

Baptism and Church Membership:

A Converted and Baptized People

Identity & Doctrine Series



its preferred form of symbolizing the passage of a person into church membership. It signalled the believer's entry into the fellowship of a local church and also signalled that incorporation into the body of Christ had already occurred.

As J.I. Packer wrote, "The New Testament idea of initiation is [that] of becoming a Christian-in-the-church. There is no 'flight of the alone to the alone;' we are saved in company, as units in the body of Christ, or not at all." Obedience to Christ demands that we join God's visible community.

Baptism, then, has necessary implications for community life (Rom. 12:4, 1 Cor. 12:4). "Isolationism in church—sitting apart, not getting acquainted, dodging responsibility—denies the meaning of baptism."² We show what baptism means when we actively love our fellow believers in the body of Christ.

Preparation for baptism is essential. In the apostolic church, baptismal candidates were probably prepared for baptism through some form of instruction about Christian belief and practice. Later, in the early centuries of the church's history, it was common to require a year of instruction before baptism. To this day, most churches continue the rule that instruction about faith and practice precedes baptism.

Two Ordinances

God's people celebrate their membership in Christ's body through two ordinances: believer's baptism and participation in the Lord's Supper. The two together visibly portray the realities of our faith in God. Baptism is celebrated once and for all at the outset of our Christian life and the Lord's Supper is celebrated from time to time. The first is celebrated before God's people and the other in community with them.

According to Paul, all who confess faith in Christ are invited to the Lord's table (1 Cor. 10:14-22). Since, in New Testament times, such confession was immediately followed by baptism, does that mean that only those who have been baptized can partake? Most churches at one time or another face questions posed because someone may be too old to be baptized, may have been baptized as an infant, may have come to faith in a movement that doesn't

baptize (e.g., the Salvation Army), or may be away from the church community in which they were baptized.

The New Testament doesn't speak to these cases. We don't read that access to the Lord's table should be denied to those who haven't yet been baptized. Yet we believe "that the normal pattern in the New Testament was that baptism preceded participation in the Lord's Supper," according to our Confession of Faith. Certainly the Lord's table is open to those who profess to belong to the Lord and are in fellowship with a believing community.

On the other hand, the New Testament does place limitations on participation. Immoral conduct, adherence to doctrinal error that causes divisions, or knowingly breaking fellowship with others, would normally forfeit the right to attend. Further, the New Testament encourages us to celebrate the Lord's Supper in a manner that fits its sacred role.

To accept Christ is to accept and love his people. Our discovery of new life in Christ should lead us to confess our faith through baptism and entrance into a visible community of believers. And when we participate in the Lord's Supper, we sit in union with one another as family members around a common table. We anticipate the day of the final homecoming of all God's people. Then "the home of God will be among mortals, he will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples" (Rev. 21:3). ■

Adapted from "A Converted and Baptized People" (*Direction*, Fall, 1986) by Ray Bystrom.

Copyright © March, 2000. Redesigned March, 2010. Published by the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Board of Faith and Life. For additional copies, contact: Canadian Conference of MB Churches, 1310 Taylor Ave., Winnipeg, MB R3M 3Z6. Call toll-free: 1.888.669.6575.

1. Ralph Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
2. J.I. Packer, *I want to be a Christian* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1977).



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

mbconf.ca/faithandlife



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

Faith and Life

Baptism and Church Membership: A Converted and Baptized People

Is it necessary to be baptized? Why should baptism and church membership be connected? Why should I bother to join a church at all? Many—especially young people—ask themselves these questions. After all, joining a group of any sort can be intimidating.

At the time of the Reformation, some churches recaptured the understanding that baptism and church membership—in contrast to infant baptism—were for people who could testify to a life-transforming encounter with Christ. They became known as “believers’ churches,” and Anabaptists were foremost among them.

Together with other Mennonite bodies, Mennonite Brethren have maintained that baptism and church membership are an integral part of one’s Christian experience. Whatever the reasons for our tendency to resist becoming church members, it is clear that we need to rediscover the biblical basis for such a commitment. Indeed, it is essential that all of us—theologians, pastors, and young Christians alike—think together about what it means to be members of the body of Christ.

Meaning of Church

In the New Testament, the word “church” is used in two distinct yet connected ways. It is frequently used to refer to a community (e.g., Acts 11:26) or communities of believers at a certain place (e.g., Acts 15:41). The emphasis on an actual gathering of Christians within a certain area is especially clear in

a Pauline phrase like “when you come together as a church” (1 Cor. 11:18).

Secondly, however, the word “church” is also used to refer to a wider spiritual community. In Colossians and Ephesians, for example, Paul regularly speaks about the “body of Christ” to which all Christians belong. Writing to the Ephesian Christians, Paul says that “God has made us alive with Christ...and raised us up with Christ” (Eph. 2:5-6).

According to Paul, who most clearly defined the meaning of church in the New Testament, Christians belong to both a universal church and a local church. If we were to ask Paul about the relationship of these two, he would probably answer that wherever Christians gather to worship, edify one another, or serve, they are a visible expression of the universal church. As Robert Banks puts it, they are “a manifestation in time and space of that which is essentially eternal and infinite in character.”

If this is what church means, what does it mean to be a member of a church? When and how do we become a committed part of a gathering of God’s people and a visible expression of a heavenly community?

Usually, we have connected membership to formal reception into the fellowship of a local church. But the New Testament actually tells us nothing about becoming “church members.” It only speaks about being “members of Christ” (1 Cor. 6:15) and “members of the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). As J.I. Packer has written, “In Scripture, Christ’s body is essentially ordinary folk living together in a new and extraordinary life because the risen Lord has touched and claimed and now controls them.” People who found new life in Christ naturally entered into or “became members” of a local, visible community of believers. What we do with membership today gives formal shape to what the church has always done naturally from the beginning.

The word “member” fits perfectly with the idea of the body because the body has many parts or limbs. Paul’s use of the body metaphor indicates that “living together” means “living within a network of interpersonal relationships that both lay their claims upon us and invite us to contribute our best.”¹

As Paul travelled the Mediterranean proclaiming the good news about Christ, communities sprang up and multiplied. He intentionally brought people into an intimate relationship with God which, simultaneously, connected men and women to one another in lively communities of faith.

Is Membership Important?

Why is church membership important? We might give two different but closely related answers.

First, membership in the church is important because God needs “his own people” to witness to the world. Indeed, the church as a community of people is crucial to God’s plan in human history. All of the biblical story testifies to the fact that God has not chosen to work with people in isolation, but rather with people in community. “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...,” writes Peter (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

Peter underscores that the church is a community of people who owe their existence and uniqueness to one fundamental fact—the call of God. Peter also emphasizes that the church is a community of people who are bound in a covenant relationship with God and one another. Our relationship with God becomes the model for our relationship with one another. God’s people commit themselves to one another. And Peter highlights the truth that the church is a community of people who exist for the world. As Lesslie Newbigin wrote, “Wherever men think that the purpose of election is their own salvation rather than the salvation of the world, then God’s people have betrayed their trust.” God has called a special people into existence and it is his purpose to use them for the salvation of the world.

Second, membership in the church is important because the believer needs a family in which to grow. In the account of the birth of the church, as written by Ralph Martin, “The apostles’ word was not primarily, ‘Come, catch our enthusiasm and share our joy,’ but rather, ‘Come, join God’s new society and take your place in its ranks.’” The book of Acts reminds us that it is in the community of faith where we are nurtured to maturity in Christ. (Or see also Eph. 4:16.) Terms like “body,” “family,” and “fellowship” used in the New Testament all underline the importance of community life. In this setting, the relationship with God becomes

vital, habits of Christian behaviour are developed, spiritual gifts are discovered, and spiritual maturity is promoted.

Before We Become Members

Two things must happen before we become church members—we must be converted and we must be baptized. The two belong together like treble and bass in music.

Basic to the New Testament is the command of Jesus, “Be converted!” (Mk. 1:15, Matt. 18:3). Conversion involves a turning, changing direction, reversing the focus of our lives so that our fundamental loyalties are shifted toward rather than away from God. It is essentially a commitment to God in response to the mercy of God and consists of repentance and faith. Repentance signals a radical about-turn in our thoughts, aims, actions, and loyalties. Service to God and others replaces the “me-first” outlook of the old life. Faith—not merely believing in Christian truth—but trusting Christ to forgive us through his death and resurrection—gives us peace and life. Our lives begin to be lived in joyous and grateful obedience to God’s faithfulness and love.

Conversions may occur suddenly, as in the case of Saul of Tarsus, or gradually, as in the case of Lydia, the cloth-seller.

The New Testament plainly teaches that faith and baptism belong together. Baptism follows a personal confession of faith (Rom. 10:9-10, 1 Tim. 6:12). While faith without baptism was possible (e.g., the thief on the cross), normally, a profession of faith was followed by baptism (Acts 16:25-34), in obedience to Christ’s command (Matt. 28:19,20). So, baptism is an act of confession.

A temporary space between faith and baptism may be healthy in some cases, as for very young persons. But when professing adults with credible conversion experiences postpone baptism indefinitely, they are really declaring their unwillingness to submit to the lordship of Christ. Faith without the good work of baptism is incomplete.

Baptism is also an act of initiation. The word comes from a Latin word meaning “beginning” and refers to reception and entrance into a committed membership. The early church selected water as

► continued on reverse