

What madness possessed you? Catechesis for new allegiance

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My daughter wanted to be baptized when she was eight years old. “I believe in Jesus,” she insisted. Having been baptized too young myself, I urged her to wait until she was old enough to assess the faith understandings of her parents. Eventually baptized at fifteen, she bucked (Old) Mennonite convention and requested immersion. Because it was too cold to baptize outdoors, our congregation rented a tub designed for underwater childbirth. My daughter emerged from the baptismal/birthing tub to be wrapped in a white robe and a new identity.

This story is one example of Mennonites rethinking baptism. In the past century, baptism in our denomination largely has lost the radical political and eschatological significance it had in the early church and the sixteenth century. Renewal of baptism—and of catechesis¹—will be vital to our denominational future in a world of rapidly increasing religious diversity.

***Sacramentum* as oath of allegiance**

In 298 C.E., a Roman centurion named Marcellus, stationed at Tingis (in modern Morocco), defied the superpower of his day. When his troops were celebrating the “divine” emperor’s birthday, Marcellus “rejected these pagan festivities, and after throwing down his soldier’s belt [which carried his weapons] in front of the legionary standards . . . he bore witness in a loud voice, ‘I am a soldier of Jesus Christ, the eternal king. From now I cease to serve your emperors and I despise the worship of your gods of wood and stone.’”² A trial judge interrogated Marcellus: “What madness possessed you to throw down the symbols of your military oath [*sacramentum*] and to say the things you did?” “No madness possesses those who fear the Lord,” the soldier replied, “. . . for it is not fitting that a Christian, who fights for Christ his Lord, should fight for the armies of this world.”³ Marcellus was promptly executed.

Marcellus probably was preparing for baptism or already had received it when he was arrested. His offense was that he violated an oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*) to the emperor and gave singular allegiance to Jesus Christ. When the word *sacramentum* appears in the Latin Bible, it generally translates the Greek word *mysterion* (mystery). Paul uses *mysterion* to refer to the central confession of Christian faith: that God, through incarnation in Jesus Christ, has ushered in a new era of salvation by winning a cosmic spiritual struggle:⁴ “Without any doubt, the mystery⁵ of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16).

This kind of confession became, in effect, an oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*) taken on the occasion of baptism. It paralleled the oath to the emperor recited by soldiers on enlistment or on the anniversary of the emperor’s accession to power.⁶ Tertullian (ca. 200 C.E.) understood that the Christian baptismal oath was incompatible with an oath to the emperor: “There is no agreement between the divine and the human sacrament [*sacramentum*], the standard of Christ and the standard of the

devil, the [military] camp of light and the [military] camp of darkness. One soul cannot be due to two masters—God and Caesar.”⁷

In the past century, baptism among Mennonites has lost the radical political and eschatological significance it had in the early church and the sixteenth century. Renewal of baptism—and of catechism—will be vital to our future.

The Apostle Paul on Christus Victor

The earliest Christian writers who refer to baptism understand the ritual in the context of a cosmic struggle. Although the death of Jesus at first appeared to be the ultimate triumph of evil, believers place their hope of overcoming sin and death in the power of Jesus’ resurrection: “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so

that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4).⁸

The prospect of being united in resurrection with Christ has ethical implications: “Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies” (Rom. 6:12). Those receiving baptism have power to feed the enemy (12:20), abandon drunkenness and jealousy

(13:13), and otherwise embody God's reign. Someday, by the same power that transforms individual lives, "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (8:21). Baptism is an individual manifestation of the salvation that someday will happen on a cosmic scale—what theologians later called a Christus Victor view of the atonement.⁹

Theologies of atonement

The Christus Victor interpretation of Jesus' death stands in contrast to other theologies of atonement:¹⁰

Satisfaction (substitutionary) theory. First articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century, the satisfaction theory holds that "the sin of humankind had offended the honor of God and had brought disharmony and injustice into the universe. A debt payment was necessary in order to restore God's honor or to restore justice in the universe. Since humankind owed the debt but could not pay it, Jesus paid the debt by dying in their place."¹¹ Although such a view of the atonement has New Testament basis, when it stands alone it tilts the meaning of baptism toward personal piety and individual salvation. Baptism in this framework may include a turning away from individual sins such as lust or deceit, but not necessarily conversion from involvement in structural evils such as militarism or racism. This theology of atonement tends to make catechesis little more than asking the candidate to give intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions.

Moral influence theory. Propounded by Abelard of France in the twelfth century, the moral influence understanding of atonement sees Jesus as a lofty example of service and love in one wholly devoted to God. Humans are redeemed by following Jesus, living changed lives, and speaking prophetically against societal sin.

Both the satisfaction theory and the moral influence interpretation of atonement should remain part of Mennonite baptismal preparation. But we must recover Christus Victor theology and a vibrant eschatology to move our framework of baptism beyond mere individualistic piety and human-engineered social agenda.

Baptism as eschatological threshold

Christians did not invent the practice of baptism; the ritual was established in Jewish tradition as initiation for Gentiles who wished to claim the faith of Abraham. Instead of using baptism only for Gentiles converting to Judaism, John prescribed baptism for everyone who accepted the good news. The hallmark of those receiving John's baptism was changed behavior: sharing of food and material possessions, and an end to extortion and greed (Luke 3:10–14). Despite such dramatic transformation, John's baptism paled in comparison to the brilliance that would come with Jesus: "I baptize you with water. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16).

The fact that Jesus himself was baptized reveals the eschatological significance of the rite. His baptism marks the beginning of transition to the age of new covenant. The heavens are rent, opening a new avenue between God and mortals. The Holy Spirit descends like a dove. God speaks to Jesus with words destined for anyone who receives baptism: "You are my son [daughter] . . . ; with you I am well pleased." In receiving baptism, Jesus played the same pioneering role he would have in resurrection: "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22).

Sequence of catechesis and baptism in the early church

The word *catechesis* does not appear in the New Testament, although sometimes a new believer received instruction (Acts 18:24–26). Narratives in Acts, however, suggest that the first baptisms generally happened promptly upon confession of faith, with little Christian instruction. After Peter preached a spirited sermon, three thousand new believers received baptism (Acts 2:41).¹² In most (but not all) baptismal narratives in Acts, however, we can infer that those who accepted the gospel were Jews or "God-fearers," people already schooled in the Hebrew Scriptures and in devout living. Many already were believers in Yahweh who had not yet heard that Jesus was the Christ.¹³

The sequence of catechesis and baptism in generations after the apostolic era apparently was something like the following.¹⁴

Scrutiny. The candidate, accompanied by a sponsor, meets with teachers of the church. They ask questions about lifestyle, to

determine whether marital status, occupation, and values are consistent with the gospel. Unacceptable professions include gladiator, astrologer, and many others. Those who enlist in the military are rejected, and soldiers already enlisted may not kill.¹⁵

Instruction, further scrutiny, and exorcism. New believers “hear the word” for up to three years, with attention to lifestyle. Teachers ask whether candidates have honored widows, visited the sick, and “fulfilled all good works.”¹⁶ Candidates receive frequent exorcism. Cyprian (d. 258) describes how preparation for baptism involved giving up the banquets, fine clothes, and civic honors of his patrician past.¹⁷

Baptism. Candidates fast on Friday of Holy Week, and on Saturday kneel for exorcism to expel “every foreign spirit.” The bishop breathes on the candidates and “seals” their foreheads, ears, and nostrils with the sign of the cross.¹⁸ They stay awake all Saturday night, listening to readings and instruction. At dawn on Easter Sunday, candidates remove all clothing, receive the anointing of exorcism, and say, “I renounce you, Satan, and all your service.” Candidates are baptized three times, giving affirmation to a version of the Apostles’ Creed. The new believers receive the Eucharist for the first time.¹⁹

How then shall we catechize?

If we look to the early church for precedent, we see that the question “What must Mennonites believe to be baptized?” is inadequate. We should also ask “Who must Mennonites become to be baptized?”²⁰ “We don’t speak great things—we *live* them!” wrote a Christian lawyer in second-century Rome.²¹ The earliest Anabaptist creedal statements place the accent on behavior.

However, both the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists took it for granted that belief stood at the heart of catechesis and discipleship. The most basic confession of faith for baptism remained “Jesus is Lord.” The early church understood this confession as an exclusive statement about Christ in relation to other religions or political entities. Assuming this starting point, Mennonites today might expect the following from baptismal candidates:

1. Knowledge of the salvation metanarrative—at least a cursory understanding of the sweep of salvation history in the Old

and New Testaments. The accent should be on Christus Victor understandings of Jesus confronting and overcoming powers through the cross and resurrection.

2. Acceptance of classic creeds of the early church, especially the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. These summary statements capture the core of Christus Victor understanding.

3. Ability to place themselves within the Christus Victor metanarrative by recognizing their own need for forgiveness through the cross and resurrection.

4. Knowledge of God's faithful acts in the congregation and the denomination they are joining. They should be aware of at least a few such events from the sixteenth century to the present.

5. Exorcism, and evidence of changed life. If the word *exorcism* is unsettling, we can use other terminology. But the practice should be revived in which leaders of the church pray over baptismal candidates, invoking Christus Victor power to break the hold of sin. Demonic power may manifest itself in materialism, militarism, sexism, and other forms of domination or abuse.

6. Commitment to make the body of Christ, the church, the place of primary identity and belonging.

7. Willingness to serve and suffer for Christ. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists spoke of threefold baptism (cf. 1 John 5:7)—by Spirit, water, and blood (suffering). Followers of Jesus make choices that may be costly in family relationships, economics, politics, and social position.

Little if any of the above agenda is appropriate for children; all is impossible for infants. We should stop using baptism as a panacea for prepubescent guilt or as a nice way to affirm children. The church should give tender affirmation to children who confess faith during the affiliative stage of their development, when children seek to please authority figures. But children requesting baptism should be told that baptism involves making commitments about time, money, career, relationships, and responsibility in the church—all of which must be done when they are old enough to begin thinking as adults and count the cost.

How shall we baptize?

We could reap greater value from the baptism ritual by paying attention to all five senses as avenues for transformation. Having

leaned heavily in the past on verbal communication in worship, we can now also explore a spectrum of sensory symbols.

We could start by restoring mystery to the *sacramentum* of baptism. Anabaptists have made much of baptism being “just” symbol. Hans Hut insisted that water baptism is “not the true reality by which [one] is made righteous, but is only a sign, a covenant, a likeness, and a memorial of one’s dedication, which [sign] reminds one daily to expect the true baptism.”²² This approach shades over into dualism, making water baptism almost superfluous. We need a more integrated understanding of ritual. Humans have no way to talk about God except by symbol, and good symbols participate in the reality they represent.

We might decide to baptize at dawn on Resurrection Sunday or even at midnight Saturday night. We could pass candidates through the waters, seal their foreheads with the sign of the cross, clothe them in white robes, and give a taste of milk and honey symbolizing the Promised Land. Perhaps it is too much to expect that candidates will remove all clothing! The early Christians apparently undressed for baptism in near-darkness, and not before the whole congregation.

Preparation for baptism could include exorcism, and the church might expect special outpouring of the Holy Spirit during baptism. The divine words “you are beloved” should reverberate throughout the ceremony, setting a tone for nurturing relationships within the congregation.

Each generation the church must refine and adapt catechetical resources.²³ Let us seek to recover the rich theological, ethical, and political significance of baptism. It signals full embrace of our future in the reign of God.

Notes

¹ I use *catechesis* to describe a process and *catechism* to mean a document.

² Herbert Musurillo, comp., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr., 1972), 251.

³ *Ibid.*, 253.

⁴ Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 9; Col. 1:26–27.

⁵ *mysterion/sacramentum*.

⁶ For discussion of oaths in the Roman army, see John Helgeland, “Roman Army Religion,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt: Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, Part 2, *Principat*, 16.2, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978): 1470–1505; see especially 1479.

⁷ Tertullian *De idolatria* 19.2.

⁸ Both Eph. 2:5–6 and Col. 2:12–13 understand being raised with Christ as a *present* reality.

⁹ For recent discussion of Christus Victor atonement theory, see J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 12–98.

¹⁰ For treatment of atonement theories, see John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.; Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Pr., 1986).

¹¹ Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 16.

¹² Note that the immediate agenda after baptism is economic redistribution (Acts 2:44–45). Others who promptly received baptism on confession of faith were Simon and fellow Samaritans (8:9–13), an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–39), Saul (9:10–19), Cornelius and fellow Gentiles (10:44–48), Lydia (16:11–15), a Philippian jailor (16:25–34), Crispus and others from the synagogue at Corinth (18:5–8), and Ephesians who had received John’s baptism (19:1–7).

¹³ Pontius makes this observation in the third century (*Vita Cypriani* 3). Cited by Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1999), 26.

¹⁴ This is my summary of the teaching in *The Apostolic Tradition* (ca. 200, Rome). See Kreider, *Change of Conversion*, 21–32; Paul F. Bradshaw, et al., *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Pr., 2002), 82–135; and Thomas M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, Message of the Fathers of the Church, vol. 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Pr., 1992).

¹⁵ *Apostolic Tradition* 15–16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17–19.

¹⁷ *Ad Donatum* 3; see Kreider, *Change of Conversion*, 7–9.

¹⁸ See Rev. 7:3.

¹⁹ *Apostolic Tradition* 20–21.

²⁰ I was asked to address the question “What must Mennonites believe to be baptized?” at the catechism consultation for which this piece was originally prepared.

²¹ Minucius Felix *Octavius* 31.7, 38.6.

²² Hans Hut, “The Mystery of Baptism,” in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1980), 170.

²³ A useful resource in the Mennonite Church is Jane Hooper Peifer and John Stahl-Wert, *Welcoming New Christians: A Guide for the Christian Initiation of Adults* (Newton, Kans.: Faith & Life Pr; Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing Hse., 1995).

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