

I: Guidance Concerning Baptism and the Basis of Union

The following statement was accepted by the General Assembly in 1989 as an interpretation of paragraph 14 of the Basis of Union: 'We affirm, along with the whole Church of God, that there is one baptism which God has given us as the means of entry into the body of Christ. Almost alone among churches the URC holds in trust for the coming great Church a dual track practice of baptism, in which as a church we recognise both infant and believer's baptism. Beyond those differences we hold that baptism 'is the sacrament of entry into the Church and is therefore administered once only to any person.' (Basis of Union, clause 14.) As a Church we hold that baptism, whether of believers or of infants, is administered in the light of the divine promise and in response to the priority of grace.

We therefore affirm with Baptism, Eucharist and ministry, that 'Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as 'rebaptism' must be avoided.'

We confess that the baptismal practice of the Church has sometimes been the cause of pain and scandal. We recognise that some have, for various reasons, ceased to regard their baptism as infants as true baptism. In our own communion, uncertainties about the conscience clause in the Scheme of Union have led to perplexity and misunderstanding. With regard to the conscience clause the Basis of Union is explicit that as a church we affirm that 'both forms of baptism are understood to be used by God in the upbuilding of faith.' (Basis of Union, clause 14). The rights of conscience allow that no particular minister shall be compelled to administer baptism in a form to which s/he 'has a conscientious objection.' They do not allow that a congregation may declare one exclusive mode of baptism. We believe that ministers are obliged to make it clear to their congregations that there is a case for both forms of baptism. We also believe that if we are to be truly a dual track fellowship, the opportunity for both forms of administration must be made quite plain. All parents bringing an infant for initiation must be informed that there are two possible forms of initiation.

We believe that careful pastoral practice will help to prevent some of the pain and misunderstanding that have been a feature of recent experience. On the one hand the seriousness of vows made by parents and the congregation must be stressed. On the other hand, we would wish to encourage opportunity to be given for the reaffirmation of baptismal vows both at the point of personal declaration of faith and as a regular feature of the church's worship.

The URC depends for its well-being on the conciliar discipline according to which we voluntarily and with integrity order our pastoral practice according to the Basis of Union. We affirm that it is the responsibility of District Councils to see that those who make vows before God make them seriously and with the intention to live in accordance with them. These considerations must be borne in mind particularly at the time of inductions to pastorates.

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