



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 8 [MB Confession of Faith]

Christian Baptism

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” (Matt. 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 (Rom. 6:3; 1 Cor. 6:11; 10:2; 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; 5:26; Col. 2:12; Tit. 3:5; Heb. 10:22; 1 Pet. 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 behavior 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, Exod. 10:1, Num. 14:11; Jesus performed signs, John 2:11, 12:37, 20:30; the apostles did signs and wonders, Acts 4:16, 6:8, Rom. 15:19). Second, a sign also refers to human action (the Israelites put blood on their doorposts as a sign, Exod. 12:13; unleavened bread was a sign, Exod. 13:9; the law was given to Israel as a sign, Deut. 6:8; the Sabbath was a sign, Exod. 31:13, Ezek. 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.

