

## **SOME THOUGHT REGARDING BAPTISM**

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October 1990**

The point of this paper is to briefly state the case for believer's baptism as practiced within the Anabaptist tradition. The paper was written as a member of a study committee within the Brethren in Christ Church.

### **THE NEW BIRTH AND BAPTISM**

When baptism is understood aright, there is an inner relatedness between the new birth and believer's baptism. The divine grace initiative which made provision for the new birth in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, continues in God's calling of persons to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The decision to surrender to accept Christ -- to repent from and leave the old sinful life and through the forgiveness of sins and receiving the Holy Spirit, to walk in newness of life -- is the most important event in the life of any person. Believer's baptism is God's provision to adequately and fully testify and witness to the event of eternal significance. In contrast, in infant baptism the one receiving the sacrament knows nothing about God's salvation provision, repentance, receiving the Holy Spirit and walking in newness of life. The infant cannot testify and witness to God's saving action, and in that inability nullifies the evangelistic aspect of believer's baptism.

To suggest that God is at work in the infant raises the question as to what God does in the infant. To Catholics and Lutherans, the infant is saved in the act of baptism. Evangelicals who relate personal salvation to a conscious decision to accept Christ cannot accept such a view. For people in the Reformed tradition, baptism means bringing the infant into the care and nurture of the Christian community. Such a concern is commendable, but it is exercised more purposefully in child dedication. The new birth as a conscious experience and believer's baptism are not to be separated; the New Testament has them interrelated.

In the book of Acts, the history of the New Testament Church, the conjunction of the new birth and water baptism is repeatedly recorded. From Peter's call on the day of Pentecost that his listeners were to "repent and be baptized" (2:38), to Paul recounting that God told him he was to be baptized (22:16), the basic pattern was people accepting Christ and being baptized.

The very important addition to the pattern was the receiving of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament clearly indicates the priority of God's saving action, including the receiving of the Holy Spirit, above the human response and baptism. At the same time, the two are dovetailed and gain their full meaning together.

It is legitimate for the sake of scholarship to separate the two, but to draw one's theological conclusions from such a separation reflects a misunderstanding of the biblical intent. That intent is to highlight the conversion commitment in such a way as to impress its meaning on the baptized, to maximize the evangelistic impact of the event, and to set the convert on the way of discipleship.

In the New Testament there is no teaching or command calling for infant baptism or any explicit example of the same. At the same time Jesus in his baptism called for the "fulfill[ing] of all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15) and in the Great Commission commanded that disciples were to be baptized (Matt. 28:18-20). Efforts to find infant baptism in the New Testament -- connecting circumcision to baptism, using Peter's "This promise is to you and your children" words in his Pentecost sermon, or citing the "household" references -- have not been convincing. The suggestion that believer's baptism is the only kind of baptism found in the New Testament because the situation was a missionary one, fails to take into account that believer's baptism is inherently missionary in intent.

All people need at some point in their self-conscious life to repent and believe; in the church there are no second generation Christians. The concern of Christian parents for the spiritual welfare of their children is very important, but in infant baptism the real point has to do with family and church assuming responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the infant. The rite should focus on the adults involved rather than on the infant, and that is done most meaningfully in parents and church members dedicating the infant to the Lord. Baptism is to be reserved as the graphic symbolization of accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Water baptism is an important aspect of New Testament Christianity. It does not receive extended theological consideration in the epistles, but that becomes decisive only if one's hermeneutic sees the climax of the New Testament revelation in the discursive and theological sections in the epistles. The New Testament is not a systematic consideration of Christian theology but rather the record of God's saving act in Christ and the explanation as to meaning of that act given the spiritual context of time. While infant baptism may represent a hope that the infant will as an adult accept Christ, believer's baptism is the actualization of that hope.

### **BAPTISM AND DISCIPLESHIP**

A second aspect of believer's baptism is Christ's call to discipleship and obedience (I will use the two words interchangeably). Christ himself was baptized modeling the act, doing so, in part, "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15) and commanded that his disciples baptize those who became disciples. (The Brethren in Christ, in the founding of the denomination, related fulfilling all righteousness to believer's baptism.) The obedience in baptizing is, however, not an isolated act of discipleship but rather is an important part of the disciple's whole life of obedience. Holy discipleship is to be paramount in the sanctified life. Discipleship can become a burdensome, external legalism, but the New Testament sees it as flowing from the new Holy Spirit empowered heart, as part of the koinonia of the body of Christ, and as a gratitude response to God's great love. The centrality of discipleship runs through the New Testament although it is not as obvious in the epistles as in the rest of the New Testament. Faith and obedience are both a part of total commitment. Paul wrote that we are not saved by works but we have been "created in Christ Jesus for good works..." (Eph. 2:8-10).

Jesus Christ and the apostles called for a continuity between the inner attitude or principle and an overt expression of that inner belief. An inner commitment can be lost in two ways: the one is to too rigidly set the outer expression and the other, and the other is to assume that all that is essential is the inner belief. Jesus Christ was very much concerned both with the condition of the heart (Luke 6:25) and with the outer action (Matt. 7:21-29). Heart and hand become one in

discipleship. The Brethren have been deeply concerned with being faithful to all the commandments, first in spirit and then in action.

It must also be remembered that disobedience results in the loss of salvation. A further point much worthy of mention is that obedience is a means of more fully and intimately knowing Jesus Christ. Dr. Owen Alderfer, Brethren in Christ historian and churchman, has ably set forth the Brethren understanding.

*Indeed, the path to assurance follows the route of obedience, and one does not come to full assurance until he/she is soundly obedient to the will of God. Only as one is obeying does one come to know. This is not legalism or justification by works; it is the uniting of the central elements of the faith-walk in the Christian way:*

*Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.<sup>1</sup>*

The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer stated it well: "Christ calls, the disciple follows: that is grace and commandment in one."<sup>2</sup> To be baptized as an act of obedience moves baptism beyond being a symbol of the new birth into a life lived as a follower of Christ.

#### **BAPTISM AND THE CHURCH**

Since the understanding of the nature of the church helps determine the understanding of the new birth and baptism, it is highly significant that the Brethren founding fathers believed, in the words of Brethren in Christ historian Dr. Carlton Wittlinger, that the church was "to be nothing less than an earthly microcosm of Christ's kingdom."<sup>3</sup> Many American denominations tend to give priority to the invisible church over the visible body, and see the mission of the church only as a source of personal edification and as a base for evangelism and missionary outreach. The Brethren also believed that the church was to aid in enriching personal spirituality and was a base for evangelism and missions, but they gave priority to the visible church over the invisible. Important in the understanding was the mission of being the harmonious, loving and sharing community modeled by the church that was born on the day of Pentecost.

The church is to be a place of spiritual and material

mutuality. "God's chosen people..." are to "clothe..." themselves "with compassion [and] kindness;" they are to forgive one another and, beyond that, they are to "put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Col. 3:15-16). The goal is a holy church "without stain or wrinkle" (Eph. 5:27). Mention has already been made that the new birth involved a commitment to the Brethren understanding of the church.

With such an understanding baptism involves:

1. A testimony to a new birth regeneration experience and an acceptance of Jesus Christ as the head of the church.
2. A commitment to the authority of the Bible.
3. A commitment that the church is to work toward being an earthly microcosm of Christ's kingdom.
4. A commitment to assume responsibility for the well-being of the brotherhood community including the practicing of Matthew 18:15-18.
5. A renouncing of the world, the flesh and the devil.

In infant baptism the family and church pledge to nurture the infant. That responsibility, whether in infant baptism or child dedication, is highly important. Consideration needs to be given as to how that pledge can be made concrete. In believer's baptism the convert can make his/her own pledge to work toward Christ-like community living.

#### **CHURCH HISTORY AND BAPTISM**

Although the evidence regarding the practice of baptism in the first Christian centuries is limited and at times ambiguous, the data indicate that believer's baptism was practiced in the first four centuries and was apparently the predominant, if not the only, form in the second century. (The mode customarily was immersion.) In the fourth century some people, believing that baptism washed away past sins and could not be repeated, waited until the temptations of youth were past or until they were on their death beds before they received baptism. In contrast, the origins of infant baptism are not known. It may have begun in the time of the apostles as Alexandrian theologian Origen (c. 185 - c. 254) claimed. The first "incontestable evidence" of infant baptism is in the writings of North African church father Tertullian (c. 160/70 - c. 215/20); he opposed it.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, church father Irenaeus (c. 130 - c. 200) appears to have approved

infant baptism, and Origen championed the position. It is apparent that for considerable time both forms were used, and in the fifth century infant baptism became the general practice.<sup>5</sup>

Some changes in the theological and political orientations indicate the context in which infant baptism gained its meaning. In the second century there emerged the idea that the act of baptism itself brought about the forgiveness of sin. Related to that belief was the view that infants were born not only with an original sin nature, but also with the guilt of Adam's sin. (An earlier view was that infants were innocent.) If infants bore the guilt of Adam, baptism was necessary for the salvation of the infant.<sup>6</sup> Further, with Constantine and the favorable attitude toward Christianity (later it became the official religion of the Roman Empire), many believed that state and church working together would bring the Roman Empire to its highest level. In the "popular mind a fusion was taking place between Rome and Christianity as over against the barbarian and the pagan."<sup>7</sup> The Christian peace and the Roman peace could together bring in the peaceable kingdom. Another ingredient was the belief that God will not bless a nation if He was not worshipped aright. With people becoming citizens by birth and Christians by infant baptism, the whole of society could become one toward the end of a Christianized society.<sup>8</sup> And so the rise and spread of infant baptism is rooted in the sociological forces that brought about the union of church and state.

The nature of baptism again became an issue in the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. For a time, before he guided the Reformation in Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli rejected infant baptism.<sup>9</sup> At one point, Luther set forth the nature of the church for those who wanted "to be Christian in earnest" which may have pointed toward believer's baptism.<sup>10</sup> But when he became a reformer, he was given to infant baptism in which, because of the faithfulness of God as promised in the Scripture, the soul was recreated.<sup>11</sup> The faith required by Luther was at one point the faith of those who sponsored the infant and at another time the infant's faith -- akin to an adult's faith when sleeping. The Reformed tradition, as already noted, saw infant baptism as a time of bringing the infant into the nurture and guidance of the Christian community. It appears the major reformers were unwittingly captive to the understanding dating back to the time of Constantine in which church and state worked together

for the actualization of the Christianized society. (They were also weak on discipleship and were not given to the believers' Church.) Infant baptism was integral to that understanding.

The Anabaptists were given to the priority of divine grace, first in God's provision of salvation in and through Christ's work. More directly to the point of personal salvation, the Anabaptists were given to the divine initiative in the conversion experience. Mennonite theologian Martin Miller has written that "contemporary scholarship has shown that... [those in] the Anabaptist tradition... usually acknowledge that the ability and will to turn to God in faith are the gift of God in Christ rather than an ability resident in human beings apart from divine grace."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, humans could reject God's gifts. It is true that the Anabaptists and their children have made much of the subjective aspect of the conversion experience, but such emphasis should not leave us under the impression that the Anabaptists did not give priority to the objective aspect of conversion.

German Pietism (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) with its emphasis on heart religion over against head religion (preoccupation with theology) and its critique of ritualism in worship minimized the sacraments -- one of which was infant baptism. The center of their concern was the heart condition, not of the infant but of the adult. The churchly Pietists (Lutheran and Reformed), seeking to be yeast in the state churches, were severely attacked for their orientation. Their response was that they were orthodox even though in actuality they made less of infant baptism than their attackers.<sup>13</sup> The outworking of the lesser emphasis on baptism is seen in the rise of the United Brethren, that body stating that baptism could be either infant or believer's baptism.<sup>14</sup> Most of their leaders, and apparently their members, were Reformed or Mennonite. (In contrast were bodies, as the German Baptist Brethren and the Brethren in Christ, that embraced both Pietism and Anabaptism. For such who accented heart religion and combined it with the importance of obedience, believer's baptism was important.) In short, Pietism emphasized heart religion and minimized outer form.

The development of denominationalism further eroded the importance of outer practice. The English Puritans, who wanted a united front against the king and the "lordly bishops," were not of one mind regarding outer

practice. Some Puritans, for example, favored a moderate episcopal form of church government, others were for presbyterian polity, while still others believed in the congregational form of church administration. The solution was to work together on the basis of "fundamental" beliefs while working for more commonality in outer forms. The end result, as it relates to this paper, was that baptism was seen as one of those outer secondary matters.<sup>15</sup>

The same result flowed from American revivalism. Rooted in the centrality of the heart religion as focused in German Pietism and English Evangelicalism, revivalism made personal salvation the central focus. All other aspects of faith were, more or less, given a secondary place. Many in the movement accented the invisible church and saw denominationalism as man-made. Although the New Testament ties the new birth and baptism together, revivalism, in part out of necessity, made nothing of baptism. Mention must be made that revivalism reflected the individualism of American society -- an individualism which often saw the corporate aspect of life in the nation.

The movements of Pietism, English Evangelicalism, denominationalism and revivalism shaped American Christianity toward the understanding that the only thing that really counts is the inner heart condition. Outer practice is secondary. The result has been that present-day evangelicalism has no real place for the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper.

In summary, infant baptism represents the hope that those so baptized will in adult life accept Christ as their personal Savior, will enter into a life of obedience, and will become church members. In contrast, in believer's baptism the hope has become a reality. Believer's baptism symbolizes the new birth; it sets the convert on the way of following his/her Lord; it results in the convert becoming a responsible member in the harmonious community.

## ENDNOTES

1. "Anabaptism as a Burden for the Brethren in Christ," Within the Perfection of Christ, edited by Terry L. Brensinger and E. Morris Sider (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press and the Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 1990), p. 257.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship, translated by R.H. Fuller (New York: Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 51. Bonhoeffer very ably summarizes the faith obedience relationship in the following sentence: "Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes." p. 56.
3. Carlton Wittlinger, The Quest for Piety and Obedience (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), p. 44.
4. Jaroslav Pelikan, The Christian Tradition, 5 volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971). volume 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), p. 290.
5. Ibid., pp. 163-166. Everett Ferguson, Early Christians Speak (Austin, TX: Sweet Publishing Company, 1971), pp. 33-34, 55-65. Kurt Aland, Did the Early Church Baptize Infants (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 29-74. Joachim Jeremias, The Origins of Infant Baptism (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1963), pp. 9-32, 64-74.
6. Ibid.
7. Roland Bainton, Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace (New York: Abingdon Press, 1960), pp. 85-95.
8. Leonard Verduin, Their Reformers and Their Stepchildren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Company, 1964), pp. 21-25.
9. Harold S. Bender, Conrad Grebel, c. 1498-1526 (Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), pp. 126-127.
10. Donald F. Durnbaugh, The Believers Church (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 3.
11. E.G. Schwiebert, Luther and His Times (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), pp. 446-448.
12. "Baptism in the Mennonite Tradition," The Mennonite Quarterly Review (July, 1990), p. 242.
13. F. Ernest Stoeffler, The Rise of Evangelical Pietism (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1965), pp. 9-23.
14. Martin H. Schrag, The Brethren in Christ Attitude Toward the "World" (Temple University: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 1967), pp. 36-39.
15. Winthrop S. Hudson, American Protestantism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 37-51.