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Coming to Speaking Terms: Communal and Ethical Dimensions of Baptism in Mennonite and Catholic Perspectives

Julia Smucker

Julia is a Mennonite-Catholic working toward a Master of Arts degree with a concentration in systematics. Julia was raised as a Mennonite and spent her life traveling including spending three years in Jamaica while her parents worked with the Mennonite Central Committee and a year in Haiti where Julia herself spent time working for the same service organization. Julia has spent much of her time working as part of an ecumenical movement to promote dialogue between Mennonites and Catholics known as Bridge Folk.

Baptism is an essential practice that shapes personal and ecclesial identity within all Christian traditions, yet questions and debates surrounding its meaning, and by extension its appropriate manner and circumstances, have long been at the root of some of the most deep-seated divisions among the churches. For the Mennonite Church, a direct descendant of the Anabaptist movement, beliefs concerning what constitutes legitimate baptism have obviously been central to its self-definition since its origin. The Catholic Church from which the Reformation movements emerged and diverged has held to the idea of continuity with its long-running tradition, in which theology has often evolved around practice, as a deep value and a recurring theme in much of its thought over the centuries. Thus it is surely accurate to observe, as does Mennonite theologian and historian Alan Kreider, that “baptism is at the heart of Mennonite/Catholic differences.”¹

Central to these differences is the polemic of infant baptism and believers’ baptism, which has formed around a myriad of interconnected questions and fields to which both traditions have frequently appealed to justify their self-defining practices. As Mark Searle summarizes, “The question has been posed in historical terms (did the primitive Church baptize infants?), in pastoral terms (is baptizing people in infancy the best way to socialize them?), in ecclesiological terms (is the church intended by Christ one that requires adult commitment?) and in sacramental terms (are the sacraments such that they can be effective without the free and knowing cooperation of the recipient?).” Searle additionally suggests addressing

the issue “theologically (is there any place in the divine economy for the child as child?) or Christologically (what soteriological value is to be ascribed to the infancy and childhood of Jesus?).”² For the majority of post-Reformation history, the churches have largely posed such questions in relative isolation during “centuries of separate institutional existence,” often for purposes of rhetorical justification of their own theology and practice “in contexts where we have often tried to prove that we are right and they are wrong.”³ Yet the acknowledgement of this unfortunate reality by the delegations of a groundbreaking large-scale Mennonite-Catholic dialogue has itself been a hopeful initial step in the common efforts now underway to move past our history of mutual suspicion. In the dialogue and its continuing reverberations, some significant groundwork has been laid for a shared understanding of what it means to be baptized into the body of Christ, while at the same time revealing how much remains to be done in the difficult but vital process of reconciliation.

Within such a historically divisive subject, certain essential common features of Mennonite and Catholic understandings of baptism have often gone overlooked, not the least of which is its communal and public nature. The Mennonite Confession of Faith stresses the importance of public baptism, saying that it “should always be done by the church and its representatives, if

¹ Alan Kreider, “A Post-Dialogue Conversation II: Alan Kreider to Frederick C. Bauerschmidt,” in *On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium, 2001-2002*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2004), 128.

² Mark Searle, “Infant Baptism Reconsidered,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 386.

³ “Called Together To Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998-2003” (http://www.bridgefolk.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/04/ctp_english.pdf), paragraph 49. This report is available online in five languages at <http://www.bridgefolk.net/theology/dialogue>.

possible in the presence of the congregation.”⁴ Similarly, the Catholic Catechism calls baptism “the sacrament of faith,” adding that “faith needs the community of believers.”⁵ In the final report of their five-year dialogue, Mennonite and Catholic delegations together affirmed their common practice of “the rite of baptism as a public celebration in the congregation,”⁶ as well as their shared belief that it constitutes “incorporation into the body of Christ.”⁷ The difference, as will be made clear, lies “in their understanding of who may be incorporated into the Church, and by what means.”⁸ While this point of divergence has too often obscured our mutual understanding of the vital role that the community of faith plays in baptism, the strength of this shared emphasis is not negligible. It is underscored even in explanations that reflect divergent ecclesiologies, as Mennonites speak of the Church as a “*fellowship* of believers” and “*community* of disciples,”⁹ and Catholics of “the Church that with her faith envelopes [sic] a child” who is “baptized into the faith of the Church.”¹⁰

An additional underlying commonality perhaps even more deeply hidden beneath division is the relation of baptism to faith and discipleship. The Mennonite Church understands these commitments as *prerequisites* for baptism, teaching that “Christian baptism is for those who ... commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of his body,”¹¹ whereas the Catholic Church views the life of faith and discipleship as the *result* of baptism: “The baptismal seal enables and commits Christians to serve God by a vital participation in the holy liturgy of the Church and to exercise their baptismal priesthood by the witness of holy lives and practical charity.”¹² Yet, in the same way that their differing communal ecclesiologies reveal the centrality of community for both churches, this very difference points to a shared belief that baptism and discipleship are

inseparable. It is because of this that Catholic scholar Frederick Bauerschmidt can draw the distinction between sacramental realism and superstition along “the idea that [the sacraments] help us apart from our appropriation of them in faith and love.”¹³

A primary divisive point still clouding such important convergences on faithful discipleship in the church’s communal life is ironically related, in that Mennonites find a central point of origin for their rejection of infant baptism in its perceived representation of Christendom, which in Anabaptist parlance invariably connotes a compromising entanglement with state power. This association is rooted in the origins of the Anabaptist movement, in which the requirement of belief and repentance as necessary prerequisites for baptism was closely tied to a conscientious withdrawal from political involvement.¹⁴ Scandalized by the medieval integration of church and state that they saw as compromising Christian discipleship, in part by implicitly making baptism as much an initiation into civil society as into the church, the Anabaptists found it necessary to advocate a dualistic separatism marked by believers’ baptism. Chad Mason offers a concise retelling of this defining point in the Anabaptist story: “In the context of 16th-century Europe, rebaptism served as a clarion call for Christians to reconnect baptism with discipleship and to disconnect baptism from state control. Anabaptism constituted an alternative society amid warring church-state complexes and called people out from those complexes of power to embrace the weakness of Christ.”¹⁵

Alan Kreider, while being commendably willing to engage in respectful dialogue on the subject, exemplifies the ways in which the connection between infant baptism and a compromised Christendom has remained deeply ingrained in Mennonite thinking. Expressing concern that preceding dialogue had not taken history seriously enough, Kreider presents a quintessentially Mennonite reading of history

⁴ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 48.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), paragraph 1253.

⁶ “Called Together To Be Peacemakers,” paragraph 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, paragraph 95.

⁸ *Ibid.*, paragraph 104.

⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 87-88, emphasis mine.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, paragraph 116.

¹¹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, 47. See also “Called Together To Be Peacemakers,” paragraph 38, 124.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1273, cf. 1265-66.

¹³ Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, “Summary Response,” in *On Baptism*, 126.

¹⁴ See for a quintessential example of this view “The Schleithem Confession: Adopted by a Swiss Brethren Conference, February 24, 1527.” (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, 1985). <http://www.anabaptists.org/history/schleith.html>. See especially articles I, IV and VI.

¹⁵ Chad S. Mason, “Mennonite But Not Anabaptist,” *The Mennonite* (January 8, 2008), 8-10 (quote from p. 9).

that attributes the origin of infant baptism to Augustinian doctrine on original sin¹⁶ and refers to the practice as a “distinguishing characteristic of the civilization called Christendom . . . in which there is no visible distinction between church and world,” provocatively equating it (at least in medieval practice) with coercion that “produces a *militia Christi* whose members are conscripts.”¹⁷ The connection to militarism is tellingly illustrative of the gut-level Mennonite sense that to condone infant baptism would be tantamount to undermining part and parcel the Mennonite Church’s historic values, including its peace witness.

From a Mennonite perspective, it comes as a surprise that certain influential thinkers within Catholic scholarship are sympathetic to the prototypically Mennonite suspicions of infant baptism exemplified by Kreider. Paul Covino’s overview of debates concerning baptismal norms among Catholic theologians following the Second Vatican Council would surely be of interest to many Mennonites. This is especially true of what Covino (following Nathan Mitchell) refers to as the “mature adulthood school,” whose reasoning bears a striking resemblance to Anabaptist ecclesiology.¹⁸ One exemplar of this school of thought is Aidan Kavanagh, who interprets the Council as implying a more normative status for the baptism of adults and a mere grudging acceptance of that of infants, specifically because the former appears to be derived from conversion rather than conformity to social trends.¹⁹

Kavanagh essentially affirms Kreider’s interpretation of church history, asserting that “the more antique set of initiatory theories and practices [i.e. adult baptism] dates back to a period prior to the emergence of medieval ‘Christendom,’ when the correlation of Church and civil society either did not exist or was only just beginning.”²⁰ The two voice strikingly similar predictions (which

do not seem very credible given their overall scandalousness to the Catholic world) that infant baptism is on its way to becoming obsolete in the post-Christendom church.²¹ Additionally, while not addressing Anabaptism in particular, sacramental theologian Fr. Louis-Marie Chauvet makes the related suggestion, perhaps more palatable to Catholics and undoubtedly attractive to Mennonites, that adult baptism should be more paradigmatic than infant baptism as a framework for sacramental theology since it more directly implies faith and ethics as an immediate response to God’s gift of grace.²²

A more nuanced Catholic recognition of Anabaptist concerns comes from Frederick Bauerschmidt. As a major contributor to Mennonite-Catholic dialogue, Bauerschmidt understands well how “the anti-constantinian narrative,” in which infant baptism is seen as representing a shift from countercultural discipleship to individual cleansing and citizenship, can appear self-evident to many Mennonites. After validating these concerns, however, he attempts to move the conversation beyond them with the point that infant baptism in itself is not necessarily constantinian, being “neither the harbinger nor the symptom of the church’s compromise with worldly power.” Conceding as a helpful starting point the claim, widely taken for granted among Mennonites, “that the practice of infant baptism has at various times and places undermined the identity of the church as a distinctive community,” he then argues that such compromise is not intrinsic to the practice itself, with the pertinent question therefore becoming “how infant baptism might be practiced so as to strengthen and support the distinctive identity of the church.”²³ Admittedly wary of the automatic connections drawn between infant baptism and Christendom, he persuasively dissociates the two, taking his experience among Southern Baptists in South Carolina as an example of how post-rational baptism can also serve the Christendom establishment in some cases,²⁴ and unequivocally condemning coerced baptism as

¹⁶ Kreider, “A Post-Dialogue Conversation,” in *On Baptism*, 112-17.

¹⁷ Kreider, “A Post-Dialogue Conversation II,” in *On Baptism*, 135.

¹⁸ Paul F. X. Covino, “The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate in the American Catholic Church,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 327-49, see esp. 329-35.

¹⁹ Aidan Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1978), 109-22.

²⁰ Kavanagh, “Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Roman Catholicism: A Brief Report,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 4.

²¹ Ibid., 4-5; Kreider in *On Baptism*, 85.

²² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 126.

²³ Bauerschmidt, “Baptism in the Diaspora,” in *On Baptism*, 21-23.

²⁴ Bauerschmidt in *On Baptism*, 139.

illegitimate while differentiating it from infant baptism, which “can, under certain conditions, actually be a commendable practice for a diaspora church that understands the preservation of its identity as a distinctive people to be a crucial undertaking.”²⁵

Mennonite pastor Chad Mason has taken note of the same distinction, observing that the medieval European relationship between church and state was significantly different from their present relationship in postmodern western societies, and that both Mennonites and Catholics “now stand in solidarity as varied expressions of God’s alternative society,” in which the baptism of both infants and adults serves as a distinctive proclamation of truth to power in our present context.²⁶ John Lapp, another influential Mennonite leader, echoes Bauerschmidt’s and Mason’s observations, recalling a statement by Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “The feature of the Constantinian age was not that the Christian community baptized its children but that baptism as such became a qualification of civic life. The false development lies not in infant baptism but in this secular qualification. The two should clearly be distinguished.” Lapp’s awareness that genuine discipleship is not limited to practitioners of believers’ baptism leads him to take the distinction seriously, noting that “the link of baptism and public life appears to be a critical issue, however and whenever one is baptized. . . . For believers, parents and congregations, baptism means there is always a question mark over civic pretensions.”²⁷

Speaking in some sense from both perspectives at once, self-described Mennonite Catholics such as Ivan Kauffman and Gerald Schlabach²⁸ are particularly well-positioned to address the concerns arising from their Anabaptist heritage. With a concern for attention to history that parallels Kreider’s, Kauffman notes that the early Anabaptists were rightly opposed to civically required infant baptism but “could only find grounds for rejecting this particular practice

by rejecting the baptism of infants *per se*,” simply for lack of sufficient historical perspective.²⁹ On the other hand, based on his present experience, Kauffman laments the all-too-frequent absence for many Catholics of a sense of call to discipleship in the initiatory rites (baptism as well as confirmation), not necessarily due to flaws in the rites themselves but as an indication that “both Mennonites and Catholics have much work to do” in order “to look beyond the questions that have shaped this great debate in the past.”³⁰

In response to Kreider’s questioning of whether infant baptism produces disciples, Schlabach is among those who clearly affirm that it can, acknowledging with Bauerschmidt that “believers baptism by itself comes with no guarantees either.”³¹ Kavanagh, although his position is very close to Kreider’s, similarly admits that not all adult converts were necessarily motivated by genuine faith during the patristic period from which he draws his models for normative practice.³² It should therefore be acknowledged by Catholics and Mennonites alike that no form of baptism is in and by itself a guarantor of disciple-making, but that all baptism should be inextricably related to it, as Bauerschmidt helpfully affirms.³³ While Kavanagh clearly favors privileging adult baptism as normative, his view of initiation and mystagogy as “the Church’s radical business for the good of the world itself” ought to apply to all Christian initiation, which in any form must find its grounding and its fruition as “baptism in its fullness, the making of a Christian, the ongoing birth of the Church of Jesus Christ in his life-giving Spirit.”³⁴

The type of ecclesiological language that Kavanagh employs would presumably have broad resonance among Mennonites. Nevertheless, Mennonite theologian Thomas Finger, responding to Bauerschmidt’s analysis of baptism’s multivalent meaning, expresses discomfort with the application of the metaphor of birth to infant baptism, asking “how suitably birth, even as a general image, can express something passive.” Presuming that mothers in particular would not relate the birth

²⁵ “Baptism in the Diaspora” in *On Baptism*, 27-31.

²⁶ Mason, “Mennonite But Not Anabaptist,” 8-10 (quote from p. 10).

²⁷ John A. Lapp, “Musings on Baptism,” *The Mennonite* (January 8, 2008), 11.

²⁸ At the time of the conversation in question, Schlabach had not yet joined the Catholic Church and considered himself a “Catholic Mennonite.”

²⁹ Ivan J. Kauffman in *On Baptism*, 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 95.

³¹ Gerald W. Schlabach in *On Baptism*, 110.

³² Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 117.

³³ Bauerschmidt in *On Baptism*, 40-45, 118-21.

³⁴ Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 115.

experience to the apparent passivity of infant baptism (nor, he adds, does he as a father relate the latter to his own experience of begetting), Finger points to this as an example of “how baptismal images which may connote passive reception to Catholics often convey dynamic participation to Mennonites.”³⁵ However, from the perspective of both a theologian and a mother, Kimberly Belcher contests the passive connotation that the baptismal image of birth seems to have for many of her fellow Catholics. Belcher argues extensively to precisely the opposite conclusion, illustrating through numerous examples the “cooperative agency” of infants in both quotidian and ritual activities: “Their agency is at its finest when they actively cooperate with adult agents on experiences which are highly sensory, social, and well-paced, with periodic reinforcement after the initial experience. Under the right circumstances, this describes infant baptism.”³⁶ Given that Belcher does not address the central Anabaptist concerns that have been mentioned previously, her argument may not persuade many Mennonites of the legitimacy of infant baptism. It does, however, cast serious doubt on the assumption that a child being baptized is merely a passive recipient.

The reduction of baptism from active participation to passive reception, whether actual or merely presumed, is often blamed on Augustine, whose development of doctrinal theology related to original sin and the salvific necessity of baptism is said to have led to the urgent demand for baptism *quamprimum*, as immediately as possible after birth. Kreider draws this connection explicitly,³⁷ and Bauerschmidt affirms the danger of a “magical” interpretation of sacramental efficacy.³⁸ As essential as the sacramental quality of baptism is for Catholics, the related soteriological implications raise disturbing questions about the spiritual status of infants and children. Bauerschmidt and Schlabach both approach this problem by arguing for a nuanced reading of history and theology. Rather than shying away from Augustinian sacramental theology in reaction to its frequent individualistic misinterpretations (on the part of

proponents as well as critics), they reclaim it for its communal dimensions. Schlabach interprets Augustine’s infamous teachings on original sin in light of his communal anthropology; the child is thus “born into a solidarity with sinful humanity” and “baptized into a new solidarity with humanity-in-redemption, the church.”³⁹ In this way, rescuing the sacramentality of baptism from its potential reduction to individual cleansing becomes an important part of Schlabach’s attempt to elucidate for his fellow Mennonites “the core Catholic conviction that baptism does more than simply signify – that through it, God does, God acts, in a way that is miracle or mystery but not magic.”⁴⁰

Speaking as a Mennonite sympathetic to the confessional emphasis of the Anabaptist tradition, Schlabach nevertheless notices a sacramental grace gap, with reception of the Holy Spirit being the missing piece in an otherwise multifaceted view of what baptism does. In the absence of any sacramental reception, Schlabach points out, baptism appears somewhat superfluous, since its remaining purposes as named by Mennonite tradition, such as a testimony to repentance, a pledge of commitment or an incorporation into community, “could be fulfilled as well or better in other ways.” This observation leads him to ask why Mennonites baptize in the first place – “unless something happens through baptism that may surely be in continuity with other ways of receiving grace, yet is nonetheless unique and irreplaceable?”⁴¹ In other words, Mennonites may yet have retained an unarticulated sense of something unique or even sacramental about what baptism does, even if they have lost the language to describe it as such.

The conviction of just such a conferral of sacramentally specific grace can account for the ambivalence of some Catholic thinkers toward believers’ baptism models. Mark Searle, while noting the attraction of the ecclesiological insights of the believers’ church tradition for many postconciliar Catholics and affirming the departure from superstition aided by the renewal of adult initiation, appears uneasy with the idea of drawing too strongly from Anabaptist ecclesiology for fear of desacralization. To be sure, his fears are not unprecedented in view of the

³⁵ Finger in *On Baptism*, 66-67.

³⁶ Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 99-100 (see also 128-30, 157).

³⁷ Kreider in *On Baptism*, 116.

³⁸ Bauerschmidt in *On Baptism*, 126-27.

³⁹ Schlabach in *On Baptism*, 109-110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 106-107.

antisacramentalism that accompanied the call to discipleship in the Anabaptist movement, but he unfortunately overlooks the well-roundedness of reconciling “uncompromising fidelity to Gospel values” with the “faith in the power of grace” implied by sacramentality, dismissing attempts to do so as “hybrid ecclesiology.”⁴² Joseph Capizzi expresses similar misgivings in his reaction to what he perceives as “Bauerschmidt’s reduction of the ‘spiritual cleansing’ in baptism to ‘an incorporation into a people,’” preferring to retreat back to a conventionally and even stereotypically Catholic definition of baptism as primarily “purification of sin,”⁴³ which appears to confirm Mennonite fears of the Augustinian influence and its negative anthropology. Bauerschmidt, much to his credit, responds that the sacramental cleansing of baptism is not *reduced* to the communal aspect but rather *promoted* to it,⁴⁴ essentially affirming the sacrament as more (not less) than individually efficacious.

Capizzi’s fear that the cleansing efficacy of baptism “has been ignored or de-emphasized ... because of overemphasis on intention,”⁴⁵ misplaced though it may be, points to a little-acknowledged similarity in the concerns surrounding Anabaptist and paedobaptist approaches. If infant baptism is critiqued for its potential reduction to individual cleansing from sin, the parallel critique of believers’ baptism pertains to its potential reduction to individual autonomy. Mason recognizes this danger, pointing to subtle yet significant changes in the ways that Mennonites rationalize the practice of rebaptism, which today “seem to owe more to the Declaration of Independence than the Schleithem Confession.” Considering the contextual and rhetorical shifts that have brought the prevailing rationale for believers’ baptism from dissociation from earthly power structures to personal meaning and individual choice, Mason fears that

“In 21st-century America, rebaptism may serve to underwrite individualism, which is as perilous to Mennonites as to Catholics.... Our capitulation to the autonomy of the individual, manifested in our ongoing willingness to rebaptize upon request, is not only a kind of predation on other communions; it is a kind of cannibalism of our own.... After all, if we accept a wayward

Catholic’s rejection of her baptism on the grounds that she did not choose it and can’t remember it, what answer can we muster for the departing Mennonite who rejects our faith on the grounds that he was merely born and raised Mennonite?”⁴⁶

Lapp similarly wonders, “Does the individualism implied in believer’s baptism require extra effort to nurture the communal obligations of church life?”⁴⁷

In the ongoing discussions that have followed Vatican II, some theologians have expressed concern that the same individualism may be eroding infant baptism even in the Catholic Church. While such a development may please thoroughgoing Mennonites such as Kreider, it is troubling for Belcher, who for this reason appears wary of Kavanagh’s Anabaptist sympathies. Belcher’s critique of Kavanagh points out his implicit dichotomy between individualism and conformity, along with his preference to err on the side of the former.⁴⁸ Searle goes considerably further in his critique of Anabaptism itself, mistakenly portraying it as based solely or primarily on modern individualism from its very beginning.⁴⁹ By dismissing the arguments of Anabaptists and Anabaptist-leaning Catholics as individualistic, Belcher and Searle seem to be affirming Kavanagh’s dichotomy,⁵⁰ and thus the competition for normative status between infant and adult baptism becomes a question of a trade-off between the two pitfalls.

The one-sidedness of Searle’s view of Anabaptism is evidenced by Finger’s insistence on the interconnectedness of the life of the individual and that of the community, both of which enter into a covenantal relationship at the time of initiation.⁵¹ On the other hand, Finger appears to be misreading Bauerschmidt’s affirmation of the church rather than the individual as the primary subject of baptism. Far from denying the church’s nurturing of the individual, Bauerschmidt attempts

⁴² Searle in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 381-84.

⁴³ Joseph E. Capizzi in *On Baptism*, 99-100.

⁴⁴ Bauerschmidt in *On Baptism*, 126.

⁴⁵ Capizzi in *On Baptism*, 98-99.

⁴⁶ Mason, “Mennonite But Not Anabaptist,” 9-10.

⁴⁷ Lapp, “Musings on Baptism.”

⁴⁸ Belcher, 74-75; cf. Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 110.

⁴⁹ Searle in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 376-78, 400.

⁵⁰ In Belcher’s case, this assessment is based on her categorization of Kavanagh’s concerns about infant baptism “with the modern understanding of religious identity as individualistic and voluntary” (p. 75) and her sympathy to Searle’s defense of the practice, although she ultimately rejects the dichotomy in favor of dual normativity within a deeply communal framework.

⁵¹ Finger in *On Baptism*, 72-74.

to broaden Catholic and Mennonite understandings of baptism to better accommodate its nurturing role. By distancing baptism from the competing individualisms of personal cleansing and personal choice, he demonstrates how both Catholics and Mennonites, rather than dwelling on these parallel pitfalls, would do better to move away from such limited understandings of baptism toward a focus on its communal dimension which is already essential to both traditions. In doing so, he opens fresh possibilities for both churches to examine a question that is too often ignored in debates over the legitimacy of infant baptism: that of the role of children in the life of the church.⁵²

Along with the danger of individualism, that of the exclusion of children (no less painful for being unintended) is a concern regarding believers' baptism which must be addressed. Bauerschmidt is sensitive to this concern, arguing that the church's commitment to acknowledge children's gifts in its communal life and to form them as faithful disciples is a necessary foundation for infant baptism.⁵³ Kauffman, speaking from his experience in both Mennonite and Catholic circles, acknowledges the pastoral dilemmas caused by the presence of unbaptized children, whose ambiguous membership status is awkwardly highlighted by their exclusion from communion (a problem harshly criticized by Searle, who again unfairly caricatures Anabaptist ecclesiology as thoroughly nihilistic toward the value of children⁵⁴). Kauffman additionally notes that current Mennonite practice fills the initiatory void for infants with a ceremonial dedication, which, together with the trend of teenage baptism, parallels the Catholic practice of infant baptism and teenage confirmation.⁵⁵ Lapp also affirms the practice of infant dedication, while appearing open to the idea that infant baptism in its present context can fulfill the same purpose that makes dedication needed, serving the desire of Christian parents to raise their children for life in the church.⁵⁶

For Belcher, this sense of "Christian cultural orientation" is a central purpose of infant baptism. Comparing the rite to native language acquisition, she asserts that "it effectively initiates a

ritual process oriented to the formation of infants as Christian people, and this process is key to Christian being-in-the-world."⁵⁷ By focusing on the culturally orienting function of infant baptism, Belcher accentuates the need for an ecclesiology that includes children as dynamic participants. Edward Schillebeeckx, writing about fifty years earlier, affirms the same need as an added nuance to his own insistence on the importance of intention in reception of the sacraments. Schillebeeckx defends the appropriateness of infant baptism by framing it in a maternal and communal context⁵⁸ somewhat similar to that which Belcher gives, although Belcher's emphasis on dynamic participation in infancy is a strong departure from the passivity implied by Schillebeeckx's description of a baby as a "dormant personality."⁵⁹ The concerns of both, despite this difference, can be succinctly summarized by Kauffman's suggestion, "Perhaps if we would make children our focus, rather than doctrine, we would have better doctrine."⁶⁰

In view of all of these concerns underlying the differences between Mennonite and Catholic views of baptism, how can the two churches proceed together toward mutual understanding? To attain genuine mutuality on this subject is clearly no easy task, yet as we have seen, both churches have begun to realize that there has remained some long-neglected yet significant common ground buried beneath five centuries of division. In addition, certain self-critical voices within both churches have forged paths toward further points of convergence, perhaps in some cases even bypassing each other.

Based on the observation that Mennonites and Catholics in postmodern America have found themselves on relatively equal footing in relation to the secular state, with infant baptism becoming less related to civil society and state power, Mason argues that Mennonites now have less grounds for a wholesale rejection of its validity, making the case for recognition of all Trinitarian baptism as an act of faith and "a public initiation to God's alternative society" that is particularly subversive within a

⁵² Bauerschmidt in *On Baptism*, 45-46.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Searle in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 378, 400.

⁵⁵ Kauffman in *On Baptism*, 94-95.

⁵⁶ Lapp, "Musings on Baptism."

⁵⁷ Belcher, 131 (cf. 136, 154-55).

⁵⁸ E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 1963), 109-112.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁰ Kauffman in *On Baptism*, 96.

culture of individualism.⁶¹ Lapp, pondering the same phenomenon, reflects, “In an ecumenical epoch and a time of growing secularism, perhaps the time and mode of baptism is less significant than during the past five centuries.”⁶² Kavanagh, along with other representatives of the “mature adulthood school” in postconciliar Catholicism, appeals directly to the early church and Vatican II and indirectly to Anabaptist ideals in order to call

Perhaps the most helpful contributors to this conversation have been the more ambivalent ones, due to their being genuinely sympathetic to the concerns of both Catholic and Mennonite perspectives. Bauerschmidt and Finger demonstrate an understandable partiality to their respective churches’ positions on baptism that is offset by a very real sensitivity to the concerns that these positions raise. Kauffman and Schlachach, having



Catholics beyond a tridentine conception to a broader view of baptism, not merely as individual reception but as church-wide disciple-making.⁶³ Chauvet helpfully points to the perils of both “Christendom” and “believers’ church” models of ecclesiology, splitting the horns of the conformity/individualism dichotomy mentioned earlier with a paradoxical view of Christian initiation that avoids the weaknesses of either model by holding their strengths together in tension, most importantly in terms of the vital interdependence between sacramentality and ethics.⁶⁴

embraced an explicitly dual identity, are in a sense uniquely equipped to speak to and from either perspective from their position at the Mennonite-Catholic crossroads.

Lest these voices paint too rosy a picture of how far Mennonites and Catholics have come in relation to each other, certain others remind us how far we still have to go, calling attention to remaining unresolved issues too significant to be ignored. The role of historical Christendom remains a particularly tangled sticking point. Kreider is representative of many Mennonites in the tenacity with which he holds to the connection

⁶¹ Mason, “Mennonite But Not Anabaptist,” 9-10.

⁶² Lapp, “Musings on Baptism.”

⁶³ Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism*, 115.

⁶⁴ Chauvet, 54-65, 190-195.

between infant baptism and imperial coercion.⁶⁵ Capizzi takes an extreme and provocative position in defense of coerced baptism under Charlemagne, making the highly dubious claim that it too was causative of genuine conversion.⁶⁶ Searle maintains an oversimplified dichotomy between “continuity and growth” in the initiation of infants and “conversion and discontinuity” in that of adults,⁶⁷ appearing resentful that the conversion and faith commitment required of adult initiands seems to some to render infant baptism anomalous.⁶⁸ Belcher, while not directly dismissive of Anabaptist concerns so much as simply arguing in a different sphere, refers favorably or at least neutrally to the cultural formation of Christendom in a way that would doubtless be off-putting to Mennonite readers,⁶⁹ although her reading of Jean-Luc Marion as connecting the exorcism of an innocent child to Christ’s salvific nonviolence⁷⁰ could provide a fascinating dialogical starting point.

If anything is clear from this discussion, it is that both infant baptism and believers’ baptism carry potential for abuse in theology and practice. Many of the arguments appear to circle around the question of which can better produce authentic Christian disciples—a difficult if not impossible question to answer. Yet it is also apparent that both forms of baptismal practice, at their best, are indeed capable of being conducive to authentic discipleship; insofar as this is the case, both should be recognized as valid. Kauffman and Bauerschmidt imagine, without underestimating the difficulty

of attaining it, the intriguing and visionary ideal of “Mennonite Rite” communities practicing adult baptism within a unified church.⁷¹ In the meantime, a consolation and a challenge are in order for both churches. It would be unthinkable to ask that Mennonites begin practicing infant baptism, and there is no need for them to do so. They should, however, recognize its best potential for Christian formation and not seek to undercut its validity by rebaptizing converts from other Christian communions. It would likewise be unthinkable to ask that Catholics abandon infant baptism, and there is no need for them to abandon it or even to relegate it to second-place status. They should, however, take equal care not to treat adult baptism as inferior or abnormal either, instead upholding dual norms as vital and perhaps prophetic reciprocal counterbalances. There is a theological precedent for this in the “corresponding practice school” of initiation, which Covino identifies as the least developed position in the postconciliar debate, but which seems to have the most potential in terms of accounting for the appropriateness of different initiatory rites under different circumstances,⁷² and may therefore offer helpful insights to Mennonites as well as Catholics. Hopefully, these modest challenges can assist the two churches in coming to some form of mutual recognition, in service of the aim of greater Christian unity.

⁶⁵ Kreider in *On Baptism*, especially “A Post-Dialogue Conversation,” 112-17, and “A Post-Dialogue Conversation II,” 128-38, 142-45.

⁶⁶ Capizzi in *On Baptism*, 99-100.

⁶⁷ Searle in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 407-408.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 380-381.

⁶⁹ Belcher, 98-99.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 182-185.

⁷¹ *On Baptism*, 95 (Kauffman), 127 (Bauerschmidt).

⁷² Covino in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 345-48.