

Being Received: Anabaptist Baptism, Theological Anthropology, and Profound Cognitive Impairment*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the strongly activist and subjectivist anthropology implicit in much of Anabaptist theologizing around baptism makes the capacities of rationality and will crucial for potential baptismal candidates. The requirement for these capacities disqualifies people labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled from baptism, contradicting ecclesial attempts to “include” these individuals in faith communities. Some theologians and Anabaptist communities have attempted to respond to this pervasive theological “voluntarism” regarding baptismal practice, yet cannot abandon the need for subjectivity, which continues to exclude those significantly limited in rational capacity. In the end, the author suggests that one way forward may exist in making baptism a “gift of reception,” which potentially challenges Anabaptist communities to consider baptizing all those persons lacking in cognitive understanding of the practice.

A common element of baptism in the Anabaptist tradition involves testimony, the articulation and proclamation of the candidate’s spiritual journey and reason for baptism. These testimonies illustrate not only an individual’s desire to follow Jesus and join the church, but also reveal tacit understandings of “faith” and how one recognizes it. Take the following paraphrase of a testimony I recently heard at a Mennonite congregation:

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My decision to be baptized came after much thought. The choice was not an easy one to make. While I have grown up coming to this church, I knew that the choice to be baptized was mine to make, rather than my parent's decision. After a period of discernment, when I recognized the life I have received from this community, it seemed clear that the next step was to commit to belonging to this part of the body of Christ. I want to follow Jesus in life, and believe that this is the place to do that. Through choosing to be baptized, I wish to commit myself to working for God's justice in the world and in this community of faith.

This enthusiastic and sincere candidate understood faith as consisting in her choice to follow Jesus and to commit herself to being part of a faith community striving for a more just world. In this way, this candidate's baptism was consistent with the traditional Anabaptist belief in baptism as an outward "sign" of an individual's own belief.

Contrast this with a different testimony, this time from a parent of someone with a profound cognitive impairment. It comes from theologian Frances Young, speaking of the baptism of her son, Arthur.

It has always meant a great deal to me that Arthur is baptized. He will never be able to make his own response of faith, but his baptism as an infant means that he is a member of the body of Christ, and no one can take that away from him or exclude him. In recent controversies about the comparative claims of infant baptism and believers' baptism, I have not hesitated to stress this. The idea of baptism in the New Testament is partly to do with the washing away of the old worldliness; but it is also about incorporation into the new humanity. In a missionary situation, of course this happened to believers; but in any event, it is not something we do ourselves, it is something done to us, just as ordination is not something we do ourselves—it is the act of the church in the name of God. [Arthur] belongs to Christ, not because he can profess his faith in him, but

because Christ has accepted him.¹

Young's reflection on her son's baptism contrasts sharply with the Anabaptist one above where choosing and decision dominate. Incorporation defines this theology of baptism, with Arthur's lack of cognitive ability in no way disqualifying him from becoming a member of the church. Whereas individual agency stands as a demand in an Anabaptist baptismal practice, Arthur's impairments did not prevent him from baptism because reception grounded the rite in his tradition.

How might a Mennonite-Anabaptist congregation respond to a request for someone like Arthur to be baptized? Can a church so committed to individual decision and purposive agency baptize persons considered to be profoundly intellectually disabled? How hospitable is an Anabaptist theology of baptism for those with profound cognitive impairments? Unfortunately, these questions are rarely asked in Anabaptist theological circles² or concrete congregations.³ With baptism being such an important ordinance historically in Mennonite church life, the lack of reflection on the place of profound disability in the tradition's theology appears somewhere between highly insufficient and scandalous.

In this article I will interrogate the Anabaptist tradition to see how its theology and practice of baptism accounts (or not) for someone like Arthur. I will begin by articulating concerns some contemporary Mennonite thinkers have expressed regarding a highly anthropocentric and subjectivist

1 Frances M. Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 94.

2 On reflection regarding baptism and cognitive impairment in Believer's Church contexts, see Jason D. Whitt, "Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability," *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* 45 (2012): 60-67; Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Baptism and Profound Disability," *Anabaptist Disabilities Network*, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.anabaptistdisabilitiesnetwork.org/Resources/ADNotes/Pages/Baptism.aspx>; Melissa Florer-Bixler, "Believers Baptism as Supported Decision," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 135-46; Jason Reimer Greig, "Re-imaging Narratives: Anabaptist Baptismal Theology and Profound Cognitive Impairment," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 120-134.

3 For ecclesial reflection on cognitive impairment and baptism in Anabaptist congregations, see Karen Smucker, "Is Christianity about IQ?," *The Mennonite*, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://themennonite.org/feature/3439-2/>; Anna Groff, "Our Practice of Baptism," *The Mennonite*, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://themennonite.org/feature/practice-baptism/>.

trend in the church's practice of baptism. Then I will uncover examples of baptismal practice from contemporary accounts which confirm these worries. From these examples I will offer a diagnosis of a Mennonite-Anabaptist baptismal practice as being strongly activist and subjectivist, demanding a "common sense view" of the person as one endowed with the capacities of rationality and will. The strong need for these capacities inherent in the candidate eligible for baptism throws a heavy shadow on the lives of those with profound cognitive impairments, essentially disqualifying these persons from reception into the church. I will then look at ecclesial responses to baptism for people with impairments, finding them well-meaning but insufficient. In closing, I will invite Mennonite-Anabaptist theology and practice to ponder the implications of making baptism a "gift of reception" rather than one which demands "compulsory capacities" of agency and will.

A Dis-ease with Current Baptismal Practice

Some thinkers within the Mennonite tradition have begun to express a dis-ease with current ecclesial practice around baptism, particularly with regard to an increasing anthropocentric orientation. John Rempel sees in certain strands of contemporary Anabaptism a predominance of human response over any sense of God present in baptism. As a strong reaction to the "coercion" believed to exist in traditions baptizing infants, Mennonites can too easily react in the opposite direction, "making the candidate's sincerity the essence of baptism."⁴ Irma Fast Dueck agrees with Rempel's assessment, finding a curious phenomenon in her theology students: a strong desire to follow Jesus and participate in church life, but no interest in baptism. A Believers' Church "one-sided emphasis" on baptism as human response prevents believers from understanding the "enabling grace" that comes from baptism and confirms an individualistic view on the practices of the church in general.

⁴ John D. Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 92. [Editor's note: In October 2020, Mennonite Church Eastern Canada terminated the ministerial credential of Rempel following an investigation that found him guilty of ministerial sexual misconduct and ministerial misconduct. For more information see <https://mcec.ca/article/10801-mcec-terminates-ministerial-credential>].

When my students reflect on their baptism, their imagination is frequently limited to baptism as something *I* do, *I* learn, *I* decide, *I* get baptized, *I* join the church. Accompanying this individualized emphasis on the decision and act of baptism has been a history of qualifications needed in order to be eligible to participate, a practice which has brought us dangerously close to conceiving that our salvation is indeed our own responsibility; that is, it is something *I* do, *I* achieve, *I* make myself eligible; a danger our early Anabaptist fore-parents never imagined as they were reacting to the practices of baptism in the time of the Reformation.⁵

An example of this individualistic orientation in baptism comes from the publication *Ask Third Way Café*, a collection of entries on questions regarding Anabaptism from the website of the same name. In response to the question, “What is accomplished by waiting to baptize members?” editor Jodi Hisly Hertzler says the following:

[T]he benefit is that only people who have deliberately made the choice to be baptized are in fact baptized. The choice to live a Christ-centered life is not an easy one. It’s a major commitment that a person makes to God and to the church family, and it’s not to be taken lightly. When an infant is baptized, the [rite] seems to Mennonites to lose some power, as it reflects the parents’ beliefs and not the child’s... [W]e reserve baptism for people who can make the choice for themselves and can understand the meaning of what they are doing.⁶

Anabaptists believe in baptism as “a sign of...cleansing from sin,” as well as “a pledge before the church of a person’s covenant with God to walk in the

5 Irma Fast Dueck, “[Re]learning to Swim in Baptismal Waters: Contemporary Challenges in the Believers Church Tradition,” in *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, eds. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg, CMU Press, 2010), 248.

6 Jodi Nisly Hertzler, *Ask Third Way Café: 50 Common and Quirky Questions about Mennonites* (Telford, PA.: Cascadia; copublished with Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009), 22–3.

way of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.” Yet baptism should be reserved “for those who confess their sins, repent, accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, and commit themselves to follow Jesus in obedience as members of his body. These are not things that infants can do. We believe the church is strengthened when made up of adults who have made the decision to follow Christ and be baptized and can remember the impact of that ceremony in their Christian walk.”⁷

Other Mennonite scholars worry about the place (or not) of the church in theologizing around baptism. John Roth understands contemporary practice to be at risk of eclipsing any sense of God present and active in the ordinance. Late modern activism and an almost exclusive emphasis on “behavior” as marker of authentic faith risks leading congregations to a form of “self-worship” totally disconnected from a living God. According to Roth, contemporary churches live a very “modern problem”: namely, that the “lived actions of the congregation are a substitute for the more formal practices of baptism and communion,” which in turn forms congregations in making “an idol of their ‘good deeds,’ so that Christ’s presence becomes reduced to a set of intentional behaviors or admirable social practices.”⁸ On the other hand, Anthony Siegrist worries that congregations underinvest the church’s role in baptism. For Siegrist, “the working theology of baptism [in much Anabaptism] suffers from a deficient account of divine action, especially as mediated through the church.”⁹ After a review of denominational statements about baptism, Siegrist finds that 1) baptism is a practice central to the Anabaptist tradition yet presented as theologically non-essential to the Christian life, and 2) the church is seen as “second class” to an individual believer’s relationship with God.¹⁰

The *Minister’s Manual*, a practical text meant to assist pastors in congregational life and ecclesial practices, offers some theological grounds for baptism in Mennonite communities. While baptism is meant to also include the congregation’s discernment of the candidate, and come from God’s “in-

7 Ibid., 23. For a similar view, see Groff, “Our Practice of Baptism.”

8 John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottsdale, PA.: Herald Press, 2009), 200.

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

10 Ibid., 23-24.

ward” calling, consistently adhering to the early church’s practice requires “a mature commitment on the part of the recipient. Only believers aware of the import of their decision entered into it. Though there is some reference to the baptism of entire households (e.g., Acts 16:33), suggesting that young children may have received baptism, the overwhelming witness of the New Testament is that baptism was the result of mature commitments by believers conscious of their sin and having made commitments to Jesus Christ.”¹¹ Or consider the ecclesial document *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*. Article 11 on baptism states that baptism is “a testimony to God’s gift of the Holy Spirit and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers.”¹² The Holy Spirit “enables” believers to walk in the way of Christ and witness to Christ through their lives, with baptism “incorporating” people into the ecclesial body.¹³ Yet, who can receive baptism? “Christian baptism is for those who confess their sins, repent, accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of his body, both giving and receiving care and counsel of the church. Baptism is for those who are of the age of accountability and who freely request baptism on the basis of their response to Jesus Christ in faith.”¹⁴ The language of “pledge” and “commitment” emphasizes in clear terms the importance of the individual believer’s choice and decision at the heart of Mennonite practice.

Some thinkers attempt to mitigate the high subjectivism of much contemporary Anabaptist practice by appealing to the 16th century radical reformers. These appeals either accentuate the more communal and theocentric anthropology inherent in late medieval notions of faith,¹⁵ or evoke alternative theologies which have a greater place for God’s initiative, such as the baptismal theology of Pilgram Marpeck.¹⁶ Yet while it is important to keep in mind A. James Reimer’s distinction between premodern and modern

11 *Minister’s Manual*, ed. John Rempel (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 41.

12 General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 46.

13 *Ibid.*

14 *Ibid.*, 47.

15 A. James Reimer, “Christian Anthropology: The Perils of the Believers Church View of the *Humanum*,” in *Mennonites and Classical Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 536.

16 Roth, *Practices*; Rempel, *Recapturing*; Siegrist, *Participating Witness*.

voluntarism in regard to an Anabaptist-Mennonite anthropology,¹⁷ a closer look at many radical reformers' views on baptism illustrate an ambivalence at best in regard to baptism and profound cognitive impairment. Whether it concerns Menno Simons's insistent belief that baptism requires the capacity of rationality absent from children who "have less sense at birth than do irrational creatures";¹⁸ or Conrad Grebel's stress upon the "walk in newness of life" as evidence of a true "inner baptism";¹⁹ or Pilgram Marpeck's contention that children and the cognitively impaired are exempted from the demand of belief and remain in no need of baptism due to their "innocent" status,²⁰ large questions remain about how hospitable this turn to 16th century sources can be in regards to baptism and profound cognitive impairment.²¹

A Diagnosis: Baptism and a "Common Sense View" of Personhood

The tremendous weight placed upon individual agency and capacity inherent in much contemporary Anabaptist thought and practice makes it very difficult (if not impossible) to include persons with profound impairments in this baptismal imaginary. What do these accounts and practices reveal to us about an Anabaptist theological anthropology of baptism? How might

17 Reimer, "Christian Anthropology," 536. Timothy J. Reiss in *Mirages of the Self: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) continually warns of the temptation to project our late modern notions of the autonomous agent onto the people of antiquity and the Middle Ages. Yet he does admit that he finds in Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* "a growing sense of agency" (403).

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

19 Quoted in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, eds. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 80.

20 Pilgram Marpeck, "Confession," 1532, quoted from *Anabaptism in Outline*, 176–7. Marpeck is quoted here using the word "retarded," supposedly referring to the neutral categorization at the time of *Anabaptism in Outline's* publication for those considered intellectually disabled. Cf. with the same text in Pilgram Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, eds. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, *Classics of the Radical Reformation 2* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1978), 129, where "retarded" is translated as "the ignorant."

21 For more detail on the problematic perspective of the radical reformers on baptism in regards to profound cognitive impairment, see Jason Reimer Greig, "Re-Imagining Narratives: Anabaptist Baptismal Theology and Profound Cognitive Impairment," *Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020): 120-34.

one diagnose the dilemma which someone like Arthur exposes in the Anabaptist-Mennonite theological imagination?

Firstly, the heavy (and sometimes almost exclusive) emphasis placed on human response unequivocally illustrates a highly subjectivist Anabaptist anthropology, with a stress put on the active and conscious agency of the candidate. Even when it is acknowledged that some kind of grace exists in the rite, it is still highly contingent on the candidates to not only accept grace but to *understand* it as well. “The Mennonite practice of believer’s baptism recognizes that humans are free to accept or reject God’s gift of grace. Jesus consistently assumed that the person being baptized was capable of belief and instruction.”²² And for the Mennonite tradition, it is not enough just to understand baptism, but to be able to live it out in a consistent and visible way. Theologian Thomas Finger speaks to this explicitly when he notes how only a baptism based on “conscious decision” coheres with a belief in a high church ecclesiology. “When the kind of community into which it incorporates people is considered, it becomes even clearer that baptism involves conscious decision... [A]s baptism is inseparably intertwined with faith, so is it with ethics... Those who understand none of the choices involved cannot significantly undertake that journey, with its hazards. Considered from the individual side, then, baptism must be an expression of conscious belief and ethical determination.”²³ Finger’s conception of baptism shares similarities with a modern, Protestant view of ecclesial practices as placing the primary responsibility upon the individual and their commitment and understanding in order to be worthy of baptism.²⁴

Directly linked to this anthropocentric orientation is a particular notion of faith and its relation to God’s participation in the event. Even when Anabaptists seek to relativize human action and accentuate divine initiative, this often comes in the form of naming the “inner” working of the Holy Spirit

22 John D. Roth, *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 77-8.

23 Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 2:346-7. See also Thomas Finger, “Initial Response,” in *On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium, 2001-2002*, ed. Gerald W. Schlabach (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2004).

24 For example, see William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 150.

in the candidate as a sign of faith and readiness to baptism. As theologian Kimberly Belcher notes, this understanding assumes faith as “an ephemeral disposition perceptible only by the subject. Faith can only be affirmed by that person himself or herself, and he or she may deceive others. Moreover, faith is defined within a cognitively centered definition of the self (along the lines of Descartes).”²⁵ This prioritizing of faith as “inwardness” makes the baptism of persons with profound cognitive impairments (consistently) impossible. For if one cannot express in language how exactly the Holy Spirit is working “within,” and lacks the mobility and purposive agency to engage in activist forms of discipleship to express that overtly, how would one ever know the Holy Spirit is alive “within” the candidate? Attempts to use “inwardness” in this way may help to accentuate God’s initiative in baptism, but they still demand the kind of robust subjectivity and individual agency that many persons labeled as profoundly disabled may lack.

Theologian Hans Reinders has pointed out how problematic the modern notion of life lived “from the inside” can be for persons considered as profoundly intellectually disabled. Subjectivity has become such a crucial part of being human in modernity, to the degree that to lack such capacities puts into question how these lives might actually be human in any substantive sense. For “[w]ithout a relationship ‘within,’ no inner life; without an inner life, no ‘self’; and without a self, no person in the modern sense.”²⁶ This kind of subjectivity, combined with the “ethical determination” demanded of activist conceptions of discipleship, emanates from what Reinders calls the “common sense view” of personhood: people are unique “because they have language, they have reason and will and a sense of self, so that they can make up their minds about things and choose what they want, they can pursue plans and ideals, and so on. In other words, the things that human faculties allow people to do or to have are what make people different” from

25 Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 82.

26 Hans S. Reinders, “Human Dignity in the Absence of Agency,” in *God and Human Dignity*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 131–2.

non-human animals.²⁷ Crucial to this modern sense of self is an understanding of the good life as being coextensive with a chosen self, often named as the demand to be “authors” of their own stories. “In order to have a life that is properly called ‘good,’ [persons] must be in control of how they choose to live their lives. The good life results from their own project if it is to be a good life *for them*. It will be clear that this conception of the good life excludes all those incapable of purposive agency. It excludes those human beings who, because of their impairment, cannot affirm their own being.”²⁸

One response to Reinders’s critique and attempt to heavily relativize “inwardness” in the context of profound cognitive impairment is that it assumes too much about the “inner” lives of persons so labeled and how much they lack this characteristic. Reinders wishes to de-center subjectivity because making “inwardness” essential to personhood severely risks disqualifying those lacking this capacity from having equal moral status. Yet others will counter by saying that we can never fully know the subjectivity of the other, including those with profound cognitive impairments. So rather than take “inwardness” out of the equation, we should assume its presence, even when it may appear to be absent. The disability rights movement has been fighting for years for others to recognize their competence to make decisions about their lives, which includes those labeled as intellectually disabled.²⁹ Relativizing subjectivity to “include” others may be well-intentioned, but it assumes too much knowledge of those who make claims and assumes too little of those being talked about.

Yet this critique harbors its own assumptions. For why is there such op-

27 Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–2. For a theological accounting in the free church tradition of this “common sense view,” see Joe R. Jones, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine* (Lanham, MD; Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 300–22, especially 312–17.

28 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 137.

29 For a sample, see, James L. Charlton, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 127–8; Doris Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation*, updated edition (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 33–48; Steven E. Brown, “Changing America’s Consciousness: A Brief History of the Independent Living Movement in the United States,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, eds. Roy Hanes, Ivan Brown, and Nancy E. Hansen (London: Routledge, 2017), 492–5.

position to claiming certain persons as potentially lacking “inwardness,” unless that capacity is understood as crucial to being a person? And whose anthropology is this exactly? While this conception of personhood purports to be more “inclusive,” too often it merely reasserts an anthropology heavily reliant upon (intellectual) ability. Thus the call by many disability rights activists for “autonomy” tends to assume that once one has all the “supports” possible, one can “independently” be in control of one’s life. This may work for a wheelchair user or person with full cognitive capacity but can unconsciously forget those persons who live in continual states of radical dependency. Reinders is not the only one who has criticized how this understanding of being human in the disability rights movement creates a “hierarchy” of disability, that is, the more intellectually “able” one is, the louder one’s voice becomes.³⁰ One can understand how “assuming competence” appears “inclusive”: when the dominant conception of personhood involves purposive agency, believing that someone like Arthur has a flourishing “inner life” makes him much less “foreign” and much more “like us,” that is, worthy of being included in the moral community. Yet this philosophical turn also forces people with profound cognitive impairments into the “common sense view” of personhood, and only illustrates all the more the dominance of a voluntarist anthropology.

The prioritizing of the capacities which empower the will implicit in much Anabaptist theologizing highlight the anthropocentric and subjectivist orientation surrounding its practice of baptism. As a result, theologian Gerald Schlabach wonders whether Mennonites make it difficult to defend themselves from accusations of not needing grace to follow Jesus. Schlabach asks whether one can have sociological voluntarism—a strong belief in a “voluntary community” of disciples—without “falling victim to the psychological and conceptual problems that come with voluntarism in the philosophical sense (will and willpower as the key to human agency and thus moral transformation).”³¹

30 Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 26, 134-8; Anne Louise Chappell, “Still Out in the Cold: People with Learning Difficulties and the Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Reader: Social Science Perspectives*, ed. Tom Shakespeare (London: Cassell, 1998), 211-20; Daniel Docherty et al., “This is What We Think,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 432-440.

31 Schlabach, “Responses,” *On Baptism*, 108.

How have Anabaptists begun to respond to the challenges which persons labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled raise in regard to baptism? Do they avoid the voluntarism and “choosing self” so prominent in much of Anabaptist theologizing?

Ecclesial Responses

The lack of reflection by Anabaptist-Mennonite thinkers on baptism and profound cognitive impairments has not prevented believers from addressing these challenges in the context of congregational life. And while few Anabaptist-Mennonite thinkers are directly reflecting on the challenges that the profoundly impaired make to the tradition, recent responses try to address the challenge people with cognitive impairments bring to the church’s practice of baptism. The following will look at these congregational and scholarly responses and discern their adequacy in accounting for the lives of persons labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled.

Lay Responses

What is to be done when persons with profound cognitive impairments reach the “age of accountability” where many young people are being baptized or considering it? While the literature is not vast on this phenomena, there seem to be two ways in which pastors, lay leaders, and congregations approach the issue.

One approach lies in baptizing these persons with their peers as “exceptions.” Aware of the normativity of “adult” or “believer’s” baptism, church members still baptize cognitively impaired people as a form of “inclusion” and “belonging.” Not baptizing these persons due to their impairments strikes many as “exclusive,” with the potential harm that goes along with it. So ecclesial leaders pursue the process of baptism as a form of recognition and as a way of being a welcoming congregation. This often entails “adjustments” to catechetical material and instruction: simpler and more concrete language; using a variety of forms of communication; more expression in tone and body language; using more pictures than text; and teaching through stories rather than didactic resources.³²

32 April Yamasaki, *Making Disciples: Preparing People for Baptism, Christian Living, and Church Membership* (Newton, KS: Faith & Life Resources, 2003), 52.

Church members practice these “accommodations” as ways of recognizing persons with cognitive impairments as valuable members of their communities. Yet this approach risks only reasserting these persons as “exceptions which prove the rule”: namely, a community implicitly asserts the demand to have the cognitive capacity to rationally name oneself, the community and God in order to receive baptism—but will make an “exception” for the disadvantaged in order to “include” them. This parallels the problems manifest in many “thin” forms of social inclusion, which contain a strong desire to include marginalized persons as a sense of justice but without any questioning of the dominant framework(s) within which those persons are included. The “compulsory capacities” of purposive agency, subjectivity, and instrumental rationality remain implicitly yet firmly in place in order to receive the rite.³³ So, an intellectually “able” norm remains in place, which only solidifies the place of those impaired cognitively as “marginal cases” who are generously “included” even though they will never meet the norm. This guarantees both the dominance of a cognitive foundation for baptism, but also the “abnormal” status of those lacking in the capacities needed for baptism in the first place. Too often this status demotion goes along with the employment of accommodating “special needs,” narrating persons such as Arthur as abiding in a “special” category of humanity apart from those who can live the unspoken rule of purposive agency.

Even for those communities which strive to embody this type of “inclusion” towards persons with cognitive impairments, one can legitimately question the consistency or coherence of this “accommodated” baptismal practice with a larger Anabaptist theology. For congregations which place a large emphasis on following the “biblical” practice of baptism—almost exclusively interpreted as consisting of the baptism of “adult” persons (in the cognitive, developmental, social, and biological sense)—in line with the practice and theology of the radical reformers, to baptize persons considered profoundly cognitively disabled appears very hard to justify. If the salvation of persons is not at stake in the rite, what is the purpose of baptizing some-

33 On the “compulsory capacities” often implicitly understood as being essential for citizenship in western, late modern societies, see Stacy Clifford Simpican, *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

one like Arthur? As a “token”? Or is baptism here mainly some kind of “rite of passage,” completely disassociated with God or faith, executed to recognize standing or status in a congregation? How coherent is such a view with the 16th century radical reformers, or the common interpretation of baptism as an ordinance of agency and response to God? How different in reality is this practice of “inclusion” from the baptism of non-agential persons (e.g., infants)?

A second approach tries to respond to some of these questions through using alternative rites to recognize the membership and belonging of persons labeled as intellectually disabled. Congregations here create alternative rituals as “public ceremonies of acceptance” similar to child dedications. Along with these ceremonies come “alternative membership categories” for these persons to signify that they are welcomed and a part of the congregation. As one father of a profoundly impaired woman says, “All [baptism] would have meant to her is she stood up front and got her hair wet.”³⁴ His pastor “agreed that baptism was not the best choice” for her, and instead had her mark her name in the church’s membership book in front of the entire congregation. The answer to inclusion here entails a certain creativity with church practices that can tell people they are loved and loved members of a congregation.

Like those who baptize persons as “exceptions,” this pastor and his congregation arguably seek to lovingly respond to persons with cognitive impairments as fellow Christians. Yet certain problems immediately present themselves. For one, if baptism for this woman is “less important” than her membership status, why should anyone else be baptized? This implication of the *relative* importance of the ritual speaks directly to the concerns of various theologians mentioned above. In addition, while this approach maintains the coherency of a believer’s baptism theological anthropology, it potentially does it at the expense of robustly welcoming people severely lacking in cognitive capacity. In this way, one does not really avoid the problem of placing persons labeled intellectually disabled in a “special” category of humanity (or at least Christian) but may in fact accentuate it. Yet a baptismal practice which seeks to be consistent with a Mennonite-Anabaptist view actually demands this position. So while it may look as if this option for people

34 Quoted in Smucker, “Is Christianity about IQ?”

with severe impairments appears highly “exclusive,” it may in fact be the correct response for those wishing to stay committed to an authentic Anabaptist theological anthropology.

Scholarly Responses

Three Mennonite theologians who have attempted to offer robust critiques of anthropocentrism in baptismal theology are Anthony Siegrist, John Rempel, and Melissa Florer-Bixler. All three try to accentuate and reveal different ways of relativizing voluntarism in Anabaptist theologies and practices of baptism: Siegrist emphasizes the church as primary subject in baptism; Rempel stresses God’s initiative in the rite; Florer-Bixler understands baptism as a form of communal and supported decision-making.

Anthony Siegrist and Ecclesial Mediation

Siegrist’s main argument rests on the idea that Anabaptist theology and practice around baptism have become malformed by the influences of 20th century revivalism. This influence has resulted in an inordinate emphasis in churches on the individual believer’s “relationship with Jesus,” with the “voluntary power of the individual” being at the core of readiness for baptism.³⁵ Siegrist wants to counter this trend by recognizing the church’s primary role of providing “ecclesial mediation” in baptism. As the body of Christ on earth, the church mediates Christ to candidates through baptism, thus acting as a “co-witness” to God’s work. “[B]elievers’ baptism is initiation into the community that embodies Jesus’ presence to the world. With the Spirit it witnesses to the transformative power of Christ, and as a co-witness it participates in this transformation that is both inward and outward. Through baptism, candidates are acted upon by God and incorporated into the Divine life, and through it they become members of Christ’s body. Believers’ baptism is an act of God through the community of those who have been and are still being made right.”³⁶ For Siegrist, an openness to a more “sacramental” approach could not only mitigate against an inordinate subjectivism, but also undergird robust forms of discipleship at risk of “stumbling in the late

³⁵ Siegrist, *Participating Witness*, 25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

modern mist of vague moralism and ambiguous religiosity.”³⁷

On first glance, emphasizing the “ecclesial mediation” of baptism potentially opens a way for persons considered profoundly disabled to be eligible for baptism. When the church becomes the main subject offering itself as the community used by God to host the other, people like Arthur do not have to meet the strenuous anthropological demands of the “common sense view” to receive baptism.³⁸ Faith as understood here in a more corporate sense as a body committed to Christ in worship has the potential of recognizing persons with profound impairments as potential recipients and bearers of the church’s faith.

But a closer reading of Siegrist’s account reveals that he does not necessarily have this kind of social faith in mind. For while his theology seeks to reassert the crucial role of the church in baptism, Siegrist goes to pains not to eliminate the essential place of the “free” decision of the candidate for baptism. The church’s participation in Christ’s work does not “deny the voluntary character of Anabaptist communities. It does not follow from an affirmation that God acts through the church that anyone should be made to participate or be baptized into this body without their truly free decision to do so.”³⁹ Siegrist repeatedly refers to baptism as a “pledge,” “free response,” and an “initiative” of the candidate, emphasizing how the subjective aspects of the rite and the initiative of the candidate should not be “compromised.”⁴⁰

So, while Siegrist attempts to highlight the ecclesial role in baptism, his (implicit) voluntarism actually mitigates against his intent and still makes baptism contingent upon human response. It is almost as if Siegrist wants to make baptism a 50-50 prospect: 50% the church and 50% human, and when either element is lacking, baptism is simply incomplete, if not invalid. In addition, his demand for “meaningful” preparation for baptism totally excludes those with profound impairments from ever being received due to their limitations in living life “on the inside.” Siegrist arguably makes an advance in Anabaptist theology and practice of baptism by recognizing an “objective” element of God in the practice, but he still lets an anthropocen-

37 Ibid., 78.

38 See Stanley Hauerwas’s comments in “Response by Stanley Hauerwas,” *On Baptism*, 101.

39 Siegrist, *Participating Witness*, 79.

40 Ibid., 168.

tric and subjectivistic orientation define who may legitimately be baptized.

John Rempel and God's Initiative

Mennonite theologian John Rempel has worked for many years at attempting to bring a more “sacramental” theological approach to Anabaptist theology and congregational practice. Drawing upon a theological tradition often either ignored or reviled in Anabaptist contexts, Rempel seeks to both understand Mennonite practices as consistent with the historical “catholic” church, but also as rites with distinctive characteristics that flow from Anabaptist faith and life.

Rempel’s worries about the recent anthropocentric and subjectivistic emphases in baptism have led him to reassert God not only as active in the rite but as *initiator*, particularly through the work of the Holy Spirit. Rigidly adhering to a particular process or order of baptism contradicts the way the Spirit leads and acts where s/he chooses. “Like the incarnation, sacraments are acts of God’s condescension, his coming to us on our terms.”⁴¹ In response to contemporaries who have accepted Christ but who see no need for baptism, Rempel asserts the normativity of the New Testament witness, where he interprets baptism as God’s act of salvation and incorporation. While Rempel wants to understand the historical ambiguity of baptismal practices, he wants to strongly critique baptism as “optional.” For a following through on this late modern rationalist mindset risks “dissecting what the New Testament hold together. To marginalize baptism is to be left without the seal of salvation, the recapitulation of the Spirit’s work in us and our insertion into the body of Christ.”⁴²

Here Rempel shows that not only does he want to assert God’s initiative in baptism, but he also does not want to ignore the church’s role in the rite. “For believer’s baptism churches, baptism was a seamless initiation into Christ and the body of Christ. It located the believer’s belonging to the body of Christ concretely in a congregation.”⁴³ In this way, there is a very corporate dimension to baptism, one that welcomes candidates into a community of

41 Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World*, 72.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 91-2.

faith. Yet that community does not operate on its own but is still very much at the service of the Holy Spirit as her “agent.” The church does not act “in its own power but as an instrument of the Spirit. In a similar way, believers are not acting in their own power but as instruments of the Spirit in witnessing to God’s work of grace in their lives and pledging to live it out faithfully in the company of the congregation.”⁴⁴

The strong divine initiative and ecclesial role at the heart of Rempel’s account potentially makes baptismal theology and practice more hospitable for people like Arthur. Rempel seeks to avoid as much as possible the voluntarism of much theology and practice by putting the desire within God’s hands first. Not having to worry about making faith primarily “one’s own” removes a burden of subjectivity upon persons with profound cognitive impairments. And drawing upon baptism as an ecclesial rite of incorporation brings those persons into the community of faith as fellow disciples, who will subsequently live their lives within the “sacrament” of God which is the church. “[T]he congregation, in the person of the minister, confirms the work of the Spirit outwardly by baptizing the candidate with water. In baptism the whole movement of grace and faith is actualized and ‘sealed’; the believer is pried loose from the solidarity of sin and attached to the solidarity of grace, the body of Christ.”⁴⁵

But does Rempel’s account wholly evade the dilemma of purposive agency in contemporary theology and practice? Even while Rempel stresses the divine initiative in baptism, the traditionally Anabaptist language of “inwardness” often undergirds his baptismal theology. Drawing on the theology of Pilgram Marpeck, Rempel highlights the importance of understanding the “outward” sign of baptism to be of a piece with an “inward” dimension of “surrender and regeneration.” He writes, “The outward baptism of water was offered when the candidate confessed Christ and the church confirmed the candidate’s faith. Baptism re-enacted all these aspects of the believer’s salvation...[T]he outward event was one with the inward event, so a term like *recapitulation* or even *actualization*, the making present of the inward event, would be a more accurate description of what happens in baptism.”⁴⁶

44 Ibid., 92.

45 Ibid., 95-6.

46 Ibid., 91.

As noted above, problems immediately arise with this emphasis on “inwardness” for those with profound cognitive impairments: how can we confirm the “inner” event without language or intention or purposive agency? One could generously assume a sort of inwardness, but without any “sign” of this occurring, it immediately makes these persons into “exceptions” and places them in a “special” category of person. For no one would make this kind of assumption with a typical candidate who had the compulsory capacities of subjectivity and agency. Rempel’s interpretation of Marpeck states the *essential* aspect of “confession” in order to legitimately offer someone baptism. So even with Rempel’s stress of the divine initiative, baptism here still appears to be contingent on human response. And the reception of baptism by those labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled still appears inconsistent at best.

Melissa Florer-Bixler and Supported Decision-Making

Of the three theologians discussed here, Melissa Florer-Bixler is the only one who attempts to grapple with Anabaptist practices of baptism in the context of cognitive impairment. Florer-Bixler wants to take direct aim at baptismal imaginaries and practices that place a high demand upon cognitive assent as requirements for valid candidacy. While the process of teaching and linguistic confession of faith coheres with the Mennonite tradition, it excludes those lacking in the intellectual capacities needed to meet the “knowledge threshold” for baptism.⁴⁷ To baptize persons when they cannot meet this demand makes them into “exceptions to the rule,”⁴⁸ with the accompanying problems discussed above.

Florer-Bixler addresses this problem by framing baptism as a decision which inherently involves the witness of and presence in the faith community. Drawing upon the thought of Menno Simons, Florer-Bixler understands the tradition as relativizing cognitive ability in baptism. The presence of erudition and intellectual ability in the person are no guarantee that someone will enter into biblical faith. In contrast, at the heart of faith in a Mennonite context is the need for “moral development” and a moral formation that extends beyond cognitive rationality. The acquisition of the virtues of disciple-

47 Florer-Bixler, “Believers Baptism as Supported Decision,” 136.

48 Ibid.

ship occur within a community, which forms one's emotions and affections as much as the mind in living a Christian life.

When persons learn faith through the example of others in a community of faith, then they can begin the baptismal process as one of "supported decision-making." Supported decision-making has come in the context of the disability rights movement as a way for people considered intellectually disabled to exercise greater control over their own lives. Often assumed to be "incompetent" or "incapable" of making decisions, many persons with cognitive impairments want to assert that if the proper supports are in place, they can make their own decisions. Importantly for Florer-Bixler, supported decision-making is not relegated to those "special" people who need it, but instead is an inherent aspect of faith for *all* Christians. Coming to faith and being ready for baptism is a communal activity for *everyone*, not just those with cognitive impairments. When one understands faith as something learned in the context of community, baptizing persons labeled as intellectually disabled represents not an "exception" but a regular dimension of the Christian life. Florer-Bixler's understanding of faith as relational certainly creates more space for people like Arthur to be less like marginal persons to "include" and more like fellow disciples to learn from and participate with.

While the benefits to people with cognitive impairments of supported decision-making models should be emphasized, a question remains whether it really challenges the common-sense view of personhood discussed above. Florer-Bixler admirably attempts to make faith a more holistic experience, which can be more hospitable for people like Arthur. At the same time, she never challenges the requirement for autonomy as something of a first principle in the baptismal process. "The grace of chosen baptism is that others support individuals in becoming fully themselves so that they can make an autonomous, informed decision about the community they choose and the life they will live."⁴⁹ Florer-Bixler repeatedly uses the language of "agency," "autonomy," and "self-determination" throughout her discussion. One can understand Florer-Bixler's intention to not see people with cognitive impairments as purely passive objects of someone's else's care. Yet the flavor of her use of this language, without further qualification and clarification, seems to assume the kind of robust subjectivity needed for purposive agency. For

⁴⁹ Ibid.

example, how might someone like Arthur manifest the “desire” required to be a candidate for baptism?

Placing such a strong emphasis on autonomy and self-determination potentially risks overwhelming the relativization of rational ability Florer-Bixler advocates. Florer-Bixler never challenges the voluntarist demand for autonomy and control in order to be a valid candidate for baptism, but merely makes rationality a communal project. The need for a self-determined faith lived “from the inside” remains as crucial for baptism; the only difference is that the agency is extended to include the faith community. While this extension of subjectivity to include the church relates to Siegrist’s attempts to counter individualistic practices of baptism, Florer-Bixler never discusses God’s role in the baptismal process. Baptism in an Anabaptist context is a “ritual of agency”⁵⁰—but one of the individual and the church. Where God fits into the matter is not discussed. This lacuna then begs the question whether baptism is at all possible or valid if this kind of anthropocentric agency doesn’t exist? If so, this baptismal theology risks placing God as a purely contingent and secondary party to the rite, who remains mute and inactive until someone exercises agency.

Conclusion: Baptism as Gift of Reception

There exists within much contemporary Mennonite-Anabaptist theologies and practices of baptism an almost exclusive emphasis on the capacities of purposive agency, instrumental rationality, and willful-inspired behavior in order to be eligible for candidacy. These characteristics of a “common sense view” of personhood throw a heavy shadow over the lives of those labeled as profoundly intellectually disabled and make these persons either ineligible for baptism or as “exceptions which prove the rule.” Attempts at making ecclesial practice more “inclusive” not only fail to alleviate the dilemmas that the Mennonite-Anabaptist theological imaginary presents, but sometimes even accentuate the highly exclusionary nature of much contemporary baptismal theology and practice. Recent theological attempts to stress the church’s role and God’s initiative in baptism have gone some way towards mitigating problematic aspects of congregational practice. Yet the robust forms of subjectivity implicit in the need for “inwardness” in baptism rest

50 Ibid., 137.

uneasily beside persons highly limited in the abilities needed for purposive agency. Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal theology thus stands at an impasse in regard to the question of how the tradition can account for those persons who do not have the “compulsory capacities” required for candidacy.

But what if, instead of making agency and the human will primary in baptism, Anabaptist theology turned towards understanding the rite as *gift of reception*? One of the things at the center of baptism is the identity of the candidate. As I illustrated in this essay, much Mennonite-Anabaptist theology and practice understands baptism as transforming the identity of candidates through their own purposive agency. God is involved, but often in a strongly contingent fashion: without the candidate’s “choice” and “decision,” God’s work remains either incomplete or not active at all. But what if baptism was more a rite of receiving an identity as gift, a gift which cannot be earned or owned? As Belcher writes, the initiand and the church

both undergo the rite on the assumption that the one who offers is, ultimately, God—and yet God, according to the rite, is really only ‘present’ to and for the community in (or on the skin of) the body of the [candidate], who is (paradoxically) the receiver of the gift. Even the blessing of the water is transient, cannot be maintained in the face of time. In other words, the rite *may* maintain that the phenomena of its practice are ‘gifts,’ precisely by that unending deferral of giving. The rite ‘opens’ the phenomena of the Christian world by refusing to ‘own’ these phenomena but finding them in the body of the one who is not yet a part of that world.⁵¹

As a gift that cannot be earned or owned, baptism does not demand capacities or a “choosing self” but only the gift of being. In this context, Christian identity is not primarily cognitive or propositional or self-directed, but about being welcomed into a community where a person is shaped into a body that can inhabit the world in a Christian way. The gift of the rite recognizes and affirms the candidate as a gift, one which God gifts to the community. Understanding baptism in this way means that our being lies fundamentally in Christ, rather than in our self-determination. As gifts of God, baptism trans-

51 Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 174.

forms the ground of our being: not “I am” but “I am a gift”; not “I choose” but “I am chosen”; not “I know” but “I am known”; not “I believe” but “I am entrusted to.”

Orienting baptism towards being a gift of reception means that the church no longer needs to baptize people like Arthur as “exceptions” but can receive them into the Body as fellow creatures, loved and transformed by God into being. Might this baptismal theology not only host people with profound cognitive impairments but also *everyone else* as well? The embodied life of Arthur prods and compels the church to stretch the boundaries of baptism beyond the narrative of agency and rationality dominant in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Taking Arthur’s life seriously means interpreting baptism as a gift of reception available with no need for capacity or ability. In other words, I suggest that the lives of people like Arthur call Anabaptist and Believer’s Church congregations to consider moving towards a “dual norms” approach to baptism. Rather than rigidly following a norm of baptizing *only* “adults,” extending that invitation to children might more adequately counter the marked anthropocentrism of recent practice more than the theologies of Siegrist and Rempel. If the church can baptize profoundly impaired persons without guilt or as “exceptions,” why not extend that same hospitality towards *everyone*, including “non-agential” persons such as infants?⁵²

Certainly, this reading of baptism entails risks. For a tradition founded on a belief in the illegitimacy of baptizing anyone but “adults,” inviting “non-rational” persons to the rite can represent an existential threat to identity. One can rightfully wonder what is left of the tradition once paedobaptism is introduced as valid. Has everything one’s Anabaptist-Mennonite ancestors fought and died for all been for nought? What might it mean for the tradition when “choice” and “decision” no longer become requirements for becoming members of the church?

I cannot even hope to provide a definitive answer to these very weighty

52 To be clear, I am in no way wishing to equate people considered profoundly intellectually disabled with children. This is the fallacy of representing and treating people like Arthur as “perpetual children.” The point is more to draw out the implications of baptizing persons lacking purposive agency not as exceptions but as fellow creatures created in God’s image. If this can be done for persons severely lacking cognitive capacity, why could it not be done for children *of any age*?

and serious questions, yet I can posit a few suggestions. Might the notion of theological “development” not help in this regard? The first Anabaptists responded to what they understood as a static and unfaithful practice of baptism in 16th century Europe. While acknowledging that the questions posed to the magisterial ecclesial communities of the time had validity, have not those same communities developed in their own theology and practice? For example, in response to the witness of Mennonites and other free churches, some Christian communities have felt called to develop more extensive rites for adults entering the church, both drawing on ancient sources as well as contemporary theologizing. In a similar fashion, might not the presence of people with profound cognitive impairments in their communities challenge Anabaptist-Mennonites to a more hospitable theology of baptism? Anabaptist-Mennonites do not have to completely abandon adult baptism. Instead, the call is to strongly consider a “both/and” theology of the practice, one that arises from an attentiveness to some of the most vulnerable members of the faith community. Thus, development does not mean a “watering down” of the tradition to some kind of lowest common denominator, but a renewal of a practice based on the life of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Another way forward exists in a reaffirmation of the community as mediator of the Holy Spirit’s grace to each baptized member. One critique of paedobaptist traditions is that they can (and often do) baptize persons irrespective of a commitment to a local ecclesial body, a lack of engagement either from the candidate, or their sponsor, or the candidate’s parents. Even for those Anabaptist-Mennonites like Siegrist, who claim that the baptismal rite has a theologically “objective” dimension, entering the church requires a sharing of faith with a concrete body of believers. To receive baptism merely for the sake of “salvation” and to become a part of the “mystical body of Christ” risks making baptism purely functional and fails to understand redemption and faith as an enduring process of conversion in community. If baptism thus needs to happen in a Spirit-filled community to come to full fruition, where persons are shaped and formed into Christians not only through official catechesis but by a living witness, would not Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations be the ideal places for “non-agential” persons to be baptized? The value placed on the shared life of *koinonia* in many Anabaptist-Mennonite communities offers a prime foundation for people like

Arthur to enter the church and be accompanied every step of the way on their faith journey. Having a robust community life means that persons of any age can receive baptism in the assurance that they will not be forgotten or neglected. A mutual opportunity also arises for those who wish to bring someone else to the practice. Believing that God works through the rite *and* the community means that persons considering baptism must be ready to make a commitment to a local faith community. No Christian is a “free agent,” no matter the age or level of cognitive capacity. By reaffirming the place of the community within God’s sacramental grace, Anabaptist-Mennonite communities’ gifting of baptism to persons of any age could offer a profound witness to all Christians of a faithful baptismal practice.

In the end, can the church let the presence of people like Arthur challenge and call communities to renew their witness of justice and hospitality? If a community’s theology and practice of baptism form an identity that reduces persons with profound impairments to “exceptions” and “special” people, might that theology not be open to question? Might people with profound cognitive impairments help Anabaptist-Mennonites recognize the limitation of an overly voluntaristic and subjectivist theological anthropology? And might reforming that theological anthropology not be beneficial for *everyone* considering baptism and the life of faith? Anabaptist-Mennonite communities wish to be more and more “inclusive.” If that commitment is true, make that inclusion a “thick” one, that is, one that does not simply let people “attend” the church but provides a place and imaginary which takes *everyone* seriously as fellow disciples of Jesus. Do Anabaptist-Mennonites have the confidence to let people like Arthur interrogate their theologies and practices to make them not only “hospitable” but in keeping with God’s invitation to all to be incorporated into his body? If Christ is at the center of the church’s practice and theology of baptism, what is to fear regarding the baptism of “non-agential” persons? Let Mennonites witness to the global church a robust practice of baptism of *all* persons: in a community of faith, where the Holy Spirit breathes and showers down grace on *all* his children, from the baptismal font to the end of days. May it be so.

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