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THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH
A Response to the Paper by John E. Toews

1 The Meaning of This Paper for the Local Church

2 This paper states with certainty that the term "covenant"
3 has lost its meaning, that individualism has taken over in the
4 church. It asserts with emphasis that the church today is defined
5 in social contract terms, and that members associate with
6 churches and churches associate with denominations as long as the
7 individual person or the individual church receives some benefit.
8 In contrast to that stance, the author declares that to be called
9 by God is always and without exception to be called into com-
10 munity, and that to be part of the people of God is to be part of
11 the expression of his people on this earth. The first, and
12 simplest, question to be asked is: Do we agree that Toews'
13 description of the church is substantially, biblically correct?
14 If it is not, we must advance an alternative vision, one that
15 does not see the church as a community of accountable people. But
16 what is the local church if it is not the community of God's
17 people, and what is the universal church if not the world-wide
18 community of God's people? There is no biblically justifiable
19 alternative vision. The church is the community of God's people.

20 So I return to the simple question: Do we agree that Toews'
21 description of the church is substantially, biblically correct? I
22 believe that the answer must be, "Yes." What then does this
23 theology mean for us? In a general sense, it means that God's
24 peoplehood transcends individual Christianity, it transcends the

1 local church and it transcends the denomination. We who are
2 believers are part of God's great movement on this earth. In a
3 specific sense, this theology has implications for Mennonite
4 Brethren denominationalism and for Mennonite Brethren churches.
5 I'll deal with those implications later in this paper.

6 Toews spends the bulk of the paper dealing with biblical
7 images of the church. In fact, the church is defined by images.
8 How do these images shape the life of the local church? Without
9 exception, these images speak of community. There is not one New
10 Testament image of the church that can be taken to apply to an
11 individual Christian alone. There is not one biblical way in
12 which a Christian man or woman, by themselves, can be the church,
13 as it is described by these images. To say it again, when you
14 think of the church, you must think of it in community terms.
15 This means that if I am a churchman or a churchwoman my thoughts
16 and actions in relationship to my Christian life must center on
17 my relationship with other people. I can't think Christianly
18 without thinking in community terms. Therefore, in a certain
19 sense, I cannot act as a Christian totally on the basis of my own
20 feelings or ideas. Always, I must consider the impact my actions
21 will have on other people. The possibility of any action being
22 totally independent in its conceptions or its carrying out, is
23 removed, by God, in the way in which he has constituted the
24 Christian life. To take this seriously is to make a radical
25 transformation in our thinking. As Toews writes, "To declare
26 ourselves the people of a transcendent God is one of the most

1 radical assertions possible in our world." There is no decision I
2 as a believer make in which I am not accountable to the community
3 in which God has placed me. Individual Christians cannot go on
4 thinking independently. Individual churches and denominations can
5 no longer behave as if they were not responsible to others for
6 their words and actions. The implications of this line of think-
7 ing are astounding. On the individual level, this suggests that a
8 person should not get married or change jobs without the advice
9 and counsel of the community of believers. It means that to enter
10 into business or to make a decision that involves dealing with
11 members of one's family needs the support and concurrence of the
12 faith community. It means that individual churches cannot on
13 their own make decisions that involve matters of faith and
14 practice without taking into consideration the larger community.
15 How can the Christians college start a new building program
16 without asking how that program impacts the rest of the church?
17 How can the foreign mission board choose a new mission field
18 without considering the church needs at home? How can the Home
19 Missions Board plant a church without looking at the implications
20 for the rest of the denomination? To think this way is almost
21 overwhelming.

22 There are implications on the opposite side as well. Just as
23 individual Christians and churches should consider the community
24 when they make a decision, so the community has the "right" to
25 call the individual Christian, the individual church, and the
26 individual denomination, to accountability. This accountability

1 is concerned not only with matters of doctrine, but also with
2 lifestyle and conduct. Peter did not hesitate to intervene in the
3 lives of Ananias and Sapphira in a matter of lifestyle. Paul did
4 not hesitate to call the Corinthians to account for the aberr-
5 rations in their church. It is not possible to separate doctrine
6 and lifestyle. To do so is to take part of the Gospel without
7 taking the other part.

8 Are we as Christians ready to take that kind of theology
9 seriously? Are we ready to submit to the biblical directive for
10 the church and for the Christian life? These questions deserve
11 serious and responsible answers. But, in order for those answers
12 to be developed, there must be understanding of the theology and
13 the nature of the church. If this theology of the church is
14 correct, as I suggest it is, it should be taught to all pastors
15 and church leaders in a series of special seminars, and those
16 pastors and leaders should be given tools with which to teach
17 these principles to their congregations. The understanding of the
18 church which the Bible teaches needs to be propagated. To make
19 1990 the "Year of the Church," and to exhort every one of our
20 churches to adopt a proper understanding of the church as its
21 theme for the year would not be too drastic a step to take. The
22 teaching required would necessitate the development of curriculum
23 and resources to accomplish the task. But there is a challenge
24 before us. We need to rise to that challenge.

1 The Meaning of This Paper for the Denomination

2 If this theology of the church is accepted as correct, there
3 are specific implications for the Mennonite Brethren as a denomi-
4 nation. First, individuals and local churches are a part of that
5 denomination. We individuals and churches have voluntarily
6 associated together under a common statement of faith. We have
7 been together historically, and we have been together theologi-
8 cally. We recognize that our statement of faith is not the only
9 way in which Christianity can be expressed, but it is the way we
10 have chosen to express our understanding of our faith. The
11 statement of faith was not developed overnight or in a secret
12 place, but was tested and adopted by representatives of the
13 denomination in open sessions and over a period of several years.
14 By common consent, and by resolution, it was understood at the
15 time of the adoption of that confession of faith that it would be
16 adhered to by the individual members and by individual churches
17 as long as they were part of the denomination. Provision has been
18 made to change the statement of faith, and indeed, it has under-
19 gone changes.

20 Second, if we take seriously the implications of community,
21 several things become our responsibility:

22 1. First, our churches need to commit themselves to the
23 denomination and to the statement of faith. That commitment needs
24 to be a matter of public record. It is time for the churches to
25 decide where they are and where they wish to be. It is time to
26 ask each one of our churches to publicly reaffirm its commitment

1 to the statement of faith. A process must be developed by which
2 each church is asked to examine its commitment to the confession
3 of faith, to articulate its difficulties with that confession,
4 and to reaffirm its commitment to the denomination that holds
5 that confession as its centerpiece.

6 2. If churches cannot or will not make such a commitment,
7 the reason or reasons need to be determined and addressed by
8 those in leadership in the churches and in the denomination.
9 Unwillingness to commit to the confession of faith may mean
10 several things. It may mean that the confession itself needs to
11 be changed. Or, it may be that a local church needs to re-think
12 its priorities. But whatever the reasons, there must be clear
13 communication from the churches as to why they can or cannot
14 endorse the confession of faith.

15 3. The confession of faith needs to be re-examined in light
16 of the responses of the churches. Those issues that prove to be
17 points on which enlightened Christians may differ need to be
18 handled in a manner of careful study and prayer to determine if
19 they are an essential part of what it means to be an Anabaptist
20 Christian. The examination needs to be done by men and women in
21 the churches as well as by professional theologians so that the
22 results are owned by the people of the congregations.

23 4. Commitment to the statement of faith cannot be coerced by
24 the leaders of the denomination or even by the delegates at a
25 convention. Submission cannot be coerced. Biblically it is
26 impossible. To force submission violates the character of the

1 person or institution doing the submitting. Therefore, the
2 leaders of the denomination must ask the churches to consider the
3 confession of faith and respond to it, and the denomination must
4 then determine if such churches continue to be Mennonite Brethren
5 churches. Either the statement of faith or the definition of the
6 denomination may need to be changed, or both.

7 5. It is necessary, for there to be any kind of unity in the
8 M. B. community, that the leaders of the churches be in fundamen-
9 tal agreement with the confession of faith. (What is a community
10 without settled basic areas of agreement?) That agreement needs
11 to be reached through a loving and care-filled process. To
12 facilitate such agreement, the leaders of the churches, espec-
13 ially members of the pastoral staff, and probably also all
14 members of the Council/Elders, should be instructed in the
15 biblical (also Anabaptist) theology of the church. Therefore, all
16 pastoral or leadership persons need to attend a course offered
17 through the denomination, a course that would give instruction in
18 the nature of the church. It is imperative that the points listed
19 above (items #1-4) be implemented before any attempt is made to
20 begin with Item #5. There will be no success without the careful
21 preparation of the ground.

22 6. Steps must be taken to deal with a problem which has not
23 surfaced in Toews' paper, but which impacts any discussion of the
24 "nature" of the church. That is the problem of Mennonite eth-
25 nicity. The word "Mennonite" is identified in the minds of many
26 people with a specific cultural group. Many newcomers into our

1 churches do not identify themselves as Mennonites, though they
2 like their association with the church. Because of the associa-
3 tions attached to the word "Mennonite," these people tend to draw
4 away from those parts of our theology that they don't like,
5 preferring to see those parts as Mennonite rather than biblical.
6 By turning away from the ethnicity which is specifically Men-
7 nonite, and focusing on biblical/Anabaptist theology, stronger
8 adherence to the confession of faith should result.

9 7. Great care must be taken to insure that our emphasis on
10 foreign missions and on education does not obscure an equally
11 important commitment to church planting and evangelism. When
12 institutions and foreign missions become paramount in the denomi-
13 nation, the base at home is not being strengthened. When that
14 base is not being strengthened, there is much opportunity for
15 dissension and division to enter into the church, weakening the
16 community of which we are a part. One of the reasons there has
17 been a loosening of the community bond has been our over-emphasis
18 as a denomination on some things to the exclusion of others.

19 8. Finally, but most important, the people of God need to be
20 called together to pray. Rather than conventions for business, it
21 is time for convocations of prayer. It is time to call on God for
22 revival, to seek the power of the Holy Spirit, to humble our-
23 selves before the Lord. It is time to be revived. The love that
24 flows when revival fires are ignited will cover a multitude of
25 sins and will do much to end our concerns about who we are and
26 what we are here to do.

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2 This paper on the nature of the church by John E. Toews
3 tells us biblically how it is, or at least how it should be. It
4 is time now to practice what has been preached.

5 Jim Holm
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7 July, 1989