

The Scriptural Concept
of the Church and its Implications for the Organizational and
Structural Functions for the Mennonite Brethren Church.

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The Nature of the Church:

A. The Church as an exclusive fellowship of believers. Acts 2: 41-42.

"The church according to Anabaptists, is a voluntary and exclusive fellowship of truly converted believers in Christ, committed to follow him in full obedience as Lord". H. S. Bender, Menn. Encycl. Vol. p.594

"The Church of Christ is composed of all that through true faith in Jesus Christ and through obedience to the Gospel have separated themselves from the world and have their fellowship in the Holy Spirit with God the Father and Jesus Christ their only mediator". M.B. Confession of Faith, p.19.

"The Church is the called-out congregation of believers, assembled, and acting, according to its calling". Confession of Faith, Footnote, p.18.

The Purity of the Church must be guarded:

1. By preventing unbelievers from filtering into the Church from without.
2. By exercising church discipline from within.

B. The Church as a Brotherhood. 1. Cor. 12:12 - 27; Rom. 12:4 - 5; Eph. 4:1 - 4

"The Anabaptists conceived of the church as a Brotherhood in which there are no classes, no clergy and laity, no artificial distinctions, but a fellowship of equals. The N.T. designation of 'Brother' and 'Sister' were revised and given a new and deeper meaning. These terms indicated to them that members of the church were closely bound together by ties of love and mutual concern and that they should act toward each other as members of a great family of whom God is the Father".

J. A. Toews, Thesis: The Anabaptist Concept of the Church, p.121

"The Anabaptist concept of the church as a Brotherhood carries on antihierarchical emphasis, minimizing the clerical character of the church offices (elder, preacher, deacon) and maintaining a lay ministry over against a professional and salaried ministry, or at least emphasizing lay responsibility and lay participation".

H. S. Bender, Menn. Encycl. p. 596.

This concept of the Church has been accepted by the M. B. Church as its name implies.

Implications:

1. A clear-cut distinction between the church and cultural Mennonitism must be maintained.
2. The door into the M. B. Church must be kept open to true believers of non-Mennonite background.
3. A salaried ministry does not necessarily violate the principle of Brotherhood.
 - a) The classification of Brethren into laymen and clergy can only be justified with reference to duty and not to rank.
 - b) Remuneration of ministers itself does not create a rank but releases them from the concern for earning a livelihood so that they can devote themselves to feeding the flock.
 - c) A salaried ministry does not exclude the assistance of other Brethren who are able to teach.

- d) The present transition is not a planned grasp for power but rather the result of a combination of factors operating in our communities quite beyond our control. The fact that there is a scarcity of ministers who can convince the church of a divine call contributes largely to this transition.

II. Church Unity.

"We believe and confess our faith in the existence of one holy, general Christian, apostolic Church, the congregation of the saints". Confession of Faith, p.18.

"Although the members of this Church belong to all nations and ranks scattered here and there throughout the world and are divided in denominations, yet they are all one and among one another brethren and members and exist as one body in Christ their head, who is Lord, Chief, Shepherd". Confession of Faith, p. 19.

The Unity of the Church is a fact to be recognized, not a goal to be achieved.
1. Cor. 12: 12 - 13; Eph. 4:4.

Christianity cuts across all social barriers. Col. 3:11.
This unity centers in Christ and not in creeds, or culture, or colour, or caste.

Unity of faith is a goal for which we must strive. Eph. 4:11 - 16.

This unity is to be accomplished by authoritative teaching and not merely by resolutions.

Division of the Church on creedal basis tends to perpetuate differences which might more readily be overcome by patient and persistent instruction.

More faith conferences would also serve a good purpose.

Implications:

If we confess all believers to be one in Christ, how can we give more adequate expression to this truth in practical life?

1. Transfer of membership to and from other denominations.
2. Admission of Christians into membership who have been sprinkled upon faith.
Example: mixed marriages.
3. Co-operation with other denominations.

III. Church polity and organization.

"In church polity, the original Anabaptist movement was strongly congregational, although the synodal idea was not altogether absent . . . In some Mennonite groups - i.e., the Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Church - the synodal idea has conquered; authoritative government by conferences is now the rule".

H.S. Bender, Menn. Encycl., p.596

- A. The Headship of Christ. Eph. 1:22-23; 5:24; Col. 1:18.
Authority rests in Christ. We must never study the church as separated from its Head. The church as body has no primary authority but only secondary.

B. Congregationalism.

No clerical despotism taught or practised in the apostolic church. A note of congregationalism is in evidence in Acts 1 - Filling of vacancies

Acts 6 - Election of deacons.

Acts 13 - Sending out missionaries.

Acts 15 - Settling of doctrinal questions.

"It was not the dictatorial decision of James that settled the question, but the agreement of the Brethren with the verdict of the Spirit".

Private conference of leaders was followed by an open discussion which resulted in a final submission of wills to God. Acts. 15:22 "Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church".

Elders are not lords over God's heritage, but examples of flock, willing servants feeding the flock. 1. Peter 5:1 - 3.

As responsible teachers of the word they must be obeyed. Hebr. 13:17.

C. Church polity is not democratic.

Democracy is government by the people. The will of the majority becomes law. The church is in reality a theocracy. The will of God is final authority. Doctrinal questions are not decided by ballots, or by majority vote but by prayerful search of the scriptures accompanied by self-judgment and resulting in harmonious agreement. "With one accord". In democracy the government is held in check by an opposition. In the Church we are concerned about unanimity.

D. Rule by Conference.

The Scriptures teach a plurality of churches. (Acts 9:31). Churches were named according to locality in which the members resided. Naming of Churches according to human leadership, emphasis on particular doctrines, church polity or practice of Church ordinances is foreign to Scripture. Denominationalism is not established by Scripture but is rather a product of History.

Organization into Conferences is likewise not recorded in Scripture. The unity between churches was spiritual rather than organizational and was expressed in mutual aid, itinerant ministry, greetings, etc.

E. Organization.

The Church is a body, an organism rather than an organization. However, government requires organization. The Bible recognizes a division of labor, a variety of gifts to be used for the benefit of the whole. Organization serves to facilitate the discharge of these duties.

No very specific and detailed pattern of church organization is given in Scripture. Must we conclude that the matter of organization was left largely to the discretion of the church to be decided according to prevailing needs?

A few principles of organization are evident:

1. Organization is always a means to an end.
2. Organization should provide recognized leadership.
3. Organization must give primary emphasis to an effective ministry of the word.
4. Organization should be characterized by simplicity.
5. Organization must proceed according to need.

Implications.

1. Is the statement of H.S. Bender historically correct when he says that authoritative government by conference is the rule in the M.B. Brotherhood?
2. If so, have we departed from the practice of the early apostolic church?
3. Should we give greater emphasis to the autonomy of the local church?
4. How can we safeguard authority in the church against an extreme individualism which seeks advantage in congregational church polity?