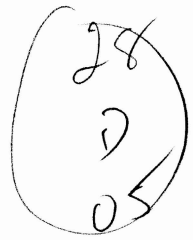


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Affirmation of 'Baptism among the Early Christians'

by **Lorraine Dick**

Given the length of this paper, I will confine my comments to the Biblical portion of his paper. The pre-church and early church perspective that Isaac takes the time to develop, adds to the understanding of the scriptural interpretation and I thank him for that.

Baptism in the New Testament (NT) is connected with salvation. Salvation comes upon repentance of an ungodly way of living, receipt of remission for sins and turning to follow Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Whether it was John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostles, or one of the missionaries, the message was the same: "Repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (**Acts 2:38**). Baptism signalled a new way of living.

Isaak sites 125 different references to baptism and its cognates, organizing them into nine categories for discussion.

The first of these is the baptism of John the Baptist. One of the strongest words John the Baptist used in his preaching was 'repent'. Repentance was a willingness to receive the forgiveness and remission of sins. To signify that this event had taken place, a person submitted to baptism, a washing. To repent and change one's ways was a call to live differently to prepare for what was to come. It was the Kingdom of Heaven that John the Baptist was looking forward to (**Matthew 3:2**), along with the One who would usher it in. Many were attracted to listen to this 'repentance preacher'. They came from all walks of life – tax collectors, soldiers, religious leaders, and common people. Response to the message was mixed. Some believed and some continued in their sceptical ways. To answer the question of who he was, the Baptist quotes the Old Testament (OT) when he declared himself the voice in the wilderness calling for preparation for the One to come – "Make straight the way for the Lord" (**John 1:23**).

Before John, as Isaak indicates, there were washings that gave witness to purification, commitment and inclusion. John the Baptist had a message of purification – repent; a message of commitment – produce fruit in keeping with repentance; and message of inclusion – join the kingdom of heaven. But his baptism pointed to who was to come as he also gave this message: "... one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you..." (**Luke 3:16**).

As John's ministry declined and Jesus' ministry increased (**John 4:1**), the truth of John's statements about baptism began to be seen. John had always said that he would baptize with water, but the One to follow would baptize with the Spirit and with fire (**Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 33**).

The Spirit and Fire baptism came on a group of believers following Jesus' return to heaven. On the day of Pentecost, as they were together in one place, the Spirit came to them and evidenced this through flames of fire and through speaking in tongues. This visible and audible event had the people in the streets of Jerusalem utterly amazed. Peter took up the challenge to bring some order to this incident by explaining it through a sermon. When he was done, the crowds call out, "What shall we do?" "Change your hearts and lives and be baptized each one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ... Then those people who accepted what Peter said were baptized. About three thousand people were added to the number of believers that day" (**Acts 2:38, 41** NCV). I. Howard Marshall states, "... Christian baptism was an expression of faith and commitment to Jesus as Lord. Just as John's baptism had mediated the divine gift of forgiveness, symbolized in the act of washing, so too Christian baptism was regarded as a sign of forgiveness (**5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18; cf. 3:19**). But Christian baptism conveyed an additional blessing. John had said that he baptized (only) with water but the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit, and this gift accompanied water baptism performed by the church in the name of Jesus. The two gifts are closely linked, since it is the Spirit who accomplishes the inner cleansing of which baptism is the outward symbol" (81).

Isaak indicates that John's baptism was a call to purification (pg. 2) so that a person could be part of the Kingdom to come. John the Baptist was looking forward to an End-time repentance. The baptism of Jesus included repentance along with an intimate participation and association with Jesus (pg. 3) and belonging to a new reality called "the body" (pg. 4).

As the paper points out, it was assumed that the people of the NT understood what was meant by baptism (Summary pg. 5). When Jesus gives the Great Commission, his instructions are to make disciples and to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (**Matthew 28:19**). Throughout Jesus' ministry, it had been Jesus and his disciples' practice to baptize as well. They gave the message of the good news of the coming Kingdom and people believed. They were baptized (**John 3:22; 4:1**). As with John, these newly baptized people were counted as Jesus' followers (See **John 3:26**).

As the NT church grew, more and more people became associated with it through repentance (that is believing that Jesus was the Son of God) and through baptism (that is being willing to show the fruit of repentance and belief). It seems to me that the result of the message had a progression. In scripture believing and being baptized seem to happen on the same day (for example Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost (**Acts 2:38, 41**); or Philip's preaching in Samaria (**Acts 8:12**); or Paul and Silas preaching in Phillipi to

Lydia (**Acts 16:15**). In each of these instances the people heard the message and believed what was being taught. And they were baptized.

Whether people were John's disciples, followers of Jesus and his apostles, converts of Peter, John, Phillip or Paul and Silas, they came to know about the Kingdom of heaven and were willing to change their ways to identify with it. Identifying with the Kingdom happened in the NT with a group of like-minded people. It happened through baptism and through becoming part of the body of Christ.

Paul wrote about what the community of believers was like from his perspective. Early in his first letter to the Corinthian church, he talks about his own baptismal practices when he addresses the divisions that had appeared in the church. It seems as though the believers were quarrelling over which leader they were following. Their quarrelling had led to divisions within the church. Paul thinks about his practices and to his knowledge he had only baptized a few people. He writes that he is glad that he had not participated in more baptisms. We know that new converts were baptized. Fellow missionaries or local believers must have done their baptism. David Ewert has this explanation of what Paul is writing of: "... Paul allowed others to do the baptizing once the church had been established, lest he tie his converts to his own apron strings. The apostles were not pastors of churches; they were church planters, and so they left the pastoral functions to the leaders of the churches they had established" (11).

Paul becomes even more specific about the result of baptism when he continues to address the believers in Corinth and reminds them that their baptism brought them into the Body of Christ. He says: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were given the one Spirit to drink. Now the body is not made up of one part but of many" (**1 Corinthians 12:13, 14**). He has just addressed the issue of spiritual gifts and is trying to help the local church come to terms with the idea that everyone is gifted. The gifts are to be used for the common good of the body (**1 Corinthians 12:7**). Each person within the body was part of it, no matter what their social standing, their gender or their abilities – all belonged. The Spirit of God was the witness that they were part of the body and their baptism signified the person's desire to commit to following Jesus Christ.

Becoming part of the body is further clarified through the letters that were written to the young church plants. In his paper called *Reclaiming the Solitary Christian*, Ron Toews discusses the relationship between Conversion/Baptism and coming into the Body of Christ. He suggests that it is the "one another" texts of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, I Thessalonians and Hebrews that help us see this correlation. "This 'one another' stuff only happens as Christians live in interacting community. Presumably only in the context of 'seven-day-a-week' community can our inter-relatedness be nurtured. That's an uphill road these days. Values, priorities, culture, societal norms – all seem to mitigate against community. Yet the Bible's 'one another' imperative is for us. In fact, it seems safe to say that keeping covenant with the local 'one another' community

of faith is one of *the tangible ways* the believer demonstrates the covenant she or he has with God.” (6)

Conclusion

In working through the question before us, as I read and thought about the material for this Study Conference, I was very quickly reminded that I read scripture through my western 21st century tinted glasses. I want scripture to fit my mold of how things have been done, or how they ought to be done. It's easy to proof text for my convenience.

I trust that as we allow the questions of this paper to work in our minds and discussions, that we will be able to rethink what it means to be a member of a Mennonite Brethren Church. Will we in fact be able to see that baptism is more than just a matter of 'me and Jesus'? Yes, baptism is a witness of what has taken place personally, but it is also an initiation of coming into the larger community.

Baptismal services in our church are great times of celebration. But perhaps we celebrate for the wrong reason. We celebrate salvation and the desire to continue with Christ. We welcome those being baptized into the church and then what? Older members speak of accountability that was real – when someone came to them and asked questions of the heart. I know that at points we have been less than caring or loving to church members when we have summarily dismissed them from our rosters with rather self-righteous attitudes. But what does an accountable church membership mean? And can we be accountable when we do not belong? It takes hard work to be the church of Jesus Christ. We are not called to the easy road, but to the way of sacrifice and self-denial. What does that mean in the context of baptism and church membership?

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Lorraine Dick is Associate Pastor of Christian Education at South Langley MB Church, Langley, BC.

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