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

by **Bruce Enns**

Introduction to my perspective

Everyone has a unique window on the world and I think it is important for me to declare "my window" right up front. I am a Pastor of College and Career ministries, also overseeing the two pastoral staff in the areas of Jr. High and Sr. High youth. I have been a pastor now for three years and do not consider myself a theologian but a practitioner, at times celebrating great victories in the lives of people, and at times stumbling around in the confusing context of meshing a passionate theology into the messy, non-linear, non-systematic perspectives of young adults. Prior to this, my career has involved athletics and coaching at the Bible College level. In these contexts, I have worked with the "twenty-something" crowd for over 15 years, trying to connect faith to everyday life, watching what happens as young adults encounter Jesus Christ in new ways. In order to give a more accurate description for young adults, a survey was administered to reveal some of their unique perspective directly on this topic. The results of which will be explained later in the paper.

My objective

My objective is to affirm aspects of David Falk's descriptive paper on The Meeting Place's (TMP's) practice and theology as I look at this topic from "my window", which includes perspectives of young adults, while submitting to scripture as the ultimate authority in this matter.

What I assume in this paper

I assume that baptism is a command of God (**Matthew 28:19**) and an exciting step of obedience for the believer. It is the most significant faith marker in the spiritual journey of one choosing to be a disciple of Christ.

I assume that Scripture invites us first and foremost to join God, not the church and that in doing so we become a child of God (**John 1:12**). That being said, I also assume that it is impossible to become a child of God without joining God's family and that we inherently are part of a significant community because of whose we are. We cannot be alone in God's family. So much of Scripture speaks to being in community. You cannot experience the 'one anothers' without community, you cannot discern and use your spiritual gifts without community, and so much of what we understand of God's love is experienced in community.

However, I assume that many of the practices and expectations surrounding membership are simply expressions of that community derived from chosen cultural practices, not biblical mandates. There are many expressions and practices of membership that could fit from a Biblical perspective.

I assume that the local church is instituted by Christ (is the 'bride of Christ'), and the primary vehicle for expressing the Kingdom of God on earth, making it a valued treasure. Or as Bill Hybels states, 'that the local church is the hope of the world because it holds the only true message of hope – Jesus Christ' (2002). Further, I understand that each local church is to be a unique expression of the gospel in the context in which it is placed.

What I affirm

David Falk has written a descriptive paper on the current practices of TMP in Winnipeg, along with considerable parallel descriptions from SunWest Christian Fellowship in Calgary. There is much in this paper that I could respond to, however, my task is to affirm components of the paper and so I will limit my discussion to three primary areas as they relate to baptism and membership from the perspective of young adults. The following are a summary of what I affirm within this paper with subsequent sections giving explanations on each one.

- Recognizing and celebrating a life of faith in Christ as a journey
- Removing barriers, but increasing accountability and discipleship
- Raising the bar from "membership" to covenant community

A survey of young adults

Before I go into a description of each of these areas of affirmation, I need to give some further context for my comments from the unique perspective of the young adults with whom I associate. Even though many of these people have grown up in the church, this is a group that is not afraid to ask the hard questions. Because of this, I feel that their perspective is helpful in representing a larger part of our culture that has not grown up in the church, but whose thoughts may not otherwise be reflected in these discussions.

In preparation for this paper, a survey was recently administered to a group of young adults primarily in the "twenty-something" years of life. This is an eclectic group of Christians from a wide variety of different churches and denominations. Of the 44 willing respondents to the survey exactly half indicated that they were members of a local church (however their church defined membership) and half were not members. There were then a number of questions relating to the topic of baptism and membership, asking for an indication of importance to them on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being the lowest level of importance and 5 indicating a very high level of importance.

When asked the question, "how important is baptism to you?" 31 of the 44 respondents indicated #5, and 95% of respondents indicated either #4 or #5 in

terms of level of importance. Only 44% of respondents indicated a similar high importance (answering #4 or #5) of “church membership”. When asked, “how important is an Acts 2 type community in your life?” 82% indicated one of the top two levels of importance (#4 or #5). The most profound response on the survey was to the question, “would you welcome more or less accountability in your life”. Fully 100% of respondents indicated that they would like more accountability. Lastly, 79% of respondents stated that there should be some symbolic “rite of passage”, or outward commitment or covenant to indicate a person’s commitment to the local church.

Recognizing and celebrating a life of faith in Christ as a journey

The context of this survey was our Monday Night Contact, which is a College and Career ministry that has developed over the years to include young adults from across the city, at times representing over 50 different congregations (indicated from previous surveys) in one evening.

The key verse for Contact Ministries is **Philippians 3:12–16** – recognizing that while we are not yet perfect, we need to forget what is behind and move forward to Christ, accountable to what we have already attained. In the context of this passage, I have often used the phrase that “God is more concerned about where you’re going, than where you’ve come from”. While most Christian adults have a testimony that tells of turning from an earlier life that was not submitted to God, for these young adults it is not something of a long ago past, but a current reality of successes and failures in their faith. While they tentatively look to the church for safe places to fall, it is a journey that is very raw and very real. Unfortunately, they have often fallen on sharp points of truth, rather than experiencing God’s grace and love in the midst of his people.

When a church is more concerned with conveying the ‘truth’ of the gospel, more than living the ‘goodness’ of the gospel it does nothing to draw young adults into a commitment with a local church. They are looking for a place to belong before they have all right beliefs figured out (McLaren, 2002, pg. 84).

We now live in an age in Canada where there is a whole generation growing up outside the church, with no concept of the message of the gospel. Last year, a young woman in her mid twenties walked into our church off the street, desperately looking for hope as she had wrestled with suicide the evening before. As we talked together, I soon realized that she had absolutely no concept of who God or Jesus Christ was, no idea of prayer, and no understanding of the Bible. Given her perspective and understanding, the fact that she came to a church looking for help was the most amazing part of all. It was obvious that God truly played a part in bringing her there.

While on the one hand, there is an increasing number of people with no understanding of the gospel, at the same time, there is an increasing search for spirituality coupled with an increasing distrust of the church. In their book, *Inside the Soul Of a New Generation*, Tim Celek and Deiter Zander, state that

this generation of young adults

are not resistant to spiritual matters. They're not resistant to the concept of God. But they are resistant to the Christian church. They view the church of being separatist, segregated, institutional, irrelevant, judgmental, holier-than-thou, controlling, authoritarian. And to some degree, they're right (p. 88).

They value God, yet are cynical of the church. They value baptism, yet not our current expression of membership.

Given the descriptions of our culture above, TMP's practice of separating membership from the significant step of baptism does allow for the gradual journey into the life of a church for those who are suspicious of the institution. This is a generation of young adults who value baptism as a significant faith marker in their journey with God, indicating their desire to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The idea of membership is often a stumbling block that they do not understand, and of which they are often suspicious because of their concerns with the institution of the church. In the midst of their journey, they are trying to sort out what is part of an authentic faith in Jesus Christ and what is simply a chosen practice of the institutional church. Too often they have seen church membership as a destination attained, rather than a context for continued spiritual growth of adults. Granted, many of their views are overly critical and unwarranted, spoken from their limited perspective – but sometimes their views are more accurate than we care to admit.

Removing barriers, but increasing accountability and discipleship

At first I was surprised by the unanimous response in the survey, desiring more accountability rather than less. But as I reflected on this, I realized that this response is consistent with countless conversations that I have had with young adults over the years.

This is a generation that is quite comfortable living in contradiction. While they want more accountability, they resist the commitment that is required in order for that to be possible. While they want mentors to disciple them and speak into their lives, they are instinctively suspicious of those who desire to do so. While they demand authenticity of their leaders (especially those in the church), they are often reserved and unwilling to be transparent themselves. While they resist commitment on many fronts, they are more involved and lead busier lives than many of their parents, all because of commitments they have made. But in the midst of all this is the clear desire for more accountability in their lives. The challenge for leaders in the church is how to provide it in this context of contradiction.

This young generation has experienced the impact of the broken and blended family, as well as the impact of double income parenting, unlike any other generation before it. And while these are simply the realities of our day, there is a desire for commitment, community, stability, and clear boundaries

that our young adults are looking for in the church. They want a church that offers radical accountability. The account of Ananias and Sapphira (**Acts 5**) tells of radical accountability and a call to authenticity and integrity that is not often expected in the church. This is the type of accountability and integrity that this generation desires and is longing for in the midst of a world of no absolutes, and continually shifting values.

I affirm the intentional accountability and discipling required at TMP in the process of the journey of faith. The four-week "Journey" course for those desiring to become baptized along with the TMP 101 orientation course, are intentional accountability and discipleship that relate to the areas of baptism and membership respectively. They also allow for more gradual entry points to the church, and also allow for easy exit points early in the process, if desired as well. Discipleship courses (or membership classes) should not equip people to fit into the church, but should equip the members for the benefit of the world (McLaren, 2001, p. 155).

Our expression of church membership is not perceived as a call to covenant community by our young adults. Membership does not equal commitment. They see it rather as a mechanical expression of entrance into an institution of which they have become skeptical and disappointed. And these are the young adults that have grown up in the church. By being coupled with the celebration of baptism, it becomes a confusing and mixed faith step. It seems strange to have the joy of submitting a life to Christ combined with the requirement to join an unfamiliar community. There is a clear desire for boundaries in their lives, but there is skepticism in how that will be lived out in the midst of the large structure of the church. This is especially an issue for young adults in larger churches that see many layers of leadership and multiple staff.

TMP's practice of more intentional involvement of small groups and the "priesthood of all believers" in the process of baptism elevates the significance of small group community and accountability that is longed for by this generation. It validates the uniqueness of their faith journey in this context of a community that can really care for them, partly by keeping them accountable. Rather than requiring people to fit into a prescribed mould, small group discipleship and accountability allows for discerning the unique journey of growth that the individual is on. This simply encourages the process.

This generation of young adults (and I believe most people in our culture) are looking for a 'life observed' that lives up to the Biblical principles coming out of the mouth of the individual. They're looking for transparency, vulnerability, and integrity. Unfortunately, many young adults today see the church as a castle surrounded by a moat, and the people inside only lowering the drawbridge as an entrance into membership – yet it's hard to walk in when you're skeptical and have no idea what's on the other side of those walls.

Raising the bar from "membership" to covenant community

TMP uses the word covenanting instead of membership as an intentional step in raising the bar on membership. Unfortunately a theology of the profound biblical term, “covenant” is not given, which would have been helpful.

A covenant, in the biblical sense, implies much more than a contract or simple agreement. A contract always has an end date, while a covenant is a permanent arrangement. Another difference is that a contract generally involves only one part of a person, such as a skill, while a covenant involves a person’s total being. The Old Testament contains many examples of covenants between people who related to each other as equals. For example, David and Jonathan entered into a covenant because of their love for each other. This agreement bound each of them to certain responsibilities (**1 Samuel 18:3**). The striking thing about God’s covenants with His people is that God is holy, all knowing, and all-powerful; but He consents to enter into covenants with people who are weak, sinful, and imperfect (Youngblood, 1997).

It seems that we have lost the “radical ness” of covenant community and replaced it with a tired word (membership) that gives a wrong focus and inaccurate impression if we are to be reaching our culture. The term membership in our broader culture is all about rights and privileges. When you sign up for a membership and receive a membership card, you also receive a description of things that you are now entitled to – privileges that you can now exercise. Free parking, lower rates for purchases, free use of facilities, and on and on the member privileges go. Unfortunately, these are images that sometimes emerge in the concept of church membership as well, rather than a covenant to sacrificial servanthood and commitment to each other.

This generation’s resistance to church membership does not have to do with the commitment to covenant community as much as it has to do with the perceived triteness that membership has come to represent. If membership truly was a commitment to a covenant community where each individual was “known, loved, rebuked, exhorted, disciplined, and equipped” (R. Paul Stevens, 1997, pg. 619) I truly believe that young adults would be joining in increasing number (or at least with less reluctance). We have minimized church membership to only include (in practice) the simplest of tasks within a covenantal relationship.

One young adult speaks from the perspective of his friends that stay away from the institutional church and describes it in this way,

the young adults who are critics would say that we are not asking for people to sacrifice their lives for the Church but more often it is for the sake of maintaining programs whether they are under the blessing of the Holy Spirit or not. Young people do not want to commit themselves to something that is not, to the uttermost, of God. In the end many of them commit to nothing and end up wandering in a religious desert by themselves, waiting for an oasis of true covenant community to appear. By the time such an oasis does appear they are often so jaded that they find it hard to believe that it

could be true (Mark Trew, personal communication, April 23, 2003).

This is a generation looking for that radical community – covenant community. Where people of the church are committed to each other so much that they learn how to work through conflict with the goal of reconciliation rather than proving who is right. Where in the midst of conflict, “no unwholesome talk will come out of their mouths except what is helpful for building others up, according to their needs, so that it may benefit those who listen” (**Ephesians 4:29**). Where, as Bill Hybels says, “the mark of community – true biblical unity – is not the absence of conflict but the presence of a reconciling spirit” (1993, pg. 14).

Galatians 2:9 tells us that the apostles accepted Barnabas and Paul as legitimate co-workers. They were accepted into the fellowship of the church. So much so, that later on in that chapter we read that Paul not only has the courage, but feels the responsibility to confront Peter for adding to the Gospel, teaching that Gentiles needed to observe Jewish customs. Peter walked as an apostle with Jesus, he preached the first great sermon at Pentecost in **Acts 2**, and yet in the context of true fellowship, Paul challenges this great pillar of the church. Their relationship obviously withstood this rebuke and it radically changed Peter’s ministry. That is the type of covenant community that is needed. As indicated in the survey, this generation longs for more accountability that is offered out of relationship and out of love. We need to raise the bar of what membership means in practical terms in the church.

Conclusion

I have intentionally focused my thoughts through the eyes of the young adults that impact my world of ministry. I believe that they give a unique perspective that is insightful for those trying to develop a healthy criticism of the church as well as those who are completely outside of the church in our culture. I pray that this perspective has been accurate and helpful to this dialogue.

Some of the challenges that are presented in this paper could be addressed in the context of linking baptism and membership, while others are most effectively addressed through separating the two as in the case of TMP. The central issue for me, however, is that we need to find more effective ways of addressing them within the church. Whatever the size of the church, whatever the term used (membership or covenanting), and whatever the timing of that is in relation to baptism, there must be a reality of the local faith community truly being “a family to belong to rather than a church to go to” (Henry Schorr, Center Street Church).

A final challenging comment from a young adult friend, gives his perception of why he sticks with the church while others around him become cynical and abandon it,

“I have stuck it out even though I have often felt the same way. I just have the view that the only way to change the system is to be a part

of it. Along the way I have discovered that it is not as bad off as people believe, but in the eyes of the beholder, perception is reality. I have come to realize that very little needs to change but that the little that could be changed would make a world of a difference" (Mark Trew, personal communication, April 23, 2003).

My prayer for the church, and for the group of churches committed to each other through the MB Conference, is that we would have the humility and intentionality of Philippians 2 as we work through these issues to a common end, "... agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one heart and purpose" (vs. 2).

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