

A Personal Reflection on Believers' Baptism, Christian Identity, and Radical Discipleship from the Indonesian Mennonite Perspective

PAULUS S. WIDJAJA*

WHY BELIEVERS' BAPTISM?

My invitation to write a personal reflection on baptism arrived less than three months after I got involved in a bit of severe tension with my son-in-law about baptism. My son-in-law is Catholic. The tension arose because he wanted to baptize his daughter Estelle in the Catholic church. She is six years old. The parochial Catholic church where my son-in-law is a member had announced that the church would offer baptism that month. The church usually offers baptism services a couple of times a year and it always takes place on Fridays. It so happened that the Friday when the church would offer a baptism service in that month was on the date my son-in-law had his birthday. That is why he insisted on having Estelle baptized on that day. I strongly rejected his idea. It was not primarily because my granddaughter would be baptized as a Catholic but because, as a Mennonite pastor and teacher, the concept and practice of child baptism is against what I believe dearly.

Ever since the tension between my son-in-law and me arose, I have pondered some questions: Why do I resist child baptism, even to the extent that I got involved in tension with my son-in-law, and even though I am a faculty member of an interdenominational seminary that is predominantly non-Mennonite? I work with Reformed theologians who compose most of the faculty. There are also two Catholics. Conversely, why do I insist on a believers' baptism and not want to give it up?

I was baptized on Sunday, January 21, 1979, when I was sixteen. Yes! It was right on the day when the Anabaptist-Mennonite churches around the globe commemorated the birthday of Anabaptism. In the baptism service, my pastor, the late Rev. Charles Christano, former president of the Mennonite World Conference, read Romans 1:16 after he sprinkled the water on my head, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16 NRS).

I felt so proud and happy to be baptized as a Christian. My name is Paulus Sugeng Widjaja. It reflects different kinds of ingredients that compose my identity. "Paulus" is a Christian name derived from the Dutch language. "Sugeng" is a Javanese name. "Widjaja" is an Indonesian name modified from the Chinese family name "Oei" that I inherited from my step-grandfather. Hence, at least five kinds of cultures or sub-cultures shape my identity. I am simultaneously a Christian, Dutch, Javanese, Chinese, and an Indonesian. I am all of that. Yet, Christianity is the only group identity that I can feel I belong to and be a part of. It is the identity that I can feel good about.

I do have Javanese foremothers, yet the Javanese community does not accept me as one of them since I am not considered a pure Javanese. For the Javanese, I am like a "mudblood" in the *Harry Potter* novels' fictional language. I also have Chinese forefathers and foremothers, yet the Chinese community does not accept me as part of their community either, since I am not considered a pure Chinese. I am thus also a mudblood for the Chinese. Let alone the Dutch community. They certainly have a problem considering me part of them, even though, based on my research, I suspect I had a Dutch forefather from my mother's side some time ago in history.

My identity as an Indonesian does give me some sense of belonging. However, the prejudice and discrimination so widespread in society against those considered "hereditary citizens"¹ has become a significant barrier for me to be entirely accepted as an Indonesian citizen. When I applied for an Indonesian passport for the first time, the immigration officer asked me to submit a letter of name change, an official letter issued by the Indonesian government declaring that the person has changed their Chinese name into an Indonesian one.² I was suspected of being a foreign Chinese person, even though I had submitted my birth certificate on which my Indonesian name, Paulus Sugeng Widjaja, is written clearly.

I also recall my traumatic childhood when my Indigenous neighbors yelled at me as I was passing them, "Cino! Cino!" Sometimes, they also threw gravel or firecrackers at me or, worse, beat me up on the street. All

*Paulus Widjaja is a lecturer on the faculty of theology at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta, Central Java, and directs the Center for the Study and Promotion of Peace at that university.

¹ Sukarno, the first Indonesian president, distinguished two kinds of Indonesian citizens: (1) "The Indonesian citizens," which refers to citizens of foreign descent, including Chinese Indonesians, and (2) "The Indonesian nationals," which refers to indigenous citizens. Leo Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority and China: A Study of Perceptions and Policies*, 2nd ed. (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1986), 30–33.

² The obligation to change the name of the Indonesian Chinese descendants was legally implemented through the Decision of Cabinet Presidium No. 127 on 27 December 1966, reiterated in Presidential Decision No. 240 issued on 10 April 1967 and Presidential Decision No. 123 in 1968. Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians*, 163.

this happened just because I am considered an outsider, an enemy worthy of bullying. The term “Cino,” (Chinese) that my indigenous neighbors used is a neutral name. In Indonesian society, however, it has become an intentional way to humiliate the so-called Chinese descendants. The Army Seminar II held in 1966 which was considered the hallmark of the beginning of the New Order era under former president Suharto (1966–1998) had recommended clearly that the Indonesian people use the derogatory term “Cina” to replace the terms “Tionghoa” (Chinese) and “Tiongkok” (China), which had been used for years in Indonesia. Later, this name-calling was stated formally in the Circulation Letter of the Cabinet Presidium No. 6 issued on July 25, 1967. The justification behind this name-calling is “[t]o remove a feeling of inferiority on the part of our people [Indigenous Indonesians], while on the other hand removing the feeling of superiority on the part of the group concerned [the local Chinese] within the state.”³

Thus, in one sense, I am everybody. Yet, in another sense, I am nobody. I am part of everybody, yet I am also rejected and considered an outcast by everybody. Within such a context, the Christian community is the only community I can feel fully a part of. This community is willing to embrace me and does not treat me as a mudblood. Within this community, I can stand as an equal among everybody. And my membership entrance into this community was through believers’ baptism.

I love Romans 1:16, the verse my pastor gave me when I was baptized. Even though different groups in Indonesian society, to which I supposedly belong, consider me a mudblood in their respective community, I can and dare to claim, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel.” My Christian identity has transcended all the other given identities within me. For me, Christianity is the true identity that has given me the strength to face the ambiguities of my identity and the impacts I experience due to that ambiguous identity. I am now somebody, and I can refer to a particular community I can claim as my community.

Moreover, I understood Romans 1:16 to mean that God bestows his salvation, that is, an eternal life with God in heaven, to those who have faith. I understood this statement as not referring to just anybody. It refers to a specific group of people, namely Christians, people who believe in God who has manifested himself in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

That is why the belief and practice of believers’ baptism is fundamental to me. It signifies that I voluntarily commit to Jesus Christ and his community of followers. My Christian identity is something that I choose voluntarily. Nobody forces me and gives me my identity against my free

³ Suryadinata, *Pribumi Indonesians*, 42–43; Charles A. Coppel, *Tionghoa Indonesia Dalam Krisis*, Cet. 2 (Jakarta: Pustaka Sinar Harapan, 1994), 176.

will. Even though I inherited it from my parents, it is born of nurture, not nature. I earned it on my own, albeit with the help of my family and church. It is not a given like my other identities that I have no power to reject, except to accept it despite the painful experiences I undergo due to those identities.

My Christian faith is not something that I have because I happened to be born into a Christian family and have a moral responsibility to continue the faith that I inherited from my parents. It is not something that I have because I was forced to make the faith commitment by my parents, my pastor, or somebody else. My Christian faith is born of my voluntary commitment to believe in Jesus Christ. In my life context, that is essential. It undergirds the fact that I choose my own identity, which I feel happy and good about, an identity I can bluntly declare that I am not ashamed of. This identity is not fake like my other identities, in which I am accepted only on the surface by the communities that share those identities with me. Within the Christian community, I am not a mudblood worthy of being treated poorly and discriminately by the communities claiming to be the determinators of their respective identities. Christianity is an identity that does not betray my trust. And the front gate to enter this community is believers' baptism.

MEET JESUS FOR THE FIRST TIME AGAIN

However, my somewhat narrow understanding of salvation written in Romans 1:16 has caused me to be too dogmatic in my understanding and practice of the Christian faith. I was simply happy with the fact that I was baptized, and that baptism took place because I voluntarily chose to have it. The context of enmity had driven me to claim God's salvation for my own sake only. Deep in my heart there was even a little "joy" in knowing that those who have done harm to me because of my ambiguous identity would be punished by God in hell.

Believers' baptism has brought something good to me since it has given me a sense of clear identity within an embracing community that I do not find anywhere else. But I was not able to grasp the whole meaning of this goodness. When I was admitted to Duta Wacana Graduate School of Theology in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in 1981, right after graduating from high school, I was enthusiastic about learning systematic theology. I thought I had to learn Christian doctrine well in order to hold on to the faith that has saved me from despair due to the ambiguities of my identity.

This somewhat narrow understanding of Christian faith made me ignore the more important dimension of Christian faith implied by the believers' baptism, that is, radical discipleship, a new life in accordance with the faith I claim. I was overly preoccupied with the justification part

of God's grace while ignoring the sanctification part. Even though my dogmatic understanding of the Christian faith changed after I studied at Duta Wacana Graduate School of Theology for five years, the primary thrust was still there. I continued to understand believers' baptism as having to do more with the affirmation of my identity as a Christian, cognitively understood to entail the correct doctrines, the orthodoxy.

My understanding was radically transformed when I studied at AMBS, then Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, in Elkhart, Indiana, USA (1995–1997). My time at AMBS is one of those formative times in my life for which I am endlessly grateful. The turning point was so big that I felt like I met Jesus for the first time again there. At AMBS, I began to grasp the most profound meaning of the so-called radical discipleship or regeneration that becomes the core thrust of a believers' baptism. Of course, I had learned those theological concepts due to my five-year theological study at Duta Wacana Graduate School of Theology. However, that understanding was more theoretical than essential. At AMBS, I started to understand that believers' baptism is not simply about having a Christian identity, let alone having a convenient means to escort Christians from Earth to Heaven. Believers' baptism is primarily about a voluntary decision to have a life that is congruent to the faith I claim. What we say and do is much more important than what we believe. 1 John 2:6 says, "whoever says, 'I abide in him [Jesus Christ],' ought to walk just as he walked" (NRS). Not more, not less. This is radical discipleship and true regeneration.

At AMBS, I started to understand believers' baptism as a voluntary open declaration before God and his community of believers. It is a public testimony and pledge that, from that moment on, I am committed fully to Jesus Christ and the community of binding and loosing. In this community, I voluntarily submit myself to my sisters and brothers to hold me accountable for the faith I claim.

Theologically speaking, as Anabaptist-Mennonites, we believe in the "baptism of the spirit," which is when God prepares us to commit to him. Later on, thanks to the baptism of the spirit, we are empowered to have "water baptism," the public enactment of the baptism of the spirit. It is the time when we declare our total commitment to Christ and are ready to go through the "baptism of blood" by which we deny ourselves so that we can live a Christ-like life, to the extent of the cross and death. Some people may argue that in all this, we depend solely on God's grace, and we are passive recipients. On the other hand, as Anabaptist Mennonites, we argue that we are not passive recipients of God's grace since we do our role in participating in God's grace. We are active recipients of God's grace due

to our voluntary decision, albeit empowered by God's grace. God's grace is a "prevenient grace" (a grace at work before one is aware of it).⁴

Regardless of our theological point of view, what I want to stress is that baptism is more than just the correct doctrine; we must settle on such theoretical matters as its essential and practical implications. Believers' baptism concerns right living, orthodox life, radical discipleship and regeneration. This has made me understand John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (NRS), not primarily about declaring our belief in the historical person named Jesus Christ, so that we could have a particular identity and be saved. There is nothing wrong with this, but it is too shallow. I understand John 14:6 as primarily about having and living out the way, the truth, and the life that Jesus has demonstrated. Our Christian identity is meaningless until it manifests in our way, our truth, and our life congruent with that of Jesus Christ.

I remember Gombak Sugeng, one of the forefathers of Gereja Kristen Muria Indonesia (GKMI), the Mennonite church I belong to. He was an unbeliever and a heavily addicted gambler. When he repented and became a Mennonite, he voluntarily cut his thumb off to prevent himself from holding cards, thus releasing him from his gambling addiction. This may be an extreme example, but it is a good example of radical discipleship. Within such radical discipleship, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" as Romans 1:16 states.

Believers' baptism is the public testimony of my belief in Jesus Christ and my commitment to follow him daily, whose integrity is tested by the congregation where I live. When I was serving as the president of the GKMI Synod, I inserted Hans Denck's famous phrase in the Sunday worship liturgy of the GKMI churches: "No one may truly know Christ except one who follows Him daily in life."⁵ Every Sunday, each GKMI congregation jointly recites this "discipleship commitment," right after the sermon is delivered and before the Apostolic Creed is proclaimed. My intention for that insertion is to show the significance of radical discipleship in following Jesus Christ. It also intends to fill the gap regarding

⁴ Thomas R. Yoder-Neufeld, "Growing in Faithfulness: Living out our Baptism. Guide for Study and Reflection on Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ, the Church. The Report of the Trilateral Conversations between Lutherans, Mennonites and Catholics 2012-2017" (Mennonite World Conference, 2020), 8, https://mwc-cmm.org/sites/default/files/resource-uploads/2020_trilateral_report-baptism_and_incorporation_into_the_body_of_christ_the_church_0.pdf.

⁵ GAMEO, "Denck, Hans (ca. 1500–1527)," May 19, 2020, [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Denck,_Hans_\(ca._1500-1527\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Denck,_Hans_(ca._1500-1527)); The Mennonite, "Reclaim the Wisdom of Hans Denck," *Anabaptist World* (blog), February 1, 2011, <https://anabaptistworld.org/reclaim-wisdom-hans-denck/>.

Jesus's life, teaching, and ministry that the Apostolic Creed has somewhat forgotten and ignored.

I am aware that not all Anabaptist-Mennonites happily accept, let alone recognize, the influence and significance of Hans Denck for the development of the early Anabaptist movement. However, no one can dismiss the fact that a mystical-spiritualist Anabaptist theologian like Hans Denck strongly emphasized radical discipleship in following Jesus Christ daily. Instead of separating our inner and outer lives, Denck integrates them into radical discipleship. Knowing Jesus Christ cognitively cannot be separated from doing concretely in life what Jesus Christ has taught and demonstrated. Orthodoxy and orthodox life are well integrated into each other.

Believers' baptism shows that justification by grace includes one's status before God and one's moral transformation. Justification is at the same time also sanctification. Within this understanding, "Believers are forgiven and transformed into persons who can follow Jesus and obey his teachings."⁶ I remember the time when, as part of the Mennonite World Conference delegation invited by the Roman Catholic Church to come to the Vatican in 2007, I joined in a conversation with the Roman Catholic magistrates. One of the Catholic priests in the meeting asked whether Mennonite World Conference is interested in joining in the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation regarding justification. My response at that time was that we were very interested in joining the conversation if the dialogue discussed not only the concept of justification but also sanctification because justification cannot and should not be separated from sanctification.

THE FUTURE OF BELIEVER'S BAPTISM WITHIN GOD'S GRACE

Believers' baptism has indeed saved me from despair due to my ambiguous identity. Yet, that practice also has an ongoing challenge. The joint statement between the Mennonite World Conference, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Lutheran World Federation mentions that one of the challenges regarding believers' baptism is as follows:

We recognize the pain that those traditions express when we baptize someone who has been baptized as an infant in their churches, which suggests to them that we consider their baptism invalid.⁷

That pain should make the Anabaptist-Mennonites start "receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their confession of faith

⁶ Yoder-Neufeld, "Growing in Faithfulness," 8.

⁷ "Baptism and Incorporation into the Body of Christ: The Church Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic Trilateral Conversations 2012-2017," 76.

and commitment to discipleship without repeating the water rite.”⁸ In Indonesia, we have done this. The Unity Charter of the Communion of Churches in Indonesia regarding Holy Baptism (Chapter 14) clearly states this.⁹ This is a way to accept and recognize God’s grace “to everyone who has faith” (Rom 1:16) regardless of how Christian faith comes to one.

The road that the Anabaptist-Mennonites around the globe must walk in practicing believers’ baptism is indeed very steep. There are challenges along the way that the Anabaptist-Mennonite churches must face. Yet, God’s empowering grace will accompany us all the way through those dark nights and trying days in the desert. This is also my testimony. I started this reflection by mentioning the tension between my son-in-law and myself regarding his plan to baptize Estelle, my granddaughter, in the Catholic church, on his birthday. But, surprisingly, the Catholic church where my son-in-law is a member suddenly cancelled the baptism service that month. My son-in-law’s sentiment and emotion related to the date of the baptism service suddenly vanished away. He no longer insisted on baptizing little Estelle. Both my son-in-law and I accepted it as a divine intervention. That is God’s grace.

⁸ Yoder-Neufeld, “Growing in Faithfulness,” 33.

⁹ Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia and BPK Gunung Mulia, PT, eds., *Dokumen Keesaan Gereja Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia (DKG-PGI), 2019-2024*, Cetakan ke-1 (Jakarta: Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja di Indonesia : BPK Gunung Mulia, 2020), 88–89.