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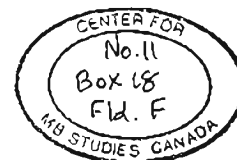
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The Role of Baptism and Church Membership in
MB Churches Around the World

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Seminar Paper: THE ROLE OF BAPTISM AND CHURCH MEMBERSHIP IN M. B. CHURCHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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Introduction

The MB churches have always affirmed and claimed to be churches totally and exclusively grounded on the teachings of the New Testament. They say that they are orientated in "belief and practice" on Biblical teachings. From the very beginning of their history Mennonite Brethren have sought to baptize only persons who give a clear testimony of their faith in Jesus Christ. The Mennonite Brethren want to be a church of converted people. With this conviction and procedure the first Mennonite Brethren gave testimony of their conception of the church of Jesus Christ. This has also been the objective of our churches until the present. In this respect A.H. Unruh writes: "The Mennonite Brethren churches of today do not orientate themselves by the opinions of past generations but by the decisive doctrine of the Gospel." (Die Geschichte der M.B. Gemeinde, Seite 81). Let us take a look at this Gospel to get reliable firsthand orientation.

In the last words of Jesus to His disciples He gives clear orientation and definition about the mission of the church in the world and the way in which this mission can and should be fulfilled. (See Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:9-18; Luke 27:44-49; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:3-8)

The will of God is that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4). To make this possible the Father gave His Son to carry the sins of all humanity. Jesus made propitiation for the sin of all human beings for all generations. In Jesus Christ, the way that leads to God was opened. This is the "Good News," the Gospel which the church must take to all persons, peoples and races. This can be done in the power of the Holy Spirit. He, the Holy Spirit, enables the disciples of Christ to do this. He gives the power to testify. He gives wisdom and courage. The Holy Spirit gives life to the gospel and applies it to the lives of human beings. He

convinces of sin, righteousness and judgment. He regenerates and seals for salvation. Thus the salvation of mankind is the work of the triune God. What is then the human contribution? The task of the church? Let us analyze this aspect from two angles.

1. For the church of God this task includes three explicit commands of Jesus Christ: (a) to witness and make disciples, (b) to baptize, (c) to teach all things that Jesus commanded. The first aspect - witness or make disciples - we can call evangelizing. The second I would describe as establishing or stabilizing those who believe. The third is the longest and broadest; it embraces the whole life of a Christian; it is teaching to live according to God's principles. It is the edification of the Christians for their ministry in the world.

2. For the world, or the lost sinners, the command is to listen to the Gospel, receive the testimony, accept the gospel by faith, receive baptism and the teaching of all designs of God, integrating himself organically into the church. In this context I will try to analyze specifically the aspects of baptism and church membership; the topic which was assigned to me.

I. BAPTISM IN THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCHES

There has never been a doubt among Mennonite Brethren about the fact that baptism is a clear commandment of Jesus Christ. Neither has there been a doubt that baptism should be restricted to persons who have already declared their faith in Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. We mention here such texts as Matt. 28:19, Mark 16:16, and Acts 2:38. These texts are clear and provide an excellent basis for the practice of baptism. The practice has been to orientate the new convert to demonstrate the authenticity of his conversion by a new sanctified life. Who gives this proof may present himself to the church, confess his faith in Jesus Christ and receive baptism and be accepted officially as a member into the church. We consider as wholesome the emphasis on the practical demonstration of faith in daily life. However, we do not believe it biblically justifiable to establish a minimum age or a fixed term of probation before someone has a right to be baptized. The New Testament does not justify such procedure.

Another aspect to be considered is the fact that the criteria applied in the evaluation of the faith of the candidate for baptism are often based more on cultural and traditional elements than on the teaching of the New Testament. This creates serious paradoxes in a world with accelerated

cultural and sociological changes. There is a contradictory aspect in this area. It is emphasized that baptism is merely a symbolic act, but norms (rules) have been established which indicate that the rite has become a primary and essential event. We should rethink this aspect in our doctrine and practice. This compels us to reflect about the meaning of baptism.

A. What does the New Testament say about the meaning of baptism?

An attentive reading will show that baptism was always intimately connected with conversion or the new birth. But it is also intimately connected with the sanctified life and with personal relationship of the Christian with God. I believe that in synthesis we may say that baptism is:

1. A commandment of Jesus Christ; and as such an act of obedience to Jesus Christ. By submitting to baptism a person says: "I recognize and accept that Jesus Christ has the right to order my life. I am ready to acknowledge and fulfill these orders. I recognize Jesus as Lord and submit myself consciously and voluntarily to Him."

2. Baptism is also a public testimony of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. James tells us that faith without works is dead. Thus our faith in Jesus Christ must be expressed in a concrete and material way. Baptism is, according to the New Testament, the first expression of this faith; repentance either precedes baptism or occurs simultaneously.

3. Baptism is, furthermore, a public commitment by which the candidate says: "I died with Jesus Christ on the cross and was buried with Him. I rose with Jesus Christ and with Christ I shall live a new life, a holy life, a life according to the will of God, a life that shall be the incarnate expression of God's will. This life is another concrete expression of faith in the Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ."

4. Baptism is also an external symbol of the internal experience of the new birth. An external manifestation by which the candidate says: "I have been washed of my sins by the blood of Jesus Christ. Regenerated by the Holy Spirit to a new life. The life of God in me and for me. It is not I who live, but Christ lives in me."

5. Baptism is the mark or the characteristic of the real disciple of Jesus Christ. "Make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". As a disciple the Christian evangelizes and leads new disciples to baptism.

6. Baptism is a gift of the grace of God. Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved. Salvation is promised to those who believe and to those who are baptized upon their faith.

7. Baptism is a testimony, a visible sign and remembrance that the Christian was incorporated into the church. That is, he is a part of the church, which is the body of Christ. Thus the one who received baptism considers himself and is seen by others as a living member of the body of Jesus Christ with all the rights and duties connected with this reality (I Cor. 12, 13).

8. Finally, baptism is a sign that the Christian has put on Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:27). It is true that the majority of the candidates in our churches are not sufficiently aware of these truths. Perhaps they are not even capable of understanding them in depth, but this should not cause us to reduce or simplify more and more the concept and the importance of Biblical baptism. However, according to my understanding that is what is happening.

In view of the Biblical significance of baptism it is necessary to rethink and re-examine the doctrine and practice of baptism in the Mennonite Brethren churches. Beside the aspects already mentioned, I want to suggest some questions for consideration.

1. How can we eliminate or at least diminish the legalistic aspect in our thinking about baptism?
2. What can be done to lead new converts to consider baptism more as a privilege than as an obligation?
3. How can we avoid the notion that baptism is simply an initiation ceremony, a door to enter into a local church?
4. Is baptism the exclusive privilege of the local church? Or could it be practised by Christians who would lead the new converts to the church afterward?
5. It is true that there is confusion between the concepts of conversion (new birth) and baptism among members of the Mennonite Brethren churches. How can we remedy this situation?

II. CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

The other aspect of the topic assigned to me refers to church membership. What does it mean to be a member of the Mennonite Brethren church? I believe I am right in saying in general the comprehension of

membership in our churches is as follows:

1. To be a member of the church means to be a saved person through Jesus Christ and baptized according to the custom of the Mennonite Brethren.
2. To be a member of the church means to be ready to live a life of sanctification; that is, a life of separation from the world.
3. To be a member of the church means to assume the standards of conduct approved by the church, not only in the spiritual realm, but also in social, professional and political life as well as in leisure time.
4. To be a member of the church means to participate regularly in the services and the other activities of the church.
5. To be a member of the church means to have a warranty to be received in heaven. This is at least a common understanding of many.
6. To be a member means to be a faithful and regular contributor to the support of the local work of the church and also to the extension work in missions and social assistance.
7. To be a member of the church means that a person has the right to participate at the Lord's Supper and at the administrative meeting of the church. He has the right to vote and to be voted to ecclesiastical and conference offices.
8. To be a member of the church means to have the right to receive from the church all the necessary spiritual assistance, as well as the right to cooperate actively in the work of the church.

There has been and continues to exist in the Mennonite Brethren churches a wholesome effort to watch over the members that they live lives worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This care, without question has brought encouraging and positive fruit. To God be the glory! But there have also been effects less positive and encouraging. I would like to emphasize only a few so we may ponder on some of the topics in order to improve our lives and services in the church and in the world. There were and still are various aspects where care (zeal) is confounded with legalism. There were and still are attempts trying to dominate and control the lives of the members much beyond the recommendable. This has created a dichotomy between the spiritual and the secular life of the members. Sometimes it gives the impression that we have in the church a people without a history. Sometimes we have had the impression that conversion implies literal separation from the world in order to live in a sphere that may no longer be this earth ("the world"), but still is not heaven. The result is a serious problem of

identity. What would be the proper way? Permit me to present some ideas as suggestions for a new vision and understanding of what it means to be a member of a Mennonite Brethren church.

I understand membership in a church as an exceptional privilege and as a sacred and permanent responsibility. A privilege because it means to be a member of the body of Christ in the world. It means to be a part of a group of saved men and women, separated and enabled of God for a life that has its origin, its source of power and its destiny in God. It means to be chosen by God for a ministry of reconciliation, of salvation, for restoration of humanity with God, in God and for God. To be a member of the church is a privilege because it means to live in a community where Jesus Christ is Lord, where His will is law and where this love is the link which unites us all. To be a member of the church means to have the privilege to be a bearer of a message which really supplies the need of all the people of this world regardless of what their lives or situations may be. To be a member of the church means to be able to show the world how a person can live a happy and fulfilled life. To be a member of the church is a sacred and permanent responsibility because God gave to the church the sublime and magnificent task to be in this world as: (a) light, which illuminates the life of so many that live in darkness. Yes, the light of the world. We have not been called to shine for ourselves. We must shine "outside," in the world. If we only project our light on one another, we will be blinded to the opportunities and needs of our surroundings. Thus we must be light where there is darkness; the spiritual darkness of evil; the darkness of ignorance and hopelessness; the darkness of hate and injustice. There our light must shine. This is what it means to be a member of the church of Jesus Christ. (b) salt, that permeates the society, the families, the business world, the schools, the leisure time, the public administration. Salt, that prevents rotteness. Salt to combat effectively against licentiousness, vices, immorality, and pornography. Being present in the world but not of the world. If we are salt we must mingle with the world in order to permeate it with the preserving and purifying effects of salt. On the contrary, if we want to be salt only inside the church we become which irritates and leads to death. To be a member of the church is to be the salt of the earth in the world. To be a member of the church means, in the New Testament, to assume and perform that function which the Holy Spirit attributed to us in the body of Christ. Thus only will there be harmony and balanced growth of the entire body.

The church exists in the world to be a restoring agency, to be an enabling agency for the ministry, to be a glorifying agency of God. To be a member of this church means participating actively, efficiently and permanently in the saving work of Jesus Christ in the world. In view of all this let us think about the following questions (I gratefully accept other suggestions):

1. In what areas and aspects can we as Mennonite Brethren improve our concept of membership in the church?
2. Which are the areas and aspects in which we can and should rethink our concept of the church and the practice of church life?
3. How can we give our church members a right vision of their place and function in the body of Christ?
4. How can and should we evaluate the church members in their efforts to help them to be members as God wants them to be?
5. What are really the New Testament characteristics of a church member? That is, without ethnic, cultural, economic, political, ideological and religious injunctions?