Re-Imagining Narratives: Anabaptist Baptismal Theology and Profound Cognitive Impairment

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Abstract

People with profound cognitive disabilities pose a serious challenge for churches in the Anabaptist tradition in regard to baptism. This essay investigates the baptismal theology of the 16th-century radical reformers and finds that this theology demands a high degree of purposive agency and inward subjectivity in order to receive baptism. These capacities exclude many (if not most) people with profound cognitive impairments. If Anabaptist communities are to become more hospitable, their theology and narratives require re-imagining. Suggestions are made on how to re-envision a baptismal theology that more fully honors those with profound impairments. This re-envisioning also offers a potentially more freeing and truthful discipleship for all believers.

Churches that practice the baptism of believers upon confession of faith have offered an alternative to the more creedal traditions for the last 500 years. Based upon a belief in the normativity of the baptism of adult converts in the New Testament and early church, this theology increasingly fits a post-Christendom world. With there no longer being a need to baptize out of citizenship requirements or fear of eternal damnation, a baptismal theology emanating from the 16th-century radical reformers appears to most adequately protect the integrity of an ordinance that requires a personal response to the inward grace of God.

Enter Dorothea, a young woman with a profound developmental disability whom I met some years ago at a residential care facility in the western United States.[1] Dorothea's ability to communicate was minimal: she was unable to speak and had little capacity for controlling the movements of

[1] "Dorothea" is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of this young woman.

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her body. She remained perpetually in a prone position and was constantly dependent upon others for mobility. She required assistance with such basic necessities as eating, bathing, and general personal care. While I never inquired of her diagnosis, it appeared that her intellectual and physical impairment was a profound one, which meant an extremely limited capacity for personal response and purposive agency.

The presence of someone like Dorothea prompts a question: If she belonged to an Anabaptist-Mennonite church today, would she be eligible for baptism? She can make no personal and public confession of faith due to her limitations in communication, and her severe cognitive impairment means that she may have severely limited ability to process inward mental states. Does this mean that her "mental age" makes her "innocent" and thus not in need of baptismal grace? Can this assessment adequately account for her full humanity and place in the Body of Christ?

This essay explores how the presence of people like Dorothea offers a bold challenge to an Anabaptist theology and practice of baptism. By looking at baptism through the lens of profound intellectual disability, it becomes clear that an Anabaptist theology of baptism demands capacities of rationality and personal agency. This investment in subjectivity raises questions as to how one can consistently hold to a theology of personally confessing baptism and still offer the ordinance to people considered profoundly intellectually disabled. A practice that absolutely demands a freely chosen and personal confession of faith makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to consistently admit persons like Dorothea to the baptismal font or pool.

I will start by taking a brief look at the theology and practice of the first Anabaptists. This discussion will illustrate that people like Dorothea could never meet the strict requirements for baptism demanded by these radical leaders. To hold to these demands would mean that such persons should either not be baptized or only receive the ordinance as "special cases." I will then offer suggestions for re-envisioning an Anabaptist baptismal theology that can account more adequately for the full humanity of people with cognitive impairments. I will attempt to do this by keeping people like Dorothea in mind as fellow members of the body of Christ. My hope is that she can be a gentle interrogator of baptismal theology and practice,

and reveal some of the presuppositions that prevent her full humanity from being recognized.

16th-Century Anabaptism on Baptism

In "Early Anabaptist Ideas about the Nature of Children," Hillel Schwartz outlines three criteria that manifest the shift from child to youth, thus signaling the readiness of the person for baptism and entry into the church: 1) the development of self-will; 2) "adult" reasoning; 3) a penitential conscience.[2] Here I will look closely at how the radical reformers saw these criteria, thereby discerning how they point strongly to the sense of personhood as resting on a free, rational, and inward self. The life of Dorothea will then be brought to bear on these reflections, in order to see what her presence has to say to the baptismal theology of the first Anabaptists.

The Free Agent

Schwartz highlights how one of the first criteria that made someone eligible to become an adult and thus be ready for baptism was the development of "self-will." "Without self-will in sin none can be damned; and in children there is no self-will," writes Ulrich Stadler (d. 1540).[3] Pilgram Marpeck (c. 1496-1556) also sees the burgeoning of the intentional act of sinning as manifesting the shift into adolescence. The child enters a new stage of development when she begins a "process of individuation" that leads to a "personal volitional choice" to disobey God.[4] Yet when they reach this "age of discretion" the youth can not only choose to sin but also freely choose God by joining the church. To be a youth and thus ready for baptism meant to be able to choose between alternatives: good or evil, church or world. At this stage of development Stadler states that the child can "set his heart on a goal" and appropriate the faith for himself.[5] "[Y]our faith has made you whole" adds Hans Schlaffer (1490-1528). "It is your own and not someone else's faith. Whoever believes and is baptized, [the Bible] says. That is, whoever

[2] Hillel Schwartz, "Early Anabaptist Ideas about the Nature of Children," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 47, no. 2 (April 1973): 105-106.

[3] Quoted in ibid., 105.

[4] Stephen Boyd, *Pilgram Marpeck: His Life and Social Theology* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1992), 149.

[5] Schwartz, "Early Anabaptist Ideas," 105.

believes for himself, he shall be baptized."[6] There was to be no more believing for another, according to Marpeck: "neither wife for husband, nor husband for wife, children for parents, parents for children."[7]

The radical reformers' emphasis on free will was crucial in their insistence on returning to the voluntary nature of the early church. According to John Howard Yoder, the first Anabaptists "were so concerned with restoring the (adult) voluntariness, which baptism had had in the beginning, that they were willing to be persecuted to the death for being baptized upon confession of their faith."[8] In order to ensure the integrity of the church, called to live the Gospel with its emphases on patience, nonviolence, and readiness to face persecution, being a Christian meant to freely and willingly commit oneself to Christ. According to Balthasar Hubmaier (1480-1528), this free choice included the candidate's voluntary submission to the church's powers of binding and loosing:

> [W]hen he receives the baptism of water the one who is baptized testifies publically that he has pledged himself henceforth to lie according to the Rule of Christ. By virtue of this pledge he has submitted himself to sisters, brothers, and to the church so that when he transgresses they now have the authority to admonish, punish, ban, and reaccept him.[9]

Reason and Understanding

The radical reformers considered the ability to reason and cognitively understand as crucial in considering people for baptism. Youth could choose

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[6] Hans Schlaffer, "A Short and Simple Admonition," 1527, quoted from *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 171.

[7] Quoted in Schwartz, "Early Anabaptist Ideas," 105.

[8] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 84, n40. *[Perhaps the best-known Mennonite theologian of the 20th century, Yoder is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. Documentation and discussion of these abuses is found at http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/ and in* Mennonite Quarterly Review *89, no. 1 (January 2015).—CGR Editors]*

[9] Balthasar Hubmaier, *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. by H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA.: Herald Press, 1989), 127.

to do good instead of evil by being taught, and being teachable implied the capacity for rational thought. Thus Menno Simons (1496-1561) could write of little children:

> It is plain that they cannot be taught, admonished or instructed. And many have less sense at birth than do irrational creatures—so without rationality that they cannot be taught anything about carnal things until their hearing, comprehension, and understanding have begun to develop.[10]

As the first Anabaptists saw conversion as beginning with teaching, which led to faith and then baptism, the importance they placed on cognitive understanding becomes clear. The order of teaching, faith, and baptism was grounded in the apostolic witness itself.[11] Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543) thus speaks of baptism as

> that high covenant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the sign of the covenant of God, instituted solely for the old, the mature, and the rational, who can receive, assimilate, and understand the teaching and the preaching of the Lord, and not for the immature, uncomprehending, and unreasonable, who cannot receive, learn, or understand the teaching of the apostolic emissaries: such are immature children.[12]

Clearly, when the radical reformers spoke about reason they did not mean a scholastic or highly speculative theology but a biblical sense of wisdom or understanding. Rationality was merely a tool that could facilitate surrender to Christ and lead to discipleship. Nonetheless, reason was important; the early Anabaptists never completely renounced the gift of thinking.[13]

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[10] Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons,* trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. J.C. Wenger (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 240.

[11] See Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 160-61.

[12] Quoted in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, eds. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 192.

[13] Ernst Crous, "Reason and Obedience," *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), 4:259.

Inward Conscience

A prominent feature of the baptismal theology under discussion was its emphasis upon an inner transformation, often referred to as "Spirit" or "spiritual" baptism. Mennonite historian Arnold Snyder contends that many early Anabaptists considered this the real baptism, and without it water baptism "could mean nothing."[14] The rite was an outward expression of an inner renewal that had already occurred. Drawing on 1 Peter 3:21, Simons remarks on the importance of this inward transformation:

> Here Peter teaches us how the inward baptism saves us, by which the inner man is washed, and not the outward baptism, as already stated, is of value in the sight of God, while outward baptism follows as an evidence of obedience which is of faith. . . . Oh no, outward baptism avails nothing so long as we are not inwardly renewed, regenerated, and baptized with the heavenly fire of the Holy Ghost of God. But when we are the recipients of this baptism from above, then we are constrained through the Spirit and Word of God by a good conscience which we obtain thereby, because we believe sincerely in the merits and death of the Lord and in the power and fruits of his resurrection, and because we are inwardly cleansed by faith.[15]

This "change of heart" of the "inward man"[16] did not lead merely to individual salvation; it required a fundamental change in living one's life. As Conrad Grebel (c. 1498-1526) put it,

> The Scripture describes baptism for us thus, that it signifies that, by faith and the blood of Christ, sins have been washed away for him who is baptized, changes his mind, and believes before and after; that it signifies that a man is dead and ought to be dead unto sin and walks in newness of life and spirit, and that he shall certainly be saved if, according to this meaning, by inner

[14] C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 71.
[15] Simons, *The Complete Writings,* 125.
[16] Ibid., 134.

baptism he lives his faith.[17]

In this way, baptism witnessed to an inward intention and was only for those who were committed to a life devoted to Christ in the community of faith. The cleansing of the conscience brought about by contrition must lead to discipleship in the church and world.

Radical Reformers, Baptism, and People with Profound Impairments

What then would the early Anabaptists have to say to Dorothea and others with profound cognitive impairments? As they saw adult human persons as possessing the faculties of will, reason, and conscience, we could assume that these 16th-century Christians would place persons like Dorothea in the category of "perpetual child." They would thus be deemed "innocent" and therefore have no need for baptism. As Marpeck claims,

> Paul says: "Without faith no man can please God." Children and the retarded are not required to believe or disbelieve these words, but those who are born from the knowledge of good and evil into the innocence and simplicity of faith are required to believe. . . . [R]eason is . . . included in faith in the true sonship of Christ. Christ has accepted the children without sacrifice, without circumcision, without faith, without knowledge, without baptism; he has accepted them solely in virtue of the Word: "To such belongs the kingdom of heaven." That is the difference between the children and understanding. And even if the children were referred to here, it would not follow that they should be baptized . . . but that they should be left in the order into which Christ placed them.[18]

According to Marpeck, it would be extremely difficult to perceive someone like Dorothea as having faith due to her impaired ability to reason. The crucifixion of all fleshly understanding and desire also point to the

[17] Quoted in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 80.

[18] Pilgram Marpeck, "Confession," quoted from *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Klaassen, 176-77. Compare this with the same text in Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, eds. William Klassen and Klaassen, 129, where "retarded" is translated as "the ignorant."

development of an inward conscience, another capacity that many people labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled might not possess.

In this conception of baptism, Dorothea and others with similar embodiments would neither be admitted to the ordinance nor even have need of it. For a contemporary faith community wishing to be inclusive, this denial of baptism can appear highly exclusive and contradictory to the commitment to being a welcoming church. Yet to hold consistently to a theology and practice based on the radical reformers requires baptizing people with profound cognitive impairments as "special cases" or "exceptions." While this approach could be commended for making baptism accessible, the problem is that people like Dorothea risk becoming simply exceptions that prove the rule—namely the rule that being a rational subject, endowed with the capacity to make a free decision of faith, is necessary to receive baptism. Baptizing persons considered profoundly intellectually disabled in this spirit illustrates a particularly thin mode of inclusion. That is, marginalized people can be included in the domain of the dominant group, but without any change of thought or structure that created the marginalized group in the first place. So, while someone like Dorothea may be baptized, she remains in a special category, perhaps even a "perpetual child" due to her lack of capacity to meet the norm.

Re-Envisioning a Theology and Practice of Believers Baptism

The first Anabaptists' practice of baptism potentially marginalizes people like Dorothea in the community of faith and risks relegating her to receive baptism only as an exception. But must this be the last word? Can the tradition make room in its theology and practice so that people with profound cognitive impairments can enter the baptismal font as constitutive members of the body of Christ? What might act as reorienting steps for Anabaptist faith communities today in moving beyond inclusion to embracing the challenge which people like Dorothea make to the ordinance of baptism? In the following I will offer some preliminary suggestions on how an Anabaptist theology of baptism can be re-imagined in order to make it more hospitable and honoring not only for those with profound cognitive impairments but for others as well.

Re-emphasize God's Initiative

Some concern already exists in Anabaptist circles in regard to the turn towards a highly subjective, individualistic emphasis in recent practices of baptism.[19] The tendency in American revivalism to place a heavy weight upon individual conversion, along with the latent tendency towards anti-sacramentalism present from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, have sometimes combined to reduce baptism to a merely personal, human act.[20] The heavy investment in the individual and their confession of faith also throws a dark shadow over people whose capacity for purposive agency is highly limited.

One way to counteract this tendency would be to re-assert God's initiative in the process of initiation. By stressing God as the primary agent in baptism, the emphasis moves from Christians *earning* grace to *receiving* grace. With God as actor, the human role in the ordinance concerns itself less with what it needs to do than what it needs to be or become. This reorientation might help curb an Anabaptist tendency towards self-directed activism, at the same time cohering with the robust pneumatology of the first radical reformers. As Marpeck writes, "Without the artistry and teaching of the Holy Spirit, who pours out the love, which is God, into the hearts of the faith, and which surpasses all reason and understanding, everything is in vain."[21] Seeing baptism first and foremost in the light of the Holy Spirit means that not only can someone like Dorothea receive baptism, but through her gifts of contemplative presence she might even teach the community about the disposition needed for being transformed into Christ by the Spirit. In this vision, it is ultimately the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than one's own intentions or abilities, that gratuitously (re)creates Christians into the people of God.

[19] Marlin E. Miller, "The Mennonites," in *Baptism & Church: A Believers' Church Vision*, ed. Merle D. Strege (Grand Rapids, MI: Sagamore Books, 1986), 23-24; "Baptism in the Mennonite Tradition," 53-54; John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 199-200; John Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 92.

[20] Anthony G. Siegrist, *Participating Witness: An Anabaptist Theology of Baptism and the Sacramental Character of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 13.

[21] Quoted in Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness*, 204.

Re-emphasize the Church as Active Subject

Another way to counter the temptation to make the individual's subjective experience the essence of baptism would be to focus on the church as an active subject of the ordinance. Anthony Siegrist suggests that Anabaptist communities must return to a theology and practice of baptism that stresses the church as a prime place of "mediation" for God's action.[22] To be baptized is not simply to experience God's forgiveness individually or confess one's own individual faith but to become part of the community of faith. John Howard Yoder emphasizes this incorporation into the church: "Baptism introduces or initiates persons into a new people."[23] The church does not consist of atomized individuals whose initiative makes them worthy; it is a new being that changes and becomes more the body of Christ every time someone enters the font. This becomes "a new inter-ethnic social reality into which the individual is inducted rather than the social reality being the sum of the individuals. This new belonging provokes subjective faith, but it is not the product of the individual's inward believing."[24] A shifting of emphasis toward the faith of the church and not the inner self-consciousness of the individual potentially makes a way for people like Dorothea. Additionally, it would resound with the original impulse of the 16th-century movement, which had a solid and robust ecclesiology.

By re-orienting the faith needed in baptism from the individual to the church, we affirm that faith cannot exist in isolation but must be in relation with others. Just as our faith never wholly originates with us but comes as a gift from God, so it must never be only for us but for the church, God's people. This helps to accentuate that Christians fundamentally *need* others: "we cannot baptize ourselves. Baptism stands out as an act of the Christian community we are called to; God works through the lives of the members participating in the sacrament of baptism."[25] When the church becomes a

[22] Siegrist, *Participating Witness*.

[23] Yoder, *Body Politics*, 28.

[24] Ibid., 30. At other times Yoder reiterates the need for a personal and authentic adult confession of faith. See John Howard Yoder, *Adjusting to the Changing Shape of the Debate on Infant Baptism* (Amsterdam: Algemene Doopsgezinde Societeit, 1989), 213-14.

[25] Stanley Hauerwas and Brett Webb-Mitchell, "The Radical Edge of Baptism," in Brett Webb-Mitchell, *Dancing with Disabilities: Opening the Church to All God's Children* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1996), 16.

subject of baptism rather than merely the individual, people with profound cognitive impairments can as much as anyone receive the grace of salvation and incorporation that baptism provides.

When a community of faith baptizes people like Dorothea it also affirms these persons' particular gift of ministry that the Spirit has given them as a service to God and the church. Brethren theologian Dale Brown contends that baptism consists not merely in "getting saved" but acts as "an ordination to public ministry."[26] Thus, when the church baptizes someone with a profound cognitive impairment, it not only affirms their full membership within the community but also recognizes that God has given them a mission to share with the congregation and the world.

The Knowing Body and Symbolic Thinking

As discussed above, the traditionally strong requirement for conscious rationality can unconsciously marginalize and disqualify people with cognitive impairments. A way to relativize this overtly intellectual knowing would be to turn towards the knowing of the body. The roots of a strong spirit-matter dualism run deep within the streams of the Western theological tradition, including Anabaptism. This dualism sees human beings as "'thinking things', autonomous rational agents, transcendental rational egos, disembodied centers of cognitive perception."[27] By moving towards a more embodied rationality, the church can affirm people labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled as knowers while reminding the rest of the Body not to forget the absolute centrality of the body in its contemporary theology and practice.

As arguably the primary mode of perception, the body might act for ecclesial communities as something of an "epistemic principle." In her reflections on the love feast in the Brethren tradition, theologian Anna Lisa Gross stresses that congregations need to understand bodies as central for ecclesial life and practice. Ordinances like footwashing and communion illustrate *bodies* as communicating and perceiving presence before, and

[26] Dale W. Brown, "The Brethren," in *Baptism & Church*, 34-35.

[27] James K.A. Smith, *Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 54. See also his *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 39-73.

without, *words*. Through these rituals "bodies speak to and touch one another with messages of redemption, love and transcendence."[28] If the body is essential for understanding, people with profound cognitive impairments are not immature children but fellow persons of faith. A faith based upon this knowing liberates them from being continually defined by their mental age and recognizes in them a potential wisdom that has come from their whole person having to negotiate an ableist world dominated by the mind.

Another path towards re-envisioning baptism is to be open to thinking by means of symbols and ritual. The faith and worship of believers' churches have historically reflected an almost exclusive bias towards a highly intellectual and conceptual rationality. Yet symbols have their own reason embedded in them and communicate less cognitively and more through action and liturgy. By cultivating a more symbolic approach that makes room for the body and other forms of knowing, the church can realize that people like Dorothea are potentially as prepared as anyone else for receiving the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. For the divine communication that occurs through worship comes by way of mystery, and consists of a knowledge that often bypasses or transcends strictly conceptual rationality.

Worship is a fundamentally communal activity that requires bodies that give praise and thanksgiving to God. By incorporating more liturgical gestures in worship, Anabaptist Christians can not only let their bodies communicate their thanks to God and receive God's love in return, but also affirm that they can never truly know God on their own. A Christian epistemology is inherently a shared one: knowledge does not come in isolation from one another but as a community, both past and present. Being in relationship with people like Dorothea can show the community that no one is ultimately the originator of their own thoughts, but all are members of Christ's body and receive truth from a communal discernment in the power of the Holy Spirit. The presence of people with profound cognitive impairments can continually remind members that worship involves a gathering together of a Body with their bodies, not a meeting of individually disembodied spirits.

[28] Anna Lisa Gross, "Body Theology in the Love Feast," *Brethren Life and Thought* 55, no. 3 (2010): 66.

Discipleship as Hospitality

Arguably one of the strongest markers of the Anabaptist tradition its emphasis upon discipleship as a sign and response of faith. While some of the early reformers saw following Christ as originating in an experience of *Gelassenheit* or inner "surrender," focusing so tightly on discipleship can easily make the Christian life primarily activist in its orientation. In this conception of following Christ, the stress is on the initiative of the agent to do demonstrable acts of service (usually to those designated as "poor"). While commendable in many ways, this strong activist orientation as a requisite for baptism or as a sign of faith can marginalize those like Dorothea with a limited ability for purposive agency. What would happen if Anabaptist churches could include within their ethical commitments the practices of hospitality and mutual relationships? With such a turn they might be able to recognize, with theologian Amos Yong, that

> people with disabilities are not only the guests who are recipients of the hospitality of others. Rather they are constitutive members of the body of Christ who are also charismatically empowered through the fellowship of the Spirit to be hosts who extend hospitality to others and mediate the hospitality of God. . . . [T]he inclusive hospitality of the Spirit liberally dispenses the charisms of ministry to all people—the "weak" and the "strong" alike—so that the "disabled" and nondisabled are equally instruments of God's reconciling and transforming power.[29]

How, then, does someone like Dorothea embody this neglected dimension of discipleship? Theologian Hans Reinders sees discipleship in the gifts of trust and presence that people with severe disabilities show us: "Given the condition that characterizes their lives, they have learned, in one way or another, to trust in order to survive."[30] Non-disabled Christians constantly face the temptation of going through life hiding their brokenness through acts of (spiritual) strength. But entering into a genuine relationship of friendship and mutuality with someone like Dorothea shatters this

[29] Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Re-imagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor Univ. Press, 2007), 224, 225.

[30] Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 376.

presumption. The friendship of such people is a gift for the Body, because they help everyone recognize the fundamental dimension of trust in others that makes up our humanity and our relationship with God. We can begin to see the gift of a contemplative, welcoming presence given by the Holy Spirit to some people with profound cognitive impairments as a legitimate charism of following Christ. This gift makes them not only candidates for baptism but also witnesses to everyone that discipleship must include hospitality, trust, and friendship with the other, in addition to works of mercy and justice.

Conclusion: Paying Attention to Narrative

Perhaps the most crucial need in re-imaging an Anabaptist theology of baptism that fully accounts for someone like Dorothea is to pay attention to the stories the church tells about this ordinance. An approach that relies on the 16th-century radical reformers makes it very difficult to include people like her within its narrative of baptism. The first Anabaptists' stress on the development of will, reason, and conscience as requirements meant that these people could be seen only as innocent children and thus ineligible for full membership in the Body. The strongly capacity-oriented self assumed there—a voluntary, rational, and inward decider—can include such folk only as exceptions or special cases. Thus a contemporary Anabaptist baptismal narrative grounded in the 16th century might go something like this: "*Through your personal relationship with Christ you have chosen to give your life to him, and intentionally follow him on the way to the Cross.*" But the full presence in the church of those with profound cognitive impairments challenges believers to re-imagine Christian identity and to create alternative stories of becoming members of the Body. The themes of the Holy Spirit's prevenient calling and the church as an active subject, faithfully speak to God's initiative in a person's coming to faith.

A new story of baptism that emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the action of the church must not be told merely as an accommodation to those like Dorothea. Rather, this renewed narrative speaks to all believers as creatures radically dependent on God and one another. Baptism "embodies a narrative of reception, witness, and sharing with a full acknowledgement of our utter dependence on the other for our present communion as well as

our eschatological vision of hope for the future."[31] So, a new narrative might go like this: *"By the power of the Holy Spirit, we baptize you into the Body of Christ, affirming your being as a child of God and calling you to become a minister of God's reconciling work in the world."*

Much work needs to be done in Anabaptist theology to make it more hospitable to people like Dorothea. The vast lacunae in Anabaptist-Mennonite thinking about people considered profoundly intellectually disabled must be seriously and immediately addressed. Otherwise it will be difficult to believe that the church takes Paul seriously when he asserts that "the members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect" (1 Cor. 12:23). This essay is only a very preliminary and incomplete beginning in that work. I have attempted to let Dorothea and others like her challenge basic assumptions of Anabaptist theology on baptism, and I urge re-imagined thought and practice on this ordinance so that it can adequately account for the humanity of people with profound cognitive impairments.

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[31] Keith G. Meador and Joel James Shuman, "Who/se We Are: Baptism as Personhood," *Christian Bioethics* 6, no. 1 (April 2000): 79.