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THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

John E. Toews

What life have you
if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community,
and no community not lived
in praise of God.^[1]

The church has long confessed that God created persons for community, and that only within the context of community can authentic Christian life be nurtured and sustained. T.S. Eliot points to the truth that the person who has no people has no God.

*The church
is the place
where the
coming of
God ... is
... evident*

Why This Paper?

This paper is necessary because some modern Christians think they no longer need the church, and because some local churches no longer think they need other churches.

The immediate occasion for this paper is Mennonite Brethren conversation about the relationship of baptism to church membership and the Lord's Supper. The Mennonite Brethren Church teaches that baptism is into a local church as a manifestation of the body of Christ, and that only persons incorporated into a local church can participate in the Lord's Supper. This teaching is being challenged today. There are people

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who believe that a person can be baptized on confession of faith without being incorporated into a church, and that any person, especially children, who confess Jesus as Lord can participate in the Lord's Supper without either baptism or incorporation into a local church.

The "trigger issue," the relationship of baptism to church membership and the Lord's Supper, is part of a much larger set of questions in the Mennonite Brethren Church — the meaning of the church as a covenant community, the meaning of church membership, and the relationship of local churches to the Conference of churches and the larger body of Christ. The original name of the Mennonite Brethren Church was the "Mennonite Brethren Brotherhood." The name disclosed a theology of the church. The Christian life was defined as a life of interdependence between Christians in a family, and church life was defined by relationships of interdependence between congregations. The Christian life could not be lived alone, and church life could not be sustained and nurtured in isolation from accountability to other churches in the family.

The historic Mennonite Brethren understanding of church is under challenge today. The term "covenant" has lost its meaning. Accountability is rejected by most people. The Christian life and church life are defined by the modern cult of individualism. A Christian is a person who has "accepted Jesus," and lives in a personal relationship with him. Church is convenient, but not necessary. Furthermore, church is defined entirely in social contract terms. I participate in a church as long as it meets my needs. The church is responsible to nurture my personal and spiritual life; it has no responsibility and no business to tell me how I should live and/or to call me to accountability if I decide to live differently. The paradigm of the individual's relationship to the church also shapes how churches define their relationship to other churches. Churches associate with each other as long as the association benefits "my church." Inter-church structures, known as conferences or denominations in our time, have no authority and no claim on "my church" if "we" do not like what the conference is doing and/or saying.

The Mennonite Brethren loss of a sense of covenant community is not an isolated phenomenon. It is an illustration of the larger loss of community in North America, a loss documented repeatedly in recent years by a series of social com-

mentators.^[2] Modern men and women no longer accept Eliot's dictum that "there is no life that is not in community." They live by the illusion of the autonomous self. Life is centered in me; I can meet my needs as I choose without the need for community. The purpose of this paper is to outline a biblical theology of the church that will provide a theological foundation for the Mennonite Brethren Church to address these issues. It is not intended to address the specific issues themselves — this will be done in other papers at this and subsequent study conferences — but to offer a biblical basis for further study and guidance on the issues facing the church.

The Historic Foundations of the Church

The Original Calling Out ^[3]

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Ex. 20.2).

Israel was called into being as a people. God created this people by delivering them from slavery in Egypt. Israel's "calling out" is a paradigmatic event that defines the nature of the people of God.

The exodus event revealed both the nature of God and the nature of the community he intended to create. God embraced a humble and oppressed people. His deliverance of Israel annulled religious and social systems based on special privilege.

God's deliverance of Israel in the exodus inaugurated a new order of community. In this community there is an organic linkage between the event of calling/salvation and the structures of communal life. The structures of community must reflect the nature of the God who called and saved. Therefore, Israel is concerned with systems of justice, land distribution, use of capital, treatment of the vulnerable within society.

The people of God is first and foremost a people called into existence by God. Divine initiative is the foundation for the people of God. The fundamental terms for community in the Old and New Testament reflect this understanding: *qahal* (assembly), *eda* (congregation), *sod* (assembly), *ecclesia* (assembly, church). God is the one who calls a people. A

people gathers in response to the call of God.^{14]}

Because God's calling a people is the foundation of the church, the God who called is the source and center of this community. He is the absolute One who relativizes all other gods, powers and goods. He alone is the basis for community. Therefore the centrality of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20.3), and Israel's confession of faith, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6.4-5). The loss of this center meant the loss of unity and community; Israel became fractured by conflicting allegiances.

The church is the people called by God. This people is to worship God, and live together in community by the norms of righteousness and steadfast love that characterize the nature of the calling and saving God, as given in the Torah.

Israel's faithfulness to this center and norm varied over the centuries, but it was the center to which its teachers always called the people. Israel is the people of God because, and only because, God called her into existence from bondage. All deviations from that center, and from the righteousness and steadfast love of the calling God, must be judged.

The Messianic Renewal^{15]}

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (Mk. 1.14).

I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Mt. 16.18).

Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. The "fulfillment theme" that frames his preaching is clear evidence of the confluence of old and new. Jesus is acting in a new and decisive way to bring old hopes and promises to fulfillment.

Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God announces that God is present to renew his people. Several things follow. 1) Jesus calls for undivided loyalty to God. God's people must recenter life in God. All other allegiances — family, homes, land — must be surrendered (Mk. 10.29-30). 2) Jesus redefines community membership in a new and inclusive way. Because God's call creates community, all people, pure and impure, are invited. Existing religious and social presuppositions are rejected. Jesus does not destroy community by obliterating all

distinctions, but redefines community in terms of God's original vision of an outcast people called to be his people (e.g., Lk. 7.22; Mt. 11.5; Mt. 8.11; Lk. 10.25-37). 3) Jesus defines faithfulness in terms of the character of God. Because God is righteous and merciful, Jesus' followers are to be righteous and merciful. "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Mt. 6.33) and "be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Lk. 6.36).

Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God is nothing more or less than the renewal of God's original foundation for the people of God. God calls a people into existence that is to be centered in himself, and to live righteously and compassionately because that is who God is. Jesus renews the call for such a people in light of the eschatological presence of God through his mission and message.

In short, Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom cannot be understood apart from his intention to gather a renewed community of God's people. Jesus' mission is to gather the eschatological people of God over whom and through whom God reigns in kingly power.

No Jew could think of the Messiah or the Kingdom of God apart from peoplehood. The problem was that they thought of this peoplehood in nationalistic terms. It was for Jews only. Jesus'd mission to regather the people of God breaks the bounds of this nationalism with a universal vision. The nations are going to sit at the messianic banquet with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Mt. 8.11). Jesus' mission was to establish the rule of God in visible form. The shape of that visibility was the renewed people of God. God's eschatological presence and rule is to be present in a concrete people.

Two of Jesus' words about the church make this point.

Rock and Mission; Binding and Loosing (Matt. 16:17-19)

The context of this saying is a discussion about the identity and mission of Jesus. Jesus addresses the question by saying to Peter, "you are correct, I am the Messiah. And my messianic mission is to build the church on the rock."

The rock is a powerful image in Judaism. It is the sacred point of contact between heaven and earth from the time of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28. In the prophets the rock is eschatologized. It becomes the holy mount, the navel of the world, the sanctuary of the nations (Isa. 2.2-4; 60; Zeph. 3;

Zech. 8; Jer. 3.17). In the inter-testamental and early rabbinic writings the rock becomes the place where God is specially present to protect and to save his people.

Jesus' messianic mission is to build the church on the rock. The word for church is *ecclesia*, the term used in the Old Testament to describe the gathered assembly of God's people. It is the end-time community of salvation in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus' mission is to gather the eschatological people of God on the rock, to gather them together into the presence of God so that he may save and protect them.

This text brings together two classic messianic themes, the cosmic rock and the messianic building. The Messiah in Judaism is expected to build a new Temple where God will dwell in a new and powerful way among his people. Jesus says that his mission is to build the church on the rock as that messianic building. Jesus' mission is to gather the people of God together into the church as the visible community of God's presence in the world. The church is the place where the coming of God into the world is most clearly evident. The church is where the Kingdom of God is most visible.

Jesus says two other things about the church on the rock. First of all, the church will triumph over the gates of Hades. The phrase "the gates of Hades" is used in the inter-testamental literature as a synonym for Satan. That is, Satan and the powers of the demonic will not prevail over the church that is built on the rock. Jesus builds the church with the promise that the presence and power of God is greater than the presence and power of the demonic.

Secondly, the church engages in "binding and loosing". "Binding and loosing" is technical Jewish language that means two things. First, it is used in inter-testamental literature to denote the binding of Satan and the loosing of people bound by demonic powers. The language is used this way in the New Testament (see Mk. 3.27; 7.34-35; Mt. 12.19; Lk. 13.16; Rev. 20). "To bind and to loose" means to overcome Satan and to liberate victims from demonic powers.

"To bind and to loose" also means to engage in ethical discernment about what is right and/or wrong, to bind and to loose behavior consistent or inconsistent with the law, to judge or forgive where disobedience has or has not occurred, to bind a person who has sinned or to loose a person who thought he/she had violated the law but in fact had not.

“Binding and loosing” in Matthew 16 is clearly a reference to the binding and loosing of Satan. It is defined by the church triumphing over Satan with the keys of the kingdom. The image of “keys” is associated with the binding of Satan in Revelation 20. Jesus builds the church on the rock as a kingdom outpost to bind the powers of the demonic present in the world, and to liberate people from demonic powers and structures. The church is the Kingdom community where Satan is bound and where people are loosed.

A Community of Ethical Discernment (Matt. 18:15-20)

The Matthew 18.15-20 reference to binding and loosing defines the church as a community of ethical discernment. The church is to engage in discernment of right and wrong. The church is to bind and loose how Christians live in the world. When a brother/sister sins he/she is to be bound or loosed, confronted about the sin and called to repentance. Where repentance does not occur the church is to discipline. This understanding of “binding and loosing” is also the meaning of the John 20.23 reference to “binding and loosing” associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians who have the Spirit are to engage in ethical discernment, forgiveness and discipline.

Jesus builds the church as a kingdom outpost of ethical discernment. The church is the gathered people of God discerning what it means to live as the people of God in the world, and to hold each other accountable to the consensus discerned. It is to free fellow believers who sin and repent, and to discipline disciples who sin and do not repent.

Summary

God calls a people. That people is to worship God and live righteously and compassionately before him and with each other. Jesus’ mission is to renew the call of God to his people. Jesus’ renews the people of God as the church on the rock where God is present in history to bind and to loose all people from demonic powers and to free them for faithful living.

*The Theological Interpretation of the Church
in the New Testament*^[6]

You shall be my people (2 Cor. 6.16)

We who are many are one body (1 Cor. 10.17)

Jesus not only renewed the people of God, but commissioned his disciples to proclaim the gospel to all people and to build the church among all peoples of the world. The question to which we now move is, how is the church understood and interpreted by the first apostles and teachers? What do the writings of the New Testament say about the nature of the church?

To our surprise, the New Testament provides no theological definition of the church. Ecclesiology in the New Testament is shaped by images, not definitional statements. Nowhere are we told that the church is New Testament ecclesiology is metaphorical, not doctrinal. Furthermore, the images used are many and diverse, not singular. Most theolog-ies of the church are doctrinal statements. When ecclesiologies do venture into the realm of images, they usually select one or only a few as the normative definition of the church, e.g., the church as the body of Christ.

We struggle with metaphorical theology, with images as the mode of articulating theology. A metaphor makes a comparison. It creates a tension between two dissimilar things to bring out points of similarity and difference. The point of comparison is specific and partial. No metaphor is complete. All images are partial. We are scientific in our thinking; we prefer definitional or propositional statements that attempt to state the essence of the whole. Biblical writers communicate more via images than by definitional statements. One of our great frustrations in understanding Jesus' message of the kingdom of God, for example, is that he defines it with stories and parables; he never says "the Kingdom of God is...", but "the kingdom of God is like..." The same is true of the New Testament descriptions of the church. The New Testament writers define the church by images, 73 images at least (see the Appendix).

Metaphorical theology was the dominant way of theologizing in the early church.^[7] Images were used to describe something that was both known and also mysterious. A reality that is a sign of God's presence in history is described by images that awaken the imagination. Thus Christ is described by many different images. The reality of Christ cannot be captured by one definitional statement or by one image. Every image conceivable is used by the writers of the New Testament to describe the work and person of Christ. So also with the

church. The reality of the church as the eschatological people of God in the world cannot be defined easily or simply. Many different word pictures are needed to describe the nature of the church.

To understand the nature of the church in the New Testament, therefore, we must study the images of the church. These images can be studied in two different ways. First, the theology of the different writers — Matthew, Paul, I Peter — can be studied to see which images they use to interpret the church. Paul's view of the church (e.g., people of God, body of Christ, household) is similar to and different than I Peter's (elect, holy nation, household) because he uses similar and different images, or he interprets the same images in different ways. Secondly, the images can be studied thematically, by searching for overarching linkages between the images that suggests some clustering. Both methods are necessary to develop a complete theology of the church in the New Testament. Because of time limitations at this Conference, only the second method will be followed in this paper. These limitations necessitate the selection of images; the study of all the images would not change the thesis of the paper. The themes that define the clusters represent interpretive proposals; the themes are not so classified in the New Testament itself.

People of God Images

One of the most powerful images of the church in the New Testament is the people of God. The image is used by six writers in fourteen writings.⁶¹ Many of the references employ quotations from the Old Testament. The image names a particular people, Israel. All other peoples are *ethnoi*. Israel is the people of God because God has chosen her in a particular historical event, the exodus. God's election of Israel places a special responsibility on the chosen nation.

The New Testament use is continuous with the Old, as the many citations indicate. The church is a people created by God. The accent is on God and his action. The church as the people of God asserts the priority and the power of God. The church is the people of God only because God has called them, dwells within and among them. Two passages especially make this point. 1 Peter 2.9-10 states with heavy dependence on the Old Testament that prior to God's calling, the people of the church lived a shadowy nonexistence in darkness that

could only be defined as non-peoplehood. But a transformation occurred because God acted. Paul makes the same point in Rom. 9.25-26. "Not my people" became "my people" because of the action of God (see also 2 Cor. 6.16; Heb. 8.10; Rev. 21.3).

The people of God image serves several purposes in the New Testament. First, it connects the church with Israel. The church is continuous with the story of God's dealings with Israel. Secondly, membership in the people of God is radically redefined. Gentiles are included in the people of God. They are legitimately God's people because God calls and includes them in fulfillment of his promises to Abraham. The particularism of the Old Testament is exploded into a universalism that embraces all people.

The people of God image is the center of a cluster of terms that originally apply to Israel but are redefined in the New Testament to interpret the meaning of the church. These images come from different fields of meaning in Israel's history. One set of images is political: a chosen race (1 Pet. 2.9), a holy nation (1 Pet. 2.9), the twelve tribes (Jas. 1.1; Rev. 7.4), the patriarchs, the exodus, the house of David, the elect. These images serve three functions. First they link the church with the history of Israel. Continuity with God's prior action in the world is important. Secondly, they emphasize the significance of being inside this people rather than outside. It is important to be elect, a holy nation, the children of Abraham. The people God creates is inclusive. New members can and are adopted into a people with a long history. Thirdly, they contrast the people of God with the nations. God's people live by a different politics.

A second set of images comes from the pastoral economy of Israel: flock^[9], sheep^[10], shepherds^[11]. These images refer to the church as the possession of God. The picture of the church as flock leads immediately to the picture of the shepherd. The master image is the shepherd-flock. The church is the flock of God. Jesus is the appointed shepherd of the flock. Shepherd and flock are interdependent; the flock know his voice, he leads them to pasture and to the fold. The central point of the images is the divine ownership of the flock.

A third set of images derive from the cultic life of Israel: the Holy City, the holy temple, the priesthood, the festivals. Every culture in the Ancient Near East had a sacred city.

Jerusalem was that city for Israel. It was the place where God chose to dwell among his people. It was the center for kingly rule, prophetic proclamation, priestly mediation, and messianic hope. That is why Jesus journeys to Jerusalem to possess the city as king, prophet, and Messiah (especially the Gospel of Luke). Four New Testament writings picture the church as Jerusalem: Luke, Galatians, Hebrews and Revelation. The church is the Jerusalem where God dwells among his people. The center of Jerusalem was the Temple. It was the place where God and the Spirit of God is present among the people of God. Therefore the church is pictured as the temple in the New Testament (1 Cor. 6.19; 3.16-17; Eph. 2.21). It is the place where God's Spirit dwells. The Temple in Judaism was the center of the priestly ministry. Significantly, the two New Testament writers who picture the church as priests (1 Pet. and Rev.) do not use the term for a special form of ministry within the church, as in the Old Testament, but to define the church as a whole. The church is the priesthood in the New Testament. The images of the church that are derived from Israel's cultic life again link the church with the history of Israel. But they also suggest the radical revision the Gospel initiates. The church is the holy city, the temple, and the priesthood. The church is the place where God is present in history, the community that celebrates God's saving work.

Community Images

The church as the people of God is characterized as a community by a series of images. Many of these images are usually used to define the shape of individual Christian life. But in the New Testament they are used in the plural to define the corporate nature of the church. The church is community.

Let me illustrate. Three terms are used in the plural to describe the church. Saints (*hagioi*), faithful ones (*pistoi*), righteous ones (*dikaioi*) define the character of the church. Individual Christians are saints or righteous because they are part of the action of God that has created the community of the saints or the righteous ones. All three terms have ecclesiological meaning that is prior to their meaning for individual Christian life. What is true of these three images, is true of all the images in this section.

Saints, Faithful Ones, Righteous Ones

The church is saints (*hagioi*), a people set apart by God's "setting apart" action ("saint," singular, is not used in the NT to refer to one member of the church). The verb ("sanctified") indicates that the "setting apart" has resulted in the creation of a community of saints. The point of "saints" language is that God has created a holy people (a saintly community) because that is who he is (1 Pet. 1.15-16). The process of saint-making is anchored in the death of "the saint" (*ho hagios*), Jesus Christ (Heb. 10.14, 29; 13.12; 1 Cor. 1.30; 6.11; Eph. 5.26). The dual relation of the saints to the holy God and to Christ "the saint" is the work of the Spirit. The community of saints has been born of the Spirit and baptized into this one Spirit; it is defined, determined and empowered by the Spirit. The community of saints are to act saintly, as a people set apart by God to be like God and to be missional. The identity and the ethic is corporate.

The saints are the "the faithful ones" (*pistoi*; cf. Col. 1.2). The church is people who have faith (trusted) God. Acts describes "the faithful ones" as bold, as unanimous in praise and prayer, as full of power and grace, and as sharing everything in common. The act of trusting God creates a community with inner cohesion and dynamic. Romans offers a very different picture. The faithful ones are so sharply divided they cannot eat together or agree on which day to worship. Therefore, they must be instructed to "welcome one another" in the same way God welcomed them in Christ (chs. 14-15). They must leave judgment to God, and give priority to the common good. To trust God creates communal bonds that are strong enough to overcome ethnic differences in the church.

The faithful ones are the righteous ones (*dikaioi*). The language again is plural. The church is righteous people, people whom God has made righteous through the faithfulness of Jesus. The accent falls on God. The righteous God makes a righteous people. The church is people who share a common ground, the transforming righteousness of God, and, therefore, a common ethic, to be the righteous peoplehood they have been made.

Followers, Slaves, 'Household of God'

Two images picture the church in relationship to Jesus as

teacher. The church is followers and disciples. The disciples in the Gospels are the historical followers of Jesus, but they also are the archetypes for subsequent disciples.^[12] “Disciples” in Acts describe the totality of the church as well as individual believers.^[13] The church as disciples means a community of learners of Christ (Eph. 4.20-21; Heb. 5.8-9). The content of that learning has very significant ecclesiological consequences. It means to treat the least of the disciples as Christ incognito (Mt. 10.40-42; 25.45; Jn. 13.20), to take up the cross of Christ, to reduce family membership to secondary status, to love neighbors and enemies, to be on one level with all other disciples as “brothers” (Mt. 23.8-9), and to treat the least as the first (Mk. 10.35-45; Mt. 23.10-12).

The slave (*douloi*) image describes the church’s subservient nature. The master image of slavery is total ownership and allegiance to one master. The image is used at least 50 times and in 18 different writings to characterize the church. The center point of the image is slavery to Jesus Christ as master and lord. The church is people who have died to all other masters and allegiances. Therefore, the church is people bound by Christ’s death to slavery to all those for whom he died; they are slaves of one another (Gal. 5.13). Relationships in the church have been revolutionized because every obligation toward the Messiah is immediately transferable into attitudes and actions towards fellow disciples (Mt. 10.24; Jn. 13.16; Mk. 10.44-45).

The church as “the household of God” (1 Pet. 4.17) is the last community metaphor we note. A household in the ancient world was defined by a common ancestor. A common patriarch constituted a people and a family, while the loss of this common parent destroyed peoplehood. The church is a household because Christians have a common patriarch, God.

The people who join a community are called children of the leader. Members of the church are children of God. “Sonship” binds people both to the father, God, and to each other in the family. The relationships of children within the church family is defined by family terms. “Brother/sister” is the most common form of address in the New Testament. It defines people in the church as members of a common family.

The church is a community. It is a plurality of people that are viewed as a collective whole. Whether described as saints, disciples, slaves, or brothers, the church is defined as a people-

hood by its common patriarch, God.

Cosmic Images

One set of images picture the church in universal and cosmic terms. The church is more than a community of God's people in continuity with the history of God's saving activity in the world. It is the fulfillment of God's promises. This fulfillment is so grand and complete that cosmic categories are necessary to interpret the meaning of God's work.

The church is a new creation (2 Cor. 5.17). A more cosmic category is hardly imaginable. The church replaces the creation of the world in Genesis 1-2. The church means the passing of the old order of creation and the emergence of a new creation of God. To enter the church through union with Christ is to enter a new eschatological creation.

Two other images make the same point. The church is the first fruits (*aparche*). The language recalls the Jewish practice of giving the first produce — grain, flocks, bread, children — to God. The practice reflects a profound theology: God is lord of all and gives gifts to all; humanity dedicates all productivity to God; the appearance and presentation of the first fruit is a pledge of the coming harvest; the first has the power to represent the others in the series; the first has the power to sanctify and to cleanse the entire series.

This first fruits theology is used in the New Testament to interpret the meaning of Christ and salvation. He is the first fruits of the dead (1 Cor. 15.20-23), the promise of the resurrection of all God's children. The Spirit is the first fruits, literally the down payment, of the coming redemption (Rom. 8.23; 11.16). While less frequently acknowledged, this first fruits theology also shapes a significant understanding of the church. The first converts in a province are the promise of the salvation for the whole region (Rom. 16.5; 1 Cor. 16.15). The church as a whole is the first fruits of all God's creatures (Jas. 1.18; cf. also Rev. 14.4; 2 Thes. 2.13). The church is a sign of what God will yet do in the world, regionally and cosmically. The church is the promise of God's future.

The New Humanity

The church is also the new humanity (Eph. 2, Col. 3.10). The assumption behind the image is that two humanities exhaust the human and cosmic possibilities. Every person

incorporates himself/herself into one of the two by an act of decision. Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 assert that Christ is the new Human Being; he is the first fruits of a new humanity that God is creating in the world. That new humanity is defined as the church in Ephesians and Colossians. The new humanity stands in contrast to the old humanity. Both humanities have distinct practices. The one divides people according to class, race, and/or religion. The other transcends all divisions and makes everything new. The new humanity is the image of God, another new creation image. The fall of Genesis 3 has been reversed. God is creating a new humanity through Christ.

Another creation image pictures the church as light. Nineteen different New Testament writings describe the church as light. The light is given by God to the children of light (Jn. 12.35; 1 Thes. 5.5). The image is used to describe the unity and the mission of the church. There is but one light set over against the one darkness (2 Cor. 4.6; 1 Pet. 2.9). When the light shines in peoples' lives it communicates fellowship in the light as a common bond (Col. 1.12; 1 Jn. 1-2). The light is set on a hill to illumine the world (Mt. 5.14-16; Phi. 2.15; Acts 26.18). The light image draws on a major religious idiom of all ancient religions. It is probably more influential, often in subtle ways, than many images which have dominated theological statements about and controversies over the nature of the church. e.g., the body of Christ.

The point of the cosmic images is to present the church as the new creation of God. The church is the fulfillment and the promise of what God intended in the original creation of the world. The images assert that God is doing a new thing in the church; he is making all things new.

Body Images

One major set of images is uniquely Pauline, the church as the body of Christ. The image oscillates around three terms: body, members, head. The imagery is not singular in meaning, but multi-valent; it means one thing in one context, and another in a different context. Paul never organizes all the nuances into a single pattern.

I Corinthians uses the image in several different ways. It asserts "that your bodies are members of Christ" in chapters 6 and 10 to resolve misuse of the body and the continued

practice of idolatry. The Christian becomes one with Christ, and thereby becomes part of a larger but single communal whole (“we who are many are one body”). The union with Christ and his body excludes all other loyalties. In chapter 11 this union creates such an interdependence of the members of the body that a denial of relationship with any member means a denial of relationship with Christ himself. Oneness with Christ transforms all human relationships, and creates a profound societal interdependence between the members that erases the socio-economic distinctions of the world.

In chapter 12 the issue is a profusion of spiritual gifts that divides and demoralizes the church. The central problem was the relationship between the Spirit, who gives many gifts, and the unity of the church, the context in which the gifts are apportioned and exercised. The answer is many gifts from one Spirit and one Lord for the sake of producing the common good. The theological ground for the answer is that “all are baptized into one body.” This baptism replaces old solidarities — Jew or Greek, slave or free — with a new one. The new solidarity makes all members of the body interdependent, so interdependent that when one suffers all suffer, when one is honored all are honored. The unity of the new solidarity is expressed through a multiplicity of gifts and ministries that together build the whole.

Christians are members of a body, the body of Christ, the church. That union transforms all relationships. It excludes immoral relationships, idolatry, socio-economic distinctions, divisions within the church over the value and exercise of gifts of the Spirit.

A New Solidarity

The imagery of “the body” takes on new meanings in Romans 5-8. Christians are “baptized into Christ Jesus” (6.3). This “baptism into Christ” follows the discussion of Adam and Christ as the two inclusive representatives of the two humanities (5.12-21). Those in solidarity with Adam constitute one body; those in solidarity with Christ constitute another. The two bodies are the only solidarities open to human beings; they are universal and mutually exclusive. To “be baptized into Christ” means to be incorporated into the community of which he is the head, just as to be baptized into Moses meant to be incorporated into the Israel of which he was the leader (1

Cor. 10.2). "Body" language denotes the universal solidarity of all persons in one person, whether the old or the new.

The application of this theological foundation in chapter 12 adds a nuance not found in 1 Corinthians. Not only are all Christians "one body in Christ" but they are also "individually members one of another" (v. 5). To be one body in Christ means that a Christian is a member of all other Christians, and all other Christians are members of him/her. Christians are really interdependent in the one body of Christ even though they do not all have the same function. Therefore, Christians cannot think of themselves more highly than they ought to think (v. 3).

A further stage of development in "body of Christ" language occurs in Colossians and Ephesians. Colossians introduces the idea of the relationship of the head to the body. Christ is the head of the body, the church. Christ as the head neutralizes all other powers and forces because "the fullness of God dwells in him" (1.19). Christ as the head of the body is the only real power in the cosmos and over humanity. Salvation is found by becoming a member of the body of Christ, the church.

The body metaphor is developed to the full in Ephesians. The church is the body of Christ and Christ is the head of the body. Christ fills the body just as he fills the universe. The one body is the place of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to God and to each other. The image of the body describes a social revolution. A new society has been created that heals the great divisions within humanity. This body also grows into maturity when it is rightly related to the head and receives nourishment from him, and when its members are rightly related to each other, each making his/her own contribution.

The Pauline "church as body" pictures an organic unity composed of a multiplicity of members, each necessary to the other and to the growth of the whole. This community unity is based on the unity of the body with Christ. Christ is the source of the body's life, and fills it with all the resources of his power and grace. The church grows as its members are properly related to the Head and to each other. The point of the metaphor is the radical unity in Christ and the diversity of gifts within the one unity.

The Independent Images

Four clusters of metaphors have been examined. The different and similar images in the clusters seem to be related; they have common themes and pictures. There are a whole series of other metaphors used to define the nature of the church that do not seem connected to each other. These are characterized as independent or free-standing images. At least 24 such metaphors can be identified in the New Testament. Only a few are noted to illustrate the diversity and depth of meaning conveyed about the church.

The church is a letter (2 Cor. 3.2-3). It is a public witness to the grace of God and to the founder (Paul).

The church is the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11.1f.; Eph. 5.22-33; Rev. 19.7; 21.2-4). The metaphor has a long tradition of meaning in the Old Testament prophets and Jewish intertestamental literature. The church as the bride sustains a twofold relationship to Christ: 1) she is a whole person distinct from Christ (*hoi duo*, Eph. 5.31); 2) she is united with Christ and forms part of a larger entity (*mia sarx*, Eph. 5.31). As the bride, the church is chaste, submissive, mutually interdependent with Christ, ready to be presented as holy and without blemish. The church as the bride of Christ provides the pattern for husband-wife relationships; she is the extended family for the nuclear family.

The church is a building (1 Cor. 3.9, 16f.; 2 Cor. 6.16-18; Eph. 2.20-22), another image from the Old Testament and Jewish literature. Many themes are developed from this picture. The church belongs to God (1 Cor. 3.9). The church is a temple where God dwells. It is built on the cornerstone of Christ, on the foundation of the apostles, and is in the process of growing.

The church is a foreign embassy (2 Cor. 5.18-21). The church represents Christ's kingdom in the world by "embassy-ing" (a verb rather than a noun) the reconciliation of God.

Everyone of the independent images belongs to a long tradition of meaning that can illumine its application to the church. The images are used in what appear to be contradictory ways. For example, Christ is the bridegroom who dies for his bride, the living husband who cherishes her, and the lord who will return to celebrate the wedding feast with her. Each image carries a multiplicity of meanings. The precise meaning

is determined by the context, the association with other images, and the transforming power of God's final revelation in Christ. "The image is made for the message, not the message for the image".^[14]

Reflections on the Images

What is the meaning of the plethora of images for the church in the New Testament? What do the many images mean theologically and ecclesiologicaly? Several observations are suggested.

First, there is a diversity of images. The images come from many walks and experiences of life, e.g., family life, farm life, city streets, courtrooms, ancient traditions, religious practices, and institutions.

The diversity of images suggests that no one image can be selected as the base line for a theology of the church. No biblical writer starts from one master image and then systematically builds an ecclesiology from that foundation.

The church in every age tends to focus on one or two images. If the biblical writers do not prioritize an image or two, how can we? Many of the images are introduced to correct a problem in church life. The church is continually blind to its own character; its self-understanding is never complete or large enough. J.B. Phillips once said that "our God is too small." The same is true of our view of the church; "our theology of church is too small." The church in every age must continually open itself to the diversity of images in the New Testament in order to be renewed by images it has lost. We must give up the quest for one central image to construct our theology of the church. We do better to let ourselves be "grasped" by the diversity of the many images, especially the ones we have lost in our self-understanding.

Secondly, the many different images all speak of one reality, the church of Jesus Christ. The purpose of every image is to point beyond itself to the people God is creating in the world. The greater the number of images, the greater the number of pointers. Every image points beyond itself to the people in whom God, Christ, and the Spirit are working. The nature of the church is a reflection of the reality and activity of God, Christ, and the Spirit in creating a people in the world. Different images stress one or another of the diverse activities of God, Christ, and the Spirit in the church. The point is that the

diversity of images are centered; they are centered in the people-creating work of God through Christ and the Spirit in history.

The church in the New Testament is never a separate or autonomous entity. We tend to define the church in relation to other institutions and groups in society. We try to describe the uniqueness of the church by making the case that it is different than a school, a club, or a corporation. The New Testament writers think very differently. The church is defined by its relation to God, not by its likeness or differentness to other socio-political structures. Uniqueness is centered beyond the church in the work of God through Christ and the Spirit.

Thirdly, the many different images are centered in another way. They all have a common referent, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the creator of God's church. The church is centered in Jesus Christ and reflects his nature and ministry. Because the diverse ecclesiological images are centered christologically they can be used in many different, even confusing, ways. The same metaphor can be used for the life of an individual believer, the life of separate churches, or the total community of faith (e.g., temple). Paul can combine the image of the body, a building, a planting, a nation, a table and a temple. Unity at the center permits great diversity of expression.

Fourthly, the center can be defined even more narrowly. Many of the images focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. The church exists and ministers because Jesus took upon himself the form of a servant. In him all die and all are made alive. The story of Jesus defines the nature of the church. The pictures of him — priest, sacrifice, shepherd, king, human being, servant, witness, holy one — define and redefine the metaphors of the church.

What is the Nature of the Church?

The church is a people called into existence by God. It is God's people; it is not its own or our own. This people is inclusive; it embraces all peoples and nations. The church is the people where God is present in history to bind and to loose, to liberate people from evil and to engage in ethical discernment about how to live together in the world. The church is a people in history with a history of living and walking with God. The church is the community, the body of God's Messiah and Lord. The whole is subordinate to him, is

prior to and greater than the parts, and, in fact, defines the meaning and inter-relationship of the parts. The church is the new creation of God in the world that simultaneously realizes and points to the intent of the original creation.

So What?

What does all of this mean for Mennonite Brethren self-understanding at the end of the twentieth century. First, we are part of God's and his Messiah's people. We are not our own, and we are not alone. We are not God's people. We are part of God's people.

God's people or body has members, men and women, whom he is incorporating into his people. The church is not a membership organization, e.g., a club that people decide to join, but an organic peoplehood that God is creating.

Because God's people is a peoplehood in history its form is expressed in many local communities or congregations, whether tribes in the Old Testament, or synagogues in first century Judaism, or house churches in the New Testament. There is no such thing as a non-historical peoplehood of God in history. Every one of God's persons is and must be a member of a local body of God's people.

The members of God's body, universal and local, are inter-dependent. The body images articulate this life-in-mutuality most clearly, but many other images make the same point. The family analogies stress mutuality. The building metaphors speak of the integration of various parts within a common and larger structure. The point of the gift images is service for the sake of others. Baptism by definition means incorporation into the church as the people of God. Church members exist in solidarity, mutuality, interdependence, all under and for the headship of Christ. There are not and cannot be autonomous Christians.

What is true of members within churches is also true of the inter-relation of churches. Antioch is dependent on and serves Jerusalem, just as the latter ministers to the new churches of the expanding mission in the world. There are not and cannot be autonomous churches.

Denominations are both biblical and non-biblical. God's people has always expressed itself in structures of accountability between local bodies of believers. The particular form of

that accountability has changed over the centuries, and may not use explicit biblical language, e.g., denomination, conference. But the principle of covenantal accountability is a biblical one.

Christians are part of and accountable to each other in a local body of believers. Local churches are accountable to each other in whatever structures of accountability they mutually agree to create, and associations of local churches are accountable to other associations of local churches. When the churches of Ireland fight each other all churches in the world are hurt. The decision of one body of churches to ordain homosexual persons for ministry impacts all churches. When the leader of one body of churches falls into sin, all churches and all church leaders in the world are affected.

The Mennonite Brethren Church faces three principle challenges at this time. The first is to understand itself as the people of God in a post-Christian world. To declare ourselves the people of a transcendent God is one of the most radical assertions possible in our world. It is to confess that we do not belong to ourselves and are not centered in ourselves. To understand ourselves as the people of God is to stand against the polytheistic (many gods) and narcissistic (self-centered) paganism of our time.

The second challenge is to recover an understanding and social experience of church as covenant community. Community has been eroded by the autonomous and now fragmented self of modernity. The church is a binding and loosing community; it is people in family, solidarity, mutuality, interdependence. The refashioning of church as community calls for the fundamental reversal of the deepest modern assumptions and commitments. It will require genuine binding and loosing, the liberation of Christians from false gods that fragment so that people can be made whole. This binding and loosing as liberation must then be followed by binding and loosing as ethical discernment, as covenant making by and among liberated Christians. What is true of Christians at the local level must also become the experience of churches in relationship to each other and denominations in relationship to each other.

Thirdly, the church as the people of God living in covenant must live differently than the nations. The church is social ethics. It is another way to be in the world. The pressure of modern and evangelical culture on Mennonite Brethren is to

accommodate to the ways and values of pagan North American culture. To be the church as binding and loosing community is to be a discerningly different community following "a different drummer."

ENDNOTES

1. T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (Harcourt, Brace, 1952), p. 101.
2. See Robert Bellah, et.al., *Habits of the Heart* (University of California Press, 1985) for an analysis of American society; and Reginald W. Bibby, *Fragmented Gods* (Irwin Publishing, 1987) for an assessment of Canadian society.
3. See Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called. The Growth of Community in the Bible*. Harper and Row, 1987.
4. A study of the first reflection on the exodus event, Exodus 15, reveals this understanding. Israel is delivered from bondage. The God who delivers and creates Israel is the holy and "steadfast loving" (*hesed*) God. He is the incomparably holy One who relativizes all other authorities and realities, and who established a new standard of righteousness and justice for his people that reflects his holiness. He is the loving and faithful one who is utterly trustworthy, and thus the new norm for all relationships within the community. So incomparable is the calling and saving God that Israel's only response is worship, "I will sing to the Lord" (v. 1).
5. See Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*. Mellen, 1984; A.E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*. Westminster, 1982; Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*. Fortress, 1984; B.F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*. SCM, 1979; E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. Fortress, 1985.
6. See Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Westminster, 1960; Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*. Eerdmans, 1980; C.K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament*. Eerdmans, 1985; Ronald Y.K. Fung, "Some Pauline Pictures of the Church," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 53 (1981), 89-107; R.J. McKelvey, *The New Temple, The Church in the New Testament*. London, 1969; John Renard, "Temple and Building: Pauline Images of Church and Community," *Review for Religions*, 41 (1982), 419-431; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament*. Seabury, 1965; George S. Worgul, "People of God, Body of Christ: Pauline Ecclesiological Contrasts," *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 12 (1982), 24-28.
7. It is probably significant that there was no theological treatise on the nature of the church until Cyprian's *On the Unity of the Church* until A.D. 250.
8. See Mt. 1.21; 2.6; 4.16, 23; Lk. 1.17, 77; 2.10, 31-32; 7.16; Jn. 11.50; 18.14; Acts 3.23; 7.34; 13.17-31; 15.14; 18.10; Rom. 9.25-26; d 11.1f.; 15.10; 2 Cor. 6.16; Tit. 2.14; Heb. 2.17; 4.9; 8.10; 10.30; 13.12; 1 Pet. 2.9-10.
9. See Mt. 26.31; Lk. 12.32; Jn. 10.16; Acts 20.28-29; 1 Cor. 9.7; 1 Pet. 5.2-3.
10. See Mt. 7.15; 9.36 par.; 10.6, 16 par.; 15.24; 25.32; Jn. 1.27; 21.16-17; Rom. 8.36; Heb. 13.20; 1 Pet. 5.1-3.
11. See Jn. 10.1-16; Acts 20.28-29; 1 Pet. 5.1-3.
12. See Mt. 5-7; 10.24-25; 19.23-30; Lk. 9.57-61; 14.26-33; Jn. 8.12; 10.4-5; 13.24-26 for the explicit connection of the historical disciples of Jesus with subsequent generations of disciples.

13. See Acts 6.1-2, 7; 9.1, 19, 25-26, 38; 11.26, 29; 14.20-22, 28; 18.23, 27; 19.9, 30; 20.1, 30; 21.4, 16.
14. Minear, *Images*, p. 60.

APPENDIX: NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES OF THE CHURCH

People of God

The people of God
 Israel
 A chosen race
 A holy nation
 Twelve tribes
 The patriarchs
 The circumcision
 The seed of Abraham
 The exodus
 The house of David
 The Flock
 The sheep
 The lambs who rule
 The Holy City — Jerusalem
 The Temple
 The priesthood
 The festivals

Community Images

Saints
 Faithful ones
 Righteous ones
 Followers
 Disciples
 The Way
 Witnesses
 Confessors
 Slaves
 Servants
 Friends
 Household of God
 Sons of God
 Brothers, brotherhood
 The name
 Gathering together

Cosmic Images

New creation
 First fruits
 New humanity
 Sabbath Rest
 Light

Body Images

The body of life
 The body of Christ
 Members of Christ
 The body and the blood
 The diversity of ministries
 Head of the cosmic spirits
 Head of the church
 The body of this head
 The unity of Jews and Gentiles
 The growth of the body
 The fulness of God

Independent (free-standing)

Salt of the earth
 Letter from Christ
 Fish and fish net
 Boat
 Ark
 Unleavened bread
 Branches of the vine
 God's planting
 God's building
 Building on the rock
 Pillar and buttress
 Virgins
 Messiah's mother
 Elect lady
 Bride of Christ
 Wedding feast
 Wearers of white robes
 Choice of clothing
 Citizens
 Exiles
 Dispersion
 Ambassadors
 Poor
 Hosts and guests