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Baptism and membership...an alternative perspective

by **David Falk**

I grew up in a small rural community where I was baptized and joined the membership of my church at age 16. This was a significant and meaningful experience for me as it was both a celebration of a personal faith step and marked my formal entry into the "adult" community of my church.

I am now part of a church that has separated baptism and membership. During the last 12 years my wife and I have been part of The Meeting Place Church in Winnipeg. When we joined TMP it was a small tight-knit community of 30-40 individuals who had an incredible vision and passion for being a church for people who were not into church. This group was committed to relational evangelism, to being attentive to the needs of spiritual seekers and to removing as many barriers that may exist between the seeker's search and the good news of Jesus. This group has grown over the past years and has become a larger church with approximately 2000 people attending our 3 weekend services and hundreds connecting through our mid-week programs and our network of small groups. Meaningfully celebrating faith steps and having a sense of belonging and community are challenging to facilitate within this environment.

I have recently read Robert Webber's book *The Younger Evangelicals* and found his descriptions of the traditional, pragmatic and younger evangelicals quite illustrative. The Meeting Place was clearly founded as a pragmatic seeker orientated church. The issues that we have struggled with most have been created by both the pull back towards traditional evangelical thought and practice as well as the discontent and yearning for more of what Webber describes as the younger evangelical or postmodern movement.

Rather than presenting a positional paper advocating our practice or an academic paper which grounds our practice in the current literature I have chosen to write a descriptive paper that illustrates our practice and provides some narrative surrounding what we do and are struggling with. We do not have generic answers for others to follow. Rather we are seeking to be faithful to working out God's call on our community. Our understanding and approach to this issue is ours to work through. The strength of belonging to a broader community of churches is that we can work out these issues as a local body being informed and influenced by the diverse experiences of other congregations.

The Meeting Place has never had baptism connected with covenanting, opting rather to see them as distinct steps on the journey of faith. Since the method communicates the message I will first begin with a description of how we approach

the issue of baptism and then share some reflections on the issues surrounding the separation of Baptism and Covenanting at TMP.

Baptism at TMP

Baptism services are one of the noted highlights of the community of The Meeting Place. The step of baptism is highly valued and has been identified as both a personal milestone of the faith journey as well as a visible indicator of the health and vitality of our community.

The journey towards baptism at TMP inevitably begins with people who are growing in their relationship with God together with others within our community. While connecting at TMP they will hear about baptism as a potential “next step” through one of our gatherings or by people they know within a small group setting. They will be encouraged to pick up a baptism brochure from our community network centre (an info desk at the back of the auditorium).

The front cover of this brochure reads: “Baptism is one of the greatest celebration events in the life of a Christ follower and their surrounding faith community. Baptism is an expression of choosing to follow the will of God just as Jesus chose to surrender Himself to His Father’s will in His baptism. It is an outward symbol of inward grace given to us by God and received by faith, and is a response of gratitude to God for changing our life through His Son. When we decided to follow Jesus, we choose to obey His commands; baptism is a public step of obedience that is commanded in the Bible (**Matthew 28:19**)”

The brochure goes on to briefly answer several frequently asked questions such as:

- Why immersion?
- What about my baptism as an infant?
- Does Baptism ensure my salvation?
- What is parent/child dedication?
- Who will baptize me?
- At what age is it meaningful for a child to be baptized? and
- Do I have to speak in public?

People who are interested in baptism are pointed towards a four-week course entitled “Journey” that must be taken before being baptized. The “Journey” course is offered both as a general workshop session and also as a special package of materials that any leaders could work through within their small group if they had a group member that was considering baptism.

This seminar goes far beyond answering the questions listed above by having people focus on understanding their life of faith in Christ as a journey. During these sessions participants have the opportunity to share how they came to know Christ and to identify and reflect on the significance of key aspects and events of their faith journey. Time is spent acknowledging that we will all experience challenges and doubts and teaching is provided on the importance of affirming our commitment to a life of faith both through baptism and through communion.

The other theme emphasized during these sessions is the importance of Christian community. We need authentic relationships through which we can continue to learn to live as followers of Christ. The course concludes with participants interested in baptism writing out a summary of how they came to faith in Christ and working through the specific logistics of their baptism.

In addition to the "Journey" course there are several other significant features of baptism at TMP that I have come to appreciate.

A special time and place

Our baptism services are scheduled outside of our regular weekend service times. This enables people to have their community surround them at this special occasion. While all of our baptisms are "public" some communities within the church host their own baptism services such as this past summer's Student Ministries baptism service. We have found it important to set aside these times to enable family, friends, leaders and other interested individuals to attend as numeric growth causes "community" and "congregation" to no longer be synonymous. One of the highlights of our year is our summer baptism, which is held outside at a swimming beach in Bird's Hill Park.

Affirming the priesthood of all believers

Candidates may select who baptizes them so long as the individual is a person who has had a significant spiritual relationship with them in their journey to faith in Christ. This may be a friend, small group leader, alpha host, youth leader, and elder or pastoral staff member. At this past summer's baptism service there were 22 individuals baptized by 12 people. Opening the privilege of baptizing others to more than just pastoral staff and elders is a highly visible way of affirming our belief in the priesthood of all believers. It clearly demonstrates a high level of expectation and empowerment for all Christ-Followers in our church to be about the church's mission of leading others to become devoted followers of Christ (**Mathew 28:19**).

Affirming community

With both large numbers of people being baptized and a large crowd of witnesses it is easy to have the process of baptism to become driven by efficiency and to start feeling like a spectacle, or worse an assembly line. To mitigate this we have opted to invite those being baptized to have their community (family and friends) come forward with them, to stand by them in support as they share their story, and to stand at the edge of the tank/lake as they go into the water. Beyond just ensuring that they have a good view, this practice is a physical way of honoring community and demonstrating our value of living the journey of faith in relationship with others.

Removing unnecessary barriers

To be baptized, candidates must profess Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior in the presence of their community. This does not mean you have to be able to speak in front of hundreds of friendly strangers. We attempt to work through and resolve any barriers such as the fear of public speaking and physical ability issues so that the

individual can participate in this significant faith step. It is therefore not uncommon for someone to read their friend's faith story for them. While advocating immersion for its potent symbolism we have also altered the mode of baptism when it has been a legitimate barrier. In one case due to a variety of circumstances we baptized a person in their apartment in the presence of his family and friends. The bottom line for us is that the individual professes Christ as Lord and Savior in the presence of community.

Respectful and mindful of past

Many at TMP have been baptized as infants. At TMP we wish to honor the faith of our parents who chose baptism for us as an expression of their faith. We confirm however, the importance of individuals at The Meeting Place to choose to be baptized as a personal step of obedience to Christ. This means that gentle and respectful teaching on this issue is done at every baptism service.

Baptism and covenanting – why have we separated them?

For a community that has placed such an emphasis on a specific vision, on removing barriers to Christ and on faith being a journey it is not surprising to me that we have separated baptism and covenanting. The rationale for this separation has been strengthened by the impact of our numeric growth which has made it essential for people to develop authentic relationships through smaller groups and not to assume that they will have any great sense of relationship or belonging by becoming a covenant community member.

Protecting a particular vision

The Meeting Place began with a focused mission and purpose. Leaders were very clear that this church was intentional about addressing the needs of spiritual seekers. One did not just simply transfer your membership to TMP. Rather there was a rigorous process that included an orientation course (TMP 101), a course for discerning your spiritual gifts (Servant Profile) and an Elder interview through which your joining the covenant community was mutually discerned. Only after these steps were you then welcomed into the covenant community. Due to challenges in my schedule it took me over a year and a half to finally become a covenant member at TMP. This process ensured that people joining the church understood and agreed with the specific mission, vision, values and strategy of the church. Celebrating one's commitment to Christ is quite different than "signing on" to contribute towards the specific mission of this specific outreach focused church. Willy Reimer, Lead Pastor of SunWest in Calgary, was influenced by some of the early developments at TMP. He describes SunWest Christian Fellowship's approach to baptism and membership in the following way.

Initially we practiced the traditional teaching regarding baptism and membership but soon encountered the challenge of needing to either move baptism further away from conversion in order to bring people to an understanding of membership or take very immature Christ-followers into membership.

We felt that neither of these were viable options in the development of a strong membership core and ongoing effective ministry. In order to be an effective, Spirit-led faith community we believed that we needed a strong membership core who would take responsibility for the vision and integrity of the Bride of Christ called SunWest. Given that our goal was to be a church that was open to our community with all the inherent challenges that unchurched and religiously lost people bring we soon realized that we needed to reconsider our membership practice.

Guided by our philosophy of ministry, our experiences and our study of Scripture we moved to separate baptism and membership so that new Christ-followers could make a public profession of faith and be integrated into the body of Christ. This reflected our church's philosophy that "we don't care where you're coming from, we care where you're going." We wanted people to understand that God takes us where we are and moves us forward from that point. In order to accept people where they were we needed a strong, committed membership core to guide the integrity of the church, protect the vision of the church and express the mission of the church....

SunWest has attempted to raise the bar on membership to add significance to its meaning as well as strength for the local body of Christ. In fact, we have discovered that we need to increase the responsibilities of membership and call people to a "high commitment" in order for the church to reach its "redemptive potential."

Our membership philosophy is also rooted in our understanding of God's call on the lives of individuals as well as on "called out" communities of faith. We believe that God has a unique purpose for each of our lives. We also believe that God has placed a unique calling on each faith community and that he has equipped that faith community to fulfill that calling. When Christians come to SunWest I will often tell them, "if God wants you here we do too and if he doesn't we don't either." At first hearing these may seem harsh but I believe that Christ-followers need to seek God's leading when searching out a faith community. It is the responsibility of the church to live out its calling with passion and effectiveness and it is the responsibility of each Christ-follower to determine whether God's calling on them and His calling on a specific church body match up. We are not here to cater to the needs of Christ-followers who are seeking a specific flavor of church. We are here to invite them on the adventure that God has called us to if that resonates with His calling on their lives.

I love the clarity and passion in Willy's description and it is accurately represents the primary reason why TMP also did not link membership and baptism together. This type of "assimilation strategy" worked wonderfully for us in our early years when we had many Christians checking out the "latest church in town". It helped ensure that the church stayed focused on its vision and mission and was not distracted by the longings of Christians that loved part of TMP but would like us to

focus our ministries more on some of their interests or needs and less on our vision for outreach. As the “flavor of the month” passed from TMP to other new churches we began to experience a new problem. Instead of Church shoppers, we now primarily had seekers and very new Christ followers attending our TMP 101 course. These individuals were looking for community and discipleship, not a blunt description of our values, strategy and a “sign on, or find a different church,” challenge. We responded by changing our focus from “assimilating” people into our covenant community to “integrating” or connecting people into community where they could meaningfully continue their journey with the support of others. This change of strategy illustrates in part our commitment to work at removing barriers for the sake of the kingdom.

Removing barriers

The New Testament is full of examples of barriers being taken down so that people could encounter Jesus. On many occasions Jesus removed or crossed over barriers in order to enable someone to encounter him, be they a child, the sick, women or even the elite like Nicodemus at night (**John 3**). Peter was sent visions and instructions to eat unclean food in order to get him to cross over into the gentile world with the Message. Jesus’ parting instructions to his followers was to go into the world and make disciples baptizing them in his name (**Matthew 28**). The mandate is one that emphasizes a purposeful and relational movement into the world, not a strategic drawing of people into membership-based organizations. For many in our contemporary culture coming to Jesus is difficult enough let alone dealing with ones feelings and potential baggage about being part of “organized religion”. A core value at TMP is to be people who live as cultural insiders impacting those around us with the truth, hope and love of Christ. Like Philip and the Ethiopian this means that we may find ourselves a long way from Jerusalem with the opportunity to affirm and facilitate a friend’s individual faith step of baptism and encourage them to continue to take next steps of faith with us. Having them be required to become a “member” of our particular church becomes an unnecessary barrier that can be removed at this time. As we move into our world and make disciples many may be ready to publicly declare their commitment to Christ long before they are ready to “sign on” to the organized church. Separating these two important steps enables us to reach out across cultural barriers and baggage.

Faith understood as journeying

Understanding our faith as a journey enables us to view several distinct points that we will cross when it is our time. **Acts 8:26–40** records the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian, a spiritual seeker. After a wonderful chariot study session the Ethiopian understands and embraces Jesus and desires to right then and there mark this new point of his spiritual journey by being baptized. Philip baptizes him and the Ethiopian continues on his trip home, not stopping to return to Jerusalem to be registered as a member. Baptism was a relevant action for him to do at this time in front of his accompanying entourage. I have heard several theories about the faith communities this individual fostered back in his homeland. We have many people who come to a point in their spiritual journey where baptism is an important and relevant step; however becoming a “covenant community member” of our

church is not relevant for them at this point in time. This does not mean that we are promoting independence or lone ranger Christians, rather we strongly advocate for authentic community. At the time of baptism people are declaring their need for and allegiance to Christ in the presence of their close community (who literally surround them at the water's edge). Baptism occurs within the context of relational community, leaving the official commitment to the corporate mission of the community for a separate time and place.

Authentic community

Following Christ is not an independent activity. We believe that it is inconsistent to be a Christ follower and not be committed to a local body of believers. One of our emphases as Anabaptists is the importance of community. However our experience of community becomes strained as our churches experience growth. Malcolm Gladwell, author of the book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, cites social science research, history and modern corporate examples of how, as a group becomes larger than 150 persons, the experience of collective cohesive identity begins to break down. The average individual simply cannot sustain a meaningful sense of connection with that many relationships. This creates a problem for Evangelical Anabaptist churches that strongly value both kingdom growth and meaningful community. As we struggle with the challenges of growth at TMP we continue to work towards finding ways of stimulating real relationships within the larger body. The way we practice baptism is an attempt to symbolically emphasize that the individuals declaring their relationship to Christ are doing so in the context of a specific group of family and or friends that are committed to journeying with them. While many of us witness the baptisms and cheer on those up front, it is the few gathered around the water's edge that truly know each other's lives beyond the testimonies that were read into the microphone.

In larger churches we cannot assume that membership will facilitate community. For many of us who have grown up in smaller congregations, experiencing church growth, especially the move to multiple services, is a difficult and painful transition in which we can easily feel an erosion of our sense of belonging, identity and connection. This loss can be mitigated by clarifying the function of membership and advocating the need for authentic relationships to be developed through a network of smaller ministry groups.

A covenant for corporate well-being

With the dual emphasis on reaching out and developing authentic community through small groups we have struggled significantly with the role and function of our covenant community. In the early days of TMP, while the covenant community served as a way to "uphold and protect" the mission, vision and values of the church, it also facilitated a close relational community where a sense of congregational belonging, oneness and ownership was felt. Due, at least in part, to our focus to integrate seekers, our growth in size, increased diversity of ministries, some difficult community issues, and our struggle with maintaining relevance in a postmodern culture, we have experienced much confusion over the value and function of our

covenant community.

Currently we are seeking to envision people to take the step of covenanting when an individual is ready to declare their commitment to the on-going health and well-being of the overall community of TMP. Covenanting does not guarantee relationship; rather it is an indication of an intention to continue to live and contribute through relationships, and it demonstrates a commitment to the vision, mission and values of the community.

The specific organizational function of Covenant Community at The Meeting Place is to discern elders, appoint auditors and represent TMP in our conference and other church associations. With the support and affirmation of Covenant Community, Elders support and affirm Ministry Staff who oversee a network of ministry leaders. All leaders maintain connection to the community through relationships of support and accountability.

It may be helpful to think about the image of the ministry of the church being like an emergency room. Many broken people come to the room with the support of their friends and loved ones. Accepting Christ as their Lord and Savior is akin to when a person first arrives and agrees to life-saving intervention. Baptism is like when the person, now stabilized, makes a commitment to a life of recovery and rehabilitation. A natural progression during this recovery process is for the recovering one to begin to desire to show their gratefulness for their new life by finding some way of contributing to the community that has cared for them and or caring for others in crisis. In doing this they move from being recipients of Christ's love to becoming people who are actively sharing His love. Covenanting is the process where the individual moves on from their initial responses of gratitude to make a commitment to contribute in an ongoing way to the health and well-being of the vision, mission, values and community of the emergency room and its association (church and conference).

Lest anyone gets the impression that we have it all figured out, let me assure you that we do not. The struggle to find the best model that will support our collective mission and foster the development of authentic community is an ongoing challenge. We are currently struggling with how to best refresh our process of covenanting so that it is less of a centralized Elder/administration process and interfaces more naturally with our network of ministry leaders and groups.

What is the best way to organize relationships within church communities? As a young person baptism and membership were combined and, in that setting, contributed to my sense of belonging to the community. At The Meeting Place, combining the two may actually be a barrier for some of the individuals desiring baptism and in some cases even impede authentic community by creating a superficial sense of belonging to the organization without taking the time to develop authentic relationships.

For me this discussion is ultimately rooted in our understanding and vision of the church. What does it mean for us to be people of purpose and mission, a people who live life in relationship with Christ and others, a people who come together collectively to have an impact that our individual families and friendship groups

would otherwise not be able to accomplish? Whatever our particular vision is, it is essential that we act and organize ourselves in ways that are congruent with our vision and values. Methods and details of things such as baptism and membership are important. How a church organizes and acts will either breathe life into its mission and vision and or undermine the very dynamic that it is attempting to nurture.

I am grateful to the conference for inviting me to share some of my reflections from our experience at The Meeting Place. I am even more grateful that we are invited to openly share our practice, which I understand is a deviation from the conference's norm. The willingness to discuss these issues and to invite a range of perspectives is an indicator to me of our collective interest in the issues of evangelism, discipleship, church membership and, ultimately, care for the well-being of the bride of Christ: the church.

I look forward to the upcoming conversations.

Warmly,
David Falk

This chart comes from Robert Webber's book, *The Younger Evangelicals* and does an excellent job of showing some of the differences between the moderns (traditional and pragmatic evangelicals) and the postmodern (the younger evangelicals)

	Traditional Evangelicals 1950–1975	Pragmatic Evangelicals 1975–2000	Younger Evangelicals 2000–
Theological commitment	Christianity as a rational worldview	Christianity as therapy Answers needs	Christianity as a community of faith. Ancient/Reformation
Apologetics style	Evidential foundational	Christianity as meaning-giver Experiential personal faith	Embrace the metanarrative Embodied apologetic Communal faith
Ecclesial paradigm	Constantinian church Civil religion	Culturally sensitive church Market driven	Missional church Counter cultural
Church style	Neighbourhood churches/Rural	Megachurch Suburban Market targeted	Small church Back to cities Intercultural
Leadership style	Pastor centred	Managerial model CEO	Team ministry Priesthood of all
Youth	Church-	Outreach	Prayer, Bible study,

ministry	centred programs	Programs Weekend fun retreats	worship, social action
Education	Sunday school Information centred	Target generational groups and needs	Intergenerational formation in community
Spirituality	Keep the rules	Prosperity and success	Authentic embodiment
Worship	Traditional	Contemporary	Convergence
Art	Restrained	Art as illustration	Incarnational embodiment
Evangelism	Mass evangelism	Seeker service	Process evangelism
Activists	Beginnings of evangelical social action	Need-driving social action (divorce groups, drug rehab)	Rebuild cities and neighbourhoods

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