

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN ORDINANCES: BAPTISM AND THE LOVE FEAST

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TOPIC	PAGE NUMBER
<i>Ordinances & Sacraments</i>	2
<i>Baptism by Trine Immersion</i>	3
<i>Early Meaning of Baptism</i>	3
<i>Baptism Today</i>	5
<i>Three Times Forward</i>	6
<i>The Love Feast</i>	9
<i>The Examination</i>	9
<i>Feetwashing</i>	10
<i>The Agape Meal</i>	11
<i>The Bread & Cup Communion</i>	12
<i>Conclusion</i>	12
<i>Bibliography</i>	13

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The Church of the Brethren denomination has several church practices that are rich in meaning. From their beginning, the denomination's focus was to restore the faith and actions of the early church found in the Scriptures. The Church of the Brethren have historically practiced six ordinances: the love feast (John 13:1-20; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34), the anointing with oil (James 5:14-18), the laying on of hands (Acts 8:17; 1 Timothy 4:14), the assembling together for worship (Hebrews 10:25), and the Christian salutation of the holy kiss (Romans 16:16; 1 Peter 5:14).¹ Baptism and the Love Feast are the two most distinctive ordinances of the denomination. This paper will focus on the Church of the Brethren theological meaning of baptism and the love feast.

Ordinances and Sacraments

Before we get to these two ordinances, it is important to note that the Church of the Brethren does not view them as "Sacraments," those rituals that pass on the grace of God mysteriously simply by the fact that they are done. Brethren scholars would use the terms: celebrations or ordinances (they are orders, "commanded practices," by Christ).² The term "ordinance" means "visible acts and signs appointed by Christ to be administered in the church which express and confirm the saving truth of the gospel to the believer."³ An ordinance is a scriptural command that requires more than one believer to perform. Ordinances are essential factors in the development of the Christian life, because of their rich meaning.⁴ The Brethren

¹ Harold S. Martin, ed. *Handbook of Basic Beliefs within the Church of the Brethren*. (Ephrata, PA: Brethren Revival Fellowship, 1968), 4.

² Vernard Eller. *In Place of Sacraments*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 4.

³ *The Brethren Encyclopedia, Volume 2: K-Z* (1983), s.v. "Ordinances."

⁴ Paul W. Brubaker. "Is the Church of the Brethren A New Testament Church?" *Brethren Revival Fellowship Journal* 12 (1977):1-2

believe the ordinances may be regarded as having sacramental significance but should not be seen as conveying grace in of themselves.⁵

The Brethren would still question the existence of a believer's faith if that believer did not practice the New Testament ordinances. We read in Paul's second letter to Timothy (Weymouth translation), "if any man takes part in an athletic contest, he gets no prize unless he obeys the rules." As we run the race for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, we are expected to observe the rules, just as those great athletes of Greece (who were contestants in the games) were expected to observe the rules of the race. Jesus said, "It is not everyone who keeps saying to me, Lord, Lord, who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the man who actually does my heavenly Father's will" (Matthew 7:21/ Phillips).⁶ Brethren see these ordinances (especially baptism and the love feast) as rules that must be followed for the Christian.

BAPTISM BY FORWARD TRINE IMMERSION

From its beginning, the Church of the Brethren denomination was concerned about baptism. In fact, "much of the early published writings of Brethren authors were about the subject of baptism."⁷ Baptism and eschatology were written about more than any other subject by the early leaders.

Early Meaning of Baptism

The Brethren were highly influenced by the Anabaptists who taught the concept of two Kingdoms: the Kingdom of man, and the Kingdom of God. Christians were to be part of the Kingdom of God, a separate people of God; and baptism was the symbol of this separation. The Anabaptists also taught that infant baptism was wrong, because anywhere baptism is taught or

⁵ *TBE*, Vo. 2, s.v. "Ordinances."

⁶ Olen B. Landes. "Dangerous Trends in the Church of the Brethren," *Brethren Revival Fellowship Journal* 23 (1988): 4.

⁷ Donald F. Durnbaugh. *The Brethren in Colonial America*. (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1967):426.

practiced in the Scriptures, it always follows repentance and believing. “A baby just couldn't do these things.”⁸

In 1708, Alexander Mack and seven others covenanted together to follow and obey the teachings of the New Testament. They gathered on the banks of the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany, to demonstrate the public means of this covenant: baptism.⁹ They felt strongly that they "must be baptized according to the teaching of Jesus Christ and the apostles."¹⁰ It was an illegal act for an adult to be “re-baptized” after having been baptized as a baby. The meaning of baptism was so deep for these early founders, that they were willing to die for it.

These early believers of the Church of the Brethren felt that baptism was a necessary action for their faith. Their primary goal was the desire for a marked gathered community of believers according to the "Rights and Ordinances" of the New Testament.¹¹ Since believer's baptism was explicitly commanded by Christ and by the New Testament authors, they knew they had to do it if they were going to call themselves New Testament people. The Church was the gathered body and baptism was the mark of membership in the Body. They believed that the Holy Spirit was leading them in unity and baptism was a sign of the work of the Spirit.

When they studied the Scriptures, they saw that baptism had deep significance. According to early Brethren theologians, baptism in the New Testament developed through three distinct phases. Each of these phases was cumulative; adding further meaning and insights as God revealed them to the previous phase. The phases are: John's baptism (which is a baptism of repentance and a once-for-all forgiveness of sin), Jesus' baptism (a representation of the coming

⁸ Craig Alan Myers. “New Testament Baptism,” *Brethren Revival Fellowship Journal* 38 (2003):3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ Alexander Mack. *The Complete Writings of Alexander Mack*. Translated by William R. Eberly. (Winona Lake, IN: Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1991): 9.

¹¹ Hans Schneider. “Basic Questions on Water Baptism: An Early Anti-Brethren Pamphlet,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 43 (1997): 48.

of the Holy Spirit and an ordination to ministry), and Paul's baptism (a baptism that is post-resurrection and represents a "union with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection").¹² For the early Brethren, baptism by forward trine immersion held all of these meanings.

Baptism Today

For Brethren today, there should be no question about the necessity of the rite of baptism.¹³ While it is essential, they believe that it is not as essential as faith and repentance. "A believer who desires to be baptized, but cannot obtain it because of necessity - like the criminal on the cross - is still saved. If, however, a man does not desire to be baptized, he is rightly to be judged as unbelieving and disobedient, not because of baptism, but because of his unbelief and disobedience."¹⁴ Baptism didn't automatically bring salvation or the Holy Spirit either. They did not believe that the Holy Spirit was commanded by baptism, but that the Holy Spirit commanded baptism. The earliest Brethren also included the laying on of hands right after baptism, specifically for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. This was to make sure that the new believer received the fruit of the Spirit and received spiritual gifts for public ministry, and evangelism (and proclamation).

Brethren today believe that baptism is linked to repentance. They see baptism as a celebration of God's forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. This does not necessarily mean they believe that baptism is the time of salvation, but baptism is because of salvation. One very important meaning to baptism is that the very act of it is a separation from the world and a shift of loyalty from the values of the present age to those of the age to come. Baptism also

¹² *The Brethren Encyclopedia, Volume 1: A-J* (1983), s.v. "Baptism, Theology of."

¹³ J. H. Moore. *The New Testament Doctrines*. (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1914): 8.

¹⁴ Mack, 28.

incorporates the believer “into a community of believers, a common life where faith flourishes and worship abounds.”¹⁵

One of the major reasons for baptism by immersion today in the Church of the Brethren is to follow the example of Jesus Christ. Both Matthew 3:15-16 and Mark 1:9 tell us that Jesus came up out of the water. You can not come up out of the water, unless you went down into it. This means that Jesus Himself was baptized by immersion. Jesus also commanded baptism for his followers (Matthew 28:19 & Mark 16:16). The Brethren also believe that baptism publicly confesses Christ (Romans 10:9-10), and is a sign of you following His commands (1 John 2:3). The Brethren hold up the Scriptures of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 & Colossians 2:12 to show us that immersion makes us one with Jesus’ burial and resurrection and that immersion best symbolizes death to sin, and rising to new life (Romans 6:4 & Colossians 2:12). They believe strongly that baptism is putting on Christ (Galatians 3:27) and symbolizes a washing away of sins (Acts 22:16).

Three Times Forward

The mode of baptism (the way it is done) also has special meaning for Brethren. Many would argue today that the only proper way for baptism is three times forward. They believe that being immersed forwards shows that you relate to Christ’s death. When Jesus died on the cross, He bowed His head (John 19:30). For Brethren this suggests that baptism should be forward as well, because you relate to Jesus’ death in baptism. They believe that trine immersion by a forward motion is the literal application of the Scripture. If Jesus bowed His head in a forward movement, then we too, should receive baptism in the same way, bowing our heads in a forward movement. The Brethren also believe strongly in trine immersion so that faith in the Trinity can be shown. They make a big deal that the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19), specifically calls on the Trinity

¹⁵ Richard B. Gardner and Kenneth M. Shaffer. *Let Our Joys Be Known*. (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1998): 15

in baptism. They call for people to be immersed three times, once at the naming of each person of the Godhead. After studying the writing of the early church fathers, the Brethren truly believe that "Trine Immersion proves itself to be the best and most complete way to carry out all the Scriptures command in relation to the rite of baptism. Historically, the early authors and Church fathers unite together in giving a vast amount of testimony supporting Trine Immersion, along with countless historians throughout the ages"¹⁶ They point to many early Church writings, which include:

- The Didache. Sometimes called The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, was written about A.D. 100. It says, "But concerning baptism, thus baptize ye: having first recited all these precepts, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in running water." Brethren scholars believe this to be a strong implication for trine immersion as the preferred means of baptism.
- Tertullian, A.D. 160-220: "Jesus gave as his last command that they should immerse into the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, not into one person. Therefore, all who believed were immersed. For we are immersed, not once but thrice, at the naming of every person of the Trinity."
- Augustine, A.D. 354-430, "In this font, before we dipped your whole body, we asked you, 'Believest thou in God the omnipotent Father?' After you declared that you believed, we immersed three times your heads in the sacred font ... You are rightly immersed three times, you who receive baptism in the

¹⁶Timothy Mark Hodge. *Could it be Three?* (Winona Lake, IN: CE National, 2002): 31

name of Jesus Christ, who rose the third day from the dead" (Sermon on the Mystery of Baptism).

- Jerome, A.D. 340-420: "We are thrice dipped in water that the mystery of the Trinity may appear to be but one, and therefore though we be thrice put under the water to represent the mystery of the Trinity, yet it is reputed to be but one baptism."
- Chrysostom, A.D. 347-407 "Christ delivered to his disciples one baptism in three immersions when he said to them, 'Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.'"¹⁷

In fact, the Brethren scholars point out that when Church leaders study what the early church did, they are forced to use trine baptism. They use John Wesley as one example: "when Mr. Wesley baptized adults professing faith in Christ, he chose to do it by trine immersion if the person would submit to it, judging this to be the apostolic method."¹⁸

Since the early founders of the denomination believed that baptism was necessary for salvation, it should be noted that this is not the official stance of the denomination today. In 1958 a major shift took place. At the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, the denomination in the name of ecumenicism voted to accept 'letters of transfer' (no matter how the believer was baptized) as acceptance for good standing membership status. Prior to this landmark decision, members desiring to join the Church of the Brethren from another Christian denomination were required to be rebaptized by trine immersion, even though they retained good standing membership status in another denomination. You can not believe that immersion is a

¹⁷ Myers, p. 5

¹⁸ Henry Moore. *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley, Volume 1*. (NY: N. Bangs & J. Emory, 1825):425

necessary mark of salvation and agree with this position. This should show that the meaning of baptism for the Church of the Brethren varies from member to member.

THE LOVE FEAST

For Brethren, the traditional love feast, held once or twice a year, remains the profound central act and symbol of the church's life.¹⁹ The Love Feast is the celebration of the ordinance that Jesus taught. It is not just taking communion, but has four basic parts: an examination period, feetwashing, an agape meal and the Eucharist (which means the celebration of the communion cup of bread). This ordinance has major significance, because to the Brethren it is a reminder of what Jesus did (1 Corinthians 11:24-25), a time for examination of your faith walk (1 Corinthians 11:28) and a time of fellowship with your brothers & sisters in Christ (Jude 12).

The Examination

From the beginning, Brethren leaders took seriously Church unity within its members. The Love Feast reflects this as it has deep meaning for the reevaluation of each local body's unity. Traditionally, the deacons had the task of visiting those who were going to attend the Love Feast and ask them three questions that pertained to the unity of the Church:

1. Are you of the same faith?
2. Do you have love and harmony with others in the congregation?
3. Do you have anything to bring to council?²⁰

The members were to confess any sins in preparation for the Love Feast as well. The Brethren believed that "the remedy for sin and failure is confession. And confession is not simply mouthing a few words in prayer. Confession includes taking sides with God against ourselves,

¹⁹ General Board of the Church of the Brethren. *For All Who Minister*. (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1993):183.

²⁰ Jeff Bach. "Brethren Faith and Heritage," class lecture at the Brethren Academy. (Richmond, IN: Bethany Seminary, January 12-16, 2004).

acknowledging that we have been wrong, seeking grace to cultivate the virtues of Jesus, and if we have wronged another person, going to that person and making an apology.”²¹ It was not uncommon for major disputes to be settled before a love feast occurred.

This meaning of unity changed, however, in the denomination. In 1951, the Annual Conference voted that people who were baptized in another fashion other than immersion could take part in the love feast. This means that people who did not share a common mark of baptism were now taking communion together. For those Brethren who believed in the necessity of baptism, this meant that some congregations were taking communion with unbelievers. Another major change occurred in 1958. The love feast and communion was opened to members of any Christian denomination. This was a sweeping departure from the traditional service wherein only Brethren could participate. Additionally, several congregations still practiced 'examination' of its own members to determine if they were worthy to receive communion. A member needed to affirm harmony with God and fellow Brethren in the presence of a deacon or Elder. Slowly, the examination period began to erode away as an important part of the love feast. In fact, some Church of the Brethren leaders do not mention it today and say that the love feast has only three parts (feetwashing, an agape meal, and communion).

Feetwashing

Brethren leaders believe that Jesus meant for feetwashing to be a vital part of the communion experience. They believe that even though the first three gospels do not mention feetwashing, Jesus' teaching in John 13:1-15 should take precedent. In Jesus' day, it was custom for the slaves to wash the feet of guests as they entered a home. Jesus wanted to teach the arguing disciples a powerful lesson. John 13:1-5 (NLT) says, "He now showed the disciples the

²¹ Harold S. Martin. "The Three Part Feast of Charity," *Brethren Revival Fellowship Journal* 35 (2000): 2.

full extent of his love... Jesus knew that the Father had given him authority over everything and that he had come from God and would return to God. So he got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he had around him." Jesus wanted His followers to celebrate His ultimate example of servanthood (when He died on the cross) by washing each other's feet. They believe that not doing this is rejecting John 13:15 that says, "I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you." Church of the Brethren leaders take this to be quite a literal command for all followers of Jesus.

The Agape Meal

Every Love Feast also has a time to share a meal that they call "the Agape Meal". Church of the Brethren leaders believe that the Scriptures continually point to a meal while taking communion (John 13:4 & 1 Corinthians 11:20 & Jude 12). This has never been a Seder supper for the Brethren, but the dish that is served usually is a beef and bread sop. This tradition comes from Germany and is what peasants usually had for supper. They do this to remind every member that they each poor without Jesus. They also do not have a Jewish Passover meal, because they believe the Agape Meal to be a symbol of the coming meal, the Great Supper at the end of the Age.

The Agape Meal, ultimately, is a sign that there was true fellowship for the Brethren. They look to history to explain the importance of eating together. In first century Christian meals, there was mixed social class. In Hellenistic culture, people sat according to their social status. Christians were commanded to not make such distinctions. For thousands of years, eating together was also a sign of friendship. In the Old Testament, eating together was the sign of a ratified agreement (example: Genesis 26:30). In the days leading up to the birth of Christ,

eating together was a popular figure of speech for the Kingdom of God (Luke 13:29-30).

Finally, eating together is one of the significant things a family does as a family.²² The Brethren try to bring all of these meanings out when the Agape Meal is being eaten.

The Bread & Cup of Communion

The communion proper (the Eucharist) comes as a climax to the other parts: the examination, feetwashing, and the Agape Meal.²³ The Brethren take the memorial stance in their view of communion (as opposed to transubstantiation). “Communion [in the Church of the Brethren] is a memorial of Christ's death and passion.”²⁴ It is also a time to remember the redemption which the individual has received, and a recall of the believer's participation in the Body of Christ, the church. The bread and cup also give us a foretaste of the future banquet in heaven.

CONCLUSION

The Church of the Brethren has always considered the actions of its people to be utmost importance to the faith. What you do matters. They believe strongly that the practices, ordinances, sacraments, or celebrations of the church should be dictated by the New Testament example. When people have tried to change this, it has been disastrous for the church. It was noted earlier that major changes in the meaning of the ordinances for the Church of the Brethren occurred in 1958. It should also be noted that 1963 was the peak of the Church of the Brethren membership (around 210K). Today we are at around 134K. Could this be because some leaders were more concerned about unity than trying to lift up Christ in all they do? Colossians 1:18 (KJV) says, “[Jesus] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”

²² John C. Middlekauff. "The Lord's Supper," *Brethren Life and Thought* 24 (1979): 226

²³ *The Brethren Encyclopedia, Volume 2: K-Z* (1983), s.v. "Love Feast."

²⁴ William M. Beahm. *The Brethren Love Feast*. (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1959): 14-15

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