

ARTICLE 8

Christian Baptism

ENDNOTES (FORMERLY COMMENTARY)

¹ Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two ordinances practiced by all Mennonite Brethren churches. They testify to and celebrate God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ offered freely to anyone who responds in faith. Baptism is the church ordinance which recognizes and celebrates a believer's entry into this covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and that believer's entry into Christ's body, the church. The Lord's Supper (see Article 9) is the church ordinance which expresses each believer's ongoing renewal of this covenant with both God and the Body of Christ, and the ongoing renewal of the whole church's spiritual and relational life. Throughout Article 8, one sees the word "church" repeated often. Baptism is a church or body of Christ event and not simply an individual event expressing one's own spiritual commitment.

Baptism is a very important act in the New Testament. Even Jesus himself at the beginning of his earthly ministry was baptized as a means of identification with us and with God's purpose in saving and forming a people ("to fulfill all righteousness," Matthew 3:13-17). The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) highlights the importance of baptism by connecting it to the central missionary assignment given by Jesus Christ, to "make disciples of all nations." Baptism is a discipleship step in the context of obeying everything Jesus commanded.

At Pentecost, Peter stood up and addressed the Jerusalem crowd with these words: "Repent and be baptized, **every one of you**, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.... Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:38,41). The act of baptism is central to forming the church.

² Water baptism is God's command for everyone who desires to be a disciple of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; Matthew 28:18-20). Disciples of Christ are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). There is no hint in the New Testament that baptism is optional, an add-on, or an action limited to some special spiritual group. Also, an unbaptized believer never passes an age or a maturity level where baptism is no longer a relevant command for them. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you" is every bit as applicable today as at Pentecost (Acts 2:38).

³ Baptism has a past, present, and future dimension. It is a person's testimony about what has happened in their life past (faith; cleansing; freedom from sin and death; receiving the Holy Spirit), a commitment about how they want to live in the

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present (desire for spiritual growth; full participation and inclusion into Christ's body and its mission), and a faith affirmation about what they believe will happen in their ultimate future (bodily resurrection into the fullness of God's eternal Kingdom). In the early church, conversion and baptism occurred in very close relation to each other, so they often appear as one event in the Bible. However, they are two separate but closely related steps in the life of a Christian disciple (cf. Acts 8:12; 10:47-48).

Mennonite Brethren understand baptism as an ordinance in the life of the local church which is why it is placed in the Confession of Faith after the Nature of the Church (Article 6) and the Mission of the Church (Article 7) rather than right after the article on Salvation (Article 5). Baptism is a church community ordinance not simply an individual or personal event. In the New Testament, believers never baptized themselves. The church or representatives of the church were given this responsibility, which means that the local church also testifies and makes commitments as it participates in the baptism event.

The New Testament teachings on the meaning of baptism are clustered around four key themes. The person has been **cleansed or freed from sin** (1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5; Hebrew 10:22; Romans 6:3-6). The person **has moved from death to new life in Christ** (Colossians 2:12-13; Galatians 3:26-27). The person **has been incorporated into the body of Christ, as expressed in the local church family** (Acts 2:41; Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 12:13). There, the person joins other baptized believers in the **unity and oneness of this "body"** (Galatians 3:27-28; Ephesians 4:4-6).

⁴ Baptism is an act of obedience for both the person being baptized (Acts 2:38) and the church participating in the baptism (Matthew 28:19).

⁵ In the baptism event, the believer testifies and affirms that by faith these powerful divine actions are true. The church as it represents God in the event testifies to the saving work of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the person's life. The Holy Spirit comes at the time of a person's salvation in Jesus and the water baptism that follows is a testimony to the presence of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 10:47-48).

⁶ Together with the Lord's Supper, some Christian traditions see baptism as a "sacrament" where God's grace is specially transferred to the baptized individual because of the event. Others see it as a "sign" or "symbol," merely pointing to what happened earlier in a person's life. We hold that baptism, while not salvific or sacramental, is a powerful act of obedience and testimony which deeply impacts every area of one's life. For believers, it is an act of commitment, faith, and obedience. Its observance crowns the process of a person's initial conversion. It also has the power to deeply impact the spiritual and relational life of the church and the individual. Baptism is the external and public step of faith commanded by Jesus as part of salvation. While baptism is not necessary for salvation, it crowns the process of inner faith by giving it a visible and public dimension. Baptism is the observable and recognizable means

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by which God adds believers to the church (cf. Acts 2:41; 5:14). By the same token, baptism without personal faith in Jesus is a meaningless ritual (cf. Mark 16:16).

⁷ Water baptism represents the work of the Holy Spirit, who baptizes believers into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13) by cleansing them from sin. Other New Testament texts also speak of the Spirit's washing that **cleanses and frees from sin**. Christians have been washed and sanctified (1 Corinthians 6:11) through faith made visible in baptism. Christians have been freed from slavery to sin demonstrated in baptism (Romans 6:3-6). Jesus loved the church so he cleansed her by the "washing with water through the word" (Ephesians 5:26). Both Titus 3:5 and Hebrews 10:22 pick up the "washing" image. All of these are in continuity with the practice of baptism in Judaism (observant Jews would regularly enter a pool of water to be spiritually and ritually cleansed) and with John the Baptist's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4).

⁸ Colossians 2:12-13 associates baptism with moving from death ("buried with him in baptism") to **new life in Christ**. Galatians 3:26-27 speaks of the baptized ones as now having "clothed yourselves with Christ." Baptism is associated here with new life, the life of the kingdom of God, and fullness of life in Christ.

⁹ Baptism in the New Testament world had strong associations with **incorporation or inclusion** into a group. Gentiles who wanted to become proselytes or converts to Judaism would be required to enter a pool of water called a mikveh and immerse themselves. Prior to any Christian baptisms, this action of immersion in water had associations with incorporation or inclusion into Judaism. These associations are strongly present in Acts 2:41 as an action of incorporation or inclusion into the church, where the newly converted were baptized and then "about three thousand were added to their number that day."

¹⁰ These qualifications for baptism echo several biblical texts. In Romans 10:9, Paul explains that God saves those who believe and confess that Jesus is the resurrected Lord. In Acts 2:38, Peter calls those who believe to repent from their current life direction and follow Christ because God promises to give the Holy Spirit to those who repent and are baptized. In Acts 10:47, however, because of the undeniable evidence that new believers had received the Holy Spirit, water baptism was their next step. Evidence of receiving the Holy Spirit can vary; but at the most basic level, as Paul clarifies in 1 Corinthians 12:3, those who declare "Jesus is Lord" are already under the influence of the Spirit. As Jesus indicates in John 3:5, water and Spirit each play a part when a person is born from above. Put most simply, Jesus instructs his followers to baptize all those who are becoming his obedient disciples (Matthew 28:19-20).

¹¹ The decision to be baptized is in response to the saving work of God in a person's

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life. The New Testament pattern of baptism takes place after individuals voluntarily repented, received the Holy Spirit, and became disciples of Jesus by faith. This is why Mennonite Brethren do not practice infant baptism, the baptism of young children, forced baptisms, and baptisms on behalf of others. The only New Testament evidence that might support the practice of infant baptism involves five references to “household baptisms” (Acts 11:13-14; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 1 Cor 1:16) and the analogy between Old Testament circumcision of male infants born to Israelite parents. Mennonite Brethren, along with all those in the Believers Church tradition, agree that the analogy and these five ambiguous references do not provide adequate support for baptizing infants of believing parents.

¹² First Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:27-28, and Ephesians 4:4-6 link baptism with **unity or oneness in the church**. Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12:13 incorporates people “into one body” which brings about sociological unity in the church. Jew and Greek, slave and free are united into one community or family, and one Spirit nurtures all. Baptism has the same consequence in Galatians 3:27-28; the differences between Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female no longer divide. Baptism demonstrates that one’s identity in Christ supersedes every other identity. Being baptized into Christ therefore means that the cultural, socio-economic, racial, ethnic, gender barriers which cause hostility and division between people have been broken down. In place of these divisions God, in Christ, is creating one, new humanity (Ephesians 2:14-16). Different people and social classes are united through baptism into Christ.

The emphasis on “one baptism” in Ephesians 4:4-6 points to church unity, as does one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one God. Baptism unites diverse people into one people because all enter the body of Christ in the same way—through faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism signifies unity in the church, creating one body out of very different people, even former enemies.

¹³ The local church welcomes baptized disciples of Jesus who have been baptized upon their own confession of faith in other Christian denominations and Christian traditions to participate and serve in the church. The mode of baptism (immersion, pouring, sprinkling) is of secondary importance to what their baptism symbolized (i.e., their personal confession of faith in Jesus as Lord, their desire to grow in discipleship, and their desire to be part of Christ’s body).

¹⁴ Although Mennonite Brethren consider the biblical support for the practice of baptizing infants as inadequate, they do respect the love and spiritual care this action represents on the part of the believing parents. However, in order to follow the biblical model as we understand it, Mennonite Brethren call every disciple of Jesus to be baptized upon their own confession of faith prior to incorporation into the local church family.