with the practise of baptising children. He said:

"...nothing grieves me more ... than at present I must baptise children, for I know it ought not to be done". (28)

Why then did Zwingli allow the practice to continue?

"To answer this question, one must remember that the civil rulers of the city were sacralists; they saw in sacrament the cement that bound society together; they would therefore be loath to part with infant baptism."(29)

Zwingli knew this. He wrote, "But if I were to stop the practice of Infant Baptism, I would lose my office." (30)

Zwingli’s pragmatism was to lead him into fierce debate with the Anabaptists including Balthasar Hubmaier who, in public debate, forced Zwingli to say that he had been "mistaken" in his earlier views on infant baptism. Zwingli’s pragmatic acceptance of infant baptism coupled with his alarm over the factionalism of the radical reformers was to express itself tragically in his participation in the execution by drowning of the Anabaptist Felix Manz in 1527. The mid point in Zwingli’s vacillation over baptism was well expressed by his comment,

"I leave baptism untouched. I call it neither right nor wrong. If we were to baptise as Christ instituted it, then we would not baptise any person until he reached the years of discretion, for I find Infant Baptism nowhere written or practised. But we must practice it now so as not to offend our fellow men.... It is better not to preach (adult baptism) until the world is ready to receive it." (Quellen, IX, p.186)

Zwingli and Calivin’s decision to retain infant baptism was therefore as much political as theological. By changing baptismal practice, they risked jeopardising the reform that had already been accomplished.

Perhaps it is time for us to free baptismal theology from historical constraints that no longer apply.
This brief summary of baptismal thinking is not intended to prove or disprove the validity of infant baptism. Its purpose is to establish the fact that the case for or against paedobaptism has not been established with any certainty, and as such, the Uniting Church should work at accommodating both streams of thinking about the subject.

A way ahead

Let us meet the challenge issued by the World Council of Churches and reconsider our baptismal practices. Let us, the Uniting Church, offer a choice of the two baptismal practices, allowing the option of dedication followed by responsible believer’s baptism or infant baptism followed by confirmation. Let the two options for each faith stage be as similar as possible both in content and theology. Let our spectrum of choice be our strength. Such a position would suggest that both theological understandings on baptism be held with humility and with a willingness to acknowledge the other’s view. Such a position makes no claim to be the final answer. It is uncompromisingly a compromise. It is a mid point on a journey. Such a step is pastorally sensitive, theologically sound and offers a way ahead.

EndNotes

1) Uniting Church publications such as *Understanding the Church’s Teaching on Baptism: An expanded statement by the Assembly Commission on Doctrine*, (Melbourne, Uniting Church Press, 1988) have bewailed the lack of understanding of baptism by church members. We need to recognise, however, that ministry is not something that is given but is something that is received. If people are not persuaded by it, it is not their problem but that of our own commissions who have not communicated a teaching on baptism that is either clear or believable.


3) An example of this can be seen in *Understanding the Church’s Teaching on Baptism: An expanded statement by the Assembly Commission on Doctrine* (Uniting Church Press, 1988).

This document suggests that the laity are supporting responsible believer’s baptism because they are "uniformed" (p.7). It is perhaps unwise to call the likes of Barth, Moltmann and many scholarly ministers and laity uniformed.

4) P Bently and P. Hughes *The Uniting Church in Australia* (AGPS, 1996)
Barth is enigmatic, perhaps even inconsistent because he insists that infant baptism (although imperfect) is fully efficacious - but then insists that it is only a complete baptism when confession of faith consummates it. Indeed, he talks of the need for the "other half of the sacrament of baptism", that is, confession of faith, something that is celebrated by the act of confirmation (pp.47-48).


9) Mark Searle makes the comment "practice is invariably a step or two ahead of theology." Mark Searle, "Infant Baptism Reconsidered", in *Alternative Futures for Worship*, ed. Mark Searle (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1987) p.16


12) *BEM* Commentary on paragraph 6.

13) BEM, p.3

14) Rudolf Schnackenburg *Symbol und Wirklichkeit im Kultmysterium* (Bonn, 1940) p.108

15) Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp.13-14

16) Unfortunately, and rather unhelpfully, BEM does not go on to say what it means for a child to be "under the protection of God’s grace" or what it means for a child for whom no such claim has been made.

17) BEM, p.6

19) Loren Mead, *The Once and Future Church*, p. 61

20) Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p.43

21) Joachim Jeremias, "*The Origins of Infant Baptism*" (SCM, 1963) p.65

22) Joachim Jeremias, pp.17, 25-32


24) *BEM*

25) Joachim Jeremias, p.10

26) Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p.42


30) *Ibid. p.199*
This uniting together with the Lord now forms an actual spiritual union with Him. We are now all part of the same one Spirit, and that one Spirit is the Holy Spirit Himself. Being fully immersed into the water during the rite of water baptism perfectly symbolizes our new inner union with the Lord since water is one of the main symbols of the Holy Spirit in the Bible. 5. Initiation Into the Body of Christ. I believe that going through a proper water baptism is also an actual initiation rite with the Lord. Not only are we being directly joined to the Lord through the Holy Spirit as a result of baptism, but water baptism is a significant milestone in the life of every Christian. In City Harvest Church, we believe that water baptism is a biblical teaching and sacred practice for true followers of Christ. While baptism itself has no power to cleanse or save from sin, it is an important step of obedience in a believer’s life as an outward acknowledgment of the salvation experience that has already taken place. The act of immersion and emerging from the water represents the death of our old self, and mirrors the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism by immersion symbolizes our death and burial, while rising out of the baptismal water symbolizes a resurrection to a new life in Christ (Romans 6:3-5)

Know you not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death? [4] Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. [5] For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: American King James...  

Baptism symbolizes in part our being united with Christ in death and burial in a figurative sense: “Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?”