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Critique of 'Baptism among the Early Christians'

by Gay Lynn Voth

This response will focus on two basic questions raised by Jon Isaak's discussion of *Baptism among the Early Christians*: 1) What distinction does the early church draw between local, visible congregations and the universal, invisible church of Jesus Christ? 2) Into which "body" were early Christian believers incorporated through the ritual of baptism?

Both questions emerge directly from Isaak's presentation, when (near the end of page 3) he writes: "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?" Isaak believes that the "distinction between visible and invisible would have been inconceivable to Paul in the 1st century" because this is a modern distinction being drawn. I would argue that the distinction is not essentially a "modern" one for two reasons. Gnostic writings of the first centuries CE indicate a strong belief in the distinction between the "material", earthly reality that is "visible" and the "invisible", heavenly reality that is essentially "spiritual". Irenaeus in his refutation of the heresies threatening the early church, argues for the *Unity of the Faith of the Church Throughout the Whole World*, in light of the fact that numerous "churches" have been planted or scattered to Germany, Spain, Gaul, the East, Egypt, Libya, and "the central regions of the world" (Anti-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1 Chapter X).

It appears Paul is addressing this unity of 'the faith' when he attempts to articulate rules of order for "all churches" under his leadership (1 **Corinthians 11:16**). Paul is well aware of distinct Christian gatherings (local church congregations) with significant visible differences from one another. This is not a matter of the "modern" personal "I" but rather a matter of unique "local, visible" congregations beginning to quarrel about their differences – "... each of you is saying, 'I am of Paul,' and 'I of Apollos,' and 'I of Cephas,' and 'I of Christ' (1 **Cor. 1:11–12**). Paul argues that, while distinctions may rightfully exist, they should not destroy the unity of the Church, for Christ cannot be divided. Legitimately, Paul claims, the Church can only be One because there is only one Christ – and one baptism in the name of Christ. If local, visible practices and theological arguments occur in the various church congregations, Paul urges them to work at unity "in Christ Jesus" (1 **Cor. 1:30**) through the ministry of the one Spirit of God (1 **Cor. 2:10–13**). The unity of the church is Trinitarian (unity in diversity; diversity in unity) and is not uniformity.

Rather than submitting to an enforced uniformity, the early local congregations were called to practice “humility and gentleness, patience and forbearance to one another in love” as they attempt to preserve the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”. This practice reflects the belief that there is only “one body” – the “body of Christ”, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all (**Ephesians 4:2–6**). Since there are diverse gifts given to individual members of the various church congregations for the practical, historical function of the church, Paul attempts to unify this diversity with a call to be “in Christ” – as the universal, invisible church that has its being throughout the ages because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

The second question then, “Into which ‘body’ were early Christian believers incorporated through baptism?” seems like a moot question. Obviously, Paul argues, there is only one baptism – the baptism of Christ – a baptism into the death of Christ and his resurrection. This baptism unites the believers with Him, in a crucifixion of the “old” and resurrection to the “new” (**Romans 6:1–6**). This newly formed “body of Christ” was just being established during the first century, however there is no good reason to assume that the significance of this life-giving entity should be diminished with the passing of time. One of the images provided by Jesus in his teachings is that of a small mustard seed growing into a large plant, which may then multiply and spread (**Luke 13:18,19**). The source of the “many”, however, is the “one Spirit” who births the many from the One.

It is true that our ancestors, the Anabaptists, seemed to be arguing against the idea of the “universal, invisible” Church during the Reformation, in favor of the local, visible congregations. They were not doing so, however, to dismiss the idea of the one “body of Christ”, but rather to call the church to its true identity. The civic church, they argued, was in error since it was divided in its allegiance. As David Epp argued in 1910, the Mennonites sought to restore the “spiritual common body (*Gemeine*)” according to Luther’s translation (Dueck 124). Epp, as a minister of the Chortizer Mennonite Church, wrote about these matters in a response to H. J. Braun, Minister of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century in the midst of a new debate about the nature of the “true church”. In both the 16th and 20th century, the question problematically becomes: ‘*Which church is the true church*’ – the large, seemingly unfaithful church, or the new, local congregations emerging in attempts to be the faithful?

At the time of the Reformation, the Mennonite “brotherhoods” or “brother-churches” were established in response to the moral decay of the Roman Catholic Church. Many Anabaptists attempted to establish congregations that looked very different from the civic church they considered to be “unclean and impure”. Attention was drawn to the symbol of baptism, with a rejection of infant baptism, and the (re)institution of voluntary baptism upon confession of faith. David Epp notes that in the early 20th century, the Mennonite Brethren repeated this pattern in their relationship to the Mennonite churches from which they withdrew. The term “the

church" (*Kirche*) was applied to the Mennonite church, and Epp states that the designation "the church" was not offensive because the Mennonites did not want to be a member of the great invisible Church of Christ on earth made up of all peoples and tongues, nor because he would not want to consider the Mennonite congregations as a small part of that great universal church, but because this designation was intended to set the Mennonite Brethren apart as the antithesis of the Mennonite Church. The problem appeared to be, as Epp states, that the Mennonite Brethren Church thought it alone bore the genuine Christian life. Again the ritual of baptism was used to accentuate the difference – this time baptismal immersion replaced the practice of pouring or sprinkling, as the method with the fullest biblical meaning according to **Romans 6** – to be buried and to rise again with Christ unto newness of life (Dueck 123–127).

This brief historical detour is helpful to see that baptism is indeed a "visible act with a spiritual meaning", as Isaak states in a reference to Beasley-Murray. It can indeed be viewed as a "means of entry into a visible community of God's people *and* the body which transcends any one place or time" (3). Problems still arise however. Is it possible to think in terms of particular denominations as being the exclusive "true church" over and against all other Christian congregations throughout the history of the church? Are the various symbolic meanings given to baptism all legitimate when they are consistent with the theological views of each diverse Christian tradition? Could it perhaps be more crucial to discuss the possible theological diversity within the "universal, invisible" church of Jesus Christ for a better understanding of our symbolic practices? Another question (more directly concerning our gathering here) can also rightfully be asked – "What spiritual meaning is (or should be) assigned to the visible act of baptism within the Mennonite Brethren churches today?"

Isaak proposes that the ritual of baptism be moved 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"(7). This is very similar to the understanding and practice of baptism outlined by J.B. Toews in *Pilgrimage of Faith* (35–37). Toews argued that this understanding hardened into a dogmatism, and carried with it elements of legalism. Could Isaak's proposal lead us in that direction again? Could we see an increase in attitudes of exclusivity and elitism, a new form of clericalism emerging (with those inside church membership as holding special status over those who are not yet members), a reliance on human effort to accomplish spiritual reform before baptism marks entrance into the church? What happens to the idea that the Spirit of God is essential for a spiritual renewal that can occur when one is within the "body of Christ" – being nourished and sustained through the power of God working in us?

I agree with Isaak that membership should not be seen as a matter of entitlement and that the church needs to embrace its commitment to being 'missional'. Baptismal rites should be preceded with a well-rounded church

education, for the purposes of encouraging intentional Christian living. If it is true, however, as Isaak states and as I agree, that “conversion is an ongoing process” – we are saved, but we are also being saved, and one day we will be saved – we must be careful not to isolate those who may be the “weaker” among us, by blessing only the “strong” with church membership. The body of Christ continues to need an emphasis on the conditions for unity within the early Christian Church – humility, patience, forbearance, and love.

To conclude, I want to suggest one practical reason why baptism may have been delayed at times, with a stronger emphasis on “right” teaching prior to membership into the body of Christ. It seems this practice coincides with the persecution of believers – in the time of Jesus, the 2nd century church, the 16th century church, and the MB church in the late 19th century. In each of these periods, baptism was given a new significance, and the choice to follow the new ideas could result in death for the believer.

- a. In the time of Jesus – as Isaak points out (3. d), Jesus uses the language of “baptism” to symbolize the challenge of faithfulness when he asks James and John: “Are you able . . . to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (**Mark 10:38**). The final “baptism” facing Jesus was a painful death on the cross, and he wonders if his disciples are willing to identify with him despite the high cost it will demand from them – their very lives.
- b. In the 2nd–4th centuries – during this period of extreme persecution, believers went through a three year preparation for baptism. Writing of this period, Eusebius stated that converts needed to be deeply committed to their convictions to endure the horrific martyrdom awaiting them. Becoming a member of the Christian church demanded the believer’s all, and choosing to be baptized could mean an excruciating death (Oden 38–41).
- c. In the 16th century reformation – Balthasar Hubmaier, arguing for the rejection of infant baptism, and a “true” baptism that was voluntary and based on a confession of faith in the work of Jesus Christ, noted that there were three baptisms – baptism of the spirit for inner renewal, baptism of water, as an outward symbol of the new inward reality, and a baptism of blood, in the event of martyrdom for choosing rebaptism (Hubmaier 349).
- d. The beginning of the MB church in the 19th century – J. B. Toews indicated that the Russian Mennonites who chose to be become Mennonite Brethren were often harshly persecuted for choosing to be rebaptized by immersion. The opposition resulted in bloody floggings with rods, which only served to strengthen the movement’s spiritual convictions (Toews 37).

Each of these movements used baptism as a public confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ as well as a visible act symbolizing other strong inward convictions. In each era, the decision to become baptized pressed the believer to a full exercise of their faith – enduring persecution. Baptism was not taken

lightly under these circumstances, and theological positions could harden around the particular distinctions drawn. We may need to keep this dogmatic necessity and/or tendency in mind when we reexamine schismatic periods, like the time of the early church, for application today.

In a final response, then, to Isaak's concluding question "What is the church anyway?" (8), I find it helpful to reflect on some words of Hubmaier, an Anabaptist forefather:

The church is sometimes understood to include all the people who are gathered and united in one God, one faith, and one baptism, and have confessed this faith with their mouths, wherever they may be on earth. This then, is the universal Christian corporeal church and fellowship of the saints, assembled only in the Spirit of God...At other times the church is understood to mean each separate and outward meeting assembly or parish membership that is under one shepherd or bishop and assembles for instruction, for baptism and the Lord's Supper. The difference between the two churches is that the particular congregation may err...but the universal church cannot err. She is without spot, without wrinkle, is controlled by the Holy Spirit, and Christ is with her until the end of the world (Hubmaier 351–352).

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