

ONE BAPTISM – ONE CHURCH? BAPTISM, BELONGING, AND THE
CONTEMPORARY ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT – SELECTED SESSION

- Topic: One Baptism – One Church? Baptism, Belonging, and the Contemporary Ecumenical Movement Selected Session
- Convener: Kimberly Hope Belcher, University of Notre Dame
- Moderator: Anna Petrin, Mount Angel Seminary
- Presenters: Benjamin Durham, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John’s University
Tom McLean, St. Patrick’s Pontifical University, Maynooth
Theresa Rice, University of Notre Dame

One Baptism – One Church? A History and Theology of the Reception of Baptized Christians (Kimberly Belcher, Nathan Chase, and Alexander Turpin, Liturgical Press, 2024) is a mixed-method ecumenical treatment of the reception of baptized Christians across ecclesial boundaries in the Eastern and Western churches, from third century North Africa to the present. The book is especially attentive to the sociological motivations that hinder ecumenical commitments, such as threatened communities that fail to recognize shared baptism despite the more ecumenical theologies explicitly espoused by the central authorities of their churches. The invited panelists commented on and expanded the argument of the book using diverse methods from three different ecclesial locations.

Benjamin Durham of the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University, in his paper, “Actions Matter: On the Liturgical (Mis-)Recognition of a Common Baptism,” observed that in rural Roman Catholic parishes he has studied, as in historical frontiers like ninth-century Bulgaria examined in the book, attitudes towards other Christians are dominated by “exactly the Catholic pieties that tend to distinguish or even distance Catholic practice from that of other Christians,” and “find[ing] a way back home to the Roman Catholic Church” is considered the proper exercise of sacramental ecumenism. Durham contextualized this sociologically: the maintenance of boundaries embodies the “dogged resilience” of rural precariousness and also responds to threats of marginalization and closure by the community’s own central authorities. Supplementing Mary Douglas’s cultural theory, used in the book, with Margaret Archer’s critical realist sociology, Durham argues that “what is real in liturgical expression is not only what we observe, but also the forces (social and otherwise) that led to the manifestation of what we observe,” such as the pressures on rural or other low-grid communities. In other words, our ecumenical commitments must be structurally elaborated into social relationships and repeated liturgical embodiment to be theologically real.

Tom McLean of St Patrick’s Pontifical University presented “A Personal Matter: Autoethnographic Reflections on Crossing Denominational Lines,” which also explored the contrast between notions of reception of baptized Christians and the real, localized experience of the church. Centering ecclesial belonging in the form of “being the Lord’s people sharing at the Lord’s table in thanksgiving for and participation in the Lord’s saving deeds,” McLean noted that he has been admitted to eucharistic participation in the British Methodist Church, the Church of England, and the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium before having been formally received into membership in

any of the three. The practical discontinuity between eucharistic participation and formal reception depends on the ambiguous role of confirmation and local or widespread eucharistic hospitality. These experiences blur the boundaries between initiation and reception, and raise questions about the shared recognition of baptism. In the spirit of receptive ecumenism, then, McLean proposed adopting a non-sacramental liturgical rite like that used in British Methodism that receives new people into the local church (whether they are coming from a community in communion with their new local church or not, and whether they are eligible communicants or not). Such a rite would explicitly support participation and belonging in the local church, without implying doctrinal statements about initiation status.

Theresa Rice from the University of Notre Dame presented “Dialoguing with the Past: Reflections on the Role of History in Ecumenism and the Reception of Baptized Christians.” Attending to the ongoing need for formation in ecumenical concern of Roman Catholics, Rice argued for the necessity of history pursued as an ecumenical “dialogue [with a] partner separated by time rather than ecclesial location.” This permits the inescapable authenticating factor of past practice to be grounded in the whole spectrum of Christian practice, so that the imagination has “the tools to envision a common past for the sake of a unified future.” Practically, Rice asks how contemporary reception of baptized Christians and a broadened historical embrace of penance might support the visibility of the “ecclesial wound” as the order of penitents did in the early church, while inviting “those Catholics as yet unaware of their own concern for Christian unity ... toward ecclesial repentance.”

The ensuing discussion continued the tension, explored in each of the papers, between the abstract doctrinal commitment to ecumenism and the lived practice of ecclesial boundaries. The lived experiences of a number of participants surrounding the reception of baptized Christians were shared and explored.

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