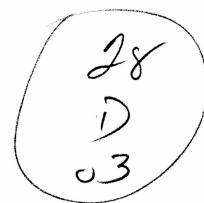


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## Critique of 'MB theology of baptism'

by **Ed Boschman**

This "critical response" is being written during the "48 Hours" declared by President Bush as a last plea to Saddam Hussein to choose peaceful disarmament. Whatever personal positions one might choose on the Iraq situation, I side solidly with my brother Lynn to engage in this discussion without the use of any verbal or attitudinal weapons. Further, I don't see it as battle. My personal journey on this matter shows its own signs of "pendulum is as pendulum does."

There can be little doubt believer's water baptism is owned and "administered by the local church." That it "includes incorporation into the local church" is not so self-evident. If that were indisputably so, one wonders whether the pre-baptized believer (older or younger) is definitively outside the church and salvation, and also whether a change in local churches should be baptismally accomplished for ongoing inclusion in the body of Christ. Additionally, it begs the questions of the eternal destiny of the de-churched (local institutional church dropouts), and/or informal affiliations of believers that do not have confessions of faith, policy and procedure manuals, or membership lists.

There is a hint of presupposition in the paper under review that a duly recorded and certified baptism provides the assurance that one's name is written in the Book of Life.

There are two fulcrums at which it appears we have divergence in our theological understanding and local practice. One revolves around the question of whether there is any real or plausible differentiation between the spiritual universal church and the local congregation, and the second attaches to the issue of whether baptism is really pretty close to salvatory.

To conclude that "baptism is incorporation" into *local churches* could be defensible for the culture and context of those 1st generation believers. But to say that the texts definitively teach that "incorporation into Christ" meant the same thing as committing to the local body, is to pull at the text too hard. It could, in fact, be argued that Paul's line of reasoning about gifts for the body in **1 Corinthians 12** suggests a more spiritual/universal view of the church.

To say "baptism is cleansing" must be understood symbolically or metaphorically. Water baptism cleanses nothing, but it represents cleansing. This is much different from accomplishing or effecting cleansing.

The way in which baptism is linked to unity must of necessity be first

spiritual, though it surely is intended to be practical in community.

The Scriptures are indeed our starting point. We do agree on that. In the light of that it was of interest to follow the review of the Esau article:

We practice Baptism because: 1) Jesus commanded it (**Matthew 28:18–20**); 2) Jesus modeled it (**Matthew 3:13–17**); 3) New Testament believers practiced it (**Acts 2:38**); and 4) it means incorporation (*no text*). I suppose that's why we're taking a break from theology on the run.

So, to say "All of us as Christians agree" that "baptism incorporates individuals into the body" is to have said too much. *Unless* we all mean and agree that spiritual baptism initiates us into the universal church. We *might* have unanimity on the fact that water baptism symbolizes the fact that our spiritual baptism unites us all as one in Christ.

The statement, "conversion/baptism is a single act which transforms outsiders to insiders" must mean conversion and simultaneous baptism of the Spirit, else it escapes me. If it means, choosing to commit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, *and* water baptism then, by the tack of the paper, one needs to add joining the (local) church to the definition. Is getting saved getting more complicated?

One of the rubber-meets-the-road questions we are needing to address is the desire of today's new Christian to be baptized, alongside a hesitation to commit to covenant membership in the local church before understanding it. There are numerous good reasons why people are leery (rampant cultism, un-integrous leadership, binding legalism, etc.). To tell them they are in violation of clearly commanded standards for believers when involved in occultism or cohabitation is one thing. To say that their caution or desire to learn more about the local church, and verify it's integrity, is flagrant disobedience to the Jesus Christ they have just found, and wish to publicly profess in symbolic baptism, is quite another. Helping new disciples to be converted to the church and the world following their conversion to Jesus (cf. O.Costas) is a preferable alternative.

That the universal church expresses itself in no other way than the local church is true. The plan of Jesus is that the local church is the hope of the world. It is not arguable that Jesus' ideal is for all His disciples to be covenantally united and "working His plan" in a local church. Sometimes, though, choosing Jesus and His spiritual family is easier and comes earlier for people than choosing the local church.

The paper states that "baptism into the body is non-negotiable." If the meaning is that spiritual baptism into the universal body is non-negotiable, we're good to go. If we're meaning that baptism (though not salvatory) represents an important heavy-with-meaning step of obedience to Christ, and precedes local membership, we're also good to go. If we suggest a narrower meaning, it feels a lot like a line in the sand.

It is suggested that we have urged our children to confess faith at an early age because we were unsure about their eternal security. Could not the motive to encourage our children to invite Jesus into their lives and desire intimacy with God be the reason to call them to a relationship with Jesus? Additionally, to help children experience the forgiveness and grace of a loving heavenly Father, corroborated by the modeling of their parents, sets up a good chance at a spiritually, emotionally, healthy future for them.

On the matter of the age of baptism and Spirit baptism, the paper offers little help. Seems we'll all go back to theology on the run sooner rather than later.

## Some questions about the proposal:

- How can two spiritual journeys be “virtually identical” while including a 15-year gap (infant–age 15) in water baptism?
- Is not baptism biblically defined as a self-chosen public sign of a personal decision?
- Does **Acts 19** teach that rebaptism could be a good thing?
- Is the paper suggesting that Conrad Grebel and his friends were wrong?
- Are we not, by making an exception in one detail, radically adjusting both our practical theology and the fundamentals of Anabaptism?
- Do we really think this practice would bring greater unity in the body?

## Additional observation

Of the 23 references to water baptism in Acts, only one (**Acts 2:41**), connects water baptism and the local church.

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