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Mennonite Brethren Theology of Baptism

Lynn Jost

I want to introduce this paper with a few remarks about the context in which this conversation must proceed. The best term for the attitude which should pervade this paper and this conversation is probably "humility." I am indebted to John D. Roth's explanation in *Choosing Against War* for this approach. Roth points out that in important theological issues we must "negotiate our way . . . between the temptation to assert the truth with absolute certainty and the equally tempting impulse to retreat into an open-ended relativism incapable of making moral commitments" (Roth, 101). Paraphrasing Roth, mutual respect, or humility, requires that I do the best I possibly can to express my understanding, its significance, and the crucial distinctions at stake in a way that consistently reflects Christ's love. Of course, it also means listening to you as you do the same. Finally, mutual commitment calls us to discern how we can express our points of agreement and narrow the areas of disagreement in Christian harmony. I will seek to present and defend my views vigorously as an expression of my respect for those who disagree and yet consistent with the attitude of humility.

*The practical issues regarding baptism must be
answered by relying on the basic principles and premises
shared by Mennonite Brethren.*

Study conferences and confessions of faith address church disputes. The controversy that we are addressing has to do primarily with the relationship of baptism with church membership. About ten years ago we convened a study conference in Denver on related topics. There John E. Toews reminded us that the New Testament (NT) shared with

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pastors and congregations a common theological process which he called “doing theology on the run.” Our purpose here is to stop running for a few hours. We want to consider what the New Testament teaches about baptism. We want to think about the traditional Mennonite Brethren (MB) interpretation of those primary texts. We want to hear about how congregations are working out their “theology on the run.” Finally, we want to sit still long enough to think about how we can stay connected to all of those important worlds.

Repeatedly, we refer to the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. The Confession is not infallible. It is not our Bible. The Confession is our consensus regarding the best reading of the Bible. It is clear that the confession addresses quite directly the controversy before us: What is the relationship of baptism and church membership? The answer given by the confession is straightforward: Baptism is administered by the local church. Baptism includes incorporation of the newly baptized person into the church. The church exists as local congregations and as part of the worldwide faith community.

THE AIMS OF THIS PAPER

The MB Confession of Faith describes baptism as “a public sign” in which the believer confesses faith in Christ Jesus as Lord and through which God incorporates the believer into the church. My assignment is to “unpack” the theological language used to explain that description. My aims are (1) to identify the primary presuppositions which govern MB understandings, (2) to explore the implications of the premises which Mennonite Brethren have traditionally shared, and (3) to invite dialogue regarding contemporary MB baptismal practice, with an awareness that MB practice is both quite flexible and at the same time biblically based. The organization of this study conference invites me also to interact with the papers that have preceded this one. I will review the answers given to two primary questions: (1) What is the church? and (2) What motivates our baptismal practice? I will also explore some of the consequences of the answers given for our conversation together.

THE MB CONFESSION OF FAITH CONCERNING BAPTISM

The Confession makes clear that Mennonite Brethren understand the human response to God’s offer of salvation to begin as a personal, individual commitment to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Baptism is the believer’s public confession of two things: One, the individual has accepted God’s salvation act in Jesus. Two, the individual is committing him- or herself to be a disciple of Christ. Explicitly, the

Confession identifies discipleship as a community process. The statement which describes an MB understanding of the biblical teaching regarding baptism has been summarized as follows: "One cannot belong to Christ without belonging to the church. One cannot belong to an invisible, universal church without a simultaneous commitment to a local, visible congregation" (Jost and Faber, 37).

An analysis of Article 8 of the MB Confession of Faith reveals repeated emphasis on these two pillars. In Article 8, there are at least eight sentences which make explicit reference to personal repentance, receiving God's salvation, and confession of the believer's faith in Jesus. In addition, at least eight sentences explicitly describe baptism as a commitment to the covenant community, which is described variously as "the church," "the body of Christ," "the local church," and "local congregations." The statements call for faithful discipleship, incorporation, serving Christ with one's gifts, mutual accountability, and membership. Thus, three-fourths of the article's statements refer to personal commitment to Jesus as Savior. Equally, three-fourths of the statements connect baptism to community or body life.

The confessional commentary on Article 8 describes five facets of meaning in baptism.

- First, baptism is incorporation (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; 1 Cor. 10:2; 12:13). These texts describe baptism as "into Christ," with the commentary interpreting the phrase to mean into the people of which Christ is the head.
- Second, baptism is cleansing (1 Cor. 6:11; Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5; Heb. 10:22). "Baptism represents a cleansing from sin."
- Third, baptism is linked to unity (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5). "Baptism unites diverse people into one people."
- Fourth, baptism is associated with new life (Col. 2:12). Baptism is an active metaphor of being buried with Christ and being raised to new life in Christ.
- Fifth, baptism is linked with salvation (1 Pet. 3:21). The confessional commentary on this "notoriously difficult" text suggests that "Salvation requires both a divine initiative and a human response."

The commentary makes two summary statements.

1. It emphasizes that baptism is both sociological and soteriological. Baptism effects community, an egalitarian people of God. Baptism

also marks salvation. Baptism celebrates human repentance and divine cleansing.

2. It defends the use of the word “sign” to describe baptism. As a sign, baptism represents both God’s saving action and human response to what God has done in Christ.

PREMISES OF THE MB CONFESSION

What leads us to the theological positions outlined above? What are the premises upon which believers agree? What are the shared starting principles from which we can move in working out our practical theology? Upon what kind of foundation should our practice be based?

David Esau’s article, “Dry Times for Believers Baptism?” introduces us to the premises which undergird our NT understanding of baptism. The article points out that we practice baptism because (1) Jesus commanded it (Matt. 28:18-20); (2) Jesus modeled it (Matt. 3:13-17 and parallels); and (3) NT believers practiced it (Acts 2:38, etc.). Esau also defends the importance of baptism as incorporation and of baptism of confessing believers only (against pedobaptism).

The New Testament as Guide

One obvious starting point for Mennonite Brethren is that the NT is our guide. The authority for our teaching resides in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles. Jesus himself gives the authoritative mandate in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 to make disciples, baptizing and teaching obedience.

Baptism Incorporates

A second premise is that baptism incorporates individuals into the body. All of us as Christians agree with this premise. In all of the historical conflicts among Christians, the issue of whether or not baptism incorporates the baptized into the church has not been in question. Regardless of differences between first-century Jews who rejected and those who embraced Jesus as Messiah, there was agreement regarding the community nature of baptism. For Christians, baptism incorporates the baptized person into the new reign-of-God community.

The current discussion is not about whether baptism incorporates but about the nature of that incorporation. Once again, the Christian church through the ages has not seen this as a question. Although there is little evidence regarding membership roles, rolls, or rules, the book of Acts assumes that conversion is coupled with baptism and being “added to their number” (Acts 2:38). The oft-cited, apparent exception to this

assumption is the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-38). Although Luke is silent on the question, church tradition holds that the eunuch founded the African Christian Church. There is no evidence that the eunuch was unincorporated into the church.

Conversion/baptism is a single act which transforms outsiders into insiders, those who don't belong into those who belong to God and the church. As the missionary efforts moved from a Jewish or a related, God-fearing base into pagan regions, apparently the pastoral problem of quick conversion/baptisms without sufficient understanding emerged. Within decades of the first century, the church had established a procedure of incorporation which lengthened the process of conversion.

Robert E. Webber (*Journey to Jesus*) traces the rituals of the early church. He shows that evangelism was seen as (1) a process and (2) a corporate experience (Webber, 40, 63). He uses the following set of terms to describe early church practice: (1) The seeker experiences conversion; (2) The hearer commits to covenant; (3) The kneeler accepts baptism; and (4) The faithful receives the eucharist (Webber, 15).

Although we may criticize the early evolution of the conversion/baptism process because it seems to separate conversion from baptism chronologically, the history is instructive. First, it shows that conversion and baptism are part of a single event-process. Second, it shows that the conversion/baptism event involves both individual, personal commitment, on the one hand, and incorporation into the body, on the other. Third, it shows that the event-process is defined by the church as taught to the new disciple.

One Baptism

Let's consider a third premise. Baptism should strengthen commitment to the Pauline confession of "one baptism." Ephesians 4:4-6 reads (NRSV, *passim*), "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." Paul also writes in 1 Corinthians 12:13 that "in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body." Let's consider the implications of "one baptism."

Anabaptists resisted the charge, implicit in their name, that they were rebaptizers. They argued that their first baptism as infants did not involve faith and should be rejected as an empty rite. Since that time, we as Mennonite Brethren have struggled with the issue of "one-ness" in baptism. After 1860 we decided that immersion, not sprinkling or pouring, was the biblical baptismal mode. This decision helped give the

new denomination unity and distinguish its members from other Russian Mennonites. The practice of immersion also strengthened our ecumenical relations with German Baptists.

After years of requiring rebaptism of General Conference Mennonites and "Old" Mennonites (who had been "poured" or "sprinkled"), in 1963 we agreed to "accept into fellowship believers who have been baptized upon an experiential and confessed faith with a mode of baptism other than immersion" (Mennonite Brethren Church 1963). This was a positive step toward unity. Further, through the years we have had individuals who have struggled with whether their baptism as a believing child was an authentic baptism upon confession of faith. Some have chosen to be rebaptized after concluding that their earlier confession was immature and insufficiently informed.

The biblical emphasis on "one baptism" can serve as a rule for us. Baptism should unify. Baptism should draw the congregation together. Baptism should also unite the church, including the church at large. Baptismal procedures and policies which unite the body of Christ would seem to support Paul's confession of "one baptism."

As we move to conversation about the practical implications of our theological presuppositions, let's briefly review our shared premises. One, the Bible, especially the NT, is our guide for faith and practice. Two, through baptism the believer is incorporated into the body of Christ. Three, we confess that there is one baptism.

THE PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

Baptism and Church Membership

Baptism into the body of Christ is nonnegotiable. Membership definitions are modern conveniences. Our study conference may be more about membership and less about baptism. Although the NT uses the phrase "added to their number," it does not clearly define how membership is to be organized. To be committed to Jesus is to be committed to a local congregating body and to the global family of believers. As we listen to various ways of organizing for membership, including annual covenants, let us seek a model which brings those recently baptized into full fellowship and promotes accountability for all members.

What about new converts who need to be baptized but feel they aren't ready for church membership? We've already agreed that Jesus' Great Commission calls us to make disciples by both baptizing and teaching. We also agree that many, perhaps most, new adult converts come from a pagan background that has little advance knowledge of Jesus, the church, and, by extension, baptism. Everything they know

about these they learn from us, the church. So, any reluctance to see conversion/baptism/incorporation-into-the-body as a single event-process should be met the same way any other objection to faithfulness is met. (Here, I am thinking of such ethical-pastoral problems as unmarried cohabitation or occultic practices.) We teach them the way of Jesus and the church.

With baptism, we see the reluctance to commit to the congregation as an opportunity for further discipling. Commitment to Jesus involves baptism which includes incorporation into the body of Christ. Since the new convert is quite ignorant about faithful Christianity, we will accept responsibility for teaching about baptism as related to body life as one more essential element of discipleship. We will teach that body life includes (1) shared faith (confessional integrity), (2) faithful participation in community events, (3) missional service using spiritual gifts, and (4) generous sharing in the community to meet physical needs.

Age of Baptism

The Canadian conference is to be applauded for leading us into conversation about preparing children to participate in the Lord's Supper and baptism. Several principles should be part of our conversation.

First, as Anabaptists we have always held that the grace of God includes children in God's saving action until the age of accountability. Evangelicalism and child evangelism have prodded us to call children to confession of faith at an early age in order to find assurance of salvation. This has presented us with difficult issues. How do we treat a young child who has "accepted Jesus into her/his heart" or prayed to confess, "I love Jesus as my Savior"? Should such a child be baptized? Should such a child celebrate God's salvation by participating in the Lord's Supper? Lack of clarity regarding the eternal security of young children has pressed us into some uncomfortable compromises on these questions.

Second, as already noted, how we answer the question of baptismal age has implications for the Lord's Supper. As a denomination, we have agreed to allow believing children to the covenant table before they have committed to the covenant community. There is a logical inconsistency here.

Third, baptism is a commitment to Christ and to community. The pastoral application of Article 8 counsels pastoral discernment to avoid quenching youthful enthusiasm for faith and to avoid trivializing the baptismal ordinance by including children who do not have adequate understanding, are not ready for mutual accountability, and who do not themselves request baptism. This implies that baptism of the child nur-

tured in the church is usually best postponed until early or middle adolescence. Given the pressure that some parents place on pastors to baptize young children, it is important for us to give sufficient guidance regarding the age of baptism.

Spirit Baptism

The confession of "one baptism" has implications for our understanding of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. First Corinthians 12:13 speaks of baptism by one Spirit into one body. As Mennonite Brethren, we have understood baptism of the Holy Spirit to occur at conversion. Because conversion and baptism are a single event-process, we have not taught that a second experience of Spirit baptism is to be expected. Filling with the Spirit which is synonymous with obedience to Christ is an ongoing experience for the believer. Traditionally, water baptism is a time for laying on of hands, for recognizing the receipt of the Spirit at conversion, and for affirming spiritual gifts. From time to time, it is valuable for the church to review our understanding of the relationship of Spirit baptism and water baptism.

FINDING THEOLOGICAL UNITY WITHIN ECCLESIASTICAL DIVERSITY

The three papers presented earlier each offer a fascinating focus on the nature of the church. Each of these foci suggests a metaphor or purpose which provides a motivation for baptismal practice. These motivating metaphors not only shape our practice but also inform our method of processing our differences.

David Falk explained the perspective of The Meeting Place by suggesting the metaphor of the church as emergency room. According to this metaphor, baptism is "a commitment to a life of recovery and rehabilitation." In practice, baptism is a profession, sometimes without an audible voice, of a commitment to follow Jesus. The practice of separating baptism from membership covenant is profoundly motivated by the desire to remove unnecessary barriers. The position invites us to wrestle with this congregation whether some barriers, in fact, are necessary, biblical, or christological.

Walter Unger reviews the Anabaptist-MB conviction that the church is a wrinkle-free bride. The problem for Mennonite Brethren is that the bride-metaphor as ecclesiological core, first, produced pharisaical legalism, and second, eroded denominational loyalty. The author urges balancing the eschatological demand for purity with the reality of progressive redemptive sanctification. This pastoral conclusion calls the

church to find a middle way that avoids extremes without denying the radical identity of the church.

Jon Isaak's inductive study of early Christian baptismal practice uncovers missional vocation as the guiding metaphor. The church is God's salvation caravan. The study leads the author to propose baptism as the mark of engagement in God's mission. Mennonite Brethren are called to transform membership from entitlement to missional vocation.

These papers are encouraging in several ways. First, they are fresh initiatives, not repackaged defenses of the status quo. Second, the papers seek to be biblically rooted. Third, all of the papers want to move the church into radical engagement with the world. Fourth, the variety of metaphors is consistent with the biblical scope of scores of metaphors to describe the church. Fifth, all the metaphors recognize the corporate nature of the Christian way.

The papers also present us with a challenge. How will the MB church deal with diversity? How do we process dissent in practice? Do we change the Confession to match new practice? Is the role of the Board of Faith and Life to be spiritual enforcers of the tradition? Or is the purpose of a study conference in the postmodern context more a rhetorical event where we use stories and metaphors to seek to persuade, and less an "ecumenical council" that determines dogma? And what of local congregations? Can congregations with integrity claim the denominational label while acting contrary to the community voice? Can congregations expect covenant loyalty of its members without practicing corresponding faithfulness to the greater MB family? Finally, how do we as North Americans listen to the voice of the worldwide MB family?

Perhaps a reminder of one more biblical church metaphor will help us. Rodney Clapp (*A Peculiar People*) and Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (*Resident Aliens*) remind us that the church is an exilic community, a resident alien colony in a society of unbelief. Living as an alternative community becomes the subversive witness that confronts the kingdoms of this world. Baptism will involve accepting a new identity. Members of the new community remove unnecessary barriers but accept the scandal of the cross. Resident aliens live out eschatological purity without falling back into judgmental legalism. Peculiar people live as salt and light, disciples who shine with good works. Our motivation? To proclaim God's reign in the world as a witnessing, faithful, countercultural community.

BELIEVERS BAPTISM VS. CHURCH BAPTISM

I have carefully supported traditional MB positions regarding baptism to this point. Here I would like to be granted license to explore a position that has not been accepted by Mennonite Brethren. I would like to present an argument in favor of accepting believers who were baptized as infants in an evangelical church, who have made a personal faith commitment to Jesus, and who have confirmed their baptism in an evangelical church when they reached the age of accountability. Notice that the argument here does not apply to anyone who accepted Christ by faith after their confirmation. Forty years of experience with mode of baptism gives sufficient precedent to show that accepting members who have experienced another baptismal form does not change MB practice, nor should it.

The rationale which follows is based on several of the biblical understandings established above. One, baptism is an act of the church. Two, baptism is one element in the conversion process. Three, baptism involves confession of personal faith in Jesus as Savior. Four, Paul's statement regarding one baptism offers an argument against rebaptizing.

Let's consider the following case (it is fictional or hypothetical but hardly unusual). A young person grows up in an evangelical church that practices infant baptism (in my part of the world this could involve many Evangelical Covenant, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations). After being baptized as an infant, the child attends community vacation Bible school and accepts Jesus as Savior. Faithful, believing parents nurture the child's faith. The child grows in Christ and at age fifteen, after studying the church's catechism for two years, independently accepts the baptism that was done in her/his name at birth.

At this moment the young person publicly confesses personal faith and commits to his or her evangelical church. The process is virtually identical to the rite practiced in an MB church except that the application of water is done fifteen years earlier in the pedobaptist evangelical church (and perhaps the catechism is even more thorough).

Let's suppose that, after years of faithful service in the church, the person moves to a new community, chooses to affiliate with the MB church after studying (and agreeing to teach) MB theology, and makes the case that the act of the mother church was a legitimate baptism (based on the rationale outlined above).

The argument is based on the notion that sisters and brothers in an evangelical church are full siblings of ours as Mennonite Brethren. Their church, like ours, accepts only those who profess faith in Christ. To refuse to accept them is to deny the legitimacy of the church's evan-

gical faith. The principle that baptism is an act of the church is fundamental to this case. There is no question of conversion occurring prior to claiming the efficacy of baptism and confessing Christ as Savior and Lord. The one-baptism principle actually precludes rebaptism.

Let me reiterate that the exception is rather narrow. It applies only to those cases where the catechumen confesses thoroughly evangelical faith and the baptizing church also expresses efficacy in Christ's atonement and not in church rituals. By accepting this person, we are making an exception regarding one detail—the order in which the water is applied to the body. We are encouraging greater unity in the body and emphasis on major issues, not details. This is not to deny the significance of the historical Anabaptist rejection of the state church filled with reprobates, since both churches in our hypothetical case are "believers churches" for all practical purposes.

SUMMARY

The practical issues regarding baptism must be answered by relying on the basic principles and premises shared by Mennonite Brethren. Baptism is a sign in which the church recognizes that a new believer is confessing that God's saving act in Jesus is hers or his. This sign-act unites the believer with Jesus and with the body of Jesus as expressed locally. Details regarding how church membership is ordered are important but not clearly defined in the NT. In ongoing discussion, unity and flexibility should be valued despite the inherent tension between them. May this discussion draw us to greater oneness in Christ. ✨

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The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, Article 8 Christian Baptism, may be found at the following Web address:
www.mbconf.ca/believe/confession/baptism.en.html