

## IN THIS ISSUE

On the evening of January 21, 1525, a small group of university students, village priests, and lay people gathered in a private home in the shadow of Zurich's Grossmünster Church for a secret worship service. According to an account of the event preserved in the Hutterite *Chronicle*, the participants—all part of a larger renewal movement led by the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli—agreed “in the fear of God . . . that one must first learn true faith” before receiving “true Christian baptism as a covenant of a good conscience with God.” Following a “fervent prayer”—and “well aware that they would have to suffer for this”—Georg Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him “with true Christian baptism on [the basis of] his faith.” Blaurock then baptized the others. “And so, in great fear of God, together they surrendered themselves to the Lord . . . and confirmed one another for service in the Gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Just as October 31, 1517—the day Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors of Wittenberg's Castle Church—has become the accepted date for the beginning of the Protestant Reformation—so too, the adult baptisms on January 21, 1525, mark the beginnings of the “Anabaptist” (=rebaptizer) movement, whose descendants today include such groups as the Amish, Mennonites, and Hutterites.

To be sure, such dates are useful fictions. As with the Reformation, the Anabaptist movement did not begin at a single moment; nor were the earnest reformers who gathered to enact the ritual fully aware of the meaning or significance of what they had done. But their action that evening clearly had consequences. Although the report of Sebastian Franck that the rebaptizing movement “spread so rapidly that their teachings soon covered the whole land” was almost certainly an exaggeration, the baptisms in Zurich clearly inspired others in the surrounding Swiss territories to follow their example. Already the next day, accounts began to trickle into Zurich of additional baptisms in Zollikon, Wytikon, and other nearby villages. In the following weeks, Conrad Grebel was reportedly baptizing people in Schaffhausen; George Blaurock had embarked on a baptizing campaign into the Tyrol; Hans Brötli began baptizing in Hallau; and Lorenz Hochrütner was doing the same in St. Gall.

In subsequent years, leaders within the Anabaptist movement would articulate a range of theological beliefs and practices that distinguished

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1. *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren, known as Das große Geschichtsbuch der Hutterischen Brüder*, trans. and ed. by the Hutterian Brethren (Rifton, N.Y.: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 45.

the group from both the magisterial Reformers and the Catholic tradition. And, indeed, the Anabaptists themselves were far from unified on many points. Yet one defining characteristic of the movement about which all parties—friends and enemies alike—agreed was their conviction that baptism should only be administered to those believers who had freely confessed their faith in Christ and committed themselves to follow in the way of Jesus.

Religious and civil authorities reacted harshly to the practice. On March 7, 1526, the Zurich City Council decreed that rebaptism was a capital offense, a policy extended to the entire Holy Roman Empire in the Imperial Edict of Speyer in 1529. In the decades that followed, some 2,000 to 3,000 Anabaptists were juridically executed—generally on charges of sedition—and thousands more were fined, imprisoned, tortured, or exiled for their convictions.

Although executions of the Anabaptists had largely ceased by the end of the seventeenth century, the practice of adult (or credo-) baptism persisted as a defining feature of all the “free church” groups who descended from the Anabaptist movement, and as a significant point of division within the larger Christian world.

In light of this context, the document that follows in this issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* is a truly momentous statement, one that has the potential of overcoming divisions within the Body of Christ that have persisted for nearly 500 years.

*Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church* is the result of five years of intensive conversation among representatives of the Lutheran, Catholic, and Mennonite communions, meeting on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, and Mennonite World Conference. The work of this trilateral dialogue consciously built on the foundation established by two previous international dialogues that brought Mennonites into conversation with Catholics and Lutherans, and on fifty years of ecumenical exchange between Catholics and Lutherans, which culminated in 1999 in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.

In the report that follows, each of the participating groups offers a biblical and theological basis for its distinctive understanding of baptism, organized largely around their respective understandings of sin and grace. The report then turns to a description of the ritual itself in each of the three traditions, focusing especially on the relationship of baptism to Christian faith as it is nurtured in the context of the Christian community. A third section asks how baptism is connected to Christian discipleship in

each communion, outlining the personal, ecclesial, and public dimensions of faith in daily life.

What clearly sets “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” apart from other statements on the doctrine of baptism is the vulnerability evident throughout the document. Included alongside these theological affirmations is an open recognition of the tension each group has experienced between theology and praxis—an honest appraisal of the pastoral challenges or misconceptions that have emerged around baptism in the church life of each tradition. From the beginning, participants in the dialogue committed themselves to the practice of “receptive ecumenism”—that is, a readiness to receive differences in belief and practice as a gift; or, if not as a gift, at least as a question that could prompt new thoughts about their own identity and ways of being the church. In a closely related way, the group also sought ways of acknowledging ongoing differences in belief and practice, while simultaneously recognizing common ground on the Christian truths that they shared—a posture sometimes described as “differentiated consensus.” “It is our hope,” the document asserts, “that this report may assist our communities in discerning whether our differences in the practice of baptism could be an acceptable diversity that does not, in and of itself, constitute an insuperable obstacle to greater unity among us (§82).

The points of common ground expressed in “Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church” are almost certain to surprise, and maybe even unsettle, readers, perhaps especially those theologians and historians who are long accustomed to describing the distinctive virtues of their own tradition against the foil of the beliefs and practices of the other two. Thus, for example:

... all three of our communions wholeheartedly agree that baptism is intended not as an isolated, self-enclosed event, but as an important moment that is to be lived out throughout the course of one’s life. It is intended by God to enable and to unfold into a life of discipleship. (§83)

... Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites can fully agree that the lifelong living out of the gift of faith which is celebrated in baptism has not only personal but also ecclesial and public dimensions. (§89)

... [all agreed that] discipleship entails a spirituality that ... involves a lifelong process of repentance, conversion, and transformation. (§90)

Readers eager to ask about the practical outcomes of these dialogues should pay particular attention to the conclusion of the document. There

each of the three traditions briefly restates their “convictions held” regarding baptism, along with the “gifts received” in the course of the conversations from the other two groups. But the real work ahead lies in the sections titled “challenges accepted” and “for consideration.” Mennonites, for example, accept among other things the challenge of “making the remembrance of our baptism a lifelong motif of discipleship” (§128) and of formulating “a fuller theology of the child, particularly with regard to the age of accountability and the salvific status of older children who have reached the age of accountability” (§129). Perhaps even more challenging, Mennonite representatives—affirming that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-5) and building on a deeper understanding of the centrality of baptism to a life of faith in the Lutheran and Catholic traditions—propose that their fellow Anabaptist-Mennonite churches consider “receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their confession of faith and commitment to discipleship without repeating the water rite” (§132).

Following through on that consideration does not imply a renunciation of a 500-year-old tradition of baptism upon confession of faith or a repudiation of the sixteenth-century martyrs who died for their convictions. But it does suggest the possibility of reframing an identity often rooted in opposition—e.g., “neither Catholic nor Protestant”—as one based on the principle of “reconciled diversity” within the Body of Christ.

Clearly, *Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church* will not be the last word on the subject of baptism in our communions. Its relevance and reception, especially among our majority churches in the Global South, remains an open question. Nevertheless, the document that follows, appearing nearly five centuries after the first adult baptisms in Zurich, offers an invitation to reframe the narrative of Catholic, Lutheran, and Anabaptist-Mennonite identities in relation to each other, and provides a context for lively discussion and debate within each of our communions. That process of reception is initiated in this issue of *MQR* in the form of commentaries on the document by a leading theologian from each of the three traditions. We are deeply grateful to **Peter Casarella**, **Timothy Wengert**, and **Irma Fast Dueck** for modeling this crucial next step of critical engagement.

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– John D. Roth, editor