



CANADIAN CONFERENCE
of Mennonite Brethren Churches

ARTICLE 6 [MB Confession of Faith]

Nature of the Church

COMMENTARY

The New Testament defines the church with many different images and word pictures. These images can be clustered into groups with similar motifs and themes.

Descriptions of the Church

One cluster of images describes the church as the people of God. The church is the people called by God. The accent is on God. God creates a people (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rom. 9:25-26). The people of God in the New Testament includes all believers, both Jew and Gentile. This people replaces the temple as the place where God dwells (1 Cor. 6:19; 3:16-17; Eph. 2:21).

A second cluster of images describes the church as a community. Terms like “saints,” “faithful ones,” and “righteous ones” are always plural in the New Testament. Such terms describe the nature of the church rather than the individual Christian life. Thus the church is a saintly community, a “holy people” set apart by and for God. The church is described as “disciples,” “the way,” “slaves,” “friends,” “witnesses,” a “household.” Christians are described as “children” or as “brothers” and “sisters” in a common family. The point of all these images is that the church is a plurality of people viewed as a collective whole. And in the New Testament the whole is always prior to the individual and gives identity to the individual, rather than the reverse as in the western world.

The church is more than a community. A third set of images pictures the church in cosmic and eschatological terms. It is the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), the “first fruits” (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; James 1:18), the “new humanity” (Eph. 2:11-17; Col. 3:10), “God’s Sabbath” (Heb. 4:1-11) and “light” (Matt. 5:14-16; John 12:35; 2 Cor. 4:6; 1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Peter 2:9). The church is the fulfillment of God’s promises. The church is so grand that cosmic images are used to describe the church. These images assert that God is doing a new thing in the church; God is making all things new. The church is to be the fulfillment of what God intended in the original creation.

A fourth set of images pictures the church as the body of Christ. The church is a living body composed of many different members united together. Each member is necessary to the others and to the growth of the whole. Christ is the head of this body. The church grows as different members are properly related to the head and to each other. Such imagery highlights the unity of the church in Christ and the diversity of gifts within the one body.

The People of God

The various images describing the church assert that God is creating a people through Christ and the Spirit. This people is an alternative or contrast-society in the world. It reflects the nature of God in its corporate life and witness. Though God reveals Himself in other ways, the church is the primary place of God’s presence in the world and the primary means of God’s mission in the world.

Article 6 of the confession highlights several themes emphasizing our desire to grow together as God’s people. Our concern for unity is drawn from images such as the family of God and the body of Christ, and from teachings in 1 Corinthians 1–4, Galatians 3, and Ephesians 2. The unity theme teaches the oneness of different people in the church and in Christ.

The body of Christ has been a favorite image for the church among Anabaptists and Mennonite Brethren. Believers are united both to Christ and to each other to form one body. The church as the body of



Christ is also the public witness of Christ to the world.

The theme of accountability in the covenant community reflects an understanding of what it means to be a family, a household, a people, a body, a bride, and follows explicit teachings that exhort believers to be accountable to each other (Matt. 18:15f.; Rom. 12:3f.; Gal. 6:1f.).

Worship in the Church

The early church gathered regularly for worship (Matt. 18:20; Acts 4:31; 11:26; 13:44; 15:6,30; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17, 18, 20, 23; 14:23, 26; James 2:2). The apostles encouraged such meeting together (Heb. 10:25).

The church gathers to celebrate the grace and goodness of God, to build up the believers, and to become a unified body (1 Cor. 11 & 14). The components of worship include proclamation, teaching, baptism, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, singing, offerings, and decision making (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 11 & 14; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

One form of worship used in some Mennonite Brethren churches is the practice of footwashing. This practice is based on Jesus' example and teaching in John 13:1-20. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, he set aside the privileges of power and modeled true servanthood. Christians follow the example of Christ by "washing the feet of the saints" and by many other acts of hospitality, service and love (1 Tim. 5:10).

Discipline in the Church

Jesus instructed the church to be a disciplining community (Matt. 18:15-25). "To bind and to loose" means to engage in ethical discernment about what it means to be faithful, and then to hold people to that discernment by dismissing those who have violated the consensus of the church and liberating those who have not. Discipline is a function of discernment, pastoral care and renewal of individuals and the entire church (Gal. 6:1-2; Eph. 4:25; 1 Cor. 5:3-5; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). The goal of discipline is always restoration to Christ and the church.

The pattern for discipline begins with "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15) in direct, one-to-one conversation with the erring believer. If there is no change, a small circle of additional church members becomes involved in the confrontation. The matter becomes a concern for the entire congregation if this step is ineffective. The person who repents is to be forgiven and nurtured in making the necessary changes. If the erring person continues in sin against the admonition of the church, the church determines the appropriate discipline. Such discipline is taught in the Scriptures both to protect the purity of the internal life of the church and the integrity of the church's witness in the world.

While all believers are responsible for discipline in the church (Matt. 18:15-25; Gal. 6:1-2), church leaders have a special responsibility to give guidance and to carry out discipline (Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:5-11; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Heb. 13:17). Leaders are accountable to the church. They must be disciplined as well for incorrect teaching or misconduct. Such discipline, however, must be carefully tested because of the danger of gossip and unjust accusations (1 Tim. 5:19).

The purpose of church discipline is twofold. The first purpose is the restoration of the sinning brother or sister (Matt. 18:15f.; Gal. 6:1-2; 2 Cor. 2:5-11). The New Testament identifies a very limited number of things that justify excommunication: denying that Jesus has come in the flesh (1 John 4:1-6), persisting in sexual immorality (1 Cor. 5:1-13) and causing division in the church by opposing apostolic teaching (Rom. 16:17-18). The second goal of discipline is to uphold the integrity of the church's witness in the world (Matt. 18). The church loses its missionary witness when it does not discern the meaning of faithfulness to Christ in every age.

The practice of discipline in the church has become difficult for three reasons. First, the legalistic misuse and even abuse of discipline in Mennonite Brethren history has caused a reaction against the practice. Second, the mobility, individualism, and relativism of contemporary western society have made it difficult both to reach consensus on what constitutes sinful behavior, and to hold people accountable to such a consensus. Third, the threat of litigation has made churches cautious in the practice of discipline. But none of these problems justifies the abandonment of church discipline. Discipline is necessary in the church for



correction, renewal, pastoral care, Christian nurture and growth, and missionary witness.

Ministry in the Church

The New Testament teaches that all believers have received gifts by the Spirit for ministry in the church and in the world (1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16; Rom. 12:3-8). These gifts are to be exercised for the nurture and strengthening of the entire church.

The New Testament also teaches that the church needs leaders (Phil. 1:1; Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3). The purpose of church leadership is to enable and administrate the diversity of gifts through teaching, correction, encouragement, and loving service. Church leaders are to be mature Christians who model Christlike conduct in their personal, family, and church life (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1.5-9).

The New Testament describes a twofold pattern of ministry involving deacons and elders (the latter also called bishops or pastors). But this pattern is not taught as normative for the church. The New Testament does not prescribe a specific form of church organization. What it does teach is that the church should do all things decently and in order for the purpose of building up the whole church (1 Cor. 14). The precise form of that ordering has varied in the history of the church and among Mennonite Brethren.

