

## **The New Testament Brethren: Baptism**

### **Matthew 28:16-20**

I was happy to see a long list of new members in the October issue of Messenger. Yet as glad as I am that new members are joining the church, there is nothing that says whether these folks have been recently baptized or are merely transferring their membership from one congregation to another. My question to us in light of this difference is: how important is it today to be baptizing new believers? Well if the early Brethren leaders remarks are any indication as to what our answer should be, it should have great importance.

Looking at writings from Alexander Mack Sr. and Jr., Peter Nead, Christian Longenecker R.H. Miller and other Brethren leaders prior to 1880, any leader who wrote at all seemed destined to focus on baptism. Brethren early identified themselves as Taufgesinnte in German or, in the Netherlands, Doopsgezinde (meaning, "those who are baptism-minded"). And why wouldn't they be "baptism-minded"? Brethren took very seriously the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Yet this description of being "baptism-minded" could be a little misleading to those in other church traditions. Early Brethren took considerable risk by being rebaptized, an action that separated them from the state churches into which they had been baptized as infants. "Anabaptists" was the name given to people who chose to be rebaptized.

These Brethren were concerned to restore to the Christian church the true baptism of the New Testament. For them, this involved three elements of rapidly descending importance: (1) that it be believer baptism rather than infant baptism; (2) that it be immersion rather than sprinkling, pouring, or a waterless, spiritual baptism, and (3) that it be trine immersion, that is, dipping three times forward in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So where did the early Brethren get these understandings? From the New Testament of course. We've already looked at Matthew 28:19 as to why we might identify being baptized by trine immersion ("in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit").

Then if we look at Romans 6:5, we read, "For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." (KJV) From this passage it was understood that in baptism one's head should be lowered while being baptized as Christ's head hung on the cross upon his death, but then rise from the water as we rise in new life in Christ.

And then finally Acts 2:38 identifies why we must be baptized, "Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (NIV) So Brethren believe that baptism is a response to God's saving act through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And by living our lives to be more like Christ, we follow in His baptism and in the joys of God's forgiveness of our sins.

But what about those who believe in infant baptism? We are told in Mark 16:16, "Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved, but anyone who does not believe will be punished." (New Century Version) "Anyone who believes and is baptized" – an infant does not have the capacity to believe in or even begin to understand what it means to follow Christ. But someone old enough to make a decision to follow Christ on their own is who the Brethren believe Mark is speaking of.

And so it was that in 1969 at the age of 5, I was beginning to learn about faith. My family began attending a different church, the Osceola Church of the Brethren, upon our move from Goshen to Elkhart. The Osceola congregation was in the process of building a new facility. It was an exciting time to be a part of the congregation. Or at least I was told so, remember, I was only 5.

By 1974, after a move to Warsaw and back to Elkhart, we were attending the Osceola congregation once again. I was growing spiritually because of my pastor. Charles Stouder had been my pastor as long as I had attended Osceola. He was the one who made me most aware of the spiritual being that lay within. He was the one who invited me to join a membership class. He was the one who taught me where things were found in the Bible – not just the stories I had learned in Kindergarten, but the real depth that could be found. I actually began listening more to the sermons and to the songs we were singing in worship.

I reached the pinnacle of my young spiritual life when on Sunday, March 23, 1975, I committed my life to Christ through baptism. Although I was scared of being dunked under water, I was completely filled with the Spirit. I was so excited to be baptized. The pieces of the church, of my faith journey, were beginning to fall into place for me. And because of my study through the membership class I had taken, I felt more confident than ever as I followed Christ's teachings.

It is a pinnacle for me yet today as I serve as a teacher and baptizer. The words of the Great Commission live in my mind on a regular basis: (1) make disciples, (2) baptize them, (3) teach them to obey all that Jesus taught, (4) and by doing this we are assured that Jesus is with us always – through the end of time.

What a joy it has been to see lives of young and old alike be reshaped by the events of baptism. I've been able to baptize teenagers who are just getting to know themselves and what role faith is emerging in their lives. I've been able to baptize even my own daughters. What an amazing joy to bring people fully into the body of Christ as new believers.

One of my first baptisms was of an older couple at the Locust Grove church, Don and Shelba. They were a wonderful addition to the congregation and I was overjoyed when they accepted my invitation to join the church through baptism. They invited me to their home often for a meal or to sit and talk. I was so impressed by their love for the Lord and the church.

When we visited the Locust Grove church on the occasion of their 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary last fall, we looked for this couple who had been so dear to us during our time at the church. Soon Don approached us and I immediately asked where Shelba was – thinking she must be in the kitchen or maybe wasn't able to make it to this anniversary event.

Don told me of rushing Shelba to the hospital a year prior and of her untimely death. My mind was swimming with emotions as a tear came to his eye. In the course of our conversation, he thanked me for bringing them into the church and for baptizing them. What a glorious day that was for them and the church. And how reassuring for me to know that she was safely in her heavenly home. How life-changing a baptism story can truly be!

I would like for you this morning to turn to someone near you and share a baptism story. It may be your own, one you've witnessed, or one you have read about. Some of you are members of this church, some have not yet made that decision to be baptized, some of you are still members somewhere else. Whatever your story, share for a few moments about a baptism story.

I want to share another story of baptism with you. One in which many of you should be familiar if you've studied Brethren history. It's a story of Brethren baptism firsts.

How many of you can name where and when the first Brethren baptisms were held? That's right, 1708 in the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany. Alexander Mack was first baptized by one of the remaining seven, who Mack then in turn, baptized.

How about the first baptisms in America? Christmas Day, 1723, six persons were baptized near the Germantown, Pennsylvania area in the Wissahickon Creek by Peter Becker. Following baptism on that Christmas Day, the new believers joined in their first Love Feast.

Even on Christmas Day, the focus was not on how many presents were under the tree or if their outdoor lighting extravaganza was better than the neighbors. No, not at all. The focus was on baptism, on Love Feast, on being a follower of Christ, on living out the New Testament.

How wonderful it is to be reminded of our own baptism and how powerful baptism can be. By a simple raise of hands, how many of you, who have been baptized, were baptized indoors? Outdoors? As a teenager? As an adult? In a congregation of the Church of the Brethren? In another denomination?

By making a commitment to follow Christ, we acknowledge that we can't and don't want to go it alone. We need Christ present in our lives. And we live that out by following the New Testament. By being baptized. By communing with our brothers and sisters at Love Feast. By making disciples. By being committed to find peaceful ways of living. And by serving others in the name of Christ.

We offer another way of Christian living. When someone comes to the conclusion that attending church is more like attending to doctrines, creeds,

liturgy, and theological confusion, Brethren see faith as something different. Our life pursuit is not following ritualistic form or racing toward hopeless horizons; but rather to know the living person Jesus and follow His instructions as outlined in the New Testament. We strive to be like Jesus and exemplify His love to others. John 13:35, "*This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other,*" (The Message). You won't need to memorize a new creed because we don't have one. The entire New Testament is our statement of faith.

And that is why we must always remain New Testament Brethren. Living, Baptizing, Discipling, Peacemaking, Serving. All aspects of the New Testament we must live out on a regular basis. May we continue to offer another way of living. Living as followers of Christ. Living as New Testament Brethren. Amen.