

Pastoral Statement 5/2/2013

Believers Baptism and Hope Fellowship

Almost all Christian churches or communities have accepted the practice of baptism as an initiatory rite into the Christian family and have embraced one of two traditions, infant baptism or believer's baptism. Simply stated, infant baptism is built on a covenant theology that emphasizes the gift of God's grace sponsored through the gathered church. Believer's baptism, on the other hand, reserves baptism for those who have made a conscious choice of their own volition to confess Jesus as Lord and join the community of disciples.

A good case can be argued for either of these practices from New Testament scriptures. And both traditions -- when practiced well -- recognize, celebrate, and mark the corporate affirmation and covenant of the body as well as the journey of an individual in making decisions about discipleship and crossing various spiritual thresholds.

Early in the life of the community Hope Fellowship members affirmed three relevant values that exist together with some tension:

- To have an agreed-upon practice of baptism that would mark the decision of an individual to join the church as a disciple of Christ.
- To make efforts to affirm our unity with the ecumenical body of Christ and to try to avoid or minimize divisiveness with HF community practices.
- To find ways to help our children feel included in the family of Christ while encouraging them to consider and respond to the personal call of Jesus upon their lives.

From these three values the members derived three related practices.

1. **“We practice only believer’s baptism after a time of guidance and instruction and do not baptize children below the age of accountability.”** Baptism is a public act, not a private act, and as a community we have accepted the scriptural case that it should mark the decision of a believer to follow Jesus and join the community of disciples once she or he has been able to take into account, to at least some degree, the costliness of this decision.
2. **“We accept any previous baptism claimed by a believer seeking to join us.”** This is a fairly radical, unusual, and ecumenical practice for a church that has identified itself as Anabaptist. It is an attempt to reclaim a fundamental meaning of baptism, that it should be a sign pointing to our unity in Christ, not a practice that creates further division in the body of Christ. In Hope Fellowship history we have had believers join us in both ways -- some claiming a prior infant baptism and some who, though baptized as an infant, have chosen to receive believers baptism.
3. **“We share communion as a celebration of unity by the whole Christian family of Jesus’ resurrection, and we welcome all with a common confession, including**

children, to join us.” This is also an unusual practice; our sense is that there is no compelling scriptural basis for denying children their participation when the family comes together to affirm our unity in Christ. Otherwise there is a danger that children may clamor for baptism simply so they can be included in communion. We also feel it is important to remember it is Christ who spreads the table and invites us to communion; it is not our job to guard the “sanctity” of this rite.

Hope Fellowship has never had a sense we have figured out *the* right or one correct way to baptize or share communion, nor have we ever believed that the statements above will provide clear guidelines for navigating every set of circumstances or every situation we face as a church. We’ve always held these practices with a sense of humility and a prayer that our life together will honor God and help increase grace and love.