

DOCUMENTATION

Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry: A Melanesian Response

Introduction

1. The member churches of the Melanesian Council of Churches are grateful to the World Council of Churches for presenting the document on Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM) to them for study and response. They acknowledge that this document is the result of over 50 years of effort by the Commission on Faith and Order. This commission now includes theologians from virtually every Christian tradition, including the Roman Catholic church, and many representatives of Third World churches. Our churches in Melanesia feel that they can be part of the movement towards greater unity among Christians by responding to BEM. They recognise that the BEM document does not yet represent full agreement (“consensus”) among the churches, but it is the closest they have ever come to an expression of their common faith (“convergence”).

2. This response to BEM was prepared almost entirely by a discussion group of the Eastern Highlands Churches’ Council meeting at the Melanesian Institute in Goroka, Papua New Guinea. It was possibly the most-representative group of its kind ever to be convened in Melanesia. (See Appendix I for details of the group’s composition.) This statement was drafted for submission to the Melanesian Council of Churches as the basis of its official response to the Commission on Faith and Order, while leaving each member church free to make its own individual response.

3. As Christians in Melanesia, we confess that we still have much to learn about what our brothers and sisters in other denominations believe, and how they practise their faith. Nevertheless, we are also aware that BEM calls us to go beyond simply comparing our beliefs and practices with those of others. It calls each church to “recognise in this text the faith of the church through the ages” (p. x). Though there have been dialogues between individual churches here in

the past (“bilateral”, such as Anglican-Roman Catholic, and United-Evangelical Lutheran), we are now asked to take the further step of responding to BEM together (“multilateral”), reflecting, as we do so, on the consequences of BEM for further dialogue, and the guidance it can give us in our Melanesian context.

4. We must also confess that many of the theological problems addressed in BEM seem foreign to us, since they arise out of the history of Christianity in Europe, and thus do not appear relevant to our Melanesian concerns. However, we realise that missionaries, in bringing us the Christian faith, also brought divisions, which separate Christians throughout the world. In doing our part to help heal these divisions, we hope to grow in communion with our partner churches overseas, and with Christians in other developing countries, whose problems are similar to ours.

5. Here are some of the particular concerns we have in mind when we study BEM:

- the struggle to express our faith in Melanesian ways, finding the right relationship between the teachings of our churches and the customs and traditions of our people;
- our need for a firm Christian basis on which to work together in solving the problems of development faced by newly-independent nations;
- the tensions caused by the inability of some churches and missions to recognise the faith and baptism of others.

We now present our response to BEM in the prayerful hope that it will make a small contribution towards the eventual reception of a common expression of the apostolic faith by all churches.

BAPTISM

6. Melanesians deeply appreciate the significance of initiation. There is no such thing as self-initiation; rather, elders, or those with authority to act on behalf of the community, perform the rites, which often symbolise death and rebirth, from which children emerge as adults, and full members of the community.

7. In Melanesia, the community always includes the recent dead, the spirits, and the ancestors. People regard it as necessary for the well-being of the community to communicate with the spirits of the dead, and of nature. Though this wider concept of community corresponds to certain Christian traditions, e.g., prayer for the dead, veneration of the saints, petitions for good health, fruitful harvests, and safety on journeys, we do not find the notion of incorporation into this wider community explicitly mentioned in the section on baptism. Nevertheless, we rejoice to see baptism described as incorporation into the Body of Christ (B 1, 6), and initiation into the community of faith (B 12).

8. Some of our churches, especially those from Baptist and Pentecostal traditions, are unable to admit that infant baptism is scriptural (cf. B 11). They insist that the rebirth and renewal, that are an essential part of baptism (cf. B 2), demand a true repentance, such as can only be experienced by adults. Lutherans, on the other hand, regard this as setting conditions for God's grace, and making faith into a human work. The document characterises baptism as being related to "life-long growth into Christ" (B 9), and "a response of faith made within the believing community" (B [12]). It affirms that "The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people before, in, and after their baptism" (B 5). This helps us to see how those Christian communities, which pledge to nurture the faith of the baptised, make the Christian initiation of the very young more acceptable, while at the same time taking on a grave responsibility. Indiscriminate baptism of infants (cf. B [21] [b]), and a too-easy reliance on godparents, can weaken this responsibility. For Catholics and Anglicans, the renewal of baptismal vows at Easter (cf. B [14] [c]), and, for Lutherans, the importance given to confirmation (B 14), serve to emphasise this responsibility.

9. We find that most of our churches do, indeed, have "equivalent alternatives" (B [12]) to both infant and believers' baptism in their processes of Christian initiation regarded as a whole. Where Pentecostals or Baptists would baptise a repentant adult, Catholics would offer the sacrament of penance; both are intended as the seal of repentance. Whereas the older traditions do not hesitate to baptise infants, others dedicate them to God in the presence of the community.

In many churches, confirmation emphasises the continual working of the Holy Spirit given in baptism.

10. The statement that “Christians are immersed in the liberating death of Christ, where their sins are buried, where the “Old Adam” is crucified with Christ, and where the power of sin is broken” (B 3), is a clear affirmation that baptism is the firm foundation of our unity in Christ. It is “a call to the churches to overcome their divisions, and visibly manifest their fellowship” (B 6). Though “re-baptism” is frequently practised in Melanesia, we are striving to clear away the misunderstandings on which it is based (B 13). There is, perhaps, no greater hindrance, in our context, to the realisation of our unity in Christ. Our disagreements about baptism cause us to neglect our “common responsibility, here and now, to bear witness together to the gospel of Christ” (B 10), for we see the proclamation of the Word as an integral part of baptism itself.

EUCHARIST

11. Whereas the term “Eucharist” is current in the Catholic and Anglican churches, Lutherans speak about the “Lord’s Supper”, while the United church prefers “Holy Communion”. But there is general agreement among us that this celebration is indeed “the central act of the church’s worship” (E 1).

12. There are Melanesian equivalents for the idea of “sacrifice”, e.g., in the *dema* myth, where a life is taken in order that new life may continue to appear. However, the idea of a unique sacrifice, which is all-sufficient, and cannot be repeated (cf. E 8), is a challenge to Melanesian thinking, which is closely bound to the cycles of nature. The elements of bread and wine, too, are unfamiliar and cause both material and symbolic difficulties, whereas coconut milk or *kaukau* (sweet potato) are traditionally significant, and may be more readily available. Some churches approve of the use of such substances as elements (cf. E [13], [29]). There may be cultural equivalents to the eucharist as a rite of reconciliation, such as the *kava* ceremony of Fiji.

13. The eucharist as a “memorial”, in the form of a common meal, which is “a proclamation and a celebration of the work of God”

(3) is more readily understood throughout Melanesia. We, thus, welcome the document's insistence that the eucharist is "the memorial of the crucified and risen Christ" (E 5), i.e., sacrifice and memorial belong together. In Melanesia, the shared meal is the supreme sign of fellowship and reconciliation, even with former enemies. For the Pentecostal churches, forgiveness and healing are an integral part of the celebration of communion. In our different ways, we are thus able to appreciate that "The eucharistic celebration demands reconciliation and sharing among all those regarded as brothers and sisters in the one family of God, and is a constant challenge in search of appropriate relationships in social, economic, and political life" (E 20). Whether our people are caught up in tribal fighting, or in the struggle to achieve social justice in the course of economic and political development, the eucharist as "the sacrament of the unique sacrifice of Christ, who ever lives to make intercession for us", and as "the memorial of all that God has done for the salvation of the world" (E 8), can be of the greatest significance to them.

14. "The church confesses Christ's real, living, and active presence in the eucharist" (E 13), but our churches interpret this presence in different ways. The United church has no doctrine of the eucharist as a sacrifice, and it considers the event of the celebration as a whole to be the memorial. For Lutherans, the body and blood of Christ are present "in, with, and under" the elements of bread and wine, but He is more truly represented in the eucharistic event itself. Anglicans and Catholics come closest to the terminology of the document in regarding the eucharist as the sacramental representation of the perfect sacrifice of Christ. Yet for all of us, communion with Christ, as communities, and in the context of the celebration, is the true meaning of the eucharist.

MINISTRY

15. Under certain circumstances, the United church can invite lay people to preside at the communion service, and some Lutherans consider it possible to allow this, but Catholics and Anglicans do not (cf. E 29). The United church makes least of the distinctions between ordained and lay, men and women, in the church's ministries; the Catholic church makes most of them; and the others come somewhere

in between. Yet, we can all agree that each Christian community has a right to the eucharist, and that, at least in times of need, it is possible in most of our churches for lay people designated, if not formally “ordained”, by the community, to preside at the eucharistic celebration (cf. M 14, [14]).

16. We find that we have greater difficulties with each other’s forms of ministry than with either baptism or eucharist. While the Salvation Army has neither sacraments, nor an ordained ministry, and for traditions, such as the Baptist and the Church of Christ, the whole atmosphere of such discussions about ordination and ministry is strange, for Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans the possibility of real unity stands or falls on the issues treated here. We are grateful for the opportunity given by BEM to gain insights into one another’s understandings of ministry.

17. The document’s stress on ministry, as the calling of the whole people of God, in the context of the priesthood of all believers (cf. M 4, 12), makes it easier for us to face up to the differences which separate us in the area of ordained ministry, and to include appropriate Melanesian forms of authority and service in our discussions. In the Lutheran church, “elders”, whose role can approximate quite closely to that of traditional leaders, function as “pastors”, and carry out specialised ministries. There is a special rite for bestowing the position of elder. They lead the congregation collectively, and they still have a say in deciding who should proceed to theological training and ordination. In the Catholic church, specialised ministries, which recognise the charisms of lay men and women, have developed greatly in recent times, from “catechist” (roughly equivalent to Lutheran “evangelists”), to counselling, educational, and even judicial roles. Churches in the Pentecostal tradition explicitly strive for “multiple leadership”, exercising an authority, which is neither autocratic nor democratic (cf. M 16). The United church pastor has authority over the laity, but can be checked by the community. There is a danger, however, that traditional Melanesian forms of leadership can become confused with Christian, e.g., in rivalry between lay elders and ordained pastors.

18. Regarding ordination, we are not, at present, able to resolve our differences on whether it is primarily the community's recognition or approval of a gift or calling already received (cf. M 6, 15, 44), or the actual bestowal of a gift or "charism", even to the extent of being a sacrament, in which a special grace is received (cf. M 7c, 39, 42). For some of our churches, ordination is no more than a "commissioning" of people who have already proved themselves in preaching and service. For all of us, however, it is "an action by God and the community, by which the ordained are strengthened by the Spirit for their task, and are upheld by the acknowledgment and prayers of the congregation" (M 40). On the other hand, we all need to deepen our understanding of the gifts of the Spirit, or charisms (cf. M 5, 32), and to see the ordained ministry as one of them.

19. Some of our churches have great difficulties with the traditional threefold structure of ordained ministries as those of bishops, priests, and deacons. In some churches, the ministry of *episcopo*, or "oversight", is also carried out by persons designated as "Moderator" or "President", including those who "relate the Christian community in their area to the wider church, and the universal church to their community" (M 29; cf. M 21, 22). Only Catholics and Anglicans speak of "presbyters", (cf. M 30) or ordained ministers, as "priests"; all others prefer the term "pastor". Most have difficulty in seeing any difference between the work done by catechists and evangelists, and the role ascribed to the special office of deacon (cf. M [31]). In our Melanesian situation, which is all too often characterised by Christian sectarianism and tribal disputes, we agree that "a ministry of *episcopo* is necessary to express and safeguard the unity of the body", and we observe with pride that "this ministry of unity" (M 23) is often exercised by evangelists and pastors, whether lay or ordained, at great personal risk.

20. In view of the particular status of women in Melanesian cultures, it may be premature to raise the issue of ordaining women here at present. Some churches, which ordain women in overseas countries, do not yet contemplate doing so in Melanesia, with the exception of the United church and the Salvation Army. However, our churches have made it possible for Melanesian women to discover and make use of their special gifts, and we must carefully consider the

effect of denying ordination to women on the further development of Melanesian cultures (cf. M [18]).

21. Our discussion of ministry has confronted us with the perennial question: “What is the church?” Does it depend on a “continuity of the Word” alone, or is “continuity in the apostolic tradition” (M 35) essential to it as well? Does “the apostolic tradition of the whole church” necessarily include “the succession of the apostolic ministry” (M [34])? If it does not, how can we be sure that we can recognise one another’s ministries (cf. M 52)? If we regard ordination as a special gift of the Spirit, can it be resigned or revoked (cf. M 48)? What is the ultimate source of authority in the church (cf. M 15), and how do ministers, whether ordained or lay, men or women, participate in it (cf. M [13])? These are some of the questions, which our study of BEM has forced us to reconsider in our Melanesian context.

Conclusion

22. In conclusion, we would like to suggest the following practical steps by which our churches can continue to respond to BEM:

1. Study the BEM text itself, or this Melanesian response to it in seminary courses and parish discussion groups, where possible, in ecumenical fellowship with other churches.
2. Draw on experience gained in coming to grips with BEM when dealing with Christian groups who are causing difficulties.
3. In all relationships with other churches, try to identify the faith we have in common rather than concentrating on differences.
4. Worship together, wherever occasion allows, either by offering one another the hospitality of the Lord’s table, or by using the Lima liturgy inspired by BEM.
5. Reopen both bilateral and multilateral dialogues among our churches, in order to enable as many as possible “to prepare an official response to this text at the highest

appropriate level of authority” (p. x), and thus prepare the ground for real consensus (cf. p. ix) and our common attainment of “the goal of visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, in order that the world might believe” (p. viii, from WCC By-laws).

Appendix I: The Study Groups

The Melanesian Council of Churches, at its Annual General Meeting in Popondetta, February 12-16, 1984, formed a Committee on Theology and Melanesian Life, with the express purpose of helping the churches respond to BEM. This committee met to consider the document in Port Moresby on April 10, 1985 (on baptism), but, because of organisational difficulties, it was not able to meet again.

The Eastern Highlands Churches’ Council formed a discussion group, which met at the Melanesian Institute, Goroka, on May 9, 1985, June 27, 1985 (on baptism); August 15, 1985, October 17, 1985 (on eucharist); November 21, 1985, February 6, 1986, March 13, 1986, May 1, 1986, and July 24, 1986 (on ministry). A draft response was revised on October 16 and 20, 1986.

Though not all the churches listed below attended all 12 meetings, most were represented at all of them:

- The Anglican church of Papua New Guinea (9)
- The Catholic church of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (12)
- The United church of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (10)
- The Evangelical Lutheran church of Papua New Guinea (11)
- The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel (7)
- The Christian Life Centre (2)
- The Salvation Army (2)
- The Goroka Baptist church (1)
- The Church of Christ (4)

Average attendance at the meetings was 12, with the proportion of male to female 10:2, or ordained to lay 8:4, and of expatriates to nationals 9:3.

Appendix II: Further Reading

All references in this Statement of Response are to *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982 = Faith and Order Paper No. 111), with

paragraphs numbered according to the three sections: “B”, “E”, and “M”, and commentary paragraphs in brackets.

The following books are helpful in studying and using BEM:

KINNAMON, Michael, *Why It Matters: A Popular Introduction to the Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry Text*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1985, 72 pp.

LAZARETH, William H., *Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry: A Study Guide*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1982 = Faith and Order Paper No. 114, 107 pp.

THURIAN, Max, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM: Official Responses to the “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry” Text*, vol 1, Geneva WCC Publications, 1983 = Faith and Order Paper No. 116, 246 pp.

These books, and other materials useful for study groups, including the BEM text itself, can be obtained from the Australian Council of Churches, 199 Clarence Street, Sydney NSW 2000 Australia.

(The Annual General Meeting of the Melanesian Council of Churches, Port Moresby, February 3-5, 1987, recommended this text to the member churches for study and discussion.)