

BAPTISM AS AN INITIATION RITE INTO THE CHURCH:
ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CHURCH
MEMBERSHIP

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Summary:

This paper explores the various modes and approaches to baptism as an entry ritual for the Christian church with a practical emphasis around the “The Meeting Place”, a local congregation in Winnipeg, Canada.

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Its Relationship to Church Membership

The concept of initiation is as old as the human race. Man has been created with a need for community, and initiation of some kind almost always acts as the rite of passage into that community. Where it is missing, identity within the group is uncertain. When referring to the church, initiation is defined as “the terms, forms and rites by which new members are admitted to the existing religious community, so that although its membership changes its values are conserved”.¹ In this paper, I will examine the sacrament of baptism and discuss its effectiveness as a sign of initiation into the church. I will look at its history and explain how it is practiced currently at my home church, The Meeting Place. And I will examine its relationship to church membership, something that has become a ‘hot’ topic of debate in many religious circles, including the Mennonite Brethren Conference that I belong to. It is important that as cultural understandings and experiences of community and belonging shift, the church is prepared to offer itself to the world in a way that can be understood *by* the culture without compromising its core identity as a sign *to* that culture.

As a sign of initiation, the act of baptism is layered with rich symbolism. Water itself is one of the most ancient and universal of all religious symbols. From the life-sustaining water of the womb to the uncontrollable fury of tsunami and flood, water is an ambiguous symbol that “has a unique capacity to convey (the) inseparability of grace and judgment”.² As the aim of God’s story is “the summing up of all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10), so the aim of baptism is the presentation of the full story of Christ’s work. “Creation, Fall and Redemption, Life and Death, Resurrection and Life Eternal: the entire content of the Christian faith, are thus united and ‘held

¹ R. E. O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation: A Theology of Baptism and Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), p. 13.

² Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1982), p. 19.

together’ in their inner interdependence and unity in this one symbol”.³ Oil, often used in anointing both the water and the people being baptized, is also one of the essential religious symbols, representing healing, spiritual illumination (it is a natural source of light), joy, reconciliation and peace – all works of the Holy Spirit. White robes worn by the baptismal candidates symbolize the purity of new life in Christ. Even the choice to identify with Christ’s death and resurrection through baptism echoes Christ’s voluntary choice of death on our behalf, and represents the reality of ‘pass-over’ into new life in the Kingdom of God. In baptism, we see a “correlation between form and essence. Baptism is what it represents because what it represents – death and resurrection – is true”.⁴ It is also always been a sign of covenant – one of divine initiative and human response. Or, as the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith states, “it is a covenant with the church to walk in the way of Christ through the power of the Spirit”.⁵ Thus, it functions eloquently as a powerful sign of “unrepeatable initiation into a new realm,... status (and community), from which indeed one might fall away, but into which one could never enter again for the first time”.⁶

In considering the history of the initiation rites of this covenant, one must first look at the act of circumcision, which was to post-exilic period Jews the “badge of the covenant”.⁷ In reality, the origin and early significance of this rite are unclear. God’s initial establishment of the covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 makes no mention of circumcision. Some historians believe that early people groups such as the Egyptians practiced this rite, and repeated descriptions in the Bible of the Philistines as ‘uncircumcised’ may refer to their uniqueness among the people groups of that time. Culture was dominated by the idea of ‘tribe’ rather than

³ Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water & The Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000), p. 40.

⁴ Schmemmann, p. 56.

⁵ *Confession of Faith, Mennonite Brethren Conference of Canada*. (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Kindred Productions, 2000), p. 88.

⁶ White, p. 273.

⁷ White, p. 21.

‘individual’, and covenantal relationship was a group matter. “Unlike Christian baptism, circumcision...is not a sacrament which gives the Jew his religious character as a Jew. An uncircumcised Jew is a full Jew by birth”.⁸ During the exile in Babylon, Jews found themselves distinguished from the culture around them by this practice, and it then came to be the important rite it later appears. In itself, it was insufficient, because prophets repeatedly warned people who had the physical mark with an unchanged heart. “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord and remove the foreskins of your heart, men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest My wrath go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds” (Jer. 4:4). Prophets like Jeremiah (Jer. 31:31-33), Ezekiel (Ez. 11:19), and Zechariah (Zech. 12:10) pointed toward a new covenant, stressing divine initiative and moral and spiritual conditions of membership. This covenant would be open to all people, not just Jews.

In the time of Jesus, various kinds of baptisms and ceremonial baths and innumerable ceremonial washings were used by a wide variety of religious groups, including various Jewish sects. They were rites of initiation and passage, and symbolized purification and commitment. “However, non-Christian baptism differed from Christian baptism in two areas...it was self-administered (the candidate dipped himself in the water) and lacked eschatological meanings (there was no sense of entering a new Kingdom)”.⁹ When Gentiles converted to the Jewish faith, they did so by the rite of proselyte baptism, accompanied by circumcision and the offering of sacrifices. John the Baptist initiated a baptism of confession, repentance, and forgiveness of sins, and Jesus’ first public appearance was the occasion of his baptism, where he identified with mankind, foreshadowing mankind’s eventual identification with him in that same rite. With Christ’s death and resurrection, baptism took on its full eschatological symbolism; it was the

⁸ White, p. 23.

⁹ Jon Isaak, “Baptism among the Early Christians”. *We Believe – Rite & Pilgrimage*. (Available website: mbconf.ca, April 2003), par. 19.

hinge of history. “While John announced the End, Jesus was intent on announcing and embodying God’s coming End-time rule so that Israel could at last be what God had always intended, a light to the nations”.¹⁰ And when Peter preached the first evangelistic sermon and followed it with a mass-baptism, the church was born. At this point, the question of whether baptism coincided with church membership was an irrelevant one. Cultural identity was collectivist, not individual, and the idea of being baptized into the faith but not identifying completely with the community of believers in every way would have been unthinkable.

Whereas the people in the gospels were rural folk, the world of the first century Christians was urban and cosmopolitan. Baptism ushered in a resocialization, a transcending of human distinctions. It replaced all other loyalties. Believers had a sense of urgency – they were living at the edge of time.

Three early descriptions of baptism are available: the Didache, the Apology of Justin Martyr, and the Apostolic tradition of Hippolytus, describing the practice of the church in Rome in the second and third centuries. While in the gospels, people were baptized without any delay upon believing the message of Christ, here we find instruction, preparation, and fasting. There was “development in...administration of the rite itself,...and in understanding of the rite”.¹¹ The new believer “stood in water a couple of feet deep while it was poured over his or her head”.¹² This was often done in the nude. Five key metaphors were involved: union to Christ (priesthood of all believers), incorporation into his body, the Church, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness of sins, and new birth. Eucharist was received for the first time after baptism, and then repeated throughout life. “By the 4th century, the process of baptism was two to three years in length and marked by four discrete periods of growth along with passage rites: 1) inquirer

¹⁰ Isaak, par. 23.

¹¹ Donald Bridge & David Phypers, *The Water That Divides: The Baptism Debate*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1979), p. 77.

¹² James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*. (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 16.

(seeker), 2) catechumen (hearer), 3) enlightenment (kneeler), and 4) entrance to full life of the church as marked by baptism (faithful)”.¹³ It began to take on the nature of a journey.

In AD 313, the Edict of Milan made Christianity a *legal* religion; in AD 380, it became the *official* religion. The ranks of the church swelled and ceremony and symbolism blossomed, but many people were more attracted by its outward trappings. Baptisms took place once a year, at dawn on Easter Sunday, accompanied by prayer, fasting, confession, all-night vigils, renunciation of the devil, questioning, triune immersions, anointing with oil, participation in the Eucharist, and the reception of milk, honey, and a cup of water. Understanding of the rite began to change from identification with Christ’s death and resurrection to the procurement of salvation through the power of the rite itself and the authority of the Church. This gave rise to child baptism and the accompanying rite of confirmation at the age of puberty, separating the process of initiation by many years and meeting with some disapproval. The concept of sacralism, “the view that all the members of a particular nation should be bound together by loyalty to the same religion”,¹⁴ grew to be a powerful idea that would have great impact during the Reformation.

During the Medieval period, the focus became forgiveness of sins, and the concept of union to Christ receded still further. Infant baptism was practiced widely, right after birth, thus losing its tie to salvation, Easter, and membership in the community of faith. Since bishops were too few to be accessible, “even a pagan or heretic could baptize, so long as he (used) the form of the church, and (intended) to do what the Church (did)”.¹⁵ As the powerful Catholic church fell into corruption, underground protest groups emerged, seeking biblical simplicity, condemning the worldliness and hierarchy of the official church, and questioning the validity of its indiscriminately applied baptisms.

¹³ Isaak, par. 61.

¹⁴ Bridge & Phypers, p. 85.

¹⁵ James F. White, p. 83.

One such group was the Waldensians, or ‘barbes’, a group with obscure beginnings who claimed to trace their ancestry back to the time of the apostles. A police report from the thirteenth century describes them as rising up in 1170 under the leadership of a rich citizen of Lyon, France, named Valdesius, who sold all he possessed to live a life of poverty and evangelism. He paid for the translation of the scriptures into the vernacular, and believed that evangelical preaching was the work of the priesthood of all believers, including women, and this was a significant source of irritation to the religious political elite, who thought preaching was the domain of the bishops alone. “They were not hermits seeking the solitude of the desert. Their calling was to be present in the churches, public squares and homes where their message could be heard”.¹⁶ Their underground communes spread to Italy, to the Cottian Alps, and eventually to the Swiss Alps. They “seemed to have certain Anabaptist...tendencies”¹⁷ but their views on baptism varied, and they practiced both adult baptism, when people converted to their religion, and paedobaptism of their own children. What is exceptional about the Waldensians is not only the longevity of the movement (they are still active today) but also the fact that they managed to merge successfully with streams of the infant Reformation movement in the mid 16th century. “It was a choice grounded in the realization that faithfulness to the gospel means readiness to yield to transformation’s way *in history*”,¹⁸ and, as such, sheds some interesting light on the topic at hand.

The Reformation period saw the rise of the Protestants, and baptism became one of many divisive issues. Prior to the sixteenth century, there was one ‘official’ church, and simply “the presence of an ordained minister would have been a sign that baptism (was) an act of the whole

¹⁶ Giorgio Tourn & Associates, *You Are My Witnesses: The Waldensians across 800 years*. (Claudiana, Torino: Claudiana Editrice, 1989), p. 16.

¹⁷ Tourn et al, p. 66.

¹⁸ Tourn et al, p. 71.

church administered locally”.¹⁹ The reformers converted many, but when they tried to rebuild the framework of the church that they had destroyed, they splintered. Protestants divided into Lutherans, Anglicans, and Calvinists, and the latter subdivided into Presbyterians, Independents and Baptists. Initiation rites underwent changes in different denominations, and baptism lost ground as a universally unifying symbol. “Reformation of the sixteenth century rediscovered the New Testament gospel, but failed to recreate the New Testament church”.²⁰ Most tragic is the history of the Anabaptists, or ‘re-baptizers’, as they were dubbed. They condemned the Reformation as half-hearted and incomplete, rejected infant baptism, and desired a pure “believing community, (or) brotherhood”,²¹ where adults were baptized upon confession of faith. The belief that the alliance of church and State stood in the way of a regenerated church membership lay at the core of their protest, but re-baptism of adults became the sign most focused on, and they were fiercely persecuted and martyred.

In 1536, a Catholic priest in Holland named Menno Simons joined the Anabaptists by being re-baptized himself. At a time when the radical movement was in disarray, he emphasized turning from fanaticism, avoiding the use of force, cultivating visible organization and trained ministry, and exercising discipline. He was largely responsible for the survival of the movement. The Mennonite denomination that resulted, although accused by some of spiritual pride and cliquishness, offered “a unifying and eloquent alternative to a state church sacramental system”.²² Mennonites called communion and baptism ‘divine ordinances’ rather than ‘sacraments’, outward symbols reflecting the believer’s inward state. Baptism upon confession of faith always resulted in full church membership.

¹⁹ Michael Root & Risto Saarinen, eds., *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 132.

²⁰ Bridge & Phypers, p. 96.

²¹ Maurice Martin, *Identity and Faith: Youth in a Believers’ Church*. (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1981), p. 78

²² Bridge & Phypers, p. 118.

The Puritans, spearheaded by John Bunyan in the 17th century, went a step further and maintained that baptism, being simply an outward sign of a renewed heart, was not in itself initiation and could be avoided altogether.

The 18th century evangelical awakening gave rise to Methodism. Their practice was typified by George Whitefield, one of their popular open air preachers, who advocated that “those who have been ‘born of water’ in baptism must also be ‘born of the Spirit’ in conversion”²³ to be fully initiated. John and Charles Wesley developed the theology that children grew into a life of sin, forfeiting the ‘born again’ status that they had received at their infant baptism, and needed regeneration by adult conversion. This “primacy of the conversion experience...lead to attempts to ritualize it”.²⁴ The result was the ‘Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults’ – a long process of training, examination, prayer, and final initiation through the sacraments of baptism, confession, and first communion. Many churches did attempt to keep initiation rites together, whatever the age they occurred at. In the mid 19th century, the American descendents of the Wesley movement exercised a probationary period, where reception into church membership occurred six months after baptism. Worthy of note is the Brethren movement, and in particular the Exclusive Brethren, who displayed a high degree of tolerance in their attitude toward initiation rites. They practiced believer’s baptism as well as ‘household baptism’, and accepted into their ranks members who had been baptized as infants, offering rebaptism only on personal request.

The Frontier movement of the 19th century saw the proliferation of missionaries, both in North America and abroad. They found themselves in a similar situation to the first apostles, with only first generation converts, and they all practiced adult baptism as a result.

²³ Bridge & Phypers, p. 139.

²⁴ James F. White, p. 150.

The purpose of baptism in the church is to function as a unifying sign. “Precisely by looking away from human qualifications and achievements, baptism leads us into a community in which prior human divisions or distinctions are no longer of decisive significance”.²⁵ It is ironic that this symbol has become such a source of division. In the 20th century, considerable success has been achieved in seeing the merits in a variety of practices, but there is still much ground to gain. Modern patterns of thinking cause us to try to control the process and demystify it, concentrating on which form or method is ‘valid’ more than on the full picture of what baptism signifies. In a recent editorial in the Mennonite Brethren Herald, Jim Coggins writes that “sometimes...we practice ‘believer’s baptism’ at too young an age...in a process that is not much more meaningful than infant baptism. Sometimes teenagers, parents and even church leaders secretly hope, like many Catholics, that the ritual itself will guarantee salvation”.²⁶ I was disappointed to read this, because I believe that choosing to use those kinds of comparisons will not help bring about unity, understanding, and greater respect for different parts of Christ’s body.

As for the specific focus of this paper, the fact that church members should be baptized is more or less universally agreed upon; the question of whether all who are baptized are automatically members has become a matter of debate. More specifically, what are they initiated into – the local church they are attending, or the invisible body of Christ worldwide? For the sake of space, I will limit my discussion to my faith tradition, an evangelical Mennonite one.

Maurice Martin states that Mennonites “hold that believers are baptized into the visible church, which has worldwide locations or fellowship groups”.²⁷ The Mennonite Brethren position is also “that people who are baptized in our churches should at the same time become

²⁵ Root & Saarinen, eds., p. 19.

²⁶ Jim Coggins, “Serious issues”, *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. April 2003, p. 3.

²⁷ Martin, p. 30.

members of the local MB church”.²⁸ John Murray agrees that although “the church is constituted by a relation to Christ which in itself is spiritual and invisible”,²⁹ these spiritual mysteries “are nevertheless realities which find expression in what is observable...The union of believers with one another in the body of Christ...(implies) visible association and organization”.³⁰ It seems our identity is rooted in community.

At The Meeting Place, baptism services are community highlights, and are “identified as both a personal milestone of the faith journey as well as a visible indicator of the health and vitality of our community”.³¹ They are scheduled outside of our regular service times so that the individual’s relatives and community can attend, and occasionally held at a beach or a member’s swimming pool. Their intimate community stands with the individual as they share their story and receive baptism from a person of their choice, not necessarily a minister. We generally practice immersion but have made exceptions in the case of legitimate barriers. We do not, however, make covenant membership coincide with baptism. This is partly a reflection of The Meeting Place’s emphasis on faith as a journey. The contrasting, more ‘modern’ view is that “God’s grace is kept in a box. Only by living in the box can you receive the grace. The box is the Church. Baptism puts you in the box”.³² The mission that drives our vision is one of bringing God’s grace *to* the culture in which we find ourselves; one of getting ourselves *out* of the box. We are most concerned that people are taking faith steps in the context of authentic relational community, something they are not likely to find simply in becoming a covenant member of a large church like ours. There is a desire to “reach out across cultural barriers and

²⁸ Coggins, April 2003, p. 2.

²⁹ John Murray, *Christian Baptism*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), pp. 35, 36.

³⁰ Murray, p. 37.

³¹ David Falk, “Baptism and membership...an alternative perspective”. *We Believe – Rite & Pilgrimage*. (Available website: mbconf.ca, April 2003), par. 6.

³² Bridge & Phypers, p. 24

baggage”³³ that many have about the relevance of membership in an organized institution, and a need to maintain a strong, mature ‘core’ to discern leadership and guide mission in a church that has an open door to a very diverse population.

All the same, we are struggling with our concept of covenant community and its role. “The specific organizational function of Covenant Community...is to discern elders, appoint auditors and represent TMP in our conference and other church associations”.³⁴ Even though actual covenant community meetings involve much more community, support, and worship than that, a missional and ‘kingdom’ view of membership seems lacking. “Ritual action has the power to communicate and incorporate,...(to bring) to pass the very identity it proclaims”.³⁵ By separating membership from the sign of baptism, the former loses much significance as a ritual action. By concentrating on baptism as a personal journey step, it loses its full eschatological significance. It was never meant to be a decision based on personal preference only, or simply a ‘my-witness-to-the-world’ action. It is a ritual that initiates us into a new identity, a new community, and a new way of life. Even more than that, it is a sign of God’s dawning kingdom on earth, and a proclamation of his future eternal reign.

When viewed from that perspective, the sign of baptism assaults the individualism of our post-modern mindset. I found it interesting that a non-scientific survey of Mennonite leaders done in the 1980s showed that two-thirds of respondents saw “baptism primarily as a symbol of (personal) conversion and cleansing”.³⁶ Whereas in ancient culture, personality was collectivist in nature, today, individual rights and expression are paramount, truth is relative, and organized religion is regarded with suspicion. People have ‘memberships’ in things like CD clubs, where

³³ Falk, par. 27.

³⁴ Falk, par. 33.

³⁵ Stookey, p. 26.

³⁶ Merle D. Streeb, ed., *Baptism & Church: A Believers’ Church Vision*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Sagamore Books, 1986), p. 24.

contact with another human never happens. Consumer mentality reigns; potential church members have countless options available to them and there is a widely accepted conviction that they should ‘shop around’ until they find a church that ‘fits’ their personal preferences. This makes it more difficult for a church like ours that is trying to appeal to the unchurched to simply impose membership upon reception of baptism. Believers may be experiencing genuine accountability and community within a group setting, and even be in a position of discipling and leading other Christians. They may still be wary of signing a document of membership, however, because of an intuitive mistrust of institutions or simply because they see it as irrelevant. In this day of globalization, being a part of a worldwide body of Christ probably makes more sense intuitively to many young Christians than being part of an organized ‘denomination’, or ‘branch’, of that body. Charles Colson, in his book “*The Body*”, writes that “unity is the attitude from which the church’s actions flow. It is the prerequisite for effective witness. (But) many are discovering...that when it comes to unity, biblical orthodoxy is more relevant than denominational identity”.³⁷ Many youth are not interested in church membership because they perceive it as differing “from regular participation in...church activities only in two ways, namely voting at church business meetings and tithing”.³⁸

Complicating the issue further is the fact that most churches today, TMP included, exist as legal entities whose function is governed by laws for charitable organizations. As such, there is a need for directors and membership lists, and although there is some degree of flexibility for churches, membership as a legal actuality cannot be ignored. There is, furthermore, a fairly large group of people at TMP with strong Anabaptist Mennonite roots who have grown up with a modern worldview. The world of corporation and organization is familiar and safe to them, and membership ‘makes sense’. They could easily reach the conclusion that discomfort with

³⁷ Charles Colson, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness*. (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1992), pp. 111, 116.

³⁸ Strege, ed., p. 25.

covenanting has more to do with a desire for the rights and privileges of belonging without the accompanying responsibilities.

This issue obviously has no simplistic answer. But I believe some insight may be gained from shifting the focus back to what baptism, in its fullest sense, signifies. It is a sign of new life, new identity, new community, new kingdom. Because of the communicative power of ritual action, I believe the link between baptism and membership is important. “Neither the New Testament nor early tradition knows of a class of persons who were baptized but were not full members of the church”.³⁹ To say that those persons are full members of the universal spiritual church, but not full members of the local church they attend is theologically confusing. Perhaps it is our understanding of membership that needs to change. Rather than ‘signing on the dotted line’ and attending meetings to discern leadership, ‘members’ could be seen to consist of all those baptized into the body of Christ, living in authentic community connected to The Meeting Place, and living out the mission of Christ as expressed through this particular local church. The focus could shift from discerning who’s in or out to developing connections and accountability through discipleship. The group of those with the kind of gifting, interest, and level of ownership oriented towards discerning leadership and safeguarding mission could become a ‘leadership community’, perhaps. This would be the formal entity that could represent TMP organizationally.

I would like to see The Meeting Place expand its baptismal liturgy to include parts of the ancient Church creeds, and scriptures that would envision the whole community present about the big-picture Kingdom significance of baptism. I would like to see more focus on the missional aspect of baptism; the fact that we identify not only with Christ’s death and resurrection but with his mission and his new kingdom way of life. To this end, we included

³⁹ Root & Saarinen, eds., p. 29.

anointing with oil as a symbol of being set apart for service in our last baptismal service. We also celebrated communion at a baptism service for the first time since the very early days of TMP. Both these rites were performed with the candidates surrounded by a group of their intimate community. I would also like TMP to find a way to lead people in the experience of renewing their baptism. In the same way a birthday celebration is an affirmation of life, “a ritual by means of which we express periodically the daily renewal of our birth”,⁴⁰ so a renewal of our baptism, through creed and some kind of interaction with water or laying on of hands, brings “the saving power of a past event...into the present through reenactment”,⁴¹ and affirms that the truths represented by baptism need to be mediated to us daily through the Holy Spirit. This reminds us that baptism is not a one-time event but initiation into a new way of life.

Baptism retells the story of God’s redeeming love toward mankind. It is an incredible sign of grace and new birth, as well as of the cycle of death giving way to life. Given to the Church as a sign of unity and of God’s Kingdom come to earth, it has sadly been misused and misunderstood, and has caused much division. Yet it has survived as one of *the* defining signs of the Church. Its relationship to membership in the church is a crucial one that I believe we must find a creative way to preserve, even in a culture that resists the idea of membership in any kind of organized religion. Perhaps if the Church grew to see herself more as God’s sign of grace to the world than an organization of like-minded individuals, her members would emerge as an envisioned and missional community through which the life of God is offered to all.

⁴⁰ Stookey, p. 77.

⁴¹ White, James F., p. 16.

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