

Faith Mennonite Church
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Baptism: Testimony, Spirit, and Name
John 1:29-42

Do you kids, or did you, adults when you were kids, form clubs with your friends? I have vague memories of creating or joining clubs and deciding who could join and making lists of rules of what we would and would not do. I think that some of you kids are in gaming groups and I have no idea how those groups get formed or what your rules might be. Some of our girls are in running groups; I imagine you have to make a serious commitment to run if you join that group. In our adult life, many of our professional associations require educational preparation and some have exams that must be successfully completed, proving that one is prepared to do the work that one wishes to undertake.

John's gospel begins with John the Baptist making preparations for a new club, a new community that would be led by Jesus. John used testimony and baptism as the way to prepare people. His testimony was that he was gathering people, not to follow him, but rather to prepare them to follow one who was coming after him, someone he considered so great that he was "not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal" (Jn 1:27). John's gospel doesn't go into detail about John's baptizing practice. We have to rely on the other gospels that depict John the Baptist baptizing people as they responded to his call to repentance, to turn from their evil ways, to turn toward God. In those other gospels, Jesus comes to John and receives baptism. Matthew says that Jesus was baptized to "fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Mark and Luke don't provide a reason for his baptism, but, with Matthew they share the image of the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove as Jesus came up from the waters, and a voice from heaven proclaimed: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22).

John's gospel inserts this testimony of the Spirit descending on Jesus without explicitly connecting it to the baptism of Jesus. Commentators suggest that the writer of John did not want to elevate John the Baptist over Jesus in *any* way, including having him baptize Jesus. Rather, when John sees the Spirit descend on Jesus, he recognizes that it is his time to step aside. Almost immediately, "the next day" in the narrative, two of John's disciples hear their leader describe Jesus as "the Lamb of God." They turn to follow him and when Jesus asks what they are looking for, they reply with a question, "Where do you stay?" This verb *stay* or *dwell*, is the same verb that John used in the prologue to describe Jesus' presence as "the Word became flesh and *dwelled/stayed/lived/camped out* among us" (1:14). Jesus replied, "Come and see," and they followed him. They went to abide/dwell/stay with him, to be part of his community and learn from him. One of those two, Andrew, went to let his brother know that he had found the Messiah, the one whom John the Baptist had been preaching about. When Jesus saw this brother, he addressed him by name, Simon, and then gave him a new name, Cephas/Peter, the rock.

Although John's gospel provides a story of baptism that is rather different from the other gospels, there are certainly elements in this narrative that have formed the church's understanding of baptism as a rite of initiation, as our entry step into the Christian community. First, is the element of testimony. Just as John's gospel elevates the testimony of John the Baptist regarding Jesus, our testimony—the words and actions of Jesus' followers—become the invitation for others to "come and see," to explore life in the community of Jesus. Over time, as we are formed, either as children who become youth within the church, or as persons who enter as adults, we find our own voice, our own desire to speak and to follow the ways of Jesus, to turn from other allegiances. When we are ready to testify that Jesus is God's final Word, that Jesus revealed and continues, through the Spirit, to reveal God to us, and that we wish to live in intimate relationship with this Jesus, who will draw us into the heart of God, then we are ready for baptism.

Second, in baptism we receive a new identity, a new name. In the church we take the name “Christian.” Originally this signified “little Christ,” a follower. In some Christian traditions, people take a new name at their baptism or confirmation. John the Baptist recognized Jesus’s identity as the “Lamb of God,” the one who would liberate through suffering (Isaiah 53), when he saw God’s Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove. Jesus gave Simon a new name, the Rock, when he began to follow.

Peter lived into his new name in a very unpolished way, with moments of regression and a huge denial in Jesus’ most difficult hour. In the final chapter of John’s gospel, we find a moving story as Jesus lovingly restores Peter to the community. Interestingly, in that episode, Jesus calls Peter by his given name, Simon. Perhaps it was a subtle way of letting Peter know that he was forgiven for not living up to his discipleship name, for failing miserably at being the Rock. That same loving forgiveness follows us after baptism. Although we testify to our desire to turn away from evil and take this new name and identity as a Jesus-follower at our baptism, we enter the community of life-long formation, as imperfect people. We will all fall at some time, individually and even communally.

While John’s gospel does not give great emphasis to baptism, it is the gospel that introduces us to foot-washing. Some surmise that this act, of washing the feet of another, was the rite of initiation, the “baptism” in the Johannine community. Both rites use water. Both rites are signs, pointing to something much deeper than the momentary activity. Both rites call us to humility, to receive God’s grace, and to join a community that extends that grace to one another.

May those of us who are baptized receive the grace to bear testimony and continue living into our calling. May those who are still on a journey of exploration receive grace to keep drawing nearer, to follow the Spirit’s call.