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A COVENANTING PEOPLE

Edmund Janzen

Among the urgent issues arising from the diverse theological movements of the twentieth century is that of the nature of the church. It is not a simple matter for the church of our day to grasp the New Testament concept of the church clearly, and to realize it in practice. Many models of what it means to be the church are available today. However, less and less frequently is the contemporary church defined as a covenanting community of believers. Nor is such an understanding of the church commonly present in how the people of God "do" church. Cultural, commercial, and even political influences have tended to shape our concept of the membership, organization, and mission of the church.

It is possible to discover wide deviations in biblical understanding and in historical expression of what it means to be the people of God. On the one hand one can see a developed absolutism in which the individual member and even the individual congregation are of little account (a

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hierarchical model based on the succession of apostolic authority). On the other hand one can see a pronounced individualism wherein the individual member and the individual congregation insist upon complete self-determination and absolute autonomy (a free-church model based on freedom of association and congregational authority). It is difficult to retain the biblical ideal within balance.

Central to the Mennonite Brethren (MB) view of the church (and consistent with historical Anabaptism) is the conviction that the church is composed of those who freely accept the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, turn away from a life of sin, and voluntarily are baptized into the body of Christ as expressed in a visible local congregation. Conversion for the Mennonite Brethren (as for the Anabaptists) is a two-dimensional experience. It emphasizes justification by faith based on true repentance, and it results in a new life patterned after the teaching and example of Christ. Indeed, faith in Christ must be linked with following Christ. The true believer is deeply aware that he has said "No" to self-centered living and with all his heart, mind and body set out to live a new life for the Lord and His Church. How one behaves will be determined by what one believes. Similarly, ethical choices will reflect and be consistent with the new inner nature of the believer.

The Nature of the Covenant Community

In a paper prepared for a Canadian Mennonite Brethren Study Conference in 1978, John Redekop notes four "normal traits" that characterize the Believers' Church. They are: 1) living under the authority of the Word; 2) separation of church and state; 3) the church as a voluntary gathering of covenanted believers, and 4) separation of church and world.

The concept of the New Testament church as a covenanting community of believers is not a notion of the twentieth or sixteenth centuries. Rather there are ample antecedents in both Biblical and historical perspective that document the validity of such a definition of the church. The description of those chosen as God's set-apart people appears in the Old Testament in terms of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants in Genesis and Exodus. To be sure, such an ideology of election due to God's favor often bred an inclusive view of peoplehood which in turn developed into spiritual arrogance. The prophets thundered against this abuse of spiritual privilege and the failure to accept the responsi-

bility inherent in the covenant commitment. At Pentecost, the 120 and all whom God would add to them were now the people of God, "in continuity with the people of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants" (Bender, 2). Paul, like Peter at Pentecost, made it clear to Gentile believers that they too were a part of the historic (and now new) people of God. It was the Galatians whom he called "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The Gentiles, he said, had been

alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and were strangers to the covenants of promise.... but now ... you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ ... who has made us both one, ... one body through the cross, thereby bringing hostility to an end (Eph. 2:12-22).

As H.S. Bender rightly concludes, "the new people of God are of course under a new covenant and order, with a new mode of organization and administration, a new standard of ethics, a new relationship to the world, and new resources in Christ and the Holy Spirit for their life under the Lordship of Christ"(4).

Further, the identification of the disciples of Jesus as the covenant people of God is supported by the New Testament's application to the church of a multitude of other terms and concepts once applied to Israel in the Old Testament — the remnant, the elect, the sons of Abraham, a holy nation, the exodus pilgrims. And that was their self-perception as well. Though never using the word *ecclesia* (lit., "called out together ones") in his epistles, Peter states most clearly the idea that the body of believers ("God's own people") is the continuing people of God (I Peter 2:9-10) — but only if they respond to God's grace. As Israel, so the church. The covenant was not effective at Sinai until Israel responded to God with her "Amen." Similarly, the church came into existence in response to God, by repentance and faith. The Holy Spirit came (and comes) only upon those who believe.

The Anabaptists of the Reformation period sought to be the true church of Christ after the New Testament pattern, and consequently rejected the mass church of the Reformers for the believers' church.

There was to be no crypto-discipleship in the private retreat of contemplation. Nor was there to be any surrender to the life standards of the world by a retreat into justification by faith. Christ was to be made visible in the church,

and the church was to be made visible in the world, whatever the cost. This the Anabaptists conceived to be the original apostolic pattern of the church as given in the New Testament, and they viewed themselves as restoring this pattern, and thus completing the Reformation (Bender, 20-21).

The founding leaders of the Mennonite Brethren church in 1860 saw themselves as the spiritual heirs of the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, and of the New Testament church before that. In the Document of Secession (6 January 1860) they made four specific references to the teachings of Menno Simons, and then concluded their declaration with the significant statement: "In all other articles of our confession, we are also in accord with Menno Simons" (Toews, 1975, 3). The name "Mennonite Brethren" which the founding fathers gave to the new church in 1860 was not the result of practical expediency, nor a matter of ecclesiastical diplomacy. "It was," says J.A. Toews, "a conscious and deliberate identification with the historic theological position of the Anabaptist Mennonite movement" (Toews, 1975, 3).

Joining the Covenant Community

For Mennonite Brethren since 1860, baptism of the adult believer was "the covenant of a good conscience toward God" (I Peter 2:21). It was the hallmark of discipleship. It was the pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ. It was a witness to the transforming grace of God in one's life. Reception into church membership followed the ordinance of baptism. Congregational life and work have always been an important part of being a member of a Mennonite Brethren church. "When believers join the church, they become part of a Christian family in which each member carries responsibility for all other members, including the decision-making. The freedom to join in decision-making is, however, coupled with the obligation to follow the entire body in its version and decisions whether one agrees or disagrees with them" (Wiebe, 29). Implied in this statement is an approach to decision-making that yields individual rights and opinions for the good of the corporate whole. Also implied is a covenantal style of being and doing church.

Frequently (depending upon leadership and direction of the local Mennonite Brethren church) newly baptized believers were asked to review and accept a "covenant," a written understanding

of mutually shared responsibilities incumbent upon all members. Though this collection of statements often contained positive admonitions to attend, to tithe, to witness, to pray, to bear burdens, it was often viewed as a legalistic code of ethics: not to smoke, not to drink, not to dance, not to associate with "the world."

Today many view church membership as an option. More importantly, many in our Mennonite Brethren churches who have joined, view church membership as an individual privilege. Indeed, American Evangelicalism suggests a view of salvation that is subjective and individualistic: if one confesses one's sins and loves Jesus, one is ready for baptism, and that is sufficient. For some, membership in a local body is of secondary, or limited importance. Certainly it is not seen as essential to living the Christian life in terms of individual ethical decision-making in personal life styles. Thus a certain independence emerges. Church members become "free spirits" not readily accountable to anyone but to their consciences and the Holy Spirit. By attitude and by act many deny that they are their "brother's keeper," or that their brother/sister should even evidence concern for them.

The New Testament, however, stresses the matter of mutual concern for one another, including matters of conduct in everyday life (Gal. 6:1-2; I Thess. 5:11). Joining the church did and should still represent a seriously considered and voluntary choice. It marks a juncture of individual discipleship with corporate discipleship. In the Anabaptist practice, the believer covenanted by baptism with the congregation to become submissive to its discipline and to participate in its total fellowship. Thus the form of the congregation (i.e., its polity) was that of a voluntarily gathered group that covenanted together in regard to their witness of the Lordship of Christ and to the Holy Spirit binding them together.

Futher, notes Katie Funk Wiebe,

this basic view of the corporate Christian life is also the basis for the way Mennonite Brethren congregations function today. Though spread far and wide geographically, we opt to function as one body in many aspects of our denominational witness.... All are invited to join spirits, gifts and energy at various conference levels to extend the Kingdom of God.... Member churches are expected to support conference activities, recognize and abide by all conference

resolutions, and carry them out to the best of their abilities (29).

While it is true that our Confession of Faith in describing the organization of the church states “each congregation regulates its own affairs,” it goes on to state “the work of the brotherhood is conducted in a spirit of interdependence, love, and submission one to another under the Lordship of Christ” (15).

In 1950, a document on “Evangelical Freedom in the Mennonite Brethren Churches of Canada” was presented by the Board of Spiritual and Social Concerns and was adopted by the Canadian Conference. In the resolution a significant reference to the Apostolic Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) is made as a means of addressing the spirit of localism and individual church autonomy.

By means of this council the principle was established that for the resolution of difficult questions, one assemble, deliberate, and come to a consensus. Then the resultant decision is to be conveyed to the churches, to serve as a guide for church life and action. Such decisions should conform to the Word and directive guidance of God. The resolution of these questions was not left to individual churches, not even to Paul or Peter, but was expected from the corporate body of mature brethren (Toews, 1980, 49).

This shared commitment to the lordship of Christ is crucial to a proper understanding of a true believers’ church. It is the basis for motivation in a free and joyful obedience to God’s will and for responsible participation with the people of God. It is at the point of such a commitment on the part of an individual member or a local church that the realization of the biblical view of the church as a covenant community will either stand or fall.

Discipline in the Covenant Community

The believers’ church concept of discipline is based on God’s Word (Matt. 5:23-24; 18:15-19). It emerges from the teaching of Jesus, and its context is that in a covenant community there is no “private” sin. The sin of one member involves the entire body. Thus the corporate church carries responsibility for the sin of each individual, and the individual carries responsibility for all his brothers and sisters. The church as a covenant community exercises a lively sense of sin — not in an hierarchical manner but in a mutual “caring-enough-to-confront” manner. Only a church that believes in and practices discipline maintains

the sanctity of the body of Christ. It is in such a church, where mutual responsibility is practiced, that one is held accountable (and holds others accountable) in following through on one's commitment to Christ. Discipline is shared by members and made binding at the point where a corporate consensus is obtained under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the yardstick of the Scriptures. Indeed, searching the Scriptures until a consensus is reached replaces the spirit of individualism so common today.

Marlin Jeschke contends that where the covenant concept is only acknowledged or understood by some individual members and churches, the easiest avenue available to address offenses and grievances will be the legal route. Who can deny that in our culture today even Christians choose to litigate matters in courts of law that should have best been adjudicated within the pale of the congregation? Unless a local congregation (or a district/provincial conference) spells out the expectations of members and member churches in their common life as the people of God, more and more cases of church discipline will go unresolved. Only the most blatant and public offenses will be adjudicated, and more members will follow the cultural pattern of suing one another and the church(es) in order to settle grievances.

Once again the covenant community of the Mennonite Brethren must activate what it has committed itself to do in its Confession of Faith:

Through public teaching, sympathetic encouragement, private counseling and earnest rebuke, the church promotes constructive discipline. Believers are encouraged to live a life of Christian discipleship, and to progress toward spiritual maturity so that the church will glorify God in the world.... (15).

Dialogue and Discernment in the Covenant Community

Dialogue within the church assumes the equality of believers in Christ. This means that each member has something to contribute to the understanding of God's will for the church. The importance of lay participation is clear: the accent is not on any one person's view, but on the principle of consensus and the priesthood of believers. The covenant community is the context for ethical decision-making. Paul shamed the Corinthians for going before pagan courts with lawsuits against one another. Indeed, Paul contended that even "the least esteemed" member

of the Corinthian church was competent to judge such matters because he/she too had the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:18). Similarly, the solution to the problem at Thessalonica recommended by Paul was “testing” (spiritual discernment) — “Do not quench the Spirit ... but test everything” (I Thess. 5:19-21). The mode of discernment is conversation. The quality of its conversation is what sets apart the covenant community. How do we “test the spirits” today? An old Anabaptist baptismal formula asked, “Will you give counsel and receive counsel?” The formula presupposed a communal approach to problems in which every baptized member was expected to participate. Honesty, openness, and a willingness to discern what is right and wrong are necessary ingredients of the covenant community.

Local congregations (as well as the larger conference) need to exercise their gifts of discernment with crucial current issues in mind. The church must not succumb to the culture around it. Our culture today is both pluralistic and yet individualistic; it espouses ethical relativism and dismisses absolutes. Consequently, our churches are less and less prone to hold people morally responsible for their actions.

Ethical responsibility need not be expressed legalistically. Legalism flourishes in an institutionalized environment where the reasons for “doing things right” have become as important as the reasons for “doing right things.” Paul Hiebert provides some helpful insights to the matter of legalism and ethical decision-making in a chapter entitled “Conversion in Cross-cultural Perspective” (88-106). He suggests that the majority of the Western church thinks in terms of “bounded sets,” i.e., our minds think of a set of common characteristics held by a certain object, group, or class. Therefore, we can quickly define an apple as distinct from an orange. While both have essential qualities of a fruit, there is a clearly noted boundary between the categories. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. It cannot be 70% apple and 30% orange. So all objects in a bounded set are uniform in characteristics. Similarly we tend to define Christians in terms of a “bounded set.” The boundary is clearly noted in terms of right beliefs and right practice. Thus one can emphasize certain behavior patterns (both positive and negative) as essential in defining who is or is not a Christian.

Hiebert recommends a “centered set” approach to Christian ethics. Less common to our Western minds is the notion that (as in a magnetic field) the primary focus in deciding what is or

is not Christian is what is at the center, and whether movement is toward the center or away from it. Thus, rather than focusing on the boundary, the emphasis is on the Prime Motive in our life, Jesus Christ, and whether we are moving deliberately closer to Him or away from Him. Thus behavior is judged not so much in terms of stepping out of bounds as in dynamic growth towards Christ-likeness.

“Bounded set” mentality quickly lends itself to codifying practices and patterns (legalism); “centered set” thinking provides the option of focusing on relationships and attitudes (freedom). Even a covenant community of believers could develop a framework of legalism as the basis of its covenant. Unfortunately, some within the Mennonite Brethren brotherhood can testify to such motives and methods in their past. Legalism refuses to allow for variance and, much like the Pharisees, locates spiritual maturity in right acts.

The implications of this form of the covenant community are urgent for us. The agenda of the congregation needs to grow out of the needs within the groups where the will of the Lord is sought. This is part of discipleship. Consider the biblical model for ethical decision-making in the church. Acts 15 provides the setting for the Church Council at Jerusalem, an event to which Luke plainly attaches the highest importance. The apostles did not simply hand down an edict as a solution to the problem caused by the rapid progress of Gentile evangelization in Antioch and vicinity. The danger of complete cleavage between the Jerusalem church and the Antioch church loomed ominously. The “brotherhood” at Jerusalem was given an opportunity for dialogue and decision-making. However, the church did not merely discuss, but engaged in seeking the will of God earnestly to solve a sticky ethical issue. What emerged was an apostolic letter; yet the process was one of mutual discipleship. The result was not legalism. Legalism is impersonal dogma; discipleship is personal following. In legalism the code stands sovereign; in discipleship the believer follows the Master. Legalism allows for no exceptions; discipleship seeks to relate individual conduct to the claims of Christ in everyday situations as tested by the larger church. Legalism judges all alike. Mutual discipleship recognizes that believers follow Christ in the light of their corporate understanding of the will of God and their maturity in Christ. The covenant community approach provides the context for collective wrestling with significant issues, thus furthering the

understanding of God's will. A covenant seen in that light can become a blessing rather than a burden.

Promoting Unity and Loyalty in the Covenant Community

The New Testament tells us that while local churches were distinct bodies of believers, they were not absolutely independent despite ethnic, geographic, and cultural barriers. Indeed, the decision and advice of the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 (cited earlier) were sent to all the churches so that these resolutions might guide them in their thinking. It appears that Paul did not readily separate one church from another in his thinking, for frequently what he wrote to one church became applicable to all the churches (the Colossian and Laodicean churches were to exchange Paul's letters to them, cf. Col. 4:16). Former M.B. Conference leader A.H. Unruh once said, "In the Scripture we learn that the churches moved forward unitedly. The Scripture does not teach the absolute independence in the local church" (4-5).

In today's contexts of pluralism — many denominations, many causes, and many leaders — those churches claiming a common understanding of their history, mission, and purpose should advocate interdependence and unity. Thus the churches of a conference such as the Mennonite Brethren are bound together in fellowship and understanding of the nature of the New Testament church. Primarily theological and historical distinctives and not ecclesiastical structure or machinery give shape to the larger church.

To promote unity and loyalty (the spirit of wanting to belong), the people of God must experience a common vision — a direction that the churches can affirm, and a goal that the churches can grasp. Unless such a vision is sufficiently transcendent and calls local churches to a higher level of commitment and service, the conference runs the risk of "losing" churches and their members to other causes and ministries, many of which may be worthy and virtuous. Conference institutions (schools, boards, agencies) have the right to ask, as servant-arms of the larger church conference, what the vision and direction for the future are. Similarly, local churches must recognize, affirm and demonstrate unity with and loyalty to the larger church conference. This is an important issue for the spiritual health of the corporate covenant community. A local church should have the integrity to follow through on the commitments that its

informed delegates have made on its behalf at church conventions, whether in matters of doctrine, ethics or financial obligations to conference projects.

Since the touchstone of the covenanting community are integrity and mutual responsibility, it is incumbent on each local church to work aggressively at developing and sustaining unity and loyalty by interpreting to itself the central vision and the various ministries of the conference of which it is a part. It is also incumbent upon church conference and pastoral leadership to articulate a unifying vision which will cause local congregations to want to belong and to support.

Several Practical Suggestions

Our local Mennonite Brethren churches need to seriously discuss and pray about those positions that the larger brotherhood has taken. Very few of our younger members have been part of decision-making procedures and often view conference resolutions as legalisms of a former generation. They do not own them and may therefore tend to disregard them. What stance do local churches and members take to "conference" issues? Not only is the concept of discipleship and covenant community at stake here, but so is the important feeling of ownership of and identification with our conference.

We would do well to provide a positive context in each congregation for teaching the principles of ethical decision-making and the "doing" of ethics. The development of a greater sense of loyalty and involvement result when people feel they are part of the decision-making process and experience the joy of shared responsibility and accountability. Seminars on ethics, a series of studies on the nature of the believers' church, and sermons or classes on decision-making and discipleship are several suggestions for local church agencies.

When local Mennonite Brethren churches view themselves as covenant communities, they will be less threatened by cultural change. Indeed, the consensus model provides a way of initiating change and yet allows for group cohesiveness. So often the church reacts to cultural pressures by "caving in" in bits and pieces as first one, then another and finally a stream of members pursue an independent course. Discussion after the fact is too late; rigorous discussion before and during the fact can make it possible for a group to either change as a group or reaffirm its previous stance. In any event, "doing things" for the right (Scrip-

tural) reasons is patently superior to "doing things" because everyone else is doing them.

Mennonite Brethren churches should be encouraged to activate a simple church covenant as a useful vehicle for the teaching and training of its members in responsibility and accountability. Those who are newly baptized or are joining from other fellowships should be fully informed as to the nature of a believers' church care of its membership. The expectations of membership in our local congregations should be communicated honestly to those voluntarily seeking membership. The covenant is best presented as a positive means of relating biblical principles to ethical issues.

The General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel should initiate a change of name of the Conference that is consistent with and reflects covenant theology. Both symbol and substance are important in determining what our name communicates to ourselves and to others.

Since 1963 we have been the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Such a name suggests a view of the church that accents local church autonomy and is descriptive of a loosely bound confederation of churches. Should not the name of our denomination reflect more accurately our ecclesiology and our desired polity? The adoption of the name The Mennonite Brethren Church of North America would be more consistent with what we believe about who we are (a believers' church) and who we want to become (a covenanting community).

Polity implications inherent in such a change includes: (1) the development of church/conference structure that provide for autonomy with accountability; (2) the greater integration of conference structure so that conferences do not operate too independently; (3) a greater uniformity in local church governance with toleration for differences in worship and leadership styles; (4) greater General Conference visibility in the local church.

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