

Baptism & Belonging

by R. Donald Shafer

When a person becomes a believer in Jesus Christ as Lord, then that person is beginning a whole new life. Becoming a disciple of Christ is both a personal experience and a corporate commitment. Therefore, the celebration of such a significant event and its meaning for life is important.

Historically, water baptism has been the initiation ritual and practice for nearly all Christians. It was a highlight at the beginning of Christ's ministry and an emphasis in His final words to the disciples before His ascension (Matthew 3:6, 28:19).

The observance of baptism has been expressed differently among Christian groups. They use different modes of baptism, such as sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. But the major difference among Christians concerning baptism is whether it is administered at infancy or when a person becomes a believer.

The Brethren in Christ are among those who adhere to believer's baptism as an outward sign of the inner change of heart and re-direction of life. The accepted mode for The Brethren in Christ Church is a forward kneeling immersion as a sign of humble obedience. As Christ bowed his head in death, so a believer kneels or bows in submission to God. The three immersions are done in honor of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Brethren in Christ are heirs of the Anabaptists, who understood that the New Testament teaches baptism for believers

(Matthew 3:13-17, Acts 2:38-41, Romans 6:4). Along with other groups, the Brethren in Christ affirm belief in Jesus as Lord as a prerequisite to baptism.

Baptism is offered to persons who obey Christ as responsible believers. Thus, rather than baptizing infants, the Brethren in Christ provide a ceremony of dedication for small children, as suggested by biblical examples (1 Samuel 1:11, 24-28; Mark 10:13-14).

The Brethren in Christ understand that baptism in and of itself has no power. Rather, it is a symbol of the repentance the believer has already made. It is a celebration of the forgiveness of God. We turn to the Bible for our understanding of the rite rather than to church authority or tradition. The Book of Acts clearly relates believing and baptism. The conversion of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-13), Peter's account of the Gentile converts (Acts 11:16-17), the Philippian jailor's salvation (Acts 16:33-34), the belief of Crispus, the synagogue ruler (Acts 18:8), and Paul's words to the Ephesians (Acts 19:4-5), all have one thing in common. These events tie believing and baptism together. That people "believed and were baptized" was the order of the early church. It is clear that baptism was a symbolic rite signifying entrance into the Christian way of life.

Baptism is a sign of belonging to the new Kingdom. The Brethren in Christ perceive believing followed by baptism as essential to becoming a member of Christ's body. For us, the body of Christ is a visible group of

people. The church is not primarily a place, a list of doctrines or beliefs, or even an organization. Rather it is a particular group of persons who are members together in Christ. It is the local congregation.

In writing on the patterns of church life, Norman Bert describes baptism and belonging in the early days of the Brethren in Christ Church:

"Baptism was the door through which the new convert entered the church and took the first step on the road of discipleship and brotherhood. Baptism occurred like this: a meeting would be called because some converts had applied for baptism.

"In this meeting, the Brethren would listen as the applicants testified to their experience of the new birth and expressed their acceptance of the Bible doctrines as practiced by the Brethren in Christ. After the testimonies, the assembled Brethren accepted or rejected each applicant. Those who were accepted were presently baptized in a nearby stream or lake.

"They regarded baptism as the first act of Christian obedience on the part of the new believer after his conversion.... Baptism was a brotherhood affair-all the brethren participated in accepting this new convert as one of themselves."1

Both the early church and the founders of the Brethren in Christ affirmed baptism as a sign of belief in Christ and belonging to his body. Baptism was the outward sign that a person not only believed in Jesus, but was also entering into a covenant relationship with responsibility to the worldwide Christian church. It was a symbol of incorporation into the church. This is consistent with the understanding that Christ's body is a visible group of believers. Baptism is a sign of one's becoming a believer in the church universal, and the church universal is composed of congregations. The Christian is committed

to and participates in a local expression of Christ's body.

Thus, baptism is the sign of a new life which is personal but is not in isolation. It needs to be followed by one's commitment to a given local church. A believer is baptized in the midst of a specific group. At the same time a believer is baptized into the family of God, and that is expressed visibly by a covenant or membership in a local church.

The Brethren in Christ understand membership as a covenant. Belonging to Christ's body is somewhat like marriage. It takes real commitment and work for the covenant to have lasting meaning. Membership is a covenant that is entered into with intention and love. While baptism and membership are not synonymous, they are closely related.

Each believer makes his or her covenant with a given local church. This commitment is usually called membership. Such a covenant should occur as near to the time of baptism as practical. Our covenant with a given local congregation is dependent upon a continued relationship. Upon relocating, a person's membership is affirmed with the new congregation. Those who wish to covenant with the Brethren in Christ and who have been previously baptized as believers are not required to be rebaptized.

If believers understand the commitment they are making in baptism, this will become evident in their love and care of other members of Christ's family. To belong to Christ's church is to take an active part in relating to and building up the body of believers.

For the Brethren in Christ, baptism is the sign that a believer is publicly beginning the new life and is becoming a responsible member of a congregation and denomination. Believer's baptism is indeed a significant event, a deliberate act based on personal belief in

Jesus as Lord. It is also the symbol of a new life and belonging to a new family. It is a commitment to a lifelong journey with fellow believers, an act of obedience to follow the Lord and love His people.

I. Norman Bert, Adventure in Discipleship