



Accents & Issues

Baptism and Belonging

When a person becomes a believer in Jesus Christ as Lord, that person begins a new life as a disciple of Jesus. Baptism celebrates that significant event, which includes both personal experience and corporate commitment.

Historically, water baptism has been the initiation for nearly all Christians. Baptism was the highlight of the beginning of Jesus's ministry and an emphasis in his final words to the disciples in his Great Commission (Matt. 3:13-17; 28:19).

Baptism in and of itself has no power. Rather, it is a symbol of the repentance and forgiveness of sins that the believer has already experienced, and the outward sign of an inner change of heart and redirection of life.

Christian church traditions practice different modes of baptism, such as sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. Yet, the more important difference among Christians is whether baptism is administered in infancy or only after a person becomes a believer. The Brethren in Christ are children of the Anabaptists, who understood that baptism follows belief in Jesus as Lord (Acts 2:38-41).

The book of Acts connects belief with baptism. The conversion of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9-13); Peter's account of Gentile converts (Acts 11:16-17); the Philippian jailer's salvation (Acts 16:31-34); the belief of Crispus, the synagogue ruler (Acts 18:8); and Paul's words to the Ephesians (Acts 19:4-5) all affirm that belief followed by baptism was the order of the early Church and that baptism was a symbolic rite for entrance into the Christian way of life.

The accepted mode of baptism for the Brethren in Christ is a forward kneeling immersion as a sign of humble obedience. As Christ bowed his head in death, so a believer kneels or bows in submission to God and is baptized into the death of Jesus and raised to new life through the Holy Spirit (Rom. 6:4). Three immersions honor God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those who wish to covenant with the Brethren in Christ and have been previously baptized as believers are not required to be rebaptized.

Because baptism is only offered to persons who obey Jesus as responsible believers, rather than baptizing infants, the Brethren in Christ provide a ceremony of dedication for small children, as suggested by biblical examples (1 Sam. 1:11, 24-28; Mark 10:13-16).

Baptism is a sign of belonging to Jesus' new Kingdom of all believers. The Church is not primarily a building or an organization but a group of persons who are both part of the global body of Christ and members of a local gathering of believers. Baptism is the outward sign that a person not only believes in Jesus but is also entering into a covenant relationship with responsibility to the worldwide Christian Church and a local congregation of believers.

Norman Bert described baptism and belonging in the early days of the Brethren in Christ:

Baptism was the door through which the new convert entered the church and took the first step on the road of discipleship and brotherhood. Baptism occurred like this: a meeting would be called because some converts had applied for baptism. In this meeting, the Brethren would listen as the applicants testified to their experience of the new birth and expressed their acceptance of the Bible doctrines as practiced by the Brethren in Christ. After the testimonies, the assembled Brethren accepted or rejected each applicant. Those who were accepted were presently baptized in a nearby stream or lake. They regarded baptism as the first act

of Christian obedience on the part of the new believer after his conversion.... Baptism was a brotherhood affair - all the brethren participated in accepting this new convert as one of themselves.

Thus, baptism is typically followed by commitment to a given local church. While baptism and membership are not synonymous, they are closely related. Each believer makes a covenant of membership with a local congregation, which should be entered as soon after baptism as practical.

Belonging to Christ's body is somewhat like marriage. It takes real commitment and work for the covenant to have lasting meaning. Membership in a local congregation entails taking an active part in building up the body of believers by loving and caring for other members of Jesus's family. Upon relocating, a person's membership is affirmed with a new congregation.

Baptism is the sign that a believer is publicly beginning the new life in Christ and is becoming a responsible member of a congregation and denomination. Believer's baptism is a significant event based on personal belief and a commitment to a lifelong journey with fellow believers and an act of obedience to follow the Lord and love his people.

