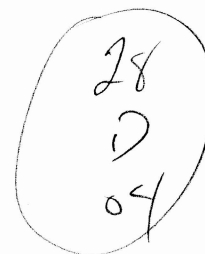


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Baptism among the Early Christians

by Jon Isaak

Note: The topic of Baptism and Membership in Mennonite Brethren thought and practice has been addressed in several important papers during the last thirty years (Bystrom 1986, 2000; Coggins; Esau; Ewert 1980, 1999, 2000; Hein; Hershberger; Kalmar; Konrad; Miller; Nikkel; Shillington; Toews; Wiens, Delbert; Wiens, Devon).

The task given to me by the organizers of this conference is to survey the practice of baptism known to the early Christians and to probe the significance of this material for contemporary Mennonite Brethren baptismal practice and theology. The first part of the paper may feel a bit like a lengthy catalogue of diverse ancient texts (and it is!), but please bear with me, I do, eventually, get to the more practical implications for today with discussion questions and a proposal.

The "Conference Version" of the paper (8 pages) refers to this longer paper as the "Full Text."

1. Objectives.

- To review the practice of baptism in the 1st century Mediterranean world.
- To identify the significance of baptism for the early Christians.
- To raise questions regarding baptism for Mennonite Brethren Christians today, specifically concerning membership.
- To suggest ways that Mennonite Brethren baptism and membership practice could, given western cultural norms, continue to be shaped by the biblical witness.

2. Baptism as practiced in the Mediterranean world in which Christianity emerged.

a) **Hermetic literature (ca. 100–200).** In most of these writings, the Greek god, Hermes, communicates secret knowledge (*gnosis*) about the divine one, creation, salvation, etc. to a disciple. It is "very probable" that the ideas contained in these writings were discussed in Egypt and elsewhere at the time when the NT was written and when Christianity spread westward from Palestine (Barrett 93).

Corpus Hermeticum 4. The Bowl 3–7 (Barrett 101–02).

Why then, my father, did God not distribute Mind to all? He willed,

my son, to set it before souls as a prize that they might win. And where did he set it? He filled a great bowl with it and set it down. He provided a herald and ordered him to proclaim to the hearts of men the following message. Dip yourself, you who can, into this bowl, you who believe that you will ascend to him who sent the bowl down, you who know for what purpose you have come into being. Those therefore who have understood the proclamation and dipped themselves in Mind partook of gnosis and became perfect men, since they received Mind. But those who ignored the proclamation, these are the *logikoi*, who have not received Mind in addition (to Reason) and do not know for what purpose they have come into being, or from what source.

“Gnosticism” refers to a diverse set of religious and philosophical views that came together and emerged at about the same time as Christianity. They likely influenced each other in significant ways. For example, the first commentary on the Gospel of John was written by Heracleon, a gnostic Christian living around the year 170 (Ehrman 2000:178), the Nag Hammadi library of gnostic texts found in 1945 was likely preserved by Christian monks (Wisse 440), and anti-gnostic polemic was produced by 2nd century Christian heresiologists. In fact, the reference to baptism in this hermetic text may owe something to the Christian precedent (Barrett 102).

What are the basic tenets of a gnostic worldview? Ehrman (2000:173–177) lists seven: 1) the world is understood in radically dualistic terms – material and spiritual; 2) God is totally spirit and accompanied by divine offspring, one of which “fell” and was forced to create the world in order to entrap the malformed divine within human bodies; 3) the human race is alienated in the material world and true Gnostics know that heaven is their home and that they are imprisoned in mortal bodies; 4) Gnostics claim that people can be saved from this material world by acquiring proper knowledge (*gnosis*); 5) the saving knowledge must come from outside the material through a divine emissary who could not be human (e.g., Jesus looked like a human, but he was not); 6) only an elite few acquire the knowledge of salvation – it is, therefore, a secret reserved for the body of the elect; and 7) the gnostic writings (e.g., Nag Hammadi library) evidence an embrace of ascetic practices that condemned gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual activity in order to speed the liberation of the soul (contrary to the flagrant acts of indecency and immorality of which they were accused by Christian heresiologists).

b) Rabbinic literature (1st century). Before the destruction of the second temple, Judaism was not uniform and there were various washing rituals (Jn 2.6) and baptismal movements (Hartman 1:583). See below regarding the Qumran Community, Bannus, and John the Baptist. However, sometime during the 1st century, proselyte baptism was introduced in Judaism (Hartman 1:583).

Yebamoth 47a,b (Barrett 209–10).

One who comes to be made a proselyte in the present time is to be

asked: 'Why dost thou come to be made a proselyte? Dost thou not know that at this time Israel is afflicted, buffeted, humiliated and harried, and that the sufferings and sore trials come upon them?' If he answer: 'I know this, and am not worthy,' they are to accept him immediately.

Then they are to instruct him in some of the lighter and some of the weightier commandments; and inform him as to the sins in regard to the corner of the field, the forgotten sheaf, the gleaning, and the tithe for the poor. Then shall they teach him the penalties for transgression . . . In the same way . . . shall they teach him the rewards for the observance of the commandments . . . Yet one must not multiply words or go too much into detail.

If he accept, he is to be circumcised immediately and received . . . and when healed brought to baptism immediately. Two men learned in the Law shall stand near him and instruct him as to some of the lighter and some of the weightier commandments. He immerses himself and when he comes up he is in all respects an Israelite.

Note that proselyte baptism is self-administered, not passive (as in Christian baptism, see below), and it is closely related to purification, without an eschatological dimension (as in Christian baptism, see below) (Ferguson 1:160). Some have thought that this is the origin of Christian baptism, however the practice did not exist early enough to be taken over by Christians (Dockery 56; Hartman 1:585).

c) Josephus (ca. 30–100) on the Essene sect. Josephus provides a valuable resource for documenting Jewish life in the 1st century. Here again we see evidence of the diversity of 1st century Judaism as he describes the Essenes (Qumran community?).

War ii 199f., 122, 137–42, 152f., 162–6 (Barrett 158–59).

Jewish philosophy, in fact, takes three forms. The followers of the first school are called Pharisees, of the second Sadducees, of the third Essenes . . .

A candidate anxious to join their sect [Essenes] is not immediately admitted. For one year, during which he remains outside the fraternity, they prescribe for him their own rule of life, presenting him with a small hatchet, the loin-cloth already mentioned, and white raiment. Having given proof of his temperance during this probationary period, he is brought into closer touch with the rule and is allowed to share the purer kind of holy water, but is not yet received into the meeting of the community. For after this exhibition of endurance, his character is tested for two years more, and only then, if found worthy, is he enrolled in the society. But, before he may touch the common food, he is made to swear tremendous oaths: first that he will practice piety towards the Deity, next that he will observe justice towards men: that he will wrong none whether of his

own mind or under another's orders; that he will for ever hate unjust and fight the battle of the just; that he will for ever keep the faith with all men, especially with the powers that be, since no ruler attains his office save by the will of God; that, should he himself bear rule, he will never abuse his authority nor, either in dress or by other outward marks of superiority, outshine his subjects; to be for ever a lover of truth and to expose liars; to keep his hands from stealing and his soul from unholy gain; to conceal nothing from the members of the sect and to report none of their secrets to others, even though tortured to death. He swears, moreover, to transmit their rules exactly as he himself received them; to abstain from robbery; and in like manner carefully to preserve the books of the sect and the names of the angels. Such are the oaths by which they secure their proselytes...

The "holy water" was used for lustrations or purification. Evidently, frequent ceremonial baths were an important feature of Essene ritual (Barrett 160).

Life 7–12 (Barrett 270).

At about the age of sixteen I determined to gain personal experience of the several sects into which our nation is divided. These, as I have frequently mentioned, are three in number – the first that of the Pharisees, the second that of the Sadducees, and the third that of the Essenes. I thought that, after a thorough investigation, I should be in a position to select the best. So I submitted myself to hard training and laborious exercises and passed through the three courses. Not content, however, with the experience thus gained, on hearing of one named Bannus, who dwelt in the wilderness, wearing only such clothing as trees provided, feeding on such things as grew of themselves, and using frequent ablutions of cold water, by day and night, for purity's sake, I became his devoted disciple. With him I lived for three years and, having accomplished my purpose, returned to the city. Being now in my nineteenth year I began to govern my life by the rules of the Pharisees, a sect having points of resemblance to that which the Greeks call the Stoic school.

Bannus was clearly an ascetic, however, not an Essene, since he lived in solitude (Barrett 271). Still, his religious practice was similar to the Essenes in some aspects, especially in his repeated lustrations or purification rituals.

d) **Summary.** Baptisms were used by a wide variety of religious groups known to the early Christians in order to give witness to purification, to commitment, and to inclusion (rites of initiation and passage). However, non-Christian baptism differed from Christian baptism in two areas (as we shall see below): it was self-administered and lacked eschatological meanings.

3. Baptism in Early Christianity as evidenced by the NT writings.

“Baptism” and its cognates (and synonyms) appear 125 times in the NT (*baptô* 4x; *baptizô* 77x; *baptisma* 19x; *baptismos* 4x; *baptistês* 12x; *apolouô* 2x; *louô* 5x; *loutron* 2x). “Baptism” refers most basically to washing and dipping. However, its full semantic field ranges from washing cups (concrete) to symbolizing a rite of passage or initiation (figurative). An analysis of all 125 NT occurrences follows.

a) Reference to John and his baptism of repentance/preparation for God’s End-time judgment and salvation (51x): Mt 3.1; 3.6; 3.7; 3.11 (1st); 3.13; 3.14; 3.16; 11.11; 11.12; 14.2; 14.8; 16.14; 17.13; 21.25; Mk 1.4 (2x); 1.5; 1.8 (1st); 1.9; 6.14; 6.24; 6.25; 8.28; 11.30; Lk 3.3; 3.7; 3.12; 3.16 (1st); 3.21 (2x); 7.20; 7.33; 7.29 (2x); 7.30; 9.19; 20.4; Jn 1.25; 1.26; 1.28; 1.31; 1.33 (2x); 3.23 (2x); 10.40; Acts 1.5 (1st); 1.22; 10.37; 11.16 (1st); 13.24.

Consider Josephus’s account of John the Baptist. *Antiquities* xviii. 116–19 (Barrett 276).

Some of the Jews thought that Herod’s army had been destroyed by God as a just punishment for his treatment of John called the Baptist. Herod killed him, though he was a good man and commanded the Jews to practice virtue, by exercising justice towards one another and piety towards God, and to come together to baptism. For the baptism would be acceptable to God if they used it, not for the putting away of certain sins, but for the purification of the body, the soul having previously been cleansed by righteousness. Now when the rest crowded together to him (for they were moved by hearing his words) Herod was afraid lest John’s great influence over the people might lead to revolt; for they seemed ready to do anything he advised. He therefore thought it much the better course to anticipate any rebellion that might arise from him by destroying him, than be involved in difficulties through an actual revolution and then regret it. So John, a victim of Herod’s suspicion, was sent to Machaerus (the fortress mentioned above), and there killed.

Note that according to Josephus, John’s baptism was merely for purification. Perhaps Josephus understates the eschatological and judgment language as “anti-Christian propaganda” (Barrett 277). In fact, John’s baptism does not appear to be simply an adaptation of previous baptismal practices. John’s appearance at the Jordan points to some kind of “exodus typology” (Hartman 1:584). His appearance, preaching, and baptism were unique in their expression of the ideas reflected in certain OT texts (**Dt 30–31, Is 40, Ez 36, or Jer 31**), not to mention other second-temple texts (Qumran, Psuedepigrapha), which looked forward to an End-time repentance when God would cleanse the People from evil in order to accomplish God’s purposes (Hartman 1:583). Thus, John’s baptism was once-for-all (unlike repeated washings), given its eschatological orientation. “The baptismal practice of John in general and his baptism of Jesus in particular are both closely related to their respective proclamations of the oncoming kingdom of God” (Eller 48).

While John announced the End, Jesus was intent on announcing and embodying God's coming End-time rule so that Israel could at last be what God had always intended, a light to the nations.

b) Jesus (likely his disciples) also begins to baptize (4x): Jn 3.22; 3.26; 4.1; 4.2.

While it could appear that Jesus was involved early on in baptizing (3.22, 26), this is corrected in 4.2. Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom and summoned people to repentance in preparation for the *eschaton*. He left the actual baptizing to his disciples. Still, it is John's baptism that is clearly the point of departure for baptism in the Jesus tradition. "The conviction of Jesus' followers that his resurrection brought about a decisive shift in the eschatological perspective (Acts 17.31; 1 Cor 15.20–21; 1 Thess 1.10) is most likely to have been an important factor that made it natural to take up John's baptism, loaded as it was with eschatological associations" (Hartman 1:586).

c) John's baptism contrasted with Jesus' baptism (10x): Mt 3.11 (2nd); Mk 1.8 (2nd); Lk 3.16 (2nd); Acts 1.5 (2nd); 11.16 (2nd); 18.25 (Apollos); 19.3 (2x); 19.4 (2x).

The NT witnesses a "two-sided treatment" regarding John and his baptism. On the one hand, they were a necessary preparation for the Messiah, but on the other, their importance is played down. It is Messiah who is the "stronger one" and it is he who will baptize with water *and* the Spirit. Baptism, in the Jesus tradition, is clearly a second stage in the developing practice.

d) Jesus uses "baptism" to symbolize the challenge of faithfulness (8x): Mk 10.38 (3x); 10.39 (3x); Lk 12.50 (2x).

Jesus asks, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"

e) Baptism's most basic idea, namely, to purify, to wash, or to dip (16x): Mk 7.4 (2x); Lk 11.38; Lk 16.24; Jn 13.10; Jn 13.26 (2x); Acts 9.37; Acts 16.33; Acts 22.16; 1 Cor 6.11; Heb 6.2; Heb 9.10; Heb 10.22; 2 Pet 2.22; Rev 19.13.

f) Baptism "into name of Jesus" and his death/resurrection (inclusion into family of God; ordination to Mission of God; transfer of primary allegiance; membership in body of Christ; realization of true humanity; regeneration; outpouring of the Holy Spirit, etc.) (21x): Mt 28.19; Mk 16.16; Acts 2.38; 2.41; 8.12; 8.13; 8.36; 8.38 (Ethiopian's baptism should not be seen as referring to personal commitment, see below); 9.18; 16.15 (household – what is true of the "head," is true of all; this is not a nuclear family); 16.33 ("entire family," as a collective, but doubtful that it refers to each person including infants); 18.8 (Chrispus the Pharisee and his household); 19.5; 22.16; Rm 6.3 (2x); 6.4; Gal 3.27; Col 2.12; Eph 5.26; Tit 3.5.

In this third stage of NT baptismal development (most clearly seen in

Paul's writings), "forgiveness of sins" is taken to its ultimate goal and gathered into our intimate participation and association with Jesus. This is not something spooky or mystical, but the realization of "our true, but not yet realized humanity" (Eller 48). Furthermore, it is about participation, intimacy, and "life in the Spirit" (Rm 8), all of which becomes our collective norm (Rm 12.1–2). To be "in Christ" is to become one in purpose, commitment, desire, and experience, with Jesus and his mission in our world.

A common question today is, "To which 'body' does baptism give entry: to the local or universal church, to the visible or the invisible church?" The question is essentially modern. It would have been inconceivable to Paul. The church is the visible manifestation of the people of God, whose life is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3.3). Baptism is a visible act with a spiritual meaning; it is therefore well adapted to be the means of entry into a visible community of God's people *and* the body which transcends any one place or time" (Beasley-Murray 64).

The reason the modern distinction between visible and invisible would have been inconceivable to Paul is that 1st century personality was essentially collectivist in nature and not individual. "Since the collectivist personality derives its information from outside of the self and in turn, serves as a source of information for others, anything unique that goes on inside of a person is filtered out of attention" (Malina 75). This is not to say that individual psychology, individual uniqueness, and individual self-consciousness are non-existent, but these were not central to ancient identity formation (compare this to our interest in promoting self-esteem in our children!). This helps to explain passages like Rm 1.16 where Paul writes, "I am not ashamed of the gospel" or Rm 7.14–25 where Paul writes, "Wretched man that I am." These are not statements of "introspection" in the modern western sense, but powerful statements of collectivist identity (see Stendahl).

g) Baptism "into name of Jesus" disconnected from gifting of Spirit (3x): Acts 8.16; 10.47; 10.48.

"The New Testament understanding is that Christian baptism catches up John's theme of repentance–forgiveness but adds the distinctive – and more central – theme of the coming of the Spirit" (Eller 52). Sometimes water baptism seems to attest to the believer's experience of the Spirit (Acts 10.47), while at other times it is the occasion for the coming of the Spirit upon the believer (Acts 2.38). The point seems to be that baptism is not some "water ritual" that automatically "triggers" the coming of the Spirit, but that *now* is the time God is "pouring out the Spirit" for the renewal of all creation.

h) Role of "baptizer" contrasted with "proclaimer" (4x): 1 Cor 1.14; 1.16 (2x); 1.17.

Perhaps Paul's sense of sharing in God's mission caused him not to add "baptizer" to his role of "proclaimer." However, the contrast is never specifically explained.

i) Baptism used in argumentation for the "collective" sense of

identity (8x): “into one body” **1 Cor 12.13**; “one Lord, one hope, one baptism” **Eph 4.5**; “into the name of Paul” **1 Cor 1.13; 1.15**; “into Moses” **1 Cor 10.2**; “on behalf of the dead” **1 Cor 15.29 (2x)** (not promoted, but utilized – the communitarian aspect of salvation was not so surprising then as it may be to us today); “saved through water [Noah]” **1 Pet 3.21**.

NT writers used “baptism” in its “collective” sense to illustrate the new reality that invaded the planet with the resurrection of Jesus. This was the great “hinge” on which the ages turn. One enormous step toward becoming truly human together had taken place – toward accessing true life, the life God intends for all people. “The mood during the [baptismal] service is not to be ‘Thank God, our brother has found the fire escape,’ but ‘Glory be! Kingdom come! It’s happening! The race is finally on its way to getting human; our brother just decided to let God make a man out of him!’ ” (Eller 55).

The Gospels describe the baptism of Jesus to make clear that God had ordained him to his life work. In a similar way, the coming of the Spirit was the early church’s ordination and enlistment into God’s mission. “Clearly, the gift of the Spirit that comes with baptism represents a relationship of new intimacy with God that includes not only . . . receiving power for a new quality of humanity but likewise . . . being ordained and deputized to use that power in the mission of God, God’s program for the world” (Eller 55–56).

Eller used “missional” language long before the term become fashionable (see Guder). Already in the 70s, Eller pointed out the increasing tendency to think of baptism and membership as individual entitlements. Typically, baptism “comes to mean little more than [being] . . . issued a credit card qualifying [one] to draw upon the church’s dispensation of grace. But make baptism an ordination to God’s service, and the picture changes drastically. Now we must speak of membership *in a caravan*, which is membership of an order like an arm or a leg’s being a member of a body; members are expected to be integral parts of the body and devote themselves in the performance of service for that body and to the ends for which the body exists” (56).

j) **Summary.** The early Christians used baptism to express the new reality they had come to experience in Jesus, however, nowhere in the NT is there direct teaching on baptism. Instead, the NT writers mostly discuss the implications and consequences of baptism. It is, therefore, risky to try to reconstruct a “theology of baptism” (likely to leave something out or to stress something at the expense of others). However, this did not stop the 2nd and 3rd century theologians from doing just this (see below).

In any case, the 125 references to baptism are used variously. Apparently, the early Christians, like those baptismal movements around them, used baptism to symbolize a combination of repentance, commitment, and inclusion. However, there appear to be two unique features that characterize NT baptismal practice: it is emblematic of the eschatological character of the Jesus movement (once-for-all) and emblematic of the collective new humanity that is on the way to being realized (not self-administered).

Eller gathered the NT witness to baptism into a chart (67) showing three distinct stages of tradition development. The chart, which I slightly adapted, shows how the early Christians did not drop earlier formulations, but added to them all the while celebrating both the inbreaking of the new age of the kingdom and the realization of our true humanity (see underlined text in the chart below).

The baptism of John the Baptist	Baptism in the Jesus tradition	An interpretation offered by Paul
1. <i>A washing which presupposes</i>	1. <i>A bestowal of the Holy Spirit signifies</i>	1. <i>Being baptized into Christ signifies</i>
2. <i>repentance and signifies</i>	2. <i>the coming into an especially intimate relationship with God which involves</i>	2. <i>the coming into an especially intimate relationship with him and consequently</i>
3. <i>a once-for-all forgiveness of sin, a situation which is understood as</i>	3. <i>forgiveness and experiencing</i>	3. <i>an intimate relationship to others who, in him, constitute his body in the knowledge that one will</i>
4. <i>a gift of the kingdom and a mark of realized humanity.</i>	4. <i>a totally new quality of life and power which are</i>	4. <i>die with him in turning away from sin and enduring the cross but also</i>
	5. <i>gifts of the kingdom and marks of realized humanity.</i> Bestowal of the Spirit also signifies	5. <i>be raised with him in deliverance from evil and entrance into the new life, which is</i>
	6. <i>being chosen and ordained to God's mission in the world and</i>	6. <i>a gift of the kingdom and a mark of realized humanity.</i>
	7. <i>covenanting with God and one's brothers and sisters to perform this mission, which is</i>	
	8. <i>the introduction of the kingdom and realization of humanity.</i>	

4. Baptism as practiced by Christians during the 2nd to 4th centuries (i.e., pre "Christendom").

a) **Church Manuals and Baptismal Treatises.** Excerpts from the *Didache*, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, and Augustine, all show the development of a

“baptismal theology” from “baptismal practice.”

The *Didache* (ca. 100) is the first “church manual” to have survived from early Christianity (discovered in 1873). Literally, it is identified as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. It includes instructions on how to baptize, when to fast, what to pray, how to celebrate the Eucharist, and how to appoint community leaders. Here are the lines referring to baptism.

Didache 7, 9.5 (Ehrman 1998:313).

Now about baptism: this is how to baptize. Give public instruction on all these points, and then baptize in running water, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. If you do not have running water, baptize in some other way. If you cannot in cold, then in warm. If you have neither, then pour water on the head three times in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before the baptism, moreover, the one who baptizes and the one being baptized must fast, and any others who can. And you must tell the one being baptized to fast for one or two days beforehand... You must not let anyone eat or drink of your Eucharist except those baptized in the Lord's name.”

Note that instruction, preparation, and fasting all precede water baptism and that the Eucharist is reserved for those thus identified with the body of Christ.

Although there are references to baptism scattered throughout the Christian literature of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, “only one extant treatise from that period [ca. 200] is devoted exclusively to the subject, that of Tertullian” (Pelikan 163). However, the most succinct statement by Tertullian on baptism actually came, not in his treatise, but in his polemic against Marcion. “Contending against Marcion’s dualism between the Creator and the Redeemer, Tertullian argued that none of the four basic gifts of baptism could be granted, if that dualism were maintained. The four gifts were: the remission of sins, deliverance from death, regeneration, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (*Against Marcion* 1.28.2 cited in Pelikan 163).

The first incontestable evidence for the practice of infant baptism comes in the writings of Tertullian. He asks, “Why should innocent infancy be in such a hurry to come to the forgiveness of sins? Let them come while they are maturing, while they are learning, while they are being taught what it is they are coming to. Let them be made Christians when they have become able to know Christ” (*On Baptism* 18.5 quoted in Pelikan 290). Whatever its origins (some point to Jesus’ blessing of the children **Mark 10.13–16**; to the account of the baptized “household” in **Acts 16.15**; or the analogy between OT circumcisions and NT infant baptism), infant baptism became the practice sometime in the second century (Pelikan 291).

Origen, writing a few years after Tertullian’s treatise *On Baptism*, maintained that there was “a tradition of the church from the apostles” to administer baptism also to infants (*Commentary on Romans* 5.9 quoted in

Pelikan 291). According to Pelikan, “the practice of infant baptism contributed to the development of a more precise doctrine of original sin by Cyprian” (165). “The achievement of a correlation between the practice of infant baptism and the doctrine of original sin was first made visible in Cyprian” (*Epistles* 64.5 cited in Pelikan 291). He invoked “a doctrine of original sin to account for a practice about whose apostolic credentials and sacramental validity he had no question whatsoever” (292). Later, Augustine argued that “infant baptism proved the presence in infants of a sin that was inevitable, but a sin for which they were nevertheless held responsible” (*On Marriage and Concupiscence* 2.29.51 cited in Pelikan 292). In fact, “the practice of exorcism associated with the rite of baptism was liturgical evidence for the doctrine that children were in the clutches of the devil” (*On the Merits and Remission of Sins* 1.23, 28, 39; 3.2.7; 3.3.6 cited in Pelikan 292 and Ferguson 1:162). Thus, “original sin was to be the principal basis for infant baptism, but the historical development followed the reverse sequence. The early Christian documents, in contrast, contain frequent reference to the sinlessness of children” (*The Shepherd of Hermas* 17.1–3; *The Letter of Barnabas* 6.11 cited in Ferguson 1:162).

Hippolytus of Rome, mid 2nd century, wrote to reestablish “apostolic tradition,” apparently to correct some perceived lapses in practice (Easton 25). While the original text was written in Greek, it is no longer extant. It is available only in several incomplete “translations” into Latin, Sahidic (southern dialect of Coptic), Bohairic (northern dialect of Coptic), Arabic, Ethiopic, as well as several versions known as the Constitutions, the Testament, and the Canons. The term “translation” is used advisedly since translators and copyist clearly elaborated and adapted the “apostolic traditions” to their particular ecclesiastical situation (Bradshaw 14). This varied manuscript tradition makes restoration of the “original text” virtually impossible (Bradshaw 12). The most that can be said is that the *Apostolic Tradition* represents Roman church practices from the mid 2nd to the mid 4th century (Bradshaw 14).

Apostolic Tradition (the Sahidic “translation” as reproduced in Bradshaw 82–135).

Let those who will be brought newly to the faith to hear the Word be brought first to the teachers before the people arrive. And let them be asked the reason why they have given their assent to the faith. And let those who have brought them bear witness as to whether they are able to hear the Word. And let them be asked about their life: What sort is it? Does he have a wife? Is he a servant of a believer? Does his master permit him? Then, let him hear. If his master does not testify on his behalf, that he is good, let him be cast out. If his master is a heathen, teach him to please his master so that there shall be no scandal. And if there is one who has a wife or a woman who has a husband, let them be taught to be content with his wife, and the woman with her husband. And if there is one who did not dwell with a wife, let him be taught not to fornicate, but either let

him take a wife according to the law or remain as he is according to the law. And if there is one who has a demon he shall not hear the word of instruction until he is purified.

They shall inquire about the crafts and work of those who will be brought in to be catechized as to what they are. If one is a brothel keeper who is a caretaker of prostitutes, either let him cease or be cast out. If he is a maker of idols or painter, let them be taught not to make idols; either let them cease or be cast out. If one is an actor or he does performances in the theater, either let him cease or be cast out. If he teaches young children, it is good indeed for him to cease. If he has no trade, then let him be forgiven. Likewise, a charioteer who contends and who goes to the games, either let him cease or be cast out. One who is a gladiator or who teaches gladiators to fight, or a hunter who performs hunts, or an official who regulates the gladiatorial contests, either let them cease or be cast out. One who is a priest of the idols, or who is a watchman of the idols, either let him cease or be cast out. A soldier who has authority, let him not kill a man. If he is ordered, let him not go to the task nor let him swear. But if he not willing, let him be cast out. One who has authority of the sword, or a ruler of a city who wears the purple, either let him cease or be cast out. A catechumen or faithful person if he wishes to become a soldier, let them be cast out because they despised God. A prostitute, or profligate man, or one who castrated himself, or again, another who did other things that it is not proper to mention, let them be cast out, for they are defiled. Nor shall a magician be considered for examination. The enchanter or the astrologer, or the wizard, or the one who interprets dreams or the one who stirs up crowds, or the one who ruins the hems of garments, those who are the stutterers, or the one who makes phylacteries either let them cease or be cast out. Someone's concubine, if she is his servant, if she rears her children and is intimate with him alone, then let her hear. If not, let her be cast out. A man who has a concubine, let him cease, and let him take a wife according to the law. But if he is unwilling, then let him be cast out. Therefore, if we have left out any other thing, the things themselves will inform you, for we all have the Spirit of God.

Let the catechumens hear the Word for three years. But if one is earnest and perseveres well in the work, the time is never judged, but the character only is that which shall be judged.

When the teacher has finished instructing, let the catechumens pray by themselves separated from the faithful. And let the women stand praying in a place in the church all by themselves, whether women faithful or women catechumens. And when they finish praying, they do not give the peace, for their kiss is not yet holy. But let the faithful greet each other only, men with men, and women with women. Men do not greet women. But let all women clothe the heads with in a

pall, but not in a piece of linen only, for this is not a head covering.

When the one who teaches, after the prayer, lays hands on the catechumens, let him pray and dismiss them. Whether a cleric is the one who teaches or a layperson, let him act the same way. If a catechumen is arrested for the name of the Lord, he is not to be double-minded concerning the testimony. For if it happens and they act violently against him and kill him during the forgiveness of sins, he will be justified, for he received baptism in his own blood.

And when those appointed to receive baptism are chosen, their life having been examined (if they have lived virtuously while they were catechumens, and if they honored the widows, and if they visited those who are sick, and if they fulfilled every good work), and when those who brought them in testify in his behalf that he acted thus, then let them hear the gospel. And, from the time that they will be separated, let hand be laid on them daily, exorcising them. And when the day draws near when they will be baptized, let the bishop exorcise each one of them so that he may know that they are holy. But if there is one who is not good or undefiled, let him be put aside because he did not hear the Word faithfully, since it is never possible to hide the stranger. And let those who are appointed for baptism be taught to wash themselves free, and wash themselves on the fifth day of the week. But if a woman is in her time of menstruation, let her be set aside and receive baptism on another day. Let those who will receive baptism fast on the day of preparation of the Sabbath. On the Sabbath, when those who will receive baptism gather in one place under the direction of the bishop, let them all be commanded to pray and to bend their knees. And when he has laid his hand on them, let him exorcise every foreign spirit, that they flee from them and not return to them ever again. And when he has finished exorcising, let him blow into them. And when he has sealed their foreheads and their ears and nostrils, let him raise them up. And let them spend the whole night awake, being read to and instructed. And those who will receive baptism are not to have any other thing except only that which each one will bring in for the Eucharist, for it is proper for the one who is worthy to bring his offering at that time.

And at the hour when the cock crows, let the water be prayed over first. Let the water be drawn into a pool or flow down into it. And let it be thus if there is no exigency. But if there is an exigency that persists and is urgent, use the water that you will find. And let them strip naked. And first baptize the small children. And each one who is able to speak for themselves, let them speak. But those not able to speak for themselves, let their parents or another one belonging to their family speak for them. Afterward, baptize the grown men, and, finally, the women, loosing all their hair and laying aside the jewelry of gold and silver that they are wearing. Let no one take any foreign thing down into the water with them.

And at the hour that has been set to baptize, let the bishop give thanks over the oil, and put it in a vessel and call it the oil of thanksgiving. And let him take another oil and exorcise it, and call it the oil of exorcism. And a deacon shall take the oil of exorcism and stand at the left hand of the presbyter, and another deacon shall take the oil of thanksgiving and stand at the right hand of the presbyter. And when the presbyter grasps each one of those who will receive baptism, let him command him to renounce, saying, "I renounce you, Satan, with all your service and all your works." And when he has renounced all these, let him anoint him with the oil of exorcism, saying, "Let every spirit be cast far from you." And in this way let him give him naked to the bishop or the presbyter standing by the water to baptize. And likewise, let the deacon go with him down into the water and let him say to him, enjoining him to say, "I believe in the only true God, the Father, the Almighty, and his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior with his Holy Spirit, the giver of life to everything, three in one substance, one divinity, one Lordship, one kingdom, one faith, one baptism, in the holy catholic apostolic church, which lives forever. Amen.

And the one who receives it, let him say to all this, "I believe thus." And the one who gives will put his hand on the head of the one who receives and dip him three times, confessing these things each time. And afterward, let him say, "Do you believe in our Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God the Father, that he became man wondrously for us in an incomprehensible unity, in his Holy Spirit from Mary, the holy virgin, without human seed; and he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate; he died willingly for our salvation; he arose on the third day; he released those who were bound; he went up to heaven; he sat at the right hand of his good Father in the heights; and he comes to judge the living and the dead by his appearance with his kingdom; and do you believe in the Holy Spirit, the good and the giver of life, who purifies the universe in the holy church?" And again let him say, "I believe." And let him ascend from the water, and let the presbyter anoint him with the oil of thanksgiving, saying, "I anoint you with an anointing of holy oil in the name of Jesus Christ." Likewise he anoints the rest, one by one.

And, thus, when he dresses the rest, let them go into the church. Let the bishop put his hand on them, fervently, saying, "Lord, God, as you have made these worthy to receive forgiveness of their sins for the coming age, make them worthy to be filled with your Holy Spirit; and send upon them your grace in order that they may serve you according to your will, because yours is the glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the holy church, now and always, and forever and ever." And he pours oil of thanksgiving on his hand and lays his hand on his head, saying to him, "I anoint you with anointing of holy oil in God the Father, the Almighty, with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit."

And he seals his forehead, giving him the kiss, and saying, "The Lord be with you." And the one who has been sealed says to him, "And with your spirit." This he does to each one of them. And let all the people pray together, and when all those who have received baptism pray, let them give peace with their mouth. Let the deacons bring the offering to the bishop, and he shall give thanks over bread because it is the likeness of flesh of Christ, with a cup of wine, because it is the blood of Christ that will be poured on all who believe on him; and milk and honey mixed together, to fulfill the promise of the fathers, because he said, "I will give to you a land that flows with milk and honey." This is the flesh of Christ, which was given to us so that the ones who believe in him may be nourished by it like small children. It will cause the bitterness of the heart to melt through the sweetness of the word. All of these things shall the bishop recount to those who will receive baptism.

When the bishop now, therefore, breaks the bread, let him give a piece to each one of them, saying, "This is the bread of heaven, the body of Christ Jesus." Let the one who receives it answer, "Amen." And if there are not sufficient presbyters there, let the deacons take possession of the cup and stand in proper order and give them the blood of Christ Jesus our Lord, and the one with the milk and honey. Let the one who gives the cup say, "This is the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord." And let the one who receives it answer, "Amen." And when these things are done, let each one hasten to do all that is good and to please God, and to live uprightly, occupied with the church, doing the things that he learned, advancing in the service of God.

And we have given these things to you in brief concerning the holy baptism and the holy offering, since you have already been instructed concerning the resurrection of the flesh and all the other things as written. And if there are other things that are appointed to recite, let the bishop say it quietly to those who will receive baptism. And do not let the unbelievers know, unless they first receive baptism. This is the white stone of which John said, "There is a new name written on it, which no one knows except the one who will receive the stone [Rev 2.17]."

b) Summary. From these traditions rooted in the 2nd century, it is clear that baptism was the symbol for coming into the church. By the 4th century, the process of baptism was two to three years in length and marked by four discrete periods of growth along with passage rites: 1) inquirer (seeker), 2) catechumen (hearer), 3) enlightenment (kneeler), and 4) entrance to full life of the church as marked by baptism (faithful).

Webber notes that four assumptions guide the emerging "baptismal theology" (147–48). 1) The "schematic" of how Christ's death was "for us," was shaped by the *Christus Victor* explanation (note the renunciation and transfer language of the baptismal liturgy; the three-player "redemption drama" – God,

Jesus, and Satan). 2) The church plays a “mothering” role of nurturing the new convert through a salvation journey (note the instruction, the preparation, and the developmental process of conversion). 3) Liturgical rituals are external means of organizing internal discipleship experiences that clarify the truth of the new reality in which the candidate participates (note the use of tangible rituals at each stage, oil, laying on of hands, sign of cross, confession, water, nakedness, redressing, milk and honey, etc.). 4) Conversion is conceptualized as a process with discrete stages of development (the candidate is led by mentors through a maturation process culminating with baptism and entrance into the church).

Early Christian evangelism was tied to baptism. Why? There are three reasons, according to Webber (146–47). 1) Christian preaching was not simply a “load of content” or mere facts, but an interpretation of an event (*kerygma*). The message is that Jesus lives and, therefore, he is victorious over Evil along with all those who are associated with him in the dawning of the new age. Thus, the baptismal process symbolically carries the “converting Christian” through the story of Jesus’ whole life. 2) The church is a sign to the world and an “Outpost” of God’s dawning kingdom – not an intrusion into the secular world, nor a parallel movement, nor an isolationist movement, but a central dynamic to the whole of life that involves the whole person (see my diagram in the Appendix). Baptism testifies to a missional ecclesiology. 3) The gospel proclamation always leads to baptism and entrance into the church – it is both about repentance and renunciation; it is about entrance into a new community, marked by the reception of the Holy Spirit. Baptism is not a “my-witness-to-the-world action. It is the ritual that initiates us into the body of Christ and begins our lifelong pursuit of holiness which takes place in the accountability of God’s community on earth, the church” (144).

5. Questions for discussion.

a) **The Hermeneutical Question.** All of the texts surveyed in this paper emerge from an ancient world which employed several cultural assumptions that Mennonite Brethren do not share (a household family system v. a nuclear family system, a collectivist personal identity v. individualistic personal identity, an imperial political system v. democratic political system). Given the Bible’s time-conditioned originating cultural location, how can Mennonite Brethren continue to confess the Bible as authoritative for life and practice in the 21st century? Do we pick and choose what seems relevant to us? Is there another way of appropriating the biblical vision?

b) **The Soteriological Question.** Most Mennonite Brethren have been significantly shaped by modernity’s emphasis on the individual. This has touched most of our practices, even the way we think about salvation. We have used the “satisfaction” theory of atonement, almost to the exclusion of the other biblical images of salvation (see Green and Baker). The result is that we think of salvation as primarily a “transaction” and a “payment for personal debt” (two player “redemption drama” – God and Jesus). Salvation is reduced to a personal and privatized “commodity” that we “shop around for,” looking

for that which will best “enhance our portfolio.” Such thinking spills over to our understanding of baptism – it is reduced to *my witness to my salvation*, largely disconnected from the church. What would it look like for Mennonite Brethren to recover a full-orbed soteriology that participates more fully in “the scandal of the cross,” one that identifies with Jesus’ victory over the powers of evil? If baptism is more than a sign of “my decision for Christ,” then what is it?

c) **The Developmental Question.** Given our tendency to “individualized personal identity” and to “reductionist” soteriology, how are we to assess the baptismal “readiness” of children? Kalmar (155) recently argued that “asking children who have already made a decision to follow Jesus and be part of the family of God to postpone baptism until they are older may only serve to stall their development, frustrate their faith, and drive them away from the church.” How do we understand the place of children in our families and our churches? Are they simply “miniature adults”? If baptism is more than a sign of “my decision for Christ at summer camp,” then what is the developmental stage required for baptism?

d) **The Ecclesiological Question.** The issues raised by the three above questions come to bear on the basic ecclesiological question. What in fact is the church any way? Why bother linking baptism to church membership? Some say there is more effective “buy in,” if some space is placed between baptism and church membership (see **Willow Creek Model of Participating Membership**). In fact, many youth leaders tell us how hard it is to convince youth that linking church membership to baptism is a good idea. Perhaps the current situation is not worth defending. Unfortunately, for a long time, church membership has been defined as the bestowal of “gifts” (since Tertullian!). By reducing membership to a “commodity,” the church functions like just another “volunteer society” that we choose based on personal preferences. I think the resistance of young people to membership in its current form is well placed. They can “smell the problem a mile away.” Why have we let this kind of ecclesiological reductionism erode Mennonite Brethren church thinking and practice? What will it take to unhook membership from a “name on a church roster” or from a certain level of financial contribution or from some other entitlement, and locate membership where it belongs? Let us remind ourselves of the critique that the 16th century Anabaptists had against the state church. No one really “joins a church,” rather one is called and gathered together in a local church to share in God’s missional witness to the world as an Outpost of God’s kingdom. What kind of ecclesiology do we want to adopt?

e) **The Liturgical Question.** If we are to take seriously our cultural location, then what kinds of liturgical practices could we develop to help us live our faith in this context? According to Hershberger, postmodern youth, by definition, do not trust cognitive learning or linear thinking. “Since modernity’s solid scientific and logical foundations have now fallen for them, their way of finding reality must come from something else. That something else is experience” (143). Can we design liturgical practices that are experiential, participatory, and interactive? What potential is there for incorporating some of the ancient baptismal rituals described in the *Apostolic Tradition* into

contemporary Mennonite Brethren practice (okay, maybe not the one about being stripped naked!)? What ritual could accompany a young person's Beginning-of-Faith steps? How could we revamp catechism? How can we recharge the baptismal ritual?

6. A proposal regarding baptism and church membership submitted for testing.

a) **Move baptism from symbolizing personal commitment to symbolizing ordination by the local church – the concluding celebration following a period of examination that marks full engagement in God's mission through its local expression of the Lord's risen body.** This will require a significant amount of reflection, courage, and cultural reframing. While we cannot escape our cultural location (with its focus on individual identity, democracy, and nuclear family), we must still ask *how* we will live in our world. We are to be self-critical participants of our cultural location. Modernity duped us into thinking that we are autonomous. This is simply not true. All of us serve some power. Conversion is the process by which we access our true identity as God's beloved, in order to participate in the newly reconfigured People of God (the new humanity). It is a transfer from one allegiance/engagement to another (it is not self-administered!). Recovering baptism as ordination or deputation or commissioning (hearing the call, responding, being empowered, and being commissioned to participate in God's mission through the local church) probably holds the most promise for renewing the church today.

Implications:

- Keep Willow Creek's "high bar" for **participating membership** (i.e., "The FiveGs" of grace, growth, group, gifts, and good stewardship, as evidenced by investigation, affirmation, confirmation, and celebration), but place baptism at the end (not at the beginning as in the Willow Creek model).
- Design some other "beginning-of-faith" ritual to mark the start of conversion (not baptism).
- Affirm children's beginning steps of faith with these rituals, but keep baptism for when they begin to "move out" from parental influence (16?) and are developmentally able to be "ordained" (graduating from a car seat to a seat belt does not authorize one to drive a car).

b) Move membership from an entitlement to a missional vocation.

This too will require a significant shift in thought and practice. It means shifting our conception of the church as "sending body" to the church as the "sent body," a missional community actively engaged in God's mission. Membership can no longer be thought of as a punctiliar event that once achieved, remains in force (there is no tenure in God's missional team!). Conversion is ongoing process and membership must reflect this. Inactive membership is therefore a contradiction in terms.

Implications:

- Pare down “membership lists” to only those who are “participating members.” If some “members” no longer participate, attend, support, give or live intentionally in community with us, they have already “moved on” and are not really “members” any longer.
- Design regular (annual?) covenanting opportunities for members to reaffirm their participation. Develop special rituals to enhance these times.

c) **Keep the connection between baptism and membership.** Even though cultural forces (individualism and distrust of institutions) push to separate these, to give in is to say something about the gospel that is fundamentally untrue – namely, that it is possible to live as a Christian apart from the body of Christ. This is not some new postmodern challenge. Similar, gnostic-like conceptions of spirituality were present in the Corinthian church that Paul worked with. The Corinthians exhibited typical ways of behaving (re. sexuality, conflict, worship, and the resurrection) that in fact trivialized the “body.” Even though it was not fashionable in Greco–Roman thinking, Paul insisted that there was such a thing as a resurrection body, that it was not a “bodiless spirit” (1 Cor 15). Paul had to remind the former pagans in Corinth that the body was worth transforming (not bad or to be escaped). Analogously, in every cultural location, Christianity has had to make the case to link baptism and membership (this is the unique thing about Christianity – the link testifies to Christianity’s eschatological character, living *now* the new humanity that is yet to be). In Paul’s language, to fail to make the link is to argue for “bodiless” Christians or that it is possible to live the Christian life outside the body of Christ. The body of Christ cannot really be experienced apart from its local expression. Finally, to use a provocative Pauline sexual metaphor (1 Cor 6), to separate baptism from membership would be like promoting pre-marital sex, the rush of orgasm apart from the covenant of marriage.

Implications:

- Expand our soteriological thinking from limiting salvation to its vertical and personal dimensions to include its horizontal and community dimensions. Salvation is about sharing in God’s salvation *caravan* (Eller’s term) where each member is assigned to and endowed for a particular role in the mission of God.
- Enlarge our atonement thinking by utilizing the other biblical metaphors for salvation (besides the court of law image) in order to move us beyond our cultural preference for autonomy. The Bible also uses images from commerce (redemption), relationships (reconciliation), worship (sacrifice), and the battleground (triumph over evil) to picture salvation.
- Reflect critically on our ecclesiology. What is the church anyway? How have Christians sorted out their relation to culture and to the reign of God? What are the options? Explore what it means to live as an Outpost of God’s kingdom and as a constant sign to our culture

until the End (see **Appendix** below).

7. Appendix: Ecclesiological options that Christians have chosen through the centuries.

The first five come from Niebuhr, the sixth I am suggesting as an Anabaptist alternative.

- a. Church in Culture (indistinguishable from Culture, *secular*)
- b. Church above Culture (unaffected by Culture, *traditional*)
- c. Church against Culture (isolated from Culture, *sectarian*)
- d. Church and Culture in Paradox (loyal to two kingdoms, *divided*)
- e. Church as transforming Culture (ambitious to overtake Culture, *infiltration*)
- f. Church as sign to Culture (concerned critic of Culture, *invitational, missional*)

Church as sign to Culture (Outpost of God's Kingdom)

In model (f), the church is the End-Time form of the People of God gathered around Jesus – living by the Spirit and participating in God's reign as an "Outpost of God's Kingdom." As a sign of the coming rule of God, the church is an anticipatory representation of the "new order of creation," living now out of the resources of the End, when all things will be made new. Thus, the church aims to be an attractive alternative, inviting people to access at last their true identity as God's beloved. During these last days, the church remains a sign to culture until the End, when Jesus returns and the church joins him to complete the ordering of all creation and thus establish God's Kingdom in its fullness.

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Jon Isaak is Assistant Professor of New Testament at the MB Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California.

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