

# BAPTISM IN THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

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## Summary:

This paper surveys the symbolic act of baptism in Scripture, and the history of the Mennonite tradition. Included is discussion around the increasing significance of baptism in current Mennonite Brethren churches.

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## INTRODUCTION

Baptism is a symbol of our devotion to God. It is also a way in which “God tells us the story of divine love – a story which, for the sake of natural memory, may be summarized under five headings: creation, covenant, Christ, church, and coming kingdom.”<sup>1</sup> Through the waters of baptism, God reminds us of creation and the waters that covered the earth. He also reminds us through the water of the covenant made with Noah. “Baptism is itself a covenant God initiates with us; the water is the sign given to us to help remember the promise of the Lord, and to remind us of our identity as responsible people.”<sup>2</sup> The waters of baptism also remind us of Christ’s baptism in the Jordan River as well as his ministry. Jesus’ ministry began around the Sea of Galilee, his first miracle was turning water into wine and he walked upon the sea as well as calmed it. The church is the community of God’s covenant. “...Baptism is a sign of identity Christ gives the church, lest we forget that we are God’s people, and become content to be just another human organization.”<sup>3</sup>

The subject of baptism has been a controversial one since the early church. There has been much debate over the issue of infant baptism versus believer’s baptism as well as the mode of baptism. Should a person be baptized by sprinkling, affusion, or immersion? Do the Scriptures give clear direction? Is baptism a sacrament or an ordinance? While these issues are all important and worthy of much study, there isn’t sufficient space in this essay to cover these topics with any amount of depth. The purpose of this paper is to look into the history of baptism in the New Testament and the Mennonite Brethren Church. This study will explore the ideas of whether the Mennonite Brethren saw baptism as an entry point of Christianity or as an arrival point of Christianity, as well as the importance of the mode of baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1982), 13.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

## THE BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL USE OF BAPTISM

### The New Testament Use of Baptism

Before Christ's ministry had even begun, John the Baptist was preparing the way for him. Matthew 3:1-12 gives an account of John's ministry in the Desert of Judea and the baptisms that he was performing for many of the Jews in the Jordan River. Baptism was not new to Judaism, for they already knew "of the baptism of proselytes coming over from heathenism. John the Baptist holds all Jews to be like proselytes and demands a baptism for forgiveness of sins from them all, in view of the impending appearance of the Messiah."<sup>4</sup> John declares to the people that he is baptizing them with water for repentance (Matt. 3:11a NIV). Lars Hartman, in his book *Into the Name of the Lord Jesus* adds:

John's preaching of repentance was addressed to the whole people. The individual was to abstain from his former way of life and to offer willing obedience to the God of Israel; and the moral demands which were once proclaimed by the prophets of old concerning human relations were reiterated by this new prophet in the desert. In this way, it seems, John sought to prepare a renewed people of God in the wilderness, the place where once the covenant between God and Israel had been made (Luke 1.17; cf. Mal 3.1; 4.5f).<sup>5</sup>

John the Baptist then goes on to say, "But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt 3:11b). "In John's preaching baptism in fire was almost certainly just another image for judgment; either the image stands for a painful cleansing (as in Mal 3.2, 'He will be as a refiner's fire') or for an annihilating judgment, also represented by the burning of the chaff."<sup>6</sup>

Jesus then comes from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John, and Jesus says in response to John's reluctance, "Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). "What could that mean? The answer stares us in the face. If Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> Oscar Cullman, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London, ENG: SCM Press Ltd., 1950), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Lars Hartman, *Into the Name of Jesus: Baptism in the Early Church* (Edinburgh, SCO: T&T Clark, 1997), 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

was really going to act proxy for sinful men and women on the cross, he must identify fully with them. And here he is doing just that. It is a dummy run for Calvary.”<sup>7</sup>

Upon Jesus’ baptism, he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and Isaiah 11:2 which says, “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him”, was fulfilled. This is significant, for in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit could rest upon someone (i.e. Saul, Samson) for a specific purpose but could then be removed because of disobedience. “At his baptism Jesus received a permanent, unwithdrawn (sic) endowment of the Holy Spirit. He had come, and he would not be removed. And that is one of the most precious strands in Christian baptism. It is the sacrament in which the permanent presence of the Holy Spirit is offered to us.”<sup>8</sup> And so with Christ came a new baptism, one that imparted the gift of the Holy Spirit.

However, there is no account of Jesus baptizing anyone during his ministry on earth and it isn’t until the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-13) that we see the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is at this time that Peter preaches to the crowd of the prophecy given in Joel 2:28-32, that God would pour out his Spirit on all people. “John had foreseen and foretold baptism in the Holy Spirit, and this Peter now promised to his hearers...This connection between water-baptism and Spirit-baptism recurs throughout the Acts of the Apostles.”<sup>9</sup> Peter also preaches of the resurrection of Christ and his being exalted to the right hand of God. Many of the people are moved and ask Peter what they should do in response to this message. He replies by saying, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Acts 2:41 goes on to say that “those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practise and Power* (London, ENG: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), 39.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Bridge, and David Phypers, *The Water That Divides: the Baptism Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 20.

their number that day.” Throughout the book of Acts, there are many references to people believing and being baptized. Acts 8 speaks of Simon the Sorcerer, along with others, believing and being baptized, as well as Phillip being directed by the Holy Spirit to the Ethiopian eunuch to share the good news of Jesus. Upon the Ethiopian’s belief, they stop by the side of the road and he is baptized. Acts 9 gives the account of Saul’s conversion and baptism and in chapter 10 there is the baptism of Cornelius and his household. This is the first specific account of a gentile being baptized. More references to entire households being baptized are found in Acts 16. In verses 11-15 Lydia is converted and she and the members of her household were baptized, and verses 16-34 give the account of the jailer believing along with his family and all being baptized. And finally, Acts 18 speaks of the many Corinthians who believed and were baptized.

#### The Historical Use of Baptism amongst Mennonites

Menno Simons, the founder of Mennonites, was an ordained priest in the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500’s. His conversion to evangelicalism was a gradual process and began with his doubts on the doctrine of transubstantiation. “Several years later, when Menno heard of the beheading of Sicke Freriks at Leeuwarden because of rebaptism, he was deeply troubled. Thus far he had never doubted the validity of infant baptism.”<sup>10</sup> It was on January 30, 1536 that Menno broke with the Roman Catholic Church and expressed his new commitment to the cause of Christ.

The visible sign of his decision was the acceptance of ‘rebaptism’ for himself, and it is interesting to see how he viewed it: ‘I have been enlightened by the Lord, converted, have fled from Babylon and entered Jerusalem. Surrendering myself to the Lord with body and soul, I committed myself into His gracious hand.’ In other words, he saw baptism as a personal act of faith, a renunciation of a false form of

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<sup>10</sup> John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, 1975), 8.

religion, an embracing of the people of God and a taking up of the cross of discipleship.<sup>11</sup>

Menno was baptized by Obbe Phillips, “a leader who had disowned the more flamboyant and violent Anabaptism of the Low Countries and was seeking to encourage others to do the same – with such success that many already referred to themselves as Obberites.”<sup>12</sup> The mode used in Menno’s baptism was affusion, the pouring of water on the head. Menno’s joining up with the Anabaptists led him into hiding and he spent the next year in meditation, prayer, and the study of Scripture. Menno was then approached by seven or eight individuals and asked to become leader and pastor of their people. Although he was reluctant, he finally agreed. “It was Menno’s leadership which saved the Dutch Anabaptist movement from fanaticism and possible disintegration. Because of this, those who belonged to the movement were soon known as Mennists, Or Mennonists, and eventually as Mennonites.”<sup>13</sup> Menno died a natural death at the age of 65 but during his life he was able to prove that “belief in a ‘spiritual church’ can be expressed in practice, and that the replacing of ‘sacraments’ with ‘divine ordinances’ of communion and baptism which reflect the believer’s inward state, can offer a unifying and eloquent alternative to a state church sacramental system.”<sup>14</sup>

### The Historical Use of Baptism in the Mennonite Brethren Church

Although Mennonite Brethren have been distinguished from other Mennonites by their mode of baptism, this was not originally the case. “In the Document of Secession they simply stress the importance of believer’s baptism: ‘Concerning baptism we confess it to be upon faith,

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<sup>11</sup> Bridge & Phypers, *The Water That Divides*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Philip H. Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 118.

as a seal of faith, but not upon a memorized belief as it is now being practiced. . .”<sup>15</sup> This stress upon a believer’s baptism was a result of the conversion experiences of the original Brethren. These conversions were influenced by a pietistic Lutheran named Eduard Wüst, who was invited to preach at the annual harvest-thanksgiving Sundays. The Holy Spirit used his preaching of free grace and holy living to convict these individuals, and as a result a wave of evangelism began. House meetings of prayer and Bible study began on Saturday afternoons and out of these meetings the first Mennonite Brethren Church was birthed on January 6, 1860. It is important to understand that these first Brethren had experienced adult baptism by sprinkling in the General Conference Mennonite Church without having had a salvation experience. Having a salvation experience led them to question the meaning of their baptisms and thus stress a believer’s baptism. The issue of true believers baptism, so central in the secession document, remained a major concern for the movement.<sup>16</sup> Baptismal candidates were required to give their testimony in front of the congregation and would then be questioned by them to see if their conversion experience was real. “For many years a candidate’s qualifications for baptism and church membership were established by similar means. In retrospect one recognizes elements of legalism, a possible reaction to the old church where such evidences were not a condition for church membership.”<sup>17</sup> Nick Sawatzky, who has been a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Killarney, Manitoba for over 50 years, commented that while baptism was initially seen as a point of entrance to the Christian faith, it became a point of arrival as those who had been baptized as unbelievers in the General Conference of Mennonites were overly cautious as to

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<sup>15</sup> Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 55.

<sup>16</sup> Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, (1789-1910)*, trans. by J.B. Toews, Abraham Friesen, Peter J. Klassen and Harry Loewen (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 231; quoted in J.B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America 1860-1990* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1993), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, 36.

who was baptized in the Mennonite Brethren Conference. However, Nick believes that this attitude has changed again as emerging generations have come into leadership. Although there still is a time of preparation and questioning of baptismal candidates, there aren't the strict requirements that were once in place.<sup>18</sup>

The first baptism by immersion took place on September 23, 1860. Jacob Bekker, in his book *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren*, gives an explanation of how the question of mode of baptism came into being. He writes:

At that time (June 1860) we knew nothing about immersion. . . . After three months, however, two sisters who had not as yet been baptized by sprinkling in the church, desired to be baptized by us. Their testimony before the congregation was satisfactory, and I was to perform the baptism. Then he who had been in Petersburg (Claassen) took me aside and asked: If you are going to baptize how are you going to do it; are you going to sprinkle and pour? This to me was a strange language, and I didn't know how to answer.<sup>19</sup>

It was out this question that the mode of baptism came into question, and much study was done on the subject. After reading a pamphlet on baptism by immersion, which cited several New Testament examples, Bekker and others were convicted that they had not been baptised on true faith or by the proper mode. Fearing that the elders of the Mennonite Church would think they were starting a new church, Bekker began to read the works of Menno Simons to see if what he believed about immersion could be cited from his works. He was relieved to find a statement by Menno that said that although the mode had changed over the years, the original baptisms took place in running water. This was the historical backing they needed in order to remain Mennonites while changing the mode of baptism to immersion. After discussing the issue over several church meetings, Bekker and the leadership decided that they could baptize the two

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<sup>18</sup> Nick Sawatzky, *Telephone Interview*, 16 June. 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob P. Bekker, Unpublished "Memoirs," translated by D. E. Pauls and A. E. Janzen (Copy in Archives of Pacific College), pp. 23-25. Revised and published as *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kan.: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest). References indicate pagination in the earlier manuscript; quoted in Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, 55.

sisters by immersion, but felt that they themselves would first need to be baptized by immersion. So in September, 1860 Bekker and a man named Jacob Bartel baptized each other by immersion and then proceeded to baptize three others. For two years, the question of baptism arose frequently, but by 1862 immersion had been established as the general practise. It has been said that the Mennonite Brethren were influenced by the Baptists in regards to the mode of baptism.<sup>20</sup>

Baptists reach their conclusions about immersion from the meaning of the Greek verb *baptizein* which means ‘to immerse’ and from the burial and resurrection symbolism of Romans 6 and Colossians 2. They claim that only a baptism by immersion in which the candidate is ‘buried’ in the water before rising from it can adequately fulfil this symbolism. Thus they claim that all New Testament baptisms were by immersion and that therefore any other form of baptism is at best imperfect and at worst invalid.<sup>21</sup>

It is truly sad, but the Mennonite Brethren were severely persecuted by the General Conference Mennonites for their practise of baptism by immersion. Those in opposition would break up the baptismal services by “driving ministers and baptismal candidates with sticks out of the baptismal waters.”<sup>22</sup> According to Jacob Bekker, “The Mennonite District Government whipped with rods until the welts bled; yet this did not halt the secession. The bloody floggings only led to greater steadfastness among the brethren. Baptisms and the Lord’s supper continued according to God’s Word.”<sup>23</sup> When in persecution, one’s belief is either strengthened or abandoned. For the brethren, their belief in immersion as the true mode of baptism was substantially increased. This dogmatic belief led to the conviction that baptism by immersion was required for membership and communion. Therefore, those who wanted to join the Mennonite Brethren had to be rebaptized by immersion before they were accepted into membership. This strict policy was held until 1963, when at the convention of the North

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<sup>20</sup> Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> Bridge & Phypers, *The Water that Divides*, 28.

<sup>22</sup> J.F. Harms, *Geschichte der Mennoniten Brüdergemeinde* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1925), 24-25; quoted in Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, 102; quoted in Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, 37.

American General Conference a vote was taken on the issue. There were 325 in favour and 120 opposed, which resulted in removing the requirement of immersion as a condition for membership.<sup>24</sup> Upon examining those who had voted, it was noted that those who opposed this decision were those who had been rebaptized by immersion.

#### THE CURRENT USE OF BAPTISM IN THE MENNONITE BRETHERN CHURCH

According to the 2001 edition of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, “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.”<sup>25</sup> This statement would agree with the original founders of the Mennonite Brethren Conference that baptism is an entry point of Christianity. It is to take place upon salvation and is not considered something that is awarded after having achieved a certain level of spirituality in the Christian life. However, there is the belief that there must be an understanding of baptism before it takes place. The Confession of Faith states, “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.”<sup>26</sup> Once again, this statement would reflect the original founders’ conviction of believer’s baptism. As a result of this belief, the Confession of Faith states, “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.”<sup>27</sup> Because infants cannot confess their faith, they are excluded from baptism. However, children who are able to give testimony to their belief in

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<sup>24</sup> Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> *Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith*, [document-on-line]; available from <http://mbconf.ca/faithlife/confession/>; Internet.; accessed 29 June. 2005.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Jesus would be allowed baptism. There is no set age limit and it is up to the discretion of each church to evaluate each child baptismal candidate.

“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.”<sup>28</sup> The conviction of baptism by immersion is still prevalent in the Mennonite Brethren Church. However, as mentioned in the historical section, they are not so strict as to forbid membership in their congregation to those who have been baptized by another mode. Their Confession of Faith states, “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.”<sup>29</sup>

While the beliefs about baptism are unanimous amongst Mennonite Brethren, the actual baptismal services may vary from church to church. The following information is based on services held at Lakeview Community (M.B.) Church in Killarney, Manitoba.

For approximately four weeks prior to the baptism, candidates receive weekly instruction as to the meaning of baptism, church membership, and the responsibility to correct or encourage brothers and sisters of Christ once baptized. After the four weeks of instruction, a night is set aside for the public testimonies of the candidates. During this service, others (especially parents) are given the opportunity to testify to the faith of the individual candidates, and words of encouragement are given to them by anyone who wishes. During the Sunday morning service, baptismal candidates give a shortened version of their testimony before being baptized. During the baptism, as the candidate and the baptizer stand in the water, the baptizer will ask the candidate whether they believe Jesus Christ has died for the forgiveness of sins and if they have

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

received him as their personal Saviour. Upon the candidate responding “yes”, the baptizer will then baptize the candidate in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The candidate is immersed backwards into the water and raised back up. After those who have been baptized have changed into dry clothes, they are given a certificate of baptism and a celebration of the Lord’s Supper takes place. This is the first time those who have been baptized will be participating in communion. After the service has concluded there is an informal time of welcoming into the church body.<sup>30</sup>

According to Nick Sawatzky, there is no specific dress for the candidates and no intentional symbolism is used during the baptismal service. However this has not always been the case. As recently as the 1980’s baptismal candidates were required to wear white for their baptisms. Another part of the service that has been omitted in the past 15 years is the laying on of hands. Elders of the church would lay hands on the individual candidates and pray for them. The prayer would be spontaneous but would also include the words of blessing from 1 Thess. 5:23&24 which says, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.”

## INCREASING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM IN THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

In his book *Liturgical Spirituality*, Philip Pfatteicher emphasizes that baptism is the door to life and that it “offers to each individual the opportunity to participate in the mystery of the Pascha, to make with Christ the passage from death to life, to reach life by means of death. This

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<sup>30</sup> Sawatzky, Telephone Interview, 30 June. 2005.

passage through the cross to the resurrection is the deepest reality of the Christian mystery.”<sup>31</sup>

Pfatteicher points out that the New Testament references to baptism provide many images for the one reality of new life. Using some of these images and incorporating practises of other churches and the church in history could increase the significance of the Mennonite Brethren baptismal services. As noted previously, baptism by immersion has been a significant factor for the Mennonite Brethren. This imagery reflects participation in Christ’s death and resurrection. Romans 6:3-5 says, “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Immersion is also a good imagery for the new birth corresponding to the new creation. John 3:5 says, “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Sprit.’”

Baptism is an image of the enlightenment by Christ. Isaiah 60:1 says, “Arise, shine, for our light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.” Ephesians 5:14 says, “for it is the light that makes everything visible. This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’” This imagery could be made vivid by practising the giving of a lighted candle to the newly baptized.

Baptism is an image of a re-clothing in Christ. Galatians 3:27 says, “for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The newly baptized could be given a white baptismal robe as they come up out of the water. The white robe is symbolic of a bridal garment, purity, forgiveness, new life, and the becoming of a new person.

The following quote from Pfatteicher brings this imagery to life:

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<sup>31</sup> Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality*, 228.

The rites of baptism were correspondingly rich and powerful. In the ancient church the candidates, after what often was years of preparation, at last were stripped of their clothing and all that it represented, descended into the water, and disappeared completely. When they emerged they were no longer what they were; they were now a new people, born anew. The image of Adam that they had borne was blotted out; the stains of earth were washed away. They were dead with Christ to the moral life that had been spoiled by Satan. Washed of their sins, they were new people, newborn, bearing the image of the new Adam, Jesus Christ. The priest marked their forehead with oil, engraving there as it were the image, the icon, of Christ, who is himself the icon of the Father. The newly baptized were clothed in white garments as they emerged from the water, for they had regained the garment of immortality that had been lost by Adam, and were clothed as brides of Christ. A lighted candle was put in the hand of each as a token of their enlightenment, for they were no longer children of darkness but children of light. They no longer lived for themselves; it was Christ who lived in them. By water and the Spirit the divine pattern revealed in Christ had been imprinted on them. Now that they had been born again, brought into God's family as adopted children, and now that the Spirit lived in them, they could pray with full meaning, "Our Father."<sup>32</sup>

Laurence Hull Stookey, in his book *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*, discusses which baptismal practises should be restored and which do not make sense in our culture.

For example, to ask candidates for baptism to face west and to spit by way of renouncing the devil is a silly enterprise in twentieth-century America. In a society that depends heavily upon artificial illumination, east and west no longer convey the opposition of light and darkness they once did; and if evil is personified at all, chances are that such personification has more to do with a misguided Satanism, or at least with a simplistic biblical literalism, than with any theological understanding we would wish to encourage. On the other hand, we do on occasion use lighted candles in our culture. Thus, to restore the presentation of the baptismal candle may seem quite natural, while turning to the west and spitting and then turning to the east would induce only discomfort or confusion.<sup>33</sup>

Stookey also suggests that the question be asked whether or not the renewal of an ancient practise will open "meanings in the Bible that otherwise are hidden behind allusion the contemporary reader cannot recognize."<sup>34</sup> If the change does not illuminate its biblical meaning it is pointless.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>33</sup> Stookey, *Baptism*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 155.

Article 8 in the liturgical reading section of the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches website is a beautiful liturgy on Christian Baptism (See Appendix).<sup>35</sup> Reading this together as a congregation would develop unity as well as strengthen and remind the congregation of the biblical beliefs on baptism. The Apostles' Creed would also be an appropriate reading for the congregation.

As pointed out in the section discussing baptism in the New Testament, the laying on of hands to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit accompanied most baptisms recorded. The return to this practise for the Mennonite Brethren would add significance to baptismal services. Having someone pray over you with the laying on of hands is always meaningful and with the prayer requesting the filling of the Holy Spirit it would be a significant prayer of blessing.

This direct equation between baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit cannot be stressed too strongly. Throughout Christian history, many have separated the two, using the idea of a post-baptism baptism of the Spirit to justify the practise of confirmation, while in the present century Pentecostal teaching has made a similar separation though on rather different grounds from earlier teaching. Yet in the light of the New Testament such a separation is hard to justify.<sup>36</sup>

Anointing with oil could also be added to the baptismal service to increase its significance. As the pastor or elder anoints the baptized person he could recite the words of Ephesians 1:13-14,

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

One more idea that could be incorporated is a fellowship meal after the baptismal service. This meal would reflect the welcoming into the church family and would encourage fellowship

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<sup>35</sup> "Christian Baptism" [document on-line]; available from <http://mbconf.ca/believe/confession/liturgical/baptism.en.html>; Internet; accessed 29 June, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Bridge & Phypers, *The Water that Divides*, 20.

with those who had been baptized. A meal is a natural way to fellowship among families, and this would reaffirm the fellowship of the family of God.

## CONCLUSION

Baptism will not let us forget the “unavoidable aspect of death which lies at the heart of the mystery of life.”<sup>37</sup> The saving grace that Christians receive from Jesus Christ is truly incomprehensible. Bridge and Phypers, in their book *The Water that Divides*, say that “baptism is integral to the salvation process, of value in itself, bringing with it the full blessing of God on the Christian.”<sup>38</sup> They also add, “In the New Testament baptism without faith is dead, achieving nothing. Faith without baptism is incomplete, for through baptism God conveys to the believer all that is granted him in Christ.”<sup>39</sup> Baptism is an act of response to this grace and the ordinance is not to be glibly performed out of duty, but celebrated. Baptism’s rich symbolism of the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-5), the washing away of sin (1 Cor. 6:11), the new birth (John 3:5), the renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5), the enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14), the re-clothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27), and the liberation into a new humanity (Gal. 3:27-28),<sup>40</sup> is worthy of much contemplation and celebration. Making this celebration as meaningful as possible, conveying the rich symbolism, and instructing the candidates of its significance is the responsibility of the church.

Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:15-16)

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<sup>37</sup> Pfatteicher, *Liturgical Spirituality*, 226.

<sup>38</sup> Bridge & Phypers, *The Water That Divides*, 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

**Article 8** liturgical reading

## **Christian Baptism**

Jesus our Lord was baptized  
to fulfill all righteousness.

All who turn to Jesus are also called  
to pass through the waters  
and embark on a life of obedience and abundant joy.

**Blessed is the one  
who hears the call of Jesus and follows.**

**Blessed is the one  
cleansed by Jesus' forgiving love,  
washed and made new by His Spirit,  
welcomed into the Father's family.**

Baptism is a public sign of repentance  
and the forgiveness of sins.

**Baptism signifies that we have died with Christ,  
that we might also be raised to newness of life in Him.**

Baptism is a pledge to serve Christ  
according to the gifts God has given.

**Baptism announces that we belong to God:  
we take His name upon ourselves,  
and His people become our people.**

So submit yourselves to God,  
and commit yourselves to the church family  
that God has entrusted with your care.

*(Optional blessing for baptismal candidates)*

**May the Spirit descend like a dove,  
and the blessing of God rest upon you:  
“Well done, my dear child,  
with you I am well pleased!”**

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