

*Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, edited by Michael Root and Risto Saarine, and *Mother Church*, by Carl E. Braaten.

reviewed by [Michael Kinnamon](#) in the [February 3, 1999](#) issue

*Edited by Michael Root and Risto Saarinen, Baptism and the Unity of the Church. (Eerdmans, 290 pp.)*

*By Carl E. Braaten, Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism. (Fortress, 164 pp.)*

Lutherans, it seems, are taking this business of ecumenism seriously. At a time when some observers speak of a loss of momentum in the search for unity among Christians, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has entered into a full communion relationship with the United Church of Christ, the Reformed Church of America and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Lutheran churches in Nordic and Baltic countries now have a similar relationship with English and Irish Anglicans; also, the members of the Lutheran World Federation have been in close conversation with Roman Catholic theologians on the doctrine of justification. These two books--one by a well-known Lutheran theologian, the other centered on a study paper produced at the request of the LWF--provide insight into the Lutheran concern for unity. They also offer a significant challenge to all Christians who care about the ecumenical movement.

Reading collections of essays from ecumenical conferences can be like eating shredded wheat without milk, but Michael Root and Risto Saarinen's book is easy to digest. Indeed, it is one of the best collections of this sort I have ever read. The problem the volume addresses is straightforward and of real consequence: Scripture (e.g., Ephesians 4) holds that there is one baptism that joins Christians with their one Lord in one body. The *Decree on Ecumenism* from Vatican II declares that "all persons who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized [i.e., with water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit] are brought into certain, though imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church." Various denominations' responses to the document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, produced by the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission, reveal an astonishing degree of convergence on the theology and practice of baptism. So "why do the churches avoid drawing conclusions from this basic consensus?" Why isn't baptism claimed

more widely as a bond of unity between churches?

The opening study paper, written by staff at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, demonstrates how baptism reflects the structure of the church as communion. This paper served as the reference point for a 1996 conference at which the other papers in this volume were presented. The authors, about half of whom are Lutheran, affirm the ecumenical importance of baptism--and then complicate the issue in ways that the editors call "sobering but also encouraging for future work."

For example, James Dunn of England wonders whether ecumenical discussions are "giving baptism the prominence due to the Spirit [or are] subordinating the Spirit to a rite which we humans decide to administer." Merja Merras of Finland presents the Orthodox view that unqualified mutual recognition of baptism should be a part of a more general mutual recognition of churches, including "unanimity in the concept of the church and in the ministry of this church." (It should be pointed out, however, that Orthodox churches often do not insist on a new baptism for those who come to them from other communions.) Mark Heim of the U.S. stresses that the real issue at stake for Baptist churches is not baptism per se but ecclesiology. John Pobee of Ghana presents "snapshots" of baptismal practices in the indigenous African Instituted Churches and argues that these communities represent a much-needed challenge to the European captivity of the church. And Kiran Sebastian of India discusses why many Indian believers refuse baptism altogether. His essay is a fittingly complicated conclusion to a book that doesn't back away from complication.

*Mother Church* is also a collection of essays, but written by one theologian over a number of years. Readers of Carl Braaten's other works will be familiar with most of the themes: his concern that contemporary churches have allowed culture to set their agenda and thus are marked by a weakening of distinctive Christian beliefs; his call for biblical literacy and for a renewed confidence in the authority of scripture; his advocacy for a church that is evangelical and catholic; his emphasis on eschatology as the necessary framework for thinking about the church.

Perhaps less well known is Braaten's commitment to the ecumenical movement insofar as it is aimed at recovering the truth of the gospel. He sees any attempt to circumvent disagreements about the faith while coming together in common structures as false ecumenism. But Braaten encourages Lutherans (and other Protestants) to recognize that the reunited church of the future should include both

bishops in apostolic succession and the papacy. These offices, he argues, can give visible expression to unity and serve as signs of continuity in the faith. Not all Lutherans will be pleased with this conclusion.

Braaten's spirited defense of ecumenical theological dialogue makes me wonder if his approach doesn't put too much weight on achieving unity and not enough on the given unity that is ours in Christ. Is consensus in matters of faith really a prerequisite for communion? Isn't the search for such consensus better understood as our response to the realization that God has bound us together? Can our agreement about doctrine or social justice or anything else effect the unity of Christ's body?

I also question Braaten's construal of the ecumenical problem as a dialogue between "Reformation Protestants" and Roman Catholics. He acknowledges that Radical Protestants (i.e., those churches that practice believer's baptism) remind historic churches of the demands of Christian faith; but these churches are, in his words, "parasitic," living off those bodies that seek to preserve the tradition. Thus, he doesn't take seriously what Reinhold Niebuhr called the great ecumenical task in North America: "to find an institutional form broad enough, and a comprehension of the Christian faith rich enough, to give a solid basis for the instruments of grace which the historic church has rightly developed and at the same time to appreciate the validity of the sectarian protest against the corruptions which periodically appear in these means of grace."

I am a member of a believer's church, the Disciples of Christ, and I would never confuse Braaten with a theologian from my tradition! But for that reason, I am always challenged by what he has to say. And I commend his work to other non-Lutherans.