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Resource

Following Jesus into baptism – clothed together in Christ

*Mark 10:38–39
Galatians 3:27–28*

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On this 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement, and the 100th birthday of the MWC, we are taking the opportunity to reflect deeply on where we come from, where we find ourselves today, and where we are going.

Today, at 100 yrs of age, MWC is a global communion, diverse in language, culture, ethics, worship and theology. While we recall our origin these days in the baptizing of believers 500 years ago, let us remember always that what holds us together is not that event, or our shared tradition, but Christ, our one and only foundation, as Menno reminds us. Baptism plays an essential role in binding us to Christ, to each other, and, indeed, to the whole body of Christ. Baptism is fundamentally about unity, about being “one,” as Ephesians 4:4–6 reminds us.

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, **one baptism**, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

Baptism is God’s call into that oneness Christ prayed for in John 17. It is, thus, a huge tragedy that at our beginnings already baptism became deeply divisive. Jesus’ praying that we might be one is a major reason that Mennonites entered into years of conversation with Lutherans and Catholics on baptism. As you know, we have also been working at reconciliation with the Reformed communion, our closest cousins among the churches of the Reformation.

However tragic those divisions over baptism were then, they have not only been present in our relationships with other communions but also *within* our Anabaptist communion. We need to confess that we have too often viewed each other with suspicion, and often self-righteously. We have questioned the integrity of each other’s faith, or we have been critical of each other’s way of baptizing, in many instances demanding rebaptism – “double Anabaptism,” we might say. Can renewing our understanding of baptism heal these wounds?

I am convinced that in a world of growing estrangement and hardening of hearts, of polarization, suspicion and fear, baptism becomes an ever more and more powerful sign and witness to God’s unifying peace in Christ. So, it is of vital importance that we take this moment in our history as God’s gift to us and reflect deeply on baptism.

No reflection could be more Anabaptist than going to the Bible for direction and insight. So, this morning I want to explore first the Gospels and then Paul's letters and draw attention to only a few items of importance.

I. Following Jesus in and into baptism

Anabaptists speak of "following Jesus," as we do in the MWC tagline. Following Jesus includes quite obviously *obeying* Jesus' words, his teachings and his example. As followers of Jesus we do as Jesus did and commanded, as he does in Matthew 28:19:

"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."

I recall being taught from early on that baptism is a "step of obedience." Jesus was baptized, and as his followers we are to do the same. Jesus commanded it, and so we obey. We thus have called baptism an "ordinance" to be obeyed more than a sacrament to be received.

But if we are to follow *Jesus* in baptism, how should we understand his *own* baptism? Jesus went to John to be baptized in the desert at the Jordan. John was dunking people under the water, dipping them in the river. So, he became known as John the dunker, the immerser, the baptizer, or as we have come to know him, John "the Baptist." Jewish people knew about bathing in a pool as a ritual of purification, making them ready for worship in the temple. But with John it was different. He called people to come to the Jordan – that historic, symbolic crossing point into the promised land – to take a bath of *repentance* and *forgiveness*, as we read (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3), preparing themselves to enter God's kingdom.

1. Baptism as turning from sin toward the kingdom of God.

Now, to "repent" usually means to be sorry for what we've done wrong, to ask for forgiveness, and to stop such behaviour. And that was very important to early Anabaptists as an initial step in the process of baptism. Listen to the Schleithem Confession of 1527. The very first of the seven articles reads:

"Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment [or change] of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ."

You and I surely need repentance and forgiveness, to change our behaviour. But does Jesus? After all, Hebrews tells us that Jesus was "without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). So, why did Jesus go to be immersed by John in the Jordan? Hebrews provides a clue, I think. Hebrews 2:11 and 14 tell us that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters, sharing the same flesh and the same struggles. Perhaps we should then think of Jesus joining the crowds at the Jordan, there to stand in solidarity with them in their brokenness and sinfulness, joining with them in their repentance from sin, as they turn from hopelessness in the face of poverty, disease, marginalization and political oppression toward hope in the liberating reign of God.

I think that makes a lot of sense. I like to think of Jesus standing with us in our baptism, in solidarity with us, as we come to the water in repentance and receiving forgiveness. We don't go through baptism alone. Jesus is there with us.

But there is more: in Jesus' mother tongue (Aramaic, Hebrew), the term for "repentance" is better translated as "turning" – a "turning from" and a "turning toward." Interestingly, MWC Shared Conviction #3 does not use the term "repent" but rather "turn:"

"As a church, we are a community of those whom God's Spirit calls to turn from sin, acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, receive baptism upon confession of faith, and follow Christ in life."

I suggest that Jesus' baptism by John was not only about standing in solidarity with the people. It was also a moment of "turning" for him personally. His baptism was not a turning *from* sin, but a turning *toward* his own calling and mission as the Messiah, as the Christ, as God's beloved son, sent for the salvation of the world. And you will remember that immediately following his baptism Jesus was taken to the desert to be tested on whether he could in fact complete his messianic mission (Matthew 4:1–11; Mark 1:12, 13; Luke 4:1–13). We know from the Gospels that his would be a deeply challenging mission, marked by popularity and success, yes, but also by exhaustion, poverty, opposition and, finally, death on the cross. That is what he was opening himself to, turning toward, when he went to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

Likewise, when we follow Jesus in baptism it becomes for us too not just a turning *from* sin and receiving forgiveness, but, more importantly, a turning *toward* God's kingdom and the mission that Jesus carried out. In following Jesus into his baptism we pledge with our whole bodies – body, mind and heart – to follow him into the kingdom. That's the first point I want to make:

Baptism is turning with Jesus toward the kingdom of God, whatever the cost, including the cross.

2. Baptism as following Jesus into the life-long immersion in the kingdom

In Mark 10:38, after announcing his coming death for the third time to his rather uncomprehending disciples, Jesus asks them a very hard question: "Are you able to be baptized with the baptism I am to be baptized?" In other words, "Are you willing to be fully immersed in my mission, even if it leads to the cross?" The disciples rather quickly and without fully understanding what they were saying, answer: "Yes, we are able!" Jesus assures them that they will indeed drink the cup he will drink and undergo his baptism.

For Jesus' disciples, as it was for him, baptism was to be not a onetime moment or event, but a life-long immersion in God's mission, one which would test them again and again to the uttermost. And many of you here are living that costly baptism, what Anabaptists called it the "baptism of blood." This "baptism of blood" was understood by them not only as a life-long struggle not to return to the old way of being, but as a way of sharing in Jesus' baptism on the cross through their own martyrdom.



Drowning of Felix Mantz in the Limmat River, Zurich, January 5, 1527

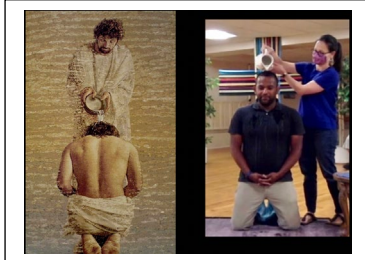
Shared Conviction #3 hints at this when it speaks of "receiving baptism upon confession of faith, *and following Christ in life.*" It does not specify what "life" means. But we can and indeed should think of discipleship as following Jesus in life-long baptism, a life-long participation in Christ's mission, all the way to the cross. So that is the second point I want to draw from this brief exploration of baptism in the Gospels.

Baptism is our pledge to follow Jesus into the life-long baptism in God's kingdom mission, cost what it may.

3. Jesus baptizes us with the Spirit

Before we leave the gospel accounts of baptism, I wish to point out one more aspect of baptism as depicted in the Gospels. The Anabaptists spoke of baptism not only as a baptism of *water* and of *blood*, but also as a “baptism of *spirit*.” When Jesus came to be baptized at the Jordan, John announced: “I baptize you with water; after me comes one who will baptize you with spirit and with fire” (Matt 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:33).

“Spirit” – *pneuma* – is that divine life-giving energy that gives life to all creation, empowering Jesus at his baptism for his kingdom mission, and us at ours. “Spirit,” which can just as well be translated as “breath” and “wind,” becomes a ferocious image when combined with fire, as John the Baptist does. You will recall that at Pentecost the Spirit, the wind, the breath of God descended on the assembled followers like flames of fire (Acts 1:1–3). For us to follow Jesus is to allow him to baptize us, immerse us in the firestorm of God’s transforming kingdom – our whole life long!



Of course this is dangerous. It was already 500 years ago and has been many times since. At times of renewal and radical change in our history as an Anabaptist family, the Spirit or, better, the appeal to Spirit has often been hugely disruptive, often in destructive ways. And then we’ve been tempted to put out the fire, to “quench the Spirit,” as Paul warns us (1 Thessalonians 5:19). But with all our nervousness about the Spirit as a firestorm, let’s be clear: without Christ himself baptizing us, immersing us, in God’s sometimes disturbing wind

of life, we remain dead. The Spirit, the breath, the wind of God needs to be part of our baptismal understanding.

In some of our churches we do not immerse but pour or sprinkle water in the way we baptize. Sprinkling or pouring is often how Jesus’ own baptism is depicted. It symbolizes the coming down of the Spirit of God on him at his baptism. It is a powerful image of the Spirit coming down on those being baptized, empowering them for the mission of the kingdom.

The mode of baptism has been a source of controversy among us. Even though I myself was baptized by immersion, I love the symbolism of sprinkling and pouring as well. I should tell you that in my home congregation we practice both. One of my children was baptized by immersion, the other by pouring. But let’s be clear: whatever the mode of baptism, whether we immerse, sprinkle, or pour, the biblical term “baptism” quite literally means dipping, plunging, dunking under, “drowning in the faith” as a famous theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, put it recently, “going under” in the mission of God. And the baptizer is finally Jesus himself – Jesus the Baptist – immersing us in the life-giving breath and empowering energy of God.

Point #1: *baptism is turning with Jesus toward the kingdom of God.*

Point #2: *baptism is life-long immersion together with Jesus in God’s mission.*

Point #3: *Jesus himself is the Baptist, standing in solidarity with us as he immerses us in the Spirit, the life-giving and empowering energy of God.*

Does this reflect your understanding of the relationship of baptism and following Jesus? Is this what you thought your own baptism meant? I invite you to reflect on that.

II. Baptism in the letters of Paul

We move now from the Gospels to the earliest writings we have in the New Testament, Paul's letters. They add further dimensions to our understanding of baptism. Instead of "following Jesus in and into baptism," Paul speaks of becoming *one with Christ* in baptism. We are, says Paul, "*baptized into Christ*."

This requires way of characterizing baptism demands of us a significant shift in thinking. Instead of imaging a teacher walking the dusty roads of Galilee and us following him as disciples, Paul now puts before us a Christ who is an encompassing reality, one in and through whom God is "gathering all things, in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 1:10). While this might explode our imagination, I suspect the ancients had an easier time with such a notion than we do with our more bounded notions of personhood.

Paul's letters provide the earliest glimpses of how baptism was practised in the early communities of Jesus followers. As best we can tell, Paul's churches adapted the practice of Jewish baths of purification in a very creative way. They would take off their clothes; they would strip off their old clothes. They would be immersed in the water, and then, after coming out of the water they would put on new clothes. Paul uses that dramatic experience of quite literally divesting oneself, going under in the water, then rising to put on new clothes to help us understand what happens in baptism.

1. "Baptized into Christ"

What we learn from Paul is that we do not simply get baptized in obedience to the command of Jesus, or because he himself was baptized that we follow him in that. We are, as Paul tells us, baptized to become a part of the Christ in whom all things are being gathered. Participation in Christ surely defies our comprehension. But that is what Paul puts before us as we attempt to understand what we open ourselves to in baptism. Paul's phrase "baptized into Christ" reminds us of John 17 and Jesus' prayer that we might be one as he and the Father are one. I quote verse 21:

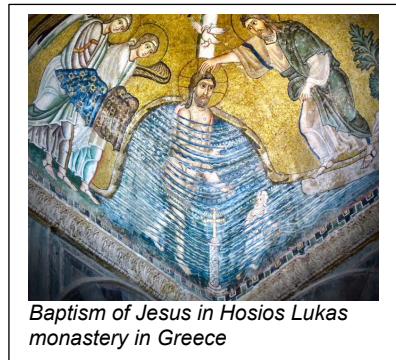
As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

The phrase "*baptized into Christ*" appears in several key passages in Paul's letters. The first is Romans 6:3–4:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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.

You will remember Jesus' question to his disciples in Mark 10: "Are you able to be baptized with the baptism with which I am to be baptized?" Here in Romans 6 being "baptized into Christ" is related to dramatically reliving, more, participating in, becoming one with Jesus' own death and resurrection, to entering into his own life-long baptism.

But Paul intends this also to be a way of speaking of *our* dying to *our* old way of being human, one of the meanings early Anabaptists associated with the "baptism of blood," or "the putting to death of the flesh" – a life-long struggle. In baptism we act out our dying to our old way of life and rising to a new life "in Christ". As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:14: "*If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation!*"



There is a wonderful phrase in Ephesians 5:14, which I believe to be directly related to baptism as being buried and being raised with Christ. I think it was used in baptisms, pronounced on one coming up out of the watery grave of baptism: *“Sleeper awake! And rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!”* Is that exclamation part of the baptismal practice in some of your settings? When the person being baptized is raised from the water, does someone shout: “Wake up, sleeper! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” To be baptized by immersion is not a comfortable experience, as I recall from personal experience. There is a moment of considerable discomfort as you struggle for breath. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be greeted with these words, welcoming you into the new identity you have become a part of? Small wonder that in many communions baptisms are performed at Easter.

What we often call discipleship is nothing other than learning to live the resurrection now already, even as we await that glorious day. Baptism is stepping into that resurrection life. Listen again to Schleithem #1:

Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Do you notice the phrase “walking in the resurrection”? The Catholic college next to the Mennonite college at which I taught at the University of Waterloo in Canada was connected to a Catholic religious order of “Resurrectionists.” Wouldn’t it be great if Anabaptists were known as resurrectionists, that we would not be identified only with suffering, sacrifice and cross, but with the wind of resurrection in our sails? The Greek word for resurrection is *“anastasia.”* What if we were known as “Anastatic Anabaptists”?

500 years ago such living the resurrection brought about a collision with a world marked by sleep, darkness and death, and has repeatedly since, as it is today in some of your churches. Eighty years ago, a Lutheran pastor in Germany, Paul Schneider, refused to follow the orders of the Nazis. He was imprisoned at the concentration camp at Buchenwald, and brutally tortured and finally murdered. On an Easter Sunday morning, he lifted himself to the small window in his cell and shouted to the prisoners assembled outside: *“Hier wird gefoltert und getötet! Jesus sagt: Ich bin die Auferstehung und das Leben!”* (“Here they are torturing and killing! Jesus says: “I am the Resurrection and the Life!”)

Is our day a time when our baptism as entry into living the resurrection can give us the backbone to pronounce the resurrected Lord of life into the madness of our time, a madness often cloaked blasphemously in the very name of Jesus? Would that God would give us the courage to live Easter, to be Anastatic Anabaptists, like many of you here today. As those who have been baptized into the risen Christ, can we take courage to live Easter in our world of war and oppression, of callous wealth and heartless government, to bring the “new creation” to bear on God’s suffering creation. Many of you are doing that with great courage in your various settings. I thank God for that.

2. Putting on Christ/clothed with Christ

There is another important biblical text that illustrates what being “baptized into Christ” means, this one in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. When Paul wrote that letter he was in a struggle for the very survival of his apostleship. He was wounded by his confrontation with Peter in Antioch, had his calling as apostle questioned, and worried about his congregations caught up in the controversy over Gentile believers. In reading the first two very defensive, even angry chapters of Galatians, it becomes obvious that Paul felt the very core of the gospel and the success of the mission God had given him was at stake. But then Paul writes this in Galatians 3:26–28:

You are all sons [and daughters] of God through faith in Christ Jesus. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ [literally, have put on Christ]. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

I find it more than astonishing that in a context of severe controversy, far greater than any we have faced in the MWC, threatening the unity of the community of believers and his apostolic mission, Paul appeals to the shared experience of baptism to remind his readers, his opponents and no doubt himself(!), of the bond they share in their baptism: they are all “one in Christ.”



Baptismal pool in the Hagia Sophia, Istanbul

The very way early Pauline believers practised baptism reinforced this message. As I said earlier, Paul’s churches, as best we can tell, adapted the practice of Jewish ritual baths. Those being baptized would “take off” their old clothes, be immersed in water, and when coming out would “put on” new clothes. They would “put on Christ,” shedding their old identity and taking on a new identity, Christ.

I was once preaching at a baptismal service in my congregation in Canada. Before the sermon I sat at the front wearing a stained and torn work outfit I had borrowed from a mechanic in our congregation. This was confusing for some of the children sitting at the front. That’s now how preachers dress! And then when I started the sermon I took off those stained and torn work clothes (I was wearing my Sunday clothes underneath!), and put on white *galabeya*, a full-length gown. Before I could say anything more, one little boy sitting in the front blurted out loud enough for all to hear: “You look just like Jesus!” The sermon was preached.



Baptismal pool in shape of a cross, Church of St. John, Ephesus

I don’t know how you celebrate baptisms. But it was surely a remarkable experience for those folks in Paul’s churches to take off the clothes representing the old life one was leaving behind and putting on new clothes representing the new life “in Christ.” I’ve noticed from photos of our various baptisms in our global family that in some of your settings those being baptized all wear white. It’s a wonderful image.

Paul uses the imagery of “taking off” and “putting on” various times as a reminder of what they have said “No” to and what they have “Yes” to in their baptismal pledge. Let me give some examples:

In Ephesians 4:20, after briefly describing the old way of life apart from God, Paul reminds his readers:

*That is not how you learned Christ [literally, were discipled in or by Christ], the truth that is in Jesus. **Take off** the former way of life, the old human, and **put on** the new human created in justice and truth.”*

Or later in that very same chapter at verse 25:

***Take off** the lie, and speak truth each with his neighbour, for we are members of each other.*

Or listen to Ephesians 6:10, where readers are told to “**put on** the whole armour of God,” a reminder that baptism is enlistment in the struggle against the death-dealing forces that today

are having such a terrible impact on our relationships to each other and our environment. Listen finally to some excerpts from Colossians 3:

*You have **taken off** the old human with its practices and have **clothed yourselves** with [or **put on**] the new one, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, **clothe yourselves** with [or **put on**] compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, **put on** love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony [literally: which is the perfect chain of harmony].*

It is very clear from these passages that “putting on Christ” in baptism includes what we often call discipleship, “learning Christ.” You are “in Christ,” so now learn to walk together in Christ, to be discipled into what it means to *be* Christ. Learn to walk like Christ, the truth that is in Jesus, to “follow Christ in life,” as Shared Conviction #3 states it. For that we need to dress – to put on Christ – day in and day out. As I said earlier, baptism is a life-long immersion into Christ.

3. Putting on the *body* of Christ

I want you to notice something especially relevant to us here in MWC, but also for our relationships with other communions. Let me re-read Galatians 3:27 and 28, this time with special attention to verse 28.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

This connection between baptism, diversity, and unity in Christ is echoed in the passage we just read in Colossians 3:9 and 11.

Don't lie to each other, since you have taken off the old human, ... and have put on the new one, in whom there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all in all.

One last example from an earlier letter of Paul's, 1 Corinthians. We are likely all familiar with chapter 12, especially Paul's use of the image of the “body” to describe the church. In verses 12 and 13 Paul explicitly refers to baptism:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in [or through] the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

It is quite evident from all of these passages that baptism is linked inseparably to the unity *and* to the challenging diversity of the body of Christ. These lists in Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Colossians are not meant to be a complete inventory, but only to signal the kind of differences that can make life in the body of Christ a severe challenge.

Some of the differences we bring with us into Christ's body are rooted in sin: racism, classicism, sexism, intolerance, to give only a few examples. Such diversity is *not* to be celebrated, but rather struggled against. But other differences and diversities are those between cultures, perspectives and especially convictions. These are a great gift, as we experience in the MWC. But they too can bring sometimes enormous challenges, as we know. Ironically, sometimes the more committed we are, the more we develop strong and often conflicting convictions on what it means to be “in Christ,” to follow Jesus. Such diversity can then threaten to estrange us from each other yet again. That was a problem early on in the

Anabaptist movement already. At one point almost no one had not been excommunicated by someone, to exaggerate only a bit, usually over wanting to be more faithful, wanting to following Jesus just right.

Christ has a very complex and conflict-laden body! But that is precisely the body we put on when we clothe ourselves in Christ in baptism. We don't just put on Christ; we put on Christ with his body! That is what you and I said yes to in baptism. And let's be honest: such a body is hard to wear. These clothes don't fit well.

Did you notice when we read 1 Corinthians 12:13 that Paul speaks specifically of "*baptism in [by, or through] the Spirit*"? Many of us associate the "baptism of the Spirit" with speaking in tongues, separating it from the baptism of water. And then some of us are able to distance ourselves from the baptism of the Spirit because we are Anabaptists and not Pentecostals. But notice that here in chapter 12 Paul insists that the baptism in and by the Spirit makes life in the body of Christ possible to begin with. The baptism in and of the Spirit makes us one in Christ, one with Christ and one with each other as Christ's body, and equips us for life in such a tension-filled and conflict-laden body. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22 and 23 that the fruit of this baptizing Spirit is "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*" We need every one of those for life in such a body of Christ, for the body we have "put on" in baptism.

And what a body it is! In baptism we join the body of the One who is incarnated, as Matthew 25 reminds us, in the most vulnerable child, in those in prisons, who are suffering violence and famine, who are driven from homes, separated from their loved ones, and in the most vulnerable among us, including in our own of churches. Christ inhabits all the members of the body, most especially the weakest and most vulnerable. And that is the body in which Christ is present in this world. Paul reminds the Corinthians in 1:26 and 27 that "*not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, or of noble birth. But God chose what is weak in this world to put to shame the wisdom of this world.*" It is this frail body with which God loves the world. We are the eyes and the hands of the Lover of the cosmos, including creation in distress.

I am reminded of the famous poem by Teresa of Avila, a Carmelite nun in Germany, contemporary with early Anabaptists. Let me read it:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks with
compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks with
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
(Teresa of Avila, 16th century)

But we should be realistic and honest. This body through which Christ is active in the world is made up of precisely the broken humanity God is gathering into Christ through the Spirit. So, we might hear Teresa's poem in this way:

- Christ has no body but *us*, *this* body we call the church, of which the churches of the MWC are a part, made up of humans who are not perfect, at best always "in process" of reconciliation, reconstruction, new creation.
- Christ has no hands, no feet but ours still very much prone to doing the wrong thing and to going their own way.
- Christ has no eyes but those which struggle, often in vain, to look with compassion on the world, and even on others in the body of Christ.

That is whose body we become a part of in baptism, that is the body we put on in baptism. Putting on Christ's body is like wearing a glorious, multi-coloured garment, woven on the loom of God's renewing and transforming grace. But it is also wearing all the pain and suffering, all the conflicts, such a body necessarily brings with it. Christ looks on his body with grace-full suffering patience and expectant hope – with love. And in baptism we pledge to do the same.

4. Tension between transforming grace and misguided perfectionism

As Anabaptists we continue to struggle with this. On one hand, we should be very grateful for the emphasis threading its way through our history on being "perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect," as Jesus says in Matthew 5:48, to be the bride of Christ "without spot or wrinkle," as we read in Ephesians 5:27. That emphasis has in our history born much fruit, highlighting the importance of radical discipleship, of mutual discipline, and of holiness.

But some of the fruit has been bitter. The vision of a church without spot and wrinkle has, in practice, led to seeing the presence of brokenness and broken people – or even just different people! – as contaminating the church, compromising the church's calling. For example, the "ban" was seen by those who wrote the Schleithem Confession of 1527 to be an essential mark of a faithful, disciplined and discipling church. The ban was intended to restore and reform those members of the body that needed correction. But "the ban" quickly became a destructive force among Anabaptists.

In reaction, many of us have come to see the ban and church discipline generally as intolerance, even communal tyranny. Such a reaction has then too easily resulted in post-baptismal clothes looking no different than pre-baptismal clothes. Discipleship becomes optional, holiness a foreign concept. "Come as you are!" becomes "Stay as you are!"

We continue to struggle with this, even if in different ways, depending on our setting. But it needs to be clear that hospitality without transformation is deformation of the gospel. You don't leave what needs repair and healing outside the repair shop or the hospital; you bring it inside. You fix it; you heal it. Grace without the demand is taking God's love for granted. Paul already exposed that temptation in Romans 6:1, 2. That was the criticism early Anabaptists levelled at the church. Sadly, I suspect they might level the same at many of us. It is just as true, at the same time, that demand without grace, discipleship without the mercy of love, becomes the destructive judgmentalism Jesus warned of in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:1-5). It deforms the gospel no less.

The very nature of the church as God's peacemaking and renewing work will ensure that there will be stains and there will be wrinkles until Christ has finished washing us, baptizing us with his word, to restate Ephesians 5:26 rather freely. Unless we can keep *both* hospitality *and* the hard work of transformation in creative tension, we betray the Creator's peacemaking efforts. We will not be able to walk together as the body of Christ – also in the MWC. And if we do

walk, we will not be following the Jesus who eats with us – while we are still sinners! (Romans 5:8) – and then makes life's hardest demands on us. We *will* find a way to combine holiness and hospitality, however, if truly follow Jesus. To do that we need, in Paul's words, to "learn Christ" (Ephesians 4:20), to develop "the mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5), and to let embracing and transforming "peace of Christ rule in our hearts" (Colossians 3:15). This Christ is none other than the Jesus who eats with sinners, who forgives them, but then demands that they sin no more. It is this Christ who gathers us all in, whom we "put on" in baptism, together with all those he gathers.

III. Discipleship as training for life-long baptism

I invite you to reflect on what the diversities and tensions are in your setting that make unity in Christ a challenge. What kinds of challenges do they present? Do they make it difficult, sometimes nearly impossible, to work together? To worship together? To respect each other's ways of living? To recognize each other as faithful members of Christ's body?

And then ask yourself these questions: How can baptism be brought to bear on these difficult dynamics? How can baptism become operational for a communion, a denomination or a congregation struggling with such challenges? What kind of discipling, training and baptismal instruction is needed?

1. Baptismal preparation

Let me first ask a few questions regarding baptismal preparation. When you as leaders prepare those coming for baptism, what are the contents of your teaching, of the formation the candidates are receiving?

- Do your candidates learn the basic building blocks of the faith? That is critically important, but does it stop there?
- Do they understand that baptism is an invitation to a *lifetime* of repentance, of turning again and again from destructive ways of being human to becoming ever more Christ-like?
- Do they see baptism as entry point into a lifetime of baptism with Jesus, in Christ?
- Does your preparation help candidates understand that by being baptized into Christ, they are entering a body, a communion, that participates in Christ's mission, of being his hands, feet and eyes?
- Are they informed that they are not simply joining a congregation in membership, but that they are joining a body that will be an essential source of support and renewal, but also of pain and suffering? Do they know that church will bless and hurt, that being "in the world and not of it" may at times be easier than "in the church and of it"?
- Do you prepare them for becoming part of such a body under constant construction, in which they are both being constructed and participants in the construction? "Building each other up" is one of Paul's most striking ways of describing relationships within the body of Christ (for example Romans 15:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:11).

You recall that when Jesus asks his disciples whether they are able to be baptized with the baptism he will face, he is making it clear that baptism is for life, a life-long entry into the joy and suffering of Christ for the sake of the church and the world. I think this sheds light on what it means when Paul says in Colossians 1:24:

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.

Paul says, in effect, “my life is part of Christ’s ongoing suffering of his own body, a suffering growing out of God’s immeasurable love.”

2. Remembering baptism

A second set of questions relates to our need to be reminded of our baptism. You may recall from the Trilateral Conversations on Baptism the Lutheran emphasis on “remembering our baptism.” The Mennonite delegates found that to be a very important learning. In some ways we are doing that as we commemorate 500 years and 100 years as a baptizing communion.

All of us need to remember our baptism throughout our life as life-long learners of Christ. It is worth noting that all the appeals in the New Testament to baptism that we have mentioned are made to those who have already been baptized! They are all *reminders* of the pledges believers made at the time of their baptism. We need such reminders for ongoing formation, reminding us of our oneness with Christ, with his baptism, his body and with his mission!

We celebrate birthdays and wedding anniversaries. Do we have the equivalents for baptism? Should our churches have annual festivals of baptism? Wouldn’t it be great to have a special day alongside Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, a Feast of Baptism, in which we would mark Jesus’ baptism, our baptism, the fruit of baptism, namely a body made up of former strangers and enemies now “in Christ” as his body?

Let us make these 500- and 100-year anniversaries such an occasion. Let us remember our baptismal vows and recommit to the pledge we made to follow Jesus, to grow into the Christ whom we have put on along with his body. Let’s allow the Spirit to keep baptizing us into Oneness with Christ and his liberating and transforming mission and with each other as hands, feet and eyes of his body.

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