Getting *all* wet
Baptism and church membership

Irma Fast Dueck

Pastor: You've been active in the church for years. You're a committed Christian and committed to living a Christian life. Why don't you want to be baptized?

Parishioner: I do want to be baptized. Really, I do. But I don't want to join the church, so I won't get baptized.

It's a conversation that many of us have participated in. Some, like me, have been on both sides of the exchange. As a teacher of undergraduates, I am bewildered by the many students who publicly express commitment to the Christian faith, who exhibit a deep desire to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship, and who are actively involved in Christian communities/churches, yet who choose not be baptized and join the church. While their reasons for not being baptized are as varied as the students themselves are, perhaps the most common reasons they give are ecclesiological: these young people desire baptism but do not want to become members of the church.

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Some churches have reacted to this resistance to church membership by separating baptism from joining the church, in hopes of making a decision for baptism easier for youth and young adults. But without the connection to the church, the rite's meaning diminishes: it becomes an individualized action focusing on a person's decision of faith without marking that person's corresponding entry into the community of faith, Christ's body, a people committed to following in the way of Christ. Without the link to becoming a member of the body, baptism is like getting just a little bit wet, like wading rather than going deep.

It is difficult to reconcile the separation of baptism and church membership with Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and understandings of the church. Indeed, baptism and church have belonged together in Christian tradition since long before the Anabaptist movements of the sixteenth century.

So what's the problem?

Current practices of baptism and church membership among Mennonites reflect a tension between a functional theology of church life and the more official "doctrinal" theology of the church expressed in the Mennonite confession of faith.[1] A growing gap between the number of church members on the rolls and those actually participating in church; discomfort with the language of church membership, which seems institutional and inhospitable; inclusion of unbaptized people at the communion table—all these elements indicate a disconnect between functional/practical and confessional theologies.

The literature emanating from the "emerging" and "missional" church movements has been important in drawing attention to the fact that a cultural shift is taking place that the church needs to navigate. And when it comes to baptism and church membership, attempts to navigate this change are taking various forms:

- Some have placed fewer expectations on those wanting to be baptized, in an attempt to make the decision for baptism easier and less complicated.
- Some, in response to the current "post-commitment" culture and in a desire to be more hospitable, have put fewer demands on church members and have blurred the line between members and non-members.
- Others churches are resisting the post-commitment culture by placing more, not fewer, demands on members, citing evidence that many people respond better to higher expectations than to more modest ones.
- Some have begun to equate church attendance with church membership, while others criticise this equating of attendance with committed membership.
- Some argue that the idea of membership, when accompanied by institutional language and expectations, is alien to Christian community. They contend that belonging is

relational and does not need to be linked with bureaucratic agenda.

- Some have moved to different types or levels of church membership, such as "seekers," "friends of the church," or "associates."[2]

These approaches are symptomatic of larger issues in our cultural climate, issues that raise new questions about the meaning of church membership and its relationship to baptism. While many factors in our culture have an impact on our practices, let me highlight two issues that may give us cause to renew our thinking about baptism and church membership:

Current practices of baptism and church membership reflect a tension between a functional theology of church life and the more official "doctrinal" theology of the church expressed in the confession of faith.

Christendom is in rapid decline. From the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine in AD 313 until approximately the midpoint of the twentieth century, the church occupied a central position in Western societies. This period has been called Christendom; as a key social institution, the church provided stability and security. Today many claim that we are in the midst of a transition from Christendom to post-Christendom. This new reality is characterized by pluralism and a radical relativism. Today religion is more frequently understood in terms of its sociological and psychological significance than in terms of claims it may make about divine revelation and absolute truth. Furthermore, the mainline church as an institution has lost its privileged position (a position, some would argue, that Anabaptist-Mennonite churches never had), and increasingly it occupies a place on the margins of society alongside other voluntary associations.

Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of baptism and church membership developed in reaction to Christendom structures and thinking. After Constantine came the union of church and state, in which baptism of infants and loyalty to the state went hand in hand. Believers baptism confronted this understanding and challenged the state's authority to dictate in church matters. This move was in many ways what made Anabaptism seem so dangerous: it was perceived, at least in part, as a threat to the state's authority and to the unity of society. The language of church

membership was significant for Anabaptist-Mennonites in a Christendom time: they wanted to clearly distinguish those truly committed to following Christ (the visible church, as distinct from the invisible church) from those who were part of the church for other reasons (through infant baptism, because of social/cultural expectations, etc.).

Today Christendom has all but disappeared, and in our secularized society most people who go to church do so because they want to be there and choose to be there despite significant social pressures to be somewhere else. But church membership is no longer a sign of radical commitment to the church and to Christ as ultimate authority in one's life.

Church membership smells of "institution." We live in a time of deep suspicion of all things institutional. Our society is facing a crisis of trust: we find it increasingly difficult to trust anything, but especially institutions. The institutions people once trusted (church, police, health care, education, etc.) have all become suspect.

Accompanying the demise of Christendom has been the demise of modernity, with its Enlightenment emphasis on logical and linear ways of thinking and living. The Protestant Reformation for the most part created churches closely aligned with the newly literate culture of the time. Linear and rational thought patterns, reasoned exegesis of texts, and expository preaching illustrated the new "modern" culture's focus on the written word. At different times and to different degrees, the church removed the symbolic, the mystical, and the experiential, in order to make space for logical and linear ways of thinking and living. Anabaptist-Mennonites were no exception to this trend.

With the modern world came an emphasis on organizational structures and efficiency. One thinks of Henry Ford's creation of assembly line methods of mass producing manufactured goods—processes that frequently resulted in dehumanization and disempowerment of workers. John Drane has argued that as the twentieth century progressed, the characteristics of a "McDonaldized" society began to show up in the church. According to Drane, the predictable, calculated, efficient, and controlling aspects of McDonald's restaurants are mirrored in today's church: there are jobs to be filled, tasks to be done, budgets to be used

efficiently: all the work is managed in an orderly fashion so as to meet the needs of the consumer. A McDonaldized church is an institutional church.[3]

In our culture the language of church membership quickly gets reduced to a list: a list of prerequisites needed so one can enter an institution, or a list of jobs to be filled by those who have taken on the responsibility of membership. Sadly, membership language has become synonymous with membership dues and membership statistics, and it contributes to a sense of exclusivity, of distinguishing between those who are in and those who are out. The language of "church membership" merges with the language of "church institution," which sounds like "constitution," which means bylaws and bureaucracy. The result is a diminished sense of the church as the body of Christ, a living organism.

This institutional language is unappealing not just to those outside the church but also to those who are deeply committed to the church. Some resist being labelled or included in organizational statistics; others are reluctant to claim denominational allegiance. Some feel membership implies total agreement with everything the church teaches; others are wary of communicating exclusivity. These reactions may be symptoms of a post-commitment culture, but in this time of transition we also need to ask whether the terminology of church membership is still helpful.

Receiving baptism in the body of Christ

So why do we continue to hold baptism and church membership together? Given the developments described above, there may be good evangelical reasons to separate them: more people might get baptized if baptism were not linked to church membership. Unfortunately, the church is often perceived as a barrier to baptism, thereby making "church" a problem that somehow needs to be solved. And if church membership is reduced to having your name on a roster, paying membership dues, meeting financial obligations, filling volunteer positions, having a sense of entitlement, clearly there is a problem, even if it is a problem of perception. But it isn't a problem that can be solved by separating baptism from church membership, because when that happens, both baptism and church are diminished, the fullness of their meaning lost.

Nobody gets baptized alone. Baptism is a primordial Christian act, and it reminds us of what it means to be Christian—among other things, that to be Christian is to participate in the church, the body of Christ. Perhaps the most obvious first clue in the act of baptism is the fact that nobody gets baptized alone. Baptism takes place with others. The water of baptism brings us into the community of the church, into the body of Christ. We join with each other in baptism, reflecting our deep dependence on God and on the body of Christ, which gives us our identity and nourishes us. Baptism reminds us that we are not alone. We are not homeless orphan children but those who belong. Just as Jesus was claimed at his baptism—"You are my Son, the Beloved . . ." (Mark 1:11)—so at our baptism we are claimed, marked, signed, branded, sealed. As Peter proclaimed, in what must have been part of an early baptismal liturgy, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Pet. 2:9–10).

Baptism reminds us that the church is not something we achieve or create or produce; through baptism we receive each other in the body of Christ.

The early Anabaptists argued that through water baptism you confessed your sins before the congregation, testified to your faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and were incorporated into the fellowship of the church, thereby accepting the responsibilities that went with membership in the church. Water baptism signified that the inner yieldedness to Christ (*Gelassenheit*) had taken place; that you were now committed to the body of Christ, the church; and that the church was committed to you. It also meant that you were willing to suffer for Christ and for your sister or brother.

Here within the Anabaptist tradition of baptism we see a curious interplay of the personal and the communal. While baptism brings you into the community, baptism is at same time a profoundly individualizing act. In being baptized you turn yourself over to God; you yield your life to God. In baptism you set yourself on a particular path in which you commit yourself to learning to love Jesus more than anything else, and you choose to walk in the path of Jesus, no matter where it leads.

A distinguishing feature of those within the believers baptism tradition is that you receive baptism as a result of your own decision, not that of your parents or government or church. And it is perhaps because of this element of personal choice that baptism and membership in the church has become strangely privatized and limited to one's own deciding and acting. When I listen to my students reflect on their baptisms, their imagination focuses on baptism as something "*I*" do: *I* learn, *I* decide, *I* choose, *I* get baptized, *I* join the church that *I* like. Accompanying this emphasis on one's own decision and action in baptism has been a history of qualifications needed in order to be eligible to participate, a practice that has brought us dangerously close to conceiving of salvation as our own responsibility, as something *I* do, *I* achieve, *I* make myself eligible for. This is a distortion our early Anabaptist forebears did not foresee as they were reacting to the practices of baptism in the time of the Reformation.

***We* receive *baptism*.** At minimum, the water of baptism should recall the simple gesture of washing, which reminds us that it is God who washes us. We don't wash ourselves; we don't baptize ourselves. God makes us clean, regenerates us, renews us. We do not achieve baptism, or earn it, or accomplish it; we *receive* baptism, as a gift, just as we receive the grace of God and the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. We don't invent our identity at baptism; in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we receive our identity. And so too with the church: baptism reminds us that the church is not something we achieve or create or produce; through baptism we receive each other in the body of Christ. In baptism we are yoked together with other Christians, whether we like it or not, whether we like them or not.

***Church participation is the lived expression of baptized life*.** Baptism is not just a one-time event based on a one-time decision. It is a way of life, a way of being Christian together. Baptism as a way of life is more akin to a spiritual practice than to a one-time decision. And it follows that church membership (participation) is the lived expression of baptized life. It too is more like a spiritual practice rather than a list of duties and obligations (though given our current cultural climate, the language of church membership may need to change). The biblical basis for

understanding church membership (or participation) as a spiritual practice comes simply from understanding what membership in the body of Christ means: loving Jesus, and loving in the way that Jesus loves, and together living as Jesus calls us to live.

It is naive to assume that anyone who gets baptized and joins the church already knows what this loving and living entails. While as Christians we may be born again, we are certainly not born full grown and fully mature. Baptismal membership in the body of Christ, then, by its very nature, should be understood as a process of spiritual growth and formation. If joining the church at baptism means anything, it means that we have decided to become part of a community committed to being formed into Christlikeness. This shifts an understanding of membership that is essentially passive (we join, and now we're in) to something that requires active participation of us. Church is no longer something we *go to* but a dynamic *we live, together*.

Baptism means getting wet. Trying to disconnect baptism from church membership—or church participation—may be like trying not to get wet at baptism. But we can't avoid getting wet in baptism. In baptism, our scriptures tell us, we are fully immersed—drowning—in Christ (see, for example, Col. 2:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:17), dying with him to rise with him to new life. Baptism is not just a personal matter but is a public testimony of our drowning in Christ, of receiving our new identity as part of the body of Christ and our ordination into the ministry of Christ.

Notes

[1] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995).

[2] Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2004), 309.

[3] See John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002). The book is based on George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1993).

About the author

Irma Fast Dueck is associate professor of practical theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She worships with the saints at Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.