

Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry

study guide

God in our image



Divided at the altar



At home alone



Christians: old and new



Introduction to this study guide

The stories and questions in this study guide on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) are intended for group discussion or individual study.

“In January 1982, a major advance was made on the ecumenical journey. Over one hundred theologians unanimously recommended to the WCC Central Committee to share an agreed statement on “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” with the churches for their common study and official response. These biblical scholars and doctrinal specialists, coming from over thirty countries, represented nearly all major Christian church traditions: Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, Methodist, United, Disciples, Baptist, Adventist and Pentecostal.” *

For groups

Read one of the stories together. You may want to encourage each person to reflect quietly after reading the story before discussing your reactions. Look together through the questions that accompany the story. Feel free to add other questions. Think about how this story is relevant to your own church or context. If it is not relevant, then think of how the issues of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry are experienced in your community. Also reflect on how age, gender, culture and identity interplay with each of these church practices. Encourage each person to participate by sharing their own stories and experiences in relation to the topics.

Follow up

- Ask the group participants to respond to the story in a creative way. Depending on the interest and willingness of the group, this could be through drama, mime, art collage, painting, music etc.
- After studying and discussing the stories you may want to visit different churches together as a group. It will be beneficial to make contact with the clergy or some members of the church before your visit. After attending a worship service, baptism or bible study at the church, meet together and debrief your experience and impressions. You may also want to do this with a member from that church so that you can ask them questions about what you saw or experienced.
- Create a map or chart of your “faith journey”. This should demonstrate how you became a Christian and what were the important moments or people that influenced your faith. Include how Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry fit into your faith journey. Once you’ve created your map, use it as a tool to share with others about your life and faith.

For individuals

After reading through the stories and questions, you may want to reflect on or write about your own personal experiences in the church especially in relation to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. How do these issues relate to your faith and local church life? Furthermore, you may want to find out more about your own church’s position on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry. What is your church’s ecumenical engagement? Is your church involved with the World Council of Churches or in bilateral dialogue with other Christian confessions? If you are not sure, you may want to ask an ordained or lay leader in your church about it. For the original “[Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry](#)” statement (the “Lima text”) or for more information about the WCC and its member churches work towards Christian unity, check the programme on [Unity, mission, evangelism and spirituality](#).

* This web-based study guide is adapted from the book “[Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—A Study Guide](#),” William H. Lazareth. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982.

For further reading, refer to “[BEM at 25—Critical insights into a continuing legacy](#),” Ed. Thomas F. Best & Tamara Grdzeldze. France: World Council of Churches, 2007.

God in our image



Questions for discussion

1. How has your culture influenced church life and practices in your context? How has Christianity affected or influenced your culture?
2. How much cultural diversity is compatible with Christian unity?
3. Paul affirmed that any one baptized in Christ is a new creation: “the old has passed away, behold, the new has come”. How do we live out our new identity in Christ amid our persisting social identifications (i.e. gender, ethnicity, nationality) among other persons also created in God’s image?
4. Churches in different parts of the world have responded to the relation of Jesus Christ to history and culture in various ways. How should Christ’s message interact with seemingly oppositional historical, cultural and political realities?
5. How do you view the relation between Christianity and other faiths? What lessons can the churches learn from their missionary activities in previous generations? What is your church’s understanding of mission?
6. Does the Christian identity between old and young generations in your church differ? What are the young peoples’ views on the relationship between culture and faith?

On Baptism, Eucharist and Culture...

The taxi lurched to a sudden halt. Canon Peter Milton had arrived at the home of Joseph Nsimba sooner than he had expected. “Africanization” was the subject he came to discuss with this retired pastor of sixty years’ service. The memories of such veteran church leaders were providing his colleagues at church headquarters with invaluable data. Here are a few of the highlights recorded by Milton during the next few hours of their probing conversation:

Milton: What is the relation between church sacraments and African culture? What are some of the theological and pastoral issues which still need more attention?

Nsimba: Baptism and Holy Communion vividly convey the meaning of the person of Christ as well as his saving work. During the missionary era, however, the reality of Christ was often confused with the forms of Western culture. Christ was domesticated. He was proclaimed only in the context of Western categories and symbols. These were seen as being superior to the indigenous and so-called “pagan” cultures of Africa. The teachings and practices of the missionaries frequently carried with them the economic, political, and ethical systems and values of Western cultures.

Milton: Would you please cite some examples?

Nsimba: In many churches, Africans were told to take “Christian” names. Only after the Bible was translated in our own language did we realize that the names of many missionaries, such as Martin, Leon, Harvey, Olivier and Dorothee, were not in the Bible. We also learned that Saint Augustine, Saint Ambrose and many other Western theologians did not have Christian names. Furthermore, most astonishing of all, Jesus did not invent a Christian name for himself. He was given a name which derived from the Hebrew verb that means “to save”. By this name God honoured the Chosen People and their culture and revealed to them in person the true meaning of salvation.

In my Congo culture, a name was given to the child six days after birth. That name performed many functions. It was used, for example, for ritualistic protection against evil powers. By somebody’s name, one could often guess the history of the individual or the family and tribe to which she or he belonged. But missionaries didn’t believe that such African names could also be used at the time of baptism.

Milton: How about local practices in Holy Communion?

Nsimba: The sole use of bread and wine—foods unknown to the diet of many Africans—was identified not only with the missionary’s foreign economy but also with the white people’s sorcery and witchcraft. Some African Christians refused to commune because it was believed that the white people’s bread and wine used in the Eucharist were the flesh and blood of men and women whom the missionaries had killed by their sorcery. Taking part in Holy Communion was therefore viewed by some as an initiation rite into the social evil most feared in the native community.

Now, as for polygamy...

Christians: old and new



Questions for discussion

1. What is this story about?
2. What is the meaning of baptism for Christian life?
3. How does baptism take place in your church, if at all?
4. What are the main differences between the approaches of those who favour infant baptism and those who advocate believer's baptism?
5. Both groups make positive affirmations. Do these complement or contradict each other?
6. Have you ever taken part in or observed a baptism in a church tradition other than your own? What were your impressions?
7. "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins" (Nicene Creed). Is it defensible in either scripture or tradition to separate two baptisms? Explain the personal experience of Philip and Cornelius (Acts 8,10) in view of the baptismal theology of the apostolic Church (cf. Rom. 6:3-6; Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4-6).

Adapted from the book "[Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—A Study Guide](#)," William H. Lazareth. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, pg. 29-31 & 35

On Baptism...

Maria's blue jeans seemed strangely incongruous with her long braided hair. Yet mixing the modern with the traditional was not at all unusual for her. It was a characteristic that made her a constant delight to her fellow students at the university. They were never quite sure whether she was going to quote someone like Dostoevsky or Brecht, to say nothing of humming aloud from both "rock" music and the Orthodox liturgy. In her religious life, however, Maria experienced an inner turmoil that she rarely shared with others. Even her closest friend, Tanya, could not really understand or approve of her increasingly frequent visits to the small congregation of "New Christians" in town.

"Our people have been Orthodox for centuries and centuries," Tanya insisted. "You are still a loyal Christian, Maria. You love the Lord. If not everything is to your liking in our church, stay and help us change it gradually from the inside. Nothing will be gained by leaving!"

Maria respected Tanya, but she remained impatient and unconvinced. There had been no organized parishes near her home as a child. She therefore joined her parents in closely following the liturgical life of a monastic community. As the years passed, though, she became growingly dissatisfied with the community's traditional routine. There seemed too few opportunities for personal involvement, and so little sensitivity for parish renewal and modern development.

"I'm sure that the Orthodox faith is eternally true," she would say quietly to Tanya, "but it's so hard for me to understand how to put it all into everyday practice."

It was only after she started to attend the university that Maria became attracted to the congregations of "new Christians". She liked their modern music, free prayers, and the fuller participation of lay persons in Sunday worship. The adult discussions in Christian education were also lively. Though she had to admit that she certainly missed the awesome beauty of the Orthodox liturgy, she really did feel closer to daily life in her new church home. That is, until the pastor began to talk privately to her about being rebaptized—as a reborn Christian.

The leader of the congregation explained that her baptism as an infant in that remote Orthodox monastery was of no real effect. Why? Because her Christian faith was never personally and publicly expressed. Her baptism was not actually a sign of Christian conversion. It was more like a family presentation in the temple according to the social customs of the traditionally Orthodox people.

No, the pastor said, if Maria wanted to continue in this community church, and she was certainly very welcome, then she would be expected to make a public profession of the faith and be baptized in the Spirit.

"But I'm already baptized in the Spirit!" was Maria's spontaneous response. It was on that basis that she had been a faithful member of the Orthodox Church for over twenty years.

She could understand and even accept some variety of baptismal rites in the various churches. Indeed, didn't her own personal experience demonstrate the weakness in baptizing all infants of Christian parents and then not providing enough care later for their nurture in Christian education and service? Yet Maria could not bring herself to believe that she must now reject her baptism as an infant, in order to become more fully engaged in active Christian discipleship.

For months now, Maria did not know which way to turn. She wanted desperately to become part of church renewal. But she could not see why some Christian communities wanted to increase their membership by denying the infant baptism of other churches in the same place. She was completely surprised when she also learned from Tanya that both churches were members together in the World Council of Churches.

Divided at the altar



Questions for discussion

1. Is Eucharist celebrated in your church tradition? If so, how?
2. What is the meaning of the Eucharist?
3. This story is especially relevant in regions where mixed marriages are common. Is this true of your community? How do the churches try to minister faithfully in meeting such difficult pastoral problems?
4. How does participating in the Eucharist relate to the social life?
5. In the history of the Church there have been various attempts to understand the mystery of the real and unique presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Which interpretation has been most common in your tradition?
6. Are you aware of any regulations in your church about receiving communion in other churches?
7. Have you ever participated in or observed the Eucharist in a Christian tradition different from your own? If so, what were your impressions?

On Eucharist...

Robert looked sad at the breakfast table as his wife and children left to attend mass without him. Certainly it has not been an easy decision for him to make. He simply was no longer able to participate throughout the entire liturgy, knowing that at the end he would not be allowed to take communion with his family anyhow. And why? Because he belonged to the same Reformed Church in which he had worshipped since his childhood.

His thoughts went back over the years to their wedding. Coming from different church backgrounds, Marguerite and he had talked a lot about their faith before they decided to marry. As a devout Roman Catholic, she naturally wanted the celebration to take place in her home parish. He agreed and was very grateful when Fr Martin had especially invited the pastor of the neighbouring Reformed congregation to participate in the ceremony. How happy all their relatives had been to be able to praise God in the same church celebration! Both Marguerite and he had prayed that the two of them would soon be able to commune together on a regular basis especially after all the ecumenical progress made during the years at the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict XVI kept smiling at them daily from his picture hanging in their hallway.

At the first Holy Communion of their son Charles, however, Robert could not go to the Lord's Table. The experience of their family divided at the altar had been so painful to him that at the first Holy Communion of their daughter Monique in another parish, Robert resolutely advanced towards the altar. While he was not refused the sacrament, the priest afterwards explained his church's official teachings in a kind but firm way.

It was also made clear to the family that Marguerite and the children could not commune in Robert's congregation. Its Holy Communion could not be recognized as a full Eucharist, the priest said, since it was administered by Reformed pastors who had never been ordained by Catholic bishops.

Now to be fair, Robert had to admit to himself that none of this came as a surprise. Fr Martin had already explained it fully before they were married. Nevertheless, as the years passed, he and Marguerite found it increasingly difficult to accept the impossibility of communing together in each other's churches. They were certainly no theologians but they believed essentially the same things about the Eucharist. Indeed, hadn't the Second Vatican Council declared that the Eucharist in the Reformed Church celebrated the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord? Why couldn't Marguerite commune there simply by believing what the Council affirmed, even if she were also convinced of the fullness of the Catholic Eucharist? And if the Council could accept his Christian baptism within the Reformed Church as authentic, what necessarily prevented his participation at Holy Communion?

After quickly swallowing the last mouthful of coffee that had long since gone cold, Robert hurried through the hallway to drive down to his church—alone. In his haste, he did not even notice the smiling face of Pope Benedict XVI in the picture on the wall.

Adapted from the book "[Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—A Study Guide](#)," William H. Lazareth. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, pg. 55-57 & 61

At home alone



Questions for discussion

1. How important is the community aspect of your church to you as a Christian?
2. What is the role, if any, of ordained ministry in your church? What are the clergy's different ministries, services and functions?
3. To whom are priests and pastors accountable? For whom are they responsible? With what power, if any, should they exercise their holy calling?
4. What is the ministry or calling of laity in the church? What are their different ministries, services and functions?
5. What role do young people play in your church? Is the church relevant for youth? Are they active in the leadership of liturgy or community life? What is the role of women?
6. Reflect on the passage from 1 Corinthians 12: 4-31. How do you relate this to your own church and the role each person plays? What does this passage tell us about working for Christian unity?

On Ministry...

Pastor Gardiner stood thinking for a long while in front of Muriel Johnson's home. He was certainly not looking forward to this particular visit! How, he wondered, can I say what I want to say without sounding defensive?

The last time he called on Mrs. Johnson she made it very clear why she stopped coming to church worship: she had found a "deeper religious experience" by watching a popular evangelist on television. From him she received comfort and inspiration. He had also convinced her that going to church wasn't nearly as important as your own personal relation to Jesus.

And that, she decided, was something she could have at home alone without being disturbed in church by all those rowdy children and radical college students and continual demands to help with this charity programme or that fund drive. I can pray very well in my own living room, she told Pastor Gardiner, without needing any minister to lead me, thank you. Besides, some of your sermons aren't very spiritual when they try to "mix religion and politics".

As the pastor walked up to the door, he recalled that Mrs Johnson's daughter and son-in-law had also stopped coming to church. Your services are "too stiff and formal for us", they told him. Why do you repeat those same things week after week, with the same people leading the same worship out of the same book? Frankly, they said, we far prefer our occasional prayer meetings with a small circle of close friends where there is no "expert minister to preach at us".

They're right, the pastor thought, when they say that our church community isn't always as lively as it could be. And it's also true that prayer groups, like Muriel's personal prayers, are an important part of our Christian life.

But yet, he countered, isn't the Church the body of Christ, more than the sum of its isolated scattered parts? Doesn't the Holy Spirit make something special happen when all those people gather together as God's family around the Table of the Lord? Without their common effort, how could we even have begun to support three refugee families? Christianity isn't a private affair; didn't Christ come to bridge our isolation from each other as well as our separation from God? And isn't it my special vocation, he wondered, to build up and guide our community life with Christ's help? But how could he say all that in a way that would somehow make sense to Muriel Johnson?

In any case, he concluded, it's important that I come here, if only to show that we care enough to listen to her. That, too, is a big part of my role. As he rang the doorbell, Pastor Gardiner took a deep breath. A front window was open and he could already hear the voice of the TV evangelist.

Adapted from the book "[Growing Together in Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry—A Study Guide](#)," William H. Lazareth. Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982, pg. 85, 86 & 91.