

CHURCH MEMBERSHIP ISSUES

by Marvin Hein

The issues to be addressed in this paper are (1) does baptism and church membership happen simultaneously and (2) is participation in the Lord's Supper restricted to baptized members of the church? Posed a bit differently: (1) can a person be baptized without joining the local church and (2) may unbaptized but believing children (or even adults) participate in the Lord's Supper?

The Confession of Faith answers both questions. In Article IX we read: "Baptism is a public commitment to discipleship. At baptism the believer enters into the full fellowship and work of the church."¹ In Article X, in the discussion on preparation for the fellowship of the Lord's Supper, we say: "Those who have peace with God, live in peace with their fellowmen, and have been baptized are invited to partake of the Lord's Supper."² During most of our history as a conference these positions have not been seriously challenged. The only reference in past resolutions is one in 1921: " . . . a minister may serve the Lord's Supper only to believers that were baptized upon confession of their faith."³

More recently, however, both of these positions have been challenged. With regard to the baptism/membership issue, critics say things like " . . . baptism is a form of identification-----with another person and his message (John's baptism, for instance). Baptism in the Gospels is always identified with Jesus and His message. The clear conclusion both in the Gospels and in the Acts is that baptism is not tied to church membership; rather it is viewed as a continuous event along with acceptance of Christ. Baptism is not an initiation into the local church (they knew nothing about a local church), but a public statement that one is identified with Christ. Baptism is a symbolic representation of becoming a member of the universal Church. In the Acts baptism is administered quickly, generously, with no demands for commitment to a local body. Covenant-commitment to a local body is nowhere alluded to in the NT."

With respect to the membership/Lord's Supper issue, comments such as the following are heard: "if baptism is identification, not initiation, that removes baptism as an absolute requirement for participating in the Lord's Supper. Instead of setting up requirements for the Lord's Supper, why not simply ask each person 'to examine himself.' The need to be baptized to take the Lord's Supper is historical/traditional, not scriptural. It is impossible to recreate a clear biblical model with regard to linkage between conversion, baptism, membership and Lord's Supper participation."

One basic difficulty exists. Almost everyone has an opinion about the baptism/membership and membership/Lord's Supper issues, but few claim biblical grounds for their opinions. More than 20 years ago the writer queried several dozen church leaders, Mennonite Brethren and others, for their views on the membership/Lord's Supper matter and found not one who submitted solid biblical evidence for his stance. D. Edmond Hiebert stated his preference and then said: "I do not really have any biblical reference to support my view in detail . . ." ⁴ Baptist Bruce Shelly fairly well expressed the feelings of most: "the reasons for this position (communion for baptized members only) do not derive from explicit scriptural statements . . . but in the biblical teaching of the doctrine of the church as a regenerated fellowship." ⁵

Our first and primary authority on any question is always the Bible. However, when the scripture is not clear, we fall back on historical theology. That is nothing unique to Mennonite Brethren. Our uniqueness, however, is that a part of our historical theology is an evangelical Anabaptist tradition. When the Bible is not plain we turn to history and tradition. We need not apologize for that.

Tradition stands on the side of baptism and membership occurring simultaneously and participation in the Lord's Supper for baptized believers only. Historically

almost all Protestant denominations (and Catholics) in the past held to participation in communion by baptized members only. Obviously, in more recent times some practices have changed. Generally there is the argument that it is indeed the Lord's Supper, not the Church's, and therefore the church cannot refuse anyone.

The Canadian Conference recently studied these issues. They discovered in 1986 that two-thirds of 95 responding pastors believed the Bible teaches that only those baptized should receive the Lord's Supper. Almost 90% stated that baptism and church membership should go together."⁶ It is generally agreed that the percentages would be lower among United States Mennonite Brethren.

It is the writer's contention that the issues hang on two questions: (1) is baptism a symbol of entrance into the universal Church or the local church as well? And (2) is the "covenant community" concept of the church a biblical one, and supported by historical theology in our Anabaptist tradition? If by baptism we mean that a believer enters into a covenant relationship with brothers and sister, as well as the larger universal Church, we may be forced to think differently about the baptism/membership and membership/Lord's Supper questions.

Baptism is not that clearly defined in the NT. Nor do we read about the "covenant community" in the Gospels or Epistles. So in a sense the critics are right and some conclusions must be drawn by inference from the scriptures. The following comments are intended to be biblical, but where that is not always possible, the arguments will be drawn from historical tradition, particularly our Anabaptist heritage.

BAPTISM/CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The Christian Church always stands in danger of two extremes---individualism and institutionalism. Individualism divorces baptism from membership. That is akin to separating the head from the body, Christ from the Church. Institutionalism, on the other hand, makes baptism and membership inseparable, cries for a uniformity

that can be stifling, and makes baptism sacramental.

Baptism is a personal declaration that Jesus is Lord, but baptism is not a solitary act. Baptism has a corporate side. Those Early Church believers no doubt found their spiritual nurture in smaller groups equivalent to local congregations (Act 2:41). The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20 reflects the fact that conversion and baptism have their corporate side. Along with new life and baptism, the Commission is clear in urging Christ-followers to teach new believers everything Christ commanded. That would be virtually impossible outside of a local church setting. Baptism marked the early believers' entrance into the local church. Baptism admittedly was also a symbol of being grafted into Christ and His larger universal body (I Cor. 12:13) and was designed to be a witness to the world, but baptism is not confined to witness. It is also entrance into partnership with Christ's people, with all the privileges and responsibilities that accompany membership.

There's a delightful black spiritual titled "Denomination Blues" sung, appropriately, by Muddy Waters. It recites the different denominational emphases and ends: "you gotta have Jesus, and that's all." Yes, in a sense in baptism we say "we gotta have Jesus" but that isn't all. You also need to be identified with Jesus' followers.

While membership rolls are not mentioned specifically in the NT, it is clear from the Acts that there were defined groups known as churches. Paul invited Barnabas to accompany him to visit some of them in Acts 15:36. In the Epistles it is plain that believers had organized into definable groups called churches. It was also certainly necessary in Acts 6, when a complaint surfaced that some widows were being ignored, to know who their "members" were.

Even in the absence of formal membership rolls, the Early Church saw involvement with the local church as having corporate implications. Ananias and Sapphira, as a part of their baptismal pledge, became subject to the nurture and discipline of the local church (Acts 5). Otherwise Peter and the church could not have taken such decisive action when the two tried to deceive the brotherhood. The young man

guilty of incest in I Corinthians 5, because of the corporate nature of the Corinthian Church, was subject to their discipline. His baptism did not only signify his membership in the universal Church. The well-known passage in Matthew 18, which suggests we are responsible to admonish our brothers and sisters who sin, is viable only when baptism and membership carries with it corporate responsibilities.

Baptism in the local body of believers in the NT had tremendous corporate implications. The Early Church's view of the Christian life resulted in an intense form of congregational life. Their belief in the church as a "covenant community" rested in Christ's sacrifice for them and then their obligation to live similarly with the members of their spiritual family. "We know love by this, that he laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I John 3:16).

They accepted the truth that loving God can't be separated from loving His children. "If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (I John 4:20). The decision to follow Christ meant a covenant relationship.

God is a covenant-making God. In the OT He bound Himself by physical tokens, almost as if He could not be trusted. The token to Noah was the rainbow (Gen. 9:8ff.). The token to Moses was the passover (Ex. 12). And the token to Abraham---the supreme mark of belonging that continues among Jews to this day---was circumcision. And while circumcision was not carried into the NT order of things, Paul writes to Christians in Gal. 3:29: "and if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."

And what physical mark of belonging, to seal that unseen contract between His undeserving love and our wobbly faith, did God give us? Baptism obviously is the mark of initiation into the New Covenant, just as circumcision was into the Old. Paul brings these two covenants and their rituals together in Col. 2:11-12: "you were circumcized with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body

of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with Him in baptism . . ."

There is an unusual baptistry in an Anglican cathedral in Geraldton, West Australia. We MBs would like the fact that it is shaped in the form of a coffin, symbolizing our Romans 6:4 view of baptism. The more eloquent symbolism of that baptistry may be its location. The baptistry stands in the middle of the main aisle. Anyone baptized there is inevitably brought into the midst of the congregation.

The words of scripture and the example of the Early Church led Anabaptists in the early 1500's to describe baptism as "each member yielding himself in God to the brotherhood completely in body and life . . ." ⁷ The baptismal vow was a pledge to place oneself under the discipline of the church. The character of that baptismal vow was basic to the quality of mutual admonition that took place, for instance, when Paul criticized the Corinthians for rallying around individuals and urged them instead to view themselves as a corporate body responsible to one another.

Anabaptist Balthaser Hubmaier in 1527 said that "the right to admonish one another comes from the baptismal commitment, which a man gives before receiving his baptism, in which he subjects himself, according to the order of Christ, to the church and all her members." ⁸ Hubmaier, reflecting on Matthew 18, saw the baptismal pledge as a promise to receive from members fraternal admonition. Some even called that corporate responsibility an "inner baptism" (placing yourself in the care and discipline of the church) just as the "outer baptism" (in water) signifies the transformation of the spirit. Pilgram Marpeck said of the baptismal vow: "for this reason, I have surrendered to God and all true believers, and try to serve all men with whatever I have . . ." ⁹

Such practices, based on perceived scriptural principles, must have been the foundation on which the Canadian Conference in 1987 presented this resolution: "the basic requirement for baptism is a clear confession of a personal faith in Jesus Christ and a statement of readiness to receive the instruction of the local church." ¹⁰ That may well have come from an earlier statement in a 1986 Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns-sponsored paper that stated: " . . . baptism identifies the believer with Jesus Christ in His death, burial and resurrection, also with the

believing community, the church."¹¹

John E. Toews has suggested that Paul speaks to the "covenant community" concept in Romans 6:3: "we who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death." We have been plunged into Christ. We have been immersed into a new community. Paul is not talking merely about a spiritual union with the universal Church. It does mean we have a personal relationship with Christ, but it means more. Baptismal language in the ancient world, says Toews, generally is incorporation language. To be baptized, whether in pagan or Jewish society, was to be incorporated into a new religious community.

Such a notion is still evident in a Jewish or Muslim culture if one of their number converts to Christianity. The family may hold a funeral service, to show that the baptized person no longer belongs to them. For all intents and purposes, the person is dead. That extreme reaction, however, does not take place if the person has not publicly declared himself by baptism. But when baptism occurs, that is seen as the point of no return. He leaves one religious family and joins another.

In the baptismal vow there is pictured not only a new personal relationship with Christ; there is also a new sociology, a new community of people who become family. When Paul says in I Cor. 10:2: "Israel was baptized into Moses . . ." he meant more than Israelites having a personal relationship with the man, Moses. He meant they had become incorporated members of the Israelite community. As Israel was baptized into a new community through Moses, so we have been baptized into a new "covenant community" in Jesus Christ. While that has universal Church implications, the expression of the universal Church is always most visible in the local congregation.

Baptism is an expression of a personal relationship, but it is far more. Michael Green calls baptism a many-splendored thing. He says that baptism speaks of new birth, as Nicodemus heard about it (John 3:5). Baptism speaks of washing " . . . but you were washed" (I Cor. 6:11). Baptism, however, is more than washing. It is

the symbol of justification. "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death" (Rom. 6:3). Baptism is putting on a new suit of clothes. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Baptism is the way of escape from the dangers of the flood. "And corresponding to that [Noah and his family delivered through the ark from the flood] baptism now saves you . . ." (I Peter 3:20) Baptism is like having fresh water poured over dry, parched ground. "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (I Cor. 12:13). Baptism means incorporation into Christ. "For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal. 3:27).¹²

MEMBERSHIP/LORD'S SUPPER

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In the Early Church it was unthinkable that a believer would go unbaptized and refrain from taking the Lord's Supper. The order in Acts 2:37 obviously was receiving the Word and repenting, baptism, and participating in the Lord's Supper. Consequently we could say that in the biblical order the sign of entry (baptism) preceded the sign of perpetuity (Lord's Supper). Or one could argue on a strictly logical basis: nature teaches that birth precedes relationship, conception comes before growth. So Christian baptism is the rite of entry (initiator) into the local church, while the Lord's Supper is the rite of union with Christ (participatory) and the church.

One difficulty, however, faces us on this issue. There is no firm evidence that any NT converts were children. Those redeemed were adults, were immediately baptized and apparently partook of the Lord's Supper at their first meeting with the church. Our situation is different. Our children are converted at a young age, we ask them to wait until their teens for baptism, and then we ask: "may the believing but unbaptized children participate in communion?"

It is to be admitted that the NT remains virtually silent on this matter. There is

a very logical argument that we should not hinder the unbaptized from receiving the Lord's Supper because we might rob them of nurture opportunities coming from the observance. If it is to be granted that the Lord's Supper (as some feel about baptism) is strictly a personal act signifying an experience of forgiveness in Christ, then all saved persons, regardless of membership, should participate.

If you want to carry out the covenant idea of the OT, you could say that a child born into a believing home, especially if he/she has been saved, has the right to celebrate the redemption in Christ even when too young to understand fully what is transpiring. If you suggest that a child does not understand enough to take the Supper worthily, you can also ask: "how mature does any believer need to be before he is eligible to participate worthily?"

We should not forget that, as in baptism, so in the Lord's Supper there is more than one purpose. It is more than an observance of personal fellowship with Christ. The NT teaches that fellowship with God is never separated from fellowship with God's people. John said: "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (I Jn. 1:3).

One of the biblical purposes of the Lord's Supper is to portray and cultivate the oneness of believers. This becomes obvious in the Corinthians passage where discord and rivalry prevailed instead of unity (I Cor. 11). Paul reminded them of their sin---a sin so serious that apparently some members had even died (I Cor. 11:29-30). The Corinthians violated spiritual unity at the very observance where it was to be nurtured.

Early Anabaptists understood that partaking amidst disunity and discord was tantamount to eating and drinking unworthily. Those sixteenth century believers referred to the first century in saying that the Supper was not simply a re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice. The memorial aspect was not lacking but they saw the

Supper as a way of expressing the reality of the new community of love and peace and truth. Andreas Ehrenpreis wrote:

"The grains had to be brought together into one flour and one loaf. Not one of them could preserve itself as it was, or keep what it had. Every grain has given itself and its whole strength into the bread. In the same way the grape. The grapes must be pressed for the wine. Every grape must give all its strength and all its juice into the uniform wine. In it no grape can keep anything for itself. Only in this way does wine come into being."

It must have been something of this that was in Paul's mind when he wrote about the Supper and unity: "is not the bread which we break a sharing of the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread (loaf)" (I Cor. 10:16-17). The question that remains then is: can that sense of oneness, for which the Supper is at least partially created, come to fruition without the participants "belonging" to one another? That belongingness may well come through the baptismal pledge.

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Another consideration in asking whether or not unbaptized believers can participate in the Lord's Supper has to do with the Supper's role in church discipline. It is clear that in the Early Church one of the disciplinary strategies with erring members was disqualification from the Lord's Supper. When the sinning stepson in I Corinthians 5 was disciplined for incest he was "delivered over to Satan" and prevented from receiving the Lord's Supper. Apparently that was no unusual penalty since Paul in the same passage suggests that other sinning Christians (covetous, idolators, drunkards, revilers, swindlers) should be treated similarly---"not even to eat with such a one" (I Cor. 5:11). The writer assumes this means eating at the Lord's table.

If we suggest that those not yet having committed themselves to the "body" through membership should participate in the Lord's Supper, we remove the possibility of this facet of NT discipline. The Reformation, in a real sense, was the rediscovery of the discipline of the Lord's Supper in the life of the Church. You

cannot consistently practice discipline with people who have not become part of the discipling community.

Perhaps a word is in order about guests who are in our services when the Lord's Supper is served, but who are believers baptized as infants. Our conference has said (1957) that we do not adhere to the position of exclusive communion, and that, therefore, those truly born again may be invited to receive the elements of the Lord's Supper. There is an interesting last paragraph in that 1957 resolution that indicates an awareness of the "covenant community" idea even with respect to visitors:

*Walter
guest*

"Should believers of other churches wish regularly to partake with us of the Lord's Supper, we would allow them to do so, provided their testimony satisfies the church concerning their spiritual life; that they assure us that they will not receive the communion with manifestly unsaved people; and that they submit themselves to the discipline of our church, as well as observe our principles of church membership."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

It should be clear that the writer believes baptism and church membership belong together. That conviction comes out of the biblical passages cited together with the understanding gained by our Anabaptist forefathers who sought to retrieve the sense of first century belief and practice. While preferring the practice of baptized believers only participating in the Lord's Supper, the writer is less adamant at this point. The biblical evidence is sufficient for the writer. For others it may appear lacking.

In light of the foregoing discussion the following suggestions are made for consideration by BORAC, the participants in this Study Conference, and the entire brotherhood:

1. We should update our studies and instructions in the churches on the theology of the church that is basic to the questions raised above.
2. We should state more carefully in the Confession of Faith that baptism also means entering a covenanting community. To discover that many of

us have not been aware of this can be understood when we see how lacking the explanation is in Article IX.

3. We should re-examine the biblical references in the Confession of Faith so that we do not use passages that do not apply to the subject.
4. We should intensify our programs of bringing people into the membership of the church. Our people often do not know the implications of their role in the church because we have not systematically taught them.
5. We might do well to come to a uniform practice with respect to participation in communion even if we are not all convinced there is ample biblical evidence for that stance. All societies have their domestic arrangements for those wishing to join them, and churches are no exception. We could admit that the NT evidence is lacking or unconvincing, but agree for the sake of unity, to follow a certain pattern. In our homes and families we have certain practices that are agreed upon, not because they are necessarily the only right way, but because we have covenanted to live that way. The Mennonite Brethren Church is a family. We can agree to abide by certain practices if and when the Bible is not clear. If that practice is contrary to our own preference, the only legitimate objection would then be if the practice were clearly unbiblical.

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At the request of the Board of Reference and Counsel
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FOOTNOTES/REFERENCES

¹ Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1976 Edition, p. 17.

² Ibid., p. 18.

³ Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1921, p. 54.

⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, (personal correspondence, November 27, 1964)

⁵ Bruce Shelly, (personal correspondence, November 10, 1964)

⁶ Roland Marsch, "Baptism and Communion, A Study Paper," 1987, p. 8.

⁷ John Richard Martin, "Discipling for Discipleship: A Handbook on Discipleship and Discipling/With An Anabaptist Perspective" (a dissertation presented to the faculty of Lancaster Theological Seminary), 1983, p. 33.

⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁰ Roland Marsch, op. cit., p. 9.

¹¹ Summary of H. P. Nickel's BSSC sponsored paper, "The Relationship of Conversion to Baptism", p. 2. Distributed to Mennonite Brethren pastors in Canada in February, 1986, by Rudy Bartel in behalf of BSSC.

¹² Michael Green, Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power, IVF 1987, pp. 46-48.

¹³ Wally Kroeker, a research paper "The Element of Unity in the Anabaptist Practice of the Lord's Supper," MBBS, 1983, p. 12.

¹⁴ Yearbook, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1957, p. 109.