



**CANADIAN CONFERENCE**  
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

**ARTICLE 8 [MB Confession of Faith]**

# Christian Baptism

## PASTORAL APPLICATION

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

### **The Importance of Teaching**

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

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

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

### **The Age of Baptism**

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

The confessional statement seeks to address this matter by introducing three qualifying statements as general principles. First, “baptism is for those who understand its meaning”; second, it is for those who “are able to be accountable to Christ and the church”; and third, it is for those who “voluntarily request it on the basis of their faith response to Jesus Christ.” These three statements should not be interpreted in a simplistic sense; rather, they should be interpreted in the light of the “Meaning” section of the confession. For example, candidates should be able to demonstrate understanding and personalization of the five statements which explain salvation: having “repented of sins,” having “received forgiveness of sins,” having “died with Christ to sin,” having “been raised to newness of life” and having “received the Holy Spirit.”

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

### **Baptism Without Incorporation into the Local Church**

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



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

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

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

The problem can be addressed in several ways. First, we must never deny the personal nature of the Christian faith. But we also must not confuse the personal nature of salvation with individualism.

Second, we must teach the biblical truth that Christians need each other just as one organ or tissue of the body needs the others in order to function and to be sustained. The importance of systematic and thorough teaching of what it means to be part of Christ's body, the church, cannot be over emphasized. Third, we must work more intentionally at creating communities of faith where each member is held in esteem, where members find an affirmation of giftedness, where Christians are built up and admonished, and where service to Christ and each other is encouraged. Fourth, as leaders we must model the meaning of life in the body with each other and with Christ as the head of the body. Finally, it is important to conduct baptism in the context of a local church body, and to make the event an experience which the entire body shares. Individual, small group, or camp/retreat baptisms are generally not ideal for the individual or the church.

### **The Rebaptism Question**

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

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

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



person explain in advance to family and friends the decision to be baptized as an adult, and to invite family and friends to be present for the baptism.

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

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

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

