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Affirmation of 'The church without spot or wrinkle'

by **Gerry Ediger**

Walter Unger has presented a helpful historical overview of Mennonite Brethren Church belief and practice with respect to baptism and church membership. He seeks to exploit this opportunity to test the tradition of what it means when Scripture speaks of a glorious church not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing (**Ephesians 5:27** KJV). It is noteworthy that Unger's dominant thematic lens in pursuing his analysis appears to be the purity of the church and church discipline. It would seem that for Unger, understanding the linkage of baptism and church membership is grounded to a significant degree in the tensions inherent in the historic Anabaptist quest for a pure church. In tracing this quest Unger delineates an ecclesiological trajectory that gained impetus at several important points. To create some points of coherent contact with Unger's paper it will be helpful to recapitulate briefly the path of the trajectory that can be discerned in Unger's historical survey of pure church ecclesiology.

The arc along which this trajectory travels seems clear enough until we enter the latter half of the twentieth century and our own present. The quest for the pure church was launched in the Anabaptist insistence that the church was first of all the covenanted, visible and gathered community. Baptism was the sign of covenant that defined and identified this community. The Lord's Supper was the continuing sign of an individual's solidarity with the baptismal covenant and ongoing inclusion in the visible community. Unger seems to present the eschatological vision of the church as a pure bride for Christ as definitive.

The trajectory of a pure church ecclesiology was reinforced by the stream of Menno as he, his circle and their followers, worked through their theology and practice of the ban. Alternate emphases were also presented by fellow Anabaptists but these were accorded less significance by the Menno circle. Thus, Menno and his followers tended to discount the Swiss and South German vision of the church as the company of the redeemed in process. As a result, the trajectory of the 'Word' and 'outer' ecclesiology was strengthened and became an eventual contributor to Mennonite Brethren Church ecclesiology. This pure church ecclesiology also gained momentum toward legalism and a potential for the abuse of discipline. Moreover, the alternate vision of the Spirit-led community in the process of redemption through renewal of the inner life began to dim. At the conclusion of the Anabaptist section, Unger explicitly acknowledges these two ecclesiological trajectories,

one based primarily on the Word and the outer life and the other more accepting of the Spirit and the inner life. As 'Anabaptists' became 'Mennonites', 'pneumatological centredness' receded in the face of ever-stricter efforts at enforcing boundaries made visible in terms of 'outer ecclesial rules of behaviour'. It is noticeable at this point in the paper that the theme of baptism and membership has virtually disappeared from the analysis. One might also wonder whether it was baptism or the Lord's Supper that was more central to the role of the ban and its maintenance of a spotless bride for Christ.

The trajectory of a pure church ecclesiology was again strengthened, especially for Mennonite Brethren believers, in the very historical process that produced the Mennonite Brethren Church itself. Unger points out the concern of early Mennonite Brethren leaders to purify the Lord's Table by means of a purified baptism with an emphasis on both inner conversion and outward purity of life. The historic linkage of baptism, communion, membership and church discipline are clearly evident. Unger could also have pointed to the early Mennonite Brethren repudiation

of those elements of renewal that were less amenable to behavioural control and decorum while seeking to be more responsive to the Spirit. Again, the trajectory of Word and outer objective purity is strengthened at the expense of the Spirit and the inner, more subjective, response. And again, Unger points to instances of 'legalism, displayed self-righteousness, intolerance and harsh unbiblical church discipline' that occurred despite a generally acknowledged desire to practice congregational discipline in a compassionate and redemptive manner.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the trajectory of the pure church ecclesiology had lost much of its momentum. Mennonite Brethren believers became unsure of their identity and their reason for being. Local congregations and individual Mennonite Brethren believers began to question and repudiate the legalism, traditionalism and cultural separation of their parents and grandparents. In the 1980s this trend stimulated a prolonged effort by the conference leadership to discern and recover the essence of the church as expressed through Mennonite Brethren faith and practice. At this point, Unger's delineation of an ecclesiological trajectory seems to become less clear and defined. This diminished sense of focus reflects well the actual situation in the Mennonite Brethren Church in the closing decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first.

Unger attests to the desire of many Mennonite Brethren congregations and believers in the 1980s, and later, to imagine a way of being the church that is more centred than bounded. In part, he seems to understand this paradigm shift as evidence that 'a considerable modification of ecclesiological tradition [had] indeed occurred'. Unger has, in fact, taken his readers to a place of historic crisis. He celebrates the lessening sectarianism of Mennonite Brethren attitudes, a more 'positive and holistic view of church membership' and the trend toward removing behavioral norms as prerequisites for baptism. He also worries that the practice of church discipline will become further weakened

and that disconnecting membership from baptism will undercut the prophetic role of the church. At the end of the test, Unger seems to remain committed to the ecclesiological tradition of the pure church, a bride for Christ without spot or wrinkle, as the definitive vision of the church. At the same time, he also appeals passionately that this vision be pursued in the spirit of 'love, nurture, forgiveness and tender care'.

The theme of this conference, the linkage of baptism and membership, is only the latest of a series of fundamental ecclesiological and theological issues that has persistently risen to challenge the conference. Two others that Unger does not mention, because these are outside the scope of his subject, are the question of retaining biblical pacifism as a central confessional element, and whether the historic Christian linkage of baptism and the Lord's Supper should remain normative for Mennonite Brethren congregations. Mennonite Brethren believers, in convention, re-affirmed the former and abandoned the latter. One of the reasons these issues arose to challenge the historic understandings and practices of the Mennonite Brethren Church is that they both have significant implications for the maintenance of boundaries at the congregational level. Both issues emerged in crisis proportions because widespread congregational practice, contrary to the conference position, was threatening to make the conference confession irrelevant. In the case of baptism and the Lord's Supper, confessional integrity was only maintained by radically re-imagining the meaning and application of the Lord's Supper. Now we are in the process of discerning our way through another question that seems to stand in the same lineage.

What are some of the implications of Unger's analysis? Is it noteworthy that when baptism and membership are addressed in the context of a pure church ecclesiology, the theme of the ban, church discipline and boundary maintenance quickly threatens to displace a discussion of the meaning, significance and connection of baptism and membership? In the final analysis, is the connection of baptism and membership to be retained because it is crucial to church discipline? Unger's rendition of the tradition is instructive but the implication that the way forward with respect to baptism and membership is to be found in striving for a less legalistic and more redemptive and humane quest for the pure church may not be sufficient to guide the Mennonite Brethren Church to resolution. It may well be that when the Mennonite Brethren Church abandoned the connection between baptism, membership and the Lord's Supper; it also signaled that the quest for a pure church was no longer the controlling paradigm of Mennonite Brethren ecclesiology. Perhaps we are now recognizing that the tradition traced by Unger is already in the process of being redefined, and that furthermore, this is happening in the context of the local congregation, relegating the conference to the role of respondent rather than leader and innovator.

For example, the desire to become more open to their communities and more cognizant of how faith grows and develops among their children and youth was an important stimulus to separating baptism and communion. In the process, Mennonite Brethren congregations can be seen as revisiting points

of diverging trajectories in their Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren past. Whether they knew it or not, their imaginations were attracted more to the generous vision of Hubmaier and Marpeck than the rigourist vision of Menno and Dirk Philips and Leenaert Bouwens. In their reaching out to their communities it has become more important for them to create pathways of connection leading from popular culture to the Christological Centre of the church as family. Such pathways are marked by welcome signs of sensitivity to the inner spiritual needs of the surrounding culture and are less encumbered by barriers of separation at the boundaries of the congregation. Furthermore, as Mennonite Brethren believers have assimilated the ethos and sensitivities of the charismatic renewal, even if publicly they remain aloof from its more central manifestations, they can again be seen to have revisited their own tradition and to have recovered a stronger emphasis on the Spirit and the inner life. Such a spirituality may be less amenable to conference definition and control but it may also be more responsive to local needs and innovation.

Therefore, an attempt to buttress the connection between baptism and membership by refurbishing a pure church ecclesiology may prove futile. What if Mennonite Brethren believers were to liberate their imaginations in other directions? The church as eschatological bride is only one of scores of biblical images for the gathered people of God. Baptism as a sign of regeneration is, of course, a central image but there are others. Our contemporary understanding of membership as a formal, institutional, and essentially static adherence to a group is difficult to sustain in the biblical text. Perhaps a new imagination is needed that can make possible a more organic and relationally grounded connection between baptism and membership.

How would the connection of baptism and membership be understood through the image of the vine and being grafted into the vine? In this time of personal alienation and fear of abandonment, the church as household or family, and baptism as a sign of welcome and a promise of nurture, might be more valid. Baptism as a sign of the infusion of the Spirit and inauguration into the community of the Spirit-led may speak more powerfully than the historic tradition. This might even lead us to allow individuals to exercise an intentional choice in the mode of baptism. Imagine the teaching possibilities in equipping baptizands to make such a decision. Need the trajectory of our past tradition limit the scope of our present and future interpretation of the meaning and significance of the historic Christian symbols of water and wine and bread? If we invite them, the biblical scholars among us are well equipped to stimulate our imaginations along these lines.

It is no accident that these few examples of alternate images of baptism and membership are generally more organic and dynamic and less static and structural in character. Baptism has tended to be understood in forensic terms. Membership has been assumed to consist of entering a name on a list. It is doubtful that the sixteenth century Anabaptist congregations had membership lists. Their sense of membership was grounded in relationship and fellowship. Baptism was a validation of an organic social relationship in the making. Again, it may be time to free our imaginations to conceive of forms of

membership that express covenant and relationship and association but with less of the modern connotation of being on one side of the congregational boundary or the other. The Mennonite Brethren decision to allow children of the congregation at the Table is already a powerful indication that there is more than one way to be a member.

It remains to thank Walter Unger for a stimulating paper, a paper that attempts to 'test the tradition.' It may well be that Mennonite Brethren congregations have already put the tradition to the test and found it wanting in respect to their understanding of God's call to them in their own local setting. If we as a larger Mennonite Brethren family want to retain a sense of solidarity around the historic connection linking the signs of Christian faith, life and community, our understanding and practice of those signs will need to be grounded in Scripture. They will also, however, need to be centrally practicable in the pastoral and missional realities of daily and weekly congregational life.

Gerry Ediger is Associate Professor of Christian History at CMU, Winnipeg, Man.

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