New Perspectives in
Believers Church Ecclesiology

Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, & Karl Koop, Editors

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VI. RECENT TRENDS

Introduction

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Western societies face a major challenge in our day. To put it simply, we find ourselves caught in the tension between globalization and individualization. Every level of society is affected by the forces at play in this milieu. Even church communities are not immune from the struggle. Indeed, from the time of its origin, the church has sought its identity and promoted its mission in the interplay between local and global interests. Postmodern thought has brought unique challenges to the fore. Some, committed to an understanding of the church as community, want to know where, on the continuum between the church local and the church universal, the Christian community establishes its primary identity. Others, turning increasingly to an individualistic spirituality, question the significance and role of the church itself.

On June 7-11, 2008, some eighty scholars and church leaders from the Believers Church family and beyond met at Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, Manitoba, to discuss ecclesiological issues related to questions of identity. The gathering met under the general theme, "Congregationalism, Denominationalism, and the Body of Christ." This was the sixteenth Believers Church conference held in North America since 1967. The "Believers Church" tradition was identified as a historic movement by the German sociologist of religion, Max Weber (1864-1920). Today the denominational families in America and beyond that consider themselves within this tradition include Baptists, Brethren, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Churches of God, Friends, Mennonites, Pentecostals, and others. A growing list of Anabaptist-oriented communities in the southern hemisphere also identify with the Believers Church family.

This volume contains a selection of seventeen plenary addresses and papers presented at the Winnipeg conference. The first two chapters explore

aspects of the conference theme from a biblical standpoint. In an opening plenary Bible study entitled, "The One and the Many," Sheila Klassen-Wiebe concludes, mainly on the basis of the Gospel of John, that the oneness of the church is a God-given gift which is ours to claim and celebrate. At the same time, the gift of oneness is dispersed among a diversity of communities. The one and the many are intertwined. Gordon Zerbe's chapter on "The Relevance of Paul's Eschatological Ecclesiology" explores the Pauline perspective on the church universal. Zerbe shows that the Apostle Paul placed ecclesiology within the future expectation of the unifying eschatological community of the Messiah. The challenge to the church of today is to cultivate the consuming expectation that "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

Chapters three to five give attention to denominationalism, at times in tension with congregationalism. Bruce L. Guenther's "Historical and Theological Reflections on Denominationalism" offer the reader a renewed appreciation for the important service that denominations provide to an understanding of the church in general and of the Believers Church in particular. John J. Friesen's review of the origin and development of the various Mennonite communities in Manitoba provides a case study of how church subgroups have changed over time, resulting in "a rich tapestry of Mennonite churches in Manitoba." Doug Heidebrecht's account of one denomination's debate regarding the role of women in the church reveals a radical shift in the relation between congregation and denomination on matters of authority. The study raises the question: What constitutes faithfulness "in the midst of swirling social and cultural changes" with their leaning toward congregationalism?

The contributors of chapters six to nine explore the unifying dimension of ecclesiology in the Believers Church tradition. In "Believers Church Ecclesiology: A Vital Alternative within the Ecumenical Family," Fernando Enns recommends that the quest for the essence of the Believers Church needs to be pursued in the context of the ecumenical unity of the churches, "since ecumenicity is one significant expression of the catholicity/universality of the church." In "Reading Tradition through Catholic Lenses," Karl Koop points in a similar direction when he reminds his readers that "while Christians are always located in particular historical, cultural, and theological streams, they are nevertheless a part of the universal communion of saints, the *communio sanctorum*." Building on the view of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist,

Michael Sattler, Brian Hamilton argues that the Anabaptists found their primary identity in the one body of Christ, which was itself "the essence of salvation." He claims that for Sattler and his followers, membership in the body of Christ was a more important mark of the church than was imitation or discipleship, which is often individualized. Speaking for the Church of the Brethren, Scott Holland's chapter, subtitled "A Brethren Corrective to the Anabaptist Communal Soul," also expresses reservations about the centrality of discipleship as a characterization of the essence of the church. From the perspective of pietism, he suggests that inner experience or the quality of one's interior life is central to the authentic life of faith.

Chapters ten and eleven discuss the potential of trinitarian theology for Believers Church ecclesiology. In "Believers Church Ecclesiology: A Trinitarian Foundation and its Implications," Fernando Enns draws attention to three prominent biblical metaphors of the church as *koinonia*: body of Christ, people of God, and temple of the Holy Spirit. These suggest "a nuanced trinitarian view of community . . . as the 'regulative principle' for reflection . . . from a Believers Church perspective." The fruitfulness of trinitarian theology is also explored in Arnold Neufeldt-Fast's chapter, "Examining the Believers Church within a Trinitarian-Missional Framework." He proposes "a shift from a traditionally christocentric to a more robust, trinitarian-missional paradigm for Believers Church ecclesiology."

No conference on Believers Church ecclesiology is complete without reference to sacraments and ordinances. This volume includes two chapters on the subject. In chapter twelve, Andrea M. Dalton reminds us that, while churches of the Believers Church tradition have generally disparaged a sacramental understanding of the Lord's Supper, this attitude merits reconsideration. The south German Anabaptist, Pilgram Marpeck, for one, "underscored the essential presence of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the meal and the mediating qualities of the elements rooted in the Incarnation." Dalton suggests that we should take voices such as Marpeck's into account. In the next chapter, Irma Fast Dueck explores the question of why a number of Christians in the Believers Church tradition appear to have lost their zeal for the role of baptism in the life of the Christian. She offers "some modest proposals for developing a healthy baptismal ecology."

The concluding chapters deal with challenges facing the churches in light of some current trends. The plenary address by Jonathan R. Wilson,

"Discerning the Spirit in the Ferment of Evangelical Ecclesiologies," reviews current church movements that break with traditional denominational culture. He offers counsel on how Believers Churches might assess and relate to these new models of the church. In "How Anabaptist Theology and the Emergent Church Address the Problem of Individualism," Gareth Brandt identifies positive as well as negative aspects of the current tendency of church programs to foster individualism. He challenges the churches "to think communally." Paul Doerksen focuses specifically on "Emerging Church Ecclesiology." Against the background of his critique of the "Emerging Church," he reminds readers of its historic calling to "be the church."

Finally, George F. Pickens' chapter on "The Southern Shift in World Christianity" provides a fitting conclusion to the volume. He draws attention to the opportunities and challenges that face Christian communities globally in the days to come. In particular, he notes a growing affinity between Believers Church values and the ecclesiology of the "younger" churches in the southern hemisphere. This issue, among others, suggests continuing agenda for future Believers Church conferences.

With the exception of the contributions by Fernando Enns, which form a sequence of thought, each of the chapters in this volume stands on its own. There was little if any collaboration between the writers. And yet, the chapters belong together as a mosaic framed by a common question: What are the challenges that face the Believers Church family in our time as it seeks to evaluate and remain accountable to its historic legacy in the midst of the competing forces of localization and globalization. Taken together, the authors contributing to this volume identify a variety of challenges, and offer the Believers Church family a rich diet of "food for thought." This is good news for the church.

The Editors

Part I

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

Chapter One

The One and the Many

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Sheila Klassen-Wiebe

The Bible contains a rich panoply of images for the church. Paul's depiction of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 comes quickly to mind; or one might think of the metaphor in 1 Peter 2 of the church as a building made of living stones, with Christ as its cornerstone. What is clear from these and other corporate biblical metaphors is that the church is both "the one" and "the many;" that is, the church is one people of God, one body of Christ, and one community of the Holy Spirit. At the very same time, in the practical expression of this identity, it is also "the many." The church consists of different denominations, diverse congregations, and many individual members. The church encompasses both unity, the One, and diversity, the Many. Regardless of whether one sees this as good or bad, it simply is. This reality has implications for how we "do" church, and it both presents challenges and brings certain gifts.

The Gospel of John is perhaps not the first place one would go for guidance on what it means for the church to be both "the one" and "the many." The Fourth Gospel does not address the topic of church per se (the word *ekklesia* is absent) nor does the Gospel envision a situation of many different denominations, though probably different house churches existed when the Gospel was written. Nevertheless, the Gospel of John offers some rich insights on what it means to be a church that encompasses both unity in Christ and diversity in its expression of that unity. According to the Fourth

Gospel, the church is one above all not because of what it does but because God in Christ has made it one. Believers demonstrate their unity in Christ through their love for one another and through their common mission of bringing hope and salvation to a broken world, thereby continuing the work of Christ, bearing witness to him, and glorifying God as he also did. The church's unity in Christ does not, of course, eliminate differences. The fact that Christ's body exists as diverse congregations and denominations may be seen positively, as an expression of the distinct callings and gifts of its various members and of its effort to live faithfully in diverse contexts.

Before we begin to explore the Gospel of John's contribution to our understanding of the church as "the one" and "the many," a few preliminary comments are in order for the sake of clarity. First, although the Fourth Gospel most likely went through several stages of composition, this presentation will engage the Gospel of John in its final canonical form and will treat it as a coherent, integrated narrative. Secondly, I will call the author of the Fourth Gospel "John" for the sake of convenience, without making any particular assumptions about who exactly that author was. Finally, I will intentionally use Father and Son language extensively to refer to God and to Jesus. Although not gender neutral language, it is nevertheless a uniquely Johannine idiom and one that cannot easily be replaced without considerably more attention than I can give it here.

The Church as "the One"

At the heart of John's vision for the church lies the unity of believers, and this is evident in various places throughout the Gospel. In 10:16 Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." And in 11:51-52 the narrator says, "[Caiaphas] did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God." Undoubtedly the strongest concentration of references to the unity of believers, the one church, occurs in John 17. The phrase, "that they may all be one," occurs no less than four times in this chapter (in vv. 11 and 20-23). One New Testament scholar says this chapter "expresses the hope of all who are concerned with church unity" and "has become the biblical motto for the

ecumenical movement."[1] Johannine scholar Raymond Brown remarks that John 17 has been used extensively in ecumenical discussions to argue for and against church unity and to bolster theories about how the church should be organized.[2] My intention in looking at this text is not to sort through the various ecumenical discussions but to look carefully at what this text says about the unity of believers in its narrative context and draw out some implications for today.

To begin with, we need to pay attention to the context and form of Jesus' words about the oneness of believers. These words about unity occur in a prayer that Jesus offers to God for his disciples on the eve of his death. In the first twelve chapters of the Gospel, Jesus speaks and performs signs that reveal him to be the Son sent from the Father to give eternal life to all who believe. With chapter 13 the narrative enters a new stage, for Jesus' hour has come to "depart from this world and go to the Father" (13:1). He gathers with his disciples at a final meal, where he washes their feet and speaks to them about his imminent betrayal. The following chapters, from the end of 13 to the end of 17, belong to the literary genre of a farewell speech; that is, a speech made by an important leader of a community prior to his departure or death.[3] In these chapters Jesus speaks to his disciples about the future and prepares them for the time when he will no longer be with them. Like many such farewell speeches, this one also concludes with a prayer for the followers left behind. Immediately after Jesus' prayer, the passion narrative begins. Jesus' words about the unity of the believers thus appear in the context of this final prayer for his disciples just before his death.

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[1] Daniel Harrington, *The Church according to the New Testament* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), 115; cf. Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 1061: "the unity of believers is at the heart of John's vision for believers (10:16; 11:52; 17:11, 21-23)."

[2] Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 2: *John 13-21*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1970), 775.

[3] Many scholars have commented on the genre of this text; e.g., Brown, *John 13-21*, 597-601; Fernando F. Segovia, *The Farewell of the Word: The Johannine Call to Abide* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991); Keener, *Gospel of John*, 896-898; D. Moody Smith, *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 262-266; Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 737-738.

Why is this significant? It matters that Jesus' hope for the oneness of believers occurs in the form of a prayer. Sometimes faith traditions that emphasize discipleship heavily have a tendency to hear everything Jesus says as moral exhortation, including blessings and prayers. However, in John 17 Jesus is not commanding the church for all time hence that it should *strive* to be unified. New Testament scholar Gail O'Day says, "The beginning point in any interpretation of John 17 must be the acknowledgement that the words in this chapter are portrayed not as Jesus' instructions to the community, but as Jesus' words offered to God in prayer."[4] To be sure, we, along with the first disciples and John's first readers, overhear Jesus' intimate communication with his Father in prayer; clearly John intends his community to overhear it and intends it to impact their life together.[5] But it is significant that the last thing Jesus does before he goes to his suffering and death is not to give last minute instructions about what believers should *do*.[6] Rather, Jesus entrusts the hope for the future of his followers not to the church itself but to God. The community is to understand that its identity in the world and "its life rests in and depends on God's care."[7] "It is interesting to ponder how the Christian community's self-definition would be changed if it took as its beginning point, 'We are a community for whom Jesus prays.'"[8] An important starting point for talking about unity, then, is to remember that the formation of the church into one body lies first and foremost in the hands of God, to whom Jesus entrusts the community before he dies. Jesus is not commanding us to be one; Jesus is asking his Father that we might be one. And God answers prayer.

A further context to consider when examining Jesus' prayer for unity among believers is the context of a world divided about who Jesus is and a world hostile to Jesus and his followers. This too has implications for how we think about the church as "the one." The word *kosmos* or "world" occurs about seventy-eight times in the Gospel, more often than in any New

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[4] O'Day, "Gospel of John," 797.

[5] Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1061; Brown, *John 13-21*, 748, states it more strongly yet: "Because there is an audience, the prayer is just as much revelation as it is intercession. The 'you' addressed is God, but Jesus is speaking to the disciples as much here as in the rest of the Discourse."

[6] O'Day, "Gospel of John," 797.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid., 798.

Testament document, and it occurs more frequently in John 17 than in any other chapter of the Gospel. "The world" is used in various ways and space does not permit me to consider here all the complexities of what it signifies. It is enough to know that, in the Fourth Gospel, most often "the world" is that which rejects God's revelation in Jesus and stands in opposition to God (e.g., 1:10-11; 7:7; 12:31; 15:18-19; 16:8-11). Earlier in the farewell discourse Jesus says that the world will hate the disciples as it hated him and that his followers will be persecuted (15:18-25; 16:2, 33). In his prayer in chapter 17 Jesus says that he is leaving the world but that his followers remain in the world even though they do not belong to the world (17:16, 18). So Jesus prays for protection for his disciples who remain in the world and will be hated by the world. Such a context of hostility has at least two implications for the unity of the body

First, to be one means to be united in confessing Jesus as the Son sent from God to reveal the Father and to give life to all who believe, in contrast to a world that does not believe this and is confused about Jesus. It is striking, when one reads the rest of the Gospel, how much confusion and division there is concerning who Jesus is and from where he comes among people who encounter him. In chapter 7 there are many references to the rampant confusion about Jesus' origin and identity (e.g., 7:12-13, 40-44). Jesus' healing of the man born blind causes great discord: "Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided" (9:16).

The disciples, on the other hand, know and believe who Jesus is, though, granted, not fully until after the resurrection. In 6:69 Simon Peter says, "We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God." In 16:27 Jesus says to his disciples, "You have loved me and have believed that I came from God." And in chapter 17 Jesus prays to God, "Now they [i.e., the disciples] know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me" (vv. 7-8) Throughout the Gospel of John the world remains confused about who Jesus is and where he comes from; the disciples, for whom Jesus prays, know and believe that he comes from God and reveals God. One thing it might mean for the church to be one in John's time and today, then, is to be

united in confessing Jesus as the One sent from God to reveal God and to give life to all who believe, over against the plurality of voices in the world that remain confused about who Jesus is.

A second implication of what it means for the church to be one in the context of a hostile world is that in a hostile world the community's confession and trust in Jesus can come under attack, and this can tear the community apart. So Jesus prays for the believers' protection from the evil one in order that they might continue to be one. Jesus knows the dangers that his followers will face in the world; if the world hated and persecuted him, so it will hate and persecute them. And so he prays for his followers' protection. It is important to note that Jesus does not here ask God to unify the disciples; rather, their oneness is to be the *result* of the protection that God will grant them in answer to Jesus' prayer (17:11). The reference to God's name here is another way of talking about God's character and identity. To say that Jesus has made God's name known to his followers (17:6) means that he has revealed who God is. During his earthly ministry Jesus protected them in God's name (v. 12). Now Jesus "asks that God keep secure the community's grounding in that name," that identity.[9] To what end? That they be one. Jesus asks not that his followers be taken out of the world but that they be protected from the evil one (v. 15), because he knows that the confusion and enmity of the world can divide them.

To understand the church as "the one," then, we must pay attention to the fact that Jesus prays for the church's unity and that the church's oneness exists in a world of confusion and conflict. A third thing that is clear in Jesus' prayer in John 17 is that he grounds the unity of the faith community in the unity that exists between the Father and Son: "Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 11); "[t]he glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 22). As Gail O'Day says, "There is no 'one' for the community without the 'we' of the Father and Son."[10] The community of believers becomes one by virtue of the intimate relationship of mutuality and reciprocity between Father and Son. But in order to understand what it means

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[9] Ibid., 792; cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 299.

[10] O'Day, "Gospel of John," 795.

for believers to mirror and share in the unity of Father and Son, it is necessary to understand the nature of the unity between Father and Son, and this is no simple matter.

Although the Gospel insists on the oneness of the Father and Son, it also paradoxically portrays the Father and Son as distinct. Thus, John can talk about the Son being sent from the Father, the Son obeying the Father, the Father loving the Son, and the Father being greater than the Son. Such language implies distinction. Just as the unity between Father and Son does not eliminate the individuality of each, so also "[t]he oneness of the believers is not a unity that abolishes their own individuality. They are one, but they are united as individuals."[11]

For the church today, however, the difficulty lies not in the individuality of members of the community but in what it means for the unity of the community to be rooted in the unity of Father and Son. Many attempts have been made in the creeds and doctrines of the church to articulate exactly of what the unity of the Father and Son consists, especially in ontological terms. As valid as the later creedal formulations about the Trinity might be, our concern here is in understanding what it means for the Father and Son to be one in the context of John's Gospel. And the narrative of the Gospel invites us to focus on the deeds of Jesus and on the unity of the Father and Son in their acts in history. Jesus is one with God because he shares in God's purpose to act for the salvation of the world.

It is not that the ontological unity between Father and Son cannot be inferred from the Gospel of John. However, the primary emphasis in the narrative of the Fourth Gospel is on the unity between Father and Son as expressed in a common purpose and in the enacting of that shared goal in history.[12] The Father and Son are one because the Father is accomplishing his work of salvation in and through the Son. The Father and Son are one because Jesus does the works of the Father, and the works of the Father are meant to lead people to eternal life. The Father and Son are one because everything that Jesus does and says comes from the Father. In John 14:9-11 Jesus says to his

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[11] Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 134.

[12] Ralph P. Martin, *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 91.

disciples, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. . . . The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me." Throughout Israel's history it was God's prerogative both to give life and to judge. Now the Father gives the Son authority to give life and to judge,[13] that is, to do the Father's work: "Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. . . . Indeed, just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whomever he wishes. The Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son, so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father'" (5:19-23). In his prayer in John 17:2 Jesus acknowledges that God has given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom God has given him. It is this common work that makes the two One.

If this is the essence of the unity between Father and Son in the narrative of John's Gospel, what does it then mean for Jesus to pray that his followers might be one, as the Father and Son are one? What does it mean for the church's unity to be based on the unity that exists between Jesus and God? Such a reading of the Gospel suggests that the church's unity lies in its common purpose and common work, as the unity of Father and Son lie in their common work. That purpose is not to condemn the world but to save and to give abundant life. The eternal life that Jesus brings in the Gospel of John is not just about "pie in the sky after we die." Rather, the eternal life that God offers the world in Jesus is life that begins now, that can be experienced in the community of believers already here. For the church to be one as the Father and Son are one is to be united in bringing the abundant life God offers through God's Son to a hostile world here and now. How we work together to do that needs to be discerned, of course, but it is part of our being one as the Father and Son are one.

A fourth thing that the Gospel of John teaches the church about its common identity is that it can be one only as it is united with God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, that is, only to the extent that it remains in close relationship with the divine. Jesus not only prays that his followers might all be one *as* the Father and Son are one, but he also prays that this followers

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[13] Kysar, *Maverick Gospel*, 54; Smith, *John*, 135.

might be *in* the Father and Son just as the Father and Son are "in" one another. Jesus prays that believers might participate in the unity of Father and Son; and by being "in" them, they will be one. It is a three-way mutual indwelling that creates unity: "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (17:21); "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one" (17:23).

In John 15, Jesus talks about being "in Christ" in terms of abiding or remaining in the vine. The branches are dependent on the vine and gain their life from the vine. They remain healthy and vital only as they continue in a close relationship with their source. Believers become one as they are drawn into Christ and become part of his body. In order to be one they must remain in Jesus, drawing nourishment and strength from him. Such a participation in Christ is not an end in itself, of course. Just as a vine exists for the purpose of bearing fruit and not just for decoration, so also a community's relationship with Jesus must result in lives of faithful service if it is healthy. It too must bear fruit.

In John's Gospel the fruit of abiding in Christ is, above all, love. In other words, a community that is "one" is a community that must be characterized by love. This point is related to the two previous ones, namely, that the community is one as the Father and Son are one and is one by virtue of its abiding in Jesus. This is a tightly interwoven chain of relationships, relationships that consist of mutual indwelling and that are characterized above all by love. For the community to be one means that it will receive the love that flows between Father and Son and will share this love with others. This love among believers is to be the same love that exists between God and God's unique Son. God loves the Son and the Son loves the Father; the Son loves the believers and they in turn are to exemplify this love between the Father and Son by showing love for one another. Thus, Jesus washes his disciples' feet and instructs them to love one another as he has loved them: "By this will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:35). Jesus also says, "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them" (14:20-21); and again, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you"

(15:12). God's love for Jesus, Jesus' love for God, the love that Jesus has for his disciples, and the love that Jesus' disciples show him by keeping his commandment to love each other are all tangled up together.

People sometimes accuse John of having a simplistic or "soft" ethic: all we are called to do is love other members of the body of Christ. Not from John's Jesus do we get any hard commands to love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. The context in which Jesus speaks about loving each other suggests, however, that there is nothing easy about such love. This love is not just a warm fuzzy emotion. To love as Jesus loved is to love without limits, to lay down one's life for the other. That the love Jesus commands is directed to others inside the community does not make it any easier.[14] In fact, it might be easier to love an enemy that we can avoid or is far away than to love a brother or sister with whom we sit in church every Sunday. Years ago Mennonite Central Committee created a poster that said, "A modest proposal for peace: Let the Christians of the world agree that they will not kill each other." What kind of witness could the church present if we could be so unified in our love for each other that we would cease to kill each other and, instead, lay down our lives for each other? By this all people would know that we are Jesus' disciples.

For the church to be one means not only that its members will love each other but also that it will be guided by the Holy Spirit dwelling within and among them. Jesus promised that he would not leave his disciples orphaned (14:18) and he does not. In his Farewell Discourse Jesus promises that the Father will send the Paraclete (that is, the Holy Spirit) in Jesus' name after he leaves them (14:16-17; 15:26; 16:7). The Paraclete will have various roles in the community of believers, all of which will assist the church in being "one" after the Son has ascended to the Father. The Paraclete is a comforter for he "will take the place of the earthly Jesus and will carry on the work of Jesus within the community of believers."[15] The Spirit will continue to teach the church and remind believers of what Jesus said when he was among them (14:26). Moreover, the Spirit will testify on behalf of Jesus, as Jesus' disciples also are to testify (15:26-27). The Spirit will guide the community in the truth and will

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[14] O'Day, "Gospel of John," 734.

[15] Harrington, *Church According to the New Testament*, 120.

convict the world of sin. The body of believers can remain one, abiding in Jesus, even after he is gone because God will send the Spirit to continue to do the work of Jesus among them.

In addition, for the community to be one means that it reveals God's glory. The "glory" language in the prayer of John 17 is extensive and its meaning difficult to discern. Verses 1-5 talk about the mutual glorification between Father and Son, referring especially to Jesus' upcoming death, which is his return to the Father and his glorification. But in verse 10 Jesus says that he has been glorified in his disciples, and in verse 22 he says, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one." Jesus has glorified God—made God known—in his deeds of power and his words. Now, in his imminent death and resurrection, he glorifies God in this supreme act of self-giving love by making the character and identity of God most fully known. What does this have to do with his disciples and the oneness of the body? When Jesus passes on to his disciples the glory given to him from God, it means that the believers also manifest the love and unity shared by the Father and Son; they too reveal God's glory, the character of God as love, and are made one in this. "The community's oneness depends on Jesus' gift to them of God's glory. That is, the community's oneness derives from the character and identity of God revealed to them in Jesus' life and death."[16] In turn, the community glorifies God as it reveals this divinely given love and unity to the world.

Finally, Jesus' prayer that his followers might be one is not an end in itself but has a missional intent. Both petitions for the unity of the church in chapter 17 conclude with almost identical words: "so that the world may believe [know] that you sent me" (vv. 21, 23). The oneness of the believers does not exist only for their own benefit, so that they have a cozy, comfortable feeling when they get together; it is not just about potlucks and care groups. The oneness of the church is about being a witness to the world—the hostile, confused, and divided world—so that the world might also believe that God sent Jesus and that God loves the world even as the Father loved the Son.

This missional purpose for the church's unity builds on what Jesus has already said to his disciples. Jesus was sent into the world by God and is returning to his Father. Now Jesus will send his followers into the world as

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[16] O'Day, "Gospel of John," 795.

God sent him into the world (17:18; 20:21). Jesus prays that his followers might be sanctified in the truth, in the word, in Jesus (17:17, 19); that is, he prays that they might be made holy and set apart from the world even as they are sent into the world to make God known as Jesus made God known. In the Gospel of John belief is not just an intellectual assent to doctrine. The goal of the church's witness and, indeed, the community's unity, is that others might be in relationship with Jesus and have true life. This is the task, the mission to which Jesus calls his disciples and the reason he now prays for their unity. When believers are united in their love for God and each other in tangible and practical ways, when believers are one in their purpose of revealing God to the world as Jesus did, when believers participate in the unity of the Father and Son in their work of saving and loving a hostile world, then the world will catch a glimpse of who God is and why God sent Jesus and, in believing, will find life.

Now, the problem with this emphasis on the oneness of the church in John's Gospel, and in Jesus' prayer in John 17 specifically, is the disconnect between what is envisioned and what is reality. The church is not one today, nor was it in John's day. When one reads the Johannine letters, which come out of the same community and tradition as the Gospel, it is abundantly evident that the church was not one.[17] It seems likely from 1 John 4:2-3 that there was a conflict over the human nature of Christ, resulting in division in the church, and 1 John 2:19 also attests to disunity and separation. In the second epistle of John, the elder warns the church about deceivers who have gone out from the church into the world, denying that Jesus came in the flesh, and he exhorts the church not to receive anyone who does not abide by the true teachings of the church (2 John 7-11). The third epistle of John gives evidence of a dispute among church leaders, for in the congregation is one Diotrephes who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge the authority of the church leaders, and is spreading lies about the leaders. In fact, he is refusing to welcome fellow believers and expelling those who would welcome them into their homes (3 John 9-10). The turmoil one glimpses in these letters, however, should not sound foreign to the church today. Contemporary examples of divisions within congregations, denominations, and in the body

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[17] As R. Martin, *Family and Fellowship*, 92, notes, "Surely this dismal picture immediately discounts any pretension to fulfil the calling ascribed in John 17."

of Christ abound. Mennonites have been experts in splitting when conflict arises.

But does the church's ongoing divisiveness, whether in John's day or ours, whether for justifiable reasons or for petty sinful reasons, nullify the prayer of Jesus? No. Jesus' prayer to his Father reminds believers who listen in that the oneness of the body "proceeds from God and belongs essentially to his redemptive work in Christ."[18] The unity of the church is a gift, rooted in the oneness of the Father and Son and in the redeeming work of both in the world. That the unity brought into being by God in Christ and preserved by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit has become marred is characteristic of our living in a still fallen world.[19] Thus, the end of Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17 points to a future time when believers will be with Jesus to see his glory (v. 24). The church is made one in Christ, even as it continues to live in a creation groaning for the final redemption and for complete unity, to use Pauline language.[20] In the meantime, we, the church, must continue to listen in on Jesus' prayer, to repent for ways in which we have alienated brothers and sisters in Christ, and to seek ways in which to express faithfully our oneness in Christ. And so we continue to pray as Jesus prayed, that God might keep us in his name and might reveal his glory in us, in order that we might be one, and that, in being one in Christ, we might witness to a divided world about the love of God shown to the world in Jesus.

The Church as "the Many"

This essay began with the claim that the church encompasses both unity and diversity, that it is both "the One" and "the Many." I have suggested, on the basis of the Gospel of John, what it might mean for the church to be truly "one." For several reasons, however, one could not be faulted for thinking that the Fourth Evangelist really does not address the topic of "the Many" at all.

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[18] Beasley-Murray, *John*, 306.

[19] Ibid., 307.

[20] George R. Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 113-114, speaks about the tension between what we are called to be and what actually is: "Existing as we do in the time between accomplished redemption and the consummation of God's purpose, we have the task of living in the power of the redemption and in light of the consummation."

For one thing, the Gospel narrative does not envision the possibility of multiple large congregations or diverse denominations and in that sense does not speak directly or explicitly to the obvious question of how denominations and congregations fit into the concept of the one church. But even beyond that, on first glance the narrative itself could be seen to eschew any modern notion of diversity in the church. I have already referred to the divisions in the community, as evidenced in the writings of the Johannine epistles, and how the practice of at least some parts of the church was to expel or, at the very least, refuse hospitality to those who did not adhere to a common orthodox belief in a fully human and divine Jesus. The letters thus imply that diversity in belief and practice was not to be tolerated.

Secondly, the Fourth Gospel is often seen as being quite sectarian, displaying an "us against them" mentality. It sets up a dualism between church and world, between those who believe in Jesus and those who do not. Likely such an emphasis reflects a context of conflict, in which the Johannine community was experiencing hostility from fellow Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. The impression one might get from this, however, is that those on the "inside" are the same, united by their difference from those on the "outside."

Thirdly, many scholars have noted that the Gospel of John exhibits a democratizing tendency and portrays the body of disciples as radically egalitarian.[21] The Paraclete is promised to *all* members of the community. In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels, John rarely refers to the Twelve, and Jesus does not name a body of apostles to be his inside cabinet. Peter, who is so prominent in the Synoptics and who in Matthew is made the rock on whom Jesus builds the church, is a main character in the Gospel of John but certainly not the head of the church. In fact, it could be argued that he is of lesser importance than the Beloved Disciple, a topic to which we will return shortly. On first impression, then, the Gospel of John is perhaps a fruitful place to begin exploring the concept of the church as "the One" but seemingly barren ground for a study of the church as "the Many;" Johannine support seems slim for the idea of diversity in the church, such as is expressed in the modern phenomenon of congregations and denominations.

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[21] Kysar, *Maverick Gospel*, 137; Wes Howard-Brook, *John's Gospel and the Renewal of the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 173.

In spite of such apparent paucity of support for the church as "the Many," a closer look at the narrative of the Gospel and its portrayal of the individual disciples who make up the community of believers presents a picture that is not nearly so uniform and homogeneous as first impressions suggest. Although Jesus prays for believers to be "one," this is not to say that believers are all to be the same. The picture of the church may be a democratic and egalitarian one but that does not preclude the presence of individual members with various gifts, different callings, and diverse origins.

First of all, one gets glimpses of this throughout the Gospel in references to the gathering together of believers into one. In John 10:16, in the Shepherd discourse, Jesus says, "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Here there is an emphasis on the one body in Christ but also the diversity of "other sheep" coming to be part of the fold.

Secondly, the narrative of the Gospel suggests that the faith community is inclusive and diverse, not exclusive. As already mentioned, reflections on discipleship in the Gospel of John sometimes point out that disciples are exhorted to love each other but that there is little to nothing in the Gospel on loving the "other," the enemy, the outsider. When one looks at who comes to believe, however, one realizes that the "each other" whom disciples are to love are not just disciples of the same class, gender, and socio-economic group.[22] Those who come to believe in and follow Jesus include the Samaritan woman and her fellow villagers. They include the royal official at Capernaum, who might have been a Gentile but could also have been a Herodian Jew directly subject to "king" Herod Antipas (4:46-54); either way, most Jews would not have looked on him with favour. The community of believers includes the blind beggar of John 9, someone physically disabled, poor, and therefore outcast. These and other characters who encounter Jesus and come to believe are part of the diverse group whom Jesus enjoins to love each other

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[22] R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of John as a Document of Faith in a Pluralistic Culture," in *"What Is John?" Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996), 116-121. Culpepper cites the work of David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia, PA Westminster Press, 1988); and R. J. Karris, *Jesus and the Marginalized in John's Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).

Thirdly, and most significantly, the disciples most closely associated with Jesus are also not a uniform group. They are "the One," as Jesus has prayed for them to be; but they are also "the Many." This body of disciples can be compared to a glass prism, through which the "light of the world" is refracted into many different colours. For this part of the study I want to focus on John 21. Although often seen as an epilogue to the Gospel, perhaps added by a later editor, this chapter is an integral part of the narrative and closes off the story line of the disciples in a significant and necessary way.[23] Although it includes post-resurrection appearances by Jesus, this chapter is really not as much about the resurrection as it is about the followers whom Jesus commissions to continue his work and, ultimately, about the nature of the church. Moreover, the diversity of this group of followers mirrors the diversity within the church; that is, it represents "the many" within "the one."

John 21 begins with a group of seven disciples gathered at the Sea of Tiberias. Although he is not mentioned in verse 2, the Beloved Disciple must be among the group since he appears in verse 7, either he is one of the two "other" disciples or he is one of the sons of Zebedee. Many commentators have noted the significance of the number seven as the number of completion; for example, George Beasley-Murray says, "So seven disciples have come together, doubtless a symbolic number, representing the whole disciple group, and indeed the whole Body of disciples, the Church."[24] Even more interesting, however, is who is included in the group. Present at the Sea of Tiberias is Nathaniel from Cana, who appears elsewhere only in chapter 1, where he is invited by Philip to "come and see." Nathaniel is skeptical at first, wondering

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[23] The scholars who view John 21 as a secondary addition to the Gospel are numerous; e.g., see Brown, *John 13-21*, 1066-1085. For an argument that John 21 is an integral part of the original Gospel, see Paul S. Minear, "The Original Functions of John 21," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (March 1983): 85-98; O'Day, "Gospel of John," 854-855. For an argument that John 20 and 21 represent dual endings, see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Archive of Excess: John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure," in *Exploring the Gospel of John*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 240-252.

[24] Beasley-Murray, *John*, 399; cf. Howard-Brook, *John's Gospel*, 161: "The effect of this list is to present a scene that brings together diverse Christian traditions, a 'conference' consisting of seven—the number of completion/perfection—representatives of both apostolic and Johannine communities."

whether anything good can come out of Nazareth, but ends up saying, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of the Jews." He is the one Jesus characterizes as "an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." He is the model Israelite, and he uses thoroughly Jewish titles to articulate his belief in Jesus.[25] Then there is Thomas—not Thomas the doubter, but Thomas the realist, the pragmatist, stubborn in his loyalty and not easily convinced by hearsay. He is the one who said earlier, "Let us also go [to Judea] that we may die with him" (11:16), and was not afraid to admit that he did not know where Jesus was going and did not know the way (14:5). He also makes one of the highest confessions of faith in the Gospel, calling Jesus "my Lord and my God" (20:28). The sons of Zebedee are mentioned only here in the Gospel but we know from the other Gospels that they were fishermen, along with Peter. These seven diverse characters are with Jesus after his resurrection and comprise the body for whom Jesus prayed in John 17, "that they might be one."

The two most important characters in the chapter are Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. It is these two characters above all who convince me that John's vision of the church, the one body of believers, is made up of many members with different gifts and roles. Peter and the Beloved Disciple have been closely linked ever since the appearance of the latter at the last supper in chapter 13. Many scholars have noticed this pairing, even rivalry, of the two in the Gospel and speculate that this might reflect a situation of tension in the church between the apostolic leadership, originating in the Petrine tradition, and the Johannine community, rooted in the tradition of the Beloved Disciple.[26] I am more skeptical that the text can so easily be used as a window into a perceived conflict in the community behind the text. Nevertheless, it is true that Peter and the Beloved Disciple have distinct, complementary, and sometimes rival roles in the Gospel.

Prior to their appearance in John 21, Peter and the Beloved Disciple have appeared together on stage several times. At their farewell meal with Jesus in chapter 13 the disciple whom Jesus loved is reclining next to him. When Jesus

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[25] R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1983), 123.

[26] See, for example, the comments in Kysar, *Maverick Gospel*, 138; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 122; Smith, *John*, 374.

predicts someone will betray him, Peter signals to the Beloved Disciple to ask Jesus of whom he is speaking (13:24-25). The Beloved Disciple speaks for Peter, which is unusual since in other Gospels Peter is always the spokesperson for the rest of the disciples. In chapter 18 Simon Peter and another disciple follow Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. Now, the text does not specify here that the other disciple is the disciple whom Jesus loved, but there are reasons for thinking he might be.[27] The other disciple is known to the high priest and manages to get Peter entrance into the courtyard as well. The Beloved Disciple is not mentioned again in this scene but Peter three times denies that he is Jesus' disciple. Peter is absent from the crucifixion scene but the Beloved Disciple is not. He appears at the foot of the cross, where the dying Jesus entrusts his mother into the care of this Beloved Disciple and names him as her son. A new community built not on blood ties but on Jesus is thus formed around the Beloved Disciple.[28] In chapter 20 the Beloved Disciple and Peter both race to the empty tomb, but the Beloved Disciple outruns Peter and reaches the tomb first. Peter enters before the Beloved Disciple but it is the latter who "saw and believed." Finally, in chapter 21 the Beloved Disciple and Peter are both fishing. The Beloved Disciple recognizes Jesus first and says to Peter, "It is the Lord!" Upon hearing this, Peter jumps in and swims to shore, leaving the others to follow in the boat. The two always seem to be jostling for first place in the race to the end of the

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[27] For example, in 20:2 the Beloved Disciple is referred to as "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved," and the fact that elsewhere the Beloved Disciple is associated with Peter suggests to many scholars that here too the Evangelist intends readers to identify the unnamed disciple with the disciple Jesus loved. There is, however, considerable debate about the matter. Brown, *John 13-21*, 822-823, has a succinct discussion of the possibilities. Keener, *Gospel of John,* 1091, maintains that "the nearly uniform opposition of Judeans . . . earlier in the Gospel makes an identification with one of Jesus' Galilean followers more difficult to conceive" and "John would probably more plainly identify this disciple as the 'disciple Jesus loved' if he intended for that identification to be clear." Beasley-Murray, *John*, 324, and Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 181, are examples of scholars who support the connection between the Beloved Disciple and the unnamed disciple in 18:15.

[28] Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 503-504; R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel and Letters of John,* Interpreting Biblical Texts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 233-234.

Gospel. The remainder of John 21 focuses on these two figures as examples of how Jesus' work will be continued in the community after he leaves them.

John 21:15-19 focuses on Simon Peter. Three times Jesus asks Peter whether he loves him and three times Peter insists that surely Jesus knows that he loves him. Many commentators have noticed how this threefold declaration of love and loyalty counterbalances Peter's threefold betrayal earlier and functions as the restoration of Peter to a relationship of intimacy and trust with Jesus.[29] Jesus here calls Peter to put his love for Jesus into action by caring for his brothers and sisters. He is reminding Peter of what he said in 13:34-35: "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." Jesus' words also recall the Good Shepherd discourse in John 10. In John 21 Jesus charges Peter to follow in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd and to love his sheep as Jesus loved them. Jesus asks Peter to feed them, to shepherd them. The Good Shepherd's extravagant love for his sheep is expressed in his willingness even to lay down his life for them. So also Peter will lay down his life for the sheep that have been entrusted to his pastoral care. Verses 18-19 look ahead to the time when Peter will follow in Jesus' footsteps and die a martyr's death, glorifying God in his death as Jesus glorified God in his death. Peter's role, then, will be to express his love for Jesus by pastoring Jesus' flock and by laying down his life. This is what it means for Peter, and for many other disciples after Peter, to "follow Jesus" (v. 19).

But what of the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, who had been close to Jesus at the farewell meal, and who was following them as Jesus commissioned Peter for his future ministry? Peter's question in verse 21, "Lord, what about him?" must have echoed the questions of John's readers and perhaps ours as well. These two disciples who have been neck and neck in the last part of the Gospel—at the meal, the trial, the empty tomb, and the catch of fish—continue to vie for the readers' attention even now at the end.

Jesus' reply to Peter is reminiscent of what Aslan in C.S. Lewis' Narnia series often tells characters when they wonder about what might happen to another character: "Child, I am telling you your story, not hers. No one is told any story but their own."[30] Jesus responds to Peter's question about the Beloved Disciple by saying, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what

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[29] For example, Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 555; Keener, *Gospel of John*, 1235.

[30] C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (London: Lions, 1954), 158.

is that to you? Follow me!" (v. 22). The narrator then comments, "So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?' This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true" (21:22-24). This exchange reflects the importance of the Beloved Disciple for the Johannine community and implies that the Beloved Disciple has already died. What of *his* role and *his* ministry? The Beloved Disciple did not, like Peter, live out his love for Jesus by dying a martyr's death. Does that make his love any less? He is not commissioned to "feed the sheep" of the Good Shepherd. Does that invalidate his work? Jesus' rebuke of Peter's question and his reiteration of the command to "follow me" in verse 22 remind the reader that what is important is not how the two followers of Jesus compare but that each does the will of Jesus. The Beloved Disciple does have an important role, although one that is different from Peter's. The Beloved Disciple's task is to bear witness to Jesus through the passing on of the traditions about Jesus, the words he spoke and signs he did during his ministry. The Beloved Disciple's testimony is important because it will lead others to believe as well. It is also interesting that there is remarkable confluence between what the Beloved Disciple will do and what Jesus promises about the Paraclete. R. A. Culpepper summarizes as follows:

> The Paraclete was to remain with the disciples (14:7), teach them everything (14:26), remind the disciples of all that Jesus had said (14:26), declare what he has heard (16:13), and glorify Jesus. . . . (16:17). From all indications this is exactly what the Beloved Disciple has done. . . . He has taught, reminded, and borne witness. . . . He is the epitome of the ideal disciple. . . . He abides in Jesus' love, and the Paraclete works through him.[31]

The Beloved Disciple's role is not Simon Peter's role, but it is surely complementary.

So why is this significant in talking about "the Many?" Peter and the Beloved Disciple are both featured prominently in chapter 21 as a climax to their parallel stories in the narrative. They are very different in many respects,

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[31] Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 122-123.

and it is not difficult to detect a hint of competition—at the very least, a glimpse of one disciple looking over his shoulder to see how he measures up. One will be martyred; the other will remain for a long time yet. One is told to feed Jesus' sheep as an expression of his love; the other becomes a witness to Jesus by passing on the tradition so that others might believe.[32] They are one in their love for Jesus and in their commitment to follow. They have been made one by God through Jesus who gave his life for them and who sent the Paraclete to teach and comfort them in Jesus' absence. But they are different in how they follow Jesus. Each is to be about the business of discipleship in the way that Jesus has called him. No comparing, no measuring oneself against another to see how big or small one is.

This portrait of two different disciples, each with a distinctive calling, speaks eloquently to believers today, who too might be tempted to compare their own calling and gifts with those of other disciples. Some of us, like Peter, are called to lay down our lives for Jesus. I think of those brothers and sisters all over the world and throughout history who have given their lives for the sake of Jesus. But not all are called to martyrdom. Some of us are called to be pastors, to spend our lives nourishing and shepherding Jesus' flock. Some of us are called to follow Jesus by bearing witness to him in our words—by writing about him and by speaking publicly about his life, death, and resurrection. Some of us are called to live our love for Jesus in many small, ordinary, day-to-day ways that often go unnoticed. The one body of Christ has many diverse ways to show its love for Jesus and to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship. Are any more valued than the other? No. What is important is that each is doing the will of God as revealed in Jesus through the Holy Spirit.[33]

One other thing about John 21 is important to note here.[34] The chapter does not begin with Peter's call to martyrdom or a commission to feed Jesus'

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[32] As Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 121, nicely sums it up, "Peter will be a *martuj* (martyr); the Beloved Disciple will give true *marturia* (testimony)."

[33] This reading of John 21 and the respective missions of Peter and the Beloved Disciple is dependent on the work and insights of other scholars, such as O'Day, "Gospel of John," 864-865; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 417-418; and Beasley-Murray, *Gospel of Life*, 122; Howard-Brook, *John's Gospel*, 164-168; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 121-122.

[34] The following reflections are not solely my own, but draw heavily on O'Day, "Gospel of John," 864-865.

sheep or with a commendation of the Beloved Disciple's testimony. It begins with a breakfast hosted by the risen Jesus—gifts of bread and fish, generously given and graciously shared. It begins with Jesus revealing himself to his disciples once again in the midst of their daily lives and assuring them that he is indeed the Resurrection and the Life. Moreover, the gifts he gives are given to *all* the disciples, represented by this motley crew of seven, disciples who could be like you or me. No comparing, no competing among this one body of Christ—just glad partaking of Jesus' gifts in preparation for a discipleship that will be expressed in varied forms in the centuries to come.

Conclusion

So where have we come in our exploration of "the One" and "the Many" in the Gospel of John? Clearly John does not answer all our questions about why denominations do or do not matter, what the relationship should be between many different denominations and congregations within the one body of Christ, and what the structure of the church should be. What the Gospel of John does assure us is that Jesus has prayed for our unity and that we are one because we belong to Christ in God and because he has made us one through the work of his Son. It affirms that we are one as we continue to abide in Christ and bear fruit; that the Holy Spirit continues to teach us and unite us in Jesus' absence; and that we are united in our commitment to the work of the Father and Son, namely, to offer life and salvation to a world torn by division and conflict. It reminds us that in our common identity and in our love for each other we bear witness to Jesus and that in our common work we continue to glorify and reveal God as Jesus did.

But all this does not erase our differences nor hundreds of years of divisions. I said earlier that the Gospel of John does not speak to the matter of different congregations and denominations. It does, however, give us a glimpse into the diversity of characters and callings within the one body of disciples. And I don't think it does violence to the text to see in that varied body of disciples a representation of the diverse nature of the church today. Like the disciples we are each individually and as congregations and denominations called to different ministries. We each have different strengths and different gifts, whether stubborn realism like Thomas or quick insight like Nathaniel. We each have different callings, whether that be to feed Jesus' sheep, like Peter, or to be transmitters of the traditions about Jesus, like the

Beloved Disciple. We need not look over our shoulders to see if the other is doing something better but we must heed Jesus call to "follow me" and do his will, assured that other members of the one body are carrying out other aspects of God's work in the world. The Gospel of John calls us to repent of the ways in which we as one body continue to be unnecessarily torn and divided and to repent when we fail to hear our calling because we are chasing after other voices. And the Gospel of John calls us to rejoice in the fact that God in Christ has made us one and continues to sustain us as one body in the Holy Spirit with diverse gifts. Jesus speaks to us as he did to his disciples in John 15:11: "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

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Chapter Two

The Relevance of Paul's Eschatological Ecclesiology for Ecumenical Relations

Gordon Zerbe

The people of God is called to be today
what the world is called to be ultimately.[1]

Paul's writings provide a valuable resource for reflection on congregationalism and denominationalism. In the context of growing diversity and divergent streams within early Christianity,[2] Paul

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[1] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1992), ix.

[2] Space does not permit a thorough survey of the divergent streams within the emerging messianic movement, which in the time of Paul was still self-understood as a sub-unit (denomination) within the religio-political entity of Israel/Judaism (cf. Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22, where the Jesus Messianists are a "party" within the people of Israel). These streams or divisions (evident both between and within regions of Paul's work) were based, as today, both on social factors (broadly speaking: linguistic-ethnic-cultural, economic-class, and status-rank-legal factors) and on the impact of key personalities that embody or express these factors (Cephas, Apollos, James, Barnabas, Paul; cf. Antioch in relation to Jerusalem; Paul's Greek-speaking congregations in relation to the "saints in Judea;" the agitators and "men from James" in Galatians; the

emphatically stresses the world-wide unity of the community of the Messiah. But equally significant is Paul's accent on the future reconciliation between that elect community and the remainder of perishing humanity, within the scope of the reign of God. Foundational for both of these issues—that is, both intramural divergence and cross-mural distancing—is Paul's eschatological ecclesiology. Paul's understanding of the church is not just oriented to a christological past (life, death, resurrection) but just as crucially to the very goal (*telos*) of God's salvation for the entire created order—"the reign of God" made possible through the full presence and victory (*parousia*) of the Messiah (e.g., 1 Cor 15:24-28). Paul's ecclesiology, not just his soteriology, has a critical eschatological dimension—that is, a future-oriented, world-transformational horizon—and to overlook it is a serious misunderstanding.

Paul's Eschatological Ecclesiology

What, then, is Paul's "eschatological ecclesiology?" The ultimate *ekklēsia* (assembly) that Paul envisions is certainly not a notion of the heavenly congregation, past, present, and future. Nor is it some notion of the church

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super-apostles and their adherents in 2 Corinthians; rival preachers in Phil 1:15-18). Acts 6-8 also attests to divergent streams, that of Stephen and the "Hellenists" and those of Peter and James and the "Hebraists," including even more Torah-committed messianic Pharisees (cf. Acts 14:4; 21:20-21). That only the "Hellenists" were subject of the persecution in Acts 7-8 confirms that there were significant differences in their approach to the Torah and the temple, the immediate cause of the persecution. Subsequent to Paul's ministry, a Johannine stream can be distinguished (along with schismatics from it: 1 John 2:18-25; 4:1-6; 2 John 7), as can a Petrine stream (Matthew). While considerable diversity is evident from the beginning of the messianic movement, such that one must recognize polygenesis, what is especially difficult is to provide appropriate descriptive terms or adequate characterization of the various streams. For instance, the terms "Jewish Christianity" or "Hellenistic Christianity" are certainly problematic, and even the term "Christianity" is significantly anachronistic for Paul's time and for his theology. See, for example, Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 3rd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2006). While Paul takes pains to resolve emerging diversity and tension within the messianic movement itself, an equally crucial question for Paul is the growing "intramural" rift within Israel more generally, as a result of adherence and non-adherence to the Messiah.

invisible, and especially not the church universal as some remnant, a mere portion of those who are the subject of God's unfailing promises. Rather, it is the mediation of identity on the grounds of a universal hope of salvation through the Messiah. It is, as a consequence of the dynamic activity of God through the Messiah, the collapsing of the "portion"—the "remnant," the not-all—and its re-absorption into the "all." It is the process by which ultimately, as Paul puts it, "God will have mercy on all humanity" (Rom 11:32), and whereby "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).[3] The *telos* that Paul envisions is nothing short of the shattering of the boundaries by which fidelity and infidelity (believers and unbelievers) mark divisions among humanity, further to the shattering of the boundaries marked by ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender (Gal 3:28). Thus the *ekklēsia* that now exists, that exists in Paul's now, is entirely provisional, interim, and contingent—a mere proleptic or vanguard expression of what must obtain ultimately through God's ongoing love story with all creation. In other words, it is an entity which exists to lose itself. Ecclesiology in Paul is subject to a crucial tension point between the so-called "not yet" and the "already," a tension point that has been typically collapsed into the "already," just as the overall drama of messianic salvation has been spiritualized into the drama of the individual's pilgrimage to heaven, and/or else muted into a drama of salvation-history, in which the church understands itself as the climax of God's redemptive work (and not as sign and agent toward the ultimate reign of God).[4]

But this characterization may require some elaboration, lest it be perceived to represent some notion of liberal universalism. The issue has instead to do with coming to terms with Paul's powerful and passionate vision of the reign of God, God's counter-sovereignty, and the implications of that for seeing our own identity and vocation as adherents in fidelity to Messiah Jesus, relative to

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[3] Translations in this essay are the author's, unless identified as NRSV.

[4] For a consistent apocalyptic-eschatological framework for Paul's ecclesiology, see esp. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980): 135-181, 303-349. By contrast, some other interpreters treat "anthropology" or "soteriology," but not "ecclesiology" under the framework of the Pauline already-not yet; e.g., J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998): 461-492. The eschatological framework for Paul's ecclesiology is certainly a neglected theme in most treatments of biblical ecclesiology.

those who, on that very account, are currently perceived (or named) as unbelieving "enemies of God" (cf. Rom 5:10; 9:25; 11:28).[5]

The central framework that gives coherence to Paul's entire theological vocabulary and to his activist, missionizing, and organizational undertaking is his conviction of the imminent and inexorable arrival of the universal reign of God.[6] The underlying script in Paul's letters is the story of God's sovereign, imperial faithfulness from creation to re-creation, whereby God will soon triumph throughout creation, signalled by the resurrection of the Messiah (the "first-fruits"), himself victimized by the powers of darkness and death as operating in the framework of empire (1 Cor 2:6-8).[7] Whereas the creation was created good, it has suffered the entry of mysterious, created, yet rebellious powers that oppress God's creation (even as creation has also been subjected to its futility by God [Rom 8:20]). Among these disparate powers Paul includes Error (Sin), Death, Law, Satan, Rulers, and Authorities. But beginning with and through the Messiah, God is in the process of reclaiming all creation for God. Paul's script expresses this through the notion of the "age to come" versus the "age that now stands," a dualism that is at the same time

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[5] For an apocalyptic, "illiberal" reading of Paul over against the Western liberal tradition, see e.g., Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 24 and throughout; see also Doug Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003).

[6] On this reading of Paul's theology, see esp. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 143: "Only a consistent apocalyptic interpretation of Paul's thought is able to demonstrate its fundamental coherence." See also the defense of this understanding of Paul's theology in approach in Douglas Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T & T Clark, 2005); he calls this "pneumatologically participatory martyrological eschatology," over against justification by faith or salvation history models of Paul's theology. Below I draw language from my "The Politics of Paul: His Supposed Social Conservatism and the Impact of Postcolonial Readings," *Conrad Grebel Review* 21, no. 1 (2003): 88-90.

[7] For example, V. P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1968), 122: "Salvation" is "Paul's overall descriptive term for the final victory of God in the coming age, when the last enemy shall have been destroyed and God shall reign as the unchallenged Sovereign above all." In Paul's thought, "the future dimension of 'salvation'" has primacy.

cosmic (God vs. Satan, and their respective forces), anthropological (the conflict resides in each individual), historical (the conflict has a *telos*, a goal), epistemological (God's wisdom vs. worldly wisdom), and soteriological (in the sense that final salvation can only come through a dynamic intervention from the transcendent "outside"). In Paul's understanding, his own generation is on the verge of a cataclysmic world transformation (e.g., 1 Cor 7:26, 29, 31; 10:11; Rom 13:11-14), a salvation-drama that is not fundamentally world-ending or world-denying but world-transforming (e.g., Rom 8:18-25; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Col 1:20). It is a vision far more terrestrially next-worldly than vertically otherworldly, anticipating the goal not as disembodied individual immortality but as corporate re-embodiment in the context of a restored creation.[8] Final salvation in Paul does not entail the departure of the righteous from earth to heaven, but an ultimate merging of heaven and earth (another division overcome), so that God's imperial reign (now only supreme in heaven) will be universal.[9]

Within this framework, then, "the church is primarily the interim eschatological community that looks forward to the future of the coming reign of God. . . . [It] is the proleptic manifestation of the kingdom of God in history, . . . the beachhead of the new creation and the sign of the new age in the old world that is 'passing away' (1 Cor 7:29). . . . The true *ekklēsia* is a future eschatological reality that will only be realized when it comprises the whole people of Israel (Rom 11:25)."[10] An eschatological understanding of the church resolves not only the matter of its ethical character as an assembly of the regenerated (e.g., 1 Thess 3:12-13; Phil 1:6, 9-11; 1 Cor 1:8), but also that of its ultimate reconciliation with a restored creation, a creation now hostile to God and the Messiah (e.g., Rom 8:17-39; 11:1-36).

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[8] For example, for Paul resurrection is what affects a "people," not merely what happens to individuals.

[9] "Heaven" is a rare word in the undisputed writings of Paul (11 times, 16 times if Colossians is included), compared to the rest of the New Testament (273 times). "Heaven" is the source of deliverance (Rom 1:8; 2 Cor 5:2; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:16; cf. Rom 11:26), and the place where salvation is now reserved (Phil 3:20; Col 1:5; cf. Gal 4:26), until the time when it emerges with a renovated earth (e.g., Rom 8:18-25; cf. Rev 21); but it is not itself the final destination.

[10] Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 303, 313, 316.

Ultimate Salvation in Paul

There is a brief dramatic sequence of "final salvation" as envisioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28 that can provide some specificity to this generalized picture. It is a picture of the "end of the ages that has come upon us" (1 Cor 10:11), and more precisely an explication of the process by which "in [by] Messiah all [humanity] shall be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22).[11] First, the Messiah is made alive as "first-fruits," by being raised by God (cf. 15:20, 23a), then further "made alive" at his coming are "those who belong to [are of] Messiah."[12] Then there is a making alive by "the de-activation (rendering ineffective) of every rule, authority, and power," by which the Messiah will put all his enemies under his feet, concluding with Death itself (1 Cor 15:24-26). Finally, the culmination is the handing of the kingdom over to the Father, the subordination of the Messiah to God (cf. 1 Cor 2:23), so that "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:27-28).

The third part of the sequence, the question of the "powers," is especially pertinent here. English translations have traditionally used the word "destroy" to translate the verb *katargein* in this passage (e.g., NRSV and TNIV). But a more adequate rendering would be "de-activate" or "render ineffective."[13] The verb contains the same sort of ambiguity of our use of the English verb, to "pacify." Indeed, when one observes the imagery that Paul uses elsewhere of this part of the eschatological drama—that is, how the hostile powers of the cosmos are dealt with—there is a curious persistent tension: we find both images of conquest (and its attendant "pacification"), and of "transformation" or "reconciliation" (and its attendant "clemency").[14] And this tension

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[11] Cf. Paul's discussion in Rom 5:12-21.

[12] That is, their own resurrection/vindication; cf. Phil 3:10-11, 21; 1 Thess 4:13-18.

[13] For example, H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, and R. McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon, with a Revised Supplement*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Indeed, a quick survey of Paul's vocabulary yields a number of words that more specifically denote "destroy," ones which Paul appears to have avoided deliberately here: e.g., *olethros, apōleia, kataluō, phtheirō, apolummi, kathairesis, kathaireō, portheō*.

[14] For example, putting enemies under his feet: 1 Cor 15:25, from Ps 110:1; 8:7; cf. 1 Thess 5:1-11; Phil 2:9-11; 3:20-21; Rom 15:8-12; 16:20. For another expression of messianic sovereignty, see 1 Cor 10:26, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

corresponds with Paul's treatment of "salvation" both in negative terms (as a deliverance from judgement, condemnation, destruction, wrath, fiery purgation, and so on) and in positive terms as the total transformation of the cosmos and the human individual within it into the design that God originally intended.[15]

On the one hand, as an exhibition of the conquest or world-subjection imagery, we have Philippians 2:9-11; 3:20-21; Romans 15:8-12; 1 Corinthians 2:6-8; 15:24-28. On the other hand, as an exhibit of final reconciliation imagery in Paul, we have Romans 11:15, where the "reconciliation of the *kosmos*" is parallel to the coming of "life from the dead." Moreover, there is Romans 8:18-25, where the claim that all "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" (NRSV) is parallel to the hope of the "redemption of our bodies," and Colossians 1:19-20, where Paul claims that, in/by Messiah, God intends "to reconcile all things unto the Messiah, making peace by the blood of his cross, whether things on earth or in heaven."[16] Thus, Paul's language of "de-activating (*katargein*) the powers" signals not their "destruction" as such, but ultimately their transformation and reconciliation. A proper Pauline ecclesiology, then, must take into account the past messianic event of resurrection which inaugurates the "ends of the ages;" the eschatological vindication and perfection of those now allied and secure in the sphere of the Messiah; and God's eschatological deliverance to deal with all powers now opposed to the Messiah, including unbelief.

The Part (Remnant) and the All: Romans 11

Romans 11 is the crucial text which explores how the very make-up of the ecclesial community is itself transformed in this telic dynamic. This chapter is indeed the highpoint of Paul's argument in Romans, but it is also a most subversive text that the church has continued to mute.

Romans is most fundamentally a bold proclamation and defence of God's own fidelity: if God is not faithful to promises of old, all new messianic proclamation collapses into irrelevance. From beginning (1:2) to end (15:8-9) the centrality of God's promise is highlighted: these are promises both to

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[15] For example, Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 122-123.

[16] See also Eph 1:10, 22-23; 2:1-3:21; cf. Acts 3:21, *apokatastasis pantōn,* "re-establishment of the universe."

Israel and to all the nations, together the constructs that for Paul make up all humanity (e.g., 1:16-17). Thus Paul rests his case on the Scriptures, cited more frequently in chapters 9-11 than elsewhere in his letters. This crucial section concludes with the most astonishing claim: "God will have mercy on all humanity" (11:32). Despite all appearances to the disconfirmation of the promises, Paul's hope for the universal realization of God's promise is unwavering, just as Abraham resolutely expressed "hope upon hope" (Rom 4:18).

Romans 11 is especially designed to challenge the arrogance of new arrivals (11:18, 20, 25)—that is, those "grafted in" where others have been "cut off." Thus Paul emphasizes the provisionality of both grafting in (potential inclusion) and of cutting off (potential exclusion; 11:17-24). In effect, there can never be a Part that takes the place of the All. Only the Part that understands itself as Not-All is worthy of being secure in the role of that Part relative to the All.[17] More specifically, in Messiah's time and instrumentality

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[17] Note the explanation of the implications of Romans 11 by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). "[The remnant] is therefore neither the all, nor a part of the all, but the impossibility for the part and the all to coincide with themselves or with each other. *At a decisive instant, the elected people, every people, will necessarily situate itself as a remnant, as not all*" (55). "The remnant is precisely what prevents divisions from being exhaustive and excludes the parts and the all from the possibility of coinciding with themselves. The remnant is not so much the object of salvation as its instrument, that which properly makes salvation possible. . . . The remnant is therefore both an excess of the all with regard to the part, and of the part with regard to the all" (56). The remnant is thus never any self-assured "kind of numeric portion or substantial positive residue" (50), but rather a division "without ever reaching any final ground" (52), while still providing the means to that destination. "In the *telos*, when God will be 'all in all,' the messianic remnant will not harbour any particular privilege and will have exhausted its meaning in losing itself in the *plērōma* (the fullness)" (56).

Similarly Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. R. Bassier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). He argues that there can never be a contentment with any historical realization of the Pauline hope, nor with any preoccupation with a new identity apart from the hope for the universal. Paul's "clearest conviction is that the eventual figure of the Resurrection exceeds its real, contingent site, which is the community of believers such as it exists at the moment.

(11:26-27), and in God's mystery (11:25, 33-36) and grace (11:5-6; cf. 9:11, 16)—that is, not by any human willing or running (9:16) —the "remnant of Israel" will collapse into the salvation of "all Israel" (11:26), that is, into its "fullness" (or "wholeness," *plērōma*, 11:12). In the same way, the proclamation among the nations will become "the fullness of the nations" (11:25; cf. "wealth of the world, wealth of the nations," 11:12), nothing short of the "reconciliation of the world" and "life from the dead" (11:15). Corresponding to the messianic enthronement drama at the outset of the letter (1:3-4), this very theme of the world-wide (ecumenical) realization of Messiah's reign concludes the argument of the letter, through a litany of scriptural citation (15:10-12): "Rejoice, O nations, with his people [Israel]" (Deut 32:43); "Praise the Lord, all nations, and all the peoples praise him" (Ps 117:1); "The root of Jesse shall come, he who rises to rule the nations; in him shall the nations hope" (Isa 11:10). Any attempt to see Paul's language of fullness and universality as really only some mere portion (e.g., as a partial "full number" of willing or predetermined individuals) disregards the force of Paul's argument. Paul is not talking about individuals here; he is talking about corporate entities that together make up all humanity.

Romans 11 is perhaps one of the most telling texts for Paul's vision of messianic redemption. It is not easily discarded as some situational outburst; nor is it the conclusion of some theoretical discourse on predestination and free will. And even less does it express some residual emotional attachment to an ethnic heritage (Israel) that goes against the logic of the gospel. Rather, Paul here is at his most consistent logic. Indeed, it is crucial to unpack here Paul's fundamental logic, further to its moorings in the overall cosmic drama of God reclaiming all creation, and its specific foundation in Scripture. Four critical logics need to be identified.

First, Romans 11 expresses the movement from enmity to being loved. Romans 9-11 is one of the most profound discourses on enemy love in the New Testament, even as Paul nowhere explicitly says "love your enemies."[18]

The work of love is still before us; the empire is vast. . . . Paul's universalism will not allow the content of hope to be a privilege accorded to the faithful who happen to be living now. It is inappropriate to make distributive justice [which focuses on the punishment of the wicked] the referent of hope" (95).

[18] Thus, Romans 11 is also a crucial build-up toward Romans 12:14-21.

Paul takes up this logic specifically in Romans 11. Those "cut off" on account of their "infidelity" are from a certain vantage point certainly "enemies of God." But Paul reminds his predominantly and increasingly arrogant (and supersessionist) Gentile readers that this was "for your sake," in a grand drama of mutual interdependence and asymmetric reciprocity (11:28-32; cf. Rom 15:22-33). The outcome or counterpart of this enmity is that they are "beloved according to election" (11:28). This is the very same logic expressed earlier in the letter, notably in Romans 5:6-11 ("while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God"),[19] and more proximately in 9:25-26, where Paul describes the counterpart movement of those nations (Gentiles) who were "not beloved" (that is, enemies) into the realm of being "the beloved." It is the movement from being "not my people" into being designated "my people," indeed, to becoming "sons [and daughters] of the living God," at the very moment when the very status of the apparently elected appeared to be in complete jeopardy (9:27-29). The fundamental logic is that God wills to move enemies into the status of the beloved, whether the nations or Israel.[20]

Second, also foundational to Paul's universal claim is that no human infidelity can compromise God's fidelity, or the working out of God's intention: "What if some were unfaithful? Does their infidelity render ineffective (*katargein*, de-activate) the fidelity of God? By no means!" (3:3-4). Thus, let God be true if every human is false, and let God be just if every human is unjust (3:4-8). While Romans 3:1-8 refers especially to Israel, Paul later uses similar language of God's promise toward the nations: no imposition of Law can be allowed to "render ineffective (*katargein*, de-activate) the promise" (4:14-15, 17-18). Nothing can compromise the covenant fidelity and justice of God relative to the promises both to Israel (3:1-4; 11:25-29) and to the nations (e.g., 15:7-13), for their final and interdependent salvation is God's work of universal restoration.[21]

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[19] On the imagery of "reconciliation," see further Rom 5:6-11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18-21; Col 1:20.

[20] Note also the imagery of rejection and casting off in relation to inclusion and reception in Rom 11:11-14.

[21] At the same time, the animation of human fidelity-faith is certainly crucial in Paul, though based on the prototypical fidelity of the Messiah himself; e.g., Rom 1:16-17; 3:21-26; 5:12-21; 10:5-21; 11:22-23. For analysis of these texts, see esp. John E. Toews, *Romans*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004).

Thirdly, we have the interplay of the polarity of wrath and mercy in the divine economy of salvation, which in Paul entails an asymmetric economy of restorative justice, in which mercy transfigures distributive justice. This interplay can hardly be fully treated in short order.[22] But this theme is crucial in the present text, providing both the prelude to Paul's final claim of universal, interdependent salvation for Israel and the nations (11:17-24) and the concluding explication (11:30-32), the final statement of which is that God's mercy ultimately overcomes all human disobedience. This dynamic is also introduced at most critical junctures earlier in the letter. The very logic of salvation now in Messiah is that it represents a demonstration of God's justice (that is, covenant fidelity) precisely as an exhibition of God's mercy toward previously committed sins, namely all those sins that were the subject of the condemning excoriation in Romans 1:18-3:20. The crux of the argument is that, while the "whole world" is liable to the threatening wrath of God (3:19-20), God has acted in a way that this wrath has been simply averted, "passed over" (3:21-26). It is only on that basis that anyone has any claim to status in the messianically reconstituted people of God.

This logic is repeated in Romans 9:19-26, a more direct counterpart to Romans 11. God is God insofar as it is completely in God's domain to show mercy instead of wrath: "What if God, while willing to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much forbearance the vessels of wrath made [i.e., destined] for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory" (11:22-23). As such, God's mercy shatters any notion of a predictable economy of salvation based on distributive justice. It is in the very being and prerogative of God that humans simply cannot presume on God, whether God's mercy, in regard to any claims of insider status (2:4), or God's justice, relative to any certainty about outsider destiny (3:21-26; 8:19-23; 11:22-24, 30-32; 12:17-21).

Finally, we have the logic of imperial world-wide sovereignty. Romans 11, which challenges any final answer being limited to a partial remnant, is founded on a logic of the Messiah as God's agent of universal, counter-imperial, cosmic sovereignty. Here, we return to that theme of God's ultimate "de-activation of all rule, authority, and power" through the Messiah (1 Cor

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[22] See further below, footnote 24.

15:24), as expressed most clearly in Philippians 2:9-11: "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acclaim, Lord Jesus Messiah, to the glory of God the Father." Naturally, the query is immediately: Well, is this acclaim coerced or voluntary? And aren't the true believers those that acclaim Jesus voluntarily? With this text, we are back to the tensive imagery between ultimate messianic victory as conquest, and ultimate deliverance as reconciliation and transformation. This imagery is indeed difficult for those of us immersed in liberal democratic ideology; that is, an approach which puts all the eggs on the side of individual choice, the autonomous individual. So the best way to unpack this imagery is in direct reference to imperial ideology, which this very proclamation uses in order to subvert or counter it.

Paul's imagery of the universal reign of the Messiah is strikingly similar in some respects (as its anti-type) to the imperial rhetoric of Octavian (Caesar Augustus) himself, as contained in the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti (RG)*, "the mighty deeds of divine Augustus."[23] Augustus composed these memoirs to be released and published at his death, mounted on bronze tablets in front of his mausoleum, and which, by the time of Paul, could be found in multilingual translations broadcast from imperial temples across the empire, the most complete version surviving in Ancyra, the then capital of Galatia. A good portion of the *Res Gestae* concerns the account by which Augustus "subjected the whole world to the sovereignty of the Roman people" (*RG*, 1; cf. Phil 3:21), through divinely-appointed and benevolent rule, and it highlights the concomitant honours that Octavian received as a bringer of such salvation and "peace." The whole rehearsal builds to the climax that confirms the true character of Augustus as exemplifying the virtues of "valour, clemency, justice, and piety" (*RG*, 34). And his acts are meant to demonstrate that during his principate "other nations experienced the faith [fidelity; L., *fides*, Gk., *pistis*] of the Roman people" (*RG*, 32). That is, the other nations were not simply forced to make oaths of allegiance (e.g., *RG*, 25); rather, they voluntarily submitted in loyalty (faith) to the rule of Romans through the Romans' own demonstration

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[23] Available in the public domain, in Latin, Greek, and English translation. See "Monumentum Ancyranum" from the Loeb Classical Library at LacusCurtius. http://www.penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Augustus/Res_Gestae/home.html.

of "fidelity" (faith) and friendship, through the agency of Augustus himself. Finally, Augustus makes sure to highlight that he was only acting on behalf of the Roman people and Senate, not for his own personal aggrandizement: following his conquest and pacification of the world, he "transferred the republic from my own power to the will of the Senate and the Roman people," on the basis of which he was given the quasi-divine name of "Augustus" (*RG*, 34; cf. 1 Cor 15:24-28; Phil 2:9-11).

This parallel does not merely show how Paul appropriates imperial rhetoric in his messianic proclamation that nullifies (de-activates) any contrary sovereignty. More importantly and specific to the argument here, this parallel illustrates the manner in which the imperial rhetoric, of which Paul is here a species, is not preoccupied with any final distinction between submission that is purely voluntary or submission that emerges out of demonstration of power (Rom 1:3-4; 11:25-27; 15:8-12; Phil 2:9-11; 3:20-21). In either case, the submission (loyalty, faith) is real, and the effect is "peace," resulting in the universal inclusion of peoples within the inhabited world (*oikoumenē*). The point, here, is that no ecclesial vanguard of those who are "on board" with the bringer of universal rule can claim that all outsiders (e.g., the current disloyal or pockets of resistance) are forever lost. Rather, the true deliverer, whether the Imperator or the Messiah, must embrace and reconcile the "whole world" in the saved dominion. Universal sovereignty actualizes universal acclamation and loyalty-faith. Nevertheless, while both the imperial and the messianic aim toward universality, what most significantly distinguishes imperial from messianic rule is the different modality of Messiah's effective rule: the latter involves the embrace of the path of lowliness and weakness, indeed that of the cross, an ironic twist on the prime mechanism of imperial terror (Phil 2:5-11; 3:10-11, 20-21); the operation of enemy love, not self-promoting benevolence and pacification by ruthless conquest; and the primacy of mercy over justice, of restorative justice over distributive justice.

To summarize, then, Paul's eschatological ecclesiology involves a *telos* (goal) in which the provisional and interim Part (Remnant) collapses into the realization of the All, as expressed in the binary "fullness of the nations" and "all Israel." This vision of universal restoration is a subset of Paul's broader vision of final cosmic restoration through the Messiah, and is founded on God's promises in Scripture which cannot be "de-activated" ("rendered

ineffective"), and more particularly on the logics of enemies transformed into becoming the beloved; divine fidelity as more persistent than human infidelity; an asymmetrical economy of restorative justice, in which mercy transfigures distributive justice; and the universal sovereignty and reconciling work of the Messiah.

The Theme of Wrath, Condemnation, Destruction on the Unfaithful (Unbelievers)

No doubt the rejoinder will come that this presentation does not take into adequate account Paul's expectation of judgement, wrath, condemnation, or destruction upon the "non-believer"—that is, expressions of what appears to enact the simple logic of distributive justice (albeit transformed from one based on works to one based on "belief"). Space does not permit a full discussion of this matter.[24] Suffice it to say that there are indeed points of

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[24] For the theme of eschatological recompense in Paul (e.g., using terms such as wrath, condemnation, judgement, perishing, destruction; day of the Lord; *parousia* of Messiah) note: (a) the reality/principle of divine wrath/judgement in response to injustice (Rom 1:18-3:20 [day of wrath, 2:5-16]; 5:16, 18; vessels of wrath destined for destruction, Rom 9:22; Col 3:5-6 [cf. transformed in Eph 5:6 to focus on "upon the sons of disobedience"]), which operates via Law (Rom 4:15; 5:20;) [cf. ministry of condemnation, 2 Cor 3:9]); (b) references to the "day of the Lord" or "*parousia* of Messiah" as a time of final judgement, used as warning, assurance, or theodicy/vindication: "day" (Rom 2:5, 16; 13:12; 1 Cor 1:8; 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess 5:2, 4 [cf. 2 Thess 1:10; 2:2, 3]); "parousia" (1 Cor 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 3:13; 4:15; 5:23 [cf. 2 Thess 2:1, 8]); (c) those destined/liable for wrath, destruction, those perishing (1 Cor 1:18 [cf. 2:6-8]; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:3); those who will meet destruction (Phil 3:19 [*apōleia*]; 1 Thess 5:3 [*olethros*] [not Phil 1:28, which refers to outsiders' expectation of the church's demise]); reference to the condemnation of the world (1 Cor 11:32 [cf. 2 Thess 1:5-12; 2:3, 8, 10, 12]); (d) salvation as deliverance from wrath, condemnation (1 Thess 1:10; 5:9-10; Rom 5:9, 16, 18; 8:1-4); (e) judgement of those now "in Messiah," as threats, warnings (e.g., Rom 14:10-12; 2 Cor 5:10; 1 Cor 3:10-15, 16-17; 4:1-5; 10:1-12; 11:30-34; for purgation, see 1 Cor 3:12-15; 5:3-5); (f) deferring judgement of "outsiders" to God (1 Cor 5:12-13; Rom 12:17-21; Phil 4:5); (g) believers to participate in judgement of "world" and "angels" (1 Cor 6:2-3); (h) oracles of judgement on some (believers or not: (Rom 3:8; Gal 1:8-9; 2:11; 5:10-12; 2 Cor 11:15; Phil 3:19); (i) divine recompense in the present age (e.g., Rom 1:18-32; 13:2-5; 1 Thess 2:16; 1 Cor 11:30-32). What is noteworthy is that the most assured, vivid, and indeed

tension in Paul's rhetoric.[25] Perhaps one can let the interplay stand, although articulated in a carefully nuanced way. On the one hand, according to Paul, no one (neither the unbeliever nor the believer, the just or the unjust) can presume on God's mercy (Rom 2:4)—the threat or prospect of wrath or destruction is real; there are real consequences. On the other hand, and this is the side I am highlighting in this essay, no one can calculate or predict the final outcome of God's justice—the potential of mercy, of the forbearing, long-suffering love of the enemy, can never be exhausted.

It should also be emphasized that Paul's universal hope in no way spells any diminution in the ongoing and active proclamation of the gospel by the church. In effect, here we are also left with an ongoing tension. The active proclamation of the Messiah, toward the animation of loyalty-belief both within and outside the church, must continue, along with the church's witness to the powers-that-be with the uncompromising claims of messianic sovereignty. This active proclamation will necessarily involve gestures of separation and dissent, insofar as the gospel is inherently counter-imperial. But meanwhile, the church must recognize that any division or boundary

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vindictive statements of wrath and condemnation on outsiders appear in deutero-Pauline writings (esp. 2 Thess 2:5-12; cf. Eph 5:6). One might say in general that this broad theme in Paul reflects: (a) the conviction that God wills the good, that which is just, on account of God's holiness; and (b) the conviction that all people are ultimately and individually accountable to God for their actions. Paul speculates neither on the certainty of any final judgement, nor on the specifics of any rewards or punishments, in contrast to later New Testament and Christian writers. Paul's purpose throughout is hortatory, that is, to encourage even stronger fidelity. See e.g., Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 120-122.

[25] It is crucial, however, to try to distinguish in Paul between argument and conviction; this is not always easy. It is also important to discern the particular function of statements in this area; that is, are they meant to warn, to console, to assure, to provide a theodicy, etc.? Moreover, it can also be noted that Paul is not overly preoccupied with the fate of the unbeliever (noted, e.g., by Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 95), quite in contrast to later writers in the New Testament and beyond. Furthermore, Paul can indeed say things to some audiences quite in tension with things said to other auditors. Paul's letters are interventions that certainly display a theological coherence; but they are not products of systematic, abstract theologizing that smooths out all points of tension. The point is that clearly not all statements have the same probative force for Christian theology.

originating from that very proclamation is not one for us to calculate with any finality, but is rather one whose resolution toward the animation of universal loyalty, in response to universal messianic merciful sovereignty, is to be left in God's hands. This allows no room either for any final ecclesial self-assurance or for any confidence in a presumed destiny of the other, the enemy.[26]

Situating Paul in the New Testament

Paul is the only New Testament witness with such a profoundly universal and unwavering hope for God's redemptive work through the Messiah. Paul stands at a critical juncture. As the earliest New Testament writer, he stands at a point before the church comes to terms with the non-fulfilment of the vision, the non-event of the *parousia*. Later the church accommodates by, in effect, lowering (or delaying) expectations. Very soon after Paul, in a process already evident in some of the later writings of the New Testament, the church increasingly adopted the premise of an economy of distributive justice, seeing itself (in its current formation) as the apex of God's plan. Its economy of distributive justice, along with an economy of scarcity (by which someone's loss helps to magnify someone's sense of gain), became the confirmation and legitimation of its own self-assured reality. Paul, however, stands at a point before the emerging institutional church routinizes itself as the thing in itself, which, granted, took place in the wake of hard practical realities (namely, extensive and persistent unbelief, not to mention severe persecution). But Paul is fiercely combative against any consequential form of supersessionism, and ultimately refuses a final identity-definition and self-understanding based on the loss of hope, based on someone else's misstep.[27] "In hope upon hope he believed" (Rom 4:18), as did Abraham, expecting nothing less than a miracle ("the mystery" of Rom 11:25; cf. 11:33-36). As a result, he pens Romans 9-11 with the deepest of anguish and sorrow, claiming that he himself would rather be "cut off" and be "accursed" (Rom 9:1-3) than for God's program of "(re)grafting in" toward the reconciliation of the *kosmos*, the fullness of the all,

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[26] See the impressive treatment of Paul's ecclesiology, especially of the church's groaning along with the rest of creation in anticipation of "the apocalypse of God's love which conquers all the powers of separation," in the work of Baptist Doug Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals*, 180 and throughout.

[27] On Paul's resistance to supersessionism, see ibid., 151-207.

be left with a final mere portion. For Paul, grief is the appropriate posture during the "not yet" when hostile unbelief still challenges the Messiah's universal reign and thus divides humanity.[28]

Implications for a Believers Church Self-Understanding

Paul's ecclesial vision is nothing less than an ecumenical one—ecumenical in the sense that it concerns the reconciliation of the "*oikoumenē*," the entire inhabited world, under the sovereign lordship of the Messiah. Thus it is an ecumenicity that shatters even the boundaries of those who are currently believers and non-believers. Paul's ecumenicity, his global universalism, then, challenges any contentment with a final diminution of the messianic into a mere part, a subset—that is, into any final form of "denominationalism." Naturally, this ecumenicity also challenges any retreat to "congregationalism," although that matter is perhaps better addressed with Pauline texts other than those dealt with in this paper.[29] Paul's understanding of messianic sovereignty means that universality mediates identity, which fundamentally questions the finality of any partitive identity formation (e.g., I am of Paul, Apollos, Cephas, Christ; cf. 1 Cor 1:12; 3:21-23).[30] In the current post-denominational reality (which unfortunately is not a function of a Pauline universalism, but rather its opposite, namely congregationalism and regionalism, including nationalism and individualism), it may in fact become a necessity or reality that networks of "believers," or transplants of the Anabaptist impulse, will be found across and beyond denominations.

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[28] On the notion that the divide between Christianity and Judaism "did not have to be," see e.g., John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[29] For instance, 1 Corinthians, which has been described as "one great fugue around the single word *pan* [all]," in Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 1. Paul's internationalism and his emphasis on corporate unity relative to Corinthian congregationalism, localism, and individualism is evident from the outset (e.g., 1:2, 9; 4:6-7, 17; 7:17; 11:16; 12:1-13; 16:1-4, 15, 19). Romans 15:7-33 (the "collection," cf. Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9) is also a crucial text for Paul's vision of a globally united church.

[30] This also suggests that we can never rest content with a retreat to any so-called tradition-based rationality and its attendant identitarianism, by which one implicitly posits that you must be "X" to understand and justify "X-ness."

This argument might also mean that one ought to raise the question as to whether the term "Believers Church" is still the best way to carry the "concept." This issue might be raised in connection with other Pauline themes, in particular the character of belief itself as "loyalty" and "fidelity," and its consequential expression with the gesture of separation from the realities of empire. A generation ago it was felt that terms such as "free church" or "dissenters" or "non-conformists" were not well-suited for liberal democracies where there is a clear separation of church and state; thus the term, Believers Church, became the preferred way to express the concept that was once foundational to a family of denominations.[31] But in a context where "belief" is increasingly a private matter, but in symbiotic co-dependency with patriotic allegiance to a liberal democratic state, the term, Believers Church, increasingly lacks meaning. Less important than a focus on a mechanism for entry will be the matter of fundamental messianic allegiance and fidelity (what Paul especially means with the word *pistis*), along with its gesture of dissent or non-conformity (relative to any other dominion, spiritual or imperial). But that very gesture of separation will ultimately need to be accompanied by an equal passion for the hope in the final realization of messianic sovereignty, in the mode of cross-oriented humility, by which current partitions will give way to universal acclaim in the lordship of the Messiah, to the glory of God.

Paul's ecumenical hope offers a challenge to any arrogance or complacency in the formation of a part that is short of the telic vision. That is, it questions any ecclesial formation that does not see itself as provisional or contingent relative to the reign of God, both spatially and temporally. The reign of God is both spatially and temporally not limited to its current expression in any bounded group of the faithful. Moreover, Paul's eschatological ecclesiology means that a messianic citizen is by consequence a global citizen, not just in the resistance to any current national sovereignty, but also in the hope that messianic sovereignty may be actualized globally, animating loyalty among all humanity and reconciling all creation.

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[31] For example, D. Durnbaugh, "Believers Church," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1987); http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B4458.html (accessed 10 June 2008).

Part II

DYNAMICS OF DENOMINATIONALISM

Chapter Three

Life in a Muddy World: Historical and Theological Reflections on Denominationalism

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Bruce L. Guenther

For the past seven years I have been one of the speakers at a national Mennonite Brethren event designed to introduce and orient new pastors from across the country to the denomination. My task has been to tell the Mennonite Brethren story in a way that both informs new leaders about the experience and priorities of this group of Christians, and invites them to become participants in this ongoing story. In addition, for the past six years I have been a member of the board responsible for conducting licensing/credentialing interviews on behalf of the Mennonite Brethren Conference in British Columbia. Through these roles I have met a significant percentage of the pastors who are being employed by our denomination. Many, like I, come into the Mennonite Brethren world with experience in multiple denominations. With remarkable regularity, in some form or another, two kinds of questions inevitably emerge: first, "Do I have to be a pacifist in order to become Mennonite Brethren?" and second, "How Mennonite do I really need to be? Are Mennonite Brethren distinctives optional?" The questions are generally posed not as a direct challenge, but as

honest queries. The queries about denominationalism and its relevance within the twenty-first century are important and have the potential for challenging the very existence of the denomination. On many occasions I have heard denominational leaders use a range of pragmatic and functional reasons for explaining the importance of denominational loyalty and supporting denominational initiatives. For example, "We can do more by pooling resources; there is greater efficiency in working together; and it is good for congregations to be part of a larger structure where there is a greater degree of accountability."[1] All of these reasons are plausible and even compelling, but beg the question of whether pragmatic reasons alone are adequate for defining denominational identity and purpose. Is it possible to offer a theological rationale for why denominations matter? The search for answers to these questions precipitate the following historical reflections on denominationalism.[2] This essay offers first a review of some contemporary perceptions and responses to denominationalism and denominational historiography; second, it uses a brief historical overview to trace how denominationalism came to be, with special attention to some of the theological transitions that made denominationalism a reality; and third, the essay concludes with a specific look at the work of Jeremiah Burroughs, one of the first persons to articulate the so-called "denominational principle." These

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[1] The question arises in a variety of places within the denomination; for another example, see "One very long staff meeting," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (16 December 2005), 10-11. BC Mennonite Brethren Conference staff travelled throughout the province to discuss the question, "Why do we belong to the MB Conference?" The answer: "Belonging provides common vision and mutual accountability, and it reminds us that every part is needed and that together we can accomplish more."

[2] The term "denomination" first appeared in the English language during the fourteenth century to describe the action of naming something. It referred to a characteristic or qualifying name given to a thing or class of things. During the 1640s it was used by John Goodwin in a more technical way to denote a particular religious group, but such usage did not become common until a century later. According to Winthrop Hudson, "the earlier equivalent of the word 'denomination,' which was used by the seventeenth century divines, was the word 'way,'" that is, the "Episcopal Way," the "Presbyterian Way," etc. (*Oxford English Dictionary*; and Winthrop Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity: A Seventeenth-Century Conception," *Church History* 24, no. 1 [March 1955]: 48).

historical reflections are intended to assist in building a foundation for a more fully-orbed theological response to denominationalism.

Denominationalism's Bad Reputation

A reality that one encounters quickly when examining the literature on denominationalism (a rather limited body of literature, one might add) is the bad reputation that denominationalism has acquired in some circles. Russell Richey, an American scholar who for several decades has led the way in studying North American denominationalism, describes how "slurs on the denomination and denominationalism recur throughout religious literature, made as though they were so self-evident as to require no elaboration."[3] The poor reputation, which denominationalism has acquired (sometimes for good reason), makes articulating a theological foundation for it a daunting challenge.

Few have offered a stronger condemnation of denominationalism in the twentieth century than H. Richard Niebuhr, whose description of denominations in the 1920s during the apex of the ecumenical movement set the tone: denominations are "emblems of the victory of world over church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the church's sanction of the divisiveness which the church's gospel condemns. . . . Denominational Christianity, that is a Christianity which surrenders its leadership to the social forces of national and economic life, offers no hope to the divided world."[4] Many accepted Niebuhr's assessment that denominationalism was essentially "secular" in character and represented "the moral failure of Christianity."[5]

This assault on denominationalism received support from other theologians, the most notable recent example being the late Lesslie Newbigin, who took exception to a famous essay written in 1955 by Winthrop Hudson. Hudson's essay, entitled, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity,"

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[3] "Foreword," in Russell E. Richey, ed., *Denominationalism* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1977), 9.

[4] H. Richard Niebuhr, *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Hamden, CT: The Shoe String Press, 1954), 275.

[5] Ibid., 25. Niebuhr described denominations as an "accommodation of religion to the caste system," and attributed denominationalism largely to the impact of economic factors (25-26).

outlined four basic affirmations of denominationalism in America, and served as the springboard for Newbigin to launch his own tirade against denominationalism. According to Newbigin, denominationalism

> is the form that religion takes in a culture controlled by the ideology of the Enlightenment. It is the social form in which the privatization of religion is expressed. As Thomas Luckman says, "Once religion is defined as a private affair the individual may choose from the assortment of ultimate meanings as he sees fit." The denomination provides shelter for those who have made the same choice. It is thus in principle unable to confront the state and society with the claim with which Jesus confronted Pilate—the claim of the truth. It is not, in any biblical sense, the church.[6]

Even all the "denominations linked together in some kind of federal unity or 'reconciled diversity' cannot be the agents of a missionary confrontation" with culture, writes Newbigin, "for the simple reason that they are themselves the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual surrender to the ideology of [western] culture."[7] A genuinely ecumenical movement would, for Newbigin, include restoring the "face of the Catholic Church."

The writing of denominational history has also become unpopular among scholars of religion.[8] In the academy, the search for rubrics broad enough to include all expressions of spirituality, along with a preference for analytical approaches, and the trend towards studies of pan-denominational phenomena (e.g., evangelicalism and gender), has weakened an interest in using

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[6] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 145. Newbigin objects to the almost euphoric celebration by some of denominationalism as "the great gift of North American Christianity to the universal church" (144). However, his ecumenical vision leads him to misrepresent Hudson's statement that most denominations do not claim to represent the whole body of Christ as meaning that "denominations do not claim to be part of the church in the sense in which the word is used in the New Testament" (144-145). Newbigin does not account adequately for the way ecclesiatical forms are of necessity shaped by culture.

[7] Ibid., 146.

[8] For a fuller discussion, see Bruce L. Guenther, "'From the Edge of Oblivion:' Reflections on Evangelical Protestant Denominational Historiography in Canada," *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (2008): 153-174.

denomination as a category of analysis. Scholars of religion have, in recent decades, successfully demonstrated the multidisciplinary relevance of religion for understanding human experience and events. To study specific denominations sounds to many like a regressive attempt to move the study of Christianity back to a former era when "church history" often meant the defense and promotion of a particular tradition. As a result, denominations have become almost invisible within scholarly studies of Christianity in North American Canada.[9]

Making matters worse is the fact that many denominational histories are poorly written works of triumphalistic hagiography that are long on details, but short on interpretation. Such histories are often an invaluable source of information, to be sure, but they seldom offer answers to critical questions or situate a denominational story within larger social-cultural, national, or even theological trends. All of these factors have left denominational history, in the words of Henry Bowden, on the edge of historiographical oblivion.[10] (A notable exception in the large desert of denominational historiography is the work done by several Mennonite denominations and, to a lesser extent, several Baptist denominations.)

Interest in denominationalism has diminished still further as loyalty to institutions, including religious institutions, has waned during the latter half of the twentieth century. Mennonite Brethren leaders are not alone in noting the growing number of individuals (and congregations) who no longer

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[9] There are some notable exceptions: worthy of mention is the Denominations in America series edited by Henry Bowden and published by Greenwood Press. The efforts of Greenwood have been augmented by scholars such as Edith Blumhofer (*Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* [Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993]), and Grant Wacker (*Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001]), whose work on American Pentecostals serve as superb examples of the best kind of denominational histories. A Lilly Endowment-funded conference organized by Russell Richey (Duke University) in the early 1990s resulted in a provocative collection of essays highlighting the need to recover denominational stories (Russell Richey and Bruce Robert Mullin, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretative Essays* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994]).

[10] Henry Bowden, "The Death and Rebirth of Denominational History," in Richey and Mullin, eds., *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 17.

consider the maintenance of denominational structures and institutions as necessary or relevant.[11] Denominational leaders often feel as if they are being treated like a parachurch organization, and must compete with them for the loyalty and participation of their own members.[12] It is not uncommon to meet "denominational nomads," that is, people who have been part of congregations belonging to a variety of denominations. I routinely meet students in the seminary in which I teach who have been active in half a dozen (or more) denominations. Some of this can be attributed to the geographical mobility of people who find themselves in a community that does not have a congregation belonging to a denomination of which they were previously a part. But it is also, as the work of Reginald Bibby has shown, the result of a phenomenon he has called "religion a la carte," that is, treating religious practices, doctrines, and denominations as a consumer product.[13] For many, denominational identity is, at best, a secondary consideration when finding a church: church-goers routinely use their experience as consumers to "shop" for a church in reasonable geographic proximity that will meet their "needs."

Despite the difficulties associated with denominationalism, it is worth noting that a growing number of voices are beginning to question the widespread and casual disregard for denominations.[14] I believe it is possible

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[11] See, for example, Marvin Hein, "Retrieving the Conference 'Glue,'" *Direction* 11 (July 1982): 12-19. The decline in loyalty to some Mennonite denominations in Canada has been exacerbated by the fusion of a Dutch/Swiss/German/Russian ethnic composite with denominational identity. Many have been repulsed by the way some Mennonite denominations have nurtured a singular Dutch/Swiss/German/Russian ethnic association, and made all others feel like second-class citizens.

[12] I am indebted to Terrance Tiessen for his observation that the more congregational in polity, the more likely a congregation will be to treat its denominational structure like a parachurch organization.

[13] Reginald Bibby, *Fragmented Gods: The Poverty and Potential of Religion in Canada* (Toronto, ON: Irwin Publishing, 1987), 80. In an insightful critique, Vincent Miller goes further by arguing that consumerism has also resulted in the commodification and distribution of elements of religious traditions (Vincent Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* [New York: Continuum, 2004]).

[14] See for example, Adair T. Lummis, "Brand Name Identity in a Post-Denominational Age: Regional Leaders' Perspectives on Its Importance for Churches,"

(and necessary) to articulate a response to denominationalism that avoids the divisiveness, elitism, and exclusivity of the past; that moves beyond a utilitarian pragmatism; and that challenges the cavalier and ahistoric pronouncements of the arrival of a post-denominational era, and the individualistic consumerism of some Christians in the present. I agree with Mark Shaw who writes that "denominationalism is not beyond redemption. Nor do I believe that it is the real cause of the church's disunity."[15]

The Historical Evolution of Denominationalism

Helpful for a better understanding of denominationalism is a closer look at questions such as: How did denominations come to be? What gave rise to the present-day proliferation of denominations? What theological shifts accompanied, and perhaps even facilitated, the emergence of denominations? A brief historical overview that highlights answers to these questions will offer insights that contribute to the construction of a theology of denominationalism.

The sixteenth-century Reformation era set in motion possibilities that had, from the earliest centuries in the history of the church, been considered anathema and unthinkable. The Nicene Creed spelled out the four descriptive and fundamental "marks" of the church—one, holy, catholic, apostolic. Oneness had for centuries been understood to mean that all congregations ought to be united as part of a single ecclesiastical entity. Disunity and schism were considered among the most serious offences, comparable only to heresy.

The fragmentation of the Roman Catholic Church raised a fundamental theological question: What is (and where is) the "true" church? Protestants

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unpublished paper presented to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Columbus, Ohio, October 2001; Alfred Neufeld, "Shaping Christian Higher Education for Church Ministry and Service," *Direction* 36 (Fall 2007): 162, 168; David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman, eds., *Church, Identity, and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); and John D. Roth, "Boundaries and Bridges: Do Denominations Matter?" Convocation address at Goshen College, 12 February 2008; http://www.goshen.edu/news/-pressarchive/02-25-08-roth-folo/transcript.html.

[15] Mark Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History: A Decision-Maker's Guide to Shaping Your Church* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 65.

declared that "the true Church can never be identified in any exclusive sense with one ecclesiastical institution. Neither the continuity nor the unity of the Church, they asserted, depends ultimately upon outward ecclesiastical forms. The true succession is a succession of believers, and the real unity is the unity to be found wherever faith is awakened."[16] The Reformers differed on the external forms and internal practices that were prescribed in Scripture, but they did agree that only God knows those who are truly God's.

Although Christianity was not able to achieve global organizational unity during its first fifteen centuries of existence, the number of ecclesiastical options in any given geographical region was usually limited to one. During the sixteenth century the breaches created by the Protestants added a religious dimension to the political fragmentation of western Europe. The magisterial reformers were convinced that there needed to be religious uniformity within a particular political jurisdiction; church boundaries were, therefore, made coterminous with political boundaries. This resulted in the emergence of a variety of national churches. Only the radical Reformers (also known as Anabaptists) challenged the assumption of a necessary relationship between a church and the state.

It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that certain Puritan proponents in England articulated the so-called "denominational principle," which was an extension of some of the affirmations made by the Protestant Reformers more than a century before. As divisions among the Puritans over ecclesiastical polity became evident, especially between Presbyterians and Independents (i.e., Congregationalists), some Independents suggested that disagreements over polity were not actually schismatic divisions within the church. Christian communities that agreed on "the fundamental doctrines of the Christian message could, and should, still see themselves as being united even though they differed concerning church order. The belief that ecclesial differences did not necessarily lead to sectarian conflict, but could allow for cooperation can be seen as the beginning of the denominational principle."[17] The Independents pointed also towards the new reality of religious pluralism

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[16] Winthrop S. Hudson, *American Protestantism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 35.

[17] Robert Bruce Mullin, "Denomination," in *Encyclopedia of Protestantism,* ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Routledge, 2004), 581.

that was taking place in Europe where congregations made up of immigrants were being organized along linguistic lines within certain national boundaries, as well as precedents in the New World where some colonies refused to grant to any ecclesial group the privileged status of an established church.[18]

The idea of denomination surfaced again during the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century within the movement known as Pietism, and also within the early evangelical revivalism initiated by John Wesley. The emphasis on a common personal religious experience and practical Christian living made it possible to de-emphasize the theological differences separating Protestant groups. Pietism, and later evangelicalism, narrowed the Reformation question towards the individual: Instead of "What is the 'true' church?" the central question became: "What is a 'true' Christian?" And instead of focussing on renewing and unifying "visible" church forms and expressions, priority was given to identification with the "invisible" church, that is, the mystical body of Christ among the nations.[19] As the basis for Christian unity moved away from a common theology and cooperation in common causes to a unity located in a common experience, new organizational forms among the partisans of revival also emerged. Despite declaring the appreciation expressed by early evangelical revivalists for the "spiritual unity" of all those who are "born again," scholars such as Bruce Hindmarsh have noted the paradoxical reality that many evangelical Protestants often remained "separated from one another in practice."[20] Nowhere was this more evident than in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America.

Scholars have noted that denominations, as the fundamental organizational form used by Christians in America, came into being during the eighteenth century almost by accident out of an environment in which churches transplanted from various parts of Europe began to mingle, and in

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[18] Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity," 33.

[19] For a fuller discussion of the implications of this shift for Protestant ecclesiology, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 287-324.

[20] Bruce Hindmarsh, "Is Evangelical Ecclesiology an Oxymoron?: A Historical Perspective," in ed., John G. Stackhouse, Jr. *Evangelical Ecclesiology: Reality or Illusion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 15.

which "the national government refused to support one group over others as the true embodiment of ancient orthodoxy."[21] Early efforts to establish particular churches in some of the colonies were undermined by the mid-century religious revivals known as the Great Awakening and then the American Revolution. As a result, churches were forced to adapt "traditional religious claims and affirmations to the voluntarism and free association of a free society."[22] Martin Marty states that the formation, legitimization, and expansion of this new form of church represented one of the most significant shifts in the life of the institutional church in over fourteen hundred years.[23]

Following the American Revolution, many of the churches in the new nation began to develop more formal national structures. Robert Mullin notes that these nineteenth-century denominational structures were characterized by three features: purposeful activism, instrumentality, and nationality.[24] National denominational structures were seen as tools to be used for the extension of Christian influence across the nation. By mid-century, a common national vision animated a new level of collaboration among Protestant denominations in North America as they collectively embarked on a program of social reconstruction through cooperative temperance, sabbatarianism, and anti-slavery campaigns. This cooperation, often facilitated through the formation of special-purpose voluntary societies, together with an ongoing commitment to a separation between the state and individual denominations, created what some dubbed the "voluntary establishment." The contribution of denominations in promoting nationalistic causes and in defining the "American way of life," did result in criticism. As noted above, H. Richard Niebuhr condemned the idea of denominationalism on the grounds that the *sources* animating and sustaining denominationalism were social rather than meaningful theological issues.

The twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of denominations as Christianity became a global religion. Early in the century,

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[21] Bowden, "The Death and Rebirth of Denominational History," 18. See also Andrew Greeley, *The Denominational Society: A Sociological Approach to Religion in America* (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1972).

[22] Richey and Mullin, "Introduction," in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 3.

[23] Martin Marty, *The Righteous Empire* (New York: Dial, 1970), 67-68.

[24] Richard Mullin, "Denominations," in *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, 582.

the ecumenical movement tried, with limited success, to redirect interdenominational cooperation towards a more comprehensive merger of denominational structures. By mid century, personal loyalties and identities began shifting away from large national denominational entities towards local communities and congregations, and towards broader transdenominational categories of identification as contentious issues often cut across historic denominational lines (e.g., gender, race, ideology).[25] Many independent mega-churches, whose charismatic leaders once decried denominations, have started networks that connect local congregations in new ways, that organize associations and conventions, and that produce publications and media products (e.g., Willow Creek Association). As noted above, many have questioned the usefulness of denominational structures with some openly suggesting that they are now nothing more than relics of the past. And yet these new networks and associations are organizational structures that often function in a quasi-denominational way.[26] As the significance of the issues that initially resulted in the formation of denominations diminished, it is ironic that the number of denominations has not decreased, but dramatically increased.

At least three observations are salient from this historical overview that should inform a theology of denominationalism. First, the organizational forms appropriated by Christians for organizing their religious life have always resembled forms and practices within their cultural milieu. Moreover, the organizational forms used by Christians over time have been dynamic as they were adapted to fit different political and cultural environments. This flexibility is consistent with the observation that the New Testament does not prescribe an ideal organizational arrangement,[27] and it is consistent with an

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[25] Mullin, "Denominations," 584. See also, David Sikkink, "'I Just Say I'm a Christian:' Symbolic Boundaries and Identity Formation among Church-Going Protestants," in Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger, eds., *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism 1900 to the Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 49-71.

[26] Examples include the Association of Vineyard Churches with over 1,500 con-gregations around the world, and the Association of Faith Churches and Ministers. Less structured are networks such as the emerging church movement, Ekklesia project, the Gospel and our Culture Network (missional church), and New Monasticism.

[27] Bruce L. Guenther and Doug Heidebrecht, "The Elusive Biblical Model of Leadership," *Direction* 28, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 153-165.

approach to culture that permits a critical adaptation of practices, ideas, and forms. Second, denominationalism is an organizational form with both potential and problems: at times, it has facilitated conflict and the fragmentation of unity among Christians but, at other times, it is been useful for mobilizing Christians to various kinds of action. It has been a remarkably flexible form, and capable of embodying a diversity of theological visions. Third, it is a form that is uniquely compatible with certain aspects of a Believers Church ecclesiology, particularly the emphasis that the church is made up only of believers who have voluntarily decided to join by making public confession of their faith. It thrives best in a political environment in which there is a separation between church and state.

The Ideas and Contribution of Jeremiah Burroughs

My historical reflections will move now from a high-altitude panoramic overview to a more specific look at the ideas and contribution of Jeremiah Burroughs. His attempt to legitimize the simultaneous diversity of Christian expressions was written during a time when many were trying to enforce a uniform approach to worship within one institutional entity. It is, nevertheless, possible to apply the wisdom of his denominational principles to our contemporary situation where the primary challenge is reversed and comes mostly from an ignorance of, and disregard for, theological traditions along with the rapid proliferation of Christian groups.

As indicated above, the architects of denominational theory were the so-called "Independents" among the seventeenth-century Puritans in England. Jeremiah Burroughs was one of the most influential spokespersons for these "Independents" or "Dissenting Brethren." This was an era characterized by intense political and ecclesiastical conflict. Burroughs was born in 1599, and educated at Emmanuel College at Cambridge University, a centre of Puritanism, from which he was forced to leave in 1624 because of his view that congregationalism was a better form of church government than episcopalianism.[28]

For a time Burroughs was able to find appointments within several congregations in England, but as persecution of nonconformists intensified

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[28] Other differences with Bishop Matthew Wren included Burroughs' refusal to read the *Book of Sports*, to bow at the name of Jesus, and to read prayers rather than speak them extemporaneously.

under the leadership of Archbishop William Laud, he was forced to flee to Rotterdam, Netherlands, in 1636. Here he became the pastor of an English-speaking congregation. In the early 1640s he was invited to return to England, where he preached regularly at two of the largest congregations in England (Stepney and Cripplegate). He developed a reputation as a passionate and practical preacher who could communicate complex theological truths in an understandable way. His writing style was more accessible than that of some of his contemporaries and contributed to his popularity. This quality may well be why some of his books remain in print today.[29]

Because of his reputation as a thoughtful, wise, and charitable person, Burroughs was one of the few "Independents" chosen to participate in the famous Westminster Assembly (1643-1646) that was convened to reform the Church of England's theology and polity. Noting both the vicious and acrimonious tone of the debates over church government and the rigidity of the Presbyterians, many of whom argued that theirs was the only form of church government prescribed in Scripture, Burroughs decided to articulate some principles regarding unity in the midst of diversity. Although his ideas were ultimately rejected by the Assembly, they were disseminated through two publications, *An Apologetical Narration*, which was published together with four colleagues in 1644 and laid out a framework for church unity, and *Irenicum: To the Lovers of Truth and Peace: The Heart Divisions opened In the Causes and Evils of them: with Cautions that we may not be hurt by them, And Endeavours to heal them*, which offered a fuller discussion of sectarianism and was published shortly after his death in 1646.

The American historian Winthrop Hudson has distilled six primary principles, which Burroughs hoped might "preserve our churches in peace and from offense and comfortably guide us to heaven in a safe way,"[30] and which can still serve as a partial frame for understanding and guiding denominationalism in the twenty-first century. I will describe briefly the six principles and use them as springboards for commenting on contemporary implications.

First, doctrinal differences among Christians are inevitable. "So long as we live here in this muddy world," writes Burroughs, there will continue to be

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[29] Many of his writings are available online: http://jeremiahburroughs.blogspot.com.

[30] Jeremiah Burroughs, *An Apologetical Narration*, 9-10; cited in Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity," 35.

divisions even among godly truth-seeking persons, particularly on secondary matters.[31] Burroughs readily acknowledged that some divisions among Christians are due to human weakness and sin, but there are some matters on which the Bible is simply not clear. The reality of differences does not, however, give license to condemn others as false or as apostate; rather, it requires a posture of humility on the part of all Christians as they recognize the limitations of their own understanding. According to Burroughs, differences should serve as an incentive to test motivations and to continue seeking further illumination from the Holy Spirit.[32] This principle serves as a helpful antidote not only to those who claim a special level of divine endorsement for their own interpretations of the Bible and ministry initiatives, but also to those who insist that genuine ecumenism requires all Christians to be a part of one institutional structure.

Second, doctrinal differences in secondary matters are still important. Burroughs argues that only the Bible, and not any human authority, has the right to dictate to the conscience its understanding on secondary matters. "Every Christian is under obligation to practice as he believes and to pursue to the end the implications of the convictions he honestly holds."[33] As a result, the Independent Puritans vigorously sought independence from state interference in the choice of how, where, when, and with whom to worship. Denominations are a place where differences can manifest themselves without creating intense conflict among Christians.[34]

The affirmation that secondary matters are in fact important serves as a healthy corrective to those who exploit the famous adage, "In Essentials, unity;

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[31] Burroughs, *Irenicum*, 240. One of the first points that Burroughs makes in *Irenicum* is that uniformity is not an acceptable foundation for unity among Christians (14).

[32] See ibid., 237-240, where Burroughs offers an extensive list of reasons why godly Christians who fear God sometimes disagree with one another.

[33] Cited in Shaw, *10 Great Ideas from Church History*, 70.

[34] Despite using an appeal to conscience to support freedom of religious practice for the Independents, Burroughs is quick to set out certain limits to such an appeal without which he believes society would degenerate into anarchy (*Irenicum*, 41-42). He recognizes the difficulty of discerning the influences that inform the conscience (30-37), but does assert that an appeal to conscience should have definite limits. It should not, for example, be used to tolerate "heresy."

in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity"[35] as a way of handling the reality of diversity and the desire for unity among Christians. To identify common theological affirmations with other Christians is important, to be sure, but the insistence by some on uniformity on those matters they deem to be essential before cooperation with other Christians is possible, and the denigration of non-essentials as matters of convenience and personal taste rather than conviction, has led to an implicit anti-denominationalism in some circles. The simple fact is that Christians do not agree on where to draw the line between essentials and non-essentials; what is deemed non-essential by one group is sometimes considered an essential matter by another. Differences need to be acknowledged and respected in our relationships with other Christians, without one group imperialistically trying to impose its list of essentials on others under the guise of creating an overarching unity. Appeals to a list of essentials are particularly common among transde-nominational evangelical organizations and institutions, and sometimes function as attempts to homogenize and truncate the legitimate and useful theological diversity that is embodied within denominations.[36]

The principle serves also as a helpful reminder that it is not possible to avoid being shaped by a particular Christian tradition and cultural context. One can be unaware of the particular traditions that have influenced one's theological perspectives, but one cannot be, as some claim, "just a Bible-believing Christian," or a "generic" Christian.[37] Every Christian's under-

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[35] This maxim was first coined in 1627 by Peter Meiderlin (Rupertus Meldenius), a seventeenth-century Lutheran, and was introduced to English-language theology by Richard Baxter.

[36] John Howard Yoder explores this phenomenon in some detail in "The Contemporary Evangelical Revival and the Peace Churches," in *Mission and the Peace Witness: The Gospel and Christian Discipleship*, ed. Robert L. Ramseyer (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1979), 68-103. He argues, "respectfully but with some vigor, that this self-evident distinction between the essential and nonessential, for all the immediate promise it gives of helping us solve problems, is actually deceptive and theologically questionable" (98).

[37] To minimize denominational differences and to promote a simplistic unity, evangelical Protestants in particular have popularized excerpts from people such as John Wesley ("I . . . refuse to be distinguished from other men by any but the common principles of Christianity. . . . I renounce and detest all other marks of distinction. But

standing of faith has been shaped by the particularities of a culture, and will be influenced by some Christian tradition. Denominational identities are, in part, indicators of the various theological perspectives that have emerged in the experience of Christians. A healthy denominational identity includes an understanding and affirmation of the contribution that its theological particularity has made to the large body of Christ.[38] Just as one recognizes how the unique "giftings" of multiple individuals are necessary for appreciating the full range of gifts given by the Holy Spirit, so too one might consider the theological distinctives that each denomination embodies as necessary for understanding more fully the mysteries of God.

Differences between some denominational traditions have become more difficult to detect as the movement of people across denominational lines has increased, as worship service styles have become more uniform, as collaboration between denominations has increased, and as new lines of division have emerged that do not neatly follow denominational lines. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that some fundamentally different theological visions continue to lurk beneath the surface, and that these theological ideas matter even if they are not immediately evident or visible.[39]

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from real Christians, of whatever denomination, I earnestly desire not to be distinguished at all. . . . Dost thou love and fear God? It is enough! I give thee my right hand of fellowship"); and George Whitefield ("Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No! Any Presbyterians? No! Any Independents or Methodists? No, no, no! Whom have you there? We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians. . . . Oh, is this not the case? Then God help us to forget party names and to become Christians in deed and truth") (John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," in *Forty-Four Sermons, or Sermons on Several Occasions* [London: Epworth, 1944], 448; and George Whitefield, as quoted in Hudson, *American Protestantism*, 45). The use of Wesley and Whitefield is ironic in that it ignores the fact that significant theological differences existed between these two men.

[38] An important part of appreciating the contribution of theological particularities is a candid assessment of the darker sides that a tradition has experienced in its history (e.g., spiritual elitism that is often present in renewal movements, the tendency towards legalism on the part of traditions that tilt towards Arminianism, the lack of motivation for holiness and evangelism on the part of some Calvinist groups, etc.).

[39] A similar point is made by Roth, "Boundaries and Bridges: Do Denominations Matter?"

Third, differences among Christians can be useful. Burroughs argues that even divisions precipitated by human weakness and sin can be used by God for God's own purposes. In these divisions, "God is working out ends above our reach for his glory and the good of his Saints." For example, God uses divisions for "the discovery of men's spirit's that they which are approved may be made manifest. . . . the melting of metal discovers the dross, for they divide the one from the other. These are melting times and thereby discovering times. . . . those who have kept upright without warping in these times are honourable before God."[40] Moreover, divisions among Christians exercise at a high rate "the graces of his saints;" that is, they call for and strengthen wisdom, faith, love, humility, patience, self-denial, and meekness. "In times of division men had need [to] stir up all their graces, and be very watchful over their ways, and walk exactly, be circumspect, accurate in their lives."[41] Burroughs rightly anticipates the possibility of having this argument exploited by those who perpetuate division and conflict needlessly through stubbornness and "carnal" motivation, but warns that such individuals are in danger of "everlasting perdition of their souls."[42] I do wonder if he would not have been more circumspect with this line of argument if he could have anticipated the tremendous proliferation of denominations that has taken place in the last century[43] and the way this has damaged the credibility of Christianity.

More compelling, however, is Burroughs' assertion that divisions among Christians can be used by God to "bring forth further light;" that is, additional knowledge that will offer a fuller understanding of the truths of Scripture.

> Sparks are beaten by the flints striking together. Many sparks of light, many truths, are beaten out by the beatings of men's spirits one against another. If light be let into a house, there must be some trouble to beat down a place in the wall for a window. A child thinks the house is beating down, but the father knows the light will be worth the cost and trouble. . . . If you will have truths argued out, you must

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[40] Burroughs, *Irenicum*, 242-243.

[41] Ibid., 243.

[42] Ibid.; and *An Apologetical Narration*, 24-27.

[43] If Dave Barrett's recent count of denominations—almost 34,000—is at all accurate (*World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2001]), it does raise the question of how one reconciles this fragmented reality with Jesus' prayer for unity among his disciples.

be content to bear with some opposition for the time. They who are not willing to bear some trouble, to be at some cost to find out the truth, are unworthy of it. . . . We may well behold men's weakness in these division but [we may] better admire God's strength and wisdom in ordering them to his glory and his children's good.[44]

The point is amplified significantly in our century as the church has become more globally conscious, multicultural, and postmodern. As the demographic centre of gravity for Christianity has shifted southwards, North American Christians are gradually becoming more aware and appreciative of the contribution that global theologies have for expanding our understanding of the kingdom of God. Diversity can contribute towards a more fully-orbed theology.[45]

Fourth, because no group of Christians has a complete grasp of divine truth, the true Church of Christ can never fully be represented by any single ecclesiastical structure. Burroughs and his colleagues argued that the New Testament had not prescribed one particular way of organizing Christian communities. This principle, therefore, seeks to avoid attitudes of elitism that claim one denomination to be superior over all others, and of exclusivity that claim one denomination to be the only true (or real) church. Hudson summarizes: "God is not the exclusive possession of any [denomination], and the existence of different churches—each striving to the best of its understanding to be faithful and a worthy representation of Christ's church in the life of the world—serves as a constant corrective to the pretensions of all churches."[46] Individual Christians may be divided from a particular institutional expression of the church, but "they are not divided from the Church."

Fifth, true unity among Christians is based on the common gospel and overshadows other differences that may exist among Christians. True unity

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[44] Burroughs, *Irenicum*, 243-244.

[45] See, for example, James V. Brownson's argument for a hermeneutic of diversity. James V. Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic," in George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 228-259.

[46] Hudson*, American Protestantism*, 41-42.

should be expressed through cooperation between denominations. Burroughs makes it very clear that all Christians, despite their differences, are united in Christ.[47] "Though our differences are sad enough, yet they come not up to this to make us men of different religions. We agree in the same end, though not in the same means. They are but different ways of opposing the common enemy."[48] Near the conclusion of *Irenicum*, Burroughs acknowledges that

> [t]here has been much ado to get us to agree. We laboured to get our opinions into one, but they will not come together. It may be [that] in our endeavours for agreement we have begun at the wrong end. Let us try what we can do at the other end. It may be that we shall have better success there. Let us labour to join our hearts, to engage our affections, one to another. If we cannot be of one mind that we may agree, let us agree to be of one heart.[49]

The diversity manifested by denominations ought neither to overshadow a common commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ nor to be used to justify the neglect of visible expressions of unity. This is best expressed through cooperation in common causes rather than in an idealistic pursuit of a merger of all denominations into one. A good example of cooperative ecumenism has been the growing level of collaboration among denominations in Canada since the 1970s in the areas such as higher education, addressing social needs, church planting, and public policy.[50]

Sixth, denominational diversity is not necessarily schism. Burroughs was frequently accused of advocating schism because of his emphasis on the necessity of "liberty of conscience." The Independents contested the

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[47] See Burroughs, *Irenicum 101-102*. D.H. Williams similarly tries to address the impulse towards sectarianism and divisions within Protestantism by pointing towards a common understanding of our Christian heritage and identity, and using it as a basis for increased dialogue and greater unity among Christians (*Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 15, 202, 208, 213-217).

[48] Burroughs*, Irenicum*, 101.

[49] Ibid., 255.

[50] John G. Stackhouse, Jr., "The Protestant Experience in Canada since 1945," in George A. Rawlyk, ed., *The Canadian Protestant Experience, 1760-1990* (Burlington, ON: Welch Publishing, 1990), 232.

assumptions underlying the parish system, which used place of birth and place of residence as the criteria for organizing Christian communities, and which used the power of the state to ensure conformity. "When men, who give good testimony of their godliness and peaceableness," argued Burroughs,

> cannot without sin to them (though it be through weakness) enjoy all the ordinances of Christ and partake in all the duties of worship as members of that congregation where their dwelling is, they therefore in all humility and meekness . . . join in another congregation, yet . . . not condemning those churches they join not as false but still preserve all Christian communion with the Saints as members of the same body of Christ, of the Church Catholic, and join also with them in all duties of worship that belong to particular churches so far as they are able—if this be called schism, it is more than yet I have learned.[51]

Although the Independent Puritans did not offer a clear set of guidelines for deciding when one ought to feel free to look for another Christian community with which to worship, it is clear that "liberty of conscience" was not to be misunderstood as a license for everyone to do whatever they pleased. Similar to the Believers Church tradition, the Independent Puritans argued that, if the mixture of "profane and godly Christians" in a particular congregation was such that it seriously jeopardized the spiritual well-being of those interested in sincerely pursuing a life of godliness and holiness, they should join a congregation of like-minded individuals. According to Burroughs, real schism has more to do with how people leave a congregation and how they characterize other Christians: "the true nature of schism is . . . an uncharitable, unjust, rash, violent breaking from union with the church or members of it."

The problem of what to do when an institutional expression of the church becomes corrupt or apostate has often created difficult dilemmas for Christians. After considering questions of how to ascertain apostasy, and determining that the accusation of corruption or apostasy has not been misused for self-interest, the fact that alternative denominational options exist has made it possible for some Christians to live an authentic life of discipleship and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., the Confessing

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[51] *A Vindication of Mr. Burroughs*, 15; cited in Hudson, "Denominationalism as a Basis for Ecumenicity," 46.

Church in Germany during the 1930s). As Hans Küng has pointed out, in such instances, it is not denominationalism that is the cause of disunity but rather careless syncretism.[52]

Conclusion

These historical reflections do not constitute a comprehensive theology of denominationalism, but they do offer some fertile starting points. I'll conclude with several additional considerations that are not mentioned by Jeremiah Burroughs but that need to be included in the construction of a theological response to denominationalism.

First, a theology of denominationalism must hold in tension the biblical emphasis on unity and the reality of differences among Christians. Christian unity begins, as Karl Koop affirms, with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and not with human initiatives, practices, or agreements. "The *communio sanctorum*, of which we are a part, is not the product of our doing but is a gift of grace."[53] The familial-like unity envisioned by the apostle Paul (Ephesians 4) is a reality despite the divisions and disagreements that continue to exist among Christians. Jesus' prayer for the unity of those who would believe (John 17) envisions a unity that is more than a mystical, spiritual reality because it is to be seen by others, and it will be a factor in convincing people that Jesus is who he claimed to be. The "one body" metaphor by Paul also implies some sort of tangible connection between the one and the many that is mandatory for believers. Does this unity imply uniformity? Does it direct us towards a singular organizational form? Or does it demand of us mutual respect, and a degree of fellowship and visible cooperation? I think the latter is most probable.

Second, postmodernism has generated an interest in particularities as a reaction to the imposition of totalizing metanarratives. We cannot express or embody our faith apart from cultural forms. This interest in cultural particularities creates a new opportunity for denominations, especially those that have a clear sense of their theological identity and vision, that can

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[52] Hans Küng, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday/Image, 1976), 357.

[53] Karl Koop, "Reading Tradition through Catholic Lenses: Moving beyond Restorationism," paper presented at 16th Believers Church Conference on Congregationalism, Denominationalism and the Body of Christ, 11-14 June 2008, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB (see chapter seven below, 135).

articulate it in a narrative form, and that can present it in a relational way, inviting people to be a part of a community that is participating in an ongoing story (or narrative). Martin Marty writes, "Denominations are not disappearing but changing, they are coming to be more like extended families—operating with memory and sensibility, ethos, and kinship—than like creedal or other conformity engendering units."[54] Denominations that are able to adjust to such a pluralistic cultural reality, that are able to avoid expressing their particular identities in exclusive, arrogant ways, and that are able to celebrate the collective diversity that is embodied by denominations as necessary for seeing more clearly the mysteries and complexities of the kingdom of God, may still have a future.[55]

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[54] Martin E. Marty, Review of Richey and Mullin, *Reimagining Denominationalism*, in *Christian Century* (7 December 1994), 1162.

[55] Is it possible that denominational diversity is implied in the final eschatological vision presented in the New Testament by John, whose portrait of diversity in Revelation 7 includes believers from every nation, tribe, people, language worshipping together before the Throne of God? (Roth, "Boundaries and Bridges: Do Denominations Matter?").

Chapter Four

The Church as the Body of Christ Incarnate in the Manitoba Mennonite Experience

John J. Friesen

This study will examine the developments among Manitoba Mennonites that have resulted in different conceptions and practices related to the nature of the church since Mennonites first arrived in Manitoba in the 1870s.[1] The study is divided into three time periods, each with distinctive character and emphases. The first period extends from settlement to the 1920s, the second from the 1920s to the 1950s, and the third from the 1950s to the present. The study will show how Manitoba Mennonite churches have varied in their view of how to be the church. Some have enthusiastically embraced the new, while others have deliberately retained more of the traditional. These different mixes have created a rich tapestry of Mennonite churches in Manitoba.

Historical Background

It is important to review the background of Mennonites in order to understand their view of church. Mennonites who came to Manitoba in the

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[1] For a fuller treatment of these developments, see the sections on "Churches" in my *Building Communities: The Changing Face of Manitoba Mennonites* (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2007).

1870s had their roots in the sixteenth-century Dutch Anabaptist movement and originated in countries that are now known as Belgium, the Netherlands, and northern Germany. This movement was shaped to a large extent by Menno Simons, and thus named after him. He contributed various teachings to the movement, including the belief that the Bible is the basis for faith and life, the church is central to the story of salvation, faith should be applied to all areas of life, and the church is a community of peace. These emphases have continued to characterize Mennonites.

Mennonites fled persecution in the Netherlands and settled in the Vistula River delta regions of Poland during the sixteenth century. Much of the institutionalization of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist vision of being church occurred during the two-hundred-and-fifty years in Poland, before the emigration to Russia. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the region in Poland where Mennonites lived was taken over by Prussia, Mennonites faced Prussian militarism and the rise of modernity. Beginning in 1788 thousands of Mennonites immigrated to Russia to escape these pressures. They settled the two major colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna. Later they established additional colonies, including Bergthal, Fuerstenland, and Borosenko. Most of the immigrants to Manitoba in the 1870s came from these latter three daughter colonies and from Chortitza.

Mennonites soon encountered various aspects of modernity in Russia. Some stemmed from educational and agricultural reforms led by Johann Cornies, while others came from religious renewal movements mediated by Moravians, Lutheran Pietists, and German Baptists. Some Mennonites eagerly embraced these modernizing movements, while others resisted them. In 1860 these influences led to the formation of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Most of the immigrants to Manitoba in the 1870s were suspicious of the religious and educational modernizing movements in Russia and emigrated in order to escape those influences. The migrants to Manitoba were also interested in renewal, but renewal on the basis of traditional Anabaptist beliefs and practices.

During their years in Poland-Prussia and Russia, Mennonites developed a distinct form of church. They called their churches *Gemeinden*, a term based on the German word for "fellowship." Mennonites formed churches by the free association, or fellowship, of people. This concept of the nature of the church was in contrast to the state churches. The Mennonite churches maintained the Anabaptist principle of local appointment of church leaders.

All bishops, ministers, and deacons were elected from the membership of the congregation. Bishops were called *"Aeltesten"* (meaning an older, revered person) to avoid the state church designation. The term for minister was "*Lehrer*" (literally, teacher). The main role of the minister was to be a Bible teacher. "Deacon" was a biblical term, and the holders of this office were responsible for the church's purse, taking care of the welfare of needy members. None of the church officials was salaried.

Mennonites believed that the visible body of Christ should care for the spiritual and physical needs of its members (1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4), and therefore they rejected any attempt to reduce faith to inner spiritualization. The body of Christ, they believed, ought to address all areas of life, including the economic, political, and social. They rejected distinctions between the personal and inner issues as sacred, and the public, outer issues as secular. All of life was sacred.

The church as the body of Christ was also seen as a reconciling community which took seriously Christ's admonition for people to forgive one another, to show hospitality, and to love the enemy according to the teachings of St. Matthew 5. In 1642 Mennonites negotiated a formal *Privilegium* with the king of Poland, acknowledging Mennonite belief in biblical nonresistance and exemption of members from military service. Similar *Privilegia* were negotiated with subsequent rulers in Poland, Prussia, and Russia. The threatened loss of this right in Russia in the 1870s was a major reason for moving to Manitoba.

Mennonites believed that salvation included commitment to God and to the community. Salvation required living together, sharing, forgiving, and supporting others in the community. Salvation, although personal, was not individualistic. An individualistic view of salvation, which focussed on saving the soul, expressed the ontological individualism of modernity, according to which the individual is capable of experiencing the full measure of salvation without the necessity of community. This view was foreign to Mennonites.

The Era of the Gemeinden: *1870s–1920s*

When Mennonites settled in Manitoba in the 1870s, they came, not as individuals, but as church groups, or *Gemeinden,* complete with leaders and organizations. On the east side of the Red River the Kleine Gemeinde and the Chortitzer Gemeinde settled. On the west side of the Red River the Old Colony Gemeinde and the Bergthaler Gemeinde established themselves.

In each of the churches, the *Aeltester* provided the vision, spiritual direction, and organizational cohesion. A number of ministers, or *Lehrer*, assisted the *Aeltesten* with preaching at Sunday morning church services, and provided pastoral counselling where necessary. Deacons provided financial care for those members who were needy, poor, elderly, or ill. The *Gemeinde* was like a very large congregation that met in a number of locales because of size and distance. The *Gemeinde* was not a conference, because the individual meeting places were not independent congregations. Rather, the whole group was a tightly knit church that saw itself as the body of Christ, as a covenanted people together striving to do the will of God. The early Manitoba *Gemeinden* numbered from a couple of hundred adult members to more than two thousand.

The *Gemeinde* saw itself as deciding corporately about issues of farming, education, fire insurance, road building, and care for orphans, as well as about preaching, baptism, and communion. The *Gemeinde* believed the gospel of Christ should, and could, shape believers' lives, both corporate and personal. Members understood being Christian as being "in fellowship" with members of the community and participating in the various aspects of its life.

Additional factors that created and sustained community were the villages in which people farmed their land semi-communally. Within that context, community events like weddings, hog slaughtering, and grain threshing helped to build close ties. Other factors that helped to create community were the Low German language acquired while in Poland, distinctive dress for both women and men, many kinship ties which were nurtured by constant visiting, especially on Sunday afternoons, and relative isolation from urban centres like Winnipeg.

Within a few decades of arriving in Manitoba, Mennonites were subjected to a variety of pressures to modernize. These included religious renewal movements, education reform, and economic changes. Each of these factors pushed Mennonites to de-emphasize community and increased the importance of individual initiative, individual ownership, individual decision-making, and individual expressions of faith. The result was that most of the churches divided, with a minority of modernizers in each case opting to form their own church group.

Ironically, the first modernizing influence that challenged this more corporate understanding of being church came from evangelists sent by Mennonite groups in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. Four

Mennonite churches sent evangelists, or missioners, to Manitoba: the Church of God in Christ Mennonite (Holdeman), Mennonite Brethren, General Conference, and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren, also known as Bruderthaler. The Holdeman incursion resulted in almost half of the Kleine Gemeinde, including its *Aeltester*, leaving to form a Holdeman church in every major Kleine Gemeinde village, thus splitting each village. The Mennonite Brethren missioners were able to form a church north of Winkler on the West Reserve with members drawn from the Old Colony Church, then known as the Reinlaender Church. Those who left to join the Mennonite Brethren Church withdrew from the Old Colony corporate institutions like the Orphans Bureau (*Waisenamt*) and usually moved out of the villages, thus effectively breaking them up. People influenced by the General Conference joined either the Mennonite Brethren or Bergthaler churches. The Bruderthaler, the last of the American missioners to arrive, coming in 1898, drew converts primarily from the Steinbach Kleine Gemeinde church, and thus further splintered this group.

These evangelical mission efforts were carried on by Mennonites who had been influenced by Pietism in Russia or by American revivalism. Some had studied at Moody Bible Institute, thus bringing along also a strong dispensationalist theology. Instead of the more communal, relational, and wholistic emphases of Mennonites in Manitoba, centred in village and community, the evangelical missionaries placed greater emphasis on assurance of personal salvation, public confession of faith, definite conversion experiences, and a motivation to proselytize. The Mennonite Brethren and Bruderthaler not only modernized in matters of faith, but also in areas of business practices and participation in local governments; thus these churches became leaders in acculturation and modernization in their respective communities. The Holdeman church combined revivalism with its traditional Swiss Mennonite theology of separation from the world, and thus did not exert a strong modernizing influence on the Mennonite communities.

The second modernizing influence was that of education. In 1891 the Bergthaler church established a school of higher education in Gretna, with Henry H. Ewert as its long-time principal. This school also served as a teacher training school, recognized by the Manitoba government. The Gretna school, run by the Bergthaler Church and supported by the Mennonite Brethren and Kleine Gemeinde, became a force for modernization and change. Instead of training young people primarily for life in the immediate village and

community, it engaged the larger world of ideas. It lifted the intellectual horizon of its graduates, and soon they were attending universities in Manitoba and abroad, with many permanently leaving their home communities.

The opposition to this school was so strong that the Bergthaler church divided, with only about fifteen percent of the membership siding with the *Aeltester* and the school. The remainder left to form the Sommerfelder Mennoniten Gemeinde. A further consequence of the controversy about this school was that the Old Colony and Chortitzer churches became adamantly opposed to higher education; this shaped their view of education for generations to come.

In the area of economics, Mennonite immigrants had developed a variety of community based institutions, including fire insurance organizations, the Orphans Bureau (*Waisenamt*), which served as a local savings and loan organization, and a fund for the poor (*Armenkasse*). Mennonites were suspicious of capitalism and its emphasis on profit, its individual control, and its ties to the larger world of finance and markets. In the early Manitoba settlements, those who engaged in market capitalism usually moved into one of the railway towns which were in or near the Mennonite communities. Since, in the early years, most of the residents of these towns were non-Mennonite elevator agents, merchants, or civil servants, the impression was strong that to engage in business was to acculturate; that is, to move into the "English" world.

This early era of the *Gemeinden* came to an end by events set in motion by World War I. During the war, Mennonites were exempted from military service. They had been granted this exemption in an 1873 letter from John Lowe on behalf of the Canadian government. During World War I the Canadian government honoured this commitment. Mennonites believed it was not in their character as Mennonite churches to go to war, and their members were exempt on the basis of group identification, not on the basis of individual conscience.

During World War I, however, the Manitoba government was most displeased that Mennonites did not participate in the Canadian war effort. It decided it had failed to instil British and Canadian nationalism in Mennonite children, and concluded that a school system fully controlled by the government was the answer. Such a school system, using only English as the language of instruction, would be able to indoctrinate Mennonite school

children with the necessary patriotic loyalty to the British flag and empire, so that in future wars, Mennonite young men would also fight. When the government closed all private schools and changed the bilingual schools into English-only schools, Mennonites saw this not only as an attack on their school system, but as an attack on their character and faith as a body of Christ.

At first all Mennonite groups, even the most acculturated and Pietist, stood together in opposition to this attack. However, when the government refused to back down, Mennonites responded in two ways. One group decided to emigrate. The leaders, and a large portion of the three largest Mennonite Gemeinden—Old Colony, Sommerfelder, and Chortitzer—migrated to Mexico and Paraguay. About 6,000 of a total of 20,000 Mennonites immigrated to these two countries in the 1920s.

The smaller church groups—Bergthaler, Mennonite Brethren, Bruder-thaler, Holdeman, and Kleine Gemeinde—plus some of the members of the larger churches whose leaders lead migrations to Latin America, decided to remain in Manitoba. They hoped to make the best of a bad situation, and hoped to be able to make the necessary accommodations with the provincial government without losing the core of their faith.

The first era of the *Gemeinden* thus came to an end when the priorities of the body of Christ collided with the priorities of a country bent on having its citizens absorb a national spirit. The idea of churches somewhat separate from society, free to create their own religious world in which their Christian faith could shape daily social and economic lives, came to an end. Those who had this inclusive vision of being church immigrated to Mexico and Paraguay. Those who remained in Manitoba had to find new ways of being church.

Formation of Conferences: 1920–1950s

The Mennonite scene in Manitoba after the 1920s can be characterized by new waves of immigration, accommodations to the Canadian ethos, and the formation of conferences. In the 1920s about 6,000 immigrants arrived in Manitoba from the Soviet Union. They came at the same time that an approximately equal number of conservatives left for Latin America. These immigrants from the Soviet Union had been traumatized by anarchy, civil war, and the loss of their land. Equally important was that, in the fifty years prior to this immigration, most of the immigrants had experienced Pietist influences that significantly reshaped their theology.

The new migrants settled in scattered communities throughout the province. Fairly quickly they organized into circles of churches that were also called *Gemeinden*, even though their character was a looser bond than that of the earlier *Gemeinden* of the 1870s immigrants. By the 1930s these immigrant groups banded together to form province-wide conferences. The 1920s Mennonite Brethren (MB) immigrants, together with the earlier MB congregations, formed an MB conference. The other immigrant churches, together with their 1870s counterpart, the Bergthaler Church, formed what is now known as Mennonite Church Manitoba (MC Manitoba).

To a large extent the strength and cohesion of the MB and the MC conferences were due to the fact that the majority of members in both groups shared common Russian experiences of war, revolution, terror, immigration, and the difficulties of settlement. They were bound by ties of faith, language, family, and cultural practices. But the most important influence was their common Pietist background that shaped their piety, choral hymnody, and positive outlook on higher education.

The 1870s immigrants, who had not migrated to Latin America, also re-formed their former *Gemeinden,* each with an *Aeltester* and numerous meeting places. Each of them was smaller and weaker than before the emigration. Also, because of the emigration and due to the Depression in the 1930s, each of these *Gemeinden* lost most of their mutual aid organizations like the fire insurances, Orphans Bureaus, funds for the poor, and the semi-communal village organizations. Church life focussed primarily on the "spiritual" nurture of preaching, counselling, baptism, communion, marriage, and burial.

At the end of this era, in the 1950s, some of the 1870s immigrant *Gemeinden* that had remained in Manitoba also adopted the conference model. This change was, however, not merely organizational. Forming a conference signalled a change in theology. In the 1950s both the Kleine Gemeinde and the Rudnerweider Gemeinde changed their names to the Evangelical Mennonite Conference and the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, respectively. Each meeting place became an independent congregation with its own budget, a congregationally appointed pastor, and congregationally determined mission and service projects.

The transition to conferences resulted in a transfer of authority in areas of budgets and decision-making from the *Gemeinden* to the local congregations.

By adopting the conference model, these *Gemeinden* also indicated that they were adopting a revivalist evangelical theology, accepting Sunday schools, engaging in evangelism and mission, and modernizing at many levels, including language of worship and hymnody. Organizationally, at the conference level, this change signalled the move from leadership by *Aeltesten* to leadership by boards and committees, and eventually by salaried conference staff. At the congregational level, there was a change from unsalaried itinerant ministers, to unsalaried local ministers, and finally to salaried local ministers or pastors.

World War II was of great significance in shaping the character of Manitoba Mennonite conferences and *Gemeinden*. The question of how to respond to the war caused a deep division between the earlier 1870s immigrant *Gemeinden* and the later 1920s immigrants. The earlier immigrants wanted complete exemption from military service, whereas the latter immigrants were ready to accept alternative service as conscientious objectors (COs). The government decided that Mennonites would have to do alternative service. Postponements of military service were based not on group identity, as during World War I, but on personal confessions, thus placing a much greater onus on individuals to be able to articulate their faith clearly.

When the war ended, Mennonite churches were dismayed that almost forty percent of their young men had accepted military service. Those who opted for CO service, however, made a significant and unanticipated impact upon the churches. Many COs were sent to camps and institutions far from their home communities where they encountered the larger world, rubbed shoulders with men from other denominations, and gained new perspectives on issues facing the church. When these COs returned, many became leaders in the churches, and their broadened perspectives helped to bring about changes.

After the war, Mennonite churches engaged in a flurry of activity, which included building private high schools and colleges to teach nonresistance and Mennonite values. Eventually they also organized Mennonite Central Committee Canada to provide relief and development internationally, and established numerous personal care facilities and a mental health facility. Even though Mennonites seemed to have lost some of their earlier cohesiveness and identity, the experiences of war seemed to unleashed a new vigour and creativity.

From Conferences to Congregations: 1950s to the Present

In the third era, from the 1950s to the present, the relative role of congregations and conferences changed again. During this time period, congregations increased in importance while conferences gradually decreased in significance. This change was particularly evident among those groups which adopted a conference structure; less so in those church groups which operated according to the traditional *Gemeinde* system.

The increasing importance of congregations is demonstrated by the fact that in some cases conference projects were moved to local church levels. Congregations make more decisions about which mission and service projects to support. Some Mennonite Brethren churches have dropped the name Mennonite and have renamed themselves community churches, thus loosening ties to the conference. More money is spent on local concerns, such as staff, programs, and buildings, while conferences have difficulty raising funds for their programs. Evidence for the growing importance of congregations is particularly evident in that more churches are withdrawing from conference affiliation and becoming free-standing in their polity and theological affiliations. Many drop the name Mennonite, and thus try to appeal to a larger constituency.

Mennonite Church Manitoba has changed its name: from "conference" to "church," from Conference of Mennonites in Manitoba to Mennonite Church Manitoba. This change is intended to mitigate the tendency toward decentralization and foster the sense that the congregation is part of a larger body of Christ that is not only provincial, but also national and international in mission, affiliation, and identity.

In some Mennonite groups, however, the role of the conference is increasing. The Chortitzer Church recently changed from *Gemeinde* to a conference. Even though here too the adoption of the conference model signalled a certain amount of decentralization, it also strengthened the role of the conference in the area of missions. The Chortitzer Conference established a missions committee whose role is to promote missions and to coordinate their members' participation in mission programs. Earlier, members were more on their own if they wished to engage in missions. The Chortitzer Conference has also retained the *Gemeinde* system of having ministers rotate among the various meeting places, thus continuing to build a bond among congregations.

The Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference has also strengthened its central mission program. In earlier years many of its members were sponsored by faith missions and had to solicit their own support, usually within their local congregations. Now the majority of their missionaries serve in their own denomination's mission program and are supported by the unified budget of the conference.

A number of Mennonite churches in Manitoba continue the traditional *Gemeinde* pattern of elected lay itinerant ministers, multiple meeting places, use of Low German language in worship, and a minimal number of committees to carry on the work of the *Gemeinde*. Of the four churches that follow this pattern—German Old Colony, Old Colony, Reinland, and Sommerfelder—the Sommerfelder Church has largely changed the language of worship to English and has adopted some characteristics of a conference. With a combined adult membership of 7,500, the four churches represent about twenty percent of Manitoba Mennonites.

Despite pressures to decentralize and focus on congregationally based programs, Mennonite conferences are also engaged in some highly visible common projects. For example, Steinbach Bible College is supported by three conferences: the Chortitzer, Evangelical Mennonite, and Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference. Canadian Mennonite University is supported by two conferences: the Manitoba Mennonite Brethren conference and Mennonite Church Canada. In addition, conferences produce Sunday school material, operate camps, and engage in foreign missions.

Another development that has affected Manitoba Mennonites' self-understanding as the body of Christ is that they have become more multi-ethnic. In recent decades most congregations have changed their language of worship from German to English, while others have begun to worship in a variety of other languages. As a result they have welcomed people from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds into membership. Mennonites in Manitoba are no longer only the descendents of the major migrations from Russia. Many "new" Mennonite churches have been created, including Mennonite churches formed by Chinese, Korean, French, Spanish, and Aboriginal people. The majority of these churches worship in their own language. Most of these "new" Mennonite churches have joined either the Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite Church conferences and receive assistance from them. Manitoba Mennonite churches, as the body of Christ,

have therefore begun to reflect the multi-ethnic character of Mennonites worldwide.

This move to becoming more multi-ethnic has had the effect of strengthening the local congregation as the body of Christ. Congregations have their own unique set of experiences; thus there are fewer shared bonds with other congregations.

Conclusion

What has happened to Manitoba Mennonites' view of the church as the body of Christ? For some groups, there has been a shift from *Gemeinden*, to conferences, to congregations. Other groups have retained the *Gemeinde* structure, and have thereby tried to mitigate some of the pressures toward individualism and de-centralization. The result has been a variety of views about how to be the body of Christ.

The sense of the church as a community is still strong for Mennonites in Manitoba, regardless of whether they are organized as *Gemeinden,* like the Old Colony or Reinlander, or are experiencing the vitality of newly organized conferences, like the Chortitzer, or are increasingly moving to congregationalism, like the MBs and MCs. Even though the language of faith in many churches is individualistic and expresses salvation as "saving the soul," the life and experience of the churches is often more communal and corporate than the language suggests. The life of the church more fully expresses the nature of the church as the body of Christ.

The Manitoba Mennonite groups are also not as fragmented as they may appear. To a large extent they are finding a common sense of being the body of Christ through their connection with Mennonite Central Committee. By means of this relationship with MCC, its image, and its programs of service, peace, justice, and relief, Manitoba Mennonites are experiencing a common sense of being the body of Christ with a mission within the larger Manitoban and Canadian society.

Chapter Five

Women among Canadian Mennonite Brethren and the Struggle for Denominational Consensus

Doug Heidebrecht

In the summer of 2006, after fifty years of reflection and debate regarding the role of women in the church, Canadian Mennonite Brethren affirmed the following resolution: "On this non-confessional issue, the Board of Faith and Life recommends that the Conference bless each member church in its own discernment of Scripture, conviction and practice to call and affirm gifted men and women to serve in ministry and pastoral leadership."[1] This particular decision not only represents a shift in Canadian Mennonite Brethren understanding of the nature of the issue of women in church leadership, but also in their perception of how consensus may no longer provide the justification for defining Mennonite Brethren (MB) denominational unity and identity.[2]

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[1] "Board of Faith and Life Women in Ministry Leadership Resolution," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (February 2006), 15.

[2] Mennonite Brethren in North America first organized into a General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches in 1879, which later divided into three subgroups or

How does the church, whether at the congregational or denominational level, discern its path when conflicting convictions permeate the faith community itself and consensus remains a distant and elusive ideal? This is a critical question for the Believers Church as it seeks to be faithful in the midst of swirling social and cultural changes. I propose that an examination of the process of communal discernment engaged in by Canadian Mennonite Brethren in response to the loss of consensus regarding women in church leadership will provide insight into how to address the presence of conflicting convictions within the Believers Church. I will begin by painting a portrait of what consensus looked like among Mennonite Brethren during the mid-twentieth century. Then I will highlight how the emergence of differing convictions regarding women in the church began to challenge this consensus. Finally, I will examine the strategies used by the Canadian and General Mennonite Brethren Conferences to negotiate the collapse of consensus. An awareness of this process of communal discernment will be relevant for understanding the implications that arise with the struggle for consensus in the Believers Church.

Mennonite Brethren Consensus

Deliberate reflection by Mennonite Brethren on the significance of consensus within the church emerged, not surprisingly, at a time when two intersecting social forces collided. First, during the 1950s, Canadian Mennonite Brethren experienced a rapid practically "text-book case of ethno-religious acculturation" into the dominant North America culture.[3] The insularity and

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district conferences in 1909. In 1954, these subgroups were reorganized along national lines into the United States Mennonite Brethren Conference and the Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. The United States Conference is presently divided into five regional districts and the Canadian Conference is divided into seven provincial conferences. The General Conference was dissolved in 2002, leaving the national conferences responsible for Mennonite Brethren faith and practice. See Paul Toews, "Searching for the Right Structures," in Paul Toews and Kevin Enns-Rempel, eds., *For Everything a Season: Mennonite Brethren in North America, 1874-2002: An Informal History* (Fresno, CA: Historical Commission, 2002), 55, 59, 62.

    [3] John E. Toews, "Theological Reflections," *Direction* 14, no. 2 (1985): 65. Richard Kyle observes, "The history of the Mennonite Brethren in North America is one of

cohesion provided by a strong Mennonite Brethren conference and local church structures, which was so necessary for maintaining clearly defined ethnic and religious boundaries, were quickly dissipating. Second, Mennonite Brethren were quite unprepared for the cultural upheaval which swept across the United States and Canada during the 1960s. In particular, the feminist movement, which first arose as a women's rights movement and then spontaneously erupted as a wide-spread women's liberation movement, caught Mennonite Brethren unawares. During this time Mennonite Brethren found themselves both mirroring and resisting the values and attitudes of the larger North American society. In light of these overwhelming changes, F. C. Peters described consensus as the uniformity of position within the group, following the pattern of Acts 15 where the early believing community arrived at a shared agreement.[4]

During the 1950s and early 1960s, Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the United States reflected a virtually uniform perspective regarding their understanding of women's roles within the church and the home. This was clearly evident in the decision to rescind the ordination of women to missionary service in 1957. The Mennonite Brethren practice of ordaining missionaries between 1899 and 1958 was reflected in the biographical sketches published in several missionary albums during the 1950s.[5] At least 131 women

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progressive acceptance of cultural traits from the wider society on one hand, and a largely unsuccessful resistance to this acculturation on the other." See Richard Kyle, "The Concept and Practice of Separation from the World in Mennonite Brethren History," *Direction* 13, no. 1, 2 (1984): 37-38.

[4] F. C. Peters, "Consensus and Change in Our Brotherhood," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Supplement (12 January 1968), 7. See also the General Conference resolution, "Consensus and Change on Ethical Issues in the Brotherhood," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (5 September 1969), 13.

[5] See, *Missionary Album of Missionaries Serving under the Board of Foreign Missions, Mennonite Brethren Conference, Inc.* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Foreign Missions, 1951); *Missionary Album of Missionaries Serving under the Board of Foreign Missions, Mennonite Brethren Conference, Inc.* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Foreign Missions, 1952); *Missionary Album of Missionaries Serving under the Board of Foreign Missions, Mennonite Brethren Conference, Inc.* (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Foreign Missions, 1954); and *Missionary Album of Missionaries Serving under the Board of Foreign Missions, Mennonite Brethren Conference, Inc.*, revised (Hillsboro, KS: Board of Foreign Missions, 1956).

were ordained by Mennonite Brethren congregations for missionary service, both overseas and in North America.[6]

The motivation behind the move to rescind this long-standing practice arose out of a very different concern regarding the regulation of the appointment and ordination of church leaders who were not raised up from within local Mennonite Brethren churches.[7] Mennonite Brethren polity was rapidly moving away from a system consisting of several voluntary ministers working together to a single paid pastor.[8] In 1954, embedded within the Pacific District suggestion that the creation of two levels of recognition (commissioning and ordination) might address these concerns was the seemingly unrelated question: "whether it wouldn't be better that women missionaries be commissioned and not ordained."[9] The General Conference Committee of Reference and Counsel met in February 1955 and asked B. J. Braun "to write out the principles as established by the Pacific District Conference regarding these questions."[10] Braun limited commissioning "for a

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[6] For more details see, Doug Heidebrecht, "Mennonite Brethren Ordination of Women, 1899-1958," *Mennonite Historian* 34, no. 4 (December 2008): 1-2, 8-9.

[7] Conference leadership was concerned about the growing number of pastors who were being trained in other denominational educational institutions whose teaching could not be endorsed. This concern was also behind the move initiated at this time to establish a Mennonite Brethren seminary. See *Year Book of the 44th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1948), 76, 106-107; and *Year Book of the 45th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1951), 126.

[8] See also, J. B. Toews, *Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church 1860-1990* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Press, 1993), 219-224.

[9] *Year Book of the 46th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1954), 6.

[10] "The Minutes of the Annual Sessions of the Committee of the Reference and Counsel of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America" (Hillsboro, KS: 1955), 4. B. J. Braun was a member of the Pacific District Committee Reference and Counsel as well as the General Conference Committee of Reference and Counsel. In a few months, Braun would accept the presidency of the newly founded Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. See "Braun Accepts Institute-Seminary Presidency," *The Christian Leader* (15 May 1955), 10-11.

specific Christian work project and for a specified period of time," while ordination was reserved exclusively for Christian workers who were "acceptable for the ministry of the Word within the framework of the M.B. Church."[11] Braun then provided a rationale for the rescinding of women's ordination:

> That in view of the fact that we as an MB Church, on the basis of clearly conceived scriptural convictions, do not admit sisters to the public gospel preaching ministry on par with brethren, we as a Conference designate the act of setting aside sisters to missionary work "a commissioning" rather than "an ordination."[12]

The Committee minutes provide no explanation of the "clearly conceived scriptural convictions" nor do they list any biblical references to support this motion. There is no indication that this proposal was ever submitted to the district conferences or the mission board requesting their feedback. This exact statement was presented to the 1957 General Conference three years later, where women had no opportunity to speak to the issue since only men were allowed to be conference delegates at that time.[13] It was this appeal to uncontested assumptions and the status quo of common practice, coupled with a lack of due process, which indicates that the rescinding of women's ordination reflected a much wider consensus of opinion among Mennonite Brethren.

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[11] "The Minutes of the Annual Sessions of the Committee of the Reference and Counsel of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America" (Hillsboro, KS: 1955), 13.

[12] Ibid.

[13] *Year Book of the 47th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1957), 106. Despite this new resolution, the long-standing practice of ordaining women missionaries did not fade away immediately. For example, Daisy Martens was ordained for mission work in Herbert, Saskatchewan, on June 15, 1958 by J. H. Epp, principal of Bethany Bible Institute and a member of the Board of Foreign Missions. Nancy Fehderau was also ordained on this same date in the Kitchener MB Church by J. B. Toews, Executive Secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions. See "Ordination-Farewell held for Daisy Martens," *The Christian Leader* (23 September 1958), 9; and "Missions News," *The Christian Leader* (17 June 1958), 7.

This consensus was also clearly evident in the articles and discussions about women's place in the church and the home by Mennonite Brethren during this same time period. The following examples reveal a consistent set of assumptions. J. J. Siemens, a minister in the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church, pointed out in 1956 that "the assignments of sisters lie in silence, in the home, in the family. That is her God directed place."[14] In 1957, New Testament scholar D. Edmond Hiebert reasoned that a woman could not "assume the office of a public teacher in the congregation" for this official position of "superiority and authority" was "inconsistent with her divinely assigned position of subordination to the man."[15] I. W. Redekopp, pastor of the Elmwood Mennonite Brethren Church in Winnipeg, observed in 1963, "We must note immediately that it is a woman's gift to serve through submission. The desire to be led is in her nature. If she grasps for leadership she leaves her greatest gift and can therefore only become less than she might be."[16]

The overturning of the almost sixty-year practice of ordaining women missionaries without any open dialogue or explicit biblical support may appear surprising, until we recognize that the power underlying the decision rested not with the process, but in the shared and unarticulated assumptions of the Mennonite Brethren community. However, this consensus would soon begin to crack as Mennonite Brethren encountered a changing society that questioned their perceptions.

The Emergence of Differing Convictions

The first challenge to Canadian Mennonite Brethren consensus surfaced quietly within women's columns published in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*

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[14] J. J. Siemens, "Die Stellung der Schwestern in der Gemeinde," trans. Hilda S. Heidebrecht, *Zionsbote* (30 May 1956), 4. Siemens, ordained to the preaching ministry in the Coaldale MB church in 1936, presented this paper at a ministers and deacons conference in Lindbrook, Alberta.

[15] D. Edmond Hiebert, *First Timothy* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1957), 60. Hiebert was professor of New Testament at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno and a colleague of B. J. Braun.

[16] I. W. Redekopp, "The Woman's Place in the Church," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (15 March 1963), 5. This was the first *Mennonite Brethren Herald* article to address women's role in the church.

(Canada) and *The Christian Leader* (United States). In particular, it was one person, Katie Funk Wiebe, who gave voice to the experience of women in the midst of the swirling social changes sweeping across North America. In 1962 Wiebe began a regular column in *The Christian Leader* entitled "Women and the Church," when she and her husband moved to Kansas from Canada.[17] Wiebe struggled to reconcile the "vast reservoir of untapped potential of . . . women" with the church's inability to think beyond traditional patterns of women's service.[18] She argued that women's changing role was "a problem which needs the careful guidance of church leaders instead of a gentle patting into submissiveness back to the kitchen and the sewing circle."[19] By 1970, Katie Funk Wiebe was actively calling for a Mennonite Brethren study conference on "the position of women in the church."[20]

While Katie Funk Wiebe resonated with the changes in society that encouraged broader participation of women beyond their traditional roles, it wasn't until 1970 that she also began to identify with the Women's Liberation Movement's plea to treat women "like persons and not like objects."[21] Wiebe

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[17] Wiebe's column replaced the previous column entitled, "Pots, Pans and Patter for Christian Homemakers." Walter Wiebe, her husband, passed away in November 1962. See Orlando Harms, "Editorial: Walter Wiebe, 1918-1962," *The Christian Leader* (27 November 1962), 2, 20. For Katie Funk Wiebe's reflections, see Katie Funk Wiebe, "When God Does Not Heal," *The Christian Leader* (12 December 1972), 6-7.

[18] See Katie Wiebe, "Women and the Church," *The Christian Leader* (21 August 1962), 21; Katie Wiebe, "Women and the Church," *The Christian Leader* (4 September 1962), 21; Katie Wiebe, "Women and the Church," *The Christian Leader* (23 July 1963), 21; and Katie Funk Wiebe, "Continuing Education for Women," *The Christian Leader* (7 November 1967), 29.

[19] Katie Funk Wiebe, "A Problem without a Name," *The Christian Leader* (13 April 1965), 25. See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963). Wiebe questioned whether the "church has fallen short by building an image for women which includes mostly silence and submission—a silence which is empty, and a submission which too often has been a negation of individuality?" See also, Katie Funk Wiebe, "The Image Is Wrong," *The Christian Leader* (1 March 1966), 21; and Katie Funk Wiebe, "A Timely Topic for Women," *The Christian Leader* (22 November 1966), 21.

[20] Katie Funk Wiebe, "I Am Confused," *The Christian Leader* (10 February 1970), 19.

[21] Katie Funk Wiebe, "Liberation—For Men and Women," *The Christian Leader* (3 November 1970), 19; and Katie Funk Wiebe, "Color Me a Person," *Mennonite Brethren*

persistently critiqued the church's acceptance of "myths" about women that "have become so intertwined with biblical teaching that it has become difficult to extricate truth from tradition."[22] However, it may be because Wiebe's appeal for transformed attitudes and practices in the church was grounded primarily in pragmatic values and her personal experience, with only passing references to key biblical texts addressing women, that her voice was often ignored within the church itself.[23]

The second challenge to Canadian Mennonite Brethren consensus was a spontaneous shift in practice. Five women attended the Canadian Mennonite Brethren convention as official delegates for the first time in 1968.[24] These women were simply sent as delegates by their local churches prior to any deliberate policy change by the conference. The door was now cracked open and the ripple effect of more and more women attending conventions as delegates began to raise implications for women's involvement in the local

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Herald (28 December 1973), 2-5, 7. Wiebe, nevertheless, remains apprehensive with the "feminist" label. See Katie Funk Wiebe, "Another Kind of Feminism," *The Christian Leader* (23 December 1975), 11.

[22] Katie Funk Wiebe, "Women's Freedom—The Church's Necessity," *Direction* 1, no. 3 (1972): 82.

[23] For example, see Frank C. Peters, "Doubt—Involvement—Women in the Church," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (20 March 1970), 28. Peters expressed concern that any change in polity regarding women in the church must be based on careful biblical exegesis and not in response to pressure from "liberation movements." For brief references to 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, see Katie Wiebe, "Women and the Church," *The Christian Leader* (10 July 1962), 21; and Katie Wiebe, "Women and the Church," *The Christian Leader* (3 September 1963), 21. For the use of biblical women as models, see Katie Funk Wiebe, "The Image is Wrong," *The Christian Leader* (1 March 1966), 21; and Katie Funk Wiebe, "Leave Her Alone," *The Christian Leader* (21 March 1972), 19. For an appeal to Paul's assertion in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ there is neither male nor female, see Katie Funk Wiebe, "I am Confused," *The Christian Leader* 10 February 1970), 19.

[24] Harold Jantz, "Editorial: Barrier Fallen," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (26 July 1968), 3. The five female delegates included: Irene E. Willems and Betty Willems from Saskatchewan; Mrs. Paul Poetker and Mrs. Don Neufeld from Alberta; and Anne Neufeld from British Columbia. See *Year Book of the Fifty-eighth Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (Clearbrook, BC: Christian Press, 1968), 146-150.

church.[25] Uneasiness about the participation of women prompted some delegates to ask the Canadian Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns at the 1970 convention: "Why do we have women delegates at our conferences? Is it biblical?"[26] The Ontario conference leadership was the first group in Canada to pick up these questions and they conceded that, since women were welcome at local church business meetings, it would only be consistent that they should be recognized as conference delegates.[27] Nevertheless, in light of a study paper presented by F. C. Peters, the Ontario Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns deliberately reaffirmed the perceived consensus that "men have a specific responsibility under God to be leaders and responsible teachers in church and conference activities."[28]

The third challenge to Canadian Mennonite Brethren consensus came with the publication of an alternative interpretation of the key biblical texts, which dared to question the Canadian Conference leadership's official endorsement of F. C. Peters' traditional approach.[29] In May 1973 the

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[25] Ten women attended the 1969 General Conference convention as delegates and 24 women attended the 1970 Canadian Conference convention. See *1969 Yearbook of the Sixtieth Convention General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (Vancouver, BC: Christian Press, 1969), 3-7; and *1970 Yearbook of the Sixtieth Convention Canadian Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (Saskatoon, SK: Christian Press, 1970), 127-130.

[26] "Minutes of the Canadian Conference Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns," (29-30 December 1970), 2. The board's response was to refer this question to the upcoming 1971 General Conference Study Conference; however, the issue of women in the church was not addressed.

[27] *1972 Yearbook of the Forty-first Annual Provincial Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Ontario* (Virgil, ON: Christian Press, 1972), 17.

[28] "Minutes of the B.S.S.C. Mtg. in Toronto" (21 October 1972), 2. See Frank C. Peters, "The Place of Women in the Life of the Church," unpublished paper (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Archives, Papers and Essays, No. 7, Box 8, Folder Mb., 1972).

[29] Frank C. Peters, "Editorial Procedure Unfair," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (13 July 1973), 7. Frank C. Peters' paper, which he presented to both the Ontario and Canadian Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns, was approved by the Canadian Conference Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns in 1973 as their official position. See Frank C. Peters, "The Place of the Sister in the Life of the Church," unpublished paper (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Archives, 1973); "Minutes of the Sessions of the

Mennonite Brethren Herald devoted an entire issue to the question of women in the church, which included a feature article by Allan Guenther and Herb Swartz.[30] Guenther and Swartz acknowledged the need "to distinguish between abiding Biblical principles and the passing cultural elements which may have occasioned the teachings or otherwise shaped their expression."[31] At the same time, they recognized that one's contemporary cultural setting can also shape the concrete expression or application of biblical principles. Guenther and Swartz argued that since "the creation order is superseded by the redemptive order," then "the contemporary application of Biblical teaching would be that women should be encouraged and feel free to use the gifts God has given them to build the church."[32]

Guenther and Swartz's article was significant because it presented Canadian Mennonite Brethren with an alternative hermeneutic that challenged conventional interpretive strategies in a way that was never experienced among Mennonite Brethren in the United States.[33] Furthermore, this article generated an impassioned public debate among readers, thus engaging the wider Canadian Mennonite Brethren community in the discussion for the first time.[34] Questions were even raised at the July 1973

Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns" (12-14 January 1973), 1; and *Yearbook: 62nd Convention Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Three Hills, AB: Christian Press, 1973), 9.

[30] Allen R. Guenther and Herbert Swartz, "The Role of Women in the Church," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (4 May 1973), 4-9. Guenther and Swartz, two former Mennonite Brethren Bible College instructors, were both working on doctoral degrees in Toronto at the time.

[31] Ibid., 4.

[32] Ibid., 4, 9. Guenther and Swartz suggest, "This includes mission work, counselling, teaching Sunday School, preaching, teaching in our denominational schools, participation in Bible studies, voting, being convention representatives and board members."

[33] The United States Conference distributed and published an uncontested defence of the traditional stance in 1972. See D. Edmond Hiebert, "Woman's Role in the Church," *The Christian Leader* (8 August 1972), 2-5, 12-13.

[34] Nineteen letters were written in response to Guenther and Swartz's article; and of the twelve written by Canadians, 58 percent disagreed with their interpretation. John Redekop remarked that this "must surely be one of the most significant items ever

Canadian Conference convention about the *Herald* publishing articles not in agreement with the doctrinal view of the conference. Editor Peter Klassen responded, "How can we reach brotherhood consensus if the brotherhood stifles discussion in advance?"[35] It seems that Guenther and Swartz's article finally created enough dissonance to prompt the Canadian Conference to officially address the role of women in the church at its 1974 study conference in Vancouver.[36]

Negotiating the Collapse of Consensus

How did the Canadian Conference seek to address this challenge to their shared consensus regarding the role of women in the church? The primary approach taken by the Mennonite Brethren since the mid 1950s, when faced with controversial issues, was to gather the community together for study and conversation.[37] The usual practice, following a time of study, also included the formulation of a convention resolution, which was intended to provide guidance for local churches. Between 1974 and 2006, Mennonite Brethren addressed the question of women's roles in the church through four study conferences and in seven resolutions.[38] Noteworthy were the particular strategies employed by Mennonite Brethren leaders as they negotiated the presence of conflicting convictions within the community, namely, the attempt to find a mediating position; the endeavour to better understand the opposing sides of the issue; and the allowance for diversity of conviction and practice.

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published by this periodical." See John H. Redekop, "The Role of Women," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (15 June 1973), 8.

[35] Peter Klassen, "Controversial Articles in the *Herald*," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (31 August 1973), 10.

[36] *Yearbook: 62nd Convention Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Three Hills, AB: Christian Press, 1973), 9-10. See page 3 where questions were raised at the July 1973 convention regarding whether the *Herald* should publish articles not in agreement with the doctrinal view of the conference.

[37] Regular study conferences became the method of choice for engaging Mennonite Brethren in conversation around relevant issues following the first one in 1956. See "Report of the Winnipeg Study Conference," *The Christian Leader* (1 January 1957), 9, 13.

[38] The study conferences were sponsored by either the Canadian Conference (1974 and 2004-2005) or the General Conference (1980 and 1989).

The Canadian Conference initiated the first study conference in 1974 by asking New Testament scholar David Ewert to present a biblical study of the place of women within the church.[39] Ewert brought an innovative hermeneutical strategy to reading and applying the key biblical texts regarding women in the church, an approach which resonated with Canadian Mennonite Brethren.[40] He was cognizant that this issue "could lead to polarization and division in the brotherhood."[41] Ewert's interpretive approach was to preserve the inherent tension that he perceived existed between the affirming and restricting texts in the New Testament and then to apply that same tension to the practical questions that Mennonite Brethren were bringing to the Bible regarding women's involvement in the conference and the church. Ewert was able both to affirm the freedom and gifting of women and, at the same time, to restrict women from the preaching ministry and pastoral leadership on the basis of the order of creation and male headship.[42] By doing so, Ewert navigated a mediating position between those who questioned "established church customs" and those who feared a capitulation to contemporary cultural (particularly feminist) attitudes and values.[43] Official consensus, albeit reduced in its scope, was still maintained with the approval of a Canadian Conference resolution in 1975, which both limited and endorsed the involvement of women in the conference and church.[44]

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[39] Ewert had written on this topic earlier. See David Ewert, "Women in the Church," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (25 February 1966), 4-6.

[40] David Ewert, "The Christian Woman in the Church and the Conference," in *Roles and Resources* (Vancouver: Faith and Life Convention of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1974), 22-40.

[41] Ibid., 32.

[42] Ibid., 23, 31, 33-34.

[43] Ibid., 23.

[44] "The Place of the Woman in the Church," *64th Convention Yearbook: Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Regina, SK: Christian Press, 1975): 9-10, 106. The original resolution brought to the convention was so hotly contested that it was referred back to the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns and eventually approved in a much limited form. Women were restricted from being ordained to the preaching and pastoral ministry as well as being elected to boards "whose work is of the nature of eldership." Women were, however, "eligible to be elected as delegates to conferences and to church and conference boards and committees." For an

Five years later, this time at the 1980 General Conference study conference in Clearbrook, David Ewert again presented a paper in which he sought to outline a biblical view of women in the church.[45] Ewert continued to promote a hermeneutical strategy that was cautious of attempts to "harmonize the freedom passages with the restriction passages" by setting aside one set of texts in favour of another.[46] Instead, on the one hand, he argued that the biblical command to be silent must be understood "in light of the status of womanhood" within the first century and so cannot be universalized for all time; on the other hand, he asserted that women's freedom to use their gifts must be qualified "in light of the creation order and the strong emphasis . . . on man's headship."[47] Ewert, however, did not explicitly articulate the assumptions underlying his view of the order of creation and male headship, which led him to the conclusion that women should be restricted from pastoral leadership and ordination to the pastoral ministry.[48]

The 1981 General Conference "Resolution on the Ministry of Women in the Church," written by David Ewert following the 1980 study conference, continued to reflect his attempt to express a mediating position among

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interpretation of this resolution, see Frank C. Peters, "Women in the Church," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (28 November 1975), 18.

[45] David Ewert, "The 'Place' of the Woman in the Church," unpublished paper (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Archives, Papers and Essays, No. 6, Box 6, Folder N, 1980), 1-22. Two years earlier Ewert had presented another version of this paper at an MCC-sponsored symposium in Clearbrook. See David Ewert, "The Place of the Christian Woman: In the NT Epistolary Literature," unpublished paper (Clearbrook: Biblical Perspectives on Women in the Church, 1978), 1-26. See pages 14-15, where Ewert saw his task as harmonizing the freedom and restrictive passages without explaining either set of texts "away" in light of the other.

[46] Ewert, "The 'Place' of the Woman in the Church," 9.

[47] Ibid., 12, 13, 19, 20, 21.

[48] Ibid., 22. For a critique of Ewert's paper, see Karen Berg Neufeld, "Response To: 'The 'Place' of the Woman in the Church,'" unpublished paper (Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Archives, Papers and Essays, No. 6, Box 6, Folder N, 1980), 1-5. Neufeld critiqued Ewert for failing to provide a thorough discussion of the meaning of the order of creation and the headship of men, which would support his conclusion. She also argued that Ewert's unstated leadership model underlying his restriction of women equated pastoral ministry with authority leadership.

Mennonite Brethren.[49] Consequently, the resolution both encouraged women to participate "in local church and conference ministries" and restricted them from ordination to "pastoral leadership."[50] Questions from the convention floor, wondering whether women could now "be elders, serve on church councils, serve at communion or teach in our colleges," highlighted the ambiguous nature of the resolution, and prompted David Ewert to state, "we have only drawn the limitation at one place—on the pastoral ministry."[51] It appears as if the Board of Reference and Counsel (formerly the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns) was unprepared to address the pragmatic implications arising with their affirmation of greater freedom for women.

While on the surface the 1981 General Conference resolution portrayed a united stance, it in fact revealed a growing fissure emerging among Mennonite Brethren in their attitude towards women in the church. Already at the 1981 convention, convention delegates expressed concern about the perceived negative tone of the resolution despite the Board of Reference and Counsel's intent to encourage the expansion of women's involvement in the church.[52] Three years later in 1984, the Board of Reference and Counsel

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[49] "The Resolution on the Place of Women in the Church," *Yearbook: 55th Session General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (7-11 August 1981): 46-47. The title was later changed to refer to the "ministry" of women rather than the "place" of women in the church. Ewert summarized the intent of the resolution during the discussion on the convention floor by stating, "The New Testament reflects a dialectic. It presents tremendous freedom on one hand, and limitations on the other. We have tried to reflect this." See Wally Kroeker, Don Ratzlaff, Harold Jantz, and Gordon Nickel, "Moving Ahead While Looking Back," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (18 August 1981), 6.

[50] "The Resolution on the Place of Women in the Church," 47. The restriction is clearly addressing the practice of ordination.

[51] Kroeker, et al., "Moving Ahead While Looking Back," 6. Henry H. Dick, chair of BORAC, would later caution against interpreting the resolution to mean literally that women can do anything in the church "except serve as ordained pastors." See "Expanding the Ministry of Women: An Interview with Henry H. Dick, Chairman, Board of Reference and Counsel," *The Christian Leader* (30 November 1982), 5.

[52] See Kroeker, et al., "Moving Ahead While Looking Back," 6, and "The Resolution on the Place of Women in the Church," 47. The motion was approved with the provision that David Ewert would likely add an additional explanatory paragraph. This never happened.

attempted to respond to the call for a more positive statement by encouraging churches to "open more doors for service" for women.[53] Nevertheless, conference leaders were chided by delegates for providing "little leadership" for churches and for not intentionally nominating women to conference positions.[54] The board appeared uncertain about how exactly to proceed, although they did recognize the need for further guidelines.

In 1986 Board of Reference and Counsel appointed a Task Force on the Role of Women, comprised of both women and men, to prepare a resolution for the 1987 General Conference convention, which would provide greater specificity regarding guidelines for church practice.[55] However, the Board of Reference and Counsel was again surprised by challenges to the resolution from the convention floor; this time by delegates who expressed concern that the board had "offered privileges not granted by scripture."[56] The tone of convention delegates now reflected a very different attitude than the call for more openness expressed at the previous two conventions. In the end, the specific guidelines were removed and a very general statement was approved, which added little to the 1981 resolution on women in ministry.[57] The Board of Reference and Counsel now faced the difficult prospect of holding together an increasingly polarized constituency. Ewert's mediating strategy seemed

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[53] "Ministry of Women in Our Churches," *Yearbook: 56th Session General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (12-16 October 1984): 75-76. This Statement of Counsel was written by Waldo Hiebert.

[54] Wally Kroeker, Jim Coggins, and Harold Jantz, "Gospel is Growing, Church Celebrates," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (2 November 1984), 7.

[55] "Resolution on Women in Ministry," *Yearbook: 57th Session General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (7-11 August 1987): 46-47. The Task Force was comprised of Katie Funk Wiebe, Lorina Marsh, Esther Wiens, Ray Bystrom, Waldo Hiebert, and John E. Toews. See "Minutes Board of Reference and Counsel," (1-3 May 1986), 6.

[56] Don Ratzlaff, "General Conference Reports: Board of Reference and Counsel" *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (28 August 1987), 15-16. Herb Brandt, chair of the Board of Reference and Counsel, "maintained that the resolution only added more detail and worded more positively the resolution on women in ministry that had passed at the 1981 convention."

[57] "Resolution on Women in Ministry," *Yearbook: 57th Session General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (7-11 August, 1987): 72.

unable to provide the guidance needed to negotiate a path when the will to compromise was no longer there.

The second strategy attempted by Mennonite Brethren leaders to address the disintegration of consensus was to provide a forum where the two opposing positions represented among Mennonite Brethren could be better understood. The first endeavour used the familiar pattern of a study conference in 1989. Ed Boschman, a pastor from Kelowna, provided a defense of the perspective restricting the positions of elders and pastors to males.[58] New Testament scholar Tim Geddert, however, sidestepped the Board of Reference and Counsel's agenda and instead proposed a very different way to address the current diversity of interpretation and opinion.[59] Geddert suggested that Mennonite Brethren should grant freedom to churches to practice their convictions even when others did not share them.[60] He reasoned that "it is not inappropriate for churches in different contexts to reach different conclusions;" therefore, any attempt to impose uniformity on churches undermines rather than facilitates ongoing dialogue and discernment.[61] Geddert suggested it is only when Mennonite Brethren "are willing and able to dialogue openly about . . . hermeneutics, without criticizing or judging each other" that they would be able to move toward consensus on the issue.[62]

Another attempt to create a better understanding of the two opposing approaches to women in ministry came in the form of the 1992 congregational study guide, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, which had been commissioned by the Board of Reference and Counsel.[63] John E. Toews stated

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[58] See Ed Boschman, "Women's Role in Ministry in the Church," *Direction* 18, no. 2 (1989): 44-53.

[59] Timothy J. Geddert, "The Ministry of Women—A Proposal for Mennonite Brethren," *Direction* 18, no. 2 (1989): 54-71. Geddert's refusal to engage Boschman in debate did not provide the intended alternative response to Boschman's assertions. For a review, see Don Ratzlaff, "MBs Study, But Don't Resolve," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (25 August 1989), 14-16.

[60] Ibid., 69.

[61] Ibid., 70.

[62] Ibid., 66-67.

[63] John E. Toews, Valerie Rempel, and Katie Funk Wiebe, eds., *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Women in Ministry in the Church* (Winnipeg, MB; Hillsboro, KS: Kindred

that the intent of the book was "to stimulate Bible study and discussion in local churches about the role of women in church ministry."[64] Initially, the plan for the book was to present an egalitarian interpretation of the key biblical texts. However, two of the thirteen chapters were later replaced with ones representing a more traditional perspective. A revised version of David Ewert's 1980 study conference paper was included along with an exploration of the significance of the order of creation for women's roles in the church by Elmer Martens, a professor of Old Testament.[65] Despite the intent to help people sort out which interpretation was preferable based on a sound exegesis of the biblical texts, John E. Toews and Valerie Rempel concluded by noting, "We do not believe that the real issues concerning women in church ministry are biblical, but psychological and sociological. The deeper issues are personal questions of sexuality, power and personal identity."[66]

While *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy* generated positive discussion within churches, it also served as a stimulus to polarize Mennonite Brethren even further. In an extended review of *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy* in the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, the majority of respondents challenged the hermeneutical approach, cautioned about possible accommodations to contemporary culture, and questioned the integrity of the entire process.[67] These reviews prompted a flood of letters to the editor, which were almost equally divided between support and opposition for the book's affirmation of women in church leadership.

Following the publication of *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, the General

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Press, 1992). For a summary, see Susan Brandt, "Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: A Summary," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (20 November 1992), 4-5.

[64] John E. Toews, "Why This Book," in Toews, et al., eds., *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy*, 13.

[65] See David Ewert, "Members by Grace," in ibid., 17-30; and Elmer A. Martens, "Adam Named Her Eve," in ibid., 31-45.

[66] John E. Toews and Valerie Rempel, "What is at Stake?" in ibid., 208. Ron Geddert also concluded that the failure to follow through on the 1981 resolution suggested that the problem was really sociological rather than theological because, even though the giftedness of women for ministry was affirmed, churches had trouble accepting it in practice. See Ron Geddert, "Editorial: The Real Problem," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (20 November 1992), 2-3.

[67] See *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (10 November 1992), 6-14.

Conference Board of Faith and Life (formerly the Board of Reference and Counsel) was very aware that consensus among Mennonite Brethren was not imminent and they began considering a third strategy; "a resolution that would seek middle ground."[68] It is at this point that Tim Geddert's earlier proposal to grant churches the freedom to hold differing convictions was adopted as an interim strategy to address the loss of consensus among Mennonite Brethren. The Board of Faith and Life, in their proposed resolution, appealed to Mennonite Brethren not to use this issue as a test of Christian integrity and faithfulness, nor as the motivation to break the bond of fellowship with one another.[69] Rather, they called on delegates "to allow for diversity of conviction and practice in the appointment of women to pastoral leadership in ways that are consistent with the governance patterns of the local congregation."[70]

Don Ratzlaff summarized the flavour of the discussion by delegates in response to the proposed resolution:

> Take an emotion-laden doctrinal debate. Mix it with a long-standing concern for biblical faithfulness. Now add to that a heavy emphasis on the importance of covenant community and theological integrity. Stir for several years and pour it into the mold of compromise. What do you get? A recipe for disaster.[71]

In addition to disagreements about how to interpret the Bible, several delegates expressed concern about the introduction of a level of local church autonomy that would be difficult to undo later.[72] If each church was allowed to follow its own convictions, would there be the mutual commitment needed to do the hard work of hermeneutics together with those who disagree? At the end of a difficult conversation, the resolution was defeated and consensus still remained a distant and elusive ideal.

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[68] Don Ratzlaff, "BFL: A Vote on Women, Hymnal," *The Mennonite Brethren Herald* (30 April 1993), 16.

[69] "Women in Leadership," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (11 June 1993), 12.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Don Ratzlaff, "Smorgasbord of Issues gets Mixed Reviews," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (6 August 1993), 7.

[72] *Yearbook: 59th Session General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (7-11 July 1993): 33-35.

Implications for Living with Conflicting Convictions in the Church

Thirteen years later, delegates of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference affirmed their willingness to allow for diversity of conviction and practice among churches regarding women in church leadership.[73] While consensus was still not a reality, congregations were willing to live with conflicting convictions within the denomination on what was defined as a non-confessional issue. Nevertheless, this decision raises new concerns because it is now the responsibility of local church members to arrive at a consensus regarding their own particular practice of church leadership. I suspect that consensus will be just as elusive at the congregational level as it was within the larger denomination.

So what can we learn from the process of communal discernment engaged in by Canadian Mennonite Brethren that could help local churches process their own response to women in church leadership? How does an understanding of this process enable denominations within the Believers Church tradition to appropriately address the presence of conflicting convictions?

First, the nature of consensus within the church needs to be explored further. During the 1950s, consensus among Mennonite Brethren was exhibited in the acceptance of uncontested assumptions, an appeal to the status quo, and a lack of due process. However, uniformity of opinion should not simply be equated with consensus. Rather, consensus represents the outcome of the openness to hear alternative voices, the deliberate examination of issues, intentional and likely difficult conversation around disagreements, and the affirmation of shared convictions. Claims of consensus remain hollow without an appreciation for the process of communal discernment.

Second, challenges to consensus should not be ignored. Alternative and marginal voices have much to offer the larger church community, particularly when they are able to see what others cannot. These voices may be easy to disregard; however, we do so at the risk of potentially silencing the Spirit's voice within the church. A better approach would be to listen carefully and then weigh what is said as a community.[74]

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[73] The reasons the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference moved in this direction in 2006 are beyond the scope of this paper.

[74] For example, see the pattern advocated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:29.

Third, practice and conviction are integrally linked. A change in practice within the church already reflects shifting convictions and will prove difficult to reverse without deliberately examining those convictions. We should not live with a dichotomy between what the church believes and what the church does.

Fourth, conversation around conflicting convictions must also address the interpretive strategies used to support those convictions. Disagreements are not just about what we believe, but also about how we arrive at those beliefs. Simply to provide two alternative approaches, and assume that people will be able to agree with the best defensible option, fails to recognize the powerful yet unexamined undercurrents supporting those different convictions.

Fifth, attempts to reach consensus through a mediating position may not adequately address the differences between conflicting convictions. Compromise looks very different than consensus because neither group is entirely satisfied with the end result. When the will for compromise is no longer there, the potential for further polarization arises.

Finally, diversity of practice and conviction may not necessarily be incompatible with consensus. Consensus within the church can be defined more broadly than uniform agreement on one particular issue. Consensus around the value of unity in relationship or mission is not undermined by differences among churches. Nevertheless, several questions still remain. Will the acceptance of diverse practices and convictions thwart further attempts to reach consensus on an issue? How does the church decide when to seek consensus and when to allow for diversity?

The journey of Canadian Mennonite Brethren in response to the loss of consensus regarding women in church leadership provides a fascinating, though not always positive, example of how a denomination sought to address the presence of conflicting convictions. Their commitment to engage in a process of communal discernment as they sought to hear God's Spirit through Scripture and through one another, even when it was difficult, is very commendable. Local congregations can also learn from the experience of the Mennonite Brethren as they seek to walk faithfully amidst the presence of conflicting convictions within the church.

Part III

REVIEWING ASSUMPTIONS

Chapter Six

Believers Church Ecclesiology: A Vital Alternative within the Ecumenical Family

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Fernando Enns

The apostle Paul describes the church primarily as the "body of Christ."[1] The church, then, is called to be the body of Christ, and to live in the promise of the kingdom of God. This depiction of the church and its calling raises several preliminary questions for us.

First, we are faced with the reality of a plurality of church traditions. Which church institution is the body of Christ? In the Believers Church tradition the question has its own complexity. Given a Believers Church understanding of ecclesiology, where do we *locate* the body of Christ? Is it the local church, what we call the congregation? Is it a group of congregations, sometimes known as a church conference? Is it the "national" church? Is it the denomination as expressed in a world communion such as the Mennonite World Conference or the Baptist World Alliance? Or should we refer to all these different levels as a composite of the body of Christ?

Second, the church is fraught with the reality of conflicts and schisms, of difficulties and shortcomings. How do we *locate* that church which we can claim to be the body of Christ? Our experience prevents us from speaking too easily of our "church" as the body of Christ. And yet, theologically speaking,

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[1] Cf. Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; Eph 1:23; 4:16; 5:23, 30, et al.

we believe and confess that the church is the body of Christ. We claim this description because this is what the New Testament promises to us and calls us to be.

Third, given the tension between our reality and our theology, a third question arises: What are the criteria for defining the social entity we understand as "church" and describe as the "body of Christ"?

Preliminary Reflections on Doing Ecclesiology: Believed *Church and* Experienced *Church*

These questions trigger crucial and necessary preliminary reflections when doing ecclesiology. If we do not clarify them, let alone resolve them, I believe we will end up time and again in *aporias* or with misunderstandings. History bears evidence of countless schisms precisely because of unclarity concerning these questions, or because of different ways of answering them. There are other questions as well, but for now we will focus on these.

Paradoxically, the church is already what she is destined to become. Her very being is determined by her calling. In the midst of this historical reality, the church is constantly challenged by the truth to which she has been called. This tension becomes evident to every ecclesiology, for both "calling" and "promise" apply to the church in her historical state. Therefore, I propose to differentiate between the *believed church*—according to her calling—and the *experienced church*—according to the way we concretely experience church.[2]

In order not to separate but still to differentiate, one might suggest the following: The *experienced church* constantly knows herself in relation to and in tension with the *believed church*. We need to examine this tension theologically, as it appears to be rooted in the church's very essence. It is present in the ecclesiological reflection of all traditions. Among the traditions, different terms and concepts have been developed to describe this tension.

In Orthodoxy, ecclesiology has not undergone dogmatic fixation.[3] The Orthodox churches would not accurately be characterized as an institution

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[2] Cf. Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press; and Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2007), 1.

[3] Cf. Anastasios Kallis, Art., "Kirche, V. Orthodoxe Kirche," in *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (*TRE*), vol. 18, 252-262. Gregorius Larentzakis, *Die Orthodoxe Kirche: Ihr Leben und Ihr Glaube* (Wien: Styria, 2000).

but more as a "spiritual certitude." Here ecclesiology is a "unique experience," a "new life." "Consistently there can be no satisfactory and substantial definition of the church," says Vitally Borovoy.[4] A full grasp of what the church is cannot be contained in a definition. Thus the Orthodox answer to the question of the church's essence is "Come and see—one recognizes the church only through experience, through grace, by partaking of its life. For that reason, before any kind of formal definition can be formulated, one must understand the church in its mystical being. This understanding underlies, and far exceeds, all other definitions," says Borovoy.

In Roman Catholic ecclesiology, a distinction is made between "sacrament" and "institution," between the "mystical body of Christ" in the power of which the church lives and the real "eucharistic body of Christ."[5] Yet there is an inseparable unity between the invisible mystical body and the visible eucharistic body. The church is the result of a coalescing of human and divine elements. That the mystical body is then simply identified with the Roman Catholic Church presents a particular challenge to the ecclesiologies of the ecumenical community. The second Vatican Council tried to develop a *communio*-ecclesiology and set out to interpret church not only as mystery but as the visible church in all its complex reality. The following statement is the key to the Council's modification of Catholic ecclesiology: *Haec Ecclesia in hoc mundo ut societas constituta et ordinata, subsistit in Ecclesia catholica* ("This Church constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church").[6] But the discussions within Roman Catholicism and in

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[4] Vitally Borovoy, "Die kirchliche Bedeutung des ÖRK: Vermächtnis und Verheissung von Toronto," *Es begann in Amsterdam, Beiheft zur Oekumenischen Rundschau* (*OeR*) 59 (Frankfurt, M: Lembeck, 1989), 166. Borovoy relies on Sergij N. Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1988), trans. from the Russian (London: Centenary, 1935).

[5] Cf. Josef Finkenzeller, Art. "Kirche, IV: Katholische Kirche," in *TRE*, vol. 18, 227-252, 229.

[6] *Lumen Gentium*, 8, *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II.* Douglas G. Bushman, "Introductions," ed. Marianne Lorraine Trouvé (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1999). In addition, other ways of being are at least minimally thinkable. The non-Catholic churches are now recognized as "*Ecclesiae vel communitates ecclesiasticae, ecclesiales*" ("Churches or ecclesiastical communities, and ecclesial*"), cf. Lumen*

its ecumenical relations continue to this day, especially following the latest declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.[7] It appears that for Roman Catholicism the relationship of *believed church* and *experienced church* remains itself a *mysterium*.[8]

In the Protestant churches, even given their great variety, church is understood first and foremost as *creatura verbi divini* (a creation by God's Word).[9] The conceptual differentiation between *ecclesia visibilis* (visible church) and *ecclesia invisibilis* (invisible church), which has its origin in an Augustinian distinction, occurs with Zwingli[10] and then again with Calvin.[11] Luther differentiated between the visible and the "hidden" church (*ecclesia abscondita*),[12] and related the inner foundation to the outer structure of the church using the image of soul and body.[13] "According to this relationship," says Wilfried Härle, "the hidden church is the inner life principle, over against

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Gentium, 15; Unitatis Redintegratio, 3, 19, 22, ibid. Some 30 years later the Roman Catholic Church is not able to describe the relationship differently.

[7] "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church" (29 June 2007), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/-documents. See also *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church,* published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Baltimore, MD: L'Osservatore Romano, 2000) Special Insert.

[8] Cf. e.g., Werner Löser, *Anmerkungen zur Ekklesiologie aus römisch-katholischer Sicht*, in Dietrich Ritschl and Peter Neuner, eds., *Kirchen in Gemeinschaft—Gemeinschaft der Kirche: Studie des Deutschen Ökumenischen Studienausschusses (DÖSTA) zu Fragen der Ekklesiologie, Beiheft zur OeR 66* (Frankfurt, M: Lembeck, 1993), 117.

[9] *"Ecclesia enim creatura est Euangelii,"* in D. Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (abbr. *WA*) (Weimar, 1883ff.; Neudruck: Graz, 1964ff); WA 2, 430, 6f. (Engl.: *Works* [abbr. *LW*], American edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaraslov Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman [St. Louis, MS: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1955-1986].

[10] Cf. Huldrych Zwingli, *Exposito christianae fidei* (1531), in *Schriften*, vol. 4, ed. Th. Brunnschweiler and S. Lutz (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1995).

[11] Cf. *Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia* (abbr. *CO*), ed. G. Baum, E. Kunitz, and E. Reuss, 58 vols. (Braunschweig and Berlin, 1863-1900). Especially *Institutio Religionis Christianae* (Endgestalt 1559), vol. IV, 1, 2-7.

[12] *WA* 18, 652, 23.

[13] Cf. *WA* 6, 296f.

which the visible church is the outer living form, whereby the one cannot exist without the other."[14] However, both elements together— the inner basis and the earthly form—belong to the church's essence as one communion of believers, for the hidden church necessarily exists in outer structures. For Lutherans, the church is "the communion of saints, a company or gathering of such people as are Christian and holy." As Martin Luther said, they "receive forgiveness and grace through Christ, they conquer sin through the Holy Spirit, and thereby they are enlivened and renewed."[15] The tension between *believed church* and *experienced church* expresses itself in the faith of each individual, and from there it is brought to bear on the community of believers. According to this view, church is thus always the simultaneous communion of sinners and justified believers (a *communio simul peccatorum et sanctorum*—a *corpus permixtum*).

For the Believers Church tradition, the church is first and foremost the gathered community of believers who, on the basis of their personal confession of faith in baptism, have announced their voluntary entrance into the community. They form the body of Christ as a *visible* community of disciples. The church is the community of the elected, the "household of God," an eschatological community, becoming visible by living a messianic ethic. Differentiated from the world, the true church is outwardly visible by virtue of the absolute priority of obedience to divine authority against human and worldly "powers."[16] There is mutual admonition, forgiveness, and harmony. An abundance of gifts guarantees the awareness of local as well as universal autonomy and completeness. On the basis of the teachings of early Anabaptists, John Howard Yoder critiqued the Augustinian concept of an invisible church (*ecclesia invisibilis*),[17] a concept that has influenced the entire history of theology in the West. Yoder believed that this concept became necessary only because of the church's sociologically changed situation during

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[14] Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik* (Berlin; New York: de Gruyter, 1995), 573.

[15] *WA* 50, 624.

[16] Cf. e.g., especially Balthasar Hubmeier, *Schriften,* Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer, 9, ed. Gunnar Westin (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1962).

[17] Cf. in almost all the writings of John Howard Yoder, e.g., "The Otherness of the Church" (1960) and "Christ, the Hope of the World" (1966) in John H. Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 194-218.

the Constantinian shift, when the category of "world" against "church" was no longer conceivable. The only solution was to differentiate within the concept of church itself. Neo-Platonism offered the solution with its view that, empirically, reality is neither graspable nor visible.

There are voices in the Believers Church tradition as well that notice the tension between *believed church* and *experienced church*. Paul Peachey rightly concludes that the church "cannot justify itself by pointing to its invisibility, rather the church is justified in her Lord. She is his body, despite and with her inadequacies. This is one consequence of the incarnation that God entered into human weakness once and for all." Peachey continues: "[I]t is the idioms of grace and of faith that define the church. To witness to that reality is the only identity that the peace churches possess."[18]

Gordon D. Kaufman proposes an alternative to the language of invisible and visible, suggesting instead a distinction between eschatological and empirical speech about the church.[19] Eschatological language means "all humankind transformed into God's kingdom." Empirical talk refers to the community of believers living by this hope.

Thus we see that the tension between experience and belief is common to all traditions, and the search for appropriate resolutions of this tension between *essence* and *existence* continues. Moreover, the churches of the Reformation seem to have realized that this is an issue they should not neglect. The energy generated by this tension contributes to the church's continual renewal and thus becomes the "Reformation principle" of *ecclesia semper reformanda* (the church is always to be reformed). As Karl Barth has stated, the church is the "earthly-historical form of existence" of Christ.[20] As such, she appears to have engaged in an "institutionalized conflict" from the very beginning.

For all confessional groups, this tension finds an explicit expression primarily in worship, the occasion when the church gathers in the name of

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[18] Paul Peachey, "The Peace Churches as Ecumenical Witness," in J. Richard Burkholder and Calvin Redekop, eds., *Kingdom, Cross and Community* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1976), 247-258.

[19] Gordon D. Kaufman, *Nonresistance and Responsibility: And Other Essays*, IMS series, no. 5 (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 56f.

[20] Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (abbr. *CD*), 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), IV/1, 643; IV/2, 614; IV/3, 681.

Christ Jesus (Matt 18:20).[21] In worship the Word/Christ becomes experience in a way that the church by itself is not able to articulate. In its very gathering, the worshipping community offers the experience of fellowship, prayer, service, and proclamation. The fullness of the many-faceted richness of the church's life is concentrated in worship. With this, we may have an appropriate answer to the second question raised above. It is in worship that we experience what it is to be the body of Christ.

To summarize these preliminary reflections: When considering the church as the body of Christ, it seems theologically appropriate to distinguish between ecclesiological statements implying an ideal type of church and those aiming to describe the existing church or community of churches. That raises the question of the respective *Sitz im Leben* of an ecclesiological statement. Are we considering descriptive statements, or formative ones? If theology is to function in the service of the church, it is important to take account of this tension *theologically*, since this tension is the basic source of church formation.

What Makes the Church the Body of Christ?: Reflections on the Marks of the Church (notae ecclesiae) *among the Various Church Traditions*

In light of this differentiation between the *believed church* and the *experienced church*, we now concentrate on the third question: What makes the church the church—the body of Christ? It is the classical question about the marks of the church, the *notae ecclesiae*. To address the tension among the church's various essential features, it will be helpful to distinguish further between the *attributes* of the believed church and the *marks* of the experienced church *(the notae externae)*.

In the Nicene Creed the list of attributes is fixed, and in the churches of the ecumenical family, including the Believers Church tradition, there are deep agreements on these.[22] The church is *una, sancta, catholica et*

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[21] For the ecclesiological meaning of Matt 18:20, cf. among the church fathers; e.g., Ignatius, *Smyrn.*, VIII, 2; Tertullian, *De exhort. castit.*, VII; Cyprian, *De unitate*, XII. See also Barth, *CD* IV/2, 698ff.

[22] Cf. Karl Koop, "Holiness, Catholicity, and the Unity of all Christians," in *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honour of A. James Reimer*, ed. J. M. Bergen, et al. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 66f.

apostolica.[23] The church *is* one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Since these attributes derive from the biblical witnesses themselves, they are attributes which describe the *believed church.* The church is called to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic; and these attributes are promised to the church.

Divergent convictions appear in the ecumenical family about the *experienced church*'s "outer marks" (*notae externae*). In the Lutheran tradition, for example, the true church is "where the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered," as we learn from the *Confessio Augustana.*[24] These are the necessary and sufficient marks of the true *visible* church; they are *constitutive.* Luther himself listed additional "outer marks:" 1) the Word of God, 2) the sacrament of baptism, 3) the sacrament of the altar, 4) the use of the keys (forgiveness of sins and retention of sins), 5) the institution of church offices, 6) prayer, and 7) healing through the cross (accident, persecution, temptation, suffering).[25] Further, Luther added: 8) giving honour to worldly rulers, 9) the recognition of marriage, 10) patience, exhortation, praying for enemies, and 11) fasting.[26] Menno Simons lists "the true characteristics by which the church of Christ may be known as follows: 1) an unadulterated, pure doctrine . . . , 2) a Scriptural use of the sacramental signs . . . , 3) obedience to the Word . . . , 4) unfeigned, brotherly love . . . , 5) a bold confession of God and Christ . . . , 6) oppression and tribulation for the sake of the Lord's Word . . . ."[27]

Wilfried Härle, a Lutheran theologian from Heidelberg, writes, "*notae externae* in the strong sense of these words are a means of salvation only for

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[23] *Symbolum Nicaenum*, in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, *BSLK*, 12th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 27. Both the *Romanum* and the *Apostolicum* had developed similar formulations, although not necessarily differentiated in this four-fold way.

[24] "The Augsburg Confession: A Confession of Faith Presented in Augsburg by Certain Princes and Cities to His Imperial Majesty Charles V in 1530" (abbr. *CA*), in *Creeds and Confessions of the Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. II: *Creeds and Confessions of the Reformation Era*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 49-118, 7. "The Church," 62.

[25] Cf. *Von den Konziliis und den Kirchen* (1539), in *WA* 50, 628ff.

[26] Cf. *Wider Hans Worst* (1541), in *WA* 51, 478ff.

[27] Menno Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 743.

those who are grounded, enlivened and sustained in and through the church as the 'community of believers.' And only insofar as these *notae externae* serve that purpose are they marks of the true church."[28] According to this definition, it makes sense then to further distinguish between those outer *marks* constitutive in character in the view of the particular confessional group, and those *characteristics* that could be added.

In summary, when we speak of the church as the body of Christ, we can now speak of *attributes*, which describe the believed church; *marks*, which are constitutive for the experienced church; and *characteristics*, which are important, but not constitutive for the experienced church.

Having said earlier that we shall distinguish but not separate the *believed* from the *experienced church*, it is important then to note that marks and characteristics (of the *experienced church*) cannot be determined independently from the attributes (of the *believed church*). Härle concludes that the marks of a true visible church are "the result of human work (*opus hominum*) that *corresponds* to the work of God and yet can be *distinguished* as a category apart from God. As such, these marks are by definition not complete but are always fragmentary and underway."[29] Strictly speaking, the believed church is a critical entity understood as a goal that can never be finally and completely achieved under earthly historical conditions. To agree to this description frees the church from unreachable and, in the end, selfish, ethical perfectionism. At the same time, this description never excuses her from expressing responsibly her calling and mission by incarnating herself fully in the given context.

Before we move on to a more detailed look into our own, specific tradition, we can now try to formulate an answer to the first two questions we raised above: Which church is the body of Christ? Who is the body of Christ? Concerning the *believed church* we conclude, on the basis of the discussion above, that the church is the body of Christ, if it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These are the necessary and sufficient attributes. This definition is not limited to one or the other of the various levels of being church, but it is true on all levels of the church's existence: the local level, the regional level, and the global level. In turn, we might want to say that when and wherever a congregation or a denomination neglects or denies one of these attributes of

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[28] Härle, *Dogmatik*, 576.

[29] Ibid.

the church, it is appropriate to call their claim to be the body of Christ into question.

Concerning the *experienced church*, there are different ways to express the attributes of the (believed) church. Therefore the traditions differ in their definitions of the (constitutive) marks and the (non-constitutive) characteristics of the church. The task of doing ecclesiology in an ecumenical context may then be stated as follows: On the one hand, the unity of the *believed* and the *experienced church* must be established descriptively; on the other hand, the divergence of the experienced from the believed must be explored in regard to its normativity. The crucial question then is: Do differences and divergences relate to constitutive marks or non-constitutive characteristics? When we answer this question—by relating them to the attributes of *una, sancta, catholica et apostolica*—we will be able to judge which differences among the traditions are really church-dividing (and thus questioning the oneness of the church, that is, the being of the church), and which differences can be celebrated as an expression of the richness of the universal church, which is always incarnated in particularity, in culture, in language, in history, in a particular location. Universality and particularity are two sides of the same coin, just as the *believed* and *experienced church* are two sides of that one coin, as is the incarnated Christ.

Having said this, it becomes obvious that ecclesiological reflection needs to take place within the horizon of ecumenicity. Ecclesiology has a "therapeutic" role both vis a vis and within the community of all the churches; for it is from within the experienced reality of schisms that ecumenical theology seeks the truth of unity—oneness. From this vantage point the communion of churches, which is the true nature and calling of the church, can be discovered and recovered. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says in his *Finkenwalde Lectures on Homiletics*,[30] the truth of proclamation and the form in which the church exists must not be separated from one another. This requires that the churches pursue the ambition to be and to live out the true church *in history*; that is, to become the *believed church* in the *experienced church—in its fullness.*[31]

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[30] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "*Finkenwalder Homiletik*," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. IV ed. Eberhard Bethge, (Munich: Kaiser, 1965), 252 [Engl. "Worldly Preaching," in *Finkenwalde Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. Clyde E. Fant (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1975)].

[31] Cf. Menno Simons' ambitious "church without spot or wrinkle."

Ecclesiology from a Believers Church Perspective: A Vital Alternative

Churches from within the tradition of the Believers Church have had considerable involvement in the ecumenical movement and have made significant contributions to it.[32] This has happened even while some of our churches, in North America and elsewhere, have had reservations about an institutionalized world-wide community of churches. Such involvement, where it has occurred, has had a considerable impact on the understanding and articulation of a Believers Church ecclesiology. I now wish to point to this involvement in order to show why and how we need the context of the ecumenical family to overcome weaknesses and shortcomings in our own ecclesiologies.

Donald F. Durnbaugh has listed ecumenical "facts" and demonstrated how the Believers Church "occupies one of the wings of the household of God."[33] Durnbaugh points to early trailblazers of the modern ecumenical movement, for example, Comenius or Zinzendorf. Believers Church groups were strongly represented in the nineteenth-century missionary movement, an early impetus for the modern ecumenical movement. Ecumenical organizations emerged in special ways out of these renewal movements. As early as 1805, William Carey of India sought to call together an international meeting of Christians of all denominations. This became the forerunner of the International Missionary Council,[34] which later became part of the work of the World Council of Churches. The free churches gave encouragement to The World Evangelical Alliance (1846)[35] and the World Student Christian

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[32] See details in Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, chap. IV.

[33] Cf. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968; 2nd ed.: Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985). Cf. also the brief summary by Durnbaugh and Ch. W. Brockwell, Jr., "The Historic Peace Churches: From Sectarian Origins to Ecumenical Witness," in Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *The Church's Peace Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 182-195.

[34] Joint challenges in mission work were to be undertaken, with regular meetings to follow about every ten years. This plan could not be realized due to the opposition of the mission societies in Europe. Some 100 years later, in Edinburgh (1910), the International Missionary Council was formed.

[35] Cf. on the ecumenical organizations, the relevant articles in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. Nicholas Lossky, 2nd ed., et al., (Geneva: WCC, 2002).

Federation (WSCF, 1895); and they have participated actively in these movements. John R. Mott, one of the founders of WSCF, first made his Christian confession after a conversion experience within the evangelical movement. He served the WSCF for 33 years as general secretary.[36] The "signature" of the Believers Church is unmistakably inscribed on ecumenical institutions such as the YMCA and YWCA. The early peace conferences in Den Haag (1899 and 1907) asked the Quaker, J. Allen Baker, to foster friendly relations between the churches in England and in Germany, out of which grew the foundation of the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the churches (1914). In the same year, Henry Hodkin, another Quaker, and Friedrich Siegmund-Schultze, a pacifist Lutheran from Germany, started preparations to install an International Fellowship of Reconciliation (1919). All these movements finally resulted in the founding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. The WCC claims its place as a privileged, although not exclusive, expression of the oneness of the body of Christ.

Durnbaugh finds validation for a distinctive Believers Church ecumenicity in the following features of this tradition: First, in the idea of restitution, a universal claim is implied. Second, there is widespread agreement on how to view others, including non-Christians; namely by living peacefully with all, and not taking sides against others in warfare. Third, addressing one another simply as "brothers," "friends," or "Christians" indicates an openness toward each other.

In 1968 we hear Durnbaugh complaining: "Because in recent decades the ecumenical movement has tended to be dominated by those confessions which place primary emphasis upon a morphological unity, the contribution of the Believers Churches to the ecumenical story has not been fully recognized."[37] But this judgement on the part of Durnbaugh needs to be questioned, particularly in regard to the Historic Peace Churches (HPCs). Especially within the institutionalized boundaries of the WCC, the HPCs have

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[36] In its founding phase, the WCC recruited four out of five of its leading personnel from this movement. Mott was president of the 1910 World Mission Conference in Edinburgh. Cf. C.H. Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865-1955*: *A Biography* (Geneva: WCC, 1979).

[37] Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, 289.

contributed significantly and they were always taken seriously. Most often, of course, the voice of the HPCs was heard in the debates on war and peace.[38]

The "Puidoux Conferences" (1955-1973), named for the place where they were first held, comprise a succession of debates on ethical and related ecclesiological questions that the HPCs brought to light. These conferences had widespread influence on ecumenical-theological and ethical discussions in the postwar period.[39] The WCC study on "The Church and the Nuclear Threat," originating in the same year as the first Puidoux Conference, was substantially determined by input from these traditions.[40]

The voice of the HPCs was represented at various general assemblies of the WCC. The third assembly in New Delhi (1961) called for a discussion between pacifists and non-pacifists, which was to transpire in 1968. In Uppsala (1968) the fourth assembly passed a resolution calling for a study of non-violent methods, in which there was wide participation by the peace churches (Cardiff, Wales, 1972).[41] Nairobi (1975) saw the first "program to combat militarism." In Vancouver (1983) the beginning of the Conciliar Process on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation occupied centre stage in the discussions, which reached its preliminary culmination during the World

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[38] Cf. Wolfgang Lienemann, *Frieden*, Bensheimer Hefte, vol. 92 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000) for an overview of these discussions in the ecumenical movement, esp. 123-131. Cf also Herbert Fröhlich, et al., *Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung: Ökumenische Shalom-Dienste fordern Kirchen heraus* (Hildesheim, et al.: Georg Olms, 1991). For an evaluation of the role of the peace church, cf. esp 11-16.

[39] Cf. Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed., *On Earth Peace: Discussions on War/Peace Issues between Friends, Mennonites, Brethren and European Churches 1935-1975* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1978).

[40] *Christians and the Prevention of War in an Atomic Age: A Theological Discussion* (Geneva: WCC, 1955). The central selection process actually distanced itself from the conclusions of this study, which issued a call for pacifism. Cf. also, for what followed, Ans van der Bent, *Commitment to God's World: A Concise Critical Survey of Ecumenical Thought* (Geneva: WCC, 1995), esp. WCC meetings and international Gatherings 1924-1991, 232ff.

[41] *Violence, Nonviolence and the Struggle for Social Justice: A Statement commended by the WCC Central Committee, 1973*. This statement was continued a decade later in the so-called Corrymeela Consultation: *Violence, Nonviolence and Civil Conflict* (Geneva: WCC, 1983).

Convocation on Justice, Peace and Creation (Seoul, 1990), where HPC representatives participated extensively at various levels.[42] In Canberra (1991) this constellation of themes was integrated into the WCC's general agenda.

The eighth assembly in Harare (1998) decided, on the recommendation of HPC representatives, to launch a "Decade to Overcome Violence (2001-2010)." "Churches seeking Reconciliation and Peace" has become one of the overarching themes for the present work of the WCC[43] and has resulted in a series of meetings among the HPCs to contribute explicitly to the work of the WCC (Switzerland 2001, Kenya 2004, and Indonesia 2007).[44] And finally, at the last assembly of the WCC in Porto Alegre (2006) our call for an International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in the year 2011 as the culmination of the Decade to Overcome Violence was welcomed and approved. This included the effort to issue a joint Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace at that Conference (which will take place in Kingston, Jamaica).

Contributions of the HPCs to other themes are less obvious, but present. In the Lima-Process on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*[45] (1982-1990) we find evidence of theological statements on the issues at stake imbedded in an ecclesiology from a distinct Believers Church perspective.[46] Since the German

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[42] Cf. the various positions taken by the Historic Peace Churches in the course of the Conciliar Process, above all Stuttgart 1988 and Basel 1989 "*Minderheitenvotum,*" in Wilfried Warneck, *Friedenskirchliche Existenz im Konziliaren Prozess* (Hildesheim, et al.: Georg Olms, 1990), 238-253.

[43] Cf. "The Decade to Overcome Violence," *Ecumenical Review* (abbr. *EcRev*) 53, no. 2 (2000);. Margot Kässmann, *Overcoming Violence: The Challenge to the Churches in All Places* (Geneva: WCC, 1998); Fernando Enns, ed., *Dekade zur Überwindung von Gewalt 2001-2010* (Frankfurt, M: Lembeck, 2001); Enns, "*Impuls zur Gegenbewegung: Eine ökumenische Dekade: Das ÖRK-Programm zur Überwindung von Gewalt vor und nach Harare,*" in *OeR* 48 (1999): 167-175; Enns, "Auf dem Weg zu einer Kultur des Friedens: Die ökumenische Dekade zur Überwindung von Gewalt," in *Una Sancta* 55 (2000): 131-143. Cf. also Judy Zimmerman-Herr and Bob Herr, eds., *Transforming Violence: Linking Local and Global Peacemaking* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998).

[44] See the documentations in Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann Riggs eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace* (Geneva: WCC 2004); Donald E. Miller, et al., *Seeking Peace in Africa: Stories from African Peacemakers* (Geneva: WCC 2007).

[45] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry 1982-1990*: *Report on the Process and the Responses*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 111 (Geneva: WCC, 1982).

[46] See Enns, *The Peace Church*, chap. IV, 5.

and the Dutch Mennonites are full member-churches of the WCC, they presented official responses to the ecumenical declarations on baptism, Eucharist, and ministry.[47] So did Baptists from various countries in Europe (from Great Britain and Ireland, from Scotland and Wales, from Denmark, Sweden, former East-Germany) and the United States, even from Burma; Disciples of Christ from Zaire and the United States; Waldensians from Italy; the Moravian Church from Europe and the United States, even from Jamaica; the Church of the Brethren from the United States; Quakers from the Netherlands, Great Britain, and Canada.

Ecclesiological implications, related to each of the three themes of the study, become visible here. First, *baptism*, Mennonites explained, is understood as a confession to visible discipleship (*Nachfolge*). It is the possibility of the individual to react upon God's primary grace. In the context of the *visible* and distinct community of believers this leads to mutual responsibility. Second, *Eucharist*, as commonly understood among the churches, including Believers Churches, is a joint confession to Jesus Christ. Christ is the one who invites to this table. Therefore the *Lord's Supper* has a power to transcend limits and borderlines, which enlarges the community of believers to the world-wide Church. Third, the Mennonite understanding of *ministry* does not include a representation of Christ, but is more concerned about the participation of the whole community, a consequent understanding of the priesthood of all believers. Different charismata allow for different functions of ministry, which shall never result in the building of hierarchies. For Mennonites the apostolicity of the church is not described in terms of ministry. The continuity of truth in tradition, the church's apostolicity, is granted by the message of the gospel itself. The context of the local church is the primary locus for discerning God's will, for confession, and for experiencing the community of believers, the church.

In these notable "Responses to Lima" all participating Believers Churches have confirmed their continuing commitment to the ecumenical community as one expression of the oneness of the church. And on the basis of this commitment they are also able to address critical questions to other traditions concerning various institutional forms of ecumenism.

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[47] "United German Mennonite Congregations," in Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM*, vol.VI, Faith & Order Paper, no. 144 (Geneva: WCC 1988), 123-129.

The discussions, especially on ecclesiology, are continuing. The most recent document of the WCC Commission on Faith and Order, "The Nature and the Mission of the Church," invites reactions until the year of 2010.[48] The document shows a broad range of convergences, but also identifies remaining differences among our traditions. At this time the Association of Mennonite Congregations in Germany (AMG) is preparing a thorough statement of response, because of the AMG's strong belief that "a vital alternative" should be heard within the ecumenical family and that the voice of the Believers Church should be part of the theological formation of the global community of churches. As a side benefit, the responding church faces the creative challenge of clarifying its own ecclesiology.

More examples could be added, such as the growing number of bilateral dialogues or the series of Prague-conversations.[49] All these examples demonstrate that Believers Churches represent a unique "apartment" in the one household of God. The underlying ecclesiological basis of this involvement is our conviction that the *believed church* is wider and bigger than the *experienced church* of our own denomination. It is the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church that we try to express in our particular tradition, and by our commitment to each other in the ecumenical family. By contributing our specific *notae externae*, the marks and characteristics of our own tradition, we demonstrate to others how these are valid interpretations of the common attributes of the *believed church*.

Remaining Challenges

It is only in dialogue with others that we will discover which elements are of church-dividing character, and which are expressions of the rich gifts within the *ecclesia*. It is only in dialogue with others that we will then be able to clarify the legitimacy of that plurality. In these ecumenical encounters we are

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[48] *The Nature and the Mission of the Church*: *A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 198 (Geneva: WCC, 2005).

[49] See Fernando Enns, ed., "Heilung der Erinnerungen—befreit zur gemeinsamen Zukunft," in *Mennoniten im Dialog: Berichte und Texte ökumenischer Gespräche auf nationaler und internationaler Ebene* (Frankfurt, M: Lembeck; Paderborn: Bonifatius, 2008). Cf. *Prophetic and Renewal Movements*. The Prague Consultations. ed. Walter Sawatsky, Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches 47 (Geneva: WARC 2009).

compelled to rephrase some of our "identity-markers." Also, we realize that it is not sufficient to characterize our ecclesiological convictions against the negative background of the other (for example, to state that we are "non-creedal," "non-hierarchical," "non-sacramental," or "non-liturgical," or even "anti-constantinian").[50] Instead we will need to express ourselves in a positive way, on the foundation of the witnesses of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, in light of our own history and tradition, and with reference to our denominational experience (which of course includes some very painful encounters with other denominations). The following are six initial samples of questions and issues needing further discussions.

First, are we a non-creedal church? We will have to explain what is the role that written confessions have played and continue to play in our traditions, and what status these confessions have in regard to individual, personal confessions, which play such an important role in our churches.[51]

Second, it is in voluntary discipleship that we preserve identity and apostolicity. But we will have to answer the question: How do we avoid perfectionism, works-righteousness, self-righteousness, and individualism in this approach?

Third, are we a non-hierarchical church? We need to explain that we take the "priesthood of all believers" very seriously because of the New Testament witnesses. We will need to articulate our conviction that it is the gathered assembly in Christ's name which functions as a hermeneutical community in which the different gifts of the Spirit are needed. And we will have to answer the question of how we avoid a hidden and therefore uncontrolled hierarchy in our congregations and church structures. We will be challenged to explain how this congregationalist structure can still exercise accountability within the wider, even the global, church community.

Fourth, are we a non-sacramental church? We will continue to explain that for us baptism and the Lord's Supper are, of course, more than just an ordinary bath or a regular meal; more than just any optional metaphor. We will have to show clear evidence in the Scriptures for our praxis of adult baptism and our understanding of holy communion as essential community

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[50] Cf. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, 5ff.

[51] Cf. Karl Koop, *Anabaptist-Mennonite Confessions of Faith: The Development of a Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2003).

formation, celebrating the presence of Christ, without necessarily referring to them as *media salutis* (means of salvation).

Fifth, are we a non-liturgical church? We will continue to explain why worship and prayer are so central, even essential, to our ecclesiology, and that this has been precisely the reason for not accepting traditional high-church liturgies which were priest-centred and exclusive in nature. But we will have to answer the questions: How do we avoid the loss of very meaningful, liturgical elements in our way of arbitrary worship order; and, how do we express dimensions of spirituality, preventing them from becoming mere individual emotions?

Sixth, are we an anti-Constantinian church that distances itself from the supreme authority of the state? We will be challenged to prove that, because non-violence is so central to the gospel message itself and to our image of God, Christians shall follow the non-violent path consistently. We will need to demonstrate that this is not an expression of a biblicistic or legalistic view. We will have to explain how we relate the church to the state and to society generally in a different way than other churches do. We do seek the welfare of the city, including some of its institutional forms, and we can demonstrate our readiness to take up responsibilities in and for society, although in alternative ways.

I do not believe that such dialogues will leave us unchanged. On the contrary, my hope is that conversation with the other churches will help us to grow in insight; help us to review critically our own story, tradition, and theological convictions in order to discern the truth of the gospel time and again. In that process may we discover the *believed church*, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, within our own *experience* as congregations, *and* in the other churches—"so that the world may believe" (John 17:21), as we quote in the basis-formula of the World Council of Churches. That is the ultimate motivation and the goal of all our ecumenical engagement. Ecclesiology can never be an end in itself.

Chapter Seven

Reading Tradition through Catholic Lenses: Moving beyond Restorationism

Karl Koop

The concern to restore the church to its New Testament origins is a common theme in Protestantism, but it is especially visible among Christian groups associated with the Believers Church tradition.[1] By

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[1] The term, "Believers Church," coined by Max Weber, has been used to describe Christian communities that have insisted on the indispensability of voluntary church membership. Many of these communities have also advocated believers' or adult baptism, and the importance of the Christian peace witness. The term has also been associated with a number of denominations such as the Brethren in Christ churches, the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonites, as well as some Pentecostal and Baptist churches. The first Believers Church conference was held at Louisville, Kentucky, in 1967. The conferences emerged from a vision of Johannes A. Oosterbaan, a Dutch Mennonite, who noted at the meetings of the World Council of Churches that the churches of the mainstream, such as the Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and the Reformed, had solid traditions from which to speak in the ecumenical arena, while the churches of the Radical Reformation traditions did not have a common language or strategy. For a further discussion on the term "Believers Church," see John Howard Yoder, "Introduction," in *Baptism and Church: A Believers' Church Vision*, ed. Merle D. Strege (Grand Rapids, MI: Sagamore Books, 1986), 3-7; George Hunston Williams, "The Believers' Church and the Given Church," in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, ed. Paul Basden and David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 325-332; James Leo Garrett, Jr., *The Concept of the Believers' Church*:

advocating the church's restoration, or some form of Christian primitivism, Believers Churches have generally attempted to recover the beliefs or practices of the first-century church, and have assumed that at some point after the time of the apostles the church experienced a fall.[2] Franklin Littell, in the 1950s, gave perhaps the most thoroughgoing account of the restorationist vision in his book *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, later published as *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*.[3] Littell employed the term "restitution" to describe the sixteenth-century Anabaptist interest in returning to the convictions and practices of the early church. His thesis was soon well known in Reformation historiography through George Hunston Williams' use of the term to describe more broadly the views of sixteenth-century Radical Reformers.[4]

The Believers Church tradition has been well served by the various expressions of the restorationist thesis. In privileging the history of the first-century church, perhaps also identifying sympathetically with a "faithful remnant" through the ages, Believers Church adherents have distinguished themselves from the wider Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical mainstream. What remains in question is whether this point of view is still theologically sustainable or tenable. At various levels, it seems, the distinction between Believers Churches and the wider Christian world has been breaking down. Perhaps wishing to shed cultural or sectarian baggage, or desiring a more experiential form of Christianity, some Believers Church adherents are joining

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Addresses from the 1968 Louisville Conference (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969); Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968).

[2] In this essay I do not make a distinction between the terms "restoration," "restitution," or "primitivism."

[3] Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (Boston, MA: Starr King Press, 1958); later published as *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York: MacMillan, 1964). See also, Franklin H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the True Church," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24, no. 1 (January 1950): 33-52.

[4] Geoffrey Dipple, *"Just as in the Time of the Apostles:" Uses of History in the Radical Reformation* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora: Press, 2005), 109.

nondenominational evangelical communities. Others are drawn to the so-called liturgical traditions, perhaps because of a yearning for a more profound spirituality or deeper tradition-rich form of worship.[5] These developments are taking place even as scholars are noting continuities between the Radical Reformation and medieval Christianity,[6] and as ecumenical conversations are taking place, bringing previously assumed disparate groups closer together. On a more profoundly theological level, Believers Church groups are also becoming increasingly aware that the Christian church is larger than themselves, and that by the grace of God they are an integral part of the global Christian church, initiated in Jesus Christ.

Such awareness has led to a blurring of boundaries between the various Christian traditions, and for Believers Churches this has led to questioning whether the restorationist vision is broad enough and still adequate. In what follows, I want to argue for an expanded hermeneutic of tradition beyond restorationism that views the Christian faith through *catholic* lenses. It is my conviction that, while Christians are always located in particular historical, cultural, and theological streams, they are nevertheless a part of the universal communion of saints, the *communio sanctorum* through God's redemptive work in Christ and through the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. And it is from this catholic location and self-understanding that the church should do its theology, even as it must begin its reflection from a more particular vantage point.

The argument in this paper is accompanied by two assumptions. First, I take for granted that all modes of inquiry are tradition-based and that all of us perceive the world through some sort of lens. I presume that even Scripture cannot be apprehended without the medium of some tradition, and that the notion of *sola scriptura,* as sometimes appropriated in the modern period, is

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[5] The reasons for this development cannot be entertained here. But clearly they have to do not only with the decline of denominational allegiances of the last several decades, but also sociological developments within certain immigrant communities of the Mennonite world that signal inevitable cultural assimilation into the mainstream.

[6] For a provocative account, see C. Arnold Snyder, "Spiritual Empowerment Toward Discipleship," in *Anabaptist Visions for the new Millennium: A Search for Identity*, ed. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 27-31.

essentially flawed.[7] Luther's critique of human tradition, such as the church's use of indulgences on the eve of the Reformation, was surely on the mark; yet a hermeneutically naïve reading of Scripture that tries to directly capture the pristine gospel of the first century is bound to run into difficulty because, as Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, ". . . all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought;"[8] which is to say that "there is no place outside of tradition where we can stand, from which we can understand ourselves and the world 'objectively.'"[9] As Harry Huebner has succinctly put it, "our mode of inquiry cannot be other than tradition."[10] To be sure, the original biblical witness of God's revelation is the instrument through which the Spirit of God speaks; nevertheless, the community of believers is the place and indispensable context of interpretation concerning the revelation of God to which Scripture attests.[11] A question that follows concerns the nature and shape of the community: Is it the "faithful remnant" alone, or does it also encompass the wider Christian world? Here I want to counter a sectarianism or partisanship that is often found within the restorationist thesis that fails to take into account the positive contributions of the wider church. Justo Gonzalez points out that the term *sect* has less to do with the heterodoxy or orthodoxy of a group, and more to do with assuming that one's own perspective is the only allowable perspective. "A sect may be perfectly orthodox. Indeed, it may be more orthodox than anyone else. But inasmuch as it considers itself to be the only possible orthodoxy, it is sectarian,"[12] This, in my view, is the danger that Believers Churches should seek to avoid. However,

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[7] I have argued this elsewhere. See "Scripture and Tradition: A Dilemma for Protestants," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 14-21.

[8] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.

[9] Harry Huebner, "Imagination/Tradition: Disjunction or Conjunction?" in *Mennonite Theology in Face of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman*, ed. Alain Epp Weaver (North Newton, KS: Bethel College, 1996), 69.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 41.

[12] Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2002), 70.

I also want to encourage Christians everywhere to consider a wider hermeneutic and a point of view that is more catholic, which counteracts a kind of sectarianism "that takes its own sector of reality and experience for the whole."[13]

My second assumption is that the term "catholic" is a quality of being in the church that holds in tension both unity and multiplicity, the "one" and the "many." In common speech the term is usually associated with Roman Catholicism, or sometimes it is used to mean "universal" or "one." In Christian history the term perhaps first emerged with Ignatius of Antioch's (d. 110) famous dictum: "Wherever the bishop is, there his people should be, just as, where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic church" (*Smyrn.* 8:2).[14] From the third century onward, the term came to be used polemically to refer to the church that was orthodox rather than heretical. These developments tended to associate catholicity with uniformity.[15] In this essay, I use the term to mean "according to the whole" (*kath'holou*) that seeks the inclusion of all, which celebrates rather than stifles difference. Etymologically, "according to the whole" does not mean the same thing as "universal" or "one," but rather points to the idea that all have a place and may contribute to the well-being of the whole. Thus Christians of all stripes—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant—have a place and are encouraged to take into account a catholic hermeneutic of tradition that allows for difference.

The Legacy of the Restorationist Thesis[16]

Franklin Littell did not invent the restorationist thesis nor has it been promoted only within Believers Church traditions. It was already present with

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[13] Ibid. In his discussion on catholicity, Gonzalez identifies the problem of "hidden sectarianism" within "mainline" denominations, and also identifies "socioeconomic sectarianism" and "North American sectarianism" as particular challenges of our time.

[14] Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 297.

[15] Under Theodosius, every Roman had to be a "Catholic" Christian, and in Justinian's *Codex Iuris Romani,* the law defended the "catholic" character of the church. Vincent of Lerins would then refer to the catholicity of the church as that 'which is believed everywhere and always by all men.' Ibid., 298.

[16] For this section I am heavily depended to D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 101-131.

the fourth-century historian Eusebius, and it even resonated among Christian groups in the High Middle Ages.[17] Spiritual Franciscans, Waldensians, Apostolic Brethren, along with strong papal supporters like Bernard of Clairvaux, acknowledged the moral decadence afflicting Christianity soon after its apostolic beginnings.[18] Eventually Italian and German Renaissance humanists called out for a rebirth and a return to the classical Greek and Roman sources (*ad fontes*) thereby hoping to circumvent the "Dark Ages,"[19] while radicals such as Wycliffe and Hus identified the downfall of the church with its adoption of Constantinian patronage and lust for temporal power. By the sixteenth century, virtually all parties of the Reformation were claiming to be *the* faithful continuation of the early church, while accusing others of false innovation and collusion with evil forces. Most of the Reformation traditions, along with the Catholic Church, went on to develop martyrologies, maintaining that, in spite of past corruptions, there continued to be reliable witnesses of the true gospel.[20] When Anabaptist reformers, such as Melchior Hoffman, identified the Constantinian legacy as the cause of spiritual decline in the church, they were not really introducing anything novel, but simply joining a large chorus that had been singing the restorationist song for some time.[21]

Nevertheless, it was the Radical Reformation tradition that most enthusiastically took hold of the restorationist theme, moving it forward, especially in its historiographic-like narrating of the church's past. One of the

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[17] Carter Lindberg refers to the Reformers' approach to history as the "Eusebian model," hearkening back to the work of Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-340), the "Father of Church History," who idealized the first centuries of the Christian era. See Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 4-6.

[18] Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 107-110.

[19] Petrarch probably coined the term "Dark Ages," by which he meant "an age that had lost the light of ancient civilization and had achieved nothing of value on its own." Charles Garfield Nauert, *The Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 88.

[20] For a thorough examination of the various martyr traditions following the sixteenth-century Reformation, see Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[21] For a recent examination of Radical Reformation views on church history, see Dipple, *"Just as in the Time of the Apostles."*

primary intentions of the widely read *Martyrs Mirror* of the seventeenth century was to show that the Anabaptists, rather than Catholics or Protestants, exhibited the marks of true Christianity through their practice of believers baptism and experience of martyrdom. A long line of the faithful remnant was chronicled to demonstrate that the Anabaptists were in spiritual continuity with the apostles and the faithful down through the ages.[22] More recently, John Driver's *Radical Faith: An Alternative History of the Christian Church* is perhaps the most explicit rendering of the restorationist vision from a Mennonite perspective,[23] while John Howard Yoder has arguably been one of the most articulate Mennonite scholars in associating the corruption of the church with the "Constantinian shift." In his view, the church lost its orientation when it became accepting of imperial values, along with its social and legal structures.[24]

Mennonite writers have not been the only ones initiating these sorts of writings. The Pietist historian, Gottfried Arnold, pursued a restorationist vision in appropriating Hutterian views in his *Impartial History of Church and Heresy* (1699).[25] Likewise, free church historian, Ludwig Keller, in reflecting on the *Martyrs Mirror*, developed a successionist interpretation of church that would later inspire Ernst Troeltsch to distinguish between the "church" and "sect" types in history, which he would flesh out in his magnum opus, the *Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (1911).[26] Parallel readings of the church's past also emerged in Baptist historiography. The English reformer, John Smythe, argued that continuity of faith was to be found in the succession of divine truth rather than the apostolic succession of the institutional church. This interpretation was reiterated in the early twentieth century through J. M.

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[22] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*, 5th English ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950).

[23] John Driver, *Radical Faith: An Alternative History of the Christian Church*, ed. Carrie Snyder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999).

[24] Essays giving attention to this may be found in the following: John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); and John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994).

[25] Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition*, 115.

[26] Ibid., 116.

Carroll's booklet, *The Trail of Blood Following the Christians Down through the Centuries*,[27] which underscored the view that the Baptist lineage did not begin with Protestantism, but could be found in every age since the time of the apostles. In the history of the church, true believers could be "identified chiefly through congregational polity, believers baptism, separation from the state, and persecution—the 'trail of blood.'"[28] Alexander Campbell, an early founder of the Churches of Christ in America, opined a similar model in the nineteenth century, as did the more recent twentieth-century Independent Christian Church historian, James D. Murch, who maintained that the Roman Catholic claim to primacy was facilitated by the rise of Constantine.[29] These views also found resonance among Plymouth Brethren and Seventh-Day Adventism.[30]

While some of the aforementioned writers have helpfully shown how the church can easily lose its raison d'etre by identifying too closely with the ideals of Empire or *Volk*, it remains to be asked whether the restorationist thesis, as represented in the various writings of the Radical Reformation tradition, is fair in its assessment of the wider church. Is an ecclesiology of restoration or restitution, with its often-dismissive images of the other, fair and just? Is such an attitude theologically sound? It would be unwise to suggest that Christians today should minimize the ever-present Constantinian temptation that has beset the Christian church since the fourth century. Indeed, the church must seek to be the church and not succumb to the dangers of aligning its values with the values of the world. Yet, a narrating of the past that only gives positive attention to the early church, or some "faithful remnant," does not give a full accounting of the breadth and depth of the work of God in Christ,

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[27] J. M. Carroll, *The Trail of Blood Following Christians Down through the Centuries or The History of Baptist Churches from the Time of Christ, Their Founder, to the Present Day* (Lexington, KY: Ashland Avenue Baptist Church, 1931).

[28] Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition,* 117.

[29] J. D. Murch, *The Free Church: A Treatise on Church Polity with Special Relevance to Doctrine and Practice in Christian Churches and Churches of Christ* (Louisville, KY: Restoration Press, 1966).

[30] For successionist renderings of the Plymouth Brethren and Seventh-Day Adventists, see respectively the following: E. H. Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1931); Ellen White, *The Great Controversy between Christ and Satan* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1911).

nor does it sufficiently recognize the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit—the message of Pentecost. To claim, without qualification, that the institutional church became apostate after the time of Constantine denies the possibility of the Spirit working among institutions and individuals, however imperfect. And, to hold tenaciously to a theory of a "faithful remnant" that might have been present through the ages, ignores, as Gerald Schlabach has noted, "the prospect that even the 'faithful' church always is and always has been fallen too."[31] Scholars such as Yoder have never blatantly supposed that the "faithful" church could not fail, or that the Spirit could not be present in the institutional church, but others following in his steps have not always been so nuanced. There seems, therefore, to be a need to find a corrective, or an explicit broadening of vision that is more ecumenical, or, to be precise, more catholic.

Embracing the communio sanctorum *and the Work of the Spirit*

One of the ways in which Christians might begin to apprehend a catholic horizon is by becoming more aware of their membership in the *communio sanctorum*. The Latin phrase, often translated as "community of saints," likely originated in Gaul some time in the fourth century, before finding its way into the final version of the Apostles' Creed.[32] It has occasionally been understood to mean that Christians recognize and participate in holy things like the sacraments. Sometimes the "communion of saints" has referred narrowly to the saints and martyrs of the early church. The more traditional and most

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[31] Gerald W. Schlabach, "Deuteronomic or Constantinian: What Is the Most Basic Problem for Christian Social Ethics," in *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 455.

[32] The final article of the Apostles' Creed reads thus: "I believe in the Holy Spirit; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. Amen." Quoted in Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527-1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 332. Jerome (347-420) may have been first to use the phrase *sanctorum communio*, which is the original word sequence. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Vol. 1 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works,* ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 122.

common interpretation points to the fellowship of holy persons throughout the ages, including the whole company of heaven.[33]

This latter interpretation points to a united fellowship in all places and throughout all time. Unfortunately, this united fellowship has often been relegated to the future as an eschatological hope and quickly dismissed for the present time, since full agreement among the churches has not yet been achieved, nor does it seem achievable this side of the eschaton. Of course there is a sense in which Christian unity will only be fully realized at the end of time; yet to think only futuristically fails to take seriously the "realized" eschatological dimension of unity that Christians are called to experience in the present. Moreover it presumes that Christian unity is contingent on the "success" of ecumenical discussions and the capacity of the churches to come to some form of agreement.[34] Given that the churches will never find complete agreement in this world, it is argued, Christians can only hope for unity in the next. The problem with this sort of reasoning is that it places the basis of unity in human activity. Christian unity, however, is not dependent on our abilities to achieve points of agreement—as important as our efforts may be. Unity, rather, always comes through divine initiative and is always the result of God's work, which is a gift to us.

The "Affirmation of Union" adopted in Edinburgh in 1937 by the Second World Conference on Faith and Order captures this idea when it states that unity "does not consist in the agreement of our minds or the consent of our will. It is founded in Jesus Christ Himself, Who lived, died and rose again to bring us to the Father, and Who through the Holy Spirit dwells in His

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[33] J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 2nd ed. (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 388-397; Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 64.

[34] Yoder follows this line of thinking as well when he states: "The lazy solution of pluralism reinforces the false view that unity is based on agreement, so that every dispute calls for division. As a matter of fact, disagreement calls not for dividing but for reconciling people. Undertaking that reconciling process at the point of division is more important than affirming common conviction where that can be taken for granted. . . . Thus the functional meaning of church unity is not that people agree and, therefore, work together but that where they disagree they recognize the need to talk together with a view to reconciliation" (Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood*, 292).

Church."[35] According to this statement the *communio sanctorum* is not the product of our doing but is a gift of grace. It is not only an eschatological reality but is a given for all Christians here and now. We are made one "in spite of our divisions."[36] This idea is repeated in the World Council of Churches' statement on the church's unity at New Delhi in 1961 which states: "It is in Jesus Christ, God's son and our only Mediator, that we have union with God. It is he who has given this gift to us through his coming into our world. Unity is not of our making, but as we receive the grace of Jesus Christ we are one in him."[37]

Ecumenical statements such as these are in keeping with the message that we find in the New Testament, especially Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Here we encounter the Pauline view that Christian unity is not dependant on human initiatives; for Christians are brought together through the work of redemption on the cross. Christians are bound together into one family and appear to have little say regarding who their siblings are. Thus the question "is not whether the family has been formed into one body by one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, but whether the unity bestowed will be claimed and celebrated (Eph 4)."[38] Hans Küng helpfully points out that Paul's call for recognizing the unity of the body of Christ is an imperative, based on an indicative. "Because the believers, through baptism and in the spirit, are members of the body of Christ, and since they *are* united in one body through the Lord's Supper, then they *ought* in their everyday lives to live as members of the one body and realize the unity of the one body."[39] The unity of the church, then, is not constituted through its moral unanimity or theological uniformity, or even dependant on externals like liturgy and church structure. It recognizes and celebrates difference even while acknowledging that Christians will necessarily be speaking from their

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[35] John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 573.

[36] Ibid., 574.

[37] Ibid., 585.

[38] This is the articulation of the Mennonite Church Canada document entitled, "The Unity of Christians in the Body of Christ" (presented by the Faith and Life Committee at the Annual Assembly in Edmonton, July 2006).

[39] Küng, *The Church*, 229; see also 273.

respective traditions. Genuine catholicity presupposes multiplicity and even views these differences in creed, ritual, polity, and behaviour, as gifts of the Spirit to be shared at the ecumenical table.[40] Such catholicity refuses to privilege any one particular church, and denies the possibility that, by itself, any one particular ecclesial community can represent all of God's truth.

In the New Testament, the term *ecclesia* is used in the plural, often linking very different Christian worlds, such as Jerusalem and Corinth, or Antioch and Rome.[41] Such difference need not imply that something has gone wrong. Diversity underscores the historical nature of the church and also reflects the richness of the spiritual gifts that have been given by the Spirit. That differences abound should not discourage but remind Christians that they together belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. If this doctrinal given is internalized, Christians will experience fellowship with one another; they will work together in mission; they will be in solidarity with one another in times of difficulty; and ultimately they will be drawn to common Eucharistic celebration.[42]

Justo Gonzalez suggests that the biblical canon may be seen as a paradigm for catholicity in that "the canon of the written word is itself a cath'holic canon."[43] Unlike the sectarian, Marcion, who insisted on the singular witness of the Gospel of Luke as the only true account of the life and teachings of Jesus, the early church included "four *different* gospels in its canon, as a multiform witness to the single gospel of Jesus Christ."[44] This biblical structure and composition, according to Gonzalez, models for us a form of catholicity that encourages listening to multiple voices. For the church, such a paradigm "requires a structure and a self-understanding that, like the canon of the New Testament, can bind the irreducible contributions of various perspectives in an indissoluble unity."[45]

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[40] Ibid., 274-275.

[41] Ibid., 274.

[42] Ibid., 275-276.

[43] Gonzalez, *The Changing Shape of Church History*, 76.

[44] Ibid. We might note that the Hebrew Scriptures also reflect multiple perspectives. For example, the first chapters of Genesis have not one, but two accounts of creation. See ibid.

[45] Ibid., 77.

Openness to differences in interpretation raises the question of whether Christian churches will run into the danger of accepting every interpretation that comes their way and ultimately stand for nothing. Does not a broad acceptance of others lead to a form of meaningless relativism? In the past, Christians might have solved their conflicts by dividing, or through the establishment of yet another church or denomination. In the current climate many churches often avoid conflict by side-stepping the matter of truth altogether. Yoder views this as a form of liberal Western ecumenism where "one assumes that it is proper for each denominational communion to have "their thing," perhaps thought of as their "gift" or as their "talent." One assumes that each denomination's particularity is somehow "true," in that others should listen to it respectfully rather than calling it heretical as they used to."[46]

For Christians, truth for the whole church should matter, and a teaching should be considered heretical "if the narrative it references or presupposes is so significantly different from the Christian narrative that it is really another story altogether."[47] Yet, any search for the truth, if it is catholic in character, will not take place in isolation, but will always be pursued in conversation with others, taking into account the perspectives of others. Quite naturally and appropriately, Christians will begin from their most immediate and primary vantage point as Lutherans, Catholics, Baptists, Mennonites, and so on. But in appropriating a faithful hermeneutic, they will seek to broaden the circle of discourse with the recognition that their own tradition, by itself, cannot have the final say. Their embracing of the *communio sanctorum* will lead them to listen to the confession of the whole church that exists around the world and across time with the recognition that, in the end, even the entire Christian community has its limitations in understanding the truth, since truth belongs to God alone.[48]

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[46] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom*, 80-81.

[47] Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 69.

[48] The question concerning our starting vantage point raises important method-ological considerations for theology and ecumenical conversation. Steven R. Harmon, who has been involved in interchurch activities for the Baptist World Alliance, believes that one begins from the perspective of the church catholic and then moves to one's immediate denominational vantage point. Any Baptist, he states, "who self-consciously

Such a catholic embrace of the *communio sanctorum* will also be linked to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, which is cosmic and, like the wind, "blows where it chooses" (John 3:8). It is commonly noted that pneumatology has occupied a secondary place in Western theology. This seems to be true of Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant as well as Believers Church theology.[49] Yet the early church did not suppose that all of God's truth was encapsulated in the teachings of Jesus for all time. It was understood that God's truth would continue to be revealed, and that God's work through the Spirit would be ongoing.[50] The Johannine community was especially aware that believers should anticipate the presence of the Advocate, the Spirit of truth, who would dwell within the believing community, to bring into remembrance all that Jesus had said (John 14: 16-17, 26). They understood too that the coming Spirit would say things that the community could not yet bear (John 16:7-15). The church's confession must always be tested by the core message, the Jesus story, as witnessed to in the primitive traditions of the New Testament; yet the reading of the earliest testimonies cannot exhaust the church's understanding of its faith. The Spirit continues to speak through the church, which, in turn, also becomes the interpretive lens through which the earliest witnesses are understood. All churches read through one interpretive lens or another, but it is nevertheless imperative that the churches see through a catholic lens. This means that Protestants should not only interpret their faith through a Reformation hermeneutic, but also pay attention to the patristic and medieval reading of the gospel. Similarly, Roman Catholics ought to interpret their faith

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engages in theological reflection must do so first as part of the communion of saints (cf. Barth) and then as a Baptist who is a member of the communion of saints" (ibid., 64). Harmon points to Karl Barth as one who was constantly "in dialogue with the doctrinal tradition of the church across the ages and across the denominational traditions" (ibid., 51; see also 131). It is true that we might begin our theological reflections with the broader tradition in view, but there is a sense in which even that starting point reflects our own particularity.

[49] For a recent attempt to take pneumatology seriously in the ecumenical context, see D. Donnelly, A. Denaux, and J. Fameree, *The Holy Spirit, The Church and Christian Unity: Proceedings of the Consultation Held at the Monastery of Bose, Italy (14-20 October 2002)* (Dudley, MA.: Leuven University Press, 2005).

[50] John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 379-380.

beyond the Roman sphere, and come to acknowledge the Spirit's working among other traditions. It is inevitable that Christians will find particular inspiration in specific moments in the history of the church. The Orthodox will continue to be drawn to the period of the Ecumenical Councils, while Protestants will typically be drawn to the age of the Reformation. But Christians should never presume that the Spirit of God has not been working outside of these "privileged" zones. Confession in the triune God implies the recognition that the Spirit of God has been at work in all places and at all times; for there can be no "golden age" that alone inspires, just as no one tradition is capable of revealing a "total perspective."[51]

At this point, readers sympathetic to Believers Church perspectives may be wondering if the emphasis on catholicity might lead to the possible eclipse of the local hermeneutical community. Christians in the Believers Church tradition have argued that the biblical text is understood most faithfully when disciples committed to obedience discern together what the Bible is saying. This has sometimes been referred to as *Gemeindetheologie*, an understanding that local communities that worship and serve together are in the best position to hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.[52] The model attempts to follow the pattern of the Jerusalem church as recorded in the first chapters of the Book of Acts, wherein a community of disciples gathered daily and throughout the week for fellowship, the eating of bread and the drinking of wine, and the sharing of economic resources. The argument in this paper is not intended to overturn this ecclesial model but to encourage Christians of Believers Churches to be also open to new voices that bring new insights into the conversation—insights that might, admittedly, disrupt what has previously been regarded as self-evident.[53] Such a process begins with the community not only celebrating its own rootedness, but also admitting the

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[51] This term comes from Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 12-15.

[52] See Lydia Neufeld Harder, "Postmodern Suspicion and Imagination: Therapy for Mennonite Hermeneutic Communities," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 71, no. 2 (April 1997): 267; Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, 3rd ed. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 45.

[53] Harder, "Postmodern Suspicion and Imagination," 272.

difficulty of seeing the distortions of its own discourse.[54] It includes the local church recognizing the importance of the wider hermeneutical community and drawing on the resources of the church catholic, trusting that the Spirit of God has also been at work elsewhere.

The Imperative to Commune

It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider in any extended detail how a catholic mindset might concretely impact the worship and practices of the churches. It is evident that, at the very least, ecumenical exchanges must be given priority. Unfortunately, these matters have often been relegated to the enthusiastic few, who wish to practice good Christian manners, or who are in leadership and are perhaps required to work in ecumenical fashion. Sometimes ecumenism is seen to be valuable when there is enough time and money in the budget, or if there are pragmatic outcomes like a joint educational project, a common hymnal project, or a joint publication of educational materials. Yet if Christians have been brought together in Christ, conversation and working together is not about good manners or pragmatism—as laudable as these forms of working together may be. Rather, ecumenical cooperation is a biblical imperative and it must be seen as intrinsic to the church's identity and mission.[55] The biblical passage in John 17 is an obvious foundation for this understanding. In his prayer Jesus expresses the wish that his disciples and the church of the future might be united, as the Father and the Son are one. The importance of this unity is so that the world might believe. The unity of the Father and the Son is the model and the ontological basis for the unity among believers. The unity among the believers is "to make credible the fundamental Christian claim ('that the world might believe,' said twice) and to reflect the nature of the unity between the Son and the Father, to render that credible witness substantial."[56]

Especially since the Second Vatican Council, many Christians have dared to hope that conversation and friendly gatherings might lead eventually to common eucharistic celebration. In recent years anticipation has increased, as

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[54] Ibid., 274.

[55] John Howard Yoder makes this point in *The Royal Priesthood*, 290-299.

[56] Ibid., 291.

bilateral dialogues have been fruitful, making it possible for separated communities to face each other with renewed interest and empathy. Documents of various kinds have been furnished, indicating areas of agreement and mutual understanding between churches that once considered each other enemies. In some cases these efforts have indeed brought about "full communion" between former rivals. It must be recognized, however, that a common eucharistic life has not been the outcome of most ecumenical relationships. Amiable conversations have been fruitful, the communion of coffee and cake has been made possible, but the sharing of bread and wine has remained elusive. Yet, if the work of Christ has brought together Christians into one family, and if Christians are now said to be of one body, is not any separation at the table a blatant negation of the atoning work of Christ and the ongoing work of the Spirit?[57]

Unfortunately, the Lord's Table is the place where the church and world continue to be reminded that Christians are separated from Christians. In the past, efforts to bring the believing community together for eucharistic celebration have often been stymied by historic arguments and lengthy recitals about ever-present theological differences, or the importance of the special priestly ministry that must be the condition for the legitimacy and efficacy of the sacraments. Yet Christians need to remember that it is the *Lord's* Table around which Christians are called to worship and experience fellowship. The Table is not in possession of one ecclesial stream nor within only one strand of God's *oikonomia*. The Lord's Table, therefore, should "not be allowed to exercise any controversial theological function through which Christians are separated from Christians."[58] In the Supper, Christ as prophet, priest, and king presides over the sacraments. He is the One who is present and brings to memory God's gift to us. The Supper "is gracious, unconditional and

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[57] Ephraim Radner maintains that the separation of the churches is a result not, first of all, because of doctrinal issues, but rather because of a lack of ecclesial love, the result being that the Holy Spirit has left the church. See his *The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998).

[58] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 245.

prevenient like the love of God itself."[59] As long as Christians are disallowed from sitting at the Lord's Table with one another, there will be the need for ongoing lament and confession, for repentance, and for the amendment of ecclesial life. A genuine catholic orientation calls for nothing less.

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[59] Ibid., 246.

Chapter Eight

The Ground of Perfection: Michael Sattler on "The Body of Christ"

Brian Hamilton

One standard interpretation of early Anabaptist thought frames the Christian life principally in terms of "following Christ." As Harold Bender puts it in his *The Anabaptist Vision*, "the Anabaptists were concerned most of all about 'a true Christian life,' that is, a life patterned after the teaching and example of Christ."[1] Undoubtedly, a defining mark of Anabaptism was its emphasis on practical living and following Christ's example. Yet the Anabaptists understood their relation to Christ not only as one of imitation, but also as one of incorporation. Believers do not only follow Christ; they live as members of Christ's body. This was central to their understanding of ecclesiology. Yet Bender fails even to mention this, describing the Anabaptist view of the church only as the voluntary community of willing disciples—a definition which fails to explain why the church was so necessary to the Christian life as the Anabaptists understood it. The church was necessary because she is the body of Christ, and because unity

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[1] Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944), 16.

with Christ's body is itself the essence of salvation. Such, at least, was the perspective of Michael Sattler, whose thought I want to examine in this essay.

A brief outline of Sattler's thought will serve to clarify all that follows. His thinking is animated by an unshakeable cosmic dualism between two bodies within which all human life takes place: the "body" of the world and the body of Christ. Between them, there is nothing in common. Lies and violence are all that bind the world's fellowship, but in Christ there is true unity and peace. Salvation is a matter of being transplanted from one body to the other, of being made "members of God in Christ Jesus" by faith and baptism.[2] As members of Christ's body, then, our entire life becomes determined by his life. Insofar as we are truly one with Christ, we live as he lived—not due to any ethic of imitation, but precisely because he lives in us. By celebrating the Supper and using the ban (that is, church discipline in general and not merely the act of excommunication), the church aspires to an outward unity of obedience corresponding to its inner unity of being. The relentless Christocentrism of Sattler's thought derives from something broader than a concern for obedience to the teaching and example of Jesus; it derives from the conviction that Jesus Christ alone stands apart from the tangle of sin and violence that constitutes the world, and that only in bodily union with him can our own deliverance be found.

Hence, for Michael Sattler, it is only because Christ is who he is that the church is who she is and does what she does. Specifically, I want to argue that the unity of Sattler's theological vision—his christology, ecclesiology, and ethics—lies in his understanding of the body of Christ. On another level, I also intend to challenge a common presumption in Mennonite theology that "abstract" theological reflection on issues like the nature of Jesus' being is a distraction from more "concrete" considerations like how to follow him. The difference between Bender's summary of Anabaptist discipleship and Sattler's

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[2] Michael Sattler, "Brotherly Union" (cover letter), in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 36. I take all of my English translations from this volume, which I will reference by an abbreviated title of the document at hand—"Strasbourg," for his letter to Bucer and Capito; "Schleitheim," for the confession of faith ratified there; and "Horb," for his letter to the congregation he pastored—along with a more specific textual reference if possible and the page number in Yoder's translation.

vision of it is precisely that Bender lacks a theological account of *who Christ is* that makes possible "true conversion" and "true brotherhood and love."[3] I therefore turn first to an elaboration of Sattler's christology, and especially to the relationship between its abstract-metaphysical and historical dimensions.

Christology: Totus Christus

One of Michael Sattler's writings that is especially important for its christological reflection is the parting letter he wrote to the Strasbourg reformers Wolfgang Capito and Martin Bucer. Among the figureheads of the Reformation, these two were uncommonly open to "radicals," in large part because of their special commitment to a certain kind of Christian unity. Despite genuine agreement on many important points, it eventually became clear to Sattler that his vision was incompatible with theirs and that he could no longer participate in their reform. The letter he wrote to them is an attempt to explain why. The main disagreement he identifies has to do with the nature of Christian love which, on their account, ought to trump disagreement over any particular practice of the Christian life. "Our Lord Christ is too high to be tied to water," Capito writes, "and our salvation is much too powerful and certain. . . . To [God] nothing is contrary which is according to love, for love is the end of the law."[4] According to the Strasbourg reformers, insisting on some particular doctrine or practice in a way that alienates other Christians is a failure of love, and so Sattler is thought to be wrong precisely to the extent that he makes baptism or the ban or the sword a matter for division.

Sattler's disagreement stems from his account of salvation itself, which he thinks already involves division. His response consists of twenty theses, the first of which identifies salvation as the critical issue: "1) Christ came to save all of those who would believe in Him alone." And belief itself already effects the most basic division possible. "2) He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be damned."[5] From the beginning, Sattler wants to insist that Jesus both unites and divides. Those who believe are

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[3] Bender, *Anabaptist Vision,* 26, 29. These are two of the three marks of the Anabaptist Vision identified by Bender, the third (or rather, first) of which is simply discipleship.

[4] "The Capito Letters," in Yoder*, Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 89.

[5] "Strasbourg," 22.

separated from those who do not. The only true ground of unity *among Christians* is the unity that Christians receive *with God in Christ* on the basis of faith and baptism. As Sattler goes on to say,

> 3) Faith in Jesus Christ reconciles us with the Father and gives us access to Him. 4) Baptism incorporates all believers into the body of Christ, of which He is the head. 5) Christ is the head of His body, i.e., of the believers or the congregation.[6]

It was a theological commonplace in the early days of the Reformation to speak of faith in Christ as what gives us access to God, as the single and irreplaceable means of reconciliation and union with the Father. This view included a certain anti-ecclesiological bias aimed at the Roman Catholic idea that the church also provides a kind of access to God's grace and forgiveness in the sacraments. In Sattler's thought, however, "reconciliation with God through faith" takes a directly ecclesiological turn. For Sattler, it is impossible to separate the access we are given to the Father from the body into which we are incorporated, namely, Christ's. We are made one with God only because we are made members of Christ's body (and because, as Sattler says elsewhere, Christ is himself the "one-essential true God and Savior"[7]). Likewise, believers are truly united only because they are made members of Christ's one body. This essential unity, however, also entails an essential division: unity with God means separation from the world. So for Sattler the unity of Christ's body must be measured by the likeness of body to head. It is counterproductive to set aside issues like the sword or the oath for the sake of some merely empirical unity, since anything less than committed conformity to Jesus' teaching and example destroys our unity at its source.

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[6] Ibid. It is curious that Sattler seems to distinguish "faith," as what reconciles us with the Father, from "baptism," which incorporates us into the body of Christ, but the difference is probably inconsequential. As Snyder rightly says in commenting on this letter, "faith and baptism are two inseparable aspects of one essential response of man before God's saving act: The act of baptism cannot be understood apart from faith, nor can faith be understood apart from the act of baptism." Arnold Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press), 113. If Sattler did entertain some subtle difference in the effects of faith prior to baptism and faith with baptism, he never got the opportunity to explain.

[7] "Horb," 63.

I will not walk through the rest of Sattler's theses individually, but their basic point is straightforward: Christ came to save those who would believe, making them one in him and so conforming them to his image, choosing them out of the worldly kingdom—whose power is death and whose prince is the Devil—for life, for the household of God, and for the true, refulgent glory of the heavenly kingdom. The letter makes clear that, on Sattler's understanding, our unity with God in Christ provides the foundation for insisting on believers baptism, the imitation of Christ, separation from the world, the expectation of persecution, the emphasis on *Gelassenheit* or patient suffering, and the refusal to bear arms. Every aspect of Christian life and hope stems from the sublime fact that Christ has rescued us from sin and darkness, bringing us instead into himself. For Sattler, this is not "just a metaphor;" it is a real truth of grace and the most basic consequence of God's love that those who believe are taken out of the world to live in God's kingdom—to live, in fact, *in Christ*, so that his life becomes our life and our lives (if we remain faithful) become his.

The letter to Bucer and Capito is undoubtedly the most forthrightly christological of all Sattler's writings, so it is interesting to note what does and does not appear here. What does not appear is any mention at all of the *Nachfolge* or *imitatio Christi* theme. There is no question that Sattler maintains a "practical Christocentrism,"[8] as Arnold Snyder puts it, or that "Sattler concentrates on the significance of Christ for the believer."[9] Sattler's christology, such as it is, never attempts to consider Jesus apart from his relation to the believer. Yet in this letter, that relation is not explained principally in terms of discipleship. It is wrong to say that "the emphasis appears to fall not on Christ's redemptive work but rather on Christ incarnate, after whom the believer must follow."[10] In this letter the emphasis *does* fall on Christ's redemptive work, but in a way that serves to accentuate its ethical significance rather than gloss over it. Sattler's aim is to clarify how redemption itself entails a new existential situation for the believer, who has been taken out of the world and made a member of Christ instead.

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[8] Snyder, *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, 145.

[9] Ibid., 151.

[10] Ibid.,145.

Certainly, the general concept of "following" does appear elsewhere in Sattler's writing (although the language itself is relatively rare). He says of the ban that it "shall be employed with all those who have given themselves over to the Lord, to walk after [Him] in His commandments,"[11] and with respect to the sword his main counsel is that "we should also do as He did and follow after Him."[12] On the opposite side, those from whom the faithful are separated are precisely "those who do not wish to walk the surefooted and living way of Christ."[13] It would be impossible to overestimate how important it is to Sattler that Christians be responsive to the command of Christ in simple obedience. Yet the emphasis on *following* as the central image for the relationship between the believer and Christ belongs more properly to Conrad Grebel than to Sattler, and more properly still to the later development of Anabaptist thought.

For even where Sattler does employ the concept of following, it can only properly be understood in the context of his much more consistent focus on the idea of membership in Christ. The most common way for Sattler to speak of Christ is as "the head of his body; that is, of the believers or the congregation."[14] There is no separation, of course, between the Christ in whom believers have their life and the Christ who suffered and died in Jerusalem. As Sattler insists, "Christ is despised in the world[;] so are also those who are His."[15] By faith and baptism, believers belong to the (now exalted) body of the despised and crucified Jesus Christ. The reason that disregard for Jesus of Nazareth's command and example is such a serious matter is because it contradicts our unity in that body. In the Schleitheim Confession, Sattler says:

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[11] "Schleitheim" art. ii, 37. The bracketed "[Him]" is present in Yoder's translation. In a footnote to this passage (50, n. 47), John Howard Yoder comments that "*Nachwandeln*, to walk after, is the nearest approximation in the Schleitheim text to the concept of discipleship (*Nachfolge*) which was later to become especially current among Anabaptists"—thus supporting my point that the concept of following is less natural to Sattler's own thought than most of the secondary literature indicates.

[12] "Schleitheim" art. vi, 40.

[13] "Horb," 58.

[14] "Strasbourg" #5, 22.

[15] "Strasbourg" #8, 22.

In sum: as Christ our head is minded, so also must be minded the members of the body of Christ through Him, so that there be no division in the body, through which it would be destroyed. Since then Christ is as is written of Him, so must His members also be the same, so that His body may remain whole and unified for its own advancement and upbuilding.[16]

With respect to how the believer is related to Christ, we should, therefore, look first to the concept of *membership in him*. When Snyder identifies the governing question for understanding Sattler's christology as, "Who is the Christ the believer is to follow, and what does it mean in concrete terms for the believer to follow him?", he over-determines the issue in advance.[17] What we should be asking instead is, "Who is the Christ in whose body the believer is made to live?" John Howard Yoder better identifies Sattler's central christological theme in the letter to the Strasbourg reformers as "solidarity with Christ whereby the Christian's life becomes an outworking of the divine nature."[18] It is true, therefore, as Snyder says, that the Christ at the centre of Sattler's thought is the incarnate Christ, or the *embodied* Christ, but his body is inseparably historical and cosmic, particular and infinitely spacious. It is never one without the other.

Sattler thus insists—to draw on an old Augustinian theme—on speaking always of the *totus Christus, caput et membra*, the whole Jesus Christ, head and members. Augustine liked to speak of "the whole Christ" in order to emphasize that Christ, having assumed our nature, can no longer be understood outside of his relation to the body of believers. "For Christ is not," Augustine argues, "in the head but not in the body, but rather is the whole Christ in head and in body. What his members are, therefore, he also is (though what he is, his members are not necessarily)."[19] As Sattler also said, it is Christ's body into which the believer is incorporated and Christ who is the head of that body. But equally, the believer can no longer be understood

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[16] "Schleitheim" art. vi, 41.

[17] Snyder, *Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, 151.

[18] Yoder, *Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 21.

[19] *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus*, XXVIII.1, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 36, ed. R. Willems (New York: Brepols, 1954): "Non enim Christus in capite et non in corpore, sed Christus totus in capite et in corpore. Quod ergo membra eius, ipse; quod autem ipse, non continuo membra eius."

outside of her relation to Christ. That relation is not merely of following, but of identity. To quote Augustine again: "Let us be glad and give thanks: not only have we been made Christians, but we have been made Christ."[20] This is the christological principle of Sattler's ecclesiology and his ethics: we have been united to Christ's own body, so that our bodies are animated by his life and his will. This understanding of "the whole Christ" thus affects our understanding both of the person of Christ (whose own body is uniquely capable of incorporating other bodies) and of the believer (whose being is now derived from Christ's).

Sattler's christology of the *totus Christus* necessarily relies on his convictions about Christ as God incarnate, so it stands at odds with a contemporary tendency to reduce the nature of Christ to his historical career. J. Denny Weaver, the most notable proponent of this approach in recent Mennonite theology, has argued that a christology for the Believers Churches needs to begin with a "narrative" christology rather than an "ontological" one.[21] Anabaptist theology has always affirmed the orthodox "ontological" claim that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine, he admits, but that affirmation has been basically unconnected with its more deeply-rooted concern for following Jesus. That concern is more ably helped along by a "narrative" christology that focusses in on the historical work of Jesus of Nazareth. Weaver argues that

> [i]t is precisely the narrative approach, which defines Jesus by his actions, which can appropriately see Jesus as both the agent of forgiveness and as the source of guidance in continuing the creative and salvific life. Ontological christology on the other hand, associating itself primarily with the forgiveness aspect of salvation, provides little help for the guidance aspect of Jesus' salvific activity.[22]

A narrative approach to christology, in other words—which is an approach that "defines Jesus by his actions" rather than by his inner

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[20] Ibid., XXI.8: "Ergo gratulemur et agamus gratias, non solum nos christianos factos esse, sed Christum."

[21] J. Denny Weaver, "A Believers' Church Christology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58, no. 2 (April 1983): 112–131.

[22] Ibid., 130.

constitution—contains in itself all that is necessary to support a Believers Church ecclesiology. A narrative approach begins with Jesus' historical teaching and example, and only thence stakes any ontological claims (which have to adapt to the cultural and intellectual context within which they are formulated). "A purely historical description exposes the need for a more than historical description of Jesus," Weaver says, but what that "more than historical description" will involve cannot be mandated in advance.[23]

However, if the account of Sattler's christology I have given is correct, Weaver's distinction falls apart in the face of it. For it would be impossible, on Sattler's terms, to separate the "narrative" Christ, whose commands and example are communicated in Scripture, from the "ontological" Christ, in whose body believers are members. Sattler "begins" with neither one nor the other. Even if Sattler makes little attempt to spell out how it is possible, ontologically, that believers could become part of someone else's historical body, he reads the stories in the Gospels under the conviction that it is in fact possible, that in baptism we really are made members in the body of *that* Jesus Christ. And to the extent that Sattler does implicitly explain himself, the reason can only be that Jesus is "the one-essential true God and savior,"[24] and so by nature transcends his finite human body even as incarnate. The narrative of Jesus' deeds by itself is plainly not sufficient to ground Sattler's Believers Church ecclesiology. On the contrary: extract that "ontological" conviction from Sattler's reading of the person of Christ, and his entire doctrine of the church (along with his ethics) collapses like a building without a foundation.

Ecclesiology: Being in Christ

So Michael Sattler's christology is more "ontological" than has often been thought (i.e., more concerned with who Jesus is in relation to God), although not in a way that diverts attention from the normative teaching or example of Jesus' historical existence. Sattler understands the Jesus of the Gospels not merely as a lordly figure whose past example believers ought to imitate, but as a living and active body into which believers are united by faith and baptism. As such, the person of Christ himself constitutes the possibility of the church.

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[23] Ibid., 119.
[24] "Horb," 63.

The church is, simply said, that community made one with God and with each other by being incorporated into the body of Christ.

Unity with God by membership in Christ's body is undoubtedly the grounding theme of Sattler's entire ecclesiology, and so the church's central practices—namely, baptism, the ban, and the Supper—are described primarily in terms of that unity. According to the Schleitheim Confession, baptism should be given "to all those who desire to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and be buried with Him in death, so that they might rise with Him."[25] Baptism unites one wholly with Jesus, in his glory and in his suffering. Therefore it requires willingly and freely giving up whatever life you had in order to take on his life instead (and since only adult believers are capable of freely giving up their own lives, "hereby is excluded all infant baptism"[26]). The ban—meaning church discipline in general rather than excommunication alone—is used only among "those who have been baptized into the one body of Christ,"[27] in order to guard each other against inadvertently sinning and so breaking the unity of the body with its head. It is a prerequisite to the breaking of bread, which is a sign of having already been "made one loaf together with [all the children of God]."[28] As Sattler reminds the congregation at Horb in his letter to them, it is important that the church "forget not the assembly, but apply yourselves to coming together constantly and that you may be united in prayer for all men and the breaking of the bread."[29] For it is in this constant gathering, and in this constant prayer and constant remembrance of Christ's broken body, that the church lives out the unity in God which she receives as a gift of grace in baptism.

The corollary to this emphasis on unity with God in Sattler's ecclesiology is the equal urgency with which he insists that the church be separated from the world. The open invitation to union with God in Christ is God's great "yes" to the world, his total offer of grace to anyone who would receive it, but it is an intrinsic and inextricable characteristic of this offer of absolute goodness and love that it involves just as absolute a *rejection* of all wickedness,

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[25] "Schleitheim" art. i, 36.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid. art. ii, 37.

[28] Ibid. art. iii, 37.

[29] "Horb," 62.

evil, darkness, and abomination. Gerald Biesecker-Mast quite rightly speaks of "the relation of dependence between unity and separation" in Sattler's thought, calling attention to how the purpose of the ban (which is the one tool for enforcing separation) is the unity of the body: it is used "so that we may all in one spirit and in one love break and eat from one bread and drink from one cup."[30] It is only because the church belongs to Christ, "Prince of the Spirit," that she no longer belongs to the world, whose prince is the Devil.[31]

Yet it is extremely important that this separation not be understood as something proper to the church's members, but as something owed completely to Christ and deriving its nature from him. Sattler's doctrine of separation cannot be understood apart from his understanding of the church that I have described by reference to the Augustinian idea of the *totus Christus*. The church's separation from the world flows from *Christ's* consummate and eternal separation from all corruption. As he puts it in his letter to Bucer and Capito, "Christ is despised in the world, so are also those who are His; He has no kingdom in the world, but that which is of this world is against his kingdom."[32] As with the head, so with the body. It is only because "there is nothing in common between Christ and Belial"[33] that there is neither anything in common between the members of Christ and those who walk in darkness. We might say that a "separatist christology" precedes and underwrites his "separatist ecclesiology:" the point of distinction between the church and the world is simply Christ, who brings those who believe into his own perfection. Because Christ stands apart from the world, so also do those who are his—and they do so *only* because they are his. It is not at root a sociological difference, though that is not to say that it has no sociological consequences. The members of the church continue to be sinners, continue to need discipline, continue to require the purification and instruction of the Holy Spirit; but by faith and baptism they truly do already dwell in Christ's perfection. Insofar as they are conformed to that reality, as they must

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[30] Gerald Biesecker-Mast, *Separation and the Sword in Anabaptist Persuasion* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2006), 102; quoting "Schleitheim" art. ii, 37.

[31] "Strasbourg" #11, 10; 22.

[32] Ibid. #8, 22.

[33] Ibid. #20, 23.

constantly strive to be, the clearer the light of Christ (who alone is rightly separated from the world) shines in them.

One could therefore summarize Sattler's doctrine of separation with this simple phrase of his own: "sanctify yourselves to Him who has sanctified you."[34] The saving work of God comes first; then it is a matter of giving ourselves over to the Lord ever more fully, of being conformed to Christ's image. It is a matter of being "united to stand fast in the Lord as obedient children of God, sons and daughters, who have been and shall be separated from the world in all that we do and leave undone," as Sattler says in the cover letter to the Schleitheim Confession.[35] That cover letter could fairly be read as an argument in favour of a *fides Christo formata*, a faith formed by Christ, against the Reformation tendency to understand faith as a largely invisible act of the heart. And, in that case, the *Brotherly Union* itself should be read as a short list of disputed yet critical formative points. In this context, the first three articles (on baptism, the ban, and the Supper) appear as the sequential "sacraments" of conformity to Christ, which culminate in the declaration of the church's separation from the world (in article four). As I have said, the purpose of these practices is described primarily in terms of unity with God. Baptism inaugurates our life in Christ; the ban guards against our going astray; and the Supper is the enactment of our unity in the crucified Lord. These, above all, are the practices by which we sanctify ourselves to the one who has sanctified us. The other three articles (on pastors, the sword, and the oath) are then important examples of those things that subsequently fall away: total autonomy, violence, and every hint of falsehood. In the world, the oath is what unites those who are quarrelling (art. vii)—but the only true unity comes in baptism into Christ (art. i). In the world, the sword punishes the wicked and kills them (art. vi)—but the better discipline deals not in death, but in love (art. ii). Thus it can be seen that those central practices of the church that unite us with God in Christ are also the most important acts of separation.

It should be clear that the doctrine of separation which Sattler is advocating here has nothing at all to do with cultural insularity or any kind of eremitic existence, and it certainly does not imply a lack of concern for those outside the church. This is a separation, after all, introduced not by the church

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[34] "Horb," 62.
[35] "Schleitheim" (cover letter), 35.

but by God, who wills to redeem the entire world. It is a separation intended to expose wickedness for what it is by making truth visible in the person of Christ, and so to call people away from the lies and violence of the world. According to Sattler, the church stands apart from the world for the sake of the world. On the one hand, this means that "the abomination of desolation is visible among you."[36] It is part of the church's witness to the perfect love of God that she hate abomination, that she spurn falsehood, that she leave behind all violence and willingly suffer as Christ did. Only thus can it be seen that God's love is genuinely effective, that it actually rescues people from the world's depravity. The reason that Sattler exhorts his congregation at Horb to "be sincere and righteous in all patience and love of God" is precisely "so that you can be recognized in the midst of this adulterous generation of godless men, like bright and shining lights which God the heavenly Father has kindled with the knowledge of Him and the light of the Spirit."[37] So also, on the other hand, the church's separation unto God through Christ is the very source of her splendour, without which she would have nothing at all to recommend to this fallen world. Because the church is united to Christ as his body, she is separated from the world just as he was: by her unflinching desire to walk in the Spirit of God, dying daily to the ways of the world. And she can do so only because, in being united to Christ, his life has become her own.

At the most basic level, I have only been elaborating a simple truism of Christian faith: Christ cannot be understood apart from the church, nor the church apart from Christ. For Michael Sattler, however, this truism is everything. Christ cannot be understood apart from the church because he is incarnate, because he is embodied, and his body is such that we can become members in it. Unity with God is possible—which is to say that *salvation* is possible—only because, in Christ, God has assumed a body. Therefore Sattler's christology, although it is always a practical christology, is always also concerned with *who Christ is*, even in an ontological sense. And likewise, although Sattler's ecclesiology consistently foregrounds the church's practical formation, it also depends on his account of *who the church is*: namely, members of Christ's own body. The church cannot be understood apart from Christ because, through faith and baptism, it is only as Christ that she lives

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[36] "Horb," 61.

[37] Ibid., 56.

and acts. Only once the identity of Christ and the church are thus clarified do Sattler's ethics find their proper context.

Ethics: Within the Perfection of Christ

Up to this point I have carefully avoided too much emphasis on "perfection" or "purity," although Sattler's extremely high moral standards for the congregation of God are obvious. I do think Arnold Snyder is right to say that one could call Sattler's ethic "perfectionistic,"[38] since he does imagine the Christian life as one constantly on the watch against disobedience and always quick to repentance. It is a necessary characteristic of the church that all her members strive singlemindedly for obedience, since (to repeat Sattler's axiom) "as the head is minded, so must its members also be."[39] As Sattler insisted contra Bucer and Capito, the unity of the church depends on her likeness to Jesus.

But it is important not to overstate things. It is rather rare for Sattler himself to use the language of either purity or perfection, and when he does invoke the idea—explicitly or not—it is in almost every instance tied directly to the saving work of Christ or God's gracious forgiveness. He writes in the *Brotherly Union* that "baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and the amendment of life and who believe truly that their sins are taken away through Christ."[40] Or he says, quoting the second chapter of Titus (v. 14), that the Christian life is a matter of awaiting the appearance of God's glory and the Saviour Jesus Christ, "who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds."[41] And in his conclusion to his letter to the church at Horb, he prays that "the peace of Jesus Christ, the love of the heavenly Father, and the grace of Their Spirit"—since only the triune God could do this—"keep you flawless, without sin, and present you joyous and pure before the vision of Their holiness at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."[42] In all these cases, the human part is repentance and zeal; purity or flawlessness is a gift of God. The

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[38] Snyder, *Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, 235, n. 100.

[39] "Strasbourg" #6, 22.

[40] "Schleitheim" art. i, 36.

[41] Quoted in "Schleitheim" (second cover letter), 43.

[42] "Horb," 63.

word perfection (*Vollkommenheit*) appears only once in all his writings, to speak of "the perfection of Christ" within which the children of God are made to dwell.[43] If it is true that for Sattler, over against the other Reformers, "election, repentance, and baptism suffice to place sinless perfection within the grasp" of human beings,[44] it is only because those are the conditions of unity with Christ's perfection, and not because thereafter it becomes possible to maintain any kind of sinlessness of our own.

On the contrary, Sattler knows that Christians will sin. Snyder is wrong to suggest that, when Schleitheim says the ban is for those who "*somehow* slip and fall into error and sin, being *inadvertently* overtaken" (emphasis his), it means that this error is surprising or unexpected.[45] It simply means that for those united in Christ, sin is a kind of falling away which is never intentional. Hence Sattler's conviction in his letter to Horb is that the ban can be and should be used only as an act of love. Certainly no member of the church should knowingly sin, for they have committed themselves to the way of Jesus' perfection. But, as is also said at Schleitheim, "everything which you have done unknowingly and now confess to have done wrongly, is forgiven you, through that believing prayer, which is offered among us in our meeting for all our shortcomings and guilt, through the gracious forgiveness of God and through the blood of Jesus Christ."[46] Sometimes the members of the church will be tired and lazy servants, as Sattler chastises some of congregation at Horb for having been—but through the Father's discipline and forgiving love they can come again to walk the way of Christ. When he tells that congregation that they should be "humble and sympathetic with the weak and the imperfect,"[47] the motivating sentiment is not condescension but genuine sympathy. Ecclesial accountability is not about the strong guiding the weak, but about the weak bearing the weak in love. The work of the Spirit is precisely to give "strength and consolation and constance in all tribulation to the end."[48]

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[43] "Schleitheim" art. vi, 39.

[44] Snyder, *Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, 168.

[45] Ibid., 235, n. 100.

[46] "Schleitheim" (second cover letter), 43.

[47] "Horb," 59.

[48] "Schleitheim" (cover letter), 34.

Michael Sattler's ethics are about perseverance in the word of God, about trust and hope, not about moral heroism. There is an important difference. The Christian life is hard—too hard, in fact, for a person on his or her own to bear. It is a life full of trials and temptations and all kinds of evil. The wiles of the Devil can easily lead one astray and, on top of that, the Father chastises those he loves. Life in the world really is easier than life in Christ. But better than a "brief and passing rest" is "the blessed, measured chastisement and discipline (for your salvation) of the Lord. . . . Flesh passes away and all of its glory, only the Word of the Lord remains eternally."[49] So the only way to true life and true rest is to cling to that eternal Word and to "His eternal, veritable, righteous, and life-giving commandments."[50] The goal of the Christian life is simply to persevere in obedience and love, to live a life of repentance, to stake one's entire life on the gift of God's grace. The work of discipleship is to strive constantly "to stand fast in the Lord,"[51] to yield oneself entirely to God—to God's discipline as well as to God's magnanimous provision—and to persevere in patient faithfulness through whatever trials may come. Sattler's emphasis on "purity," such as it is, is therefore not a display of moral narcissism; it is a matter of humble perseverance in Christ's way in the arduous journey through this present age, so that the whole body might at the end of the world be seen to have been "prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev 21:2). The church is indeed called to perfection, and she has indeed attained it—in the reality of her unity with Jesus Christ through faith and baptism. It is in this unity that the church is called to stand fast, come what may, and her own virtue consists simply in refusing to turn away from the goal that has been set for her.[52]

If any member of the church can be called sinless, it is only because his or her sins are taken away through Christ; if the church herself can be called pure, it is because the Spirit of all holiness presents her to the Father; if the body of Christ on earth can be called perfect, it is only because she belongs to the perfection of the whole Christ. When that famous phrase, "the perfection

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[49] "Horb," 58–59.

[50] Ibid.," 58.

[51] "Schleitheim" (cover letter), 35.

[52] "Let no one shift your goal" is Sattler's recurring exhortation to the church at Horb (e.g., "Horb," 60).

of Christ," appears in Sattler's writing, in Schleitheim's article on the sword, it is to identify the peculiar place that believers occupy in the world. The phrase appears only once, but it is a place whose presence is strongly felt in every aspect of Sattler's thought. Christ's perfection opened up a space in the cosmos where anyone who believes can be chosen out of all this world's evil and darkness and lifted up to new life in God, a life of love and truth. In this age between the ages, while death still reigns in the world at large and wages war against Christ, before the peace of Christ is established everywhere and God is all in all, it is the lot of believers to wait and hope and possibly suffer for the sake of making that peace known to everyone. And this is possible only because Christ has done it first, and has granted us a share in his perfection.

Sattler's ethics thus only make sense in the context of his understanding of the church's identity with Christ. The church is perfect insofar as she is Christ's body. As such, her perfection is not a moral one at all, if "moral" signifies something proper to human action. Her unity with Christ is not something that she accomplishes, nor something she progressively attains by discipline. In this respect, Snyder rightly argues that Sattler has no doctrine of gradual sanctification. Believers have the spirit of Christ by virtue of faith and baptism alone; "they are no longer *viatores*, they are the *sancti*."[53] All believers are saints because they have been made one with Christ by grace. That does not mean, however, that gluttons who come to believe are no longer gluttons, or that it will require no work to overcome their gluttony. On the contrary, coming to believe involves coming to recognize their gluttony as a sin, and repenting of it. In this process there can and must be slow and arduous growth through communal accountability and discipline. But when believers stumble along the narrow way that Jesus trod, as long as they submit to that discipline and are continually united with the whole Christ in receiving his Supper, their place in the perfection of Christ is not compromised. For the life of the church, marked by those practices of discipline and communion, is the life of Christ himself. Sattler's ethics can only be called perfectionistic, then, when it is understood that their perfection will never be our own, and thus will never be a "moral" perfection.

For Michael Sattler, therefore, perfection comes to humanity as a gift. It is one and the same, in fact, with the gift of Jesus Christ himself and with the gift

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[53] Snyder, *Life and Thought of Michael Sattler*, 166.

of membership in Christ's body. For God's embodiment does not only provide a moral exemplar; it offers the possibility of true unity with God and with each other. Because God's body really is a human body, he is like us in all things but sin. On earth he walked and breathed and ate, he knew joy and sadness, he suffered and eventually died. The humanity God assumed in Christ is very much our humanity, and God's body is the same as our bodies. In Jesus Christ, God lived our life and lived it perfectly; hence Christ is a kind of moral exemplar. Yet he is also more. Because God's body really is *God's* body, there is room in him for other bodies. Human beings can become members in God's body. God offers that membership in baptism, and God defends it and perfects it through discipline and the Supper. These are the sacraments that unite believers in the body of Christ, and separate them from the world. Only in this unity in the whole Christ is the gift of perfection given—hence Sattler speaks of perfection as something that the church dwells *within*, rather than a quality of its own. The church belongs to perfection, not perfection to the church. Perfection, in the end, is only Christ's. To us is repentance and hope.

Chapter Nine

The Pietist as Strong Poet: A Brethren Corrective to the Anabaptist Communal Soul

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Scott Holland

I came of age spiritually and intellectually in the Church of the Brethren under the incomparable historiography of Donald Durnbaugh. Therefore, I enthusiastically embraced and confessed the gifts of *our* Anabaptist heritage. Early in my ministry I freely proclaimed, "We are Anabaptists!" Further, study with John Howard Yoder only strengthened my Anabaptist credentials as a member of the Believers Church tradition.

Then, one Sunday morning, after preaching a strong Anabaptist sermon, I was approached by a very well read parishioner. Floyd Mallott, Jr., was a practicing psychiatrist in the city of Pittsburgh. Floyd said, "You know, Scott, when I was growing up on the campus of Bethany Seminary, Brethrenism was rarely simply identified with Anabaptism." Mallott continued, "I know you look to Durnbaugh and Yoder but take a look at my dad's book." He handed me a copy of *Studies in Brethren History* by Floyd Mallott, published in 1954.[1]

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[1] Floyd E. Mallott, *Studies in Church History* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1954).

Mallott preceded Durnbaugh as a professor at Bethany Seminary and taught courses ranging from Brethren History to Old Testament. He was the founding editor of the first academic journal of Brethren studies, *Schwarzenau*. The Church of the Brethren's scholarly journal is now titled *Brethren Life and Thought.* In his history of the Brethren movement Professor Mallott notes the important influence of the Anabaptists, or Baptists, as he often identifies them, on the emergence of the early European Brethren movement. However, in identifying the tone and texture of Brethren theology and spirituality, he insists: "We thus think of the Brethren as Biblical Pietistic mystics . . . imitators of primitive Christianity."[2] The imitation of Christ in the spiritual style of mysticism and Pietism became an important paradigm in Mallott's interpretation of the Brethren.

I tested Mallott's thesis relative to Brethren identity in the following months with older members of my congregation. One well educated deacon declared, "Your constant references to Anabaptism were really new to me. I just wondered if you didn't pick that up from your Mennonite wife!" Well, I picked up my scholarly enthusiasm for Anabaptism from Durnbaugh and Yoder but the deacon's point was well taken. Why had I given so little explicit attention to Pietism?

John Howard Yoder, as a Mennonite, of course worked out of an Anabaptist vision. Although Donald Durnbaugh, the towering Brethren historian and theological thinker, certainly treats the many streams of Pietism flowing into the German Baptist Brethren movement in his careful and comprehensive work,[3] Anabaptism appears to be a more dominant, indeed, a preferred, influence on the evolution of Brethren life and thought.

The words of Mallott the younger and the works of Mallott the elder led me to consider some earlier histories of the Brethren. I studied Martin Grove Brumbaugh's *A History of the German Brethren Baptist Brethren in Europe and America* (1899), George N. Falkenstein's *History of the German Baptist Brethren Church* (1900), H. R. Holsinger's *History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church* (1901), and Otho Winger's *History and Doctrine of the*

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[2] Ibid., 14.

[3] Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968; 2nd ed.: Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985).

Church of the Brethren (1919). I discovered Pietism was alive and well in these texts and in their authors' historiographies of Brethren theological formation. This study inspired me to reconsider the gifts and graces Pietism might offer my Anabaptist theological agendas.

What corrective or supplement might Pietism offer Anabaptism in our contemporary context? Why had I neglected this spiritual and intellectual stream flowing through the centre of my own Brethren heritage? Certainly Yoder's and Durnbaugh's Anabaptism was very attractive to me because of its contemporary call to discipleship, community, and peacemaking. It seemed to me that Anabaptism offered a public or social ethics whereas Pietism retreated into churchly spirituality and personal piety. I also likely associated piety with some kind of undesirable puritanism because a shadow had been cast over Pietism by Robert Friedmann, a scholar who came to adore both the Anabaptist Vision and its modern academic architect, H. S. Bender.

Robert Friedmann and H. S. Bender were friends and intellectual conversation partners. Bender was, of course, teaching Anabaptism at Goshen and Friedmann was a history professor at nearby Western Michigan University. Several have commented on this unlikely friendship: Bender, the plain-suited dean of Mennonite faithfulness, and Friedmann, the Jewish, the cigar puffing, worldly professor, meeting together on the academic territory of Anabaptism. Most Members of the Believers' Church guild know that in 1949 Friedmann published a widely-read and very influential book, *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries*.[4] In this work, Friedmann pries Anabaptism and Pietism apart like a cherry-stone clam and pronounces Anabaptism the ethical pearl of great price as he tosses Pietism into the dust bin of theological history. Professor Friedmann's strong sense that existential religious sentiment must find expression in social ethics led him not only to critique personal piety but to really misrepresent the complexity of Pietism as a spiritual and social mode of being in the world. Friedmann's thesis went unchallenged for many years and had a great influence on my teachers' generation of Believers Church scholars.

Happily, in recent years many scholars in our Believers Church circle have corrected Friedmann's misrepresentations or misunderstandings of Pietism and demonstrated that Anabaptism and Pietism have historically embraced

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[4] Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries: Its Genius and Literature* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949).

and kissed in some of the finest free church theology and practice. A partial list of these writers includes Steve Longenecker, John D. Roth, Dale Stoffer, Hans Schneider, Marcus Meier, Kendall Rogers, Wally Landis, and Dale Brown.[5]

As one who does theology and culture, not church history proper, my interest is in what spiritual and intellectual supplement Pietism might offer Anabaptism. I am especially interested in how the metaphor of the solitary, strong poet of Pietism might offer a corrective or supplement to the communal soul of Anabaptism.

Alexander Mack, the central leader of the early Brethren movement, was influenced by both Pietism and Anabaptism. He was influenced theologically by Mennonite Anabaptism and inspired by the Radical Pietism of Ernst Christoph Hochmann von Hochenau (1670-1721) and Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714). Like his Mennonite friends and neighbours, Mack preached Christian community, discipleship or faithfulness to the exterior Word, and a life of peace. Like the Radical Pietists, he preached the interior word of the Spirit and the religion of the heart's deep passions, which found creative expression in the writing of hymns and poetry.[6]

Brethren theologian Vernard Eller suggests that the Anabaptists stressed obeying Jesus while the Pietists emphasized loving Jesus. In Anabaptism, true faith must find clear and concrete expression in the actions of outward obedience. "One must bear fruit that befits repentance," according to Menno Simons. In Radical Pietism, inner experience or the quality of one's interior life is more central to the authentic life of faith than exterior acts of obedience. Although some contend that the Radical Pietists were simply saying that inner love must precede outward actions, Eller cites Hochmann to the contrary. Addressing those who were intent on following the exact practices of the early

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[5] For a fine collection of many of these writings, see Stephen L. Longenecker, ed., *The Dilemma of Anabaptist Piety: Strengthening or Straining the Bonds of Community?* Forum for Religious Studies at Bridgewater College (Bridgewater, VA: Penobscot Press, 1997).

[6] Although there are many scholarly treatments of Alexander Mack, this 300th Anniversary Year of the Brethren Movement has welcomed the publication of an excellent children's book which offers a surprisingly rich summary of Mack and the origins of the Brethren. Myrna Grove, *Alexander Mack: A Man Who Rippled the Waters*, illus. Mary Jewell (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 2008).

Christians as a verification and validation of the one true faith, Hochmann writes:

> To sum up, my feeling is briefly aimed therein that one must seek Jesus in one's heart as the only true foundation of salvation and the heart must be completely purified through the true living faith in Jesus. In case it is wished to perform in true singleness of heart also those outward actions which the first Christians did in addition to these inner immovable bases, I cannot consider this a mortal sin if one only remains in impartial love toward those who cannot feel in their minds this necessity for these outward acts The freedom of Christ suffers neither force nor laws.[7]

The freedom of Christ suffers neither force nor laws! Hochmann, in the company of other Radical Pietists, saw the dangers as well as the temptations of a mere rule-based religion. He was aware of how punishing and damaging creedal statements, ecclesial moral codes, and sacramental systems could be to those on a true journey of the heart. Indeed, Alexander Mack and Hochmann ultimately parted company on this point. Mack and others in the evolving Brethren movement proposed more of a theological dialectic between interior and exterior dispositions. He even endorsed the Mennonite doctrine of the ban or church discipline to ensure and enforce this dialectic of loving Jesus and obeying Jesus in a visible community of faith and practice. Hochmann departed from Mack's disciplined community to greet Jesus in a more solitary place.[8]

Gottfried Arnold, like Ernst Christoph Hochmann, was suspicious of creeds, codes, and sacraments for those on a spiritual journey. Arnold is an inspiring example of the Pietist as strong poet. The influence of this great preacher, poet, and historian on the development of Pietism can hardly be overemphasized. We have much to learn from him. He spoke of the spiritual

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[7] Hochmann quoted in Vernard Eller, "Recent Trends from the Long Perspective," in Emmit F. Bittinger, ed., *Brethren in Transition: 20th Century Directions and Dilemmas,* Forum for Religious Studies at Bridgewater College (Penobscot, VA: Penobscot Press, 1992), 81.

[8] For a comprehensive study of Hochmann, see Heinz Renkewttz, *Hochmann von Hochenau: 1670-1721*, trans. William. G. Willoughby (Philadelphia, PA: Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1993).

life not in terms of duty or mere discipleship but as the heart's desire: *Die erste Liebe* (The First Love). It was this "love theology" that found its way into early Pietist literature and later into Brethren theology.[9]

Arnold's mystical piety was refreshingly suspicious of both religious community and inherited theological creeds. As a poet and preacher, he recognized that the order of community and the language of creeds threatened to collapse *theos* into *logos.* This is always the great temptation of church and creed: to bring Infinity into submission to a historical totality. Arnold also understood very clearly how the formal language of church and creed had been used in the history of the church to punish dissidents and nonconformists who were often the true believers. He therefore preached a stubborn but enlightened noncreedalism. His historical work pointed to the absence of disciplinary creeds in the apostolic church and to the terrible violence and persecution that creedal Christianity produced.

This concern is at the centre of Arnold's massive work of historical theology, *A Nonpartisan History of Church and Heresy.*[10] Applying the principles of love-theology to the entire history of the church, his thesis was that the heretical movements had actually perpetuated the true church, while the Orthodox church that disciplined and punished them was in reality the antichurch. He charged that orthodoxy often had more to do with power and position than with the true spiritual church. Arnold's critical approach to the standard account of church history is so emotionally stunning and intellectually satisfying that some are now suggesting that Arnold is one of the fathers of modern historiography.

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[9] Arnold published *Die Erste Liebe* as a book in Frankfurt in 1696. He speaks of the Christian life in the language of "a first love" (Rev 2:4). His links to the great love mystics are evident in this work and his "love Pietism" was warmly received by the early Brethren. Arnold's life, theology, and connections to earlier expressions of mysticism are treated in Peter Erb, *Pietists, Protestants and Mysticism: The Use of Medieval Spiritual Texts in the Work of Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714)* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1989). Also see Peter Erb, ed., *Pietists: Selected Writings*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).

[10] Gottfried Arnold, *Unparteyische Kirchen und Ketzer Historie,* 3 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Thomas Fritsch, 1699-1700). This important work awaits an ambitious English translator.

Following Gottfried Arnold's thesis about the manifestation of God in the world, it might be said that the orthodox who control the order of salvation have great political interests in managing a system of church doctrine and discipline wherein all yield submissively to an established cycle of sin, repentance, and redemption. Arnold's creative theological and historical criticism demonstrates that in the history of spirituality, *theos*, in moments of *kairos*, refuses the *logos* of orthodoxy. Instead, *theos* enters history and the human soul not through the established formula of sin, repentance, and redemption, but through the heretical revolution of transgression, excess, and gift. Heretics, ecstatics, saints, mystics, pietists, and poets remind us that often God comes first as transgression, then excess, and finally, gift! This is the gift of a new vision and voice.[11] Arnold, the Pietist preacher, becomes our model of the strong poet offering a corrective or supplement to the Anabaptist super-ego or communal soul.

What is a strong poet? The literary critic Harold Bloom uses this image of the strong poet in his modern classic, *The Anxiety of Influence*.[12] Bloom employs "poet" as a metaphorical or extended sense to identify not simply one who writes poetic verse but rather to highlight one who performs some artful linguistic innovation inviting transformation. The strong poet knows the anxiety of influence produced by tradition, convention, and even by his or her most valued mentors. A weak poet would easily fold under the anxiety of hoping to please his teachers or yield to an imposed expectation to mimic her cultural-linguistic community. The strong poet, however, finds the courage to move beyond convention to some new vision and voice. This poet, in the words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, can see beyond the first range of hills and artfully give voice to new sights before him and new sensations within him, for there is a belief that this poetic imagination is indeed a link to something beyond, a pathway to something spiritual, beautiful, good, and true.

Philosopher Richard Rorty also develops this idea of the strong poet in his work.[13] Rorty was the grandson of the Anabaptist and Pietist father of the

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[11] See an extended discussion of this in Scott Holland, "When Bloch Pointed to the Cages," in Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Mast, eds., *Anabapts & Postmodernity* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000) 147-159.

[12] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[13] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 23-43.

Social Gospel Movement, Walter Rauschenbush. The pragmatic and postmodern Rorty was not a person of explicit faith, but one can hear the ghosts of his dissenting religious ancestors whispering through his writings as he challenged, again and again, the flat orthodoxies of his philosophical guild. He concluded that the most interesting philosophy could be found not in the tomes of the professional philosophers but in the creative work of novelists, playwrights, and poets. Good philosophy and, we might also add, good theology, is, after all, writing that allows us to know and name phenomenological slices of life.

Shortly before his recent, untimely death, Rorty wrote a rich and reflective personal essay in the journal *Poetry*;[14] "The Fire of Life" was written under the shadow of inoperable pancreatic cancer. It is his last reflection on the value of poetry and the importance of the strong poet. In the essay Rorty offers a summary of the Romantics' defense of poetry, with explicit reference to Shelley's classic, "Defense." With Gottfried Arnold as our model of the strong poet, it must be remembered that Romanticism was a more worldly aesthetic expression or manifestation of the deep feeling or spiritual emotion of the Pietist's heart. In the history of ideas it is not a long journey from Pietism to Romanticism.

Rorty invites us to consider the Romantic defence of a poetic way of knowing and being in the world. Romanticism—in harmony with Pietism—is unsatisfied with cool reason and suspicious of all firm and final orthodoxies. Romanticism reminds us that reason can only follow paths that the imagination has first broken. If there are no new words, no prosodic innovation, there can be no new reasoning. Without an active analogical imagination, no new words will emerge singing or shouting or whispering. Without such words, there will be little or no intellectual, ethical, or aesthetic progress. Imagination for the Romantics was not mere linguistic ornamentation, adding rhetorical flourish to the hard data or facts of life; imagination connected the poet or preacher to something beyond, to something transcendent, to something over the first range of hills. According to Rorty, the strong poet offers us new words, new vocabularies, new voices, and thus the possibility of new visions for our lives.

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[14] Richard Rorty, "The Fire of Life" in *Poetry* CXCI, no. 2 (November 2007): 129-131.

This Romantic understanding of poetics would therefore suggest that cultures—and religions—with richer vocabularies are more fully human than those with poorer ones because the memories and imaginations of men and women who draw from a multitude of texts, verses, hymns, parables, poems, plays, stories, and biographies will be drawn closer to the mystery, grace, and grit of existence in this blessed fallen world. Those who have learned many language games more quickly discern the plurality, ambiguity, and complexity of naming themselves and rendering God's name in history. Yet they also open themselves to the wonderfully satisfying surplus of meaning present in living and loving in a world of grace.

Gottfried Arnold was indeed a strong poet. His bold historiography invited spiritual seekers to re-imagine the language games of orthodoxy. The orthodoxies of Protestantism and Catholicism had become focussed upon correct doctrine or right thinking about theology, enforced by those with the power and position to regulate the sacramental access to the divine. However, *ortho-doxy*, in the ancient Christian tradition, is better translated not as right doctrine but as "right worship." For Arnold, true worship and thus good theology were guided by the experience and vision of *Die erste Liebe*.

This love theology of Pietism offers many gifts and graces to the ecumenical faith community. I would like to suggest that Arnold's theology of Pietism offers at least three additional supplements to Anabaptism: the spirituality of solitude, a theopoetics of desire, and the epistemology of the heart.

The Spirituality of Solitude

I have suggested that Anabaptism, as a highly communal religion, can become a religion of the super-ego wherein all individuals must find their plot and place in the story of the communal soul. "One knows Christ in community" is an important, and true, Anabaptist affirmation. The Pietist counter-affirmation is that one knows Jesus in solitude. The great poet Rilke, influenced by a Romantic piety, insisted that true love must stand guard over the solitude of the other. Radical Pietism celebrated the solitary walk with Jesus and accented the importance of following him to quiet places away from the multitude, community, and even the company of disciples. This theology

finds expression in Gottfried Arnold's two short poems, "True Solitude" and "Walk with Jesus."[15]

> *True Solitude*
> Let not your sense scatter this and that;
> Your spirit must be completely gathered in God.
> Soul, if you are to rejoice in a deeper peace
> Enter continually into the One.
> There you will find an altar and temple to contemplate.
> There the priest stands continually before God.
> Leave yourself and your self-centeredness
> And you will in the world be freed from the world.
>
> *Walk with Jesus*
> It is true; outside it is pleasant
> Where everything can bedeck itself with flowers.
> I, however, go into my house
> To walk in stillness with my Lamb.
> There the sun shines and the nightingale sings;
> There it is green, blossoms come forth,
> fresh springs rush out.
> There I see nothing but Jesus.
> His angelic choir fills all places.
> He is the sun, love, song.
> As a result hope is renewed and pure waters leap.
> Is that not enough for my beautiful walk?
> He is also to bring me to paradise.

This solitary walk with Jesus in Arnold's spiritual poetics invites the individual disciple to discover within the soul the adorned priest, the holy altar, the temple, the angelic choir, the nightingale's song, the flower's blossom, the living waters, the sun, and the fullness of paradise. This is not primarily a mysticism of the cross and suffering but more of a joyous celebration of the mysteries of paradise present within the soul. Thus, unlike the martyrology discipleship of Anabaptism and the Medieval Catholic

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[15] Emilie Griffin and Peter Erb, eds., *The Pietists: Selected Writings*, 112-113.

spiritualities of suffering with the crucified Christ, Arnold's mystical piety turns to interior beatific visions and voices.

A Theopoetics of Desire

There is a contemporary movement in theology known as "theopoetics."[16] This style of theology seeks to correct more scientific and scholastic approaches to theology with a reminder that both the biblical witness and the testimonies or confessions of faith in the long Christian tradition are more metaphorical than mathematical, more theo-poetic than theo-logical. The language of theology in this genre of naming God's ways and God's will understands mystery, metaphor, and surpluses of meaning as the essential grammars of a deeply spiritual vocabulary. This contemporary style of theopoetics really finds an interesting analogue in what Gottfried Arnold called his *Mystischen Theologie* (mystical theology).

Arnold's mystical theology moved through many stages during his spiritual vocation and adventures: from churchly Pietism practiced within the established churches (1688-1693), to the advocacy of separation from the fallen, established church (1694-1700), to the acceptance of service and ministry within the Lutheran Church (1701-1714).[17] The influences of many mystics, spiritualists, and Pietists are very present in his writings: the Catholic mystics, Philipp Jacob Spener, August Hermann Francke, Johann Arndt, and Jacob Boehme, to name only a few. Arnold's theopoetics or mystical theology, like several spiritual writers before him, sometimes found expression in the poetic imagery of desire or spiritual eroticism. Consider his well known poem, "The Soul Refreshes Itself in Jesus."[18]

> *The Soul Refreshes Itself in Jesus*
> Thus the loving companions play together

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[16] For an introduction to the literary and theological genre of "theopoetics," see Scott Holland, "Theology Is a Kind of Writing: Narrative and Theopoetics," in *How Do Stories Save Us?* (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 105-129.

[17] A helpful chronology of Arnold's life and work is found in Dale Stoffer, *Background and Development of Brethren Doctrines: 1650-1987* (Philadelphia, PA: Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1989), 23-36.

[18] Griffin and Erb, eds., *The Pietists: Selected Writings*, 239.

And in play increase the heavenly flames.
The one increases the desire of the other
And both know nothing except love.
They struggle in love; they give themselves
     to one another;
The manifold must finally fade into one.
He sings, she plays; he kisses, she rejoices;
He teaches, she listens; he laughs, she jokes.
He says, How eternally you are chosen for me!
She calls: You are born for my joy!
Both double into one
And cry: My friend is perfectly mine. Echo: I mine!
Thus true; this divine light increases.

This romantic and erotic poem is not about two human lovers but about the soul's passionate, reciprocal relationship with Jesus. Indeed, like other mystics of desire, for a time Gottfried Arnold preached and practiced celibacy. He believed that the spiritual relationship with God through Jesus could be a fire so consuming and so satisfying that carnal expressions of romantic love and sexual connection were unnecessary.

During this stage of his spiritual journey, Arnold also personified spiritual wisdom as the divine "Sophia," and he expressed his communion with her in language that was both ecstatic and erotic: "Whoever this dove (Sophia) takes into her lap she gives the oblation of an untroubled peace and of the certain hope of all certainty in the kiss of her mouth. She lets him experience all her freedom and supplies as much of her life-giving balm as he can contain. One can then lie consoled on her breast and drink to satisfaction, and all her pure powers are open to draw one into a paradisiacal love-play in her."[19] The poet and preacher thought he had found an ultimate consummation of human and spiritual love in Sophia's lips, breasts, and lap. However, Arnold's heart was to teach him other lessons.

The Epistemology of the Heart

Although for several years Arnold believed it was possible for the faithful Pietist and spiritual poet to remain within the fallen church of Protestantism as salt and light, by 1694, like other Radical Pietists, he was espousing

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[19] Ibid., 100.

separation. He had taken a position as tutor in a wealthy household in the city of Quedlindburg in 1693. There were a number of Spiritualists and Pietists in the city who were questioning everything from infant baptism to the validity of other sacraments of the church such as the Lord's Supper. These radicals were writing both theological tracts and poems expressing their awakenings.

Inspired by the Pietists at nearby Halle, Hofdiakon Johann Heinrich Sproegel started a conventicle or house meeting which gathered together spiritual seekers and dissidents from Quedlindburg, some of whom were refusing to attend regular Lutheran worship services and resisting the Lord's Supper. Gottfried Arnold found kindred spirits in this circle and became an intellectual leader of the conventicle, writing poetry, mystical theology, and alternative church history in response to the probing questions and passionate concerns of this spiritual movement. As the Sproegel conventicle grew in influence, it was fiercely attacked by the local Lutheran pastors and church officials who charged Arnold with heresy. He was indicted and brought before secular and church authorities on August 27, 1695, but quickly released because the entire city was becoming a centre of religious, social, and political upheaval and change.

This culture of upheaval seemed to inspire Arnold's poetry as well as his historical and theological writing. As the attacks from the orthodox pastors and theologians continued, Arnold became even more prolific and prophetic. He contrasted the *Schul-Theologie* or formal scholastic theology with the revival of mystical theology. Unlike the politics and polity of orthodox theology, Arnold argued that divine Wisdom or Sophia refused to quarrel over proper words or useless questions. She would not coerce or damn anyone for the sake of creed, doctrine, ritual, or sacrament. This had much to do with his understanding of the anatomical location of the religious or spiritual impulse. Orthodox traditions set the spiritual impulse in the will (morality) and in reason (doctrine). It could be argued that, even though the Anabaptists resisted the orthodox theologies of the Magisterial Reformers and the Catholic authorities—because of their high theology of discipleship and religious volunteerism or agency—the spiritual impulse seemed most at home in the region of the will (ethics). The great mystery of justification by faith could become tempted by a doctrine of justification by belief for the Reformers and justification by proper behaviour for Anabaptists and Catholics.

In contrast, the Pietists, and later the Romantics, invited Sophia to lead then to the heart's desire as the location of the deepest spiritual understanding. The epistemology of the heart respects reason and the will but celebrates love, deep emotion, inspiration, intuition, and imagination as necessary windows into doctrine and morality. After all, reason and morality can only follow paths first broken by the inspiration of some poet, prophet, or storyteller.

In the history of ideas, the rise of scholastic theology and Enlightenment philosophy created an unfortunate division of labour between poets and theologians or philosophers. A number of contemporary scholars are now addressing this unnecessary division. Martha Nussbaum, a classicist and philosopher, concludes that pre-modern philosophy and poetics were really rhetorics with different styles addressing the same existential end: *eudaimonia*, a word often translated as "happiness" but rendered by Nussbaum and other linguists as "human flourishing."[20]

Nussbaum makes her impassioned, theoretical agenda clear: she wants to return us to the richness of our emotional lives, lives that freely acknowledge the cognitive power of the emotions or interior life. Deep, embodied feeling, she contends, is part of thought. Only doctrinaire scholastics or philosophers who flatten the life of the mind into mere rationalism could have convinced us otherwise. Thus, Professor Nussbaum writes books like *Love's Knowledge*, in which she argues that some kinds of knowledge are accessible only when we experience the emotion of love. She continues to develop this satisfying insight in her study, *The Therapy of Desire*, where she explores the wisdom of the senses in doing moral philosophy. Her methodological moves privilege intuitive perceptions and improvisational responses over rule-based systems of ethics.

After centuries of unproductive dualisms in Western thought which pried apart reason and emotion, body and soul, ethics and aesthetics, poetry and philosophy, the heart's desire has again returned poetry to the republic of philosophy and its theological territories. With the return of such Desire in our late modern and postmodern condition, God has returned, and how could it be otherwise? Emmanuel Levinas reminds us that the relationship to the

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[20] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and the Public Life* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995).

Infinite is not a knowledge but a desire.[21] The relationship with the divine is not a mere gnosis but rather a passionate encounter with Sophia.

Gottfried Arnold would likely smile in warm recognition of this postmodern turn to the heart's desire and its suspicion of all orthodoxies. However, he might also acknowledge that postmodernists and Pietists alike, in their necessary transgression of conventional mores, can become existentially raptured in states of excess, before their revolutions and reformations can become gifts to an extended public and to a broader common good. Radical Pietists, like all radical thinkers, can become tempted by a perfectionism or utopianism that separates them not only from their neighbours but also from their own embodied affections. It seems that Arnold's spiritual journey finally led him to conclude that *the heart refuses in the end to allow a longing for the perfect to become an enemy of the good*.

Many travellers moved in and out of the Sproegel house meetings. One spiritual seeker and separatist was, in fact, a thief and stole fine jewellery from Sproegel's home. The thief was later captured by the authorities in the city of Allstedt. Sproegel's wife and youngest daughter, Anna Marie, were asked to travel to Allstedt to serve as witnesses against the thief and to recover the stolen property. Gottfried Arnold was asked to travel with the two women as an escort and protector.

When some of the Radical Pietists learned that the chaste lover of Sophia would be travelling for many days with a beautiful young woman and her mother, they feared he would be tempted to end his celibate life. He was. He did; on September 5, 1701, Gottfried and Anna Marie were married in Quedlinburg.

The journey to Allstedt not only ended Arnold's celibacy. Interestingly, it also ended his radical separatism. The widowed Duchess of Sachsen-Eisenach, Sophie Charlotte, knew Arnold's reputation as a learned, poetic preacher. Upon his arrival in Allstedt, she invited him to preach for a distinguished audience with Pietist sympathies at her castle. She was so inspired by his message that she offered him a position as court pastor. With the assurance that he would not have to submit to the oath of loyalty to the *Formula of Concord*, he accepted the position and moved back into ministry and service

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[21] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 256-266.

in the Lutheran Church. Although there were many tensions with church authorities in the months and years that followed, Arnold spent the remainder of his career as a poetic and prophetic churchly Pietist.

Gottfried Arnold's personal and professional decisions disappointed many of his radical separatist friends and colleagues. Johann Gichtel suggested that he allowed the exterior journey to Allstedt to contaminate the interior journey of his soul. We have no extended defense from Arnold on charges like these, but it is likely he would answer that he was indeed listening to love's knowledge in the epistemology of the heart, for the radicals' perfectionism, separatism, and celibacy could become just as dogmatic and doctrinaire as the creedalism and sacramentalism of fallen Christendom.

A strong poet understands that poetry, or theopoetics, provides an artful way, indeed a profoundly spiritual and human way, to discover a harmony between the external and internal impressions that drive our lives. This Romantic epistemology is expressed in Percy Bysshe Shelley's classic, *A Defense of Poetry*:

> Poetry, in a general sense, may be defined to be the expression of the imagination; and poetry is connate with the origin of man. Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alterations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to an ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them. . . .[22]

Poets, Pietists, and Romantics all know this song by heart.

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[22] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry*, ed. with intro. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), 79.

Part IV

TRINITARIAN FOUNDATIONS

Chapter Ten

Believers Church Ecclesiology: A Trinitarian Foundation and Its Implications

Fernando Enns

In the preceding essay, one of my conclusions was that every ecclesiological reflection needs to take place within the horizon of ecumenicity, since ecumenicity is one significant expression of the catholicity/universality of the church. Ecclesiology has a "therapeutic" role to play in addressing the community of churches from without and from within—for it is from within the experienced reality of schisms that ecumenical theology seeks the truth of unity. In carrying out this therapeutic role, ecclesiology helps the communion of churches to realize the true nature and calling of the church. If the Believers Churches subscribe to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's statement that the truth of proclamation and the form in which the church exists must not be separated from one another,[1] then our ecclesiology needs to take shape within the realm of the global church community.

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[1] See chapter six above: Fernando Enns, "Believers' Church Ecclesiology: A Vital Alternative within the Ecumenical Family." Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Finkenwalder Homiletik," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, vol. IV (Munich: Kaiser, 1965), 252 [Engl. "Worldly Preaching," in *Finkenwalde Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. Clyde E. Fant (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1975)].

The Context for Ecclesiological Reflection: The Community of Churches

The recent study on ecclesiology of the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Commission on Faith and Order, entitled, "The Nature and the Mission of the Church,"[2] is now being discussed in the various member churches. The study recalls the history of ecclesiological reflection within the ecumenical movement: "Since its beginning the aim [of the Faith and Order Movement] has been 'to proclaim the oneness of the Church of Jesus Christ and to call the churches to the goal of *visible* unity in one faith and one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and in common life in Christ, in order that the world may believe.'" A significant contribution to an understanding of the church was made at the WCC's Canberra Assembly (1991), where it was claimed that the church is a *gift of God* and a *calling*, a *koinonia* (Greek for "community"). With that, *koinonia* is now conceived as both the foundation and the way of living a life together in visible unity.[3] *Koinonia* has become the leading metaphor in ecclesiological reflections.

In this latest study (2005), the Commission on Faith & Order seeks to gather all the insights gained so far in the common journey of the churches, formulating growing convergences as well as remaining differences. The Commission characterizes the present context of this common journey in six points. The Commission believes: 1) that at this time the opportunity is there to draw upon the fruits of the work of the World Council of Churches and of the bilateral theological agreements; 2) that political changes and challenges in recent years are significantly altering the context in which many churches exist and therefore how they seek to understand themselves; 3) that growth in fellowship is being experienced between Christians at local, national, and world levels; 4) that particular challenges in many regions call for Christians to address *together* what it means to be the Church in that place; 5) that the situation of the world demands and deserves a credible witness to unity in diversity which is God's gift for the whole of humanity; and 6) that the

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[2] *The Nature and the Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper, no. 198 (Geneva: WCC, 2005).

[3] Michael Kinnamon and Brian E. Cope, eds. *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Geneva: WCC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 124-125.

experience of the "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry" process (Lima, 1982-1990) and an increasing interest in ecclesiology in many churches provide fresh insights into the way many Christians understand being the Church.

As a member of the Mennonite Church standing within the Believers Church tradition, I fully agree with the underlying conviction as stated in the Faith and Order document, when it says: "In God's providence the Church exists, not for itself alone, but to serve in God's work of reconciliation and for the praise and glory of God. The self-understanding of the church is essential for its proper response to its vocation. Despite diversities of language and theology, mutual understanding can grow when people are willing to allow each other space to use their own language to describe themselves." The result is a "spiritual encounter between different communities in which, as trust grows, it becomes possible to face the theological issues together."[4]

The Biblical Witnesses as the Common Starting Point

If we believe that the church is a gift of God, a creation of his Word (*creatura verbi*), it is appropriate and necessary to ground every reflection in the biblical witnesses.[5] Every tradition already claims to do that, although in different ways and in particular denominational "dialects." Every renewal movement in church history, including the Believers Church tradition, which began as a renewal movement, claims this approach as well. That is reason enough for the community of churches to seek common ground by re-examining the images of the church in the New Testament together. As we do so, let us bear in mind the underlying tension between *believed church* and *experienced church*.[6]

First, the Church is the Body of Christ—Incarnation. The Pauline body typology (cf. Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; Eph 1:23; 4:16; 5:23, 30) is basic to the New Testament understanding of the church as the body of Christ. The church has its foundation in the self-giving of God in Christ. She participates in a future

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[4] *The Nature and the Mission of the Church*, 8.

[5] Cf. in more detail Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2007), chap I, 2.4.

[6] See chapter six above: *Believers' Church Ecclesiology: A Vital Alternative within the Ecumenical Family.*

opened up through Christ. The event of the incarnation is interpreted as the beginning of the kingdom of God, whose fulfillment is expected in the eschaton. Accordingly, the church is always "between the times." Because of the incarnation, the church enters the world where she lives out and proclaims this very Word. In his notable study on ecclesiology, *Sanctorum Communio*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says: The church is the "body of Christ, the presence of Christ on earth, for she has his Word."[7]

This insight is captured in the third thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934:[8] "The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and Sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to him alone and lives and may live by his comfort and under his direction alone, in expectation of his appearing."[9]

Without the event of the incarnation, the church has no foundation, for it is in the context of this event that the Word's unique coming-into-the-world is believed. Thus if the church is "the body of Christ," its existence depends upon the incarnation of the *logos*, and the motive of incarnation will necessarily determine the church's nature and mission. In the dimension of space, we then have a metaphor that holds together the tension between universality (church as *catholica* or *oikumenica*) and particularity (church as local congregation). In like fashion, the universal dimension of the Christ-

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[7] Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche*, DBW, vol. 1 (Munich: Kaiser, 1986), 141. [Engl.: *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, DBW, vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1998)].

[8] The Barmen Theological Declaration was the initial text of the Confessing Church, the *Bekennende Kirche*, in Nazi-Germany. Donald Durnbaugh, John H. Yoder, and others have at times referred to the *Bekennende Kirche* as standing in the tradition of the Believers Church.

[9] *Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung: Einführung und Dokumentation*, rev. and expanded ed., ed. Alfred Burgsmüller and Rudolf Weth (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1993), 38. [Engl.: *The Church's Confessions under Hitler*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1962), 237-242].

event achieves particular form in a specific way in the life and death of the Jew in Palestine, Jesus of Nazareth.[10]

Bearing in mind the experienced reality of our church, we follow Bonhoeffer's suggestion that the church is the "body of Christ" as "concrete historical community in the reality of her forms, in the imperfection and insignificance of her appearances."[11] This is not meant to be misunderstood as a cheap excuse, but rather as a promise, a comfort, and a mandate.

Second, the Church is the People of God—Election. The church is elected; it is the chosen "people of God" (1 Pet 2:10; Titus 2:14). This unique situation, based on the believed election of the people of Israel through *Yahweh* and then extended to the Gentiles in Jesus Christ, makes up "the most central proposition for all theology," as Dietrich Ritschl has said.[12] To be sure, the church's election has not taken place for her own sake, but serves a specific purpose that lies outside the church. In her very being she is the "messenger" of the kingdom of God, since she *is* the *shalom* of the righteousness of God and of peace for humanity and the entire creation. Being part of the world in which she lives, the church is always the precursor to a new and different world, the *new* creation. Based on this common foundation, an insight arises that is applicable to all confessional groups: the body is always prior to its members. It is not the membership that establishes the church. Rather the church is already there, elected and called.

The *believed church* is the church that knows itself to be chosen by God in Jesus Christ. This permanently binds her to the people of Israel. In doing ecclesiology, we will need to keep this in mind. Paul van Buren developed a theology of Jewish-Christian reality and advocated the concept of a covenant that binds the church and Israel to the same God. He speaks of a common "story" and of "one way," because it is provided and enlightened by the One, even though it is given to different peoples to claim as their own and to walk in their particular manner.[13]

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[10] Alongside the body typology, one should observe the metaphor of the church as "bride of Christ." The latter carries a stronger and more enduring image of the relationship of Christ and church, cf. Rev 18:23, 22:17, et al.

[11] See Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* footnote 6.

[12] Dietrich Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology: A Brief Account of the Relationship between Basic Concepts in Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 126.

[13] Cf. Paul M. van Buren, *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1995). Part I: Discerning the Way (1980); Part II: A

For the *experienced church*, the unreconciled separation between Jews and Christians remains "the open wound." As Ritschl reminds us, this separation "makes a mockery of election and rules out the construction of a rounded and conclusive ecclesiology."[14] Doing theology in the context of German society and history, we are constantly aware of this "open wound." The words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as stated in his *Ethics,* express this in clear, confessional language:

> The Church . . . was silent when she should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven. . . . She stood by when violence and wrong were being committed under cover of the name of Christ. . . . The Church confesses that she has witnessed the lawless application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and that she did not raise her voice on behalf of the victims and did not find ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the deaths of the weakest and most defenceless brothers of Jesus Christ. . . . The Church confesses that she has witnessed in silence the pillage and exploitation of the poor and the enrichment and corruption of the strong. The church confesses her guilt towards the countless victims of calumny, denunciation and defamation. She did not convict the slanderer of his wrongdoing, and thereby abandoned the slandered to their fate."[15]

One would have expected such an unambiguous confession from the Believers Churches in Germany. It took Mennonites another fifty years to say something similar.[16] As long as Israel and the church remain unreconciled, the

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Christian Theology of the People of Israel (1983); Part III: Christ in Context (1988). A critique of van Buren's views can be found in James H. Wallis*, Post-Holocaust Christianity: Paul van Buren's Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997). Wallis speaks of "overlapping stories," ibid.*, 156. In both ways of speaking the issue illustrates the inseparability of the church and Israel. Cf. also Norbert Lohfink, *Der niemals gekündigte Bund: Exegetische Gedanken zum jüdisch-christlichen Gespräch* (Freiburg: Herder, 1989).

[14] Ritschl, *The Logic of Theology*, 126.

[15] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1949), 113ff.

[16] "50 Jahre nach Kriegsende: Erklärung der Mitgliederversammlung der Arbeits- gemeinschaft Mennonitischer Gemeinden in Deutschland 1995," in Karl Heinz Voigt,

experienced church will constantly be compelled to formulate confessions of guilt, because her experience inadequately reflects her *believed* election as the people of God.

Third, the Church is the Temple of the Holy Spirit—the Pentecost Event. The event of Pentecost (Acts 2), highlighted by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, is interpreted as the church's hour of birth. For it is through the Spirit that the truth of the gospel first becomes present as an event in the life of the church. And it is through the Spirit's work as the Word *of God* that the Word is "believed." This is the "inner witness" of the Holy Spirit, the "making present (*Aktualisierung*) of revelation," says Karl Barth.[17] He continues: "This special moment in revelation is undoubtedly to be identified with that which, with reference to the subjective side of the revelation event, the New Testament as a rule simply calls the Holy Spirit."[18]

Building up the body of Christ is brought about by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:11), who unites members with one another as a community of believers. Only in this way does the church become a communion of saints (*communio sanctorum,* cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1). New life, each sanctifying activity, is understood as the work of the Holy Spirit. This truth is captured in the third article of the Apostolic Creed: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the community of saints. . . ."[19]

"For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13). It is in baptism that participation in the Holy Spirit is visibly accomplished. The Spirit endows the individual with charisms that are meant to build up and strengthen the communion of saints. By the power of the Holy Spirit, believers grow into "a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21), into a "spiritual house" (1

Schuld und Versagen der Freikirchen im "Dritten Reich:" Aufarbeitungsprozesse seit 1945 (Frankfurt, M: Lembeck 2005), 110-112.

[17] Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (abbr. *CD*), 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-1975), I/1, 518.

[18] Ibid., 515.

[19] "Credo in spiritum sanctum, sanctum ecclesiam catholicam, sanctorum communionem, remissionem peccatorum, carnis resurrectionem, et vitam aeternam," in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (abbr. *BSLK*), 12th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1998), 21.

Pet 2:5), because the Holy Spirit "indwells" that temple or house. In the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, this is called *shechina.* Jürgen Moltmann explains *shechina* as "the descent and indwelling of God in space and time in a particular place and at a particular time, inhabiting earthen vessels and human history."[20]

Why then is it so difficult to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the "bond of peace" (Eph 4:1-3)? This community of saints *experiences* itself in broken *communio*. The *experienced churches* continue to exclude other parts of the communion and exclude themselves. Here the tension between the *believed church* and the *experienced church* becomes evident in the dimension of time: the tension between the actual present and the long-term duration. "Actuality," a work of the Holy Spirit, refers to the event character, detached from human influence and control, while "duration" refers to the process of handing on the apostolic faith by the institution. The church does not produce itself, but recognizes its dependence on that faith which is, as Karl Barth has said, "not a human possibility but a divine reality."[21] Despite the divisions within the global, as well as the local, church, the Holy Spirit continues to actualize the "bond of peace" time and again, and thus allows the *experience* of the *believed church*.

After Reviewing the Leading Biblical Metaphors for the Church:
A Trinitarian Foundation of the Church

The following are three important biblical images of the church: the church is the body of Christ, the people of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit. It becomes evident that she is this entity in her very essence, as well as in her mission carried out in the dimensions of time and space. The tension of the

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[20] Jürgen Moltmann, *Der Geist des Lebens: Eine ganzheitliche Pneumatologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1991), 60. [Engl.: *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992)]. According to Moltmann, the concept of *shechina*: 1) clarifies the personal character of the Spirit, God's empathy; 2) draws attention to the sensitivity of God as Spirit; and 3) points to the *kenosis* of the Spirit. Cf. ibid., II.3, 60-64. Cf. also Bernd Janowski, "'Ich will in Eurer Mitte wohnen:' Struktur und Genese der exilischen Schechina-Vorstellung," in *NBTh* 2 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1987), 165-193.

[21] Cf. Barth, *CD* I/1, 515f.

believed and the *experienced church* is grounded in revelation itself, the revelation of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

These biblical images and metaphors support the appropriateness of a "trinitarian approach" in holding together the respective dimensions of the church's nature and calling as we discover them in the biblical story. This is not to say that the dogma of the Trinity is found in the Bible. There are no dogmas in the Bible. But the manifold ways the Bible speaks of the church inform us about the possibility, even the necessity, of grounding our ecclesiology in a trinitarian understanding of God. This is important for at least two reasons, one positive and the other negative: to take into account the richness of the biblical witnesses, and to avoid a selective use of Scripture. Within the community of churches we have learned this lesson together, and have thus started to overcome some monistic, monarchic, and modalistic understandings within our own traditions, understandings which have influenced our ecclesiology from time to time. How we understand God, how we speak of the Creator, the Reconciler, and the Perfector, will have direct implications on our ecclesiology. While we dare not enter into speculative philosophy here about the essence of God (the immanent Trinity), the way we speak of God relating to His/Her creation (the economic Trinity) needs to qualify our understanding of who we are as God's people.

For Believers Churches in general, the doctrine of the Trinity has never played a role comparable to its role in mainline churches. There are many reasons for this. Believers Churches have stressed Jesus' narrations over metaphysical speculations. We have sought the true shape of Christian life and the church's calling with intensity, rather than reflecting on the nature of God. Some Believers Church theologies have relegated the classic view of the Trinity to the time of the Constantinian shift (the trinitarian and christological debates), making it the symbol for the "captivity" of the state churches, and thus accentuated their distance from the dogma of the Trinity and the confessions of the early church—with some strong and valid arguments.[22] We have at times restricted our *theo*logy to *Christ*ology, or even to "*Jesu*ology." Our predominant and exclusive image of the church has therefore been the church as the discipling body of Christ. Yes, this provides

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[22] See e.g., the different works of J. Denny Weaver. A. James Reimer is an extraordinary exception; cf. his *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

the basis for relativizing all other authorities, for the equality of everyone, and for the ethical responsibility of a distinct community under the lordship of Christ. But a focus on the discipling body of Christ disregards, among other things, the continuation of the election of the people of Israel. And it does not adequately take into account the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in others and in all of creation.

I believe that an ecclesiology from the Believers Church perspective can be enriched immensely by the trinitarian approach taken in ecumenical discussions. Such an approach offers a solid *theological* foundation, helping the church to conceive of herself as participating in that triune community. A nuanced, trinitarian view of community may serve as the "regulative principle" for reflections on the essence and the mission of the church from a Believers Church perspective.

Implications for an Ecclesiology from a Believers Church Perspective

What are the implications that the three images and metaphors—people of God, body of Christ, temple of the Holy Spirit—have for an ecclesiology from a Believers Church perspective? I will try to answer this by identifying appropriate expressions of the common, classical *attributes* of the *believed church*: one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.[23] The church may be considered the "one catholic church" (*una catholica*) in community (*koinonia)*, worship (*leiturgia*), service (*diaconia*), and witness *(martyria)*. These attributes are put forward here as the constitutive marks of the church (*notae externae*). Since

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[23] Cf. Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, ch. VI. Miroslav Volf has identified the failure of a trinitarian foundation in free church ecclesiology as a limitation. Against the background of discussion in the 1980s on the connection between *communio* and Trinity, he has developed a "polycentric participatory model" for an ecumenical ecclesiology. Volf seeks to position free church ecclesiology in a trinitarian framework, and wishes to establish an ecclesiological program, proceeding from the assertion that church is the "icon of the trinitarian communion." Cf. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 11, 25. Volf eventually arrives at the model of a "reciprocal interiority of the trinitarian persons" (ibid., 209) that he seeks to base on the doctrine of the Trinity by further developing Jürgen Moltmann's interpretation. See critique of methodology and the suspicion of "ideologizing" of the doctrine of the Trinity in Enns, *The Peace Church*.

the *mission* of the church is the all-encompassing concept, these marks can also be designated as *notae missionis*.

First, *Koinonia*: a "catholic" community (*communio trinitatis*). For Believers Church ecclesiology, community in its various aspects plays a decisive role and appears in various ways: in the anti-hierarchical emphasis on the assembled congregation as a hermeneutical community; in the ideal claim of a community ethic within the church, which lives visibly as the "messianic community," a prophetic witness; in the unifying idea of ethical accountability, declared in response to God's grace in the act of witness through baptism; and in the opposition to an individualistic view of salvation that threatens to neglect the church's mission for peace and justice.

"We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). "The Good News is the offer to all people of the free gift of being born into the life of communion with God and thus with one another (cf. 1 Tim 2:4, 2 Pet 2:9). Paul speaks of the relationship of believers (cf. Gal 2:20) to their Lord as being 'in Christ' (2 Cor 5:17) and of Christ being in the believer, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit."[24]

All of this is captured in the term, *koinonia*. The basic verbal form from which the noun *koinonia* derives means "to have something in common," "to share," "to participate," "to have part in," "to act together," or "to be in a contractual relationship involving obligations of mutual accountability." The word *koinonia* appears in significant passages, such as the sharing in the Lord's Supper (cf. 1 Cor 10:16), the reconciliation of Paul with Peter, James, and John (cf. Gal 2:9), the collection for the poor (cf. Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:3-4), and the experience and witness of the Church (cf. Acts 2:42-45). Through the death and resurrection of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christians enter into fellowship with God and with one another in the life and love of God.[25]

This understanding of *koinonia* establishes an ecclesial model that secures oneness in the midst of plurality, and yet shields plurality from uniformist tendencies. The relation of mutual indwelling or the "co-inherence" (*perichoresis*) of the trinitarian persons of Father, Son, and Spirit becomes the

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[24] *The Nature and the Mission of the Church*, 30.

[25] Ibid., 28-30.

prototype for the community of the believers, the *communio sanctorum*. This conception preserves the personhood of the individual members of the community. At the same time, the community is constituted by personal relationships. Personhood apart from relationship is thus unthinkable; and vice versa, no relationship is possible without maintaining personhood, for they are complementary.[26] The social nature of God comes to expression through this trinitarian expression; and a hierarchical conception, whether as lordship or subordination, is avoided. In this way personality and sociality, independence and interdependence, identity and communication can be grasped in their complementary nature. An ecclesiological model of "differentiated communion" (Miroslav Volf)[27] can be derived from this conception, which is essential for the self-understanding of the Believers Church as visible sign of the anticipated messianic community.

Koinonia holds together the three key biblical motifs. By election, incarnation, and the gift of the Spirit, human beings *participate* in the divine community and thereby become koinonia-shaped creatures. The dignity of the human being is based in this *participatio*, as is the person's necessary relationship to the community. The Spirit effects the communion of persons and brings them together into the "body of Christ," the church; the Spirit takes up residence in the church, yet remains distinct from it.[28]

The community of (local) churches then, in their remaining different contexts and traditional distinctives, can be grasped as a *communio*—a unity. It is in relationships that catholicity is fully present in the local congregation. The congregation's ecclesiality results from gathering *in His name* (Matt 18:20) in every place. Universality and particularity are thus held together. I believe this is an adequate model for visible unity in reconciled diversity.

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[26] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publishers, 1981).

[27] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 189.

[28] Even the distinction introduced by Friedrich Schleiermacher between Protestant individualism (person–Christ–church) and Catholic wholism (person–church–Christ) is subsumed thereby. Cf. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Der Christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der Evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhang dargestellt* (1830/31), ed. Martin Redeker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999) (1960), § 24 [Engl.: *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. MacKintosh and J. S. Steward (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928)].

An ecclesiology from a Believers Church perspective provides an ethically-directed, local, and experience-oriented understanding of community that complements and completes the predominantly ontological description of trinitarian *koinonia* in ecumenical discussion. The individual act of confession in believers baptism illustrates the individual's free will in this differentiated understanding of community, and documents the preservation of the person's independent identity through voluntary entrance into the *koinonia* of the church. The challenge is to allow plurality and yet maintain unity.[29]

The church lives as an alternative community because she has come into being through an alternative, extraordinary quality of communion. Individual members are freed from the tendency to uniformity and yet remain part of the community. Unity is not established through a particular office but through the interdependent charisms of its members. This is the reason we hold to the conviction that authority within such a community needs to be shaped in a "communal" way, which excludes any tendencies to church hierarchy.

We may also apply this complex problem to the relation between the local church and the community of churches. The sometimes absolutist claims for the autonomy of the local congregation in our congregationalist structures, which is just another expression of our non-hierarchical approach, has led to separatism and self-sufficiency, and stands in the way of mutual accountability within the wider church, its oneness and catholicity. The trinitarian community model of "co-inherence" or "mutual indwelling" (*perichoresis*) holds the potential to overcome the one-sided notion of congregation/local church as an independent entity. If God the creator of all is confessed, along with the Holy Spirit who dwells in all, then the local congregation cannot

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[29] Already in Tertullian there is, with reference to Matthew 18:20, an ecclesial portrayal of the divine Trinity: "For the very Church itself is, properly and principally, the Spirit Himself, in whom is the Trinity of the One Divinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The Spirit) combines that Church which the Lord has made to consist in 'three.' And thus, from that time forward, every number (of persons) who may have combined together into this faith is accounted 'a Church,' from the Author and Consecrator (of the Church)." Tertullian, *De pudicitia*, XII, 16, in *Tertulliani Opera*. Pars II: (*Opera Montanistica, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 2), ed. Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii (Turnholti: Brepols, 1954), 1328 [Engl.: On Modesty, ch. XXI, in Tertullian, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 99f.].

remain focussed on itself. Truly, the christological concentration makes her aware of belonging to the wider fellowship of churches. In addition it keeps the continuing election by the Creator in mind, and thus, due to the transcending work of the Spirit, seeks appropriate relations to the people of Israel, the people of other faiths and of no faith, and to the entire creation.[30]

Second, *Leiturgia*: a worshipping community (*communio sacramentalis*). If the church is conceived as *participating in* the triune community, it is a worshipping community, since *koinonia* is not in the first instance a construct of Christian doctrine, but an experience which has its main locus in doxology and finds an authentic expression in the celebration of the Lord's Supper and in baptism. In ecumenical discussions the eucharist is interpreted as the origin of *koinonia* in a community of sharing. The sharing of the Lord's Supper makes present the *koinonia* of Father, Son, and Spirit. Baptism is carried out in the name of the triune God. Here the church's essence comes to exemplary expression as a communion of persons. If baptism originates in the divine community of the Trinity, there can be no discrimination on the basis of gender, age, race, culture, or social and economic background. Any tendency to subordination or uniformity leads necessarily to the destruction of *koinonia*.

Are we a non-sacramental church? In the Believers Church traditions, celebrating the Lord's Supper is likewise a manifestation of the fellowship *in Christ* and with one another, which is further strengthened thereby. As the community experiences this through the uniting power of eucharistic centring, it is challenged to transcend her own boundaries. Since Christ extends the invitation to the communion table, no particular office is needed to distribute the elements, nor can the invitation be limited to members of our own tradition. For individual persons, participating in this communion is an expression of *being* a part of the wider *koinonia*; it is a confession to become responsible for one another; and it is a commitment to overcome separations by receiving the gift of reconciliation. Christ's presence—the Spirit—is not promised to the individual but to the assembled congregation, and comes to the individual only through the community. The interaction between God and

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[30] It is only by this "revelation" of how God relates to Creation, the economic Trinity, that we gain an understanding of the *koinonia* of the Trinity itself, the immanent Trinity. The reverse is not possible.

the human person is experienced in the ecclesial interaction between people, for the Lord's Supper "compels the church to engage in corporal life as gathered community."[31] If this is the understanding of what in other traditions is meant by using the term "sacrament," we should not speak of ourselves any longer as "non-sacramental," but should seek to express in a common language what we mean.

The trinitarian *koinonia* model may help our ecclesiology to overcome some tendencies to overemphasize the individual in adult baptism. The voluntary act of personal confession before baptism can become a stipulation for being part of the community. If the church is constituted by people being drawn into an event which is understood as emanating from God, they do not "become one" primarily through their personal confessions, but rather through participation in the "one body with many members" (1 Cor 11:24; 12:13). The church's existence precedes our confession of *koinonia* with God. It is given through divine election, incarnation in Christ, and in God's abiding presence through God's Spirit. The dynamic reality of the church's existence is experienced most profoundly in the celebration of the eucharist and in the act of baptism, and in the anticipation of the kingdom of God.

Any explicit liturgy will need to be shaped by this truth, since it proclaims what it celebrates. In this sense we are not non-liturgical. Indeed, we will have to re-examine our worship liturgies to see if they really contain the potential to *express* and *experience* this *euanggelion* of *being in* Christ, *participating in* the divine *koinonia*. And we will need to expand this liturgical understanding to every encounter, akin to the way those in the Orthodox tradition speak of the "liturgy after liturgy," with its ethical connotation. Isn't this exactly what our tradition meant to say when it urged a worshipful disposition in every encounter? We do well to commend this "congregationalist character" to the entire ecumenical community.

Third, *Diaconia*: the perspective of community (*communio fidelium*). If the church is conceived as participating in the triune community, it is a diaconial community. In ecumenical discussions we discover that there are different ways of giving expression to what it means to be the *apostolic* church. These include proclamation of the gospel and service in the world. The

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[31] Michael Welker, *Kirche und Abendmahl*, in W. Härle and R. Preul, eds*., Kirche,* Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie VIII (Marburg: N.G. Elwert, 1996), 47-60.

church's confession offers the decisive criterion distinguishing this community from other social entities. From this emerges the church's true perspective and service character.

We can say, first, that as a confessing community, the Believers Church stands in discontinuity with the dominant society, since the church itself *is* witness and *kerygma*; it is a "royal priesthood." The church does not speak for the entire world, but represents that part of society which is distinct because of its confession, through which renewal is anticipated for the entire world. That is her primary service. Thus distinction from "the world" is indeed demanded, whereas absolute separation is impossible (cf. the "Jeremianic model").[32]

Secondly, since the church is based on the eschatological expectation of the fulfilment of the kingdom of God, she is conceived as a "messianic community" that sees herself as the primary locus of world history, since through her the repentance (*metanoia*) of the entire world is anticipated. The Believers Church will speak against every attempt to relativize this promise and calling.

How then can the congregation-oriented church avoid the temptation of self-satisfaction and perfectionism; of interpreting "the world" (society as a whole) simply as the goal of her activity; of regarding the world only as the *means* to the church's *end*? This danger lies at hand when the *experienced church* simply identifies herself as the *believed church*. A conception of God's kingdom as a communion, a *koinonia*, of necessity includes those remaining outside the church (including, first of all, the people of Israel). To exclude "the other" carries with it the presumption that the work of the Spirit is limited to the confessing church, which is contradictory to the biblical witnesses.

Miroslaf Volf suggests that we speak of the church as a "proleptic experience within history of the eschatological integration of the entire people of God into the communion of the triune God."[33] Anticipating a fully realized *koinonia* of the whole people of God with the divine *koinonia*, allows the confessing community to treat its own experienced boundaries seriously and,

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[32] Cf. John H. Yoder, "See How They Go with Their Faces to the Sun," in *For the Nation: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 51-78. This is different from Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1985).

[33] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 175, cf. also 127.

at the same time, to transcend them. The church does not serve others paternalistically but seeks to engage them in service, aware of the interdependence given through *koinonia* across the whole creation. The Spirit's *koinonia*-forming work is recognized in the other. This does not contradict the conviction that church is *kerygma*. It is *kerygma* precisely on the basis of its anticipation of full *koinonia*. It is not a church *for* the world, but *in* and *with* the world.

Fourth, *Martyria*: a discipling community (*communio sanctorum*). When the church is conceived as participating in the triune community, it is a witnessing community. The Faith and Order document on ecclesiology states this claim as follows: "Because the servanthood of Christ entails suffering it is evident (as expressed in the New Testament writings) that the witness (*martyria*) of the Church will entail—for both individuals and for the community—the way of the cross, even to the point of martyrdom (cf. Matt 10:16-33; 16:24-28)."[34]

The idea of *participatio* in the divine *koinonia* also incorporates participation in the crucified One. God's visible turning toward the world in the incarnation—God's love, justice, and mercy in how they "come into the world" in Christ—qualify the nature of Christ's community and affect its witness. When the church is seen as called into being by God and participating in Christ through the Holy Spirit, then its witness is reconciliation and its goal is to bring healing to the whole of creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-21).

The witnessing community is characterized by self-offering and self-emptying (*kenosis*), which in turn desires the *metanoia* (repentance, new beginning) of the whole world. As stated in the document: "The Church is called to heal and reconcile broken human relationships and to be God's instrument in the reconciliation of human division and hatred. It is also called, together with all people of goodwill, to care for the integrity of creation . . . ."[35]

In the Believers Church perspective, discipleship is co-constitutive for ecclesiology. Discipleship and witness do not constitute the church but, when they are missing, the church's authenticity is in doubt. For the peace church,

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[34] *Nature and Mission of the Church*, 39.

[35] Ibid*.,* 40.

the central, identity-forming principle is the non-violent way of Jesus, even unto death on the cross. This is the way the peace church demonstrates its "responsibility" in the world: witnessing to peace and justice. Here we see how ecclesiology and ethics are inseparable in this tradition. Non-violence is not reduced to the individual's decision of conscience, but rather gives the *community* of faith itself an ethically-determined character. As such, this church presents persistent challenge to the ecumenical community because she opposes every attempt to present an ecclesiology disconnected from ethics, and opposes every attempt to sell ethics to pure political rationality.

But the above conception has limitations if the theological foundation remains christomonistic, and disregards the church's trinitarian foundation. Two issues come to mind. First, if the ethical community claims that, in the final analysis, its motivation is grounded in the kingly *authority* of Christ, she remains captive to metaphorical and categorical thinking, which is precisely what she seeks to expose.[36] The relationship described still remains a situation of "above and below," of "serving and ruling." This presents unresolved problems for the peace church when it attempts to develop a coherent model of reconciled relations. Second, an ethic of non-violence shall not risk legitimizing suffering and, in the extreme case, preserve existing authority structures for the sake of non-violence. This again would result in works righteousness.

In the trinitarian model characterized by *koinonia*, the peace church can expand the theological foundations of its regulative principles in ethics, since the foundational centre providing motivation for discipleship is not the image of Christ as ruler of the cosmos (*Pantocrator*), but rather the *koinonia* that

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[36] Konrad Raiser criticized the theocratic tradition in a similar way: "Where . . . theocentric criticism goes on further than capping all absolute claims to authority with God's universal authority, or even makes the Lordship of Jesus Christ a principle out of which to construct a universal theology of history, it remains caught in the logic of domination and loses the liberating impetus of the biblical prophetic tradition." Raiser points to "the Hussite and Waldensian movements, which emerged from the 'radical Reformation'," and which "lives on in the small peace churches." Raiser, *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement?* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), 92f. Cf. also, on the critique of aspects of lordship with reference to a social doctrine of the Trinity. Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Communion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

God offers to all of humanity. This *koinonia* enables the church, by the presence of the Spirit, to be that authentic ethical community by inviting participation in the divine *koinonia*.[37] Resorting to violence is the strongest manifestation of breaking away from community, since such a course of action always degrades the personhood of not only the victim but also the perpetrator. A differentiated community devoid of personhood is unthinkable. Therefore it is impossible to include and accept violence in any kind of relationship of *koinonia* with God. Violence has no place in a relation established by God in Christ through the Spirit.

Ecclesia Semper Reformanda—Ecclesia Viatorum
Have we drawn an idealistic image of community and projected this to the image of God, simply in order to legitimize our perceived community model? When a particular image (identity) of God is worshipped and experienced, it follows that certain conclusions are drawn about what is believed about this God. Christoph Schwöbel has rightly said that there are "three stories descriptive of God's identity that must be told about God, which belong to the enduring and determining element of the Christian faith, because they determine the identity of the God of the Christian faith. These three are the story of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who led Israel out of Egyptian slavery, . . . the story of Jesus, . . . and the story of the Spirit who contemporizes the God of faith so that believers are drawn into the relationship of

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[37] Cf. also Christoph Schwöbel, "The Quest for Communion: Reasons, Reflections and Recommendations," in *The Church as Communion: Lutheran Contributions to Ecclesiology*, LWF Documentation, no. 42 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1997), 227-286. Schwöbel develops a hermeneutic of community from a Lutheran perspective: "When we take seriously this connection between divine self-offering and human action, we can conclude that the ethical aspects of community, which are regarded in the New Testament as a substantial part of the life of *koinonia*, are a necessary element of the community of faith, brought about through God's self-giving. The self-giving of God which determines communion with God through faith, comes to expression in mutual sacrificial love. . . . The ethical communion of love is thus a necessary expression of communion. . . . Since every new response of obedience is the result of faith (*CA* VI), it cannot become a presupposition of faith. . . . The binding character of the outworking of faith consists in this, that faith renews or reinstates the possibility for the faithful to act and thereby to do the will of God." Ibid., 253f.

Jesus to God and so are set upon the way to the eschatological completion of their creation-determined fulfilment."[38] We shall not speculate about the nature of the divine, but we shall continue to speak of God as the God revealed in the witnesses of Old and New Testaments. It is on this basis that we claim the legitimization, and the calling, to speak of the church in terms of participating in that *koinonia* which qualifies the community within the church.

The community of churches retains this identity as *ecclesia viatorum* (church of the pilgrims), in the tension between *believed church* and *experienced church*, and in anticipation of a consummate *koinonia*. I believe, and experience, that ecumenical discourse provides wide-ranging distinctions and possible correctives for an ecclesiology from the perspective of my own Believers Church tradition, as we bring our distinct perspective to the table of the community of churches. Active participation in this global *koinonia* helps us to become what we are according to our nature and calling—a confessing community in ecumenical communion.

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[38] Christoph Schwöbel, *Trinitätslehre als Rahmentheorie des christlichen Glaubens*, 129-154. Schwöbel calls this the "prototrinitarian grammar of language about God," 138.

Chapter Eleven

Examining the Believers Church within a Trinitarian-Missional Framework

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast

T he introduction of a trinitarian framework or grammar may seem an odd contribution for the study of Believers Church ecclesiology. Not a few contemporary Believers Church theologians regard trinitarian theology as structurally bound to a "Constantinian" or Christendom worldview. The historical reticence amongst the Believers Churches to employ or examine the doctrine of the Trinity is well documented. In her doctoral dissertation on the Believers Church tradition, Nadine Pence Frantz writes: "Suspicious of creeds and doctrines which were used as tests of faith against them, the emphasis in the [Believers Church] tradition has been on an active, living faith, one that is demonstrated by the lifestyle of the believers rather than by their doctrine."[1] For many reasons, both good and bad, presence and action in the world have been more important than abstract understandings of ontology and the speculative tasks of the human mind.

Believers Church ecclesiologies have most often been developed

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[1] Nadine Pence Frantz, "Theological Hermeneutics: Christian Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Believers Church Tradition" (PhD diss., Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1992), 144.

christologically. Yet a growing number of Believers Church theologians—ecumenical and evangelical—are proposing trinitarian models not for speculative inquiry, but as the implicitly present grammar or crucially required framework for the ecclesiological distinctives of the Believers Church tradition.[2] Moreover, a growing number of missiologists of this same tradition now argue for the missionary grounding of the Christian community in the being and act of the trinitarian God, suggesting that only the trinitarian mission and sending of God can properly focus and rekindle the church's missionary engagement of modern Western culture and its Christendom assumptions.[3]

This essay examines the theological arguments for a shift from a traditionally christocentric to a more robust, trinitarian-missional paradigm for Believers Church ecclesiology. I begin with a presentation of the growing missiological consensus with respect to a trinitarian theology of the mission or sending of God (*missio Dei*) and its consequences for the witness of the Believers Church in post-Christendom societies (North America and Europe). I will trace the historical development of the trinitarian-missional paradigm to the theology of Karl Barth and its introduction specifically to North American Mennonites—most predominantly via the eschatologically oriented social-trinitarian theology of Jürgen Moltmann. In the final part of the essay I will examine critically the larger contribution to a trinitarian Believers Church ecclesiology by Miroslav Volf[4] and the most recent argument proposed by

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[2] Cf. Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); A. James Reimer, *Mennonite Encyclopedia,* vol. V (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988), s.v. "God (Trinity), Doctrine of;" Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence*, trans. Helmut Harder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007); Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006); Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

[3] Wilbert R. Shenk, "New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 2 (2005): 73-79; Neal Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (2004): 29-52.

[4] Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity.*

German Mennonite theologian Fernando Enns.[5] In conclusion I will make recommendations for further steps for developing the theological contribution of the Believers Church to an ecumenical understanding of the church.

Trinity as Framework and Grammar

Is a trinitarian framework necessary for a full theological account of Believers Church distinctives? The Believers Church conferences originated, in large part, to study the common heritage and promote awareness of the theological contribution to ecumenical dialogue of those Christian groups which have insisted upon the baptism of believers, on confession of faith, into visible congregations. At the centre of this heritage is a christological focus; an early Believers Church consensus acknowledges "the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Word, church membership regenerated by the Spirit, the covenant of believers, a need for a perpetual restitution of the church, the necessity for separation from the world and proclamation and service to the world, and a special conception of Christian unity."[6] Christian unity is explicated here as the "fellowship of restored congregations" under Christ as "head" and realized by the "Spirit of God." From this perspective unity should not be shaped by a formal and forced uniformity of structure or creedal (e.g., trinitarian) orthodoxy, but by "a personal relationship and mutual commitment between God and His people."[7]

The Believers Church is but one ecclesial family which has seen little practical significance of the doctrine of the Trinity for the orthodoxy or orthopraxis of the church. In his instructive book, *Act and Being: Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes*, Colin Gunton[8] traces how the theological tradition separated God's being from God's action, thereby distorting any account of God that is normed by the biblical witness and focused on the

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[5] Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence.*

[6] James Leo Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969), 324.

[7] Ibid., 322f.

[8] Colin E. Gunton, *Act and Being: Towards a Doctrine of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

person and work of Christ. A breach developed between divine attributes in philosophical theology (i.e., the negative, metaphysical, and impersonal attributes) and divine action in Christian faith (i.e., attributes derived from God's historical action). The doctrine of the Trinity became one doctrine alongside others rather than a frame of reference or grammar for all others. It took on a speculative life of its own and had little practical significance for the life of faith. Gunton summarizes that "[w]e are in the presence of an entrenched tradition which owes more to Greece than scripture and, despite modification, dominates the treatment of attributes until this day."[9] Trinity understood here as the "grammar" which explicates the biblical story of God's being in action, and thus also as the "frame of reference" for all other affirmations and embodiments of faith, is a proposal which would not deny any Believers Church affirmations, but possibly a doctrine which would allow those affirmations to be explicated more fully and with greater ecumenical effectiveness.

The Church Precedes the Individual as Mission Precedes the Church

Even with its voluntarist understanding of church, the Believers Church affirms with Cyprian that the church precedes the individual believer: "Jesus Christ is head of the church; it does not belong to its members."[10] Since the gathering of Believers Church theologians in Louisville in 1968, a growing number of Believers Church mission theologians have encouraged the churches to think of the primacy of the church once again within the larger mission or sending of the triune God. Wilbert R. Shenk, director of missions for one of the largest Mennonite conferences for many years and later missiologist at Fuller Seminary, has argued in recent years that mission must precede the church. For "sixteen centuries Christians have been taught to think of church as the prior category and mission as one among several functions of the church," Shenk writes.[11] But this view "is based on a deformed understanding of the nature and purpose of the church. Jesus the

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[9] Ibid., 52.

[10] Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church*, 322; cf. also C. Norman Kraus, *The Community of the Spirit: How the Church Is in the World*, rev. ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993).

[11] Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 7.

Messiah formed his disciple community for the express purpose of continuing his mission."[12] Shenk argues that to be authentic, "mission must be thoroughly theocentric. It begins in God's redemptive purpose and will be completed when that purpose is fulfilled. The God-given identity of the church thus arises from its *mission*. This order of priority is foundational."[13] God the Father sends the Son into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit to bring salvation in all its dimensions, that is, God's reign in its fullness. The mission of God (*missio* Dei) so understood is essentially trinitarian. Shenk links the recovery of a trinitarian-missional theology with the recovery of the missionary nature of the church in post-Christendom.[14]

In the 1960s Shenk and other missionaries—ecumenical and evangelical—began to engage seriously the work of Church of Scotland missionary, Lesslie Newbigin. At this time Newbigin began to argue that the mission of the church "can only be rightly understood in terms of the trinitarian model."[15] Mission is the overflow of the infinite love of God upon all creation, expressed in the incarnation and in the outpouring of the Spirit. God sent the Son into the world to accomplish redemption; the Father and the Son send the Spirit to create the people of God as a missionary people. God's mission is to bring comprehensive reconciliation (*shalom*) to all peoples and to the whole of creation. Especially in his later writing, Newbigin states, "It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power."[16]

This trinitarian paradigm has provided a rich and fresh context for imagining the church in the flow of the mission and sending of God, and within God's intentions for the church to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the redemptive reign of God's kingdom in the world. The mission of the church to all nations "is itself the mighty work of God, the sign of the

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Shenk, "New Wineskins for New Wine."

[15] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 118; also, Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), 31.

[16] Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 119.

inbreaking of the kingdom."[17] The self-understanding of the church is grounded in the work of the God's Spirit who brings the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and then sends it into the world to participate fully in God's mission (*missio Dei*). There is a growing convergence in missiological circles around this understanding of the *missio Dei* and its implications for ecclesiology. It has also been central to the birth of the "missional church" conversation in North America in the last fifteen years. An early and widely accepted definition of the Believers Church by Durnbaugh[18] as a covenanted and disciplined people of God gathered and willingly scattered in the work of the Lord is, for example, not threatened or superseded by this form of trinitarianism. Rather, this trinitarian theology of mission offers a new context for re-imagining and extending a Believers Church ecclesiology of "gathering and scattering" within God's mission and God's intentions for the world.

Neal Blough, long-time Mennonite missionary in France and historian of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, has argued convincingly that this *missio Dei* structure is deeply embedded in South German Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck's (d. 1556) understanding of discipleship and church. Regarding Marpeck's thinking Blough writes, "[w]ithout the sending of the Spirit and its presence in the life of the Church, there can be no sacramental extension of the Incarnation. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit that material and outward reality participates in God's action in the world."[19] For Marpeck, discipleship and church are participation in the very life of the Trinity and the visible manifestation of God's love for the world. On the basis of his extensive writings on Marpeck (mostly in French), Blough affirms that for Marpeck "[t]his socio-political living out of the narrative in the midst of history is seen as an extension of the reality of the Trinity."[20]

Blough is, of course, keenly aware that with the establishment of the Constantinian church there was a shift from ethics to dogmatics, from a concern with teaching baptismal candidates how to live the teachings of Jesus

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[17] Ibid., 119.

[18] Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1968), 33.

[19] Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 35.

[20] Ibid., 46.

in evangelical attractiveness to the avoidance of errors of heresy.[21] But Blough with others[22] contends that this problem is not *inherent* in trinitarian theology; the problem is the failure to develop a robust trinitarian theology grounded in a concrete, embodied christology. In exemplary fashion, Pilgram Marpeck used the christological and trinitarian categories to critique the Constantinian practices of the church, giving it great *practical* significance for the life of faith. Blough extends this argument and recommends John Milbank's claim that both the Constantinian church and secular modernity are established on an "ontology of violence" (priority of violence and necessity of conflict) which the doctrine of the Trinity as grammar or framework actually challenges. The self-differentiation of the triune God provides the "theological ontology" from which the non-violent narrative and communal praxis of the church flows and can be lived out.[23] Similarly Thomas Finger writes:

> We can now perceive Christ's extraordinary, kenotic self-giving originating from the Trinity's mutual self-giving, and new creation communities formed and sustained by this divine community. Historic Anabaptists, of course, did not express all these notions directly. I propose, however, that these explicate many implicit convictions that energized their communal and missional emphases.[24]

The missionary reflections of Blough and Shenk are deeply rooted in the struggle of the church in North America and Europe to rediscover its theological identity and vocation at the end of Christendom. Not only are they convinced of the Believers Church's very important contribution to ecumenical discussions on ecclesiology in this new context, but they also

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[21] Cf. Alan Kreider, "Beyond Bosch: The Early Church and the Christendom Shift," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 2 (2005): 59-68.

[22] Cf. Duane K. Friesen, "Ten Theses on Connections between Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis in Mennonite Theology," *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 3 (2005); Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture*, 94-108; Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 421-446.

[23] Blough, "The Church as Sign or Sacrament," 43; cf. also Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity is Our Social Program': The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 403-423.

[24] Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 446.

encourage the rediscovery and explication of the deeper trinitarian grammar which has informed this heritage.

Recovery of Trinitarian Theology

The recovery of trinitarian theology in twentieth- and twenty-first century theology is due in large part to the work and witness of Karl Barth. With Barth, and later Karl Rahner, the speculative theistic tradition and its a-theistic critics (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche) were vigorously engaged by—of all things—a robust trinitarian and anti-theistic approach. After the First World War, missiologists began to take special interest in these explosive new developments in biblical and systematic theology. It was Karl Barth who, in 1932, first articulated for them an understanding of mission as an activity of God at the Brandenburg Mission Conference in Berlin. Reflecting upon the impulses Barth gave at that gathering for an intensification of the linkage between theology and mission, missiologist David Bosch summarizes: "The classical doctrine of the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another 'movement:' Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. As far as missionary thinking was concerned, this linking with the doctrine of the Trinity constituted an important innovation."[25] The rethinking of western ecclesiology that was already being considered in global mission discussion was given significant theological focus by Barth insofar as he linked the missionary vocation of the church with the sending of God.

> The congregation, the so-called home church, the community of pagan Christians, should recognize itself and actively engage itself for what it essentially is: a missionary community! It is not a mission association or society, nor a group that formed itself with the firm *intention* to do mission, but a human community *called* to the act of mission.[26]

Especially in his later theology, Barth took mission out of ecclesiology and

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[25] David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 390.

[26] Karl Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1957), 118.

soteriology and placed it squarely into the context of the doctrine of Trinity.[27] In contrast to the longer trinitarian tradition which believed it could discover the shape of God's being by negating the supposed characteristics of the material or visible world, Barth's *Dogmatics* are constructed with a trinitarian framework that unfolds the implications of the Son's involvement in the material world, beginning with his humanity and the story of Israel. There is no general doctrine of materiality which must then be transcended.[28] Moreover within this structure Barth identifies the main task of the church to be that of a witnessing community in the "solidarity of the pagans inside with the pagans outside"[29]—rather than as the patronizing "owner and proper disposer" of the goods of salvation.[30] What emerges in Barth's Doctrine of Reconciliation is an understanding of church for which its "sending is not secondary to its being; rather it *is* insofar as it is *sent* and is *active* on the strength of its sending. It builds itself up for the sake of its sending and in view of it."[31]

This new christological focus and reorientation of the doctrine of the Trinity in view of God's being and activity should be welcomed by representatives of a Believers Church ecclesiology insofar as it seeks to trace the biblical witness and to place theology in the service of the missionary or missional church. It is noteworthy that his approach bears no resemblance to H. Richard Niebuhr's use of the Trinity as a framework for ecumenical theology; [32] Niebuhr proposed a "balance of unitarianisms in tension"—all heretical in isolation, but all necessary for the whole faith of the whole church. This framework rightly earned the sharp critique of John Howard Yoder.[33]

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[27] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* vol. IV, 3.2, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), §72.

[28] Gunton, *Act and Being*, 66.

[29] Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*, 102.

[30] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* IV/3.2, 827.

[31] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 1, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 725 [translation slightly altered –ANF].

[32] H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today* 3 (1946): 371-384.

[33] John H. Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasons: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John H. Yoder, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996),

Niebuhr's trinitarianism—unlike Barth's christocentric trinitarian-missional model—is laden with the problems of trying to reconcile the tensions between the God of natural theology and the God of revelation. For Barth, any knowledge of God we claim to get from reason, nature, or tradition must be tested with reference to the norm of Jesus Christ as he is attested in Scripture.

It is this trinitarian "grammar" which John Howard Yoder learned from Karl Barth. Yoder emphasized to his own students that

> . . . the problem which the doctrine of the Trinity seeks to resolve, the normativeness of Jesus as it relates to the uniqueness of God, is a problem which Christians will always have if they are Christian. The doctrine of the Trinity is a test of whether your commitment to Jesus and to God are biblical enough that you have the problem which the doctrine of the Trinity solves.[34]

This practical trinitarian "test" of one's theology functions for Yoder as a type of "grammar" by which theological claims depend for their coherence. According to Craig Carter, Yoder's own "Christology presupposes the two-natures doctrine and the full deity of Jesus Christ, his eschatology presupposes the ontological reality of God and his sovereignty over history, and his ecclesiology presupposes the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community." [35] These Yoderian affirmations follow a trinitarian grammar; and it is precisely this logic, for example, that allows Yoder to attest the deeper reality-making claim that "people who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe,"[36] that is, in accord with the way things truly are. Like Barth, Yoder connects social ethics with the actual being and activity of God and can make a claim about the ultimate shape of reality based on God's trinitarian history with the world. This logic and procedure lies behind Yoder's important ecclesiological affirmations. Arne Rasmussen calls this grammar or account of reality governing Yoder's work an "eschatological and trinitarian

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35, 62; see also Craig A. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross: The Theology and Social Ethics of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 122ff., 233.

[34] John H. Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christological and Theological Method* (Elkhart, IN: Co-Op Bookstore , 1983), 140.

[35] Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 232f.

[36] John H. Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1988): 58.

metaphysics."[37] Rasmussen writes, "This kind of metaphysics, embedded and implied in an ecclesial discourse-practice, creates a framework for historical, social, and political interpretation and practice. It cannot simply be read off the surface of history, because the trinitarian understanding of reality is implicit in it. . . ."[38] For Yoder, as with Barth, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a speculative theory that is descriptive of the inner life of God. It is not creedalism divorced from the life of faith. Rather, the doctrine has a regulative function as the supreme summary of the grammar of the whole of Christian faith—a perspective grounded on the eschatological experience of the risen Christ, safeguarding, regulating, and correcting Christian thought in service of the church's sending: "There would be no theology if there were no community specially obligated to the witness of its word."[39]

A Believers Church Recovery of the Doctrine of the Trinity for Ecclesiological Reflection

The relative neglect of the doctrine of the Trinity—not only in Believers Church traditions—was a reality of Christian theology until the last decades of the twentieth century. Today there is a broad theological consensus across denominational lines that the doctrine of the Trinity really is *the* Christian doctrine of God. Thomas Finger is, as far as I am aware, the first to unfold a consciously Believers Church theology with a full-fledged trinitarian framework or grammar. Finger's trinitarian reflections begin not proto-logically from the Father and his initiative, but from below, from "the acts of the Spirit who brings the *eschaton* alive and hastens all things towards consummation."[40] In this way Finger follows the critical (yet sympathetic) post-Barthian work of Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann writes that the "doctrine of the Trinity is the conceptual framework that is necessary if we are to

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[37] Arne Rasmussen, "Historicizing the Historicist: Ernst Troeltsch and Recent Mennonite Theology," eds. Stanley Hauerwas, Chris K. Huebner, Harry J. Huebner, and Mark Thiessen Nation, *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 241f.

[38] Ibid.; cf. Carter, *The Politics of the Cross*, 239f.

[39] Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* IV/3.2 , 879 (translation slightly altered-ANF).

[40] Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 2 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 434.

understand this history of Christ as being the history of God. . . . It is not directly practical; but it changes practice more fundamentally than all the possible alternatives which 'the active man' can think out."[41] Specifically, Moltmann affirms a social-Trinity which argues that God is in God's inmost being a tri-unity. This clarifies why co-humanity is essential to humanity made in God's image and implies, according to Finger, that salvation is at one and the same time personal and intimate as well as corporate and social. Importantly, this account finds creatures and the church caught up in different ways in the flow of divine energies, in the mission of God.[42] No later than 1982, with Moltmann's lecture series at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) and at Canadian Mennonite Bible College (Winnipeg, Manitoba), North American Mennonite theologians have been considering seriously the relevance of the doctrine of the Trinity for an understanding of discipleship and ecclesiology. At that time Finger argued that the doctrine of Trinity

> . . . provides the strongest possible theological foundation for the Anabaptist emphasis on community. . . . God is essentially an intertwining of relationships marked by self-giving, response, acknowledgement, sharing, and enjoyment of one another. This is the deepest reason why true salvation cannot be individualistic. . . . Christ's community not only follows him, but is also caught up into his life which he shares with his Father and his Spirit.[43]

Over the years Finger has argued consistently and persuasively that a trinitarian framework is crucial for an account of the ecclesiological emphases of the Believers Church. A growing number of Believers Church theologians— most comprehensively Miroslav Volf[44] but also Stanley Grenz,[45] A. James

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[41] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 81.

[42] Cf. Finger, *Christian Theology*, vol. 2, 450-455.

[43] Thomas Finger, "Moltmann's Theology of the Cross," in *Dialogue Sequel to Jürgen Moltmann's* Following Jesus Christ in the World Today, ed. W. Swartley, Occasional Papers 10 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 19; cf. also Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*.

[44] Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

[45] Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*.

Reimer,[46] Howard A. Snyder,[47] and now most recently, Fernando Enns[48]—have argued for and presented robust trinitarian frameworks for unfolding ecclesiology, missions, and ethics for a greater appreciation of the Believers Church heritage. Below I will critically examine the respective trinitarian contributions of Volf and Enns, both of whom stand on the shoulders of Barth and Moltmann, and, in the case of Enns, Yoder in particular.

Miroslav Volf

Miroslav Volf is a Pentecostal-Baptist-Episcopalian Croatian American trinitarian theologian (and more!) who has made perhaps the most significant contribution to date towards an ecclesiology for ecumenical consideration from a free church, Believers Church perspective. In his landmark study, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*,[49] Volf shares the concern of Believers Church theology to develop an ecclesiology that will facilitate "both culturally *sensitive* and culturally critical-social embodiments of the Gospel."[50]

Volf—like Barth, Moltmann, Yoder, and Finger—begins with the ontological and epistemological priority of the all-embracing framework of God's eschatological new creation for his reflections on the church: The gathering and sending of the people of God is grounded in the coming of the reign of God in the person of Jesus. The church, which emerged after the resurrection of Christ and the sending of his Spirit, is seen by the New Testament as the anticipation of the coming new, obedient world intended by God's righteousness. The "eschatological character of the church demands that systematic ecclesiological reflection begin not immediately with the

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[46] A. James Reimer, "Doctrine of God (Trinity)," in Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

[47] Howard A. Snyder, *Decoding the Church: Mapping the DNA of Christ's* Body (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002); "The Missional Church and Missional Life" (paper presentation at the meeting of faculty of Tyndale University College and Seminary, Toronto, August 2007), http://www.tyndale.ca/seminary/inministry/downloads/-SnyderMissionalChurchandLife.pdf (accessed 1 July 2008).

[48] Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*.

[49] Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*.

[50] Ibid., 5.

church itself, but rather with God's new creation in relation to God's people."[51]

Perhaps Volf's most important contribution is his trinitarian foundation and clarification of the unity and catholicity of the church from a free church perspective. On the one hand, "[i]n every congregation assembling in Christ's name to profess faith in him, the *one and the whole* Christ is present through his Spirit. For this reason, the congregation is not a *part* of the church, but rather is the *whole* church."[52] On the other hand, the "same presence of Christ through the Spirit that makes each local church 'independent' of the other churches simultaneously connects them with one another."[53] Thus on the one hand, the relation of the local congregation to "the eschatological gathering of the people of God in the new creation"—or the hoped for universal church—is Spirit-mediated;[54] it does not need to be mediated sacramentally. And on the other hand,

> . . . since the eschatological gathering of the people of God will include all these churches as its own anticipations, a local church cannot alone, in isolation from all other churches, claim to be a church. It must acknowledge all other churches, in time and space, as churches, and must at least be open to diachronic and synchronic communication with them.[55]

Thus, on the one hand, local churches are "not the variously concrete modes of existence of the universal church, but are rather *historical* anticipations of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God;" they "arise through the pneumatic anticipatory connection to the yet outstanding gathering of the whole eschatological people of God, that is, to the *eschatological* universal church . . . ."[56] And on the other hand, profession of faith in the one Jesus Christ implies the openness of a local congregation to all other churches, according to Volf. This basic openness is the "*interecclesial minimum* of the concrete ecclesial proleptic experience of the eschatological

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[51] Ibid., 128.

[52] Ibid., 154.

[53] Ibid., 155.

[54] Ibid., 156.

[55] Ibid., 157.

[56] Ibid., 202.

gathering of the whole people of God."[57] This is a very significant and unique free church argument and contribution to ecumenical discussion on the unity and catholicity of the church.

Volf also follows his teacher and mentor, Jürgen Moltmann, in his pioneer thinking of a non-hierarchical and truly communal ecclesiology based on the social Trinity.[58] Volf argues that the unity of God is best understood perichoretically; that is, each person stands in relation to the other persons and is also a personal centre of action internal to the others; that is, alive in one another and through the others in a mutual exchange or circulation of the eternal divine life.[59] If one thinks of the unity of God as the complementary nature of person and relation, then "ecclesial communities also appear as independent and yet mutually related entities affirming one another in mutual giving and receiving."[60] That is, in correspondence to a social trinitarian understanding of God, Volf argues that the church too is not a single subject, but rather a communion of interdependent subjects, or a *polycentric* community. And insofar as the Trinity is an open and inviting communion, so too churches seeking communion with other churches correspond "to the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God in communion with the triune God, and in so doing [are] actually a church in the first place."[61] As local churches enrich one another, "they will also increasingly correspond to the catholicity of the triune God, who has already constituted them as catholic churches, because they *are* anticipations of the eschatological gathering of the entire people of God."[62] The people of God are constitutively related to the triune God and simultaneously integrated into the new world of God.[63] "The church is catholic because the Spirit of the new creation present within it anticipates in it the eschatological gathering of the whole people of God."[64]

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[57] Ibid., 157.

[58] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*: *A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. M. Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993).

[59] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 203; cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*: *The Doctrine of God*, trans. M. Kohl (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981), 174f.

[60] Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 207.

[61] Ibid., 208.

[62] Ibid., 213.

[63] Ibid., 267.

[64] Ibid., 268.

This anticipatory character which grounds the correspondence between eschatological and historical catholicity also relativizes historical catholicity. "Within history each church is catholic insofar as it always reflects its full eschatological catholicity historically only in a broken fashion. This is why no church can claim full catholicity for itself."[65] The catholicity of the local church is not a realization or concretization of an already existing universal church *à la* Ratzinger, "but rather the anticipation of the still outstanding gathering of the whole people of God, albeit an anticipation in which communal eschatological salvation is experienced concretely."[66]

As noted, this is a major contribution to ecclesiology in a trinitarian framework from a free church, Believers Church perspective. Surprisingly, however, despite the brilliance and comprehensiveness of the argument of this book, Volf writes in complete ignorance of all Believers Church conference publications and of the entire corpus of John Howard Yoder's work. In one sense, this allows Volf's work to complement Yoder's and others. However, on the whole Volf's argument would have been strengthened immeasurably if he had taken up and critically engaged Yoder's thought as well as the Believers Church's heritage of attempting to embody this communal witness of the divine community. Such important cross-fertilization is still outstanding. It is worth noting that the eschatological orientation of the work of Volf and Moltmann is particularly appropriate for the development of a trinitarian missional ecclesiology.

Fernando Enns

Fernando Enns' trinitarian theology follows Miroslav Volf's contours, but also embarks on new directions. He examines peace church ecclesiology within the larger context of current ecumenical discourse and, in turn, presents and recommends to the larger ecumenical network the theological and methodological premises of the historic peace churches. This broad horizon of ecclesiological dialogue and its wide-ranging distinctions brings to light some significant correctives not only for the ecumenical community, but also for peace church ecclesiology—and by extension—Believers Churches, according to Enns. After a broad but very careful study of contemporary Mennonite

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[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 272.

theology, Enns argues that the central "regulative principle" of "community" requires a further foundation "in a Trinitarian-based theology."[67] This is especially urgent with respect to questions regarding the unity and catholicity of Believers Churches as well as for thinking about the connections between ecclesiology and ethics, and, more generally, for the ongoing process of ecclesiological reflection.

> Our study leads to the conclusion that the Historic Peace Churches have prematurely foreclosed the trinitarian option which, as ecumenical discussions have demonstrated, can offer a solid foundation for a peace church ecclesiology in providing not only a substantial community-model, but helping the church to conceive itself as participating in the triune community.[68]

Specifically, Enns argues that the trinitarian framework secures oneness in the midst of plurality and shields plurality from uniformist tendencies. Individual confession and voluntary participation in community—which the Believers Church accentuates—can only succeed "in the context of an interdependent congregation understood as *differentiated* community."[69] A view of the Trinity as a *perichoretic* community gives this ecclesiology an alternative foundation that also draws the church into the divine community which precedes the voluntary decisions of individuals.[70] This move guards theologically the voluntarism of the Believers Churches and its own affirmation that the church does not belong to its members, but to Jesus Christ.[71] As with Volf and Moltmann, the social-trinitarian *perichoresis* of the divine persons becomes the model and prototype for church as *koinonia*. Enns recommends that an ecclesiological model of "'differentiated communion' (Miroslav Volf) can be derived from this conception, which is essential for the self-understanding of the peace church as a visible symbol of the anticipated messianic community."[72] Again, Enns points to Volf and Moltmann and presents a view of church as the "proleptic experience within history of the

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[67] Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, 232.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid., 238.

[70] Ibid., 237.

[71] Garrett, ed., *The Concept of the Believers Church*, 322.

[72] Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, 233.

eschatological integration of the entire people of God into the communion of the triune God."[73]

The contribution of the Believers Church (specifically Mennonite) theology to the ecumenical discussion, according to Enns, is to provide "the framework of an ethically-directed, local, and experience-oriented (herme-neutical) understanding of community that complements and completes the predominantly ontological description of trinitarian *koinonia* in ecumenical discussion."[74] The believer's request for baptism and voluntary entrance into the *koinonia* of the church illustrates and preserves the person's independent identity in community. This is a major contribution to ecumenical discussion of ecclesiology from a Believers Church perspective. Believers Church temptations or deficits are also corrected when modelled analogically to the *koinonia* of the divine Trinity.[75]

Perhaps most provocatively Enns argues that the authenticity of the peace church's life as community—including the central, identity-forming principle of non-violence and the way of Jesus as the key source and pattern for life—is deficient if the theological foundation is one-sidedly christocentric. "If the ethical community claims that, in the final analysis, its motivation is grounded in the kingly *authority* of Christ, she remains prisoner to metaphorical and categorical thinking, which is precisely what she seeks to expose."[76] The motivation for discipleship is not Christ the king or ruler, but "the *koinonia* of God with humanity, the *participatio* of the church as a community constituted by the Holy Spirit and qualified by the Spirit as ethical community."[77] When the discipleship ethic of non-violence is placed in the trinitarian *koinonia* framework, the church's "mission of reconciliation, the recovery of com-munity, as well as peace *and* justice coalesce."[78]

Enns argues that the trinitarian community model of "co-inherence" or "mutual indwelling'" (*perichoresis*) is a necessary corrective for the peace churches in particular and the Believers Churches in general. Enns is very aware that in these churches the doctrine of the Trinity has never played a role

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[73] Ibid., 240; with reference to Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 175, 127.

[74] Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community*, 234.

[75] Ibid., 235f.

[76] Ibid., 234.

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid.

comparable to its role in the mainline churches. One of the key "correctives" which Enns' method identifies well, is the need to interpret community in all its dimensions (including the unity and catholicity of the church) as *koinonia,* grounding it in a trinitarian-based theology.

Fernando Enns' contribution to the ecumenical discussion on the being of the church from a Believers Church-peace church perspective, together with Volf's landmark ecumenical study, have clearly laid the trinitarian foundation for a missional understanding of the church. I provide a few initial critical comments for further study.

First, Enns' larger trinitarian recommendations for the Believers Church are not as new as he sometimes presents them. However, Enns supports these imperatives with new ecumenical acumen and urgency which require serious attention. His deep awareness of the opportunities and operations of current ecumenical discussions is unparalleled among Believers Church theologians. Second, Enns is an extremely alert reader of John H. Yoder's writings and has read widely in current North American Anabaptist-Mennonite thought. Astonishingly, however, Enns apparently has no awareness of Thomas Finger's *Christian Theology*[79] or of the trinitarian-missional proposals already under discussion in the North American peace church-Believers Church circles since Moltmann's lecture tour in 1983. James McClendon's work[80] is also passed over. Moreover, it is not entirely obvious to his readers why he does not embrace more fully and engage more thoroughly Volf's substantial ecumenical-free church contribution[81] and his writings on peace. Third, it could be expected that Enns would want to make connections between the deeply influential ecumenical figure, Lesslie Newbigin: his early proposals on free church ecclesiologies in the ecumenical family,[82] and to Newbigin's later work on a theology of the *missio Dei.*[83] This, however, is surprisingly absent in Enns' study. The missional theological impulses outlined at the start of this

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[79] Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vols. 1-2.

[80] James McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994).

[81] Volf, *After Our Likeness*.

[82] Lesslie Newbigin, *Household of God*: *Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press, 1954), 94ff.

[83] Lesslie Newbigin, *An Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

essay—including the references to the works of Bosch, Shenk, and Blough—would bring another level of urgency to Enns' trinitarian contribution for the church in western, post-Chrisentdom contexts.

Conclusion: The Believers Church of Tomorrow

At the 1978 Study Conference on the Believers Church in Canada, John Howard Yoder began his plenary address with the affirmation: "The Church of tomorrow cannot be but a Believers Church."[84] Thirty years later this claim continues to be valid, although the language that most, both inside and outside Believers Church circles in Canada and the United States, are now using is different: most would say that the church of today and tomorrow cannot but be a "missional church."[85] And if this is the case, then perhaps what we did not see thirty years ago is that the Believers Church as an essentially missional church cannot be but "trinitarian." Moltmann's summary statement—that the doctrine of the Trinity is the "conceptual framework that is necessary if we are to understand this history of Christ as being the history of God"[86]—will only be contested with great difficulty, even—and perhaps especially so—from a Believers Church perspective. Finger, Volf, and Enns—among others—have embraced the logic of this conclusion and provided deep trinitarian foundations for the construction of a more robust ecclesiology from a Believers Church perspective. Moreover, these newly uncovered foundations provide the groundwork for Believers Church theologians to engage in a much more meaningful and fruitful dialogue with their missional-theologian counterparts who, coming via another path, have also arrived at the broadly affirmed consensus that this church, which is essentially caught up in the being and action of the triune

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[84] John H. Yoder, "Believers Church: Global Perspectives," in *The Believers Church in Canada*, ed. Jarold K. Zeman and Walter Klaassen (with the assistance of John D. Rempel) (Brantford, ON; Winnipeg, MB: Baptist Federation of Canada/Mennonite Central Committee, 1979), 3.

[85] Cf. Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 2000); George Hunsberger and Craig van Gelder, eds., *The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996).

[86] Moltmann, *The Future of Creation: Collected Essays*, 81.

God, is missionary by its very nature. The common questions to be explored will be: What do we do when we do missional theology? How do we do missional theology? Moreover, missional theologians will bring the tools of cultural analysis to the endeavour to further assist the church in North America and Europe to embody effectively the witness to the trinitarian, missional God in a post-Christendom context.[87]

It is with this latter point—the embodiment of the witness—that another student of Barth's work, Stanley Hauerwas might be allowed to have the last word. Hauerwas is a Methodist whose thought is very close to the Believers Church tradition, especially the work of John Howard Yoder. In his Gifford Lectures, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, Hauerwas provides a very sympathetic account of "The Witness that was Karl Barth" (chap. 6); however Hauerwas notes that "[a]ttractive accounts of the world can often turn out to be no more than fantasies. The needed incentive not just to entertain but to live Christian convictions requires the display of a habitable world exemplified in the life of the Christian community."[88] Here we have a trinitarian-missional proposal that goes beyond what Hauerwas calls Barth's "over cautious" presentation of the church in the economy of God's salvation.[89] The witness requires churches—like those represented by John Howard Yoder and Pope John Paul II—who embody the "kind of witnesses who must exist if Christians are to recover the confident use of theological speech that Barth exemplifies so well."[90] These churches "have challenged the presumptions of modernity" and "called into question attempts . . . in the name of rationality and democracy [to] relegate God to 'what we do with our privacy,'" and they represent "the recovery of the politics necessary for us to understand why witness is not simply something

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[87] A good example of this kind of work is David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman, eds., *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in our Pluralistic World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1999).

[88] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2001), 214.

[89] Ibid., 202.

[90] Ibid., 216f.; compare John H. Yoder, "Karl Barth, Post-Christendom Theologian" (paper presented at the meeting of the North American Karl Barth Society, 8 June 1995), http://theology.nd.edu/people/research/yoderjohn/documents/KARLBARTH.pdf (accessed May 28 2008).

Christians 'do' but is at the heart of understanding how that to which Christians witness is true."[91] Earlier than Barth, the Believers Church had challenged "the accommodation of Christian theology to the presumed conditions of truthful speech set by the world."[92] In post-Christendom North America and Europe, however, they now share their strategic space on the margins of society with many others who were, until recently, "mainline" or "territorial" churches and who have now embraced a missional understanding of the church. Here, I believe, we will benefit deeply from the resources and gifts that each brings, and as we learn together what it means to be the faithful church of Jesus Christ in our context. The Believers Church will continue to have a distinctive (but not exclusive) witness because of the experience of creating voluntarist communities of faith and witness without which the trinitarian theological framework or grammar will remain unintelligible.

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[91] Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, 217.
[92] Ibid., 216.

Part V

CEREMONIES RECONSIDERED

Chapter Twelve

A Sacramental Believers Church: Pilgram Marpeck and the (Un)mediated Presence of God

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Andrea M. Dalton

In Mennonite Church and Church of the Brethren circles it has been common to reject sacramental understandings of the Lord's Supper and other ceremonial practices of the church. Vernard Eller, for instance, articulates what he perceives to be a misplaced understanding of holiness in sacramentalism this way:

> Sacramentalism specializes in holy objects, holy *things*. These things, then, possess special power—strange, supernatural, unearthly power. They carry a mysterious patina, radiate numinousness, vibrate with an awesome aura of divinity. Judaism had never been very enthusiastic about this sort of business. It was content to let God be the one true "holy"—and he is a person, not a thing. Holiness, divinity, and awesome glows, therefore, have to do with personal relationships, with human beings relating to God and to one another before God, rather than with things. Once things become the locus of a holiness of their own and it isn't long before

persons are made subordinate to them before they are being used to manipulate persons.[1]

Similarly John Howard Yoder rejects notions of sacramentalism by appropriating the phrase of Acts 2:42 that describes the early Christian community "breaking bread together."[2] Here Yoder sees the community involved in an economic act. He notes that "[t]o do rightly the practice of breaking bread together is a matter of economic ethics."[3] Yoder defines "breaking of bread" as an ethical practice of a different standard than the economics of the world, but nevertheless as an *economic* act.

Both Eller's and Yoder's perspectives appear to avoid understandings of the Supper that might suggest that God acts through the elements in some kind of special way. Along with Dale Brown they tend to see "the sacramental nature of all of life."[4] Rather than an original, liturgical act after which the rest of Christian life is modelled, the Supper is one of many meals; if God meets humanity in the Supper, it is not distinct from how God meets individuals in any other act. Moreover, the Supper is seen more as an ethical rather than a liturgical act.

These views that surface in the writings of Eller, Yoder, and Brown come out of a particular tradition. In the sixteenth century, many Christians who practiced believers baptism tended to reject the materialism of the Roman Catholic Church and could not accept the church's practice of revering the bread and wine as though Jesus Christ was physically present in it. In the aftermath of this primal rejection, Anabaptists and Spiritualists in southern Germany often debated whether or not, and why, the Lord's Supper should be practiced at all. As I will indicate in this essay, however, the south German Anabaptist, Pilgram Marpeck, not only insisted on the importance of the Supper, but he also underscored the essential presence of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the meal and the mediating qualities of the elements

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[1] Vernard Eller, *In Place of Sacraments: A Study of Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 11.

[2] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 14-16; Acts 2:42.

[3] Ibid., 21.

[4] Dale W. Brown, *Another Way of Believing: A Brethren Theology* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 2005), 113.

rooted in the incarnation. This, I suggest further, should remain important to Christians in the Believers Church tradition as they participate at the Lord's table.

According to Marpeck, the primary significance of the Lord's Supper is its work in forming the church as the body of Christ. Marpeck developed a sacramental theology that emphasized the unity of Christ with the church in communication with the elements. He assumed a unity in the observable particularity of the Supper and of divine activity in the Supper, which included, but also extended beyond, observation. Furthermore, the Lord's Supper constituted not only the *form* of the church's ethical life but also the *power* of the Spirit that made such living possible.

Marpeck defended this understanding of the Supper by noting that the grace of God is both *mediated* and *immediately present* to individuals in a corporate context in which they actively participate. However, rather than insisting that Christ is not present until presented by the mediating practice, the essence of Marpeck's argument is that true faith evidences itself in particular outward forms. God comes to believers in certain characteristic ways, through certain characteristic practices, instituted by Christ. These outward practices are not separate from the presence of God but are one with the work of God; they are the particular form of the believer's unity with God, which extends into all of the believer's life. This fusion finds its roots in the incarnation. Because in Christ, God has become human, so God's presence is no longer "mediated" to humanity but simply and immediately present in and with the church. Christ—more specifically, the humanity of Christ—is the church's only mediator. In Christ, the body of believers has direct access to God.

A number of Marpeck's writings outline his views on the Supper. In what follows I will consider his "ecumenical letters," his Strassburg writings against spiritualists Hans Bünderlin and Christian Entfelder, his revision of Bernhard Rothmann's "Confession," and his "Response to Caspar Schwenckfeld."

Marpeck's "Ecumenical Letters"

Marpeck's instinctive, deep, and passionate desire to unite Anabaptist congregations is displayed most explicitly in the middle of his career beginning in 1540. In his "ecumenical letters" written during this time, Marpeck notes that the unity of the church is rooted in the church's unity with

and in Christ. If the church is disunited, it also lacks unity with God. The church's entire life—its identity and action—demonstrates this unity.

In *The Churches of Christ and of Hagar*, Marpeck identifies the church with Sarah, the mother of the people of God. The church may be seen as giving birth to believers while being united in Christ. "Conceived by the action of the Holy Spirit, [the church] bears the children of the Word in her body. As stated above, that body is the body of Christ for while Christ is the husband and Head, the two are one flesh."[5] Thus, the church does not stand between Christ and believers or act alone as an intermediary liaison. The church can birth believers because the church shares in the life of Christ. Only the Word of God—only Christ—can birth believers; only the unity of the church with Christ makes the church able to do the same.

Strassburg: Marpeck and Spiritualism

This ecclesiological understanding pervades Marpeck's thought as he interacted with Spiritualists in Strassburg. Here Hans Bünderlin and Christian Entfelder had advocated a temporary cessation of outward practice (*Stillstand*) when disagreements over externals would otherwise lead to division. Although Marpeck objected to Bünderlin and Entfelder's Spiritualism, he shared with them a deep concern for the unity of the church. And he believed that the continued practice of the Supper was necessary for the church's continued life and that it was the basis for its unity. This is reflected in his works of this period, *A Clear Refutation* and *A Clear and Useful Instruction*.

Written in 1531, *A Clear Refutation* contains Marpeck's rebuttal against Hans Bünderlin's arguments that the ceremonies[6] should no longer be observed. Marpeck presents a three-part response, encouraging "the spirits" to

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[5] William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottdale, PA: 1978), 393 (hereafter cited as *WPM*).

[6] "Ceremonies" refers to "anything out of Jesus' ministry which passes on his teaching and identity. . . . The ceremonies included in [*A Clear Refutation*] are baptism, breaking of bread, Scripture, separation from the world, ban, rebuke, exhortation, prayer, kneeling, example of believers, proclamation, and teaching." Marpeck often considers the ceremonies together when he defends and theologically describes them. John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 98.

discern between right and wrong practices of the ceremonies, that is, between the ceremonies enlivened and empowered by the Spirit of Christ and those performed out of "external urge or other reasons,"[7] unto condemnation.

First, although *some* have made the ceremonies corrupt in their midst, they have not corrupted the ceremonies for all times and all places. Though the Antichrist uses the ceremonies "in a carnal manner,"[8] when the Spirit of Christ is present, the ceremonies "are also performed in a Christian manner and spiritual form."[9] The validity of the ceremonies lies in whether or not the Spirit of Christ is present. Second, the plain sense of the commands of Christ is applicable not only to Christ's immediate disciples and apostles in Scripture but also to all those who follow Christ now. Those who believe that they must receive an external command from Christ (apart from what has been written in Scripture) to validate continued practice of the sacraments have misunderstood the example of apostles who were led by the inner Spirit to teach, preach, and baptize. Third, the transmission of spiritual authority "depends upon the inner power which Christ alone gives through His spirit."[10] Power in the church is not authority-over (ruling/lordship) but humility and lowliness, in submission to Christ, including submission to the commands of Christ: the ceremonies.

In writing *A Clear and Useful Instruction* against Christian Entfelder, Marpeck continues to argue for the validity of the ceremonies.[11] In this

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[7] *WPM*, 64.

[8] Ibid., 45.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 55.

[11] Following Heinold Fast, Neal Blough has convincingly argued that Marpeck wrote this 1531 document not against Schwenckfeld, as William Klassen originally claimed, but against Christian Entfelder. Neal Blough, *Christ in Our Midst: Incarnation, Church, and Discipleship in the Theology of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2007), 34, 52. William Klassen, "Pilgram Marpeck's Two Books of 1531," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 33, no. 1 (January 1959): 18-30; William Klassen, *Covenant and Community: The Life and Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 36-45. Werner Packull agrees that Schwenckfeld and Marpeck would have concurred in Strassburg debates. Werner Packull, *Hutterite Beginnings: Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 132.

document, Marpeck focuses more attention on the outward and links it christologically to the humanity of Christ. In emphasizing the humanity of Christ, Marpeck seeks to stress the unity of the inward and the outward, the epistemological function of the outer, and humility as the appropriate attitude of a leader of the church and apostle of Christ.

According to Marpeck, the authority for the practices of the church stems not from the authority or power of the individuals involved, but from the authority and power of God. "For Christ never says to the apostles: 'Go forth, all power be committed to you;' rather, he says: 'To me all power is given— therefore go forth.'"[12] Believers never possess the authority of Word and sacrament, but their power to do the same continually comes from the Lord. Strassburg church leaders should submit to this power of God and can do so only by submitting to the humanity of Christ, the form of church practice that Christ exemplified and instituted.

Marpeck confesses that God, in the incarnation, made Godself known to humanity in material form and that, therefore, humanity can only come to know God as God continues to use the outward forms that Christ Himself instituted. For this reason, Marpeck finds absurd those who claim to know God apart from the outward practices.[13] To know God, the church must "employ the designated means of Christ."[14] Only by the proclamation of the Word can humanity come to know Christ: "For all ignorant, unbelieving men have to be addressed, taught, and directed through the outward witness of others before they will be brought to knowledge and understanding."[15] Although true practice of the ceremonies requires the presence of the Spirit, if the ceremonies are withheld from the church, then no one will come to believe.

In summary, the basis of Marpeck's theology of the Lord's Supper as evident in these two documents is his alignment of the external practice with the humanity of Christ, and insistence that only the (inward) Spirit validates the rightful practice of the ceremonies.

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[12] *WPM*, 77.

[13] Ibid., 82.

[14] Ibid., 85.

[15] Ibid., 88.

Revision of Rothmann's Work

In 1532, likely in collaboration with Leupold Scharnschlager,[16] Marpeck revised and published Bernhard Rothmann's *Confession of Both Sacraments* (Bekenntnis von beiden Sakramenten) under the title *Admonition* (Vermahnung).[17] At the commencement of the document, Marpeck discusses the word "sacrament" and its rightful use: a sacrament is a holy thing in that it has to do with an oath or commitment, by which one is sanctified or made holy. Marpeck's use of "sacrament" here, rather than "ceremonies," is borrowed from Rothmann. Nevertheless, Marpeck finds the term appropriate for baptism and the Lord's Supper; his criticisms of the Roman church do not prevent his use of this term.

In developing his earlier claims to the unity of the inward and the outward in the ceremonies, Marpeck adds the word "co-witness" (*Mitzeugnus*) where Rothmann had written "sign" (*Teken*). In contrast to his opponents who divided baptism into "material" and "formal" parts, Marpeck states that the outward act of baptism, both in matter and in form, "is a *co-witness* of the inner essence, namely of the covenant of a good conscience with God and whatever Scripture testifies to in addition to this."[18] Any use of the material and formal aspects of baptism without the inward covenant of baptism is false. There are two co-witnesses—the outward co-witness and the inward co-witness. Both testify to the true act of God in the sacrament.

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[16] Rempel defends sole authorship; Klassen and Blough stress that it was not necessarily written by Marpeck alone. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism,* 103-104; Klassen, *Covenant and Community*, 136; Blough, *Christ in our Midst*, 103.

[17] With extremely vivid language, Marpeck's first extended addition to the Rothmann text reveals his interpretation of the situation of the church as he writes: having been mixed with the false church, the true church has been made corrupt; false messengers confuse the faithful, bringing them to the point of despair; and those who claim Christ are using the sword to defend Him. In this context, Marpeck advocates humility and patience, thereby immediately differentiating himself from Münsterite violence that might be associated with Rothmann's document.

In our quotations of *Admonition*, we follow Klassen and Klaassen's typographical distinction between Rothmann's original text, indicated by plain font, and text added by Marpeck, printed in italicized font.

[18] *WPM*, 197.

Yet, Marpeck moves beyond a symbolic use of the term "co-witness:" "When the essence is there and is given testimony to, then the symbol is true and useful, and the symbol is what it claims to be. *It really is no symbol at all, but is true essence.*"[19] He accomplishes this by confession of the action of the Trinity in baptism that coheres with his prior commitment to the unity of the inward and the outward. The Son works outwardly while the Father[20] works inwardly, and the unity of the Trinity indicates that what the Son does, the Father must also be doing, for the Son imitates the Father: "*For that which the Father does, the Son of Man does simultaneously: the Father, as Spirit, internally; the Son, as Man, externally. Therefore, the external baptism and the Lord's Supper in Christ are not signs; rather, they are the external work and the essence of the Son. For whatever the Son sees the Father doing, the Son also does immediately.*"[21] Because the Son and the Father are one and act as one, the water and words of true baptism are not mere symbols of the inward reality, but they are in fact the outward act of God, bound to the inward act of God, in the Trinity.[22]

In the new covenant, God has decisively chosen to bind Godself to history and to material reality in "the order established by his Word," that is, in the humanity of Christ.[23] Through a series of distinctions between the old and new covenants,[24] Marpeck points the reader toward the order of God

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Or Spirit. Marpeck reveals his Johannine tendency toward fluid association of the Father and the Spirit. For Marpeck's Binitarian tendency and use of Johannine literature, see Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 104-108.

[21] *WPM*, 195.

[22] *On the Inner Church (1545)* also attests to this theological development of Marpeck.

[23] Blough, *Christ in Our Midst*, 120-121.

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Old Testament	**New Testament**
Figur (figure)	*Wesen* (reality)
Verhoffen Gerechtigkeyt ("anticipated" justice)	*Wiedergebornen Gerechtigkeit* (justice of new birth)
Knechtisch (servile)	*Kindlich* (filial)
Leiblich (corporeal)	*Geistlich* (spiritual)
Leiblich (corporeal)	*Wesenlich* (real)
Schatten (shadow)	*Liecht* (light)
Figurhen (figure)	*Warheit* (truth)

established in the Word of God and declares that, through this order, God makes possible the unity of believers and the church (and potentially all that belonged only to physical, material reality) with God.

Marpeck's sacramental logic can be summarized as follows: mere outward water and words do not necessarily indicate the efficacy of a sacrament, because the water and words are symbols of an inward reality. If the inward reality is lacking, then the symbols are meaningless. However, if the inward reality is present, then the outward water and words are more than *mere* symbols; they are united with the act of the Spirit to which they witness, because Christ acts outwardly and the Father inwardly, but both are one essential unity.

Finally, it can be observed that Marpeck develops a strong memorialist understanding of the Lord's Supper. From Rothmann, Marpeck inherited two sacramental doctrines.[25] The first is a sacramental realism grounded in the humanity of Christ and characterized by the trinitarian dynamism of the Gospel of John. The second is a memorialism that reflects on the work of Christ on the cross and the Christian community's emulation of this love for one another in the Supper. Here Marpeck is responding to those who concentrate on the presence of Christ in the bread and wine yet forget that right practice of the Lord's Supper involves the examination of the body of Christ, the examination of oneself and the body as a whole. The primary biblical texts that govern Marpeck's discussion are John 13 and 1 Corinthians 11. Love of believers for one another is the essential thing. Marpeck uses love to emphasize the same aspect of the Lord's Supper that he emphasized for baptism: that faith is a requirement for its rightful practice. He states, "The Lord's Supper cannot be eaten without love, which is a requirement for communion. And this true love grows out of a true faith. Therefore, only believers in Christ, and no one else, can hold such a meeting or assembly so rich in love."[26]

The different emphases of Marpeck's sacramental realism and memorialism are interrelated with his understanding of the humanity of Christ. If sacramental realism holds that the water, or bread and wine, co-witness to the

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Blough, *Christ in Our Midst*, 119: from *WPM,* 231-241.

[25] Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 129.

[26] *WPM*, 266.

true work of God as Christ's external work united with the Father/Spirit's internal work, then memorialism claims sacramental unity with Christ through proclamation, remembrance, and imitation (love). Proclamation, bread, and wine are all extensions of the humanity of Christ, because Christ instituted all of them in Scripture as true external forms bound to the Holy Spirit.

Response to Schwenkfeld

Although Marpeck intended the *Admonition* as a confessional document for several congregations, it sparked a heated stream of correspondence between him and Schwenckfeld. In these correspondences Schwenckfeld accuses Marpeck of stating that love of believers for one another constitutes the true Lord's Supper and that, from this, one can see that he "holds the Lord's Supper to be only a ceremony and a sign of love."[27] Such an argument makes no sense to Marpeck, who, in his *Response to Caspar Schwenckfeld*,[28] believes that God alone is the source of believers' love, and that believers receive love by faith:

> Welling up from within, it is love which compels their unity, bids them meet together in the body, and hold the Lord's communion. As we wrote, no one has righteous love but Christians, because the ability to love comes from true faith. . . . Unbelievers—those who lack faith and love—do not belong to the Lord's Supper.

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[27] *Later Writings by Pilgram Marpeck and His Circle*, trans. Walter Klaassen, Werner Packull, and John Rempel (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1999), 99.

[28] Scholars differ on their dating of the *Response*, but there is consensus that the document was written in two parts, the first between 1542 and 1544 and the second completed during or after 1546. John D. Rempel, "Introduction," in ibid., 68; Blough, *Christ in Our Midst*, 142.

Rempel and Blough also disagree on whether Marpeck wrote this document himself or in cooperation with others from his circle. That at least the Anabaptist community at Augsburg "stood behind" this text is certain, but since matters of authorship are always speculative, this author finds no reason to resolve this matter. For all intents and purposes, we can do no other than to assume that Marpeck's theology and that of the congregation that he led aligned. Blough, *Christ in Our Midst,* 142; Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 103.

For that reason we say that it is a bodily coming together of those who believe in Christ.[29]

For Schwenckfeld, that which is mere outward act, for Marpeck is the dynamic giving and response of Christ and his body. As John Rempel states,

> In [Marpeck's] conflation of two and sometimes even three members of the Trinity, he is saying that to have communion with the body and blood of Christ is to participate in love, which is to participate in God. Love, in all its concreteness and not as an abstract inward reality, makes the Lord's Supper a communion unto eternal life.[30]

Clearly for Marpeck, love is what binds believers' remembrance of Christ's act to the actual work of the Spirit in the Lord's Supper. Love is the active form of true remembrance, and it is a direct result of the Spirit's action.

The Mediated and Immediate Presence of God

As we have seen, Marpeck's ecclesiologically-centred theology of the Lord's Supper depends upon the commitment to particular outward forms of the church's life and being united in Christ. Because Marpeck defends the ceremonies in his writings, it might be possible, against the Spiritualists, to interpret his theology to be advocating the mediated presence of God in the sacraments. However, Marpeck's primary argument in *A Clear Refutation* signals a complexity in his theology that wants also to embrace the notion that the work of the Spirit is present not only *in* the outward form but also in the inner person of the believer. Here the emphasis is that the Spirit makes present, motivates, and validates the outward practices of the church. Put differently, the outward form and inward Spirit function as separate criteria for discerning the rightful practice of church life. Thus, according to Marpeck in *A Clear Refutation*, the ceremonies are not so much seen to mediate the Spirit, but rather the Spirit enlivens and motivates the outward practices of the church.[31]

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[29] Ibid., 100.

[30] Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 134.

[31] *WPM*, 45, 48, 55, 64, 65.

Yet Marpeck's views appear to shift, depending on the context of his writing. In *A Clear and Useful Instruction* he appears to move closer again to a theology of mediated grace. The ceremonies are necessary in spiritual formation because of their epistemological function: as humans, the only way we can come to know God is through some type of outward form; in our present state, we need outer forms and the material reality to know God.[32] As preeminently exemplified in the incarnation, God has chosen to use the material world in God's self-proclamation. Therefore, the material world in fact mediates all of our experiences of God.

The distinction that Marpeck makes between the ceremonies serving the believer and the believer serving the ceremonies is helpful in understanding how his theology of grace might be considered mediated and immediate. In *A Clear Refutation,* Marpeck states, "All ceremonies have been instituted by Christ for our service and benefit."[33] Thus God's active presence and self-proclamation in the ceremonies is for the edification and salvation of the church, but the church is not enslaved to the ceremonies; we do not *use* ceremonies to reach God but *receive* them from God: "For this reason, the true believers are lords over all outward ceremonies of Christ, and employ them for their service; the ceremonies are to serve them and not they the ceremonies."[34] We are not enslaved to the example, teachings, or exhortation of the humanity of Christ, but receive them as gifts toward new life.

Marpeck clarifies this idea further in his *Admonition* and the *Response*, where he argues that the love demonstrated in true practice of the Lord's Supper is not possible without the subjective faith of believers, which is a gift from God. In the *Response*, his refutation of Schwenckfeld's accusation that he has described a merely external meal of love hangs on Marpeck's insistence that love itself comes only from God through faith. In the *Admonition*, Marpeck argues against infant baptism on the principle that baptizing an infant is to declare that she will one day be faithful, and only God has the ability to give faith to an individual. Not even Christ could predict that his friends would become believers.[35] In this document, Marpeck also describes

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[32] Ibid., 86.

[33] Ibid., 58.

[34] Ibid., 83.

[35] Ibid., 218.

the oath of a believer in the sacraments as an exchange between a guest and a host. Those who receive gifts from God are sanctified, for this is the purpose of the gift: to reciprocate the gift in unity, faithfulness, and love, with one's whole heart and being. Therefore the sacraments require something—a spontaneous gift, an act of love—from the body, but this flows naturally from human reception of God's gifts. Thus, a close relationship exists between divine and human action. As John Rempel has noted, "For Marpeck, divine initiative and human response are meaningless if separate from one another. God is the agent, but his action can be appropriated only by faith."[36]

As we have seen, Marpeck insists that the humanity of Christ always claims a particular form, found in Scripture, to which Christians must submit. The church is an extension of the humanity of Christ, according to the form that Christ instituted in Scripture, but the church's conformity to that form is always a matter of freedom and faith. Furthermore, the church's true practice of the form—the church's true identity as an extension of the humanity of Christ—always depends upon the Spirit, which enlivens the practice. Because christologically, the humanity and divinity of Christ are never separated, love demonstrated in memory of Christ requires the Spirit's action.

Marpeck's Sacramental Legacy Today

If we were to allow Marpeck to influence contemporary Believers Church theologies of the Lord's Supper, in what directions might Marpeck nudge us? First, we might recognize that the basis for understanding the significance of the Lord's Supper is in relation to how we can say that the church is the body of Christ. The church is the body of Christ because it has unity with Christ and the trinitarian God through outward practices, instituted in Scripture, and through the internal work of the Spirit. The starting point for Believers Church theology of the Lord's Supper is not in opposition to other Christian traditions' theologies of the same, but a claim that all Christian churches make, following Paul's witness in the New Testament: the church is the body of Christ.

Second, allowing Marpeck to influence contemporary Believers Church theologies of the Lord's Supper would enable us to admit that the true power of God in the Supper, although evident in a visible way, is also beyond

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[36] Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*, 137.

ourselves. In the Supper, divine power and human power are not in contradiction or in zero-sum relationship. Both we and God are freely active in this practice; our act of sharing in love depends upon God's gift of faith.

Third, Marpeck might teach us to see the relative significance of *how* it is that we practice the Supper, be it highly formalized ritual or common meal. Marpeck firmly declares that the Supper is practiced in love, in imitation and remembrance of Christ, and with examination of the body. However, I suggest that Marpeck's failure to explicate what specific form the Supper should take is, in fact, a virtue. With this ambiguity, Marpeck keeps his communal ethic close to the example of Christ's work on the cross and retains a Believers Church theology of the Lord's Supper that does not coerce its members into an ornate ritual or community of goods. Love is the true test of the Supper. Where love is absent—despite the sharing of bread and wine, or loaves and fishes—a supper is not the Lord's.

Finally, we may want to recover the use of the term "sacrament" when referring to the Lord's Supper. It is a sacrament because it is an extension of the humanity of Christ, and one essential unity with God. The Lord's Supper is also a sacrament because it is a free gift of God for the unity and sanctification of the church. In the Supper, the church responds to this gift in love and promise to love, in the example of Christ and in Christ's Spirit. In both senses, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament because it is the means by which the church maintains its unity with Christ as Christ's body.

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Chapter Thirteen

[Re]learning to Swim in Baptismal Waters: Contemporary Challenges in the Believers Church Tradition

Irma Fast Dueck

At its roots baptism has been the practice (sacrament, ordinance, rite) that initiates us into the Christian community; it is, as Pseudo-Dionysius claimed, "a 'divine birth' through which we are marked as members of the body of Christ."[1] From the early beginnings of Christianity in the New Testament, followers of Jesus are commanded to baptize new disciples, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The act simply involves a washing in the name of that very Trinity, yet in the history of Christianity it has been a defining act—how do you know if someone is Christian? Are they baptized? Baptism is one of the most primitive of all Christian acts. Of course, the history of the church is full of disputes around this simple practice of washing. What form should the washing take: pouring? sprinkling? full immersion? What is God doing in the baptism and what are

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[1] Pseudo-Dionysius, "The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy," in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works,* trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 201, as found in Kendra G. Hotz and Matthew T. Matthews, *Shaping the Christian Life* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 141.

we doing? Who is eligible for baptism: children of professing Christians? professing adults? those who have received catechism?

From the beginning it has also been baptism that has served to define the Believers Church over against the baseline of mainline denominational traditions, although clearly what distinguishes the Believers Church from mainline Protestantism is more than its understanding and practice of baptism; at least traditionally, baptism has been the door to Believers Church theology and, in particular, its ecclesiology.

The past couple of decades have presented serious challenges for those practicing baptism in the Believers Church tradition.[2] While the issue of an "open table" (or "open communion") has raised significant questions around the theology and practice of the Lord's Supper, the issue also raises just as important questions around baptism: in particular, why are there so many self-identified or "confessing" Christian people in our congregations who long to participate in the Lord's Supper but who are not baptized?[3] Clearly the

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[2] For a further examination of some of these challenges in relation to baptism and communion in the Believers Church tradition, see, for example, the Mennonite Brethren journal, *Direction*, which has dealt with issues of baptism and youth (31, no. 2 [Fall 2002]), and baptism and church membership (33, no. 1 [Spring 2004]), and the Mennonite Church journal, *Vision*, which has focussed on issues related to catechesis (4, no. 2 [Fall 2003]) and communion (2, no. 1 [Spring 2001]).

[3] Those who practice "open communion," or what might be called an "open table," do so in a variety of ways. For some, "an open table" simply means that those other than members of the particular church are invited to participate in communion; frequently, regardless of the denominational tradition from which they come, however, they may advise non-Christians not to receive the bread and wine. For others it means that everyone is welcome at the Lord's Table regardless of baptism, belief, faith commitments, moral integrity, and so on. Those who practice an "open table" in the Mennonite tradition frequently do so with some qualification, more specifically, inviting those who give some form of assent to the Christian faith. For example, "all those who confess Jesus as their Lord and Saviour are invited to partake" or "all who seek to live in relation to the Triune God and with one another." Participation in the Lord's Supper is not qualified by baptism and is, in many ways, an attempt to include the many in the pews who profess to be Christian but are not baptized. While the question of why *children* are not baptized is not difficult for those in the Anabaptist tradition to answer; the question is more difficult to reconcile with youth and adults, who identify themselves as Christian and yet choose to remain unbaptized.

answer to this question is multi-faceted, involving cultural, anthropological, and theological dimensions. And for those like I, who work and live alongside young adults, the question is a delicate one. As a professor teaching in a primarily undergraduate university, I am continually bewildered by the many students who have publically expressed commitments to the Christian faith and whose lives exhibit a deep desire to follow after Jesus through a life of discipleship, many of whom have been actively involved in Christian communities/churches, yet choose not be baptized.

This essay will explore this particular perplexity of unbaptized confessing Christians. It will begin with an examination of several obstacles within the Believers Church tradition which hinder robust discernment around baptism. It will further contemplate the practice of baptism in light of these challenges, and conclude with some modest proposals for developing a healthy baptismal ecology.

Taking the Plunge

More recently, significant attention has been given to current "post-Christendom" realities that impact Christian faith and practice. The literature emanating from the "emerging" and "missional" church has been important in drawing attention to the fact that a wave of change is breaking upon the shores of the church; a cultural shift is taking place that the church will need to navigate.[4] While much could be said about the challenges facing the contemporary church, I would like to draw attention to two issues that have had an impact on the practice of baptism, in particular the decision to be baptized.

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[4] See, for example, Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001); Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003); Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993); Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

First, we live in a time when *baptism as a rite of the church is at risk of losing its meaning*. Increasingly I have heard students (and others) question the value or need for the rite of baptism itself. Simply put, the argument goes something like this: "Why do I need to be baptized to be a Christian? I can participate in almost all aspects of the life of the church (including communion). Baptism doesn't make me more or less Christian. Why is it necessary?" The response is disheartening but perhaps not surprising. I call this simply a lack of ritual sensibility, a lack of sensibility that lies as much within the baby-boomer generation and previous generations, than with the current and upcoming generations. The reasons for this lack of ritual sensibility are various. There may be an implicit assumption that somehow the rites and rituals of the church belong to less mature stages of human development, destined for obsolescence by the triumph of reason. Or perhaps there is a suspicion of rituals and the rites of the church as somewhat pagan, magical, or idolatrous. Or, quite possibly, the way we engage in the ritual fails to capture the theological imagination of those observing the practice. No matter what the reason, many of those in the Believers Church tradition are left to sustain meaningful baptismal practices against this lack of ritual sensibility.

Much could be said about what happens to a group or culture (particularly if you consider the Christian church as its own particular/peculiar culture[5])

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[5] Clifford Geertz, in his classic book, *The Interpretation of Cultures,* conceives of all religion as having its own cultural system. Geertz defines religion as ". . . a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 90. Other theologians, such as Stanley Hauerwas and Rodney Clapp, have significantly developed this notion where the church as its own culture can be considered a way of life just as any culture has its own way of constructing its life together. The church has its own language, its own politics and way of living together, its own rituals, all of which are drawn out of a common history: the story of the Judeo-Christian people. Rodney Clapp writes, "The church is at once a community and a history—a history still unfolding and developing, embodying and passing along a story that provides the symbols through which its people gain their identity and their way of seeing the world. The church as a culture has its own

when it loses sight of its rituals and particularly the root symbols of its identity such as baptism—and we should be concerned that Christians are not interested in a central rite of passage into the Christian community/faith. At minimum we should be listening to anthropologists who have long emphasized the importance of rituals as central to the unity and sustenance of communal identity and experience.[6] Anthropologist Mary Douglas has argued convincingly that when members of religious groups distance themselves from their religious rituals through losing sight of ritual's origins and questioning their relevance, they create the conditions for the possible demise of the group. Douglas traces various stages of disenchantment from religious rituals where the final stage is one which represents the possibility of adaptation to the larger society.[7] Daniel Smith draws on the work of Douglas by focussing on the response of the minority Jewish community in the Babylonian exile when it is threatened by either destruction or assimilation by the dominant Babylonian culture. Smith argues that social groups in minority situations need to develop creative mechanisms to maintain their identity amidst the dominant culture. These mechanisms include the development of particular patterns of social organization and leadership, which help to mediate between the minority culture and the dominant culture in ways that the former does not have to sell out to the latter.

However, perhaps most significant for our purposes is Smith's argument that rituals are a significant mechanism for what he calls "boundary maintenance" (a difficult topic to discuss these days in light of the desire for greater inclusivity and hospitality in the church). Rituals and symbols demarcate the minority community by providing a clear vision of its identity, thereby distinguishing the community from the symbols and rituals of the

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language and grammar, in which words such as *love* and *service* are crucial and are used correctly only according to certain 'rules.' The church as a culture carries and sustains its own way of life." Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 89.

[6] Cf. Ronald Grimes, "Ritual Studies: A Comparative Review of Theodor Gaster and Victor Turner," *Religious Studies Review* 2 (October 1976): 13-25; Hans Mol, *Identity and the Sacred* (New York: Free Press, 1976); Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1977).

[7] See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979).

dominant culture.[8] Rituals are critical to the survival and identity of any culture, including the "Christian" culture of the church.

More importantly for Christians, the resistance to the rite of baptism as a ritual of the church has theological implications as well. Those in the Believers Church tradition have a history of deep suspicion of rituals, not just baptism, and carry with them significant theological anxieties around them. There has been the fear that rituals somehow undermine grace or the freedom of God; that rituals might quench or undermine the working of the Spirit; or that, in worship, rituals might challenge the priority of the Word when the Word should be the main event. At the heart of the distrust of rituals is a general mistrust of things and the material world, unfortunately resulting in an elevation of the spiritual over the material, a view that owes more to deist rationalism and Gnostic dualism than to Christianity.[9] These days there is also a fear that the rituals of the Christian tradition are "inhospitable" and not sufficiently inclusive, if not downright offensive to "outsiders," and so they need to be "watered down" or tempered, in order to be made more palatable.

The problem with having these anxieties and suspicions in our collective Believers Church psyche is that they undermine not only our understanding of the rituals but how we perform and enact them as well, leaving our young adults to discern not only the meaning of a ritual such as baptism, but to assess the meaningfulness of baptism based on a ritual done half-heartedly, if not poorly. Clearly *how* we engage in rituals such as baptism has the potential to either support and enlarge our baptismal theology or sabotage it.

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[8] Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer Stone Books, 1989). In this context Smith draws on the work of Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger,* where Douglas claims that the purity rituals in the Old Testament grow out of the fear of "pollution" from the dominant culture. These rituals play a significant functional role in the preservation and symbolic resistance of the minority group. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Praeger, 1966).

[9] Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 16. Vander Zee points to the work of T. F. Torrance who develops further the theological and philosophical relationship between Augustinian (not gnostic) dualism and modern Kantian rationalism. T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976).

The influence of evangelicalism on the Believers Church tradition has not helped in developing a healthier ritual sensibility. Symbols and rituals are seldom included in more evangelical styles of worship. Many new auditorium-styled church buildings with "seeker sensitive" services will rarely include the central symbols of the communion table and baptismal fonts, common in most mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions. Dan Kimball writes,

> Currently in our culture, when someone refers to a seeker-sensitive worship service or approach, they many times are referring to a methodology or style of ministry—a strategy of designing ministry to attract those who feel the church is irrelevant or dull. This often involves removing what could be considered religious stumbling blocks and displays of the spiritual (such as extended worship, religious symbols, extensive prayer times, liturgy, etc.) so that seekers can relate to the environment and be transformed by the message of Jesus.[10]

Yet, despite having gotten rid of these "idols" and distracting material/physical "things," we now find that a significant number of evangelicals are migrating to Anglican and more liturgical churches—churches which epitomize the "smells and bells" that they were taught to suspect and even ridicule. Those paying attention to current cultural shifts claim that this is not surprising. Tony Jones, a practical theologian at Princeton Theological Seminary, who has given significant attention to postmodern youth ministry, claims that contemporary youth (and adults) long for a God of mystery. He argues that postmoderns by definition are suspicious of cognitive learning and linear thinking and depend much more on experience in order to come to understanding and knowledge.[11]

Rituals, such as baptism, are participatory experiences that enable believers to move from concrete reality where the water is just water, to another reality, where the ritual of water carries the believer into a world hidden beyond the world of facts and rationality and beyond the linear understanding of time; believers are submerged in the reality of God, the new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, and immersed in the grace, love, and mystery of God. Movements such as the emerging church movement have brought with them a renewed interest in the rituals of the church—a kind of auditing of the

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[10] Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 25.

[11] Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry,* 20-24.

Christian tradition and a wondering whether some (sacramental?) babies have indeed been thrown out with the bathwater. The movement indicates a longing for the deep treasures of the Christian tradition including the biblical tradition, treasures that have at times been buried fairly deeply within.[12] At Canadian Mennonite University, the high student attendance at Ash Wednesday (which includes the imposition of ashes on foreheads) and footwashing services indicates some of this longing, causing one to wonder whether the issue is not really the fact that baptism is a ritualized action but that it is indeed a ritualized action done poorly. The current generation of Christians may not carry the same anxieties and ritual suspicion that previous generations have had.

A second, perhaps more common reason for not participating in baptism is an ecclesiological one. The identification of baptism with membership in the church creates significant barriers for many within the Believers Church tradition. My students have frequently told me that a primary reason for not wanting to be baptized is that they do not want to join the church. The reasons for not wanting to join the church vary but, strangely, it's not necessarily because they feel the church is unimportant (although for some this may be the case); on the contrary, it is a "high" ecclesiology (that is, a high view of the church and what it should be and how it should act) that may in fact prevent them from being baptized. Some do not want to be baptized because they feel they're not good enough. They have high expectations of what the church should be like and what it should mean to participate in the body of Christ, and they feel that, for whatever reason, they are not ready or able to meet those expectations. Others also reflect a "high" ecclesiology/ expectation for the church but have difficulty making the decision for baptism not because they feel they are not good enough but because the church is not good enough. These look critically at the church, highlighting its hypocrisy, pointing to its history of oppression, many times hardly reflecting the body of Christ and the ideals and values of the church of the New Testament. These

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[12] The "Alt Worship" movements in the United Kingdom and Australia have drawn extensively from ancient worship traditions though contextualizing practices to fit contemporary realities quite significantly. See, for example, Jonny Baker and Doug Gay with Jenny Brown, *Alternative Worship* (London, UK: SPCK, 2003); Mike Riddell, Mark Pierson, and Cathy Kirkpatrick, *The Prodigal Project* (London, UK: SPCK, 2000); http://www.alternative-worship.org.

suspicions of the church are exacerbated by the language of "church membership" which quickly rings synonymous with "church institution" which sounds like constitution which means bylaws, diminishing conceptions of the church as the body of Christ, a living organism. Either way, whether people refuse to be baptized because they are not good enough or the church is not good enough, it is a high view of the church that creates barriers for baptism.

Some churches have reacted to this resistance of the connection between baptism and church membership by separating the two in order to accommodate contemporary culture in hopes of making the decision for baptism easier. Unfortunately, the risk of separating them results in "watering down" baptism *and* the church where the practice of baptism no longer encapsulates the depth and fullness of its meaning and its biblical roots (to be explored in the next section).

Hendrikus Berkhof, in his book *Two Hundred Years of Theology*, criticizes this tendency to downplay Christian faith and practice in order to better "translate" it into contemporary culture. Berkhof uses the analogy of the church as a boat navigating the shallow waters of modernity. In order to negotiate the shallows of the modern/secular world and stay afloat, it has to throw out its cargo until the vessel is completely emptied.[13] Separating baptism from church empties both of the fullness of their meaning. Without the connection to the church, the act of baptism diminishes to an individualized action that focusses primarily on a person's decision of faith without marking that person's corresponding entry into the community of faith, Christ's body, a community committed to following in the way of Christ.

It should be clear that, in my view, the barriers to baptism that we find in congregations within the Believers Church tradition are not created by a Believers Church ecclesiology as such, but by inadequate conceptions of the church. The idea that somehow the church is and is to be perfect gets in the way of an integral grasp of a theology of church. It is true that in the Anabaptist tradition the notion of a church "without spot or wrinkle" has sometimes dominated an understanding of ecclesiology, but this notion has

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[13] As found in Tex Sample, *Powerful Persuasion* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 11.

been called into question of late.[14] And for that matter, the notion of a perfect church has been problematic since the beginning of the Anabaptist movement. It would be helpful to distinguish between the church as *believed* and the church as *experienced*, between the church in the midst of history and the church according to its eschatological vision.[15] Beyond that, I would, however, argue that the language of church membership, particularly in the current cultural context, exacerbates the barriers between church membership and baptismal expectations. The practice of church membership took on importance as a counter-cultural statement at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, when those in the Anabaptist movement pressed for a distinction between those expressly committed to following Christ and those who became part of the church by social and natural processes such as birth, infant baptism, state citizenship, or cultural expectations. Christendom has all but disappeared and, in our secularized society, most people who go to church go there because they want to be there and choose to be there despite significant social pressures encouraging them to be somewhere else. In contemporary culture the language of membership risks quickly getting reduced to a list: either a list of prerequisites needed in order to be able to enter into an institution, or a list of jobs that need to be filled by those who have taken on the responsibility of membership. Sadly, membership language has become synonymous with membership dues and membership statistics, and contributes to an overall sense of exclusivity.[16] While these types of reactions may be symptoms of a culture wary of all commitment, perhaps it is time to revisit the terminology and consider what other language might better convey the richness of baptism into the body of Christ, the church.

Like a Fish in Water: Contemplating the Water We're Swimming In

Let me try to articulate again something about those waters we are swimming in, a habitat so familiar that it sometimes becomes difficult to describe. Or, to

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[14] For a fuller examination of both the history and problems of "pure church" theology, see Karl Koop and Mary H. Schertz, eds., *Without Spot or Wrinkle* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2000).

[15] Cf. Fernando Enns, *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethic of Nonviolence* (Waterloo, ON: Pandora Press; Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2007), 1-3.

[16] See Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World.*

switch the metaphor: Is there something about a practice that we have done so long and so often that we need to break through the crust of familiarity to get to the bread that is there?

There are many ways to unpack baptismal theology. In liturgical theology it is not uncommon to interpret theology through a consideration of the symbolic significance of the rite itself. Much of what the church believes about baptism is what we all believe about water more generally. In order to help cultivate the ritual-symbolic imagination that was so much part of the early church, I will briefly examine the nature of baptismal theology through the significance of water. So what *does* water mean? Let me suggest at least three things

First, *water washes us*. Perhaps the most obvious symbolic meaning of baptism is washing. In the book of Acts, when Ananias is about to baptize Paul, he says, "And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name" (22:16). The association with baptism and the washing away of sins is seen throughout the New Testament in texts such as the baptism of John the Baptist (Mark 1:4) and, of course, the baptism at Pentecost where thousands of converts, upon hearing Peter's sermon, are told that they must be baptized in the name of Jesus, "so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38).

A significant part of this washing away of sins is the invitation to begin a new way of life. Anabaptists have long argued against baptism as a means of mediating salvation or grace. Zwingli, along with the early Anabaptists emphasized human over divine activity, although this was not to discount the divine activity that brought the believer to baptism and enabled a life of discipleship. Baptism has no magical power, but it does give the assurance of salvation. Baptism does not make a person magically different, but it is a personal commitment to walk and live in the grace which is ours, which is *given* to us, through Jesus Christ. Baptism means death to an old way of life and to resurrection with Christ into a new way, a resurrection *only possible through Christ*. Traditionally we have called this "regeneration" and it has been symbolized by taking off old clothes and putting on new ones (practiced literally in the patristic period).[17] We are made clean, renewed, enabled to live a "regenerated" life, through and because of Jesus Christ.

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[17] See Galations 3:27: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."

Unfortunately, the Believers Church's one-sided emphasis on the human-ness of the action of baptism (that is, baptism is a human action which *we* perform in order to help *us* remember God's actions in the past) has sometimes prevented us from grasping the profound, liberating, and enabling nature of the grace of God and forgiveness of Christ that the washing water of baptism so beautifully symbolizes and emulates. James White, a liturgical theologian, in his critique of what he calls the Protestant "Enlightenment" rational view of the sacraments, claims that the sacrament becomes reduced to the self. William Willimon, in describing White's position, writes:

> The Enlightenment view of the sacraments puts primary stress upon the necessity of our worthiness (stated all too often in terms of our *unworthiness*) to participate in the sacraments, of our cerebral understanding of what is going on with the sacraments and of certain a priori commitments and experiences we should have in order to bring sufficient faith to the sacraments. Primary responsibility in most Protestant sacramental worship is thus placed upon *me*—my worthiness, my understanding, my commitments, my experiences.[18]

When my students reflect on their baptisms, 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. Willimon says it more sharply:

> Baptism brings the liberating word of grace. Everybody talks about grace, but few of us seem to believe it. We are forever putting conditions and qualifications on the love of God: "*If* you rid yourself of your racism, *if* you vote Democratic, *if* you accept Jesus as your saviour, *if* . . ." Such conditional, achievement-oriented, self-made-men religion certainly doesn't need Jesus dying on the cross and rising

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[18] William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1979), 150.

from the dead to make itself plausible and reasonable in an achievement-oriented, you-get-what-you-deserve capitalistic culture.[19]

At minimum, the simple gesture of washing at baptism should remind us (even those of us who come from non-sacramental traditions) that it is indeed God who washes us. We do not wash ourselves. God washes us, makes us clean, regenerates us, renews us. We *receive* baptism, as a gift, just as we receive the grace of God and the salvation offered through Jesus Christ. In this way, perhaps a correction is needed to the strong emphasis on the human activity in baptism to recognizing that baptism ultimately belongs to God, something both our Scriptures and the church have claimed through the centuries. Anabaptist-Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder's definition of sacrament as "human actions through which God acts"[20] can assist the Believers Church in reclaiming the activity of God in the action of baptism, balancing God's action and human activity.

Second, *we depend on water*. The early Anabaptists were careful to make sure the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper were kept in proper perspective. Any Anabaptist theology of the sacraments and of worship was, for the most part, a reaction to the medieval church and the Magisterial Reformation. For these the definitive characteristic was God's initiative. However, the Anabaptists emphasized the human response of faith and love. Simply put, they were more interested in the nature of the human action within the sacrament than with the sacrament itself. They were cautious not to imbue the physical element of water, wine, and bread with any supernatural powers. Yet if water doesn't make a difference, then why baptize at all? *Because we need it*. The Anabaptists were ardent in their emphasis on Christians being saved by grace through faith and not by sacramental mediation. While the waters of baptism do not save us, they *do* locate us, reminding us who we are and what is required of us. The World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order summarizes the New Testament texts on baptism in one paragraph by saying:

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[19] Ibid.

[20] John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1997), 71ff.

> Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people. Baptism is participation in Christ and with his people. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-5); (Col 2:12); a washing away of sin (1 Cor 6:11); a new birth (John 3:5); an enlightment by Christ (Eph 5:14); a reclothing in Christ (Gal 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (1 Pet 3:20-21); an exodus from bondage (1 Cor 10:1-2); and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal 3:27-28; 1 Cor 12:13).[21]

Water brings us into the community of the church, into the body of Christ. The early Anabaptists argued that through water baptism the believer confessed one's sins before the congregation, testified to one's faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ, and was incorporated into the fellowship of the church, thereby accepting the responsibilities that went with membership in the church. Water baptism signified that the inner yieldedness to Christ (*Gelassenheit*) had taken place, that the believer was now committed to the body of Christ, the church, and that the church was committed to the believer. It also meant that the believer was willing to suffer for Christ and for his/her brother or sister.

In some, the act of baptism is a profoundly individualizing act. In being baptized you turn your life over to God; you yield your life to God. You set yourself on a particular path in which you must learn to love Jesus more than anything else, and choose to walk in that path of Jesus, no matter where it leads. Or, to put it another way, in baptism you are plunged into the waters of Christ in which you must learn to swim.

Yet, at the same time that baptism is an individualizing act, it also brings the believer into the community of the church, into the body of Christ. We join with each other in baptism, reflecting our deep dependence on God and the body of Christ which locates us and nourishes us. Baptism reminds us that we are not lone, homeless, parentless children, but in baptism we are told that we belong. Or, as Jesse Jackson used to shout at the beginning of worship in his inner city church services: "You were nobody. But now you are somebody!"[22] Just as Jesus was claimed at his baptism in the book of Mark—

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[21] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva, Switzerland: WCC Publications, 1992).

[22] As found in William Willimon, "A Liberating Word in Water."

"You are my Son, the Beloved . . ." Mark 1:11)—so the believer is claimed, signed, branded, and sealed at baptism. Or as Peter proclaimed in what must have been part of an early baptismal liturgy: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Pet 2:9-10).

We need the waters of baptism for they locate us and remind us of our God-given status. Baptism is not just a personal public testimony but it is a public testimony to our adoption as God's children and our ordination into Christ's ministry.[23] As such, baptism is indeed a gift we receive and as William Willimon claims,

> A gift implies dependency, and dependency raises questions about our pretensions of omnipotence. Baptism, at whatever age it takes place, reminds us that we are always helpless, dependent, needy infants so far as our relationship to God is concerned. We are always dependent upon God to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.[24]

In baptism we are given a community of disciples, a community that takes seriously its role in shaping and forming a life of discipleship. But this too is a gift. As Jonathan Wilson claims, "[baptism] teaches us that discipleship is not the achievement of human effort but the gift of new life in Christ. It teaches us that our new life is available only in the disciple community, to whom and through whom God gives the Holy Spirit."[25]

Third, *we drown in water*. John Howard Yoder was ardent in emphasizing that a predominant New Testament way of speaking about baptism and the primary way that Paul speaks about baptism is *death*: "You were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead . . . God made

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[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Jonathan Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006), 106-107.

you alive together with him. . . . He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (Col 2:12-15).

Paul was having great difficulty bringing together Jews and Gentiles and had developed a policy where he made Jews and Gentiles members of the same community, eating and worshipping together which, of course, brought criticism from both sides. It is in this context, Yoder argues, that Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "If anyone is united to Christ, *there is a new world*; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17 NEB). In Christ, there is a new creation going on—inherited social definitions are no longer basic. In baptism the believer "dies" to those definitions and rises to a new one. [26] Baptism is that entry into the new people, the new creation, the new world. It was for the early church the distinguishing mark of this people and it transcended previous definitions, such as those which were defining and separating Jews and Gentiles.

In a similar way Paul writes to the Galatians: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ, have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:27-28). A new creation, a new way of relating happens in Christ, and baptism marks the entrance into that new community, the new humanity. Baptism celebrates and effects the merging of the Jewish and Gentile stories. It marks a new kind of social relationship, a unity that overarches the differences and separations that were in between (Jew/Gentile, male/female, slave/free); a new reconciled community in Christ.

It is difficult to capture that sense of reconciliation in our individualized society. It is a profound and radical testimony to Christ and the nature of his body, the church. This is more than a melting pot where everyone's distinctives are melted together into one; more than that, the church equals the sum of all its unique individual parts. It's not enough to say that each of us is individually born again and baptized with the result that all the born-again individuals are collected into one place, commanded by God to love one

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[26] I am indebted to John Howard Yoder for the following profound social description of the meaning of baptism. He develops this baptismal theology/ecclesiology in a number of writings but most significantly in his book, *Body Politics: Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World*, 28-46.

another and plant churches, with no more reason for discrimination. Paul says more than that: he says that two peoples, two cultures, two histories (or is it ten or twenty different histories or a hundred?) have come to flow into one new humanity, a new creation. In baptism, all kinds of different people, with different stories and histories are inducted into the same people. Yoder argues that Paul understood the church to be this people, this new society.

Do our practices of baptism and church "membership" adequately communicate this profound reality? How do we "practice" ourselves into the fullness of our baptism into the reconciling body of Christ?

[Re]learning to Swim in Baptismal Waters: Developing an Ecology of Baptism

For some reason, many in the Believers Church tradition seem to think that baptism is something that happens in a single moment of time rather than considering baptism as a way of life or pattern of Christian formation; baptism is regarded by some as a ritual that amounts to a performance accomplished by the person doing the baptizing and the one being baptized. Yet, as the rich symbolism of the water of baptism reminds us, it is God our Saviour who is always washing us, regenerating us, initiating us, calling us into relationship—we are not our own saviours. We are continually invited to receive the overflowing grace of God into our life and the lives of our communities. We constantly need to be reminded that we are not our own, that we are deeply dependent upon God and body of Christ to remind us of who we are and to whom we belong—and we are invited to live into that relationship. In fact, we spend our lives learning to respond faithfully to the gift of baptismal identity in Christ. The dying of baptism continues to surround us as we learn what it means to be and live as Christ's body, a new creation. As the early church understood, baptism really does provide the church with a way of life. Learning to swim in the baptismal waters that God in grace offers us is a lifelong adventure.

Where do we go? We need to develop a better *baptismal ecology*[27] (environment) within our Believers Church communities, not just in the rite

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[27] I first encountered the term "baptismal ecology" in a workshop with Fred Edie and resonated quickly with it for it moved baptism from being a moment in time to include a whole host of practices which together reflect a fuller understanding of baptism. Edie

of baptism itself but throughout the life of the church. To put it sharply, our baptismal imagination is remarkably sluggish. As time has passed, some churches have come to baptize persons in a fairly perfunctory and undisciplined way. Other churches, perhaps in an attempt to be inclusive and not to offend unbaptized folks, have minimized baptismal rites. Rather than using tubs, rivers, or buckets full of water, they have resorted to thimbles full of water, hardly expressing the central symbols of washing, dependency, or death and new life (a few drips of water hardly convey the transformation embodied in the act of baptism!). Others have forgotten the full narrative that informs baptismal practice by either expecting nothing from candidates as they prepare for baptism or by not helping candidates to discern the nature of their calling and participation within the body of Christ.

Part of developing a baptismal ecology is through growing the vocabulary by which we talk about our life together in the church: Do we go to church or are we the church? Baptism reminds us that we don't *go* to church because *we are* the church.[28] Baptism boldly declares that, in Christ, we are a new community. We need to nurture the core values of what it means for us as the church, the body of Christ, to centre our identity on Christ; to see ourselves as the new creation that Christ calls into being, and to live into that story.

I envy churches, Catholic and Protestant, and those in the Believers Church tradition, who continually have baptismal fonts present in every service of worship, an ongoing reminder of baptismal commitments and callings; traditions which talk openly about "living into your baptism." Congregations in the Believers Church tradition do well to place a permanent symbolic reminder of the baptismal commitment in their sanctuaries. We need robust practices of baptism and a rich ecology (environment) of baptism, including supporting practices to develop our baptismal imagination. We need to talk about our baptisms, not just how and why we decided to be

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develops this understanding of an "ecology" of baptism particularly in relation to practices of youth ministry and Christian formation. Fred P. Edie, *Book, Bath, Table and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007).

[28] Dan Kimball highlights the fact that in the New Testament there is not a single verse that says Christians *went* to church. Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 91.

baptized but about how God led us to our baptism and continues to lead us into life in the body of Christ.

Part VI

RECENT TRENDS

Chapter Fourteen

Discerning the Spirit in the Ferment of Evangelical Ecclesiologies

Jonathan R. Wilson

I n this essay I will offer some insight into what the Believers Church movement might gain from the current ferment in evangelical ecclesiologies. Three preliminary comments will lead us into my assignment proper.

First, I have long been a believer in the Believers Church movement. My preparation for ordination in the Baptist Union of Western Canada (now Canadian Baptists of Western Canada) in the late 1970s and early 1980s was one of the most significant encounters that I had. For my Baptist identity course, I wrote an essay entitled, "The Baptist Union of Western Canada: Believers Church movement or Evangelical Tradition?" in which I argued that the Believers Church movement and its conception of the gospel provided a more fitting description and guide for the Baptist Union of Western Canada than did the evangelical movement. This is because the Believers Church movement views the gospel not as a resource for living in this age more effectively, more happily, with more protection for the dangers of the age or more assurance of a future escape from this age; rather, the Believers Church movement understands that the gospel is the irruption, the breaking into this age, of a new reality, the *basileia tou Theou*—that can make life more

dangerous, more difficult, in this age, but is, in the end, the way, the truth, and the life. The evangelical tradition is quite ambivalent about this while the Believers Church movement appears to better reflect the reality of the gospel that sees the church as the people of God called into a new reality that necessarily demarcates a line between the church and the world.

Secondly, I have had to overcome my initial skepticism about the notion of an "evangelical ecclesiology." After all, evangelicalism is about as far from having a real sense of being church-centred as any movement can be. Much of its history is rooted in so-called "parachurch" organizations. (As if anything Christian could be outside or alongside the church!) Moreover, I know of no list of "evangelical essentials" or markers or characteristics that give prominence to the church. Indeed, many do not acknowledge the church at all. When we do look to "church" in the evangelical movement, we find such a profusion of ecclesiastical traditions that it would seem impossible to find a way to articulate one evangelical ecclesiology.

But I have overcome my skepticism with the realization that there is indeed ferment in evangelical ecclesiologies, perhaps precisely because of the characteristics that I have just identified. Since evangelicalism has no settled ecclesiological tradition, it is constantly in ferment. The pot boils and new substances bubble to the surface that may indeed have something to contribute to Believers Churches.

My final preliminary comment is that in this essay I have fudged the evangelical parameters somewhat. If evangelicalism is an essentially contested concept, as I think it is, then any claim to be doing something with "evangelicalism" may be contested. Indeed, not everything in this presentation is clearly "evangelical" on grounds that are internal to the movements that I will discuss. Nevertheless, I judge these to be the most fruitful for our guidance and so I plead for an indulgence and take it as granted.

The five movements that I have chosen to treat are Ancient-Future, the Ekklesia Project, Emerging, Missional, and New Monasticism. In what follows, I suggest one positive contribution from each of these movements for the Believers Church and one warning as I seek to discern the Spirit in the midst of evangelical ecclesiologies today.

Ancient-Future Christianity

Ancient-Future Christianity is the brainchild and the legacy of the late Robert E. Webber. He has advanced this call to the church through a series of books,

the Institute for Christian Worship, along with a number of strategic initiatives. This work continues through the Robert E. Webber Center for an Ancient Evangelical Future. Webber's legacy shows many signs of vitality for years to come.[1]

The contribution of Ancient-Future Christianity is its interest in recovering tradition for today—a return to creeds, catechesis, ancient forms of worship, the liturgical year, and other "ancient" marks of Christianity. The recovery of these ancient elements is the future of Christianity. This recovery of tradition is a movement of the Spirit that is deepened by an understanding of tradition as a socially-embodied argument, extended in time, about the *telos* for humankind, and indeed for all creation.[2] Thus, the church is seen as the living tradition of the gospel that seeks to discover how the gospel is at work today.

In addition to recovering a lively sense of tradition, Ancient-Future Christianity also reconceives the nature of time, not in terms of chronology, but in terms of liturgy. In saying that the ancient traditions are a part of the church's future, our contemporary conception of time as chronological time is challenged. Time is the reality in which the people of God live. This reality of time is most fully realized in our celebration of and participation in the "church year." Instead of our calendars marking July 1 or July 4, Victoria Day, Labour Day, Mother's Day, and so on, Christians are called to live by the calendar of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, and Proper.

This contribution from Ancient-Future Christianity is an important step but, for the Believers Church movement that takes discipleship seriously, Christians must go beyond liturgical time to embrace also the call to live in a

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[1] Robert Webber died on April 27, 2007. He had been a professor at Wheaton College and Northern Baptist Seminary. He developed his proposal for Ancient-Future Christianity in numerous books. The work culminated in a Call for an Ancient Evangelical Future (2006) and the establishment of the Webber Center. The Center is a ministry of Northern Baptist Seminary; its director is David Neff, who also serves as editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*. The Centre's website is found at http://www.aefcenter.org.

[2] See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222. I am theologizing—or baptizing—MacIntyre's concept.

new age that embraces God's salvific work—a new time in which God is always active; where God restores to us "the years that the . . . locust has eaten (Joel 2:25). For the Believers Church movement, this understanding of time demarcates one of the lines between this age and the new age of the Spirit.

This age of the Spirit is precisely identified by Peter, when he testifies in Acts 2: "this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel." Of course, evangelicals within the Ancient-Future movement also recognize this new age of salvation and of the Spirit, but I think that the Believers Church movement may be better situated to incarnate this new era because of its emphasis on the church as the essential community of the redeemed.

As I read and observe Ancient-Future Christianity, it seems to me that this view of soteriology is appended to the life of the church rather than being a part of its very essence. Put differently, soteriological time is a layer added to the life of the church rather than a leaven that enlivens the whole loaf. So, while Ancient-Future Christianity calls us to reconceive time soteriologically, it may be the Believers Church movement that has the ecclesiology to realize it more fully.

Ekklesia Project

The Ekklesia Project and its adherents could be described as "the friends of Stanley Hauerwas." It began with a group of Hauerwas students and hangers-on who realized that if they were truly committed to the things that Hauerwas had been teaching, then it should have some actual purchase in the life of the church. So they gathered in Chicago in July of 2001—sixteen of them. Today the group is much larger; their work now includes a lively publishing, consulting, blogging, and networking agenda.

The Ekklesia Project contributes a powerful account of practices to the task of bringing the church—including the Believers Church movement—more fully into submission to the Spirit. This emphasis on practices has deep roots in Hauerwas' theological project. In his forthcoming memoirs, Hauerwas notes that the teacher at Yale who had the greatest impact on him was Julian Hartt.[3] Hauerwas writes that from reflecting on Hartt's teaching he became convinced that his calling was to attend to "the practical force of

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[3] Stanley Hauerwas read this section of his memoirs in draft to me when I recently visited him. I am quoting from memory. The memoirs are to be published by Brazos, but have not yet been titled.

theological convictions."[4] That task of displaying the practical force of Christian convictions has pervaded Hauerwas' work and has taken on increasingly thicker dimensions as he has assimilated influences from John Howard Yoder, Alasdair MacIntyre, Anthony Trollope, Karl Barth, social theorists, and many others.

The commitment to displaying the practical force of Christian convictions has found its most significant expression in an early account of the church as "community of character" that now finds a more robust call in the Ekklesia Project. There, the practices of the church call the church beyond activity to participation in the *telos* of the gospel that depends upon a social network in which Christians are transformed and always moving into a fuller under-standing of and participation in the gospel. Practice is not achievement; it is participation in an already, ongoing reality—salvation by grace. But it also calls for our action—we participate. By our doing so, grace does its work. This conception of practice also locates our participation in a social network—the people of God; the disciple community; for us, the believers church. This social network is integral to the *telos* of the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ is that God brings into being a new humanity. This new humanity is not incidental to the gospel or its consequence; it is essential to the *telos* of the gospel.

The Ekklesia Project is a wonderful broad, rich, lively gathering of ecclesiastical traditions from the Church of Christ to Roman Catholics. Yet for this very reason, ironically, the Ekklesia Project may be ecclesiologically challenged in that participants are divided by their varying denominational affiliations that have their roots in Christendom.

For the Believers Church movement, this example of the ecclesiological division of the Ekklesia Project members, in spite of so much in common, could serve as a prod to begin to develop a mature, well-articulated Believers Church ecclesiology that moves the Christian community beyond the denominationalism of Christendom.

The Believers Churches are also challenged by denominationalism but perhaps they are best positioned to allow for denominations without falling into the trap of denominationalism that depends on the settlements of

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[4] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), xx.

Christendom. It seems to me that the Believers Church movement is precisely the place to begin to work this out. Here is a gathering that has every possibility of developing a post-denominational, post-Christendom ecclesiology. In a sense there are no longer "established" churches; instead, churches, especially in Canada, are now mission outposts in the midst of a needy world that has long written off the church. In this new context there is an opportunity for Believers Churches to show the way in which the church ought to be a meaningful presence in the world under the direction of the Spirit's guidance.

Emerging Church

The Emerging Church is most closely identified with Brian McLaren. But if one moves beyond some general shared characteristics, one has to be careful to specify the reference because the term has been so widely adopted and the movement is so loosely networked that "emerging" has been claimed by the "generous orthodoxy" of McLaren and the very traditional Reformed theology of Mark Driscoll; by the very open and egalitarian practices of Solomon's Porch and the strictly hierarchical Mars Hill Church in Seattle (not to be confused with the egalitarian Marsill Graduate School in Seattle).[5]

The one characteristic that marks all Emerging Churches which also seems to me to be a word from the Spirit to the Believers Church movement is the characteristic practice of improvisation.[6] Here, the practice of the Emerging Churches reflects their evangelical heritage. Improvisation is, perhaps, the quintessential mark of the evangelical ecclesiology. Because evangelicalism is a transdenominational phenomenon, those churches that identify themselves in practice by the term evangelical more than any other term, tend to sit quite loosely on ecclesiology. As a result, they are freer to "play off the page." Thus,

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[5] See the very helpful, short taxonomy by Scott McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/-11.35.html. See also Collin Hansen, "Young, Restless, and Reformed," http://www.christianity-today.com/ct/2006/september/42.32.html.

[6] I have written about this in an essay, "Practicing Church: Evangelical Ecclesiologies at the End of Modernity (Francis Schaeffer, Charles Colson, Rick Warren, Brian McLaren)," in Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 143-154.

ecclesiological improvisations are reflected in Methodism, and the consequences of pietist revivals in the Evangelical Covenant, the Evangelical Free, Salvation Army, Nazarene, Vineyard, the "low-church" Anglicans, and others. Sometimes these improvisations become whole new genres of church, like bebop, scat, blues, Dixieland, ragtime, and more. Indeed, I would argue that the so-called parachurch is another evangelical improvisation on church. Believers Churches can learn from the Emerging Church movement that the practice of improvisation is a way in which the Spirit may be at work orienting the church toward the future.

The responsibility of calling people to faith and making disciples is a dynamic, contextually dependent practice. Believers Churches have sometimes become so enclosed that they have lost the vision and practice of doing this well. The Emerging Church may help us recover this teleology and, by the grace of the Spirit, call us to renewed life through the freedom of improvisation. For the Believers Church movement this improvisation may include mining the resources of the past—playing with themes from the past and reconfiguring familiar activities, structures, and programs. This reconfiguring is not for the purpose of newness, of shaking things up, or of being on the cutting edge. Rather, improvisation is following the lead of the Spirit and being open to what God has in store for the church.

The great weakness of the Emerging Church movement is that its impulse to improvise is rooted less in its commitment to the music—the gospel—than in its sensitivity to an audience. That is, its forays into improvisation are not always guided by finding neglected resources in our heritage or aspects of the gospel that can be combined or related in new ways. Rather, some of the so-called improvisation is driven by the restlessness and hostility of the audience. There are elements of where the primary improvisational direction is "what does the audience want" or "what will bring them in" rather than "what are some possibilities of being faithful to the gospel in new ways?"

In another place I have described this impulse in the Emerging Church to be submissive to the "audience" as "the fear of irrelevance."[7] The Believers Church movement should take heed of this temptation. The fear of irrelevance has not historically been a temptation for the Believers Church movement, but it could provide a great temptation to Believers Churches who

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[7] Wilson, "Practicing Church," 152.

feel that they have become irrelevant to a culture that is largely driven by patterns and habits of consumption. In reaction to this perception of increasing cultural irrelevance, some Believers Churches could very easily—and may already have—capitulated to the god named "Relevant."

To resist this temptation, the creativity toward which we are called by improvisation must be rooted in "the fear of the Lord." We seek to discover the newness of the gospel and our presentation of it because God is always at work in the very particular places and times of our lives. For the Believers Church movement, this means knowing that the gospel is not a message from the past that we have to empower and make relevant to our contemporaries. Rather, the gospel is the continuing power of God active in the world for the redemption of creation. This present activity is what we participate in by faith.

Missional Church

The missional church label has, like the Emerging Church, become so widespread that one needs to be quite specific about one's use. I use it here to refer to the work of Lesslie Newbigin and the movement that arose from his work, especially the Gospel and Our Culture Network.[8] When Newbigin, an Englishman, returned to Great Britain after a lifetime of service in India, he discovered a mission field that the church did not recognize as such. So Newbigin went to work and taught us in the West to see our own home culture as missionaries see the cultures to which they are sent. This is the great lesson of the missional church: to see our own culture through missionary eyes.

Newbigin has pioneered the way forward with a critique of Western culture that relates it immediately and consistently to the gospel. This missionary critique of culture is a lesson to be learned from apprenticing ourselves to him and to the best work that has followed in his trajectory. To reinforce this claim, let me indulge in anecdotage. A few years ago, Stanley Hauerwas told me that he had mostly quit thinking of himself as an ethicist

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[8] See J. Todd Billings, "What Makes a Church Missional?" http://www.christianity-today.com/ct/2008/march/16.56.html. See also the letter to the editor by Wilbert Shenk in which he notes that John Howard Yoder wrote about the missional church for many years before the contributions of Newbigin and the Gospel and Our Culture Network. "Letters to the editor," *Christianity Today* (April 2008).

and now thought of himself as an evangelist. I think that this is exactly right, that is, understanding his work as an attempt to display the practical force of Christian convictions. The aim of such work is not to improve the world or gain a good reputation for Christians or accumulate political and social capital for the church. No, the purpose of such work is to call the church to participate in and witness to the gospel so that others may believe.

So the work of the Spirit in the missional church is to recover for the church in the West the reality that we are in a missionary relationship with our own culture. This means that we must approach our culture as the place in which God is working redemption while at the same time also regarding our culture as participant in the fallenness of human creations such as cultures and civilizations and thus also an impediment, even an enemy of God's redemption.

At this point, the missional church also becomes a corrective to the Emerging Church in that it teaches it to be more critical. In much of the Emerging Church, criticism seems to be directed toward the ways that the church in previous generations was insufficiently guarded in its relationship to modern culture. This is often accompanied, ironically, by a benign and even celebratory view of postmodern culture. The way this is done is by seeing postmodernity as the means by which the church has been set free from its cultural captivity to modernity. So modernity is bad, postmodernity is good. The missional church turns this back on the Emerging Church by teaching us to approach all cultures as the place and time—the object and occasion, let us say—of God's redemptive work. For the Emerging Church, postmodernity is typically the occasion of God's redemptive work but it is seldom the object.

From the missional church, then, the Believers Church movement needs to learn to view all cultures missionally—that is, through missionary eyes. Let me make this really pointed. The Believers Church movement needs to see even its own cultures through missionary eyes. There are certainly places where some tradition within the Believers Church movement has been so dominant that it has created its own culture. Someone has remarked that Southern Baptists have had the misfortune of being the only free church to create its own culture—and then mistake it for the kingdom of God. That is true on a large scale. But on a smaller scale, some parts of the Believers Church movement may have suffered the same misfortune. From the missional church, can some of the Believers Church movement learn to think missionally about the cultures that we have created?

At the same time that the missional church movement has much to teach Believers Churches about a missionary approach to culture, it also suffers from some limitations. The most striking limitation is that, although the work of Newbigin has generated a powerful account of the gospel in relation to Western culture in its modern expression, the movement has not been able to give an account of the gospel in relation to postmodern Western culture related to questions of power, the erasure of the human, empire and globalization, technology, and desire. The missional church, partly because it has not been able to break out of a white, male, Reformed, modern paradigm, has not developed a significant account of "foolishness to Nietzsche: the gospel and postmodern culture."

In this situation, the Believers Church movement has an opportunity and may be in a position to move more easily into a missionary understanding that would respond to the cynicism of the will-to-power by practicing suffering love. It could bear witness through the life of the disciple community where empire and globalization are resisted.

New Monasticism

New Monasticism arises from the last chapter of my little book, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's* After Virtue.[9] At the end of *After Virtue*, MacIntyre asserts that in our present circumstances in Western culture, we are waiting "not for Godot, but for a doubtless very different St. Benedict." When I wrote my little book, I realized that in this cryptic final sentence, MacIntyre was calling for a new monasticism. In June 2004, a gathering of "new monastics" in Durham, North Carolina, produced the following statement that continues to guide the movement:

> There are twelve marks of a New Monasticism. Moved by God's Spirit in this time called America to assemble at St. Johns Baptist Church in Durham, NC, we wish to acknowledge a movement of radical rebirth, grounded in God's love and drawing on the rich tradition of Christian practices that have long formed disciples in the simple Way of Christ. This contemporary school for conversion

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[9] Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's* After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007; 1st ed., Trinity Press, 1999).

which we have called a "new monasticism," is producing a grassroots ecumenism and a prophetic witness within the North American church which is diverse in form, but characterized by the following marks:

1) Humble submission to Christ's body, the church.
2) Relocation to the abandoned places of Empire.
3) Geographical proximity to community members who share a common rule of life.
4) Hospitality to the stranger.
5) Nurturing common life among members of an intentional community.
6) Sharing economic resources with fellow community members and the needy among us.
7) Peacemaking in the midst of violence and conflict resolution within communities along the lines of Matthew 18.
8) Lament for racial divisions within the church and our communities combined with the active pursuit of a just reconciliation.
9) Care for the plot of God's earth given to us along with support of our local economies.
10) Support for celibate singles alongside monogamous married couples and their children.
11) Intentional formation in the way of Christ and the rule of the community along the lines of the old novitiate.
12) Commitment to the disciplined life including common prayer, public reading of Scripture, common meals, regular teaching, confession and guidance, Eucharist, spiritual friendship, work, Sabbath keeping, and celebration.

May God give us grace by the power of the Holy Spirit to discern rules for living that will help us embody these marks in our local contexts as signs of Christ's kingdom for the sake of God's world.[10]

The genesis of this statement in a communal process of discernment and the nature of it provide the new monastics with a strong structure and direction for unity in the midst of diversity. This is the lesson for the Believers Church movement that I first discerned among the new monastics. But as I thought more and attended to the Spirit, I was drawn to an old word that can be too familiar: radical. It seems to me that the new monastic movement is

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[10] This statement may be found in numerous places, among them The Rutba House, eds., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005) and http://www.newmonasticism.org.

one of those movements of the Spirit that once again renews for the church the radical claims of the gospel.

In an article in *Christianity Today* on the new monastics, this contemporary movement was compared to the Christian communes and Jesus people of the 1960s and 1970s.[11] Most of those movements have disappeared and few had much impact. This judgment may be debatable, but what is even clearer is that the new monastics are very different from these earlier movements. If you examine the twelve marks of New Monasticism, you will see a very different sensibility from those communes that have disappeared and a sensibility closer to those that have endured, such as Reba Place and JPUSA. For the earlier communes, their "radical" edge was a radical rejection of society and the church. For New Monasticism their radical edge is a radical embrace of the gospel, a submission to the church, and an engagement with society at its neediest points, whether it is the urban wasteland of Camden, New Jersey, a suburb of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, a farm in eastern North Carolina, or the eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia.

For the Believers Church movement, this renewal of a vision for the radical claims of the gospel can serve as a reminder that the gospel is not a strategy or program for living in this age with greater contentment, skill, or success. Rather, it is the call to live according to God's reality as it has come to us in Israel's Messiah, Jesus. The New Monasticism movement may offer Believers Churches one way to renew their own commitment to the root (radical) claims of the gospel in a culture that once regarded itself as Christian but now considers itself to have outgrown that stage. With a strong basis for unity in diversity the New Monasticism takes form in wildly different communities with quite different ways of "humble submission to Christ's body, the church." This variety may lead into a whole range of ways of relating New Monasticism communities to the church—from something like pietist conventicles, to Luther's quickly abandoned *ecclesiola* in *ecclesia*, to communities that may separate entirely from any relation to Christ's body. For the Believers Church movement, a radical renewal of faithfulness to the gospel presents a similar challenge. Can congregations and what is left of our denominations be moved intact to this radical renewal? Granted that there are many things that are beyond our wisdom, are there ways that we can be wise

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[11] *Christianity Today* (September 2005): 39-46.

in embracing and proclaiming this radical call to faithfulness?

As the New Monastic movement develops in a myriad of ways, the great challenge will be to resist becoming marginal to the life of the church. Will the New Monasticism simply become an eccentric and puzzling oddity or will it permeate the life of the church with health and faithfulness? Accusations that it is sectarian, that it seeks to withdraw from the culture and the church, completely misconstrue the thinking behind the movement and causes one to wonder if the critics have read more than the "label."[12] Yet sectarianism may be an ongoing challenge for New Monasticism.

As the Believers Church movement hears and sees once again the radical life of the gospel proclaimed in New Monasticism, the Believers Church movement has an opportunity to recommit to this gospel on a larger scale, to embrace this life at the congregational, associational, and network levels. The connection between the Believers Church movement and New Monasticism is the closest and most natural of the five movements that I have presented here.[13] This embrace, however, would not mean a smooth and untroubled church life. Indeed, it would more likely create a liveliness that would often cause discomfort, struggle, and suffering. It would be, in short, a life of discipleship to the one who suffered and died, and rose again—and who lives among us today. May these movements of the Spirit bring the church into life that does indeed bear fruit and gifts for the glory of God and the hope of the world.

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[12] D. A. Carson is a particularly egregious misreader of "new monasticism." See his *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 205. I reply to Carson at length throughout the second edition of *Living Faithfully*.

[13] One of the most thorough considerations of the relationship historically may be found in Kenneth Ronald Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study in Intellectual Origins,* Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History 16 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1974).

Chapter Fifteen

How Anabaptist Theology and the Emergent Church Address the Problem of Individualism in the Believers Church

Gareth Brandt

Individualism "lies at the very core of [North] American culture. We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual," writes Robert Bellah.[1] It is clear to historians that this emphasis on the individual has brought both blessings and curses to North American Christianity.[2]

Believers Churches are by their very nature wrapped up in this issue. The very idea of believers baptism presumes the importance of an individual making the decision to be baptized upon confession of faith rather than being baptized merely because one was born into a particular community. The emphasis on the dignity of the individual and the rights of individuals to make decisions about their faith commitments, regardless of their political citizenship, is an important contribution of the Believers Church in the

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[1] Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 142.

[2] This was evident in my recent reading of Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmans, 1992) and is stated specifically in his introduction, 4-5.

modern era. It encourages a personal and vibrant faith, but it also leaves Believers Churches susceptible to the problem of individualism.

When churches are something we shop for based on personal need, when salvation becomes a product that is marketed and sold, there is a theological problem. The problem is not so much with particular programs and all the good that they may have accomplished for individuals and churches involved, but with the underlying individualistic theology and the ecclesiology of consumerism. A song I learned as a teenager in the 1970s illustrates this theology.

> Me and Jesus we got our own thing going
> We don't need anybody to tell us what it's all about

It is not what churches and well-meaning evangelists intend, but when they peddle a privatized "personal relationship with God" that can be achieved by participating in some sort of pre-packaged ritual, the end result is rampant individualism. It is hard for churches to think communally when they are made up of people who are "won to Christ" based on their own self-interest in reaching their "pie in the sky by and by when they die."[3] Individualism cheapens the way of Jesus and it becomes just another option on the store shelves of religion.

Tony Jones articulates some of the negative results of individualism.

> The evidence is in: millions of individuals "inviting Jesus Christ into their hearts as their personal Lord and Savior" at megachurches and Billy Graham crusades has done little to stem the moral dissolution of America. And ironically it's this very individualism engendered by evangelicalism that has resulted in this predicament. The primary emphasis of evangelicalism is the conversion of the individual, but that emphasis has also handicapped evangelicals in their attempts to tackle systemic issues like racism and poverty and thus has left them open to manipulation by political forces. . . . The individualism of the modern era is a blight that eventually led to holocausts and pogroms.[4]

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[3] See further articulation in Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 107.

[4] Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 13, 166.

This focus on individualism in culture leaves a profound disconnectedness among the emerging generation. They are left with a deep hole instead of a sense of "rootedness" and belonging in a meaningful community. The lyrics of one of the top rock hits of 2003 illustrate this desire:

> I want to heal
> I want to feel
> Like I'm close to something real
> I want to find something I've wanted all along
> Somewhere I belong[5]

I believe that Anabaptist theology and the Emergent[6] Church speak a word of hope to this cry.

Strange Bedfellows Respond

Anabaptism and the Emergent Church: What do these two church movements five hundred years apart have in common? I suppose we could say Brian McLaren first recognized a commonality when he mentioned the Anabaptist movement in his book on emergent theology,[7] but that small chapter has been extrapolated to some unique developments. There is now even a website devoted to it![8] Its former name, "submergent," implied that the

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[5] Chester Bennington and Mike Shinoda, "Somewhere I Belong," *Meteora* (Linkin Park: Warner Brothers, 2003).

[6] I am referring to a distinguishable and recognizable movement, not to new churches in general, thus I use "Emergent Church" rather than "emerging churches." "Emergent Village" refers to a specific organization and "emerging churches" refers more generally to new churches, so for differentiation and for consistency I will primarily, but not exclusively, be using "emergent church" where grammatically appropriate. Some authors use the terms interchangeably; still others make a more technical differentiation between the terms "emergent" and "emerging" but I do not see that as particularly significant for our study. See Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 12; Kester Brewin, *Signs of Emergence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 34-35; and Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, xvii-xx, for a further discussion of terminology.

[7] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, chap. 13.

[8] See http://www.commonroot.ning.com. Churches and individuals who are listed on the site identify themselves with both movements.

essence of the two movements is to be subversive to the prevailing empire. They both yearn for a faith that is counter-cultural and reflects the prophetic impulse of Jesus and the early church. Maybe the best way to introduce this strange union is to tell the story of two churches that have or are developing connections to both movements: neXus and soulspace.

neXus was first conceived as a creative evening service that "did church differently" within the confines of a large evangelical Believers Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.[9] It was born as an independent church in the spring of 2004 because neXus leaders realized that their emerging vision of church which they were moving toward was incompatible with the framework of the existing evangelical church. The church began identifying with the emergent movement after attending an Emergent conference in San Diego.[10] After a few years, neXus began a tangible search for a place to belong and contribute and were drawn to a particular Mennonite denomination because of the radical nature of the Anabaptist movement from which it came. neXus is actively exploring Anabaptist theology at their gatherings and are enthused about the possible insights this 500-year-old radical church movement has for their own church in the postmodern world of the twenty-first century.

Stratford, Ontario, is home to soulspace, a church that also began in 2004. soulspace has connections with other emergent congregations in North America such as Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis. soulspace is a church "where the arts flourish and worship is an experience through which we are connected to and responsive to God."[11] Gatherings at soulspace are multi-

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[9] This description of the neXus church is based on conversations with Quentin Steen and the unpublished manuscript by Dave Phillips, Randall "Peg" Peters and Quentin Steen, *Colours of God: Toward an Emerging Theology* (Abbotsford, BC, 2008).

[10] The core values of neXus revolve around their four "colours" which represent the dynamics of the faith and life of the church. They use the metaphor of colour because they see faith more like creating art than replicating a science experiment. Blue represents the foundational "Gospel faith" that is the good news of Jesus Christ and his unconditional love and grace. Green is for an integrated view of a healthy and holistic lifestyle that includes mind, body, emotions, and the environment. Red is the colour of authentic community that emphasizes social ethics rather than personal morality. Finally, yellow represents engagement with postmodern popular culture. See http://www.nexuschurch.com.

[11] See http://www.soulspacestratford.com.

voiced and very informal with the feel of a living room, a coffee house, or an art gallery.[12] Although soulspace is loosely connected to a Mennonite denomination through its "missions council," they do not have church membership but maintain an open welcome for all who come to participate fully in the gatherings. The founding leader is a former pastor in a Mennonite church and recently completed a graduate degree in theology and spirituality at an Anabaptist school. While they are excited about their place in the global Anabaptist family and the relevant challenges of an Anabaptist theology, they often feel that the Mennonite denomination has lost some of the radical, communal edge of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement.

One Emergent Church comes out of the vision of a contemporary leader schooled in Anabaptist theology. Another Emergent Church looks to the Anabaptist theological tradition for connection and inspiration. New churches are identifying with both of these movements and networking together under the banner of "common root." There are obviously personal and local circumstances involved in any story, but I believe that these churches represent a unique, even if sometimes uncomfortable and unexplored, connection. The connection between the Emergent Church and the Anabaptist movement is radical and dynamic and I believe engages and addresses the problem of individualism in North American Believers Churches.

Anabaptist Theology

What theology was at the core of the Anabaptist movement? How does this theology speak to the dilemma of our time? First of all we must recognize that sixteenth-century Anabaptism was a "spontaneous, decentralized, grassroots, underground movement of spiritual renewal and biblical reform, carried out by "common people" of no theological expertise."[13] It had no influential founder and its first generation of leaders was so mercilessly persecuted that a unified theological core was elusive, if not contradictory, to the movement itself. The theory of Anabaptist polygenesis not only points to the multiplicity

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[12] The description of soulspace is based on conversations with Anne Campion and her unpublished paper entitled, "Living Creed, Living Text" (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Grebel University College, 2007).

[13] C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 16.

of origins but also to the variety of early Anabaptist convictions.[14] However, in retrospect we can see some common theological themes developing out of this radical movement.

Walter Klaassen has already pointed out that Anabaptism was neither Catholic nor Protestant, but was instead more like a third alternative coming out of the sixteenth century.[15] We could just as accurately say that it was both Catholic *and* Protestant in its origins and character. Traditionally, some Mennonite historians have seen the Anabaptist movement as the logical extension of or radical conclusion to evangelical Protestantism. More recently, the connection to medieval mysticism and monasticism has been rediscovered, especially among the Anabaptists of southern Germany, Austria, and Moravia. Both the Dutch and the Swiss strains of Anabaptism have left numerical and institutional legacies far beyond that of the aforementioned. But in the present postmodern milieu there has been a resurgence of interest in this third geographical brand of Anabaptism; and for good reason. Its theological legacy speaks to the fragmented postmodern condition caused by the individualism of modernism.

Harold S. Bender's now famous "Anabaptist Vision" address at the American Academy of Religion in 1943 was the first modern attempt to synthesize and summarize the theological ideals of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.[16] Despite critiques and later improvements in Anabaptist historiography, it has stood the test of time as numerous others have come to similar conclusions when attempting their own summary of the theological themes that have developed out of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.[17] More

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[14] James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (April 1975): 83-121.

[15] Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant,* 3rd ed. (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001).

[16] The transcript of the address can be found in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 29-54. This volume is an example of both the reverence and critique that the speech has engendered.

[17] The most notable recent examples are J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2005), chap. 5; and Ted Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), chap. 1.

recent research and writing will be used along with sixteenth-century writings when restating his three themes. Most significantly for our purposes here, this three-fold theological summary can be seen as a prophetic response to the problem of individualism in the Believers Church today.[18]

The Anabaptist Vision saw discipleship, or following the way of Jesus, as central to Christian faith. Secondly, this way is lived out in a voluntary commitment to the body of Christ, the church; and thirdly the primary way of living the way of Jesus is through pacifism. Each of these three could be explored in much greater detail, but for our purposes here each will be briefly explicated with a focus on the community aspect of Anabaptist theology.

First, following Jesus in all of life is central to the Anabaptist perspective on the Christian faith. All of the Anabaptists committed themselves to the "normativeness of Jesus" for their lives in some form.[19] Hans Denck is often quoted in this regard, "No one can know Christ except they follow him in life." In this sense, "believers baptism" is really not the best designation of what the sixteenth-century Anabaptists died for. In fact, Arnold Snyder calls it "far too anemic a phrase" to describe the Anabaptist view of baptism.[20] Baptism was not so much about belief or mental assent to a doctrine or creed; rather it was the sign of a transformed life by a new birth of the Spirit. It was a three-fold baptism that included baptism in the Spirit, baptism in water, and finally a commitment to the baptism of blood or martyrdom, giving witness by giving their lives.

Baptism became a counter-cultural witness, a statement of allegiance to the kingdom of Christ rather than the kingdoms of the world. This allegiance was an inner commitment to Christ and an outward commitment to live in the way of Christ and to love and be held accountable to the community of Christ. For Anabaptists, baptism functioned much like a monastic vow which might be why Martin Luther derisively called it the "new monkery."[21] Baptism was one act that was part of a discipleship that had socio-economic and

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[18] The Believers Church includes Mennonite churches. Mennonites may have direct spiritual, and sometimes ancestral, ties to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century but they suffer from the problem of individualism as much as any other Believers Church.

[19] Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, 174.

[20] Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 51.

[21] Ibid., 82-83.

political implications and ramifications as well as spiritual and ecclesiological ones. "By refusing to submit to the state's domination expressed through infant baptism, Anabaptists were not simply guilty of heresy; they committed sedition, rebellion [treason], a capital offense."[22] Following the way of Jesus might grant them the same end as their Lord and Saviour.

Baptism incorporates people into the body of Christ, the church. This brings us to the second theological theme coming out of sixteenth-century Anabaptism that most specifically and directly addresses the problem of individualism—the voluntary commitment to community or *Gelassenheit*.[23] In this we see "the distance the Anabaptists maintained from the potential of individualism of the spiritualists or a private spirituality of some later Pietists: the Christian life is not simply a matter of an inner baptism (being right with God personally). . . . Rather, the faithful Christian life must be manifested in, and tested publicly, by the community of believers."[24] Persons give themselves freely to love and be loved, to admonish and be admonished. It is a free and visible church in contrast to Christendom.

Although the Dutch and the Swiss share the emphasis on community, the Hutterites, originating in Moravia, are the only remaining institutional legacy of sixteenth-century Anabaptism that practice a rigorous and structured communal life. Their eloquent theological articulation and challenge have too often been overlooked by contemporary Mennonites who have been caught up by the culture of individualistic consumerism.

> All believers have fellowship in holy things, that is, in God. He has given them all things in his Son, Christ Jesus. Just as Christ has nothing for himself, since all he has is for us, so too, no members of Christ's body should possess any gift for themselves or for their own sake. Instead, all should be consecrated for the whole body, for all the members. This is because Christ also did not bring his gifts for one individual or the other, but for everyone, for the whole body. Community of

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[22] Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus*, 19.

[23] *Gelassenheit* can be translated as yieldedness or voluntary commitment, i.e., yieldedness to Christ but also logically following, yieldedness to the body of Christ, the church.

[24] Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 79.

goods applies to both spiritual and material gifts. . . . Therefore the fellowship of believers should be visible not only in spiritual but also in temporal things.[25]

From this lengthy quote from the *Hutterite Confession of Faith*, it can be observed that the theology of community is based, first of all, on the nature of God; God exists in Trinity, in community, in relationship. Secondly, it is based on the example of Christ who gave up everything for humanity, not only for individuals but for the human community. Jesus came not so much to save individuals but to create a people.[26] The human community is spiritual and bound together in deep inner commitment to one another but is always evidenced by temporal sharing of material goods. Love was the primary motivation for community. One's readiness to renounce private possessions was a test of love and obedience to Scripture and showed love for God and the body of Christ.[27]

Communal life, however, was not an idyllic, utopian existence. The communal Anabaptists not only experienced severe persecution from the outside—part of the initial catalyst for holding things in common—but there were internal disputes and tensions as the structure of communal life was developed. There were struggles with church discipline, applying the ban, unequal distribution, and leadership issues. A theology of community is messy because it involves real people in real relationship, but that is also its glory and beauty.

God's purpose in the Bible is to establish a community of people who will know God and witness to God's ultimate purpose of universal *shalom* to bring wholeness and harmony to all people and all creation. God makes peace for all families of the earth as people of faith live together in peaceable community. God has established communities of faith so that those who have experienced God's healing love might enter and engage the brokenness of the world as

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[25] John J. Friesen, ed. and trans., *Peter Riedemann's Hutterite Confession of Faith* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1999), 119. The following Scriptures are given as references—John 1:1-3; Romans 1:16-17; Philippians 2:1-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Amos 2:42-47, 4:32-37—giving evidence of the thoughtful and thorough biblical theology.

[26] 1 Peter 2:4-10.

[27] Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 144.

agents of reconciliation and hope.[28] It is important to note that the Hutterites were not an insular sectarian group in their early generations; they were of the most effective Anabaptist evangelists.[29] It was not a community that lived only unto itself, but as salt and light in the world.

The third theological theme of sixteenth-century Anabaptism completes the previous two. Although not all of the first generation of Anabaptists were pacifist, it is a logical outgrowth of the previous commitment to the way of Christ.[30] A faithful community of Christ refuses to participate or support the violence of the state. Some of the earliest Anabaptist theological letters and writings include statements on the sword. For example, Conrad Grebel said, "Moreover, the gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor should they protect themselves."[31]

It was perhaps the most violent incident involving sixteenth-century Anabaptists that motivated and solidified an Anabaptist peace theology. This was the Münster debacle that finally convinced Menno Simons to leave the comfort of the priesthood and throw in his lot with the Anabaptists. His response was passionate and unequivocal. "Alas! Through the ungodly doctrines of Münster, and in opposition to the Spirit, the Word and the example of Christ, they drew the sword to defend themselves. . . . After this had transpired the blood of these people, although misled, fell so hot on my heart that I could not stand it, nor find rest in my soul."[32] After Münster, pacifism became one of the central distinguishing marks of future generations of what came to be nicknamed Mennonites.

Even though the violent and polygamous Münster Anabaptists had most things very wrong, they did agree with the peaceable Anabaptists on one thing: They believed that the kingdom of God was to be enacted in historical time in historical place. But this kingdom does not come about by coercion,

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[28] 2 Corinthians 5:12-21. See also Grimsrud, *Embodying the Way of Jesus*, chap. 6.

[29] John D. Roth, *Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006), 100.

[30] Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist*, 175.

[31] Written in 1524 by Conrad Grebel in Harder, Leland, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1985), 290.

[32] Menno Simons, "Reply to Gellius Faber" in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1984), 670.

which would be contradictory, but comes about as people of faith yield themselves to God and to each other in community. If God's ultimate purpose is a peaceable kingdom and if Jesus Christ inaugurated this "commonwealth of love and justice"[33] with his incarnation, life, teachings, death, and resurrection, it stands to reason that those who put their trust in God will live in the way of Jesus and the way of peace that is consistent with the nature of the kingdom. People cannot live in the way of Jesus or live in community without practicing an active non-violent love.

Emergent Church

Five centuries later, on the other side of individualistic modernism, we are again confronted by another renewal movement called the Emergent Church. The similarities to the Anabaptist movement are striking![34] But before we describe and explore these correlations we need to attempt to define this latest phenomenon.

Critics and insiders alike agree that a definition is difficult and elusive or maybe impossible, for some even undesirable. Tom Conder writes, "While the desire for a definition is understandable, it's the wrong place to start. In many ways the Emerging Church defies definition. That is part of its allure for some—and its perceived threat for others."[35] The Emergent Church is difficult to define because "not only is the movement amorphous, but its boundaries are ill-defined."[36] It is difficult to define because it is by definition still emerging; it is in a process that has not yet arrived at its destination. The Emergent Church is best seen as a present movement, a conversation,[37] a

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[33] I borrow this wonderful phrase from James Fowler, who uses it as a paraphrase for the kingdom of God. I like the term because it is inclusive and descriptive, and accurately encapsulates a term that might be elusive for biblically illiterate postmoderns.

[34] I am not the only one to notice this. The most recent example is Jules Glanzer, "Being Today's Church in Today's Culture," *Christian Leadership* (October 2008): 15.

[35] Tim Conder, *The Church in Transition: The Journey of Existing Churches into the Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 22.

[36] D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 12.

[37] Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 109.

"liquid church."[38] In a few centuries, historians may be able to look back and develop a more precise definition, but at present a definition is like trying to hit a moving target!

The Emergent Church is not a passing fad.[39] Most renewal movements throughout the history of the church have had "faddish" or strange elements. The Emergent Church is no different, but it is a movement that is having, and will have, far-reaching effects on all churches in the Western world. The emergent church needs to be taken seriously, even by those who view it critically. This movement will affect all churches, not only those who are seeking to be and do church in new ways. What is the Spirit saying to the church through this movement? This is the question that needs to be asked by scholars and church leaders alike.

Just as the Anabaptist movement was a "third way" that was neither Catholic nor Protestant, the Emergent Church is erasing, crossing, and transcending old modern dichotomies such as conservative-liberal or evangelical-mainline. And also, just like the Anabaptist movement, the Emergent Church is not primarily about addressing the traditional core doctrines of Christian theology; it is showing a new way to be the church. The Emergent Church envisions and expresses Christianity primarily as a way of life rather than as a doctrinal system or organizational pattern. Emergent theology is also more concerned with orthopraxy than orthodoxy, and it is a theology from below and from the edges.[40]

Churches that embrace the Emergent label are very diverse in style, organization, theology, and practice. Even if a precise technical definition is elusive, a description is perhaps our best definition. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger of Fuller Seminary have come up with probably the best and most comprehensive research on Emerging Churches up to this point in time. They identify three primary shared characteristics of the fifty churches in their study: identifying with the way of Jesus, living as a community, and seeing all of life as sacred.[41] These three bear an uncanny resemblance to Harold S.

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[38] Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

[39] Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 28.

[40] Brewin, *Signs of Emergence*, 34.

[41] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 43-44.

Bender's three-fold description of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist vision. Let us examine each of these, again focusing on living as community.

The first characteristic of Emergent Churches is that they identify with the way of Jesus. "Emerging churches are no longer satisfied with a reductionistic, individualized, and privatized message."[42] The way of Jesus is the way of the kingdom, about life here and now, and it is concerned not just with individual needs but with the well-being and mission of the community. The good news is not that Jesus died but that the kingdom has come.[43]

The Emergent Church emphasis on the way of Jesus is distinctly different from its predecessor, the seeker-sensitive movement, that tried to make the gospel attractive and inoffensive to people. The way of Jesus is a lifestyle of difficult discipleship, of "taking up the cross" to follow Jesus.[44] Emergent Church leader Mark Palmer began to think, "Maybe, in order to be true to what God called us to be committed to, we need to make it as difficult as we possibly can to follow Jesus, and go from there."[45] This emphasis on the way of Jesus seems to have more in common with the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement than modern evangelicalism of the past century.

Secondly, the way of Jesus leads into community. The Emergent Church emphasis on the "gospel of the kingdom" as the way of Jesus rather than "the gospel of salvation" leads to a new ecclesiology, a new way to be the church. The church embodies the way of Jesus.[46] A quote from the obituary of John Howard Yoder adorns the wall of the worship space of "Jacob's Well," an Emergent Church in Kansas City. It describes this new ecclesiology.

> The work of Jesus was not a new set of ideals or principles for reforming or even revolutionizing society, but the establishment of a new community, a people that embodies forgiveness, sharing, and self-sacrificing love in its rituals and discipline.

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[42] Ibid., 63.

[43] Again, referring to Jesus' inaugural address in Luke 4:14-30.

[44] Mark 8: 34-38.

[45] Emerging church leader, Mark Palmer, quoted in Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 57.

[46] Note the title of Grimsrud's book on contemporary Anabaptist theology, *Embodying the Way of Jesus.*

In that sense, the visible church is not to be the bearer of Christ's message, but to *be* the message.[47]

This new ecclesiology of the Emergent Church is a direct counter to individualistic consumerism. Churches that adopt a marketing approach treat their visitors as customers and potential converts instead of simply as people. In the Emergent Church the success rubric is changed from counting the numbers of souls saved to the levels of connectedness in the community.[48] A lengthy quote from the study of Gibbs and Bolger describes it best.

> Emerging churches create a space for the kingdom to come in their midst. They prepare by abandoning other allegiances, such as individualism and aspects of consumerism. They choose to dig deeper, letting go of their ideas regarding church as they display a willingness to give up cherished church forms if they hinder the kingdom. They create venues to share their stories and struggles with one another.[49]

One of the ways Emergent Churches live out this communal theology is through the practice of hospitality or inclusion. The example of Jesus was to welcome and embrace exactly those that were labelled expendable by the rest of society: the lepers, prostitutes, tax collectors, disabled. Both of the Emergent Churches introduced earlier see the practice of inclusion as central to their church life. "Inclusion is our starting point. You don't have to earn your way to Christ. . . . You are in before you are out."[50] "We do not have membership qualifications. All are welcome to be part of us whether they have made faith commitments or not."[51] This emphasis on welcoming and including all

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[47] As quoted in Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 178. I don't think it is accidental that in a list of influential theologians, preeminent Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, is listed as a major theological influence of the emergent church. See Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 57. His contribution helps us to see the way of Jesus as a social and political ethic rather than a private spiritual transaction. See in particular, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

[48] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 99.

[49] Ibid., 94-95.

[50] Phillips, et.al., *Colours of God*, 84-85.

[51] Phone interview with Anne Campion, April 30, 2008.

people, accepting them wherever they are at, is at the core of the communal practice. Stuart Murray says that Emerging Churches practice what he calls "belonging before believing."[52] People are welcomed into community first and maybe some time later they may believe, but they always belong, unconditionally.

A second practice of community hearkens back to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists who lived in intentional community, or even further back to the monastic movements of the medieval era. Christian communal projects have always been part of the church since the fourth century. The "New Monasticism" is the moniker given to these latest developments linked to the Emergent Church. The new monastic communities do not necessarily all identify themselves as emergent, but there is much connection,[53] especially when the communities that identify with the common root network are examined. Perhaps in the New Monasticism we see more tangible connection between Anabaptism and the Emerging Church than anywhere else. Most of the "12 Marks of a New Monasticism" have to do with living in community: sharing economic resources, hospitality to the stranger, submission to the church, nurturing common life, geographical proximity to community members, support for singles, married, and children, a common rule of life, peacemaking, and so on.[54] The practices of these urban monastic communities that primarily live and work among the poor and disenfranchised are a testimony to the way of Jesus and a prophetic voice to the individualistic culture.

At first glance, the third characteristic of the Anabaptist movement, the commitment to peace, and the third characteristic of the Emergent Church, seeing all of life as sacred,[55] seem not to be connected, but upon closer inspection there is an important relationship.

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[52] Stuart Murray, *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster Press, 2004), 71.

[53] Tony Jones mentions the new monasticism repeatedly in his descriptions of the forms of emerging Christianity in *The New Christians*, e.g., xviii, 166, 209.

[54] Rutba House, eds., *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005).

[55] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 66.

The Emergent Church emphasizes cultural engagement. The modern church created the secular-sacred divide. The Emergent Church seeks to erase that divide and participate in God's redemption of all of life. Secular space is transformed. Unfortunately, outward expressions such as the use of popular culture, media, and music in worship, have taken attention away from the underlying theology. For Emergent Churches, the worship wars between traditional and contemporary styles are a nonissue.[56] Cultural expressions are not used because they are trendy but because they are rooted in people's lives. Emergent Church worship makes two moves: "It brings the real world into the church, and it enables God to be encountered back into the real world."[57] Worship is not about a few hours on Sunday morning; it is about all of life. All of life and culture is redeemed.

Cultural engagement is where the Emergent Church and the Anabaptist peace witness can help each other out. Too often in the past, peace theology has been insular and sectarian for the Mennonite progenitors of the Anabaptist movement. It has not been a peace witness that challenges and engages the prevailing culture of violence. The Emergent Church can rouse the Anabaptist movement out of its comfortable rural colonies and back into the urban fray from whence it came and where the future of the kingdom is. The Anabaptist movement can inject into the Emergent Church a relevant peace witness that goes beyond trite pop cultural engagement and into the systems of dominance that enslave human beings.

How does an individualistic culture ultimately attain its desires? By violence. How can a faith community bring the gospel to bear on a world wracked by violence? With an active and compassionate communal peace witness.

Conclusion

Individualism is a problem in Believers Churches in North America. Individualism has created a society inculcated by selfish materialism and collective imperialism. The dominant religion in North America has become individualistic consumerism. How has individualistic consumerism negatively influenced the Believers Church? Churches have often become repositories for

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[56] Ibid., 77.

[57] Ibid., 75.

dispensing individual salvation and eternal reward. This is a theological and ecclesiological problem.

A response to this problem has been articulated by an Anabaptist theology rooted in the sixteenth century and by the voices of the Emergent Church in the twenty-first century. Although these voices are distinct they speak from a common root and with many similar nuances as has been pointed out. Their words sound uncannily similar. The "Hutterite Chronicle" states:

> Community, both spiritual and temporal, is a cornerstone and foundation of the entire Christian life of the believers, whose hearts grow together in mutual trust, bound one to another through grace. The inner community, attained through true surrender to God and his only Son Jesus Christ, is mirrored in their outward actions, in wholehearted, genuine service to all God's children, seeking not one's own advantage but that of the many.[58]

According to Brad Cecil on Emergent Churches:

> It is our conviction that one of the reasons Christianity is so consumeristic is that we have prioritized the individual and have commodified God. The church must share some responsibility for the monster we have created. We have made Jesus out to be the ultimate consumer commodity. . . . We are trying to flip this and prioritize the community and work to make the culture a place in which the King reigns.[59]

Jesus came not so much to save individual souls for life in another dimension but to proclaim the Jubilee and inaugurate a community and a kingdom in the here and now.[60] Jesus came to fulfil God's agenda for universal *shalom*, not individuals' personal needs. The gospel, the good news, is about restored relationships where the individual does not lose his or her individuality but the "we" becomes primary over the "I." The way of Jesus is not primarily lived out through individual piety, but through communal holiness, justice, and love. The church then, as a prophetic community,

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[58] From the "Hutterite Chronicle" as quoted in Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ*, 145.

[59] Brad Cecil as quoted in Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 139.

[60] Luke 4:14-30.

engages all aspects of the culture it finds itself in, sometimes with provocative critique and other times with creative affirmation. It enters the broken places of the world to bring healing and engages the violence of the world to bring peace, always praying, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Chapter Sixteen

The Air Is Not Quite Fresh:[1] Emerging Church Ecclesiology

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Paul Doerksen

I f Scott McKnight is correct, the Emerging Church is one of the most controversial and misunderstood movements today,[2] thus seemingly making the description or definition of the movement a somewhat Sisyphean task. Even a cursory glance at the literature, much of it online, reveals unending discussions and disputes regarding terms (emerging vs. emergent), who might qualify as legitimate representative or spokesperson, whether we should speak in terms of "movement" or "conversation," and so on. For the purposes of this essay, I want to bypass these kinds of discussions almost entirely, pursuing instead a very rudimentary description at the risk of

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[1] This phrase is taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1971), 382. Bonhoeffer is referring to the situation in which the Confessing Church in Germany found itself—at the heart of resistance and entering territory heretofore unknown—and yet Bonhoeffer believed the Confessing Church was not as "fresh" as it seemed to think, a concern I share regarding the emerging church conversation.

[2] Scott McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today* 51, no. 2 (February 2007): 35.

oversimplification, focusing primarily on the writings of Brian McLaren, again recognizing the limits of such an approach.[3] My study will proceed in three interrelated stages: first, some brief and rather general descriptions, followed by a sharper descriptive focus on the ecclesiology of the Emerging Church. Third, I will engage in a critical and constructive conversation regarding ecclesiological concerns in which I will argue that the Emerging Church's concern with novelty, broadness, and "relevance" of ecclesiology carries in its train the ironic danger that the church will be incapable of being these very things. Therefore, I will end with a call for the church to be the church so that it can exist for others.

Defining and Describing

Perhaps the least controversial definition of the Emerging Church simply claims that its central premise is that churches must respond to postmodern culture.[4] Scott McKnight's description is offered in the form of identification of themes that characterize the movement, or, put another way, he sees these themes as "streams flowing into the emerging lake. No one says the emerging movement is the only group of Christians doing these things, but together they crystallize into the emerging movement."[5] He identifies these streams as: a) prophetic or at least provocative rhetoric that tries to call the church to change; b) a postmodern stance which seeks to minister either *to* postmoderns, *with* postmoderns, or *as* postmoderns; c) praxis-oriented, especially in terms of worship, orthopraxy, and missional orientation; d) post-evangelical in the sense that it is a protest against much of evangelicalism as

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[3] I am aware that McLaren is not the only or perhaps even primary spokesperson of the Emerging Church. Indeed, one gets the sense that many views, opinions, and positions could be found within the range of people classified as "emergent." In this essay, I will focus on McLaren, and let that analysis and commentary be applied as might be appropriate to larger themes of the conversation. Nonetheless, it is the case that his is one of the strongest and most widely known voices of the Emerging Church conversation.

[4] John Hammett, "An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church," 5. http://www.ateam.blogware.com/AnEcclesiologicalAssessment.Hammett.pdf. Hammett does a fine job of showing how difficult the task of definition really is.

[5] McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," 36.

currently practiced, including a suspicion of systematic theology and "in-versus-out" mentality of evangelism; and e) political, in the sense that the movement is attempting to move beyond conservative evangelical politics.[6]

McKnight's identification of the postmodern stream is important, in that much of the material coming from the Emerging Church is self-consciously postmodern; and the move from modern to postmodern, along with all of its attendant issues as applied to the Christian faith, occupies much of McLaren's energy and introduces an emphasis on what is ostensibly a very sharp discontinuity between modern society and postmodern society.[7] This sharp discontinuity itself creates a kind of template for understanding the church, theology, and the entire Christian enterprise, a binary understanding that results in endless compare and contrast material—conventional versus emerging, existing versus emerging, solid versus liquid, and so on.[8]

Closely connected with the sharp discontinuity seen everywhere is an obsession with novelty, expressed in claims such as, "If we have a new world we need a new church."[9] It might be argued that this sentence is McLaren's thesis every time he is handed a microphone or puts pen to paper. A common complaint about McLaren is that he proceeds as if the things bound up with

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[6] Ibid., 36-39. McKnight focuses primarily on the American expression of the Emerging Church.

[7] See for example, his popular trilogy: Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001); McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003); and McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2005). In one of McLaren's earliest books, tellingly entitled *Reinventing Your Church,* his first strategy for this re-invention is to maximize the discontinuity of the postmodern and modern church. McLaren, *Reinventing Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 17-26. He later published a revised version of this book under a new title, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

[8] For example, see McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 78-79; Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006); Tim Condor, "The Existing Church/Emerging Church Matrix," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope,* ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 103. See also, Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 2004) for a similar binary explication of the contemporary situation.

[9] McLaren, *Reinventing Your Church*, 13.

postmodern culture should determine the understanding of a new kind of Christian.[10] So McLaren writes books that call Christians to enthusiastically and deliberately embrace what is explicitly new. In fact, just a glance at some of his titles brings this emphasis nicely to view: *A New Kind of Christian; Reinventing Your Church; Everything Must Change.*[11]

At this point, I have tried to bring to view the connection of several ideas that animate McLaren's thought—a focus on discontinuity between modern and postmodern leads to an obsession with novelty. In addition to exposing a deep desire to be innovative and often all too free from history,[12] this kind of understanding is surely an intensified form of modernity itself, that form of society that McLaren is so keen to eschew. That is, to repeatedly juxtapose existing/emerging, old/new, modern/postmodern, and so on reveals a modern sensibility that focuses on the new in ways that mark a decidedly Enlightenment cast of mind.[13]

Emerging Ecclesiology

Here then is an entry point for my ecclesiological concerns. If it is accurate to describe McLaren as displaying a modern sensibility regarding novelty that

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[10] D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2005), 29. McLaren disavows this kind of description, insisting that his understanding of the new also includes the old. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 22.

[11] I don't know how much should be made of this, but McLaren's titles bring to mind the kinds of titles used by Bishop John Shelby Spong. For example, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*; *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith Is Dying & How a New Faith Is Being Born; Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers In Exile; Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture.* At the very least, it seems that not all calls for novelty, rethinking, rescuing, and so on are of a piece.

[12] David Fitch, *The Great Giveaway: Reclaiming the Mission of the Church from Big Business, Parachurch Organizations, Psychotherapy, Consumer Capitalism and Other Modern Maladies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 25.

[13] In a recent study, Peter Gay argues that "Astonish me!" is a good modernist slogan, as is Ezra's Pound's summing up of the aspirations of modernists more generally, i.e., "Make it new!" Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008), 3, 4.

parades as a desire to remake things in a postmodern cast, what implications exist for ecclesiology, for the shape of the church? This is an extremely important consideration, since "at its core, the emerging movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology."[14] Given McLaren's propensity to avoid systematization of any kind (I am sympathetic to McLaren's concern here), it is of course not possible to provide any definitive picture of his ecclesiology, but again this observation should not prevent some basic description, to which I will add some critical and constructive comments.

McLaren seems eager to develop what he terms "deep ecclesiology," on which it is difficult at times to gain much purchase. It is perhaps most accurate to say that deep ecclesiology entails the honouring of the church in all of its forms (except, of course, modern forms).[15] Certainly such ecclesiology involves an understanding of the church as a mixed body,[16] and one that embraces change; an ecclesiology that hopes for the emerging of catholic, missional, monastic communities.[17] More recently, McLaren has described the church as a "community that forms disciples who work for the liberation and healing of the world, based on Jesus and the good news of the gospel."[18]

Omnivorous Ecclesiology

At bottom, McLaren seems to be quite taken with the possibility of honouring all forms of church, a sensibility that is most clearly on display in his book entitled, *A Generous Orthodoxy.* The seemingly endless subtitle of this book[19]

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[14] McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," 37.

[15] McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In,* 140, 141.

[16] Not everyone in the church is a faithful Christian, and so the church as we know it is a mixture of sinners and saints, wheat and tares. Ibid., 140.

[17] Ibid., 155. Chris Erdman describes McLaren as embracing a broad ecclesiology. As far as I can see, Erdman means by "broad" just what McLaren means by "deep." Chris Erdman, "Digging Up the Past," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope,* 241.

[18] McLaren, *Everything Must Change,* 292.

[19] The subtitle of McLaren's book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, is: "Why I am a missional and evangelical and post/protestant and liberal/conservative and mystical/poetic and biblical and charismatic/contemplative and fundamentalist/calvinist and anabaptist/ anglican and methodist and catholic and green and incarnational and depressed-yet-hopeful and emergent and unfinished Christian."

itself speaks of a certain omnivorous character that he subsumes under the rubric of "generous orthodoxy." Although it must be said that his descriptions of things he purports to be part of his generosity are thin at best, and sometimes unrecognizable,[20] in the end McLaren wonders why we can't just celebrate them all. He then draws a curious parallel to the enjoyment of food. That is, just as many of us enjoy a variety of ethnic foods, why can't we also enjoy all kinds of ecclesiologies?[21] But it is not at all clear how this can be done or, perhaps more importantly, from where we might practice this embracing and celebrating of so many ecclesiologies. McLaren and others within the Emerging Church conversation sometimes sound as if they have succeeded in embracing many things (however loosely) without being forthcoming about their own location within some tradition. The result is a certain free-floating quality to both the traditions that are ostensibly celebrated as well as the ecclesiology within which this celebration takes place. Put another way, the Emerging Church has been described as expressing a "lingering, disincarnate rejection of time, history, and tradition."[22] This propensity toward the ahistorical may also be an expression of the lingering affirmation of personal autonomy. That is, refusing to be pinned down to any one "solid" ecclesiology may be expressive of a laudable and theologically sound openness, but it may also be a grasping, a possession, of the radical individual choice that marked the modern era. If this is the case, then McLaren's work, especially his ecclesiology, still embraces a dimension of modern evangelicalism that he might classify as part of the existing church from which he is so desperate to emerge.[23]

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[20] I am thinking especially of his description of the "Anabaptist Jesus" and his take on Anabaptist ecclesiology. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy,* 61, 62.

[21] Ibid.*,* 16. Michael Pollan has alerted us to some of the dangers involved with being omnivorous in our eating habits, especially if we have little or no tradition of eating. See Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

[22] James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Books, 2006), 130.

[23] I am drawing here on the work of James K.A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 130ff. Smith is worried that the Emerging Church's attempts to emerge from the "existing" church is akin to Chief's escape from a mental institution

Church as Counter-Society

McLaren's "deep ecclesiology" also leaves him vulnerable to the charge that his notion of the church as counterculture is not robust enough. As we will see below, the point here is not to focus on a counterculture or practice for its own sake, but precisely as a way of being the church in and for the world. In McLaren's zeal to resist old paradigms wherein some are "in" and some are "out," where certain practices or beliefs are designated as litmus tests for one's status as "saved" or "unsaved," and so on, it seems that the church as counterculture is in danger of dropping from view. To be fair, McLaren makes mention of such a notion,[24] but a serious treatment of the church as an identifiable contrast society is difficult to find, no doubt because of a legitimate concern regarding the temptation toward isolationism of the church, or any ecclesiology that serves as justification for selfish self-preservation. But the reality of the church as a contrast society is surely one that is ignored at our peril. In his important book, *Jesus and Community,* Gerhard Lohfink argues that the existence of the people of God as understood in the Bible from Israel to the church is always a contrast society.[25] Unfortunately, according to Lohfink (and, one must add, too many Anabaptist theologians), any proper sense of this has largely been lost over the last number of centuries, held or recovered only intermittently, and that by groups often considered as sectarian by the rest of the church. Lohfink concludes that "the entire New Testament sees the church as a contrast-society which stands in sharp contrast to the world," which leads him to speculate that perhaps it is a blessing that any illusion of living in a Christian society has been definitively and thoroughly demolished.[26] Lohfink's conclusion is worth quoting at some length:

> What makes the church the divine contrast-society is not self-acquired holiness, not cramped efforts and moral achievements, but the saving deed of God, who

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into the "freedom" of the wilderness in Ken Kesey's novel, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* Ibid., 99, 100.

[24] McLaren, *Everything Must Change,* 284.

[25] Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 122.

[26] Ibid., 132.

justifies the godless, accepts failures and reconciles himself with the guilty. Only in this gift of reconciliation, in the miracle of life newly won against all expectation, does what is here termed as contrast-society flourish. . . . What is meant is *not* a church without guilt, but a church in which infinite hope emerges from forgiven guilt. . . . What is meant is *not* a church in which there are no divisions, but a church which finds reconciliation despite all gulfs. . . . What is meant is *not* a church without conflicts, but a church in which conflicts are settled in ways different from the rest of society. . . . What is meant, finally, is *not* a church without the cross and without passion narratives, but a church always able to celebrate Easter because it both dies and rises with Christ.[27]

Correlation or Contextualization?

To my mind, this drive to embrace all forms of church expression, combined with a less than robust notion of church as contrast-society, are closely related to the Emerging Church failure to distinguish adequately between contextualization and correlation as these relate to the church's relationship to the world. McLaren and other Emerging Church writers are good interpreters of culture and consistently grapple in important ways for the church to be relevant to the world, to resist insularity and isolationism. However, a fairly consistent note struck by McLaren is that the church must take many of its cues for change from the surrounding culture, especially as he understands surrounding postmodern culture, a concern evident both in his content and writing style. But to privilege culture while attempting to shape change is to engage too heartily in correlation.[28] Here D. A. Carson is helpful in his worry that the Emerging Church is so submerged in culture that it risks hopeless compromise—in large part because the call to reforming the church is found in cultural changes themselves.[29] After all, the ecclesiological point is not to be postmodern, but to be the church.

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[27] Ibid., 147. James Smith also takes up this emphasis on the "counter" dimension in the context of church disciplines. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 106.

[28] Ibid., 126.

[29] Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 44, 57. James Smith, who is much more generous in his analysis of the Emerging Church than is Carson, also contends that the Emerging Church lets postmodernism set the agenda instead of letting it act as a catalyst for change. See Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, 125.

My complaint about the propensity for correlation rather than contextualization is closely related to the observation that there needs to be *more* discontinuity between church and world in the work of the Emerging Church, rather than focusing on the discontinuity between the modern and postmodern noted above. It is important to emphasize that the church is sociologically unique because it is manifestly oriented toward a particular person: Jesus Christ.[30] I am deeply sympathetic to the Emerging Church's desire to move into the world and to relativize some of the conventional distinctions often made by churches of whatever stripe—including those within the evangelical-fundamentalist tradition McLaren is so keen to challenge. But it is important to realize and acknowledge, following Rowan Williams, that the relevance of the church to the world in fact depends on the *difference* from existing patterns of human relations and power. In his essay, "Incarnation and the Renewal of Community," Williams takes his own Anglican incarnational theological tradition to task, since, in his telling of the tale, such theology sees the church not as a special system of human relations, but rather as a place where other relations become intelligible, and where the deepening and securing of such relations are made possible. The danger of such an understanding is that the social consequences include the embrace of human relations in the pattern they appear before us, whereby incarnational theology is needed only to place them on a firm base and prevent them from becoming idolatrous. But this way of seeing things carries the temptation that we all too often simply embrace the status quo, that we baptize our own particularities. Rather than proceeding along these lines, Williams argues for the church as a social community without foreordained boundaries, a church that, while suspicious of itself only as a distinctive institution, nonetheless must understand the nature of its distinctiveness and separateness, factors that always place the church at an angle to the world. The separateness he speaks of includes dimensions of Christian practice such as discipleship that may

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[30] Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9. As John Howard Yoder notes, the Christian practice of evangelism is possible only if there is some sense of what constitutes the "world." See Yoder, "The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists," in Guy Herschberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 97, 98.

override the family, the witness of those committed to peace, and so on. Williams goes so far as to say that "a church which does not at least possess certain features of a 'sect' cannot act as an agent of transformation."[31] It is essential to recognize that the uniqueness, the distinctiveness I refer to here is not for institutional purposes, for self-preservation, for solid identity, but precisely so that the church can be the church for others, a point I will return to below.

A robust sense of discontinuity between church and world can easily carry in its train a search for what has been termed a "blueprint ecclesiology," a desire to identify an ecclesiological "supermodel" of the church.[32] It is important to resist this temptation. That is, an appropriate focus on sociological uniqueness must never succumb to the temptation to over-determine ecclesiology. Put yet another way, while the visibility of the church must never be in question, the kind of visibility the church is called to remains always open to (re)configuration.[33]

In response to ecclesiologies that are too abstract and propositionally defined, McLaren is explicit about the fact that one distinguishing feature of the Emerging Church is a turn from doctrines to practices.[34] Fair enough, but it is important to recognize that a focus on church practice cannot proceed constructively without reference to how beliefs about the nature and function of the church bear upon these practices and in turn how the practices bear on belief. Put another way, whatever identity the church may have is constituted in action—a process or movement that is entirely theological in nature.[35] Put yet another way that seems at first blush to simply be circular reasoning, the ecclesiology of the Emerging Church is not ecclesiological enough. As Nicholas Healy puts it, "contextual ecclesial praxis informs ecclesiology, and ecclesiology informs contextual ecclesial praxis in a hermeneutical circle."[36]

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[31] Rowan Williams, "Incarnation and the Renewal of Community," in Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 233. The longer argument of my paragraph is taken from 226-233.

[32] These are terms employed in Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life,* especially in chapter 2.

[33] See John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 71.

[34] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy,* 197.

[35] Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life,* 1.

[36] Ibid., 46.

Thus ecclesiology cannot be understood *only* as a move from doctrines to practices, since to do so would be to cut off the church's practices from the kind of reasoning that is necessary to shape and sustain those very practices. Ecclesiology is a matter of practical reasoning and practice; it arises out of ecclesial practices and is ordered directly towards them. Therefore, ecclesiology must deny any changes made only in order to fit the norms of some non-Christian view or another, since the church and the context in which she finds herself must be critically analyzed, using all available tools but within a thoroughly theological horizon. "All ecclesiological judgments are made within an ecclesiological context, and all should serve the church's work within that context."[37] Ecclesiology must be ecclesiological!

The Church as Contrast Society That Exists for Others

In the final section of this paper, I want to begin to work toward an ecclesiology that eschews any obsession with novelty in favour of one that cultivates a robust contrast-society, not for its own sake, but in order to serve as a parable, a sign—a church that exists for others.[38] Thus, while I am

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[37] Ibid., 52. The larger argument of this paragraph is taken from Healy, 46-52. Part of my complaint about the Emerging Church in this context is that one sees a paucity of the close reading of scriptural texts as the primary source for the shaping of ecclesiology. I am not saying the Bible is ignored, but rather that discussions of the shape of the church often seem to be driven by discussions of culture, which then leads to suggestions for change based on those cultural observations. I find this especially in the case of McLaren's writing, where he sometimes makes a virtue out of his lack of formal theological or biblical training, suggesting that it is his training in literature and language that has helped him to interpret culture, texts, and so on. See McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 157. Fair enough, but as I am trying to argue, an essential dimension of ecclesiology needs to be generated from within a theological horizon, which is itself shaped and generated scripturally. The work of Gerhard Lohfink, Nicholas Healy, and Karl Barth that I use in this paper are fine examples of the pursuit of ecclesiology in this scriptural mode.

[38] To be fair to McLaren, his writing is beginning to include some encouraging hints along these lines. For example, he poses the question, "Can you imagine yourself and your community of faith as a living parable where the secret message of Jesus could be hidden today?" McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006) 102. This notion of the church as parable is one that warrants more attention. See, for example, Harry

sympathetic to the Emerging Church's desire to call into question some or many of the ways in which the church has proceeded, it seems to me that what is lacking is a perpetual focus on penitence, which is very different from a deep desire for novelty. The church always already exists in danger from all sides, the dangers of alienation on the one hand and self-glorification on the other.[39] It is in recognition of these incumbent dangers and our propensity to succumb to them that the church assumes a posture of perpetual penitence, a posture that in itself goes a long way toward preventing a static or stable posture.[40] One is reminded here of the deeply felt concerns of Dietrich Bonhoeffer for the church in Nazi Germany. Not only was he concerned about the notorious German Church, but also the Confessing Church, a situation in which "the air is not quite fresh,"[41] despite the deeply held conviction that the Confessing Church was a fresh approach. Here Bonhoeffer is clear that repentance is an essential component of the life of the church in extreme times. Since there is no way back from the adulthood of the world, the way forward is based on Matthew 18:3, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Bonhoeffer adds, "i.e., through repentance, through *ultimate* honesty."[42] He connects this to "participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life. That is *metanoia:* not in the first place thinking about one's own needs, problems, sins, and fears, but allowing oneself to be caught up into the way of Jesus Christ, into the messianic event. . . ."[43] In other words, Bonhoeffer does not want even this theological notion of repentance to be turned into yet another instance of a

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Huebner and David Schroeder, *The Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg, MB: CMBC Publications, 1993). I am grateful to Professor P. Travis Kroeker for a recent helpful conversation along these lines, as well as his presentation at a retirement symposium for Professor Harry Huebner, May 2008.

[39] Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation,* vol. IV/2, *Church Dogmatics,* ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (London: T&T Clark International, 2004), 661, 667.

[40] Nicholas Healy shares such concerns as well. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life*, 185. "Sin and error, in short, are part of the church's theological and concrete identity prior to the eschaton." Ibid., 11.

[41] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, 382.

[42] Ibid., 360.

[43] Ibid., 362-363.

religious error, that of turning something properly theological into something psychological. So the concept of *metanoia* is extended to refer not only to something subjective, but also to this sharing of God's suffering in this world.[44]

The practice/posture of perpetual penitence does not in any way reduce the responsibility of the church to engage the world. But the church must avoid the kind of correlation referred to above, and move in and into the world by way of faithful contextualization. I turn here to the work of John Howard Yoder who, in grappling with questions of how the particularity of the Jesus story must encounter the call of believers for a higher level of generality, looks at five New Testament passages (John's Prologue [John 1:1-14], the Epistle to the Hebrews, Colossians, Revelation 4:1-5:4, and Philippians 2) and finds there what he calls a deep structure which involves a series of moves claiming that the Hebrew story had widened out to include everyone. The moves that Yoder discerns in these five biblical passages, that respond to the challenge of a previously formed cosmic vision which encounters the claim that Jesus is Lord, are: 1) the writer uses the language, questions of the new linguistic world; 2) instead of placing the Jesus message in the slots prepared for it by the newly encountered vision, the writer places Jesus above that cosmos; 3) there is a concentration on suffering and rejection in human form, beneath the cosmic hierarchy as that which "qualifies" Christ for his lordship; 4) we are not called to enter into a salvation system through ritual or initiation, but are called to enter the self-emptying and death of the Son; 5) behind the cosmic victory, enabling it, is the preexistence of the Son, co-essentiality with the Father, possession of the image of God, and the

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[44] James Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1970), 258-265. A similar point is made by Will Campbell, albeit in a different context. In discussing the American race problem, Campbell insists that the church has been asking the wrong questions. "Instead of demanding, What can the Christian *do* to improve race relations? we should be asking, What must the Christian *be*? As the body of Christ, the church first of all must be the redeemed community. Then it will be empowered to redeem the world and not before. The sin of the church is not that it has not reformed society, but that it has not realized self-renewal. Its sin is that it has not repented. Without repentance there cannot be renewal." Will Campbell, *Race and the Renewal of the Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1962), 4.

participation of the Son in creation and providence; and 6) the writer and readers share by faith in all that victory means.[45]

For Yoder, regarding the church's mission to the world, it is neither the world nor anything else that is the definitional category the church then proceeds to join up with, approve, or improve in some way. Rather, it is the rule of God as displayed in Christ that is the basic category, since the "rebellious but already (in principle) defeated cosmos is being brought to its knees by the Lamb. The development of a high Christology is the natural cultural ricochet of a missionary ecclesiology when it collides, as it must, with whatever cosmology explains and governs the world it invades."[46] In other words, for Yoder the particularity of incarnation is the universality of the good.[47] To provide one example: in political theology Yoder makes a move that is parallel to his argument for the relationship of particularity and universality, or perhaps better put, it is part of the same argument. In order for the church to be involved in politics, followers of Christ will not be shaped by the definitional categories of conventional secular politics, or whatever regime they find themselves in, but will continue as part of the church to seize

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[45] John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 53. Yoder's compressed description of these moves is on much fuller display in *Preface to Theology, Christology and Theological Method*, ed. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002). Here he traces the "widening" of the Jesus story from the "kerygma," through the Gospels, other New Testament writers, and the patristic period. Stanley Hauerwas and Alex Sider register concern regarding this notion of "kerygma," if by this Yoder means some core message that is not already embedded in a rich theological matrix. Hauerwas and Sider, "Introduction" to *Preface to Theology,* 24. This is a valid concern, since Yoder moves from the message of the apostles to the Gospel writers, whom he describes as developing the simple first message of the apostles in the book of Acts. He does not deny that some sifting or interpreting is going on, but claims that the Gospel writers simply reflect the faith of the church in which they live. Yoder, *Preface to Theolog y*, 60-63.

[46] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom,* 54. The essay being drawn on here is entitled "'But We Do See Jesus:' The Particularity and the Universality of Truth." Yoder covers somewhat similar territory, albeit in a more formally philosophical mode, in "On Not Being Ashamed of the Gospel: Particularity, Pluralism, and Validation," *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 3 (July 1992): 285-300.

[47] Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom,* 61.

the categories of surrounding culture and hammer them into new shapes formed by christology. "A handful of messianic Jews, moving beyond the defenses of their somewhat separate society to attack the intellectual bastions of majority culture, refused to contextualize their message by clothing it in the categories the world held ready. Instead, they seized the categories, hammered them into other shapes, and turned the cosmology on its head, with Jesus both at the bottom, crucified as a common criminal, and at the top, preexistent Son and creator, and the church his instrument in today's battle."[48]

The implication of all of this is that the church needs to move by discrimination—ready to reject some things, accept others within limits, offer motivation and coherence to other dimensions of the world, strip others of claims to autonomous truth and value, and, in some cases, create new aspects of culture that are missing.[49] This is Yoder's call, not to withdrawal, but to *authentic transformation*—transformation that is both procedural (how?) and substantial (what?). At every point then, there is a call for the follower of Jesus to assume a stance of discernment; there is no appropriate monolithic response to the question of Christ and culture—Shall we go with this? Shall we oppose this? Shall we opt out? Shall we subvert matters? Shall we encourage change and transformation?[50]

However, I also find that the church needs to embrace something that is perhaps more basic, if that is the right term. That is, the church needs to be rightly suspicious of an improper focus on itself as a distinctive institution,[51] and therefore the church *as* church is always on the move—a quiet and persistent movement that is at bottom a "living consideration of its Lord."[52] Thus the church is only the church when it exists as the church for others.[53] This is an identity that is found precisely in the process of giving itself away, in spending itself in and for the world, a strategy that is no strategy, a visibility

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[48] Ibid., 54.

[49] Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen Stassen and D.M. Yeager, eds., *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 69.

[50] Alan Kreider, "Christ, Culture, and Truth-Telling," *Conrad Grebel Review* 15, no.3 (Fall 1997): 207-233.

[51] Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 233.

[52] Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, x.

[53] Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prision*, 382.

that joyfully embraces invisibility. The church that exists for others works hard at shaping that existence, at living at an angle to the world; the church that exists for others points not toward its own authentic existence, such as it may be, but pursues authentic existence in this world in order to point away from itself toward Christ.[54] And "it is precisely because the church does not exist for itself, but completely and exclusively for the world, it is necessary that the church not become the world, that it retains its own countenance."[55] But this countenance becomes visible only as the power of the Holy Spirit shines out both in that which is traditional and customary, *and* in innovation and change. The church is a human construct, but not only that; it is the construct in which God is at work in and by God's Holy Spirit. Thus the church will never try to be anything in and of itself, because exactly to the extent that it tries to be anything in itself it becomes a mere semblance of the church. Put another way, the church does not try to express itself, but it tries to express the divine operation by which it is constituted.[56]

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians, in a complex argument, addresses the cosmic powers of this world in relation to the church. Beginning with a moving description of the spiritual blessings made real by Christ (1:3-14), Paul continues with a prayer for the church at Ephesus in which he addresses the greatness of God's power, a power that was put to work in Christ's resurrection and the placing of Christ in the position of authority over all other principalities and powers (1:15-22). That is, Christ the head is principle of the church's life and at the same time the ruler over all the cosmic powers. He fills the church with his blessing and pervades the entire universe with his power, and thus draws the world ever more into the sphere of his rule, a process that is not yet complete. In fact, Paul takes pains to show that

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[54] Here again I acknowledge a helpful conversation with P. Travis Kroeker.

[55] Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 146.

[56] Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 616-620. Barth continues, "As such it will reveal itself, or be revealed, in glory at this goal; yet only as the Church which does not try to seek and express and glorify itself, but absolutely to subordinate itself and its witness, placing itself unreservedly in the service and under the control of what God wills for it and works within it." Ibid., 620.

the church itself has long been subject to the powers of the world and continues to be so (2:1-10), although he also makes clear that a space has been opened up by Christ for the expression of the freedom provided by the work of Christ. So, Paul teaches the Ephesians that "Christ rules over all powers and forces of society. But he cannot rule without his body, the church. The church is the place in which the freedom and reconciliation opened in principle by Christ must be lived in social concreteness."[57]

In the end, I too want to be part of an "emerging church," but not as part of anything like a "movement" or "conversation" but as part of the body of Christ that points away from itself toward Christ—a church that focuses on the Bible, struggles with tradition in intensive yet not stable or finally settled ways; a church that attempts to face the reality of the gospel as "a permanent source of unsettlement, discomfiture and renewal of vocation," a church that is always "emerging from its own dissolution and reconstitution by the presence of the holy God."[58]

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[57] Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 145. I am relying in large part on Lohfink's work for my understanding of these themes in Ephesians, 143-146. Karl Barth's reading of Ephesians is parallel to Lohfink's in many ways. For example, Barth also argues that the Christian community that is fitting for the provisional representation of the universal scope (concealed as yet) of the person and work of Christ. Thus, any blessings or gifts given to the church are given not for identification but with a view to service in the world. Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 623-626.

[58] Webster, *Holiness,* 5. I am applying Webster's understanding of theology to the church here. I am grateful to Rev. Mark Doerksen, Dr. Denny Smith, and Russ Snyder-Penner for their generous reading of earlier versions of this paper.

Chapter Seventeen

The Southern Shift in World Christianity: A Kairos Episode for the Believers Church

George F. Pickens

Christians around the world are finally becoming aware of the historic times in which they live. Christians in the global North[1] have come to this realization slowly and recently, and in similar ways Christians in the South are beginning to comprehend their significance at the epicentre of world Christianity. These momentous times in which Christians are living result from relatively recent changes in the global composition of the church in which the majority of the world's Christians now reside in the lands of the southern hemisphere. Although this recent phenomenon underscores the significance of the new southern heartlands for the faith, Christianity is no stranger to the global South.

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[1] In this paper the terms "global North" or simply "North" refer to the five United Nations (UN) regions (55 countries) comprising Europe and North America. The terms "global South" or "South" refer to the sixteen UN regions (185 countries) comprising Africa, most of Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, and Australia/New Zealand. See United Nations, *List of Regional Groupings*, 2008, http://www.mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Data/RegionalGroupings.htm.

Christianity first emerged in and from Asia, and it remained a predominately southern faith for the first six centuries of its existence. After 600 CE Christianity's statistical centre of gravity moved gradually north and west, so that by 1500 most of the followers of Jesus on earth, approximately 92 percent, were northerners.[2] This latter period in which Christianity became linked historically and culturally with Europe is the one which has defined the faith for most Christians for five centuries. Indeed, many in the North and South still view Christianity in terms of this period, as a faith in and of Europe.

However, since 1500 a reverse trend has been taking place, although slowly and gradually. From 1500 until 1900, Christianity's centre of gravity moved steadily southward, and by 1950 the statistical centre of Christianity moved south of Jerusalem[3] for the first time since Jesus walked the earth. Between 1900 and 1970 the southern shift was sharper and more obvious, and soon after 1980 southern Christians outnumbered those in the North for the first time in a thousand years. By 2005, this southward shift meant that 65 percent of all Christians lived in the global South,[4] and these trends will continue so that by 2100 the global centre of Christianity is projected to be in northern Nigeria. Yet, even before that time, Christianity will have come full circle in terms of its composition and geographical centre, out of the South and back again.[5]

This historic inversion of the statistical centre of world Christianity is a result of the phenomenal growth of Christianity in the South and the accompanying decline of the church in the North. The wane of Christianity in Europe is usually understood to be the product of lower birth rates coupled with the impact of secularism and communism. Even though statistics on church attendance don't reveal a marked decline in Christianity in the United States similar to the experience of Europe, it can be argued that a decline has

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[2] Todd M. Johnson and Sun Young Chung, "Tracking Global Christianity's Statistical Centre of Gravity, AD 33-AD 2100," *International Review of Mission* 93, no. 369 (April 2004): 171.

[3] South of 31.8 degrees north latitude.

[4] Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2008): 275.

[5] Johnson and Chung, "Tracking Global Christianity," 171-174.

occurred nonetheless, demonstrated in a growing shift away from historic Christianity and towards an emergent form of deism.[6] Regardless of how this ebb is interpreted, however, the statistical decline of Christianity in the North has been clearly demonstrated.[7]

The growth of Christianity in the southern lands has also been well documented and interpreted, at least in general and regional terms.[8] Although at least one scholar foresaw the southern shift of Christianity over twenty-five years ago,[9] this trend was largely a well-kept secret within the academic community. More recently, however, a spate of articles and books has popularized the rise of southern Christians to the global majority.[10] These sources recount Christianity's southward spread through tales of triumph over formidable obstacles, internal and external, historical and cultural, religious and political, indigenous and imperial. While the protagonists in Christianity's most recent southern story were initially thought to be Northerners, it is now clear that they have been indigenous southern Christians, men and women who were "the most effective interpreters of Christianity to their own people."[11] The rise of southern Christianity is a narrative of waning European power and ascendant local initiatives that have resulted, not only in political independence for many, but also in religious and theological autonomy. Consequently, local expressions of Christianity have emerged throughout the global South, many of which are radically dissimilar from their northern correlatives.

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[6] This can be argued using the data on the emergence of "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" in the United States. See Christian Smith and Melinda Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

[7] For example, Johnson and Chung, "Tracking Global Christianity."

[8] For example, see Allan H. Anderson, *African Reformation* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001); Dana L. Robert "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24, no. 2 (April 2000): 50-58; and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford, 2002); Jenkins, "Liberating Word," *Christian Century* (July 2006): 22-26; and Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2006).

[9] Andrew F. Walls, "The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture," *Faith and Thought*, nos. 1 and 2 (1982): 39-52.

[10] The works of Philip Jenkins listed above are examples.

[11] Robert, "Shifting Southward," 53.

This re-formulation of the faith in the South is taking place across Christian traditions, and this reconfiguration of the global church has great significance for the Believers Church.[12] One of the most significant products of this southward shift of global Christianity is the disintegration of Christendom: that linking of geography and state favouritism with Christian faith that became synonymous with northern Christianity.[13] However, because Believers Church ecclesiology does not rely on Christendom models, this southern shift in world Christianity represents a *kairos* episode for the Believers Church, a time replete with possibilities and opportunities.

In the sections that follow, the potential significance of the southern shift of Christianity for the Believers Church will be examined. Three common and non-Christendom idioms to understand the church, which suggest a strategic role for the Believers Church, will be summarized. An illustration of how one Believers Church has engaged this new global Christian conversation will follow. Then, several possibilities for renewal of the Believers Church that result from this new North-South conversation will be offered.

Global God-Talk about the Church

The southern shift in global Christianity has been heralded as both good news and bad. While it is widely acknowledged that the growth of Christianity in the South represents a dynamic spread and revitalization of the faith, it has been argued that a dangerous polarization within the global church is developing. Philip Jenkins[14] has warned about a growing southern fundamentalism that could prove to be destructive for relations between Christians North and South. The current controversy over homosexuality within the worldwide Anglican Communion is one example of a North-South conflict, and it is possible that these clashes will spread and intensify.

While it can be argued that Jenkins has misunderstood the nature of southern Christianity and that the dangers associated with the spread of

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[12] For ease of expression, throughout I will use the term "Believers Church" to refer to that body as it exists in North America. I realize that expressions of the Believers Church exist elsewhere, yet this paper addresses primarily the North American community.

[13] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* (New York: Oxford, 2002).

[14] Ibid.

southern Christian fundamentalism are exaggerated, still cause for concern is warranted. Given the colossal differences in contexts within the global church, it is not surprising that Christians from different hemispheres misunderstand and even mistrust each other. Minority Christians in the North, formed by affluence and unique historical and cultural experiences, are ill-equipped to understand and engage constructively their poorer and differently formed brothers and sisters in the South. Likewise, majority Christians in the South are largely uninformed of the complex historical and cultural processes that have shaped Christianity in the North. In order to facilitate global conversation across this gulf, minority and majority Christians must discover positive ways to relate to each other.

One way to proceed is to foster a North-South conversation that draws upon the commonalities among global Christians. For example, all Christians, North or South, do theology in narrative ways whenever they speak about God (to use Augustine's definition). Indeed, northern and southern Christians have characteristic forms of "God-Talk,"[15] ways of articulating and practicing their faith that are narrative yet idiomatic and often misunderstood by the other. In order to facilitate understanding and appreciation across this global Christian divide, a significant role exists for interpreters to translate the idiomatic God-Talks of the North and South. Because she shares with many southern Christians a basic ecclesiology which doesn't build upon Christendom, the Believers Church is well-placed to become such an interpreter within the global Christian community.

Historically, the Believers Church has defined herself through eight affirmations,[16] and these convictions represent the basic theological idioms the Believers Church uses to do theology, to talk about God internally, and to carry out God-Talk with those outside the tradition. These core convictions also express the basic ecclesiology of the Believers Church, an understanding of the community of faith that does not build upon Christendom. Indeed, Believers Church ecclesiology is a rejection of the state-church model of

[15] Ogbu U. Kalu, "African Church Historiography," in *African Historiography*, ed. Toyin Falola (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1993): 166-179.

[16] Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Summary of Believers Church Affirmations," in *The Concept of the Believers Church,* ed. James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969): 322-323.

Christendom. So, when this distinctive and non-Christendom God-Talk about the Church is heard within the contemporary global context in which most southern communities are not formed by a Christendom model, common ecclesiastical idioms between the Believers Church and southern Christians can be detected. As non-Christendom ecclesiologies, these shared ways of understanding and being the community of faith are products of similar historical experiences with power structures. Like most members of the southern Church, many in the Believers Church talk about their faith communities using narratives that include varying degrees of marginalization, oppression, and persecution. Many within the Believers Church, like their contemporary southern counterparts, began their Christian journeys among communities of the poor and under-educated, suffering at the hands of those in power. Communities formed without the support of the powerful, then, are shared themes in the faith stories of Christians within the Believers Church and inside the majority church in the South.

Given these similar non-Christendom cradle experiences, it is not surprising that, when the Believers Church and many southern Christians talk of their faith communities, they employ similar ecclesiastical idioms or common theological forms of expression. While I am not suggesting that the entirety of the southern Church embraces Believers Church ecclesiology, I am saying that when many southern Christians engage in God-Talk about the church, they use non-Christendom idioms that are also used by the Believers Church. Here it will be possible to introduce only three shared ecclesiastical idioms in order to highlight a potential strategic role for the Believers Church within the global Christian conversation.

A Community of the Book

The Believers Church affirms the authority of the written word, so that the Bible is central to her identity, articulated in her beliefs, and animated in her practices. The Believers Church is also an interpreting community in which the Bible is read, interpreted, and applied communally. Rather than building on a Christendom model in which a significant role in biblical interpretation is given to state and ecclesiastical authorities, for the Believers Church it is understood that God speaks through the Book as it is discerned through the local community of faith.

Likewise, it has been demonstrated that the majority church in the global South is also a community formed by and around the Book, without the

external influences of the Christendom model.[17] Even though many members of the southern church are pre-literate, still the stories and teachings within the Bible are central and formative for the identity of the faith community. Biblical themes of slavery, exile, restoration, dreams, healings, deliverance, prophecies, and spiritual warfare resonate with much of the majority church in the South.[18] These themes which challenge the Bible's relevance in the North are exactly the ones which convince the average Christian in the South that the Bible is a living text.[19] Indeed, one of the commonly noted factors for the phenomenal growth of the southern church is the availability of the Scriptures in the vernaculars. This places the grassroots reading and application of the Bible at the centre of the local community of faith, and this is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Africa, where "Christianity has been from the beginning book-religion."[20] This African reliance upon the sacred text for communal identity, belief, and practice has been compared with the experiences of the early Anabaptists, so that clear parallels between large segments of the southern church and the Believers Church emerge.[21] When the Believers Church and the southern Church look to the Bible to form and inform their understandings of their faith communities, they are speaking a similar ecclesiastical idiom.

A Restoring Community

This reliance upon the Bible has led the Believers Church also to use widely the ecclesiastical idiom of restitution, restoration, or primitivism. The Believers Church affirms that the pristine church of the apostolic age is the timeless example for the church.[22] When the church fails to follow the patterns of the first church, a restoration of the church may be accomplished through a return to the primitive purity of the New Testament. Thus, one of

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[17] Jenkins, "Liberating Word," 22-26.

[18] David Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002): 6.

[19] Jenkins, "Liberating Word," 22.

[20] Andrew F. Walls, "The Anabaptists of Africa?: The Challenge of the African Independent Churches," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3, no. 2 (April 1979): 50.

[21] Ibid., 48-51.

[22] Durnbaugh, "Summary of Believers' Church Affirmations," 322-323.

the formative historical and theological themes of the Believers Church has been its struggle to restore the original simplicity, purity, discipleship, and dynamism of the earliest church, while also keeping the ancient faith meaningful.[23] Believers Church ecclesiology, then, looks to the past and draws upon the experiences of the first Christian communities to enlighten contemporary communal experiences.

This traditionalistic ecclesiology, which seeks to restore the purity and simplicity of the primitive church, is also characteristic of large segments of the majority church in the southern hemisphere. Many African Instituted Churches demonstrate a clear intention to restore the patterns and dynamism of the New Testament church, and many African Christians form their identities through attempts to emulate the first Christians.[24] Pentecostalism is arguably the largest form of Christianity in the global South, and it emerges from "that movement for stripping away of the extraneous, known as primitivism, whereby the believer transcends tradition to re-enter the New Testament."[25] The resonance of the dominant cultures in the Bible with the realities of everyday life in the southern hemisphere give the Bible a relevance which leads many southern Christians to form their daily lives by attempting to re-create the biblical communities of faith. Because their worlds so resemble those of the Bible, it is widely believed that they should live as did the people of faith described in the Bible.[26] Consequently, when the Believers Church and the southern church speak of the community of faith, using the idiom of restoration or primitivism, they should understand each other.[27]

A Separated Community

The common idiom of primitivism leads to another distinctive element of shared ecclesiastical God-Talk: the identity of the church as a separated community. Over against the Christendom models of sixteenth-century

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[23] John Howard Yoder, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," in *The Concept of the Believers Church*, 250-283.

[24] George F. Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004): 211-215.

[25] Martin, *Pentecostalism*, 115.

[26] Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*.

[27] This was a surprising experience during my service alongside African Instituted Churches. See Pickens, *African Christian God-Talk*, 201-202.

Europe, the Believers Church gathers a pilgrim people who are citizens of the kingdom of God, whose primary allegiance is to that realm. The Believers Church, therefore, has understood herself to be a community *in the world*, yet to some extent to be separated *from the world*.[28] Many members of the Believers Church view themselves as a minority community called to demonstrate their distinctives in humble yet obvious ways. Thus, the Believers Church has a long history of closely examining the relationship between the church and wider society distinguished by varying degrees of suspicion for and distance from the social and even theological mainstream. This understanding of a separated community has led many members of the Believers Church to embrace distinctive dress and various forms of nonresistance and nonparticipation in order to distinguish them from the Christian majority.

Christians in the global South also experience their faith in non-Christendom contexts, and many understand their churches as separated, even marginalized, communities. For some, their very profession of Christianity places them within a minority and identifies them as members of a distinctive community. Within southern lands dominated by Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or various primal religions, Christians live and practice their faith as a separated people, often suffering various forms of persecution. Additionally, many Christians living in southern lands dominated by Christianity also experience their faith in communities set apart from the mainstream churches. The classic example is members of African Instituted Churches who are obviously set apart through their display of distinctive dress, colourful public processions, and loud and lively worship. Protestant communities in Latin America and Pentecostal communities throughout the global South are additional examples of separated minorities within Christian majorities.

A recent and exciting example of southern Christians who understand themselves as pilgrims separated from the majority are members of the growing numbers of "insider movements" emerging in Muslim contexts in Asia.[29] These movements are best known in Bangladesh, where "tens of

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[28] Durnbaugh, "Summary of the Believers' Church Affirmation," 322-323.

[29] A general description of these movements throughout South Asia can be found in Dudley Woodberry, "A Global Perspective on Muslims Coming to Faith in Christ," in

thousands" of disciples of Jesus follow their Lord within the broader context of Islam. These communities, found in all sixty-four districts of Bangladesh, have a distinctive identity that separates them from the Muslim majority and Christian minority, and it is ironic that members of these distinctive communities face their fiercest persecution at the hands of the established Christian communities.[30] Like their brothers and sisters in the Believers Church from another time and place, these contemporary Asian pilgrims face environments—politically and religiously—hostile to their set-apart communities of faith. Consequently, when they speak the ecclesiastical idiom of separation from the world, the Believers Church should understand.

Because Believers Church ecclesiology is not based on Christendom, it employs ecclesiastical idioms commonly used by Christians in the global South, who are also being church in non-Christendom contexts. This commonality provides an opportunity for the Believers Church to play a strategic role in helping the global church to relate across the hemispheric divide. Positioned solidly in northern Christianity and conversant with Christendom models of the faith, yet also familiar with the formative experiences of the non-Christendom South, the Believers Church in a sense speaks both theological languages.

While the limits of this paper do not allow a discussion of other common ways of talking about the church, those mentioned above demonstrate how the idiomatic theology of the Believers Church allows it to be bilingual, speaking both northern and southern God-Talk to describe the community of faith. The three ecclesiastical idioms highlighted above continue to form the distinctive ways the Believers Church in the North views herself and, from this base understanding, the Believers Church can understand and communicate the identity of many of the churches gathered in the South. At the same time, the Believers Church in the North can interpret in the other direction across the global Christian divide to assist southerners to understand the ecclesiologies of their northern brothers and sisters.

From the Straight Path to the Narrow Way, ed. David H. Greenlee (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Books, 2005): 17-22.

[30] Jonathan Bonk, "Salvation and Other Religions: Reflections from a Crossroads," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists, Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, MB, 12-13 October, 2007, 12-13.

Even so, using this common language to talk about the church in the global context is challenging and stretching for all involved, yet it is being done.[31] One example of a North-South conversation taking place within the global Believers Church will now be summarized. This conversation is based upon shared ecclesiastical idioms and history, yet it is also formed by significantly different contemporary contexts. This partnership will highlight the possibilities of North-South relationships forged around common ecclesiastical idioms.

Christian Communities in Conversation: The Church of the Brethren and the Ekklesiar Yanu'wa a Nigeria

The Ekklesiar Yanu'wa a Nigeria[32] is the largest national body of the Church of the Brethren in the world, with over 150,000 members. This robust community of faith emerged from the work of Church of the Brethren missionaries and, from its beginning in 1923 in north-eastern Nigeria, the Brethren mission focussed on establishing an indigenous African church that was relevant to the local context.[33] Rather than attempting to import their denomination from North America, the mission sought to form Nigerian Christians rather than Brethren, thus demonstrating their core distinctive of restoration of the New Testament pattern (conversion rather than proselytization). In order to form these Nigerian communities of faith, four holistic approaches were utilized: evangelism (church-planting), education, health care, and rural development; these methods reflected the mission's understanding of the relevance of faith to everyday life.[34] In these ways the

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[31] For example, for many years North American Mennonites have served in the way that is being described among African Independent Churches. See David A. Shank, ed., *Ministry of Missions to African Independent Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1989); and David A. Shank, ed., *Ministry in Partnership with African Independent Churches* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Board of Missions, 1991).

[32] A Hausa term literally translated "the church of the children from the same mother."

[33] Church of the Brethren, *Global Mission Partnerships: Nigeria. General Board*, 2008. http://www.Brethren.org/genbd/global_mission/Nigeria.

[34] Chalmer E. Faw, "Profile of Brethren Mission: An Evaluation of Fifty Years in Nigeria," *Brethren Life and Thought* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1974): 86.

mission emphasized Christianity as a way of life rather than a mere creed,[35] so the church was introduced as a community formed more by the orthopraxy of Jesus and the first Christian communities than the orthodoxy of later Christianity. Consequently, the Nigerian church was established as a faith community under the authority of the Bible and around the pattern of the earliest Christian communities. This restorative and Bible-based approach to being the church was consistent with the European and North American experiences of the Brethren, and it has equipped the Nigerian church to build upon this ecclesiology in its own context.

When the Ekklesiar Yanu'wa a Nigeria was formed as an independent national body in 1972, the Church of the Brethren was invited to remain in partnership. North American Brethren have continued to send long-term and short-term personnel to serve in specialized capacities, mainly teachers and partnership coordinators. The Church of the Brethren also provides funds for specific projects and initiatives, and most North American Brethren now view their Nigerian counterparts as equal partners while some in the Nigerian church still understand the North American church to be the dominant partner. Yet, both communities have expressed the value of this relationship. From the Nigerian Brethren, the Church of the Brethren receives insights into church growth, an enlarged perspective on faith and the world, and "a greater sensitivity to the cross-cultural nature of the gospel."[36] From their northern partners the Ekklesiar Yanu'wa a Nigeria receives funds, personnel, and resources for developing her contextualized understanding of peace through reconciliation.[37]

What is especially relevant here is the way in which this partnership, born of a common history, builds upon a shared ecclesiology. Not only do both faith communities continue to view themselves as formed around the Bible and patterned after the earliest churches, but their common understanding of the church as a separated community is also formative for their partnership. On the one hand, the Church of the Brethren was fashioned in Europe and the

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[35] Patrick K. Bugu, "Reconciliation or Pacifism?: The Nigerian Experience," in Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann K. Riggs, eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2004), 128.

[36] Scott Holland, interview by George F. Pickens, 1 May 2008.

[37] Jan R. Thompson and Brad Bohrer, interview by George F. Pickens, 24 April 2008.

United States within the contexts of war, relative affluence, and Christendom. In this milieu, Brethren expressed their separation from the Christian majority through commitments to non-violence and simplicity, both striking alternatives to the violence and affluence of their environments. The Ekklesiar Yanu'wa a Nigeria, on the other hand, emerged within the context of poverty, injustice, tribalism, and the dominance of other religions (Islam and resilient primal religions). To be a separated community in this context also meant to be a peace church, but peace that is understood and expressed differently. The Church of the Brethren's identity as a peace church has meant primarily a commitment to non-participation in war, but for Nigerian Brethren being a peace church means primarily a commitment to reconciliation. Indeed, the Ekklesiar Yanu'wa a Nigeria now considers herself a peace church more than ever before; but rather than peace being understood primarily as the absence of war, it is understood that the community of faith should be committed to peace expressed through reconciliation between tribes, religions, and wholeness in the presence of evil and injustice.[38] Thus, a shared ecclesiastical idiom—a separated community understood as a peace church—allows for conversation and partnership which makes room for north-south contextual differences. The role of North American Brethren in this partnership illustrates the strategic possibility that exists for the Believers Church to broker such North-South conversations, building upon shared idioms for being communities of faith.

Shared understandings of the church as a peace community have also allowed North American Brethren to broker global conversations even more widely. Since the World Council of Churches declared the first decade of the twenty-first century to be "The Decade to Overcome Violence," the Church of the Brethren has been actively involved with other Historic Peace Churches in a global conversation focussing on the significance of their common ecclesiastical idiom. While this conversation is taking place in lower profile and on local levels around the world, two larger conferences have been held in which communities of faith sharing similar ecclesiologies have participated. The first was a gathering of mostly Mennonites, Brethren, and Quakers held in Bienenberg, Switzerland, in June 2001. This conference focused on more global and general issues, and the proceedings have been published.[39] The

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[38] Bugu, "Reconciliation or Pacifism?" 129-130.

[39] Enns, Holland, and Riggs, eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace*.

second gathering was organized in Nairobi, Kenya in August 2004. This conference dealt with issues more specific to Christian communities of peace in Africa; these proceedings have also been published.[40]

For our purposes these ongoing conversations are significant for at least three reasons. First, these conferences illustrate how shared understandings of the church can bring Christians together from several traditions. Rather than focussing on the more inhospitable and limiting aspects of Christian doctrine (what is believed), these conversations proceed from more hospitable common expressions of Christian community (what is experienced and shared with others). While these two dimensions of the faith are ultimately interdependent, the ecumenical possibilities for proceeding from the latter are clearly illustrated.

Second, these conversations around common ecclesiastical idioms are global, including Christians from the minority North and the majority South. Thus, the ecumenical possibilities of shared ways of understanding the church are realized on an even deeper level, as the hemispheric divide is crossed. Even though, as we have seen in Nigeria, a common ecclesiastical idiom does not necessarily mean shared understandings, nevertheless constructive North-South conversations can take place when commonalities are realized.

Third, these global gatherings of peace churches illustrate the strategic role offered to the Believers Church in this *kairos* episode of world Christianity. The non-Christendom, and thus more global and translatable, ecclesiastical idioms of Brethren and Mennonites have allowed these communities to lead in these initiatives, and this ability highlights how the Believers Church is well placed to broker further North-South conversations. When these shared ways of being the church are supplemented with the resources of the Believers Church in the North and the dynamism and vitality of the churches in the South, exciting possibilities for the global church can be realized.

Seizing the Kairos *Moment*

In order to increase her faithfulness in engaging the possibilities of this *kairos* episode in the global history of Christianity and broker more broadly and deeply the kinds of global conversations that were illustrated above, the

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[40] Donald E. Miller, Scott Holland, Lon Fendall, and Dean Johnson, eds., *Seeking Peace in Africa* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing, 2007).

Believers Church needs to continue transformations that have already begun. One of the most significant adjustments builds upon one of the implications of the above discussion of shared ecclesiastical idioms. In the current global context, as demonstrated above, what resonates with many majority Christians in the South are the most fundamental and historic elements of Believers Church ecclesiology. Indeed, formed as she is through varying degrees of crisis and marginalization, the Believers Church's historic experiences and consequent theological expressions allow her to relate to the plight of most southern Christians. So, as the Believers Church struggles with the relevance of her past, and even as she experiments with shifts away from distinctives that are believed by some to have lost their usefulness, the Believers Church must understand the strategic role she can play in the global church *because* of her identity, not in spite of it. This should encourage the Believers Church to remain grounded in her historic identities and to build upon them in fresh ways.

Even so, this is not permission for complacency, rigidity, or any form of historical or theological legalism. Indeed, this *kairos* moment for the Believers Church can be seized only when she ceases to be preoccupied with herself and her survival, and then takes deliberate steps to actively, intentionally, and globally apply her distinctives in service to the Christian community beyond herself. Core elements of the Believers Church ecclesiology—her orientation towards peace and reconciliation, her emphasis on simplicity, and her struggle to remain distinctive in the midst of creeping globalization—provide ways of talking about and being the church that resonate with the contexts of most southern Christians. So, rather than withdraw within herself, the Believers Church must find increased and more effective ways to utilize this strategic position to broker North-South conversation, understanding, and partnership.

Taking up her role in this *kairos* episode of world Christianity will also require the Believers Church to continue to develop new postures and attitudes. The Believers Church, and indeed the entire global Church, must come to terms with the implications of the historic inversion of global Christianity. Radical alterations must be made in virtually every area of Christian experience, including theological education and local church life. Yet, these adjustments must be carried out with a clear understanding of what has actually happened. Rather than one form of Christendom (Northern-centred) being replaced with another (Southern-centred), as Philip Jenkins

has argued,[41] it is more accurate to say that the global Church has moved from having only one hub to having many centres of influence.

This shift from Euro-centrism to poly-centrism requires that all Christians begin to view Christianity in all its wonderful variety, and learn to hold multiple expressions of the faith together, even in the midst of tension. All Christians must acknowledge that the contemporary story of the followers of Jesus does not revolve around any single people or place, and that no single community of Christians has the right to speak solely or most favourably for their Lord.[42] For the Believers Church this means that she must fully recognize her southern counterparts, many of whom now outnumber their northern brothers and sisters. It also means that she must humbly move into this poly-centred global faith and use her experiences with minority status to assist northern Christians to make peace with this role.

To engage this global Christian poly-centrism, rather than relating to her southern brothers and sisters from positions of perceived power that often lead to paternalism and various forms of disregard, the Believers Church must continue to extend sincere regard to the majority Christians in the South. This means that northern Christians must seek to understand and appreciate not only the myriad expressions of the church in the South, but also the variety of contexts in which the southern church has been formed. When southern Christians are labelled, stereotyped, or otherwise generalized, they suffer a form of "anonymous" regard which stifles North-South relations.[43] The Believers Church, therefore, when serving as broker must exercise humility, patience, and a realistic understanding of her own identity, not expecting more from southern Christian communities than they do from their own. Such avoidance of anonymous regard and moving to more accurate understandings of ourselves and our southern brothers and sisters is necessary if the Believers Church is to seize this *kairos* moment.

The recent southern shift in world Christianity that has heralded the end of Christendom has also brought unprecedented challenges. Even so, it has also brought to the Believers Church a *kairos* opportunity. Resulting from her

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[41] Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*.

[42] Jack T. Thompson, "Re-membering the Body: Discovering History as a Healing Art," *Studies in World Christianity* 2, no. 2 (April 1996): 137ff.

[43] Ibid., 133.

more globally understood and translatable ecclesiology that does not rely on Christendom, the Believers Church is strategically placed to serve as a broker across the emerging North-South Christian divide. Certain communities within the Believers Church have already taken up this role, yet these efforts need to be broadened and refined. This will require new postures and attitudes, yet the Believers Church has long been known for her courage. "When opportunity knocks the wise build bridges while the timorous will build dams. It is a new day."[44]

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[44] Sanneh, "Disciples of All Nations," 287.

Contributors

Gareth Brandt is Professor of Practical Theology at Columbia Bible College. He is currently working on a book in the area of male spirituality and is a member of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Andrea M. Dalton is Adjunct Professor of Bible and Peace Studies at Goshen College. She graduated from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 2008 with an MA in Theological Studies and intends to pursue further graduate studies in Bible and theology. She attends Eighth Street Mennonite Church in Goshen, Indiana.

Paul Doerksen teaches theology and ethics in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is the author of *Beyond Suspicion: Post-Christendom Protestant Political Theology in Yoder and O'Donovan* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2009).

Irma Fast Dueck is Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. She has a forthcoming book on Mennonite worship and ethics to be published by Herald Press as part of the Polyglossia Series. She is a member of Bethel Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Abe J. Dueck is Academic Dean Emeritus of Canadian Mennonite University. He was Director of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies and Executive Secretary of the Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America. He is the editor of *Moving beyond Secession: Defining Russian Mennonite Brethren Mission and Identity,*

1872-1922 (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 1997). He is a member of River East Mennonite Brethren Church.

Fernando Enns is Lecturer in Systematic Theology, Ethics, and Ecumenical Studies at the University of Hamburg in Germany, where he also is Director of the Institute of Peace Church Theology. His latest publication is *The Peace Church and the Ecumenical Community: Ecclesiology and the Ethics of Nonviolence* (Kitchener: Pandora Press; Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2007). He is currently a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, and is Vice-Chair of the Association of Mennonite Churches in Germany (AMG).

John J. Friesen is Professor Emeritus of History and Theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is the author of *Building Communities: The Changing Face of Manitoba Mennonites* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2007) and is a member of Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship in Winnipeg.

Bruce L. Guenther is Associate Professor of Church History and Mennonite Studies at Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (Langley campus), a partner in ACTS Seminaries at Trinity Western University. He has published numerous articles on Canadian evangelical Protestants, Mennonite history, and the history of theological education in Canada. Bruce and his wife Lois are members of Bakerview Mennonite Brethren Church in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

Brian Hamilton is a PhD student in moral theology at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana, where his research is in the history of Christian social and political thought. He belongs to Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana.

Helmut Harder is Professor Emeritus of Theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He was co-chair of the Mennonite Church's Confession of Faith Committee (1989-1995), which produced the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995), and of the International Catholic-Mennonite Dialogue (1998-2003).

He is the author of *David Toews Was Here 1870-1947* (Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2002). He is a member of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Doug Heidebrecht is Director of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg. His research interests include community hermeneutics as well as Mennonite Brethren identity and theology. He is currently completing a PhD dissertation through the University of Wales and is editing a book about Katie Funk Wiebe.

Scott Holland is Professor of Theology and Culture and Director of Peace Studies at Bethany Theological Seminary in partnership with the Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. He is the author of *How Do Stories Save Us?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006; Leuven: Belgium: Peeters Press, 2006).

Sheila Klassen-Wiebe is Associate Professor of New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Her primary area of teaching and research is the Gospels. She has recently written for *Gather 'Round*, a Sunday School curriculum published by Mennonite Publishing Network and Brethren Press. She is a member of Charleswood Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Karl Koop is Associate Professor of History and Theology at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. He is co-editor with Jeremy M. Bergen and Paul G. Doerksen of *Creed and Conscience: Essays in Honour of A. James Reimer* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007). He is a member of First Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast is Associate Professor of Theology and Associate Academic Dean at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, Ontario. His research interests are in the area of contemporary Protestant theology. He is currently translating the second volume of Karl Barth's *Göttingen Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). He is a member of Community Mennonite Church in Stouffville, Ontario.

George F. Pickens is Associate Professor of Theology and Mission at Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania. His current research interests include Jesus in world Christianity and Muslim-Christian encounter in West Africa. He is the author of *African Christian God-Talk: Matthew Ajuoga's Johera Narrative* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2004) and is a member of the Mechanicsburg (PA) Church of the Brethren.

Jonathan R. Wilson is Pioneer McDonald Professor of Theology at Carey Theological College, Vancouver, British Columbia. His most recent book is *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006). He is member and chair of the Board of Deacons at West Point Grey Baptist Church in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Gordon Zerbe is Professor of New Testament at Canadian Mennonite University, Winnipeg, Manitoba. His research interests include the study of Paul, peace, and the church's mission. He is the editor of *Reclaiming the Old Testament: Essays in Honour of Waldemar Janzen* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 2001) and is a member of Fort Garry Mennonite Fellowship in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology

How can the Believers Church family (made up of Baptists, Brethren, Churches of Christ, Churches of God, Mennonites, Pentecostals, and others) remain accountable to the Gospel amidst competing forces of globalization and localization?

These essays engage Believers Church theology with topics such as denominationalism, the sacramental tradition, the Emerging Church movement, and Global Christianity. In a spirit of critical dialogue, this volume revisits debates over the relationship between church and world, individual and community, and practices related to the church's mission.

Contributors:

Gareth Brandt

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Paul Doerksen

Irma Fast Dueck

Fernando Enns

John J. Friesen

Bruce L. Guenther

Brian Hamilton

Doug Heidebrecht

Scott Holland

Sheila Klassen-Wiebe

Karl Koop

Arnold Neufeldt-Fast

George F. Pickens

Jonathan R. Wilson

Gordon Zerbe

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