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Critique of 'Baptism and membership...an alternative perspective'

by Vidya J. Narimalla

I just returned from a trip to India. During my brief visit there I wanted to hear some thoughts on this question of baptism and church membership from a few people in the second largest Mennonite Brethren church conference in our M.B. world. They couldn't figure out what all the fuss is about. Then, one of the persons commented that he finds it interesting that while the church numbers in the West continues to decline, there is always some new issue that seems to be pulling the church in different directions. He simply couldn't understand why people want to get baptized and not be a part of the church family through membership.

I came back to Canada and I kept thinking about my response to this question of baptism and church membership. Then in the last three months, I had the occasion to visit a bowling alley, a rock-climbing place, and a couple of airports. There was one common thread that ran through all these establishments – they had some rules and regulations. I never questioned any of them, especially at the airports. We continue to frequent many public and private establishments and quietly follow their guidelines. That's the uniqueness of their organization. And yet, when it comes to church and commitment we seem to struggle in embracing the concept of community and accountability. It also puzzles me that we are struggling with this issue as a church with Anabaptist roots which places such premium on the concept of community and "priesthood of all believers."

Christians are a minority in this world – a very small minority. Most are found in Bible-believing churches. A few are scattered in churches that are not committed to the biblical faith. There are others, however, and a significant number in our day, who are not members of any church. Without that commitment there is a freedom to drift from church to church. Better yet, one can just stay home and listen to the endless parade of television evangelists. Who needs this rigid commitment and rules and accountability anyway? Who needs the pressures of responsibilities in a church, and the conflicts that all too often characterize the church of Jesus Christ? Gerhard Lohfink, in his book, *Jesus and Community*, wonders, "Is not a serious illness of the present church – the fact that many Christian communities are hardly recognizable as communities and that Christians have increasingly accommodated themselves to the rest of society – being canonized with the aid of an appropriate ecclesiology?" (64).

In the nine years that I have been a pastor of a Mennonite Brethren church, first as a church planter in Toronto, now at Kitchener Mennonite Brethren, I observed two things. First, I had the privilege of baptizing many people, mostly from non-Christian, non-M.B. backgrounds. I can say that none wondered about the baptism and church membership connection. Secondly, I sensed that they viewed membership as a privilege and that they were becoming an integral part of the visible Christian community through baptism. At KMB, baptism and church membership are very much connected and even as we are preparing for ten baptisms on Easter Sunday, none have questioned this connection.

I have no difficulty in accepting the proposition that salvation is an individual matter between God and the person in question. I also believe that this realization brings the new believer into a community – the church. In the book of Acts, converts were not just added to the Lord, but also to the congregation of believers (**Acts 2:41, 47**). In the beginning there may not have been a formal membership process, but there was certainly a body of believers to which people were added, and from which they could be removed (**1 Corinthians 5:13**). As church organization developed, we see an indication of lists – of widows for example (**1 Timothy 5:9**), so it is a reasonable assumption that there would also be a list of church members. There are references to people being chosen or appointed by churches for specific responsibilities (e.g. **Acts 6:3, 2 Corinthians 8:19**).

There are other reasons why Christians should be firmly committed to a local church. One is the need to serve. Every believer is given talents – gifts they can use for the Lord. In **1 Corinthians 12**, Paul likens the church to a body. A body has various parts or members, each of which contributes to the efficient functioning of the body. Some parts, like an eye or a hand, are more prominent in their activities; the body is greatly handicapped without them. But every member is important, and a lack of any part will be a drawback. So in the church, we all have spiritual gifts (verse 7). Some are given more prominence, but more accountability as well with harsher judgment for failures. However, all are necessary for the body to express itself in purpose and unity.

Another reason for local church commitment is the need we have of the ministry of other believers. We need the encouragement of other Christians, and they need our encouragement. We can build each other up in the faith. There is also at times the need for warning and rebuke. The extreme application of this is in church discipline. In this, we as the Mennonite Brethren have come a long way, and I believe in the right direction, but let's not throw the baby and the bathtub with the bathwater. We need people to warn us, to admonish us in love; and there may be those who need us to help them along in their understanding of what it means to be a part of the church. Christians need each other, and that need can only be fully met through a definite commitment to a local church.

Before I proceed, let me present the current position of our Mennonite

Brethren Church as articulated in the Confession of Faith:

“Baptism is for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of the local church. 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”

Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (15).

1. Conversion

In **Acts 2**, Peter addressed the Jews on the day of Pentecost and preached Christ to them. Their hearts were pierced and they asked what they should do. Peter's first directive was, 'Repent!' (verse 38). Repentance was a vital ingredient of the gospel message preached by Jesus and the apostles (**Mark 1:4,15, 6:12**). Repentance means simply a change of mind, but in connection with the gospel, it is a change of mind and behaviour about sin. Paul preached that we should 'turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ' (**Acts 20:21**).

Conversion then, is repentance plus faith, and conversion is essential for a person to join a local church. Of course, human judgment is always fallible. There may be those who join a church without experiencing true conversion, but a reasonable effort should be made to ensure that candidates give evidence of conversion before they are accepted as members.

2. Baptism

The second directive Peter gave to those who asked what they must do, was, 'Be baptized' (**Acts 2:38**). In the early church, baptism was closely associated with salvation. Note the following passages in Acts: **2:41, 8:12,13, 36-38, 9:18, 10:47,48, 16:14,15, 31-33, 18:8**. In all these incidents, it is clear that conversion had taken place before baptism. It was taken for granted that one who professed faith in Christ would be baptized following that profession. Baptism then became a public testimony to that change and identification with the people of God. We read that those who received Peter's message of Christ were baptized and were 'added to their number' (**Acts 2:41**). There seems to be a link between baptism and addition to the local church. By baptism a convert not only testifies to the forgiveness of sins and union with Christ, but also declares solidarity with the people of God. There may be exceptions to this. The Ethiopian eunuch did not join any church when he was baptized (**Acts 8:39**). One can even argue that we don't even need baptism to receive salvation. The thief on the cross didn't have the opportunity for baptism and yet the assuring words of Jesus leave us with no doubts of the robber's salvation. Many of us have heard stories of deathbed conversions. While the issue is not to get bogged down in technicalities, the question of baptism and church membership is one of obedience having understood the need for both. There would have to be unusual circumstances not to expect a person being baptized to join the local church in association with which he or

she was baptized. The example cited from **Acts 2:41–42** is a fairly clear example of the pattern of the New Testament church in Acts:

“Those who accepted his message were baptized and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...” It is clear that only those who accepted the message of the gospel and were baptized were added to the company of the church and admitted to its privileges.

3. Church membership

James H. Waltner, in his book entitled, *This We Believe*, says that Christian fellowship is more than having a good time and feeling good about our association with the church. He writes, “Believers in Christ do not decide to have *fellowship*. They are a community. And this Christian community is created and sustained by the awareness of a common body of beliefs, a common life in Christ, a common commitment to Him in faith and obedience, and a common expression of Christian love. *Koinonia* comes about when we become responsible to each other and for each other” (123–124). Church membership means commitment. The believer, having joined the church, should be more than a statistic. He or she is a vital part of the body of Christ: a member of a believing community. There is commitment to the Lord, but also to fellow-believers in the Lord. In many parts of the world where Christians are persecuted, the two things that can incriminate a believer are baptism and church membership. Baptism and church membership are times of celebration, a visible and radical change in one’s life if you are a Hindu or a Muslim, and it is also a time to prepare for whatever persecution that may come next. Christians are identified in many countries through their baptism and church membership.

Harry Huebner writes in his article entitled, “Christology: Discipleship and Ethics,” “Our North American society teaches us daily that we are to take charge of our lives, be strong, independent, know what it is that we want to achieve and then go achieve it. Many non-Christians around us tell us that they look in vain for real differences between us and them. The world outside of this continent, whether Christian or not, sees our church as being in complicity with the imperialistic and self-seeking goals of our governments. Discipleship ethics challenges this” (47). I believe that a strong commitment and identification with the church of Jesus Christ allows for the world to view us as a distinct people – in the world, but not of the world. Jesus was clear in His warnings that the world will hate us because of who we are in Him. He also said that we are supposed to be the salt and light of the earth and losing either of the qualities of saltiness or light would render us useless to the world.

A few other thoughts on the need for the connection between baptism and church membership:

A. Unity

Everyone agrees that there is an essential unity among Christians. We are 'All one in Christ Jesus' (**Galatians 3:28**). But Satan will work hard to disrupt that unity, so we must 'make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace' (**Ephesians 4:3**). Unity is important because a loving, united fellowship is a powerful witness to the gospel. Jesus said that everyone would know that we are His disciples if we love one another (**John 13:35**). This unity has been a major reason for the success of our mission overseas in the last century. Joining a church is similar to baptism. It's a tangible symbol of a spiritual reality. Our baptism identifies us with Christ. Church membership identifies us with the Christian family and the church.

B. Fellowship

Those converted under the guidance of the apostles, "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (**Acts 2:42**). Those activities meant time spent together. The fellowship of believers had a high priority in their lives. If we want to grow spiritually, we must avail ourselves of those means of grace – the teaching of the Word of God, breaking of bread (the Lord's Table) and corporate prayer. As a pastor, I have sensed more openness and accountability on the part of committed church members as opposed to believers who attend the church services without becoming members.

C. Financial support

Commitment to a church means commitment to its vision and mission, and that includes finances. Not everyone can contribute equally. The nice thing about giving is that the actual amount is not important. The widow's mite is seen by the Lord as a greater gift than the large donations of the wealthy (**Mark 12:41–44**). The amount that anyone gives is a matter between them and the Lord, but there are some biblical guidelines. The Jews were required to give a tithe (a tenth) of their income. No such rule is binding on New Covenant believers, but we do have the principle of regular, proportionate giving:

D. Holiness as a public witness

Our holy living as Christians is an area where our commitment to the church is demonstrated. Paul wrote: 'It is God's will that you should be holy' (**1 Thessalonians 4:3**). Holiness has to do primarily with the Christian's relationship with the Lord, but it also affects the church. Every member is a representative of that church. His or her behaviour in the eyes of the world will either enhance or spoil the image of that church. We have seen ample examples to support both. Conduct inconsistent with the gospel will dishonour the Lord, but it will also discredit the church to which the person is attached. On the other hand, a godly believer who is known to belong to a particular church will bring credit to that church. It is another application of the truth of the unity of the body. The behaviour of one part affects the whole body (**1 Corinthians 12:26**). Most non-Christians, particularly people of a different faith persuasion (Hindus and Muslims) expect Christians to belong to a church as members. Sometimes I wonder if the problem with church membership is coming from

within the church because of some negative experiences people might have experienced.

E. Membership/covenant is necessary for order and organization:

Church membership is necessary for positions of church leadership. It's true that a name on a church membership roll makes for nothing in itself. But how seriously can we take a person who says he or she wants to be a part of the church but doesn't want to sign their name publicly or agrees with our understanding of Scripture, theology, purpose and mission?

Conclusion

While I can live with churches choosing to separate baptism and church membership or covenanting or whatever one wants to call the association, I do believe that this practice will over time weaken the strength of community within the Mennonite Brethren Church. We are already seeing many signs pointing toward this direction. I believe this separation will have a growing impact in the way our denomination does missions, both here and overseas. It will also contribute to a fragmented theology of our Anabaptist heritage and understanding of faith and practice.

In closing, I have to say that the arguments for the separation of baptism and church membership have not convinced me to think differently. Having traveled to different countries and having seen the persecution of the Christian believers, our need for a more unified church polity is more urgent than ever. In his study book for the Mennonite World Conference, *Witnessing to Christ in Today's World*, Helmut Harder suggests that to be a strong witness to Christ in today's world, "Believers need a strong supportive community of faith, not only to make an impact upon today's worldly temptations, but even to survive as believers in the midst of temptations. Such a community is not only a support for convinced Christians, but also serves as an attractive invitation for those who do not yet believe. In the face of today's widespread attitude of self-sufficiency and independence, it is not a simple matter to convince people that they need Christian community. Yet we are convinced of the essential importance of fellowship in Christ. Our testimony to this conviction must remain persistent and strong" (24–25).

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Vidya Narimalla is a pastor in Kitchner, Ont.

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