

1989

1 THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

2
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4
5 WHY THIS PAPER?



6
7 What life have you if you have not life together?
8 There is no life that is not in community.
9 and no community not lived in praise of God.[¹]

10
11 The church has long confessed that God created persons for community, and that
12 only within the context of community can authentic Christian life be nurtured
13 and sustained. T.S. Eliot points to the truth that the person who has no
14 people has no God.

15
16 This paper is necessary because some modern Christians think they no longer
17 need the church, and because some local churches no longer think they need
18 other churches.

19
20 The immediate occasion for this paper is Mennonite Brethren conversation about
21 the relationship of baptism to church membership and the Lord's Supper. The
22 Mennonite Brethren Church teaches that baptism is into a local church as a
23 manifestation of the body of Christ, and that only persons incorporated into a
24 local church can participate in the Lord's Supper. This teaching is being
25 challenged today. There are people who believe that a person can be baptized
26 on confession of faith without being incorporated into a church, and that any
27 person, especially children, who confess Jesus as Lord can participate in the
28 Lord's Supper without either baptism or incorporation into a local church.

29
30 The "trigger issue," the relationship of baptism to church membership and the
31 Lord's Supper, is part of a much larger set of questions in the Mennonite
32 Brethren Church--the meaning of the church as a covenant community, the
33 meaning of church membership, and the relationship of local churches to the
34 Conference of churches and the larger body of Christ. The original name of the
35 Mennonite Brethren Church was the "Mennonite Brethren Brotherhood." The name
36 disclosed a theology of the church. The Christian life was defined as a life
37 of interdependence between Christians in a family, and church life was defined
38 by relationships of interdependence between congregations. The Christian life
39 could not be lived alone, and church life could not be sustained and nurtured
40 in isolation from accountability to other churches in the family.

41
42 The historic Mennonite Brethren understanding of church is under challenge
43 today. The term "covenant" has lost its meaning. Accountability is rejected by
44 most people. The Christian life and church life are defined by the modern cult
45 of individualism. A Christian is a person who has "accepted Jesus," and lives
46 in a personal relationship with him. Church is convenient, but not necessary.
47 Furthermore, church is defined entirely in social contract terms. I
48 participate in a church as long as it meets my needs. The church is
49 responsible to nurture my personal and spiritual life: it has no
50 responsibility and no business to tell me how I should live and/or to call me
51 to accountability if I decide to live differently. The paradigm of the
52 individual's relationship to the church also shapes how churches define their
53 relationship to other churches. Churches associate with each other as long as
54 the association benefits "my church." Inter-church structures, known as

1 conferences or denominations in our time, have no authority and no claim on
2 "my church" if "we" do not like what the conference is doing and/or saying.

3
4 The Mennonite Brethren loss of a sense of covenant community is not an
5 isolated phenomenon. It is an illustration of the larger loss of community in
6 North America, a loss documented repeatedly in recent years by a series of
7 social commentators. [°] Modern men and women no longer accept Eliot's dictum
8 that "there is no life that is not in community." They live by the illusion of
9 the autonomous self. Life is centered in me: I can meet my needs as I choose
10 without the need for community.

11
12 The purpose of this paper is to outline a biblical theology of the church that
13 will provide a theological foundation for the Mennonite Brethren Church to
14 address these issues. It is not intended to address the specific issues
15 themselves--this will done in other papers at this and subsequent study
16 conferences--but to offer a biblical basis for further study and guidance on
17 the issues facing the church.

18 THE HISTORIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHURCH

19 The Original Calling Out [°]

20
21 I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the
22 house, of bondage (Ex. 20.2).

23
24 Israel was called into being as a people. God created this people by
25 delivering them from slavery in Egypt. Israel's "calling out" is a
26 paradigmatic event that defines the nature of the people of God.

27
28 The exodus event revealed both the nature of God and the nature of the
29 community he intended to create. God embraced a humble and oppressed people.
30 His deliverance of Israel annulled religious and social systems based on
31 special privilege.

32
33 God's deliverance of Israel in the exodus inaugurated a new order of
34 community. In this community there is an organic linkage between the event of
35 calling/salvation and the structures of communal life. The structures of
36 community must reflect the nature of the God who called and saved. Therefore,
37 Israel is concerned with systems of justice, land distribution, use of
38 capital, treatment of the vulnerable within society.

39
40 The people of God is first and foremost a people called into existence by God.
41 Divine initiative is the foundation for the people of God. The fundamental
42 terms for community in the Old and New Testament reflect this understanding:
43 qahal (assembly), eda (congregation), sod (assembly), ecclesia (assembly,
44 church). God is the one who calls a people. A people gathers in response to
45 the call of God. [°]

46
47 Because God's calling a people is the foundation of the church, the God who
48 called is the source and center of this community. He is the absolute One who
49 relativizes all other gods, powers and goods. He alone is the basis for
50 community. Therefore the centrality of the first commandment, "you shall have
51
52

1 no other gods before me" (Ex. 20.3). and Israel's confession of faith. "Hear O
2 Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God
3 with all your heart. and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut.
4 6.4-5). The loss of this center meant the loss of unity and community: Israel
5 became fractured by conflicting allegiances.

6
7 The church is the people called by God. This people is to worship God, and
8 live together in community by the norms of righteousness and steadfast love
9 that characterize the nature of the calling and saving God (the Torah).

10
11 Israel's faithfulness to this center and norm varied over the centuries, but
12 it was the center to which its teachers always called the people. Israel is
13 the people of God because, and only because, God called her into existence
14 from bondage. All deviations from that center, and from the righteousness and
15 steadfast love of the calling God, must be judged.

16 17 The Messianic Renewal [5]

18
19 The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe
20 in the gospel (Mk. 1.14).

21
22 I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it (Mt.
23 16.18).

24
25 Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. The "fulfillment theme" that frames
26 his preaching is clear evidence of the confluence of old and new. Jesus is
27 acting in a new and decisive way to bring old hopes and promises to
28 fulfillment.

29
30 Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God announces that God is present to
31 renew his people. Several things follow. 1) Jesus calls for undivided loyalty
32 to God. God's people must re-center life in God. All other allegiances--
33 family, homes, land--must be surrendered (Mk. 10.29-30). 2) Jesus redefines
34 community membership in a new and inclusive way. Because God's call creates
35 community, all people, pure and impure, are invited. Existing religious and
36 social presuppositions are rejected. Jesus does not destroy community by
37 obliterating all distinctions, but redefines community in terms of God's
38 original vision of an outcast people called to be his people (e.g., Lk.
39 7.22/Mt. 11.5; Mt. 8.11; Lk. 10.25-37). 3) Jesus defines faithfulness in terms
40 of the character of God. Because God is righteous and merciful, Jesus
41 followers are to be righteous and merciful. "But seek first his kingdom and
42 his righteousness" (Mt. 6.33) and "be merciful, just as your Father is
43 merciful" (Lk. 6.36).

44
45 Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God is nothing more or less than the
46 renewal of God's original foundation for the people of God. God calls a people
47 into existence that is to be centered in himself, and to live righteously and
48 compassionately because that is who God is. Jesus renews the call for such a
49 people in light of the eschatological presence of God through his mission and
50 message.
51

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

5
 6 No Jew could think of the Messiah or the Kingdom of God apart from peoplehood.
 7 The problem was they thought of this peoplehood in nationalist terms. It was
 8 for Jews only. Jesus' mission to regather the people of God breaks the bounds
 9 of this nationalism with a universal vision. The nations are going to sit at
 10 the messianic banquet with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Mt. 8.11).

11
 12 Jesus' mission was to establish the rule of God in visible form. The shape of
 13 that visibility was the renewed people of God. God's eschatological presence
 14 and rule is to be present in a concrete people.

15
 16 Two words of Jesus about the church make this point.

17
 18 Matthew 16.17-19

19
 20 The context of this saying is a discussion about the identity and mission of
 21 Jesus. Jesus addresses the question by saying to Peter, "you are correct. I am
 22 the Messiah. And my messianic mission is to build the church on the rock."

23
 24 The rock is a powerful image in Judaism. It is the sacred point of contact
 25 between heaven and earth from the time of Jacob's dream in Genesis 28. In the
 26 prophets the rock is eschatologized. It becomes the holy mount, the navel of
 27 the world, the sanctuary of the nations (Isa. 2.2-4; 60; Zeph. 3; Zech. 8;
 28 Jer. 3.17). In the inter-testamental and early rabbinic writings the rock
 29 becomes the place where God is specially present to protect and to save his
 30 people.

31
 32 Jesus' messianic mission is to build the church on the rock. The word for
 33 church is ecclesia, the term used in the Old Testament to describe the
 34 gathered assembly of God's people. It is the end-time community of salvation
 35 in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus' mission is to gather the eschatological people
 36 of God on the rock, to gather them together into the presence of God so that
 37 he may save and protect them.

38
 39 This text brings together two classic messianic themes, the cosmic rock and
 40 the messianic building. The Messiah in Judaism is expected to build a new
 41 Temple where God will dwell in a new and powerful way among his people. Jesus
 42 says that his mission is to build the church on the rock as that messianic
 43 building. Jesus' mission is to gather the people of God together into the
 44 church as the visible community of God's presence in the world. The church is
 45 the place where the coming of God into the world is most clearly evident. The
 46 church is where the Kingdom of God is most visible.

47
 48 Jesus says two other things about the church on the rock. First of all, the
 49 church will triumph over the gates of Hades. The phrase "the gates of Hades"
 50 is used in the inter-testamental literature as a synonym for Satan. That is,
 51 Satan and the powers of the demonic will not prevail over the church that is

1 built on the rock. Jesus builds the church with the promise that the presence
2 and power of God is greater than the presence and power of the demonic.

3
4 Secondly, the church engages in "binding and loosing". "Binding and loosing"
5 is technical Jewish language that means two things. First, it is used in
6 inter-testamental literature to denote the binding of Satan and the loosing of
7 people bound by demonic powers. The language is used this way in the New
8 Testament (see Mk. 3.27; 7.34-35; Mt. 12.19; Lk. 13.16; Rev. 20). To bind and
9 to loose means to overcome Satan and to liberate victims from demonic powers.

10
11 "To bind and to loose" also means to engage in ethical discernment about what
12 is right and/or wrong, to bind and to loose behavior consistent or
13 inconsistent with the law, to judge or forgive where disobedience has or has
14 not occurred, to bind a person who has sinned or to loose a person who thought
15 he/she had violated the law but in fact had not.

16
17 "Binding and loosing" in Matthew 16 is clearly a reference to the binding and
18 loosing of Satan. It is defined by the church triumphing over Satan and the
19 keys of the kingdom. The image of "keys" is associated with the binding of
20 Satan in Revelation 20.

21
22 Jesus builds the church on the rock as a kingdom outpost to bind the powers of
23 the demonic present in the world, and to liberate people from demonic powers
24 and structures. The church is the Kingdom community where Satan is bound and
25 where people are loosed.

26 27 Matthew 18.15-20

28
29 The Matthew 18.15-20 reference to binding and loosing defines the church as a
30 community of ethical discernment. The church is to engage in discernment of
31 right and wrong. The church is to bind and loose how Christians live in the
32 world. When a brother/sister sins he/she is to be bound or loosed, confronted
33 about the sin and called to repentance. Where repentance does not occur the
34 church is to discipline. This understanding of "binding and loosing" is also
35 the meaning of the John 20.23 reference to "binding and loosing" associated
36 with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christians who have the Spirit are to engage
37 in ethical discernment, forgiveness and discipline.

38
39 Jesus builds the church as a kingdom outpost of ethical discernment. The
40 church is the gathered people of God discerning what it means to live as the
41 people of God in the world, and to hold each other accountable to the
42 consensus discerned. It is to free fellow believers who sin and repent, and to
43 discipline disciples who sin and do not repent.

44 45 Summary

46
47 God calls a people. That people is to worship God and live righteously and
48 compassionately before him and with each other. Jesus' mission is to renew the
49 call of God to his people. Jesus' renews the people of God as the church on
50 the rock where God is present in history to bind and to loose all people from
51 demonic powers and to free them for faithful living.

1 THE THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT [°]

2
3 You shall be my people (2 Cor. 6.16)

4
5 We who are many are one body (1 Cor. 10.17)

6
7 Jesus not only renewed the people of God, but commissioned his disciples to
8 proclaim the gospel to all people and to build the church among all peoples of
9 the world. The question to which we now move is, how is the church understood
10 and interpreted by the first apostles and teachers? What do the writings of
11 the New Testament say about the nature of the church?

12
13 To our surprise, the New Testament provides no theological definition of the
14 church. Ecclesiology in the New Testament is shaped by images, not
15 definitional statements. Nowhere are we told that the church is New
16 Testament ecclesiology is metaphorical, not doctrinal. Furthermore, the images
17 used are many and diverse, not singular. Most theologies of the church are
18 doctrinal statements. When ecclesiologies do venture into the realm of images,
19 they usually select one or only a few as the normative definition of the
20 church, e.g., the church as the body of Christ.

21
22 We struggle with metaphorical theology, with images as the mode of
23 articulating theology. A metaphor makes a comparison. It creates a tension
24 between two dissimilar things to bring out points of similarity and
25 difference. The point of comparison is specific and partial. No metaphor is
26 complete. All images are partial. We are scientific in our thinking; we prefer
27 definitional or propositional statements that attempt to state the essence of
28 the whole. Biblical writers communicate more via images than by definitional
29 statements. One of our great frustrations in understanding Jesus' message of
30 the kingdom of God, for example, is that he defines it with stories and
31 parables; he never says "the Kingdom of God is . . .". but "the kingdom of God
32 is like . . ." The same is true of the New Testament descriptions of the
33 church. The New Testament writers define the church by images, 73 images at
34 least (see the Appendix).

35
36 Metaphorical theology was the dominant way of theologizing in the early
37 church.[⁷] Images were used to describe something that was both known and also
38 mysterious. A reality that is a sign of God's presence in history is described
39 by images that awaken the imagination. Thus Christ is described by many
40 different images. The reality of Christ cannot be captured by one definitional
41 statement or by one image. Every image conceivable is used by the writers of
42 the New Testament to describe the work and person of Christ. So also with the
43 church. The reality of the church as the eschatological people of God in the
44 world cannot be defined easily or simply. Many different word pictures are
45 needed to describe the nature of the church.

46
47 To understand the nature of the church in the New Testament, therefore, we
48 must study the images of the church. These images can be studied in two
49 different ways. First, the theology of the different writers--Matthew, Paul, 1
50 Peter--can be studied to see which images they use to interpret the church.
51 Paul's view of the church (e.g., people of God, body of Christ, household) is
52 similar to and different than 1 Peter's (elect, holy nation, household)

1 because he uses similar and different images, or he interprets the same images
 2 in different ways. Secondly, the images can be studied thematically, by
 3 searching for overarching linkages between the images that suggests some
 4 clustering. Both methods are necessary to develop a complete theology of the
 5 church in the New Testament. Because of time limitations at this Conference,
 6 only the second method will be followed in this paper. These limitations
 7 necessitate the selection of images: the study of all the images would not
 8 change the thesis of the paper. The themes that define the clusters represent
 9 interpretive proposals; the themes are not so classified in the New Testament
 10 itself.

11 People of God Images

12
 13
 14 One of the most powerful images of the church in the New Testament is the
 15 people of God. The image is used by six writers in fourteen writings. [°] Many
 16 of the references employ quotations from the Old Testament. The image names a
 17 particular people, Israel. All other peoples are ethnoi. Israel is the people
 18 of God because God has chosen her in a particular historical event, the
 19 exodus. God's election of Israel places a special responsibility on the chosen
 20 nation.

21
 22 The New Testament use is continuous with the Old, as the many citations
 23 indicate. The church is a people created by God. The accent is on God and his
 24 action. The church as the people of God asserts the priority and the power of
 25 God. The church is the people of God only because God has called them, dwells
 26 within and among them. Two passages especially make this point. 1 Peter 2.9-10
 27 states with heavy dependence on the Old Testament that prior to God's calling,
 28 the people of the church lived a shadowy nonexistence in darkness that could
 29 only be defined as non-peoplehood. But a transformation occurred because God
 30 acted. Paul makes the same point in Rom. 9.25-26. "Not my people" became "my
 31 people" because of the action of God (see also 2 Cor. 6.16; Heb. 8.10; Rev.
 32 21.3).

33
 34 The people of God image serves several purposes in the New Testament. First,
 35 it connects the church with Israel. The church is continuous with the story of
 36 God's dealings with Israel. Secondly, membership in the people of God is
 37 radically redefined. Gentiles are included in the people of God. They are
 38 legitimately God's people because God calls and includes them in fulfillment
 39 of his promises to Abraham. The particularism of the Old Testament is exploded
 40 into a universalism that embraces all people.

41
 42 The people of God image is the center of a cluster of terms that originally
 43 apply to Israel but are redefined in the New Testament to interpret the
 44 meaning of the church. These images come from different fields of meaning in
 45 Israel's history. One set of images is political: a chosen race (1 Pet. 2.9),
 46 a holy nation (1 Pet. 2.9), the twelve tribes (Jas. 1.1; Rev. 7.4), the
 47 patriarchs, the exodus, the house of David, the elect. These images serve
 48 three functions. First they link the church with the history of Israel.
 49 Continuity with God's prior action in the world is important. Secondly, they
 50 emphasize the significance of being inside this people rather than outside. It
 51 is important to be elect, a holy nation, the children of Abraham. The people
 52 God creates is inclusive. New members can and are adopted into a people with a

1 long history. Thirdly, they contrast the people of God with the nations. God's
2 people live by a different politics.

3
4 A second set of images comes from the pastoral economy of Israel: flock[⁹],
5 sheep[¹⁰], shepherds.[¹¹] The images refer the church as the possession of
6 God. The picture of the church as flock leads immediately to the picture of
7 the shepherd. The master image is the shepherd-flock. The church is the flock
8 of God. Jesus is the appointed shepherd of the flock. Shepherd and flock are
9 interdependent: the flock know his voice, he leads them to pasture and to the
10 fold. The central point of the images is the divine ownership of the flock.
11

12 A third set of images derive from the cultic life of Israel: the Holy City,
13 the holy temple, the priesthood, the festivals. Every culture in the Ancient
14 Near East had a sacred city. Jerusalem was that city for Israel. It was the
15 place where God chose to dwell among his people. It was the center for kingly
16 rule, prophetic proclamation, priestly mediation, and messianic hope. That is
17 why Jesus journeys to Jerusalem to possess the city as king, prophet, and
18 Messiah (especially the Gospel of Luke). Four New Testament writings picture
19 the church as Jerusalem: Luke, Galatians, Hebrews and Revelation. The church
20 is the Jerusalem where God dwells among his people. The center of Jerusalem
21 was the Temple. It was the place where God and the Spirit of God is present
22 among the people of God. Therefore the church is pictured as the temple in the
23 New Testament (1 Cor. 6.19; 3.16-17; Eph. 2.21). It is the place where God's
24 Spirit dwells. The Temple in Judaism was the center of the priestly ministry.
25 Significantly, the two New Testament writers who picture the church as priests
26 (1 Pet. and Rev.) do not use the term for a special form of ministry within
27 the church, as in the Old Testament, but to define the church as a whole. The
28 church is the priesthood in the New Testament. The images of the church that
29 are derived from Israel's cultic life again link the church with the history
30 of Israel. But they also suggest the radical revision the Gospel initiates.
31 The church is the holy city, the temple, and the priesthood. The church is the
32 place where God is present in history, the community that celebrates God's
33 saving work.
34

35 Community Images

36
37 The church as the people of God is characterized as a community by a series of
38 images. Many of these images are usually used to define the shape of
39 individual Christian life. But in the New Testament they are used in the
40 plural to define the corporate nature of the church. The church is community.
41

42 Let me illustrate. Three terms are used in the plural to describe the church.
43 Saints (hagioi), faithful ones (pistoi), righteous ones (dikaioi) define the
44 character of the church. Individual Christians are saints or righteous because
45 they are part of the action of God that has created the community of the
46 saints or the righteous ones. All three terms have ecclesiological meaning
47 that is prior to their meaning for individual Christian life. What is true of
48 these three images, is true of all the images in this section.
49

50 The church is saints (hagioi), a people set apart by God's "setting apart"
51 action ("saint," singular, is not used in the NT to refer to one member of the
52 church). The verb ("sanctified") indicates that the "setting apart" has

1 resulted in the creation of a community of saints. The point of "saints"
 2 language is that God has created a holy people (a saintly community) because
 3 that is who he is (1 Pet. 1.15-16). The process of saint-making is anchored in
 4 the death of "the saint" (ho hagios). Jesus Christ (Heb. 10.14, 29; 13.12; 1
 5 Cor. 1.30; 6.11; Eph. 5.26). The dual relation of the saints to the holy God
 6 and to Christ "the saint" is the work of the Spirit. The community of saints
 7 has been born of the Spirit and baptized into this one Spirit; it is defined,
 8 determined and empowered by the Spirit. The community of saints are to act
 9 saintly, as a people set apart by God to be like God and to be missional. The
 10 identity and the ethic is corporate.

11
 12 The saints are the "the faithful ones" (pistoi; cf. Col. 1.2). The church is
 13 people who have faith(ed) (trusted) God. Acts describes "the faithful ones" as
 14 bold, as unanimous in praise and prayer, as full of power and grace, and as
 15 sharing everything in common. The act of trusting God creates a community with
 16 inner cohesion and dynamic. Romans offers a very different picture. The
 17 faithful ones are so sharply divided they cannot eat together or agree on
 18 which day to worship. Therefore, they must be instructed to "welcome one
 19 another" in the same way God welcomed them in Christ (chs. 14-15). They must
 20 leave judgment to God, and give priority to the common good. To trust God
 21 creates communal bonds that are strong enough to overcome ethnic differences
 22 in the church.

23
 24 The faithful ones are the righteous ones (dikaioi). The language again is
 25 plural. The church is righteous people, people whom God has made righteous
 26 through the faithfulness of Jesus. The accent falls on God. The righteous God
 27 makes a righteous people. The church is people who share a common ground, the
 28 transforming righteousness of God, and, therefore, a common ethic, to be the
 29 righteous peoplehood they have been made.

30
 31 Two images picture the church in relationship to Jesus as teacher. The church
 32 is followers and disciples. The disciples in the Gospels are the historical
 33 followers of Jesus, but they also are the archetypes for subsequent
 34 disciples.^[12] "Disciples" in Acts describe the totality of the church as well
 35 as individual believers.^[13] The church as disciples means to be a community
 36 of learners of Christ (Eph. 4.20-21; Heb. 5.8-9). The content of that learning
 37 has very significant ecclesiological consequences. It means to treat the least
 38 of the disciples as Christ incognito (Mt. 10.40-42; 25.45; Jn. 13.20), to take
 39 up the cross of Christ, to reduce family membership to secondary status, to
 40 love neighbors and enemies, to be on one level with all other disciples as
 41 "brothers" (Mt. 23.8-9), to treat the least as the first (Mk. 10.35-45; Mt.
 42 23.10-12).

43
 44 The slave (douloi) image describes the church's subservient nature. The master
 45 image of slavery is total ownership and allegiance to one master. The image is
 46 used at least 50 times and in 18 different writings to characterize the
 47 church. The center point of the image is slavery to Jesus Christ as master and
 48 lord. The church is people who have died to all other masters and allegiances.
 49 Therefore, the church is people bound by Christ's death to slavery to all
 50 those for whom he died; they are slaves of one another (Gal. 5.13).
 51 Relationships in the church have been revolutionized because every obligation

1 toward the Messiah is immediately transferable into attitudes and actions
2 towards fellow disciples (Mt. 10.24; Jn. 13.16; Mk. 10.44-45).

3
4 The church as "the household of God" (1 Pet. 4.17) is the last community
5 metaphor we note. A household in the ancient world was defined by a common
6 ancestor. A common patriarch constituted a people a family, and the loss of
7 this common parent destroyed peoplehood. The church is a household because
8 Christians have a common patriarch, God.

9
10 The people who join a community are called children of the leader. Members of
11 the church are children of God. "Sonship" binds people both to the father.
12 God, and to each other in the family. The relationships of children within the
13 church family is defined by family terms. "Brother/sister" is the most common
14 form of address in the New Testament. It defines people in the church as
15 members of a common family.

16
17 The church is a community. It is a plurality of people that are viewed as a
18 collective whole. Whether described as saints, disciples, slaves, brothers,
19 the church is defined as a peoplehood by its common patriarch, God.

20 21 Cosmic Images

22
23 One set of images picture the church in universal and cosmic terms. The church
24 is more than a community of God's people in continuity with the history of
25 God's saving activity in the world. It is the fulfillment of God's promises.
26 This fulfillment is so grand and complete that cosmic categories are necessary
27 to interpret the meaning of God's work.

28
29 The church is a new creation (2 Cor. 5.17). A more cosmic category is hardly
30 imaginable. The church replaces the creation of the world in Genesis 1-2. The
31 church means the passing of the old order of creation and the emergence of a
32 new creation of God. To enter the church through union with Christ is to enter
33 a new eschatological creation.

34
35 Two other images make the same point. The church is the first fruits
36 (aparche). The language recalls the Jewish practice of giving the first
37 produce--grain, flocks, bread, children--to God. The practice reflects a
38 profound theology: God is lord of all and gives gifts to all; humanity
39 dedicates all productivity to God; the appearance and presentation of the
40 first fruit is a pledge of the coming harvest; the first has the power to
41 represent the others in the series; the first has the power to sanctify and to
42 cleanse the entire series.

43
44 This first fruits theology is used in the New Testament to interpret the
45 meaning of Christ and salvation. He is the first fruits of the dead (1 Cor.
46 15.20-23), the promise of the resurrection of all God's children. The Spirit
47 is the first fruits, literally the down payment, of the coming redemption (Rm.
48 8.23; 11.16). While less frequently acknowledged, this first fruits theology
49 also shapes a significant understanding of the church. The first converts in a
50 province are the promise of the salvation for the whole region (Rm. 16.5; 1
51 Cor. 16.15). The church as a whole is the first fruits of all God's creatures
52 (Jas. 1.18; cf. also Rev. 14.4; 2 Thes. 2.13). The church is a sign of what

1 God will yet do in the world, regionally and cosmically. The church is the
2 promise of God's future.

3
4 The church is also the new humanity (Eph. 2. Col. 3.10). The assumption behind
5 the image is that two humanities exhaust the human and cosmic possibilities.
6 Every person incorporates himself/herself into one of the two by an act of
7 decision. Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15 assert that Christ is the new Human
8 Being: he is the first fruits of a new humanity that God is creating in the
9 world. That new humanity is defined as the church in Ephesians and Colossians.
10 The new humanity stands in contrast to the old humanity. Both humanities have
11 distinct practices. The one divides people according to class, race, religion.
12 The other transcends all divisions and makes everything new. The new humanity
13 is the image of God, another new creation image. The fall of Genesis 3 has
14 been reversed. God is creating a new humanity through Christ.

15
16 Another creation image pictures the church as light. Nineteen different New
17 Testament writings describe the church as light. The light is given by God to
18 the children of light (Jn. 12.35; 1 Thes. 5.5). The image is used to describe
19 the unity and the mission of the church. There is but one light set over
20 against the one darkness (2 Cor. 4.6; 1 Pet. 2.9). When the light shines in
21 peoples lives it communicates fellowship in the light as a common bond (Col.
22 1.12; 1 Jn. 1-2). The light is set on a hill to illumine the world (Mt. 5.14-
23 16; Phi. 2.15; Acts 26.18). The light image draws on a major religious idiom
24 of all ancient religions. It is probably more influential, often in subtle
25 ways, than many images which have dominated theological statements about and
26 controversies over the nature of the church, e.g., the body of Christ.

27
28 The point of the cosmic images is to present the church as the new creation of
29 God. The church is the fulfillment and the promise of what God intended in the
30 original creation of the world. The images assert that God is doing a new
31 thing in the church: he is making all things new.

32 33 Body Images

34
35 One major set of images is uniquely Pauline, the church as the body of Christ.
36 The image oscillates around three terms: body, members, head. The imagery is
37 not singular in meaning, but multi-valent; it means one thing in one context,
38 and another in a different context. Paul never organizes all the nuances into
39 a single pattern.

40
41 1 Corinthians uses the image in several different ways. It asserts "that your
42 bodies are members of Christ" in chapters 6 and 10 to resolve misuse of the
43 body and the continued practice of idolatry. The Christian becomes one with
44 Christ, and thereby becomes part of a larger but single communal whole ("we
45 who are many are one body"). The union with Christ and his body excludes all
46 other loyalties. In chapter 11 this union creates such an interdependence of
47 the members of the body that a denial of relationship with any member means a
48 denial of relationship with Christ himself. Oneness with Christ transforms all
49 human relationships, and creates a profound societal interdependence between
50 the members that erases the socio-economic distinctions of the world.
51

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

12
13 Christians are members of a body, the body of Christ, the church. That union
14 transforms all relationships. It excludes immoral relationships, idolatry,
15 socio-economic distinctions, divisions within the church over the value and
16 exercise of gifts of the Spirit.

17
18 The imagery of "the body" takes on new meanings in Romans 5-8. Christians are
19 "baptized into Christ Jesus" (6.3). This "baptism into Christ" follows the
20 discussion of Adam and Christ as the two inclusive representatives of the two
21 humanities (5.12-21). Those in solidarity with Adam constitute one body; those
22 in solidarity with Christ constitute another. The two bodies are the only
23 solidarities open to human beings; they are universal and mutually exclusive.
24 To "be baptized into Christ" means to be incorporated into the community of
25 which he is the head, just as to be baptized into Moses meant to be
26 incorporated into the Israel of which he was the leader(1 Cor. 10.2). "Body"
27 language denotes the universal solidarity of all persons in one person,
28 whether the old or the new.

29
30 The application of this theological foundation in chapter 12 adds a nuance not
31 found in 1 Corinthians. Not only are all Christians "one body in Christ" but
32 they are also "individually members one of another" (v. 5). To be one body in
33 Christ means that a Christian is a member of all other Christians, and all
34 other Christians are members of him/her. Christians are really interdependent
35 in the one body of Christ even though they do not all have the same function.
36 Therefore, Christians cannot think of themselves more highly than they ought
37 to think (v. 3).

38
39 A further stage of development in "body of Christ" language occurs in
40 Colossians and Ephesians. Colossians introduces the idea of the relationship
41 of the head to the body. Christ is the head of the body, the church. Christ as
42 the head neutralizes all other powers and forces because "the fullness of God
43 dwells in him" (1.19). Christ as the head of the body is the only real power
44 in the cosmos and over humanity. Salvation is found by becoming a member of
45 the body of Christ, the church.

46
47 The body metaphor is developed to the full in Ephesians. The church is the
48 body of Christ and Christ is the head of the body. Christ fills the body just
49 as he fills the universe. The one body is the place of the reconciliation of
50 Jew and Gentile to God and to each other. The image of the body describes a
51 social revolution. A new society has been created that heals the great
52 divisions within humanity. This body also grows into maturity when it is

1 rightly related to the head and receives nourishment from him, and when its
2 members are rightly related to each other, each making his/her own
3 contribution.

4
5 The Pauline "church as body" pictures an organic unity composed of a
6 multiplicity of members, each necessary to the other and to the growth of the
7 whole. This community unity is based on the unity of the body with Christ.
8 Christ is the source of the body's life, and fills it with all the resources
9 of his power and grace. The church grows as its members are properly related
10 to the Head and to each other. The point of the metaphor is the radical unity
11 in Christ and the diversity of gifts within the one unity.

12 13 The Independent Images

14
15 Four clusters of metaphors have been examined. The different and similar
16 images in the clusters seem to be related; they have common themes and
17 pictures. There are a whole series of other metaphors used to define the
18 nature of the church that do not seem connected to each other. These are
19 characterized as independent or free-standing images. At least 24 such
20 metaphors can be identified in the New Testament. Only a few are noted to
21 illustrate the diversity and depth of meaning conveyed about the church.

22
23 The church is a letter (2 Cor. 3.2-3). It is a public witness to the grace of
24 God and to the founder (Paul).

25
26 The church is the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11.1f.; Eph. 5.22-33; Rev. 19.7:
27 21.2-4). The metaphor has a long tradition of meaning in the Old Testament
28 prophets and Jewish inter-testamental literature. The church as the bride
29 sustains a twofold relationship to Christ: 1) she is a whole person distinct
30 from Christ (hoi duo, Eph. 5.31); 2) she is united with Christ and forms part
31 of a larger entity (mia sarx, Eph. 5.31). As the bride, the church is chaste,
32 submissive, mutually interdependent with Christ, ready to be presented as holy
33 and without blemish. The church as the bride of Christ provides the pattern
34 for husband-wife relationships; she is the extended family for the nuclear
35 family.

36
37 The church is a building (1 Cor. 3.9, 16f.; 2 Cor. 6.16-18; Eph. 2.20-22),
38 another image from the Old Testament and Jewish literature. Many themes are
39 developed from this picture. The church belongs to God (1 Cor. 3.9). The
40 church is a temple where God dwells. It is built on the cornerstone of Christ,
41 on the foundation of the apostles, and is in the process of growing.

42
43 The church is a foreign embassy (2 Cor. 5.18-21). The church represents
44 Christ's kingdom in the world by "embassying" (a verb rather than a noun) the
45 reconciliation of God.

46
47 Everyone of the independent images belongs to a long tradition of meaning that
48 can illumine its application to the church. The images are used in what appear
49 to be contradictory ways. For example, Christ is the bridegroom who dies for
50 his bride, the living husband who cherishes her, and the lord who will return
51 to celebrate the wedding feast with her. Each image carries a multiplicity of
52 meanings. The precise meaning is determined by the context, the association

1 with other images. and the transforming power of God's final revelation in
 2 Christ. "The image is made for the message, not the message for the
 3 image". [14]

4
 5 Reflections on the Images

6
 7 What is the meaning of the plethora of images for the church in the New
 8 Testament? What do the many images mean theologically and ecclesiologically?
 9 Several observations are suggested.

10
 11 First. there is a diversity of images. The images come from many walks and
 12 experiences of life, e.g., family life, farm life, city streets, courtrooms,
 13 ancient traditions, religious practices and institutions.

14
 15 The diversity of images suggests that no one image can be selected as the base
 16 line for a theology of the church. No biblical writer starts from one master
 17 image and then systematically builds an ecclesiology from that foundation.

18
 19 The church in every age tends to focus on one or two images. If the biblical
 20 writers do not prioritize an image or two, how can we? Many of the images are
 21 introduced to correct a problem in church life. The church is continually
 22 blind to its own character; its self-understanding is never complete or large
 23 enough. J.B. Phillips once said that "our God is too small." The same is true
 24 of our view of the church; "our theology of church is too small." The church
 25 in every age must continually open itself to the diversity of images in the
 26 New Testament in order to be renewed by images it has lost. We must give up
 27 the quest for one central image to construct our theology of the church. We do
 28 better to let ourselves be "grasped" by the diversity of the many images,
 29 especially the ones we have lost in our self-understanding.

30
 31 Secondly, the many different images all speak of one reality, the church of
 32 Jesus Christ. The purpose of every image is to point beyond itself to the
 33 people God is creating in the world. The greater the number of images, the
 34 greater the number of pointers. Every image points beyond itself to the people
 35 in whom God, Christ and the Spirit are working. The nature of the church is a
 36 reflection of the reality and activity of God, Christ and the Spirit in
 37 creating a people in the world. Different images stress one or another of the
 38 diverse activities of God, Christ and the Spirit in the church. The point is
 39 that the diversity of images are centered; they are centered in the people-
 40 creating work of God through Christ and the Spirit in history.

41
 42 The church in the New Testament is never a separate or autonomous entity. We
 43 tend to define the church in relation to other institutions and groups in
 44 society. We try to describe the uniqueness of the church by making the case
 45 that it is different than a school, a club or a corporation. The New Testament
 46 writers think very differently. The church is defined by its relation to God,
 47 not by its likeness or differentness to other socio-political structures.
 48 Uniqueness is centered beyond the church in the work of God through Christ and
 49 the Spirit.

50
 51 Thirdly, the many different images are centered in another way. They all have
 52 a common referent, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the creator of God's church. The

1 church is centered in Jesus Christ and reflects his nature and ministry.
 2 Because the diverse ecclesiological images are centered christologically they
 3 can be used in many different, even confusing, ways. The same metaphor can be
 4 used for the life of an individual believer, the life of separate churches,
 5 the total community of faith (e.g., temple). Or, Paul can combine the image of
 6 the body, a building, a planting, a nation, a table and a temple. Unity at the
 7 center permits great diversity of expression.

8
 9 Fourthly, the center can be defined even more narrowly. Many of the images
 10 focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. The church exists and ministers
 11 because Jesus took upon himself the form of a servant. In him all die and all
 12 are made alive. The story of Jesus defines the nature of the church. The
 13 pictures of him--priest, sacrifice, shepherd, king, human being, servant,
 14 witness, holy one--define and redefine the metaphors of the church.

15 16 What is the Nature of the Church?

17
 18 The church is a people called into existence by God. It is God's people; it is
 19 not its or our own. This people is inclusive; it embraces all peoples and
 20 nations. The church is the people where God is present in history to bind and
 21 to loose, to liberate people from evil and to engage in ethical discernment
 22 about how to live together in the world. The church is a people in history
 23 with a history of living and walking with God. The church is the community,
 24 the body, of God's Messiah and Lord. The whole is subordinate to him, is prior
 25 to and greater than the parts, and, in fact, defines the meaning and inter-
 26 relationship of the parts. The church is the new creation of God in the world
 27 that simultaneously realizes and points to the intent of the original
 28 creation.

29 30 SO WHAT?

31
 32 What does all of this mean for Mennonite Brethren self-understanding at the
 33 end of the twentieth century. First, we are part of God's and his Messiah's
 34 people. We are not our own, and we are not alone. We are not God's people. We
 35 are part of God's people.

36
 37 God's people or body has members, men and women, whom he is incorporating into
 38 his people. The church is not a membership organization, e.g., a club that
 39 people decide to join, but an organic peoplehood that God is creating.

40
 41 Because God's people is a peoplehood in history its form is expressed in many
 42 local communities or congregations, whether tribes in the Old Testament, or
 43 synagogues in first century Judaism, or house churches in the New Testament.
 44 There is no such thing as a non-historical peoplehood of God in history.
 45 Everyone of God's persons is and must be a member of a local body of God's
 46 people.

47
 48 The members of God's body, universal and local, are interdependent. The body
 49 images articulate this life-in-mutuality most clearly, but many other images
 50 make the same point. The family analogies stress mutuality. The building
 51 metaphors speak of the integration of various parts within a common and larger
 52 structure. The point of the gift images is service for the sake of others.

1 Baptism by definition means incorporation into the church as the people of
2 God. Church members exist in solidarity, mutuality, interdependence, all under
3 and for the headship of Christ. There are not and cannot be autonomous
4 Christians.

5
6 What is true of members within churches is also true of the inter-relation of
7 churches. Antioch is dependent on and serves Jerusalem, just as the latter
8 ministers to the new churches of the expanding mission in the world. There are
9 not and cannot be autonomous churches.

10
11 Denominations are both biblical and non-biblical. God's people has always
12 expressed itself in structures of accountability between local bodies of
13 believers. The particular form of that accountability has changed over the
14 centuries, and may not use explicit biblical language, e.g., denomination,
15 conference. But the principle of covenantal accountability is a biblical one.

16
17 Christians are part of and accountable to each other in a local body of
18 believers. Local churches are accountable to each other in whatever structures
19 of accountability they mutually agree to create, and associations of local
20 churches are accountable to other associations of local churches. When the
21 churches of Ireland fight each other all churches in the world are hurt. The
22 decision of one body of churches to ordain homosexual persons for ministry
23 impacts all churches. When the leader of one body of churches falls into sin,
24 all churches and all church leaders in the world are affected.

25
26 The Mennonite Brethren Church faces three principle challenges at this time.
27 The first is to understand itself as the people of God in a post-Christian
28 world. To declare ourselves the people of a transcendent God is one of the
29 most radical assertions possible in our world. It is to confess that we do not
30 belong to ourselves and are not centered in ourselves. To understand ourselves
31 as the people of God is to stand against the polytheistic (many gods) and
32 narcissistic (self-centered) paganism of our time.

33
34 The second challenge is to recover an understanding and social experience of
35 church as covenant community. Community has been eroded by the autonomous and
36 now fragmented self of modernity. The church is a binding and loosing
37 community; it is people in family, solidarity, mutuality, interdependence. The
38 refashioning of church as community calls for the fundamental reversal of the
39 deepest modern assumptions and commitments. It will require genuine binding
40 and loosing, the liberation of Christians from false gods that fragment so
41 that people can be made whole. This binding and loosing as liberation must
42 then be followed by binding and loosing as ethical discernment, as covenant
43 making by and among liberated Christians. What is true of Christians at the
44 local level must also become the experience of churches in relationship to
45 each other and denominations in relationship to each other.

46
47 Thirdly, the church as the people of God living in covenant must live
48 differently than the nations. The church is social ethics. It is another way
49 to be in the world. The pressure of modern and evangelical culture on
50 Mennonite Brethren is to accommodate to the ways and values of pagan North
51 American culture. To be the church as binding and loosing community is to be a
52 discerningly different community following "a different drummer."