

Witnesses of Christ in Today's World. Dialogue between Catholics and Baptists

Świadkowie Chrystusa w dzisiejszym świecie.
Dialog między katolikami a baptystami

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to highlight the most significant achievements of ecumenical dialogue on Christology between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance. The use of textual analysis alongside an ecumenical approach will enable us to trace the Christological issues addressed in this dialogue on the global stage. Focusing initially on Christological issues, the dialogue will affirm a shared biblical Christology, recognising Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Lord and Saviour, and confirming the authority of the first four ecumenical councils. It will also note the continuing differences regarding baptism, ecclesiology and the acceptance of salvation outside Christianity, as well as the emphasis placed by both traditions on conversion, discipleship and the communal witness of the Church (koinonia) enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

Keywords: Catholic Church; Catholicism; Baptist Churches; Baptism; Christology; dialogue; ecumenism

Abstrakt: Celem niniejszego opracowania jest wyeksponowanie najważniejszych osiągnięć dialogu ekumenicznego w zakresie chrystologii między Kościołem katolickim a Światowym Aliansem Baptystycznym. Zastosowana metoda analizy tekstu, wraz z metodą ekumeniczną, pozwoli na prześledzenie zagadnień chrystologicznych dialogu na forum światowym. Koncentrując się początkowo na kwestiach chrystologicznych, w ramach dialogu potwierdzona zostanie wspólna chrystologia biblijna, uznająca Jezusa Chrystusa za Syna Bożego, Pana i Zbawiciela oraz potwierdzająca autorytet pierwszych czterech soborów powszechnych.

Odnotowane zostaną także nadal istniejące rozbieżności dotyczące chrztu, eklezjologii i przyjmowania zbawienia poza chrześcijaństwem, nacisk kładziony przez obie tradycje na nawrócenie, bycie uczniem oraz na wspólnotowe świadectwo Kościoła (*koinonia*) ożywione przez Ducha Świętego.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół katolicki; katolicyzm; Kościoły baptystyczne; baptyzm; chrystologia; dialog; ekumenizm

I. Introduction

The sixteenth-century Reformation movement assumed the form of several currents closely related to one another in doctrinal terms, which in time developed into distinct denominations. One of the Reformation currents is *Baptism*, which traces its origins to English Puritanism. One of the defining characteristics of Baptists is their extreme individualism in the expression of faith, which is summed up by the saying: “No Baptist can speak for another” (Stransky 1988). This is accompanied by the complete self-sufficiency and self-governance of local congregations, which makes it problematic for representative bodies – right up to and including the Baptist World Alliance – to speak on behalf of all Baptists. However, since the Catholic Church’s dialogue with Baptists cannot take place with each congregation individually, but must occur at a global level, the appropriate partner for such dialogue is precisely the Baptist World Alliance, founded in 1905 (Lotz 2002, 97). It is worth noting that not all Baptist churches belong to the Baptist World Alliance. For example, of the two largest Baptist conventions, both of which are based in the USA, the Northern Baptist Convention is a member of the BWA, whereas the Southern Baptist Convention is not. Baptist churches are also divided on the issue of participation in the ecumenical movement (Payne 1960, 258–267).

The official doctrinal dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance began in the 1970s. The contacts between the Baptist World Alliance and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity made possible in 1984 the commencement of the Baptist–Roman Catholic International Conversation. The series of five international conversations held between 1984 and 1988 resulted in the report entitled *Summons to Witness to Christ in Today’s World: A Report on the Baptist–Roman Catholic International Conversations* (DPCU 1988). The second phase of the dialogue took place in the years 2006–2010 and bore fruit in the publication of the document *The Word of God in the Life of the Church* (DPCU 2010). In the years 2017–2023 another round of talks took place, the final document of which has not yet been officially published. Christological questions were addressed in the first round of dialogue; consequently, the final document of this phase of the conversations will be the subject of further analysis.

2. Landmarks of Christology in dialogue

The World Council of Churches, at its Assembly held in New Delhi, India, in 1961, established the doctrinal minimum by which a given religious body may be recognised as a Church or a Christian community. In order to be called Christians, there must be faith in the Triune God, the confession of Jesus Christ as God and Saviour, and baptism with water administered in the name of the Holy Trinity (WCC 1961).

One of the principal differences dividing the Baptist Churches from the Roman Catholic Church lies in their understanding of the sacrament of baptism – particularly regarding the possibility of administering Holy Baptism to infants and young children before they have attained the capacity for a conscious profession of faith.

In accordance with the hermeneutical principle governing ecumenical dialogues – namely, that it is preferable to begin with matters that are less contentious rather than with those that are more difficult – the conversations did not commence with the question of baptismal practice. Instead, the confession of Christ as God and Saviour, which constitutes one of the fundamental prerequisites for mutual recognition as Christians, became the subject of reflection during the first phase of the Catholic–Baptist dialogue. It may therefore be said that this dialogue began with Christological questions.

Who, then, is the Christ whom believers in the Baptist congregations and in the Roman Catholic Church alike recognise and confess – acknowledging both His divinity and His humanity, and proclaiming His saving power? Since the Baptist Churches trace their origins to early Protestant Puritanism, and since the Reformation rejected Tradition as a vehicle of Divine Revelation, the sole source of authentic knowledge of Jesus Christ remains Holy Scripture. The Christology of the Catholic–Baptist dialogue is thus a biblical Christology.

The image of Christ is interpreted as He is revealed in the pages of the New Testament. In this way, the parties engaged in dialogue attain “insight into the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4) (DPCU 1988, 5). This is the Christ who, in the kerygmatic proclamation of Saint Peter recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, is He whom the Jews put to death and whom God raised from the dead.

The Synoptic Gospels present Jesus as the one who proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God, calls sinners to conversion, heals the sick, delivers those possessed by evil spirits, gathers disciples about Himself, sends them forth to proclaim the Good News, teaches the love of one's neighbour with all one's heart and soul, and ultimately gives His life as a ransom for the liberation of humanity from sin and death (DPCU 1988, 7).

The Gospel according to Saint John portrays Jesus as the eternal Word of God who took flesh to dwell among us and to bestow upon us the gift of eternal

life. Eternal life consists in the true knowledge of God, which is possible only through His Son, Jesus Christ (DPCU 1988, 8).

In the letters of Saint Paul, the saving work of Christ is expressed through a variety of metaphors – such as justification, salvation, atonement, and reconciliation. These expressions signify an ontological and objective event in which God initiated the restoration of the relationship between fallen humanity and Himself, and inaugurated the renewal of all creation through the death of Christ upon the Cross and His Resurrection from the dead (DPCU 1988, 10).

These shared conclusions reached in the course of dialogue made it possible to affirm that both traditions proclaim Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Lord, and Saviour (DPCU 1988, 11). Since both Catholics and Baptists together profess the Christological faith articulated by the first four Ecumenical Councils – Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon – and since it was precisely at these councils that early Christian Christology took shape, the first document of the Catholic-Baptist dialogue states that there are no substantial differences in the expression of doctrine concerning the Person and work of Christ. The only divergences arise with regard to the reception of Christ's redemptive work (DPCU 1988, 11).

It should be noted, moreover, that the dogmatic formulations of the Ecumenical Councils, which express the faith of the Church, have a normative function for Catholics; whereas Baptists regard them as valuable expressions of the Church's faith, but recognise as normative only Holy Scripture itself. The normative function of the Council's decrees was never called into question in the Church during the first millennium, nor in the second millennium by the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches. Nevertheless, Pius IV confirmed the decrees of the Council of Trent by his bull *Benedictus Deus*, reserving to himself all interpretations of the decrees and appointing a congregation of cardinals to see to their implementation (Borromeo 2023, 326–340).

3. Personal engagement of a believer in Christ

The Catholic-Baptist dialogue does not centre upon the great Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. As has been stated above, the Christology formulated by the Ecumenical Councils is received by both parties to the dialogue. The document produced as the fruit of these conversations, however, focuses upon the question of our individual and communal witness to Christ. What does it mean to be a witness to Christ?

In order to become a witness, one must first undergo a process of conversion. The testimony borne to Christ is, in the first instance, the testimony of the community of the Church. Only thereafter does it become our personal witness

before the world. This witness faces numerous challenges, which were likewise noted in the course of the Catholic–Baptist dialogue. The structure of the joint document reflects not only the mentality of contemporary humanity, but also its interest in matters of faith – and, among these, in the person of Jesus Christ.

To believe is to enter into a personal relationship. Christ is not to remain merely a figure of the past – confined to the pages of Holy Scripture, the definitions of the Councils of the first millennium, the folios of the *Summae theologicae*, or the later manuals of theology. For the believer, Christ is to be someone vital not only in the past, but above all today and in the future. Hence the strong emphasis placed upon the confession of faith in the present: What Christ do I receive today, and what Christ do I proclaim to others?

The first mark of a disciple of Christ is conversion and the reception of the forgiveness of sins, brought to completion in the sacrament of baptism. In this way, every Christian who is mindful of their responsibilities – whilst constantly striving for conversion – simultaneously proclaims conversion to everyone around them (DPCU 1988, 14). This conversion is understood as a turning away from all that is opposed to God, from all that contradicts the teaching of Christ. It is, therefore, a turning towards God, towards Christ His Son, through the working of the Holy Spirit (DPCU 1988, 15). In this consists the passage from death to life and the growth in divine grace.

Called to follow Jesus, His disciples are formed through the words of Holy Scripture, through prayer, divine worship, works of mercy towards others, and the witness of daily life (DPCU 1988, 17). The life of a disciple of Christ – the giving of witness to Him – does not take place in isolation from others. It unfolds within the community of the Church, which is itself the fellowship of Christ's disciples.

For Catholics, the gateway into this community of disciples is baptism, administered even in infancy, on the basis of the faith of the parents and of the entire ecclesial community. For Baptists, the constitutive act of entry into the community of disciples is the personal confession of faith, made when the young person has attained sufficient discernment. Baptism then follows as the confirmation and outward sign of that confession of faith (Larrabee 2014).

4. Witness to Christ within the *koinonia* of the Church

Witness to Christ is borne within the community of the church, into which one enters through faith and baptism. The most fitting expression of this community is the biblical term *koinonia*, used chiefly by Saint Paul the Apostle. It signifies something more profound than mere *fellowship* or *community*. *Koinonia* is realised both between God and humanity, and among human beings themselves.

It also constitutes the very foundation laid by Christ, upon which He has built His Church (DPCU 1988, 19–20; Jagodziński 2017, 77–95).

The gathering of the Church is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who, through baptism, unites within the one Body of the Church both Jews and Greeks, women and men, slaves and free. One may extend this further: white and black, rich and poor, learned and simple alike (DPCU 1988, 20–21).

While both parties to the dialogue agree that the term *koinonia* most aptly expresses the nature of the Church as animated by the Holy Spirit – who manifests within it a diversity of gifts – Catholics and Baptists differ in their understanding of what constitutes the Church as such. Catholics perceive the Church as a universal whole: a communion gathered by the Spirit, endowed with visible structures, and encompassing the entire world. Baptists, on the other hand, regard the local congregation as the primary realisation of the Church, assembled by the Holy Spirit in obedience to the Word of God.

A certain divergence likewise emerges between Catholics and Baptists concerning the coexistence of the divine and human dimensions of the Church. Catholics affirm the inseparable interpenetration of the divine and human elements within the Church, formulating this in the doctrine of the theandric structure of the Church (Omollo 2022, 47–59). Baptists, however, prefer to say that the Church is divine in its origin and mission, yet human in its historical existence and structure (DPCU 1988, 23).

The witness borne to Christ by Christians – both for Catholics and for Baptists – is not confined within the bounds of the Church. In accordance with the command of Christ, Christians are sent into the world to proclaim the Good News of salvation. The difference between the two traditions lies in their respective approaches to the possibility of salvation within religions other than Christianity.

For while the Catholic Church, in the declaration *Nostra aetate* of the Second Vatican Council, affirmed that other religions may “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men” (SVC 1965), Baptists, in a more cautious manner, acknowledge the possibility of salvation only in the name of Jesus. It should be noted, moreover, that the more expansive interpretation of *Nostra aetate* referred to in the joint Catholic–Baptist document does not find confirmation in the statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in 2000, *Dominus Iesus* (CDF 2000), which emphasises that salvation is possible only in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that even if God grants salvation to a person belonging to a religion other than Christianity, such salvation is nonetheless accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ.

5. Conclusion

The Catholic–Baptist dialogue, rooted in the ecumenical spirit of the twentieth century, has fostered a deepened mutual understanding between two Christian traditions historically divided since the Reformation. While recognising enduring differences – particularly in their theology of baptism and ecclesiology – both communities profess together the faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, Lord, and Saviour, as articulated in the first four Ecumenical Councils. Their shared Christology, grounded in Scripture, emphasises the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ as the ontological foundation of salvation and the renewal of all creation.

The dialogue has moved beyond doctrinal controversy to focus on the shared vocation of witnessing to Christ in the contemporary world. Both traditions affirm conversion as the beginning of discipleship and view the Church, animated by the Holy Spirit, as the communion (*koinonia*) in which this witness takes form. While Catholics perceive the Church as a universal, visibly structured body, Baptists emphasise the primacy of the local congregation gathered in obedience to the Word. Despite differing approaches to salvation outside Christianity, both affirm that all salvation flows from the mystery of Christ's Cross and Resurrection, through whom God continues to call humanity into the fullness of divine communion.

The path towards finding unity between the Baptist Churches and the Roman Catholic Church still seems long and difficult. The points of convergence in teaching about Christ highlighted above should be regarded as highly valuable, though without succumbing to premature enthusiasm. One must take into account the internal structure of the Baptist Churches and the Baptists' own ecclesiological understanding. Thomas Stranski rightly noted this, quoting a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention (USA): "We (Baptists) have no organic unity amongst ourselves; hardly would we seek it with others of a different doctrinal persuasion" (Stransky 1988). Furthermore, the matter is complicated by the reluctance of many Baptists to reach common doctrinal agreements, even within their own denomination. As Denton Lotz observed: "Where there is need for cooperation for evangelism and mission, Baptists will be involved. Where there is a call for structural unity or doctrinal unity, Baptists, mindful of their heritage, are hesitant to join" (Lotz 2002, 99). However, what is beyond human capacity remains possible for God. Therefore, both Catholics and Baptists do not give up on dialogue, trusting that the absence of spectacular successes along the way in no way precludes the possibility of successfully reaching the goal of the unity of Christ's disciples, as commanded by Christ.

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