

ARTICLE 8

Christian Baptism

Confession

We believe that when people receive God's gift of salvation, they are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign of having been cleansed from sin. It is a covenant with the church to walk in the way of Christ through the power of the Spirit.

Meaning

Baptism by water is a public sign that a person has repented of sins, received forgiveness of sins, died with Christ to sin, been raised to newness of life, and received the Holy Spirit. Baptism is a sign of the believer's incorporation into the body of Christ as expressed in the local church. Baptism is also a pledge to serve Christ according to the gifts given to each person.

Eligibility

Baptism is for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of the local church. Baptism is for those who understand its meaning, are able to be accountable to Christ and the church, and voluntarily request it on the basis of their faith response to Jesus Christ.

Practice

We practice water baptism by immersion administered by the local church. Local congregations may receive into membership those who have been baptized by another mode on their confession of faith. Persons who claim baptism as infants and wish to become members of a Mennonite Brethren congregation are to receive baptism on their confession of faith.

Matthew 3:13-17; 28:18-20; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:2-6; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Colossians 2:12-13; Galatians 3:26-27; Ephesians 4:4-6.

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COMMENTARY

Baptism is a very important act in the New Testament. The Great Commission highlights its significance. The only command in the commission is to “make disciples of all nations.” The command is defined by two explanatory phrases, “baptizing them” and “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20). Discipling involves baptizing and teaching. Why baptism? Because baptism means death to the past, cleansing from sin, and incorporation into a new community of faith. People cannot be discipled apart from their liberation from the bonds of the past and their recentering in a new community of faith. The missionary assignment given the church by Christ is to disciple people by baptizing them and instructing them to observe the teachings of Jesus.

It is important to remember that the early church was a first generation movement, and everyone entering the church was a first generation believer. Conversion and baptism were essentially one event; the faith decision, receiving of the Holy Spirit, and incorporation into the church (baptism) occurred in very close relation to each other.

The meaning of baptism is interpreted in 11 primary texts in the New Testament (Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 6:11; 10:2; 12:13; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5; 5:26; Colossians 2:12; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 10:22; 1 Peter 3:21). These make it clear that the term “baptism” has different meanings in particular texts. Each text must be examined in order to put together the puzzle of the larger whole.

Baptism as Incorporation

Romans 6:3, Galatians 3:27, 1 Corinthians 10:2 and 12:13 define baptism as incorporation.

Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:27 describe baptism as “into Christ.” The phrase means incorporation into the community of which Jesus is the head, not only the initiation of a mystical union with Christ, or an individual relationship with him. The meaning of incorporation in Romans 6:3 is underlined by a parallel phrase in 1 Corinthians 10:2. There baptism is spoken of as “into Moses.” This does not refer to baptism into an individual relationship with Moses, but into the people of whom he was the head or leader.

Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13 is “into one body,” into the church of which

Christ is the head. Baptism means to become part of the people of whom Christ is the head, the leader. Baptism as incorporation means leaving one's past and becoming one with the church of Jesus Christ. The Acts 2:47 reference to the Lord adding "to their number daily those who were being saved" describes the incorporation of new people into the church.

Baptism as Cleansing

First Corinthians 6:11, Ephesians 5:26, Titus 3:5, and Hebrews 10:22 speak of baptism as cleansing.

Immoral behaviour in 1 Corinthians 6:11 is declared inappropriate for Christians because they have been washed and sanctified. The "washing" is usually understood as a reference to baptism. Baptism signifies a cleansing from sin that makes sinning inappropriate.

One evidence that Christ loved the church in Ephesians 5:26 is that he cleansed "her by the washing with water through the word" in order that the church may be pure, holy, without blemish. The "washing with water" is usually interpreted as baptism.

Titus 3:5 describes the salvation effected by Christ as "the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Again, the washing reference is another way of speaking of baptism, this time linked with the reception of the Holy Spirit.

In Hebrews 10:22, Christians are exhorted to approach the presence of God "having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." The washing of the body with pure water is a reference to baptism. Baptism involves cleansing that enables Christians to enter the presence of the holy God.

Baptism represents a cleansing from sin that makes former life patterns inappropriate, and that opens access to the presence of God. This aspect of baptism is in continuity with the practice of baptism in Judaism and by John the Baptist ("a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"—Mark 1:4).

Baptism as Unity

First Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27, and Ephesians 4:5 link baptism and unity or oneness.

Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13 incorporates people "into one body" which affects sociological unity in the church. Jew and Greek, slave and free are united into one community, and one Spirit nurtures all. Baptism has the same consequence in Galatians 3:27. It erases the critical distinctions between people, Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/ female. Different people and social classes are united through baptism into Christ.

Baptism means oneness in Ephesians 4:5, as does one body, one Spirit,

one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God. Baptism unites diverse people into one people. Baptism signifies unity in the church, creating one body out of very different people, even former enemies.

Baptism as New Life

Colossians 2:12 associates baptism with new life in Christ. Fullness of life in Christ is a function of being circumcised with Christ (meaning, died in his death), being buried with Christ in baptism, and being raised through the faithful working of God.

Baptism is associated with new life, the life of the kingdom of God, and fullness of life in Christ.

Baptism as Salvation

One baptism text, 1 Peter 3:21, is notoriously difficult. It links baptism and salvation, the only such explicit association in the New Testament. According to the passage, the water of Christian baptism corresponds to, is a type of, the water which saved Noah and his family.

The meaning of baptism as salvation is clarified by a “not/but” phrase: “not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” The “removal of dirt from the body” can be read as a reference to moral cleansing, as in James 1:21. That meaning is underscored in the next phrase, “the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” “Good conscience” is synonymous with “pure heart”; it refers to genuine inward purity. Baptism is not asking God for “a good conscience” but results from “a good conscience.” The “pledge to God” is an action directed toward God. In this passage, moral cleansing is presupposed by the act of water baptism.

How does baptism save? Probably in a way similar to something Jesus said on several occasions in the Gospels, “your faith has saved you.” Salvation requires both a divine initiative and a human response. The “not/but” phrase qualifies the statement that baptism saves. It saves in that it follows the process of repentance and cleansing that produces a good conscience, which in turn constitutes a pledge on behalf of the baptized person to God.

The Meaning of Baptism

Baptism means the incorporation of people who have been cleansed from sin and gifted with new life into the church as one body. Each component meaning of baptism is significant. Baptism is a powerful sociological event. It incorporates believers into the church. It erases all of the cultural, racial, ethnic, class, and gender distinctions that divide people in the world. Baptism effects community and levels the ground in the community.

Baptism is also a powerful salvation event. It involves a process of

profound repentance and cleansing from sin and evil. And it is associated with a new quality of life, the life of the kingdom of God, a life of fullness in Christ.

The New Testament texts on baptism teach that baptism is vitally connected to these ideas of incorporation, unity, cleansing, and new life. It is important as the first means identified by Jesus in discipling people. Baptism links a series of actions and decisions that change people: repentance and cleansing, incorporation into the community of the church, oneness with the people in the church.

Historically, baptism has been interpreted either sacramentally, as mediating the grace of God, or symbolically, as symbolizing an internal reality that has occurred. Anabaptists have rejected the sacramental understanding of baptism and opted for a symbolic meaning. However, a more holistic understanding walks between the two options. Baptism is less than sacrament, but more than symbol. It effects real change that reflects both divine grace and human reality. It does this in close association with the faith decision (repentance and trust) and the receipt of the Holy Spirit, and not apart from them.

Mennonite Brethren have used the term “sign” to express this meaning. A “sign” is a biblical term that refers first of all to an act of God (God delivered Israel from Egypt, Exodus 10:1, Numbers 14:11; Jesus performed signs, John 2:11, 12:37, 20:30; the apostles did signs and wonders, Acts 4:16, 6:8, Romans 15:19). Second, a sign also refers to human action (the Israelites put blood on their doorposts as a sign, Exodus 12:13; unleavened bread was a sign, Exodus 13:9; the law was given to Israel as a sign, Deuteronomy 6:8; the Sabbath was a sign, Exodus 31:13, Ezekiel 20:20).

While the New Testament does not describe baptism as a sign, it can be understood in this way. It represents both God’s saving action in Jesus Christ and the response of human beings to God’s action. It is a sign of God’s faithfulness to the covenant with believers, and the commitment of believers to follow God faithfully in the midst of His covenant people. As such, it effects change in the lives of people.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

The transition from belief to practice in the ordinances of the church can be difficult, perhaps even more so than with other confessional articles. Following are some of the practical issues we grapple with in practicing the teachings of the confession in the area of baptism.

The Importance of Teaching

Clear and adequate teaching on the meaning of baptism is always important for the church and especially for those being baptized.

Many people who become Christians today do not understand the necessity of baptism, and have never been present at a baptism. Careful biblical teaching helps such persons understand that baptism is more than just an outward physical act. We want persons being baptized to appreciate and experience the full benefit of this act of obedience to Christ. Therefore it is important that each facet of baptism be clearly taught and understood.

Most of us grow in our understanding of baptism over time. Like other important decisions in life, the value of baptism grows for us as we learn more about its meaning. The more we can help people make this a mature and responsible act, the richer the value will be for them and for the church.

The Age of Baptism

Since we understand baptism to be a highly visual, public sign of new life in Christ, it is natural to baptize persons as soon as possible after the conversion experience. In fact, in the New Testament conversion and baptism are linked as two parts of the same experience. This is because the early church was a first generation church and it was mostly adults who became believers. However, in following generations with the conversion of children, often at a very early age, it became a more difficult matter.

The confessional statement seeks to address this matter by introducing three qualifying statements as general principles. First, “baptism is for those who understand its meaning”; second, it is for those who “are able to be accountable to Christ and the church”; and third, it is for those who “voluntarily request it on the basis of their faith response to Jesus Christ.” These three statements should not be interpreted in a simplistic sense; rather, they should be interpreted in the light of the “Meaning” section of the confession. For example, candidates should be able to demonstrate

understanding and personalization of the five statements which explain salvation: having “repented of sins,” having “received forgiveness of sins,” having “died with Christ to sin,” having “been raised to newness of life,” and having “received the Holy Spirit.”

A temptation pastors face is to acquiesce to the pressure to baptize young children. Though their understanding of salvation may represent an authentic initial spiritual experience, it may not represent an adequate understanding for baptism. Therefore, considerable sensitivity and discernment are needed both to avoid quenching the inner aspirations of the young believer, and to avoid trivializing the ordinance by baptizing children who do not have an adequate understanding of the act.

Baptism Without Incorporation into the Local Church

Since we believe that baptism is the “sign of the believer’s incorporation into the body of Christ as expressed in the local church,” we have tied baptism and membership in a local church together. The local church is the expression of Christ’s body on earth.

There is considerable pressure today to separate baptism from church membership. This attitude reflects the increasing tendency toward individualism in our culture. Accountability and submission are not readily accepted concepts. Since our North American societies are driven by constitutional guarantees of personal rights, the call to mutual submission and accountability is strange language to many believers.

Increasingly, converts want baptism but not incorporation into the local church, which demands accountability, submission, service, and stewardship of time and resources. Some converts see themselves as members of the universal church but not the local church.

At the heart of this matter is the question of the relevance of belonging to a church. For many persons, there is a longing to belong to God but a hesitancy to commit to a particular congregation. The church is often seen as an institution which is more of a hindrance to maturity and service than a blessing which enhances Christian faith.

The problem can be addressed in several ways. First, we must never deny the personal nature of the Christian faith. But we also must not confuse the personal nature of salvation with individualism. Second, we must teach the biblical truth that Christians need each other just as one organ or tissue of the body needs the others in order to function and to be sustained. The importance of systematic and thorough teaching of what it means to be part of Christ’s body, the church, cannot be over emphasized. Third, we must work more intentionally at creating communities of faith where each member is held in esteem, where members find an affirmation of giftedness, where

Christians are built up and admonished, and where service to Christ and each other is encouraged. Fourth, as leaders, we must model the meaning of life in the body with each other and with Christ as the head of the body. Finally, it is important to conduct baptism in the context of a local church body, and to make the event an experience which the entire body shares. Individual, small group, or camp/retreat baptisms are generally not ideal for the individual or the church.

The Rebaptism Question

Our confessional statement affirms that “Persons who claim baptism as infants and wish to become members of a Mennonite Brethren congregation are to receive baptism on their confession of faith.”

Two pastoral issues are relevant in this area. The first involves people who, a long time after making some kind of commitment to Christ, have a life-changing faith renewal experience. The new experience calls into question the earlier commitment. Such people may assume that the earlier experience, including baptism, was meaningless and needs to be repeated. Pastoral discernment here is critical. It may be that the person in fact has entered into a personal relationship with Christ for the first time, and therefore needs to be baptized. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for important experiences or decisions of life to be more fully understood long after the event or in light of new experiences. New experiences need to be integrated with former experiences for life to be whole. Therefore, the most appropriate pastoral response is to help integrate the old and the new rather than to invalidate the old. Married people understand that the marriage ceremony does not reflect the depth of relationship which develops over time, and sometimes much later in life. The later experiences do not invalidate the initial commitment and ceremony, but build on them.

The second pastoral issue concerns new persons coming to our congregations from traditions in which they were baptized as infants. Two different issues often emerge for such people. First is the validity of the prior baptism, or the relation of the infant baptism to the believer’s baptism. For the parents of the individuals, the original baptism was most likely a thoughtful and important act. Nothing is accomplished by putting down the infant baptism, or by comparing the two experiences in a competitive way. It is better to acknowledge the earlier baptism for what it was: the result of well-meaning parents seeking what they understood to be best for the child. We are then free to teach the purpose and value of baptism into Christ and the church as mature believers. We should try to clarify our understanding of biblical teaching without reflecting negatively on the good intentions of parents or on a meaningful family act. It may be helpful for the pastor to

tell the church as part of the believer's baptism event that the person was presented for baptism by his or her parents and that what is occurring now is different. This can become a teaching opportunity helpful for others with a similar background. In many cases, it may also be wise to suggest that a person explain in advance to family and friends the decision to be baptized as an adult, and to invite family and friends to be present for the baptism.

It is important to recognize that the issue can become further complicated when persons have made a verbal confession of faith at the time of their confirmation, which they may see as their personal statement of believing faith. In other words, we baptize after the personal statement of faith; they have been baptized before the statement of faith, though that statement may well have been given with all sincerity, integrity, and belief.

The second issue involving those baptized as infants is the leadership/service qualifications of non-rebaptized persons. Often these are mature believers, well-instructed in the Christian faith, who have become involved in our church life. Having not taken part in believer's baptism, however, they are disqualified from membership in the local congregation. This problem is often compounded because in such cases some congregations place no restrictions on service in the church; others allow non-leadership service; others ban all types of formal service in the church. Each of these practices can create pastoral problems.

All we can do is counsel patience and understanding for such persons. Often through time, they either come to accept rebaptism; or they simply stay with the church as fellowshiping adherents and never join the church; or they eventually fade away to another congregation which has a more open view of membership.