



# The church without spot or wrinkle

by Walter Unger

## Introduction

Maintaining a biblical understanding of the church seems like a continual challenge for Mennonite Brethren. Ecclesiology was the root issue in the sixteenth century Anabaptist break with both the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reform movements, and in 1860 the Brethren sought to go back to Menno and his concept of the church.

The past quarter century has been one of seeking theological focus and identity among Mennonite Brethren. Once again, the biblical concept of the church and church leadership has been the most frequent topic featured at study conferences convened by the General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel and later by the Board of Faith and Life – the topic of not less than twelve different conferences. Others in the Mennonite faith community are also grappling with this topic. Last year the Mennonite Church of Canada convened a three day conference on “Baptism and Mission,” with one lengthy paper by Chris Arney on “Membership and the Missional Church”. Hopefully our present efforts will bring a clarifying perspective on both the history and current belief and practice of Mennonite Brethren regarding baptism and church membership, and be an impetus 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**).

## **The ecclesiological core of Anabaptism**

In my own faith pilgrimage to Anabaptist–Mennonite convictions, it was the Anabaptist view of the church that was particularly compelling. Ecclesiology was at the core of Anabaptism and the chief distinctive of the movement. Baptism was a corollary. The church was for believers who voluntarily obeyed Christ in baptism and a life of discipleship. The new birth had to be demonstrated by a new way of life. High priority was placed on discipleship, both individual and corporate. Indeed the Anabaptist's concept of the church came from their understanding of Christianity as discipleship i.e. the obedient following of Christ in the context of a covenant community.

## **The church was visible**

There are two extremes, both of which are to be avoided in one's view of the church. The first is to see the church almost exclusively in terms of a vast invisible cloud of witnesses of all nations throughout the ages – the true body of Christ, known only to Him. The other is to see one's own local, visible community of faith as *the* church above all others and that only by belonging to it can one truly experience God. The danger of an overemphasis of the former, platonic view of the church, is a devaluing of membership in a local church and also a corresponding devaluing of the outward signs of such belonging – baptism and the Lord's Supper. An overemphasis on one's own particular church or denomination as the unique and possibly only depository of God's truth leads to sectarianism, spiritual pride, and a very narrow view of God's working with humankind.

Anabaptists rejected the concept of an invisible church, teaching that the body of Christ is made concrete in the visible, localized community of faith. The church particular was the visible manifestation of the church

universal i.e. true believers everywhere and, as in apostolic days, those who accepted the message of Christ were to be baptised, not only as a sign of the forgiveness of sins, but also as the act of entry into the visible church where teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer could occur (**Acts 2:41–42**).

### **Baptism was the door to the visible church**

Baptism is a rite of initiation. It signifies “incorporation into the community of which Jesus is the head, not only the initiation of a mystical union with Christ, or an individual relationship with him” (COF Commentary & Pastoral Application 2000:89). Thus baptism and ecclesiology are inextricably linked, for baptism highlights the questions: what is the church and where is it to be found?

Anabaptists and Mennonite Brethren have, throughout their history said the church is found in the local body of believers whose baptismal covenant is not only vertical i.e. to God as a pledge of a clear conscience (**1 Peter 3:21**), but also horizontal i.e. to fellow brothers and sisters in pilgrimage. The following are representative statements.

In 1525, Balthaser Hubmaier responded to Ulrich Zwingli’s attack on believers’ baptism. The Christian Baptism of Believers has been lauded by the Catholic historian Loserth as “the classic presentation of (Anabaptist) teaching on baptism and as one of the best defences of adult baptism ever written” (Estep 1996: 88–89). Hubmaier denies that baptism is necessary for salvation but does insist it is essential to the life of the church.

Where baptism in water does not exist, there is no Church, no brother, no sister, no fraternal discipline, exclusion or restoration. I speak here of

the visible Church as Christ said (**Matt. 18**). For there must be some outward sign of testimony by which brothers and sisters can know one another, though faith be in the heart alone. By receiving baptism, the candidate testifies publicly that...he has submitted himself to his brothers and sisters... that is, to the Church. If he transgresses, they have power to admonish, punish, exclude and restore (Estep 1996:89).

Menno Simons, in his Admonition on Church Discipline, written in 1541, urged his “beloved brethren and sisters in the Lord never to forget to what they were called, taught and baptized. Remember the covenant of the Most High which you voluntarily desired and accepted,” reminding them of the holy life to which they have been called (CWMS: 410).

Menno moves from the vertical covenant to the horizontal when he exhorts:

... diligently to observe each other unto salvation, in all becoming ways teaching, instructing, admonishing, reproving, warning, and consoling each other as occasion requires...If you see your brother sin, then do not pass him by as one that does not value his soul; but if his fall be curable, from that moment endeavour to raise him up by gentle admonition and brotherly instruction (CWMS: 411–12).

The 1902 Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, which became the normative confession for the denomination on both sides of the Atlantic for most of the twentieth century succinctly states: “We believe and confess, that Christian baptism is a holy, visible evangelical, sacred act and ordinance (institution) of Christ, commanded by the Lord Himself for a sacred sign

of regeneration and embodiment in Him and His church” (Loewen 1985:168).

The 1999 revision of the Confession of Faith, in **Article 8** states that “Baptism is for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and commit themselves to follow Christ in obedience as members of the local church”. It also says baptism is “a covenant with the church to walk in the way of Christ and through the power of the Spirit” (COF CPA 2000:88).

### **Accountability and discipline were practiced in a covenanting community**

As already noted, Anabaptist ecclesiology placed enormous emphasis on the body life of the believing community. The very essence of the church was covenant, with accountability, mutual watchcare, and discipline taken very seriously – in fact, at times to the extreme.

The Schleithem Confession of 1527 elaborated on baptism, the ban, and the Lord’s Supper in the first three articles. The rule of Christ (**Matthew 18**) is to be followed in dealing with those who have been overtaken by sin and “this shall be done according to the ordering of the Spirit of God before the breaking of the bread so that we may all in one spirit and in one love break and eat from one bread and one cup” (Loewen 1985: 81).

Menno’s high ecclesiology stressed the church as the pure bride of Christ, the “without spot or wrinkle” church (**Eph. 5:27**), a church that could only be kept pure by constant vigilance to check those who would defile it from within or enemies who might enter from without. Therefore, writes Menno . . . “a church without ban or expulsion is like a vineyard without wall or trenches, or a city without walls and gates. For the enemies have free access into it, to sow and plant their pernicious tares unhindered” (CWMS:724). Accountability, admonition,

yes ban and separation, are painful but purposeful to maintaining a pure church.

The peaceful, evangelical Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands had to convince European authorities that it was not like one of the many revolutionary groups of the day breaking down the civil order and generally wreaking havoc in society. Menno believed that the strict practice of discipline was one of the features that distinguished the peaceful Anabaptists from violent revolutionaries. In his Instruction on Excommunication Menno wrote:

It is more than evident that if we had not been zealous in this matter (i.e. use of the ban) these days, we would be considered and called by every man the companions of the sect of Muenster and all perverted sects (CSMS:962).

How strict ought church discipline to be? What was all entailed in the use of the ban? Such problems regarding church discipline emerged among the followers of Menno over the question of marital avoidance and only escalated after that. By 1557 the lines had hardened between the “moderate” and the “strict” parties concerning the ban – there were “mild banners” and “hard banners”. Major divisions among early Mennonites occurred over this controversy. Menno, influenced by the powerful Dirk Philips and even more by the powerful Leenaert Bouwens moved to the position of a “hard banner”, but again as an expression of his concern for a pure community. In 1558 Menno stated his strict position in his tract Instruction on Excommunication. The same year Dirk Philips and Leenaert Bouwens co-authored a tract again upholding the strict use of the ban.

In 1559–60 Dirk set out his model of the Christian church in the treatise The Congregation of God. He writes:

... just as God began his congregation on earth in

paradise, **Gen. 2:8**, with pure and holy persons who were created according to his image and were made in his likeness, so also he still wants to have such persons in his congregation who are created after Christ Jesus and are renewed by the Holy Spirit, **Heb. 2:3f; 5:12** (WDP:357).

He goes on to write that without separation God's congregation may not exist and if one does not expel the unfruitful branches (**John 15:6**) the entire congregation will become impure. Indeed, "no congregation or assembly may exist before God when they do not use the ban" (WDP:368). Dirk's hermeneutic of the pure church governed his approach to Scripture and for him "it was impossible to read Scriptures without having in mind the fundamental ecclesiological and practical concerns that the Scriptures serve" (Shantz 1986:126). The same must be said of Menno, particularly the "later Menno" where he became much more concerned with the "pure community" (Snyder 1995:341).

### **The Spirit/inner life and letter/outer life emphases were in tension**

In the writings of Anabaptist theologians such as Hubmaier, Marpeck, Menno, Dirk Philips, Riedemann, as well as in numerous Anabaptist–Mennonite confessions of faith that emerged later, there are clear statements that discipline and ban are always redemptive and restorative, not punitive. Although one can find examples where this ideal was not realized, the stated goal of Anabaptist church discipline has always been the spiritual well-being of the offender and credibility of the church's witness to the world. Church discipline was an essential corollary to the Anabaptist principles of voluntary baptism and church membership. John D. Roth observes that:

... the integrity of both the voluntary choice and

the moral character of the congregation could be preserved only if the community exercised discipline in relation to members whose beliefs or actions later proved to be at odds with those of the congregation. Otherwise, as Anabaptists never tired of pointing out, the baptismal choice was meaningless. A church without discipline might just as well baptize babies since, in their way of thinking, moral or theological standards are ultimately meaningless in such a congregation. Discipline guaranteed that the voluntary decision to become a member of a church remained ongoing i.e., that membership continued to be an active choice (WSW 2000: 13–14).

Such a view of baptism and church membership has been the locus of conflict in the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition. This showed itself early on in the tension between the spirit/inner life and letter/outer life emphasis. Dangers for the church lay in either direction as subsequent historical events amply demonstrated.

Arnold Snyder points out even though the ban was the key in reforming, disciplining and sanctifying the community there were two different approaches. The Swiss and South German Anabaptists emphasized the Spirit and inner life and tended to emphasize love and the healing, reconciling, redemptive potential of community discipline. Then there were those who stressed the letter and outer life to maintain the unity and purity of the church in literal obedience to the Word. Over time, this approach prevailed, as we have seen with Menno, Dirk and Leenaert Bouwens and the divisiveness it caused (Snyder 1995:339; Estep 1996:173).

Ken Davis has documented that Anabaptism was “ascetically oriented and demanded, as the essential fruit of a true reformation, a moral and spiritual purification of



the church, a separation of the church from the world” and this strain was drawn from the medieval Catholic ascetic tradition (1974: 295–96). The Anabaptist teaching on the ban was rooted in this late medieval call for a moral reform of the church “in head and members”. The strictest of the Anabaptists read the New Testament as giving a literal rule of life and this involved the ban.

Another strain, which heavily influenced Menno in both his Christology and ecclesiology, was the unorthodox, docetic teaching of Melchior Hoffman. Hoffman rejected the two natures of Christ and held that the divine Saviour passed through Mary like water through a pipe, thus escaping contamination from Mary. Jesus was in Mary but not of Mary. God alone must be held as the progenitor of Jesus.

Salvation came to the believer, taught Hoffman through a spiritual process of repentance, regeneration and baptism, a process he described as a spiritual marriage to Christ and a joining to His spiritual Body, the Church. The regenerate had now, through Christ conquered the flesh by the Spirit, just as Christ had conquered the flesh perfectly by means of an immaculate, perfect conception and pure birth.

Hoffman’s regenerative anthropology was extremely optimistic (Snyder 1995: 357–58). Menno adopted these views of Hoffman and consistently defended them. Stressing **John 1:14** “The Word became flesh” Menno believed that Jesus did not receive His body from Mary but He himself became a body which was received by Mary in faith and through the Holy Spirit that she might nourish Him and bring Him into the world according to the way of nature (Oosterbaan 1961:192). That Christ’s entire being was of celestial origin was Menno’s succinct view: “The entire Christ Jesus, both God and man, man and God, has his origin in heaven and not on earth

(CWMS: 797–98). Our Lord was untainted from Adamic sin since He did not receive his human nature from Mary.

Menno held with Hoffman that the regenerated by Christ partake of His Spirit and nature and have been made like unto Him, they are married to Christ spiritually and are heavenly minded (CWMS:424). Menno described members of the “rightly believing Christian church” as follows:

They are the body and bride of Christ, the ark, the mount and garden of the Lord, the house, people, city, temple of God, the spiritual Eve, flesh of Christ’s flesh and bone of His bone, children of God, the chosen generation, the spiritual seed of Abraham, children of the promise, branches and trees of righteousness, sheep of the heavenly pasture, kings and priests, a holy people which is God’s own (CWMS:448).

The corporate entity is the true body of Christ ‘flesh of Christ’s flesh and bone of His bone’, not the individual (Kenney 1968: 155). Nevertheless, the regenerate, writes Menno “live no longer after the old corrupted nature of the earthly Adam, but after the new upright nature of the new and heavenly Adam, Christ Jesus” (CWMS: 93). They exhibit the holiness of the Bride and nurture, admonition, and if necessary church discipline is the way brothers and sisters uphold purity and maintain the credibility of the church before the watching world.

Although the Anabaptists rejected the sacramental mediation of grace and insisted that the water of baptism was just water and the bread and wine of communion just bread and wine, for them the true church was sacrament. While rejecting the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Anabaptists nevertheless believed the Body of Christ was present on earth in the visible congregation of saints. In

this light, the use of the ban was tantamount to being sacramental in that it maintained the purity of the Lord's Supper. The regenerate came to the Table of the Lord pure, as an offering, rather than as sinners to receive cleansing (Snyder: 394; Rempel 1993: 32–37). The bar for membership in the Anabaptist fellowship was exceedingly high! Timothy George aptly comments regarding Anabaptist ecclesiology:

Faced with persecution and hostility from without, the Anabaptist churches were especially on guard against corruption or laxity from within.

Membership in an Anabaptist church was neither casual nor assumed; participation was perforce hearty and vigorous (1988: 297).

Menno's heterodox celestial flesh Christology which undergirded his view of the church was a major point of controversy between Mennonites and Protestants as well as between several Mennonite and Anabaptist groups into the seventeenth century. Some Mennonite groups continued to hold Menno's pure church views to the middle of the eighteenth century. The more liberal Dutch groups began to give up this doctrine during the seventeenth century (MEIII: 20, MEV: 148). Menno's ecclesiology has influenced Mennonite concepts of church, salvation and Christian ethics in renewal movements, particularly that of the Brethren in 1860. Unfortunately it has also contributed in considerable measure to a spirit of legalism, perfectionism and division among Anabaptists and Mennonites throughout their history.

It is clear that Melchiorite teaching heightened Menno's optimism concerning the ethical results of the new birth and thus heightened his expectations regarding the obedience of the pure Bride of Christ. This view, based on a docetic Christology, necessitated that the earthly

Body of Christ, the church indwelt by her Lord, stress purity above all else. Purity in the individual member then took precedence over growth as the chief character trait to be evident in the believing community. The concrete and visible church was where the physical presence of Christ in His members would be incarnated in the world. To safeguard this pure manifestation of the pure Christ, the strictest exercise of ever stricter boundaries was necessary, with the inevitability of growing legalism, as soon became evident. This is the ecclesiological tradition that was passed down through Mennonite history.

The milder, more realistic stream of Hubmaier and Marpeck argued that their brethren did not appreciate the stubborn nature of human sinfulness and the difficult process of change. This stream would agree with the Lutheran critique in 1578 that regeneration did not tear out sin with its roots from human beings. Hubmaier and Marpeck pointed away from an understanding of the church as the only pure Bride of Christ and saw the church rather as a gathering of people still in process. Thus the church was to be structured not so much to preserve unity among regenerated saints but rather to encourage growth for the “weak and imperfect”, which included all members of the church.

Pilgram Marpeck provided an alternative Anabaptist conception of the Christian life and the church. He saw both the restorative and the missional aspects and combined them. The church was a place of healing for members who in their weakness could minister to the world. Thus the church gives “teaching, wisdom, and information, the prescribed medicine and remedy of the true Master, to their fellow members and, in its infirmity and deficiency, to the world” (WPM: 87).

The spirit/inner life was the primary dynamic in the early years of Anabaptism. As time went on, the

movement lost its pneumentological centeredness. Indeed, the emphasis on the Holy Spirit faded in those Anabaptist groups which established stricter boundaries. Ecclesiology came to contain and define pneumatology, avers Snyder. As the sixteenth century progressed, the general tendency in the surviving movement – the part of the movement that passed on the Believers' Church tradition – was to limit or even suppress pneumatic expression: letter took priority over spirit; conformity to outer ecclesial rules of behaviour took priority over experiences of inner regeneration; visible lines of demarcation separating church from world were defined with increasing precision (Snyder 1995:380).

## **The Brethren: church-centered**

In his 1975 *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, J.A. Toews noted that Menno's high regard for the church found expression in the theology of the Mennonite Brethren, adding that in a real sense one could describe their theology as being church-centered (1975: 372). The ascetic, literalistic tradition of the "pure church", lost (at least in practice) in the Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, was picked up with great fervour by the Brethren in 1860. Indeed, as John B. Toews has observed:

The Brethren were tempted to make a pure church purer and so generally defined the nature of the Christian walk rather precisely...They in effect said: 'This is what we can be, let's strive to attain it'...The conservatives among the Brethren instinctively restricted the circle of the elect (1984:57).

The Document of Secession of January 6, 1860 reflected the biblical principles stressed by Menno Simons, to whom the document refers five times. The

issues specifically outlined were:

1. dissociation from the decadent Mennonite Church where godless living was not disciplined,
2. baptism on a genuine, loving faith effected by the Spirit of God, not on a memorized faith, as was the practice,
3. the Lord's Supper as a sign of the covenant and fellowship of believers and not a sign of the fellowship of believers and unbelievers as was practiced,
4. footwashing to be practiced,
5. ministers to be called out by God by His Spirit; others called through the instrumentality of true believers,
6. along with a call for separation from the world in the article on communion, the last article is an extensive statement on the ban.

Regarding the ban, we confess that all carnal and reprobate sinners must be banned from the fellowship of believers, as Paul states in **2 Thess. 3:14–15**. In the event that someone falls into a carnal sin (God save us from it), and the Spirit of Christ, who alone can work true repentance, convicts him of his sin, so that he confesses and repents; in that case, the church has no authority to ban such a repentant sinner, because the forgiveness of sin is not obtained in or through the ban, but by the merit of Jesus Christ. This was also Menno's conviction, as recorded in Vol. III, p.334 and 335. However, an unrepentant sinner may not be accepted into the fellowship of believers until he be genuinely converted to Christ (PMF: 232).

The document ends by simply stating that in all other articles of their confession, the Brethren are in full agreement with Menno Simons. It is clear that the 1860 reform was driven by the same ecclesiological imperatives that drove Menno – maintaining a pure and separated Bride of Christ and practicing true brotherhood.

### **A church without spot or wrinkle**

The Brethren did not produce their own official Confession of Faith until 1902. This Confession adopted for use in Russia and North America has the imprint of Menno throughout. There are six footnotes citing Menno, five of them extensive. There is also a one-paragraph citation from C.H. Spurgeon.

The Confession declares baptism as an ordinance commanded by Christ “for a sacred sign of regeneration and embodiment in Him and His church.” The ethical dimensions of walking in newness of life, using one’s spiritual gifts and carefully guarding the “holy privileges of divine citizenship” round out this section (Loewen 1985: 168–69).

Article III on the Church begins by highlighting redemption by the blood of Jesus, sanctification and our Lord’s goal of “a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. **Acts 20:28; Rev. 1:5; Eph. 5:25–27**” (166). Separation from the world is delineated next, a necessary corollary of maintaining a pure church. Again, under the characteristics of the true Church the first mark is a “life of sanctification according to the teaching of Christ and His apostles”.

The Christian exhortation, pastoral care and church discipline section highlights the rule of Christ in **Matthew 18:15–20** as well as the words of Paul in **1 Thessalonians 5:11–14** and **Acts 20:28, 32**

(Paragraph 42). Extensive scripture is cited regarding rebuking sin, withdrawing from the disorderly and rejecting those who lapse into heresy. The paragraph concludes with the words: “The church shall treat such excommunicated persons with love and helpful compassion, as it behooves a Christian to love all men, yea, even his enemies. **2 Thess. 3:15; Phil. 4:5.**”

Regarding restoration, the Confession cites **Matthew 18: 21–35** and **2 Corinthians 2:2–11** as backing for the statement, “If an excommunicated person shows repentance and sorrow over his sin, the church shall forgive him again and again and accept him into membership according to the word of the Saviour . . . and the apostle Paul.”

This confessional statement governed Mennonite Brethren belief and practice on “the pure church” for the better part of the twentieth century. In actual practice there were times when Mennonite Brethren lapsed into legalism, displayed self-righteousness, intolerance and practiced harsh and unbiblical church discipline. This occurred both early on in MB history and into the twentieth century. P.M. Friesen noted “Menno’s very serious, somewhat melancholy theology” being counterbalanced by Pietist Eduard Wuest’s joyous doctrine of justification. Nevertheless, it seemed the melancholy theology of Menno overshadowed all other influences. Friesen says as much when in 1910 he writes about the “reserved, anxiously suspicious disposition” of the Brethren in their relationships with the old church. His prose becomes heated:

This artificially pious and reserved attitude was one of the most repulsive aspects of the M.B. Church until recent times...(we talk about that which we – as members of the M.B. Church have witnessed with boiling blood and burning brain).



This sin of the M.B. Church, too, must be named in a truthful history (645).

The ideal of brotherhood and a community of equals was an integral part of M.B. ecclesiology, although the Church struggled with its implementation. Although there was a congregational church policy, church councils led by strong ministerial leadership were the real decision-makers. Over the churches was the general and district conferences whose decisions were to govern congregational life. The Confession is quite clear that "All questions relating to doctrine and life in the congregation are decided according to the example of the apostolic church" citing Acts 15 and numerous other New Testament passages (Loewen 1985:167).

Submission to the larger M.B. Brotherhood is to be the norm, as outlined in a note to the subject: Church of God:

The decisions made at the annual sessions of the entire denomination (triennial general conference or annual district conference) become operative in such local church through acceptance at a regular church council meeting. In making decisions in the local church council or in the general conference meetings the rule obtains that, whenever a non-desirable difference of view arises, the minority willingly submit itself; for thus only can freedom and order be upheld in the house of God (168).

## **Twentieth century: transitions and challenges**

As an immigrant people, North American Mennonite Brethren protected their theology and Christian convictions from contamination by the "world". The German language was seen by many as preserving the religious heritage. In the 1940's and 50's there was a shift

to a more intentional Anabaptist Mennonite Brethren identity. Up until then North American fundamentalism had influenced M.B. theology, which along with the impact of dispensationalist theology had undermined some Anabaptist values.

In the struggle to keep the M.B. Church one “without spot or wrinkle”, separation was becoming less and less a matter of biblical conviction and more one of legalism and tradition until about mid-century after which most of the separationist cultural standards began to crumble. In his analysis of North American Mennonite Brethren at mid-century, Richard Kyle concluded:

Generally, it seems that a tendency toward isolationism and ethical legalism held sway in Mennonite Brethren circles until the mid-twentieth century in the United States and perhaps a decade longer in Canada. Therefore, when industrialization, urbanization, secularization, materialism and the use of English became part of the Mennonite Brethren way of life, the old separationist cultural standards began to crumble. The Mennonite Brethren, for the most part, have not successfully replaced their earlier cultural separation with an equally rigorous biblical separation (Toews 1995:194).

In his 1975 *History of the Mennonite Church*, J.A. Toews wrote of church discipline as “a Mennonite Brethren distinctive which seems to be rapidly disappearing” (372).

Regarding baptism and church membership, mid-century Conference resolutions held a firm line on the traditional position : immersion on confession of faith was the only accepted entry rite to the church. The concept of “associate membership” was rejected and it was clearly

stated again that non-immersed believers could not be received for membership (1975 resolutions in *We Recommend* 1978: 89–92). The same set of resolutions allowed a form of open communion providing there be a clear testimony and a submission to the discipline of the church and observance of M.B. principles of church membership by the participant. In 1963, membership entry was expanded to allow those baptized as believers by a mode other than immersion to become members providing they accepted the M.B. Confession of Faith, agreed to be baptized by immersion as soon as they saw such light from the Word and that they would not hold any office requiring ordination (WR 1978:93).

Church membership issues surfaced again in 1969 with a broad resolution addressing critical matters of both church and member responsibility. In setting forth the ethical guidelines to assist the believer and the church, the statement admits it is possible for the church to fail “because she either neglects to do it or does it in the wrong way or in the wrong spirit.” This remarkable resolution then states:

As a brotherhood we confess:

- a. That we have at times been self-righteous and pharisaical in the way we have judged those who did not agree with us.
- b. That we have often neglected to give instruction concerning the biblical principles that underlie the guidelines which the church has laid down.
- c. That we have too often made abstinence from disorderly behaviour that hallmark of discipleship and spirituality, thus giving the expression of our faith a somewhat negative character (273).

A further resolution states that the church will continue to set guidelines to assist all members “to work before the Lord in holiness and truth”, adding the following two paragraphs:

- b. That we will consider such guidelines, not as conditions for membership in our church, but rather as ideals, the attainment of which remains the constant goal and desire of each member.
- c. That we will, however ask of each person who seeks membership in our churches, that he will accept these guidelines as his ideal and that he will maintain an honest openness and willingness to be instructed and nurtured in the way which the church believes to be true to the Word of God; that he will personally commit himself to diligent searching and prayer concerning areas in which he is uncertain (273-4).

A lengthy resolution on church membership and fellowship was passed in 1972. Among other points made, it encouraged uniformity in the congregations in associating baptism and church membership, adding that “Except for special reasons we should not encourage baptism without having the baptized relate to a specific, organized fellowship of believers.” The seventh point of the resolution stated the following:

That where a believer, for valid reasons, does not feel free to become a member of a local congregation, but nevertheless worships and works with a larger body, we allow such freedom and extend opportunity for fellowship in the life of the church (275).

Two major developments in the last third of the

century that again underscored the deep concern Mennonite Brethren had to have their ecclesiology articulated in clear, contemporary terms were the two revisions of the 1902 Confession of Faith. In the introduction of the 1976 edition, J.A. Toews states that the Confession “constitutes a commitment, a covenant of a brotherhood”. Further he writes:

This Confession can serve as a guide and standard for scriptural discipline of disobedient members and dissenting churches. Departure from the Confession of Faith constitutes a serious violation of the covenantal relationship of the brotherhood, and hence may require the withdrawal of fellowship from individuals and churches guilty of such violation (COF 1976:8).

This continued concern for a pure church is further expressed in a lengthy section under Article VI “Christian Nurture and Discipline”. There is a gentle tone, at first affirming the promotion of “constructive discipline” through public teaching, sympathetic encouragement, private counselling and earnest rebuke. The progressive nature of growth toward spiritual maturity is stressed. However, when Christians continue living in sin, not heeding churchly admonishment and private counselling, “the church exercises redemptive discipline. If warnings are disregarded and the attitude of rebellion and estrangement persists, the offender is formally excluded from the fellowship of the church” (16–17).

There is a significant reduction in the description of the aforementioned subject in the 1999 Confession of Faith, although the Commentary and Pastoral Application sections provide helpful amplification. The wording is very succinct:

The New Testament guides the practice of

redemptive church discipline. The church is responsible to correct members who continue to sin. Congregations forgive and restore those who repent, but formally exclude those who disregard discipline (COF CPA 2000:66).

The 1999 Confession reaffirms the traditional M.B. understanding of baptism as a covenant with the church and a sign of the believer's incorporation into the body of Christ, as expressed in the local church. It also underscores *believer's* baptism and states unequivocally that "persons who claim baptism as infants and wish to become members of a Mennonite Brethren congregation are to receive baptism on their confession of faith" (88). The Pastoral Application section provides some wise counsel regarding this last point. The church is to respect the act of infant baptism for what it was, most likely a thoughtful and important act of well-meaning parents seeking what they understood to be the best for the child. Then, without putting down infant baptism (how different from the early Anabaptists!) teach believers baptism and hold to it as the only biblical initiation into the local church (95–96).

The two revised confessions served as bookends for the sense of urgency Conference leadership expressed in the mid-eighties for Mennonite Brethren to redefine their understanding of the nature of the church. In 1986, A Pastoral Letter: A Call to Reason Together was sent out to all M.B. churches in North America and was published in the *Christian Leader* and *M.B. Herald*. The issues raised in the letter were discussed at a special Study Conference held in Fresno October 15–17, 1986. The Pastoral Letter, as well as the five papers presented at the conference appeared in the *Direction* Fall issue of 1986 under the title "The Church as a Covenanting Community."

The Letter called for a larger sense of "peoplehood", a

striving for a new sense of church community. It stated: “While we believe ourselves to be a strong Anabaptist–Evangelical church, there seems to be a lack of clarity as to what that means”, adding “we are no longer clear what ‘the church’ and particularly the Mennonite Brethren Church is all about” (*Direction* Fall 1986:5).

Further observations included the following:

- erosion of churchly authority
- a strong trend toward individualism, both personal and corporate i.e. “Total local autonomy, for all intents and purposes, is dividing us”.
- weakened loyalty to the Conference.

Regarding a shaping of the future, the Letter outlined four strategic calls:

- the call to live as a covenant community reflecting doctrinal and ethical unity
- the call to meaningful and responsible church membership and unity on the meaning of conversion and baptism
- the call to faithful ministry in the church, including affirming the ministry of women and a review of the requirement of rebaptism for ordained persons
- the call to renewal within the church.

The Study Conference papers addressed the concerns and strategic calls of the Pastoral Letter and affirmed M.B. ecclesiological convictions as expressed in the Confession of Faith. The Findings Report made numerous telling observations. It noted that the frequent references to bounded and centered sets, with a clear emphasis on moving people to the Centre, Christ rather than on boundary maintenance, as well as other aspects of the discussion “shows that we are not being asked to return to

the way of being a community that once characterize us" (72). And in a prophetic mode looking to the year 2000, the Report averred

... questions of faith and theology will probably be determined by expediency or pragmatism. The Mennonite Brethren Church will probably become a loose federation of churches whose character and 'glue' will consist of evangelism and activism; the significance of the church as a covenanting community and the presence of church discipline will decline. Growing churches will press for acceptance of the more popular evangelical and culturally popular stances. Missional congregations will gradually become community churches (75).

## **The Twenty-First Century**

Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century it is safe to say that considerable modification of the early Mennonite Brethren and certainly of the sixteenth century Anabaptists ecclesiological tradition has indeed occurred. This is to be expected since the cultural, political, and religious realities of our time are so radically different from those of our sixteenth century forebears. It must be remembered that the early Anabaptists took such a strong stand on church discipline, the ban and excommunication in opposition to Lutheran and Zwinglian churches, who did not at first attempt any discipline except for heresy. When the Anabaptists were questioned by state church leaders as to the reasons for their separation from them, a primary reason given was the lack of discipline (MEI: 595). How could the state church be the true church of Christ when it tolerated in its midst all kinds of sin? Menno makes this point very clearly in his Brief And Clear Confession, addressed to the Reformed pastor John á Lasco:



After that, cleanse your church, also. Exclude, according to the Word of God, all harlots and fornicators, drunkards, slanderous, swearers, those who lead a shameful and disorderly life, the proud, the avaricious, the idolatrous, and those who are disobedient unto God, adulterers, and the like, in order that you may become holy, the Christian church which is without spot or blemish....But if you remain as you are, this I say publicly, better to die than to enter into your doctrine, sacraments, life, & church (CWMS: 449).

The other reason Menno referred to the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians as “the great and comfortable sects” and grouped them with Arians and Muensterites was that they used force “to make valid their positions, faith, and conduct with the sword” (CWMS: 175). For Menno and his followers to act to separate the centuries-long organic unity of church and society undergirded by the coercive power of the state was seen as revolutionary and led to violent reprisals against the Anabaptists.

Contemporary followers of Menno do not live in the spectre of persecution from civil and religious authorities. The Anabaptists separated from sixteenth century churches they saw as churches of the Antichrist whose rituals, particularly infant baptism, were seen as sacrilegious. Now in the twenty-first century there is a spirit of cooperation by Mennonites with the evangelical pedobaptists, even with some evangelical Catholics. People from mainline Protestant churches attend M.B. churches; Christian Reformed, United, Anglican and others from pedobaptist backgrounds come and many are rebaptized and become members. Contemporary Mennonite Brethren have a much more open attitude to the larger work of God in the world, a view Menno lacked

since he was constantly on the defensive. The sense that the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition long held of being the only true church is gone.

What remains? The ideal of being a disciplined, visible believers' church still remains at the heart of M.B. self-understanding. Our current ecclesiology seeks to take seriously both a high view of the nature of the church as well as take seriously our humanity and the pilgrim/process nature of those within the church. The gospel we preach is after all a gospel of grace and "the church remains faithful not by being perfect but by keeping that message central" (Dueck Fast 2002:10). Such understandings may well help remove the barrier or at least the mystique that church membership is only for those already "without spot or wrinkle", a misconception which in the past has made the decision for baptism and membership very difficult, particularly for sensitive young people.

In the past decade, there has been a shift to a more positive and holistic view of church membership, a shift from authoritarian leadership to a more egalitarian one, from church edicts to Scriptural guidelines, and even following these guidelines is not seen as a condition of membership but an ideal, which with the help and nurture of fellow brothers and sisters the member strives to attain. Many churches are developing covenants which see membership as an ongoing commitment to utilizing one's gifts to build up the body and witness to the world. Churches are becoming more intentionally missional, calling each member to become involved.

Church discipline, although weakened in practice, still remains a part of M.B. understanding of church membership. Further retrenchment on this matter will have deleterious effects. Surely past abuses, as painful as they were, do not mean that we replace bad church

?

discipline with no church discipline. In reviewing the Anabaptists–Mennonite ecclesiological tradition, church historian John D. Roth concludes

... those groups that rejected the practice of church discipline, or allowed it to atrophy, almost inevitably lost their distinctive identity, declined in numbers, and became assimilated into other denominations or into the broader culture (WSW 2000:15).

A casualty of the move by some M.B. churches to disconnect baptism and church membership is loss of the sense that the church has more than a priestly role – it also has a prophetic and disciplinary role in the baptizand's life. With such thinking, exclusion or ban would certainly not be an issue. Where this is the case, we need to relearn the lesson that the linking of the ban (or at least the possibility of the ban) to baptism and membership underscores the essentiality of mutual accountability and the covenant relationship of the church. Indeed, can there be a believers' church without such accountability? How might we recover this dimension in our churches in our individualistic age?

We must not take historical perspective lightly. We ignore it at our peril, as Roth has noted. There are hopeful signs that more and more M.B. churches are seeking to strengthen covenant community and grow in becoming discerning communities, endeavouring to separate essential features of Christian belief and practice from cultural ones and from things adiaphora i.e. non-essential; things that call for correction and discipline and those that do not.

Roth offers the observation that the long record of the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition “testifies to the fact that membership in the gathered body of believers is the

beginning of conversation not the end of it.” Furthermore,

... baptism signifies a commitment to the difficult, dynamic, and life-giving task of discernment: of reading the cultural context, studying the Scriptures, listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, and testing one’s impulses and assumptions against the wisdom of fellow and sister believers.

In this process, conflict is inevitable, but conflict is an unavoidable part of parsing out faithfulness for each generation and each cultural setting.

It is necessary for each generation to clarify and claim scriptural truth. For the present generation of Mennonite Brethren, this does not mean we will simply assimilate the latest ecclesiological teachings and trends but we will carefully restudy Scripture in light of our culture and seek creative ways of being the church in that culture. At the beginning of the past century P.M. Friesen called his generation of Mennonite Brethren to relearn the good of the past and balance this with the new of the present. On the occasion of commemorating the centennial of the birth of the M.B. Church J.A. Toews called his generation to know the wisdom of the past tradition but also to look afresh at Scripture and go beyond the forefathers’ understanding and interpretation. The call “Back to the faith of our fathers,” wrote Toews,

... does not necessarily imply that we stay within the limits of their *understanding* of the Scriptures. Their understanding, like ours, was a partial one. The Spirit of God can, and must, extend spiritual horizons and enlarge knowledge within our Brotherhood (1981:99).

In our contemporary setting this will be a matter of finding that delicate balance between Word and Spirit, outer and inner, old and new, past and present. It will

mean affirming once again the fundamental truths that are fixed in our view of baptism, church, and Christian discipleship and remaining flexible in ways in applying and expressing these biblical norms in our current cultural setting.

We do well to remember that our Lord's *ideal* of the church to be presented one day without spot or wrinkle and the reality of how we experience the church as imperfect people on a pilgrimage, will always be in tension, as is the ideal and the real in our own sanctification. In **Ephesians 5:22–33** Paul encompasses such a discussion with the themes of love, nurture, forgiveness, and tender care for one another. In such a spirit, dealing with blemishes in the bride will always be redemptive.

The ultimate purity of the church is the work of Christ. That purity will not be realized on this earth but awaits the consummation when our Lord makes all things new.

## Works cited

- Davis, Kenneth Ronald. 1974. *Anabaptism and Asceticism*. Scottdale, PA; Kitchener, ON: Herald.
- *Direction* 1986. Vol.15 No.2 "The Church as a Covenant Community"
- Dueck Fast, Irma. 2002. "Baptism and Mission." Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Mennonite University
- Estep, William R. 1996. *The Anabaptist Story*. Third edition, revised and enlarged. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- George, Timothy. 1988. *Theology of the Reformers*. Nashville, TN: Broadman.
- Kenney, William Echard. 1968. *Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice 1539–1564*. Nieuwkoop: B. DeGraff.
- Loewen, John Howard. 1985. *One Lord, One Church, One Hope, And One God*. Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America. Elkhart, IN. Institute of Mennonite Studies.
- Oosterbaan, J.A. 1961. *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Vol.35 No.3

“The Theology of Menno Simons.”

- Rempel, John D. 1993. *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism*. Waterloo, ON; Scottdale, PA: Herald.
- Shantz, Douglas H. 1986. *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. Vol.55 No.2  
“The Ecclesiological Focus of Dirk Philips' Hermeneutical Thought in 1559: A Conceptual Study.”
- Snyder, C. Arnold. 1995. *Anabaptist History and Theology – An Introduction*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora.
- Toews, John A. 1975. *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*. Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1981. *People of the Way – Selected Essays and Addresses by John A. Toews* edited by Abe J. Dueck, Herbert Giesbrecht, Allen R. Guenther. Winnipeg, MB: Historical Committee.
- Toews, John B. 1984. *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. Vol.2  
“Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada.”
- Toews, Paul, ed. 1995. *Bridging Troubled Waters – The Mennonite Brethren at Mid-Century*. Winnipeg, MB, Hillsboro, KS: Kindred.

## Abbreviations

- **COF:** 1976 Edition of Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches
- **COF CPA:** 2000 Edition of 1999 revision of MB Confession of Faith with Commentary and Pastoral Application
- **CWMS:** *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, J.C. Wenger, ed.
- **ME:** The Mennonite Encyclopedia
- **PMF:** *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789–1910)*, Peter M. Friesen
- **WDP:** *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, translated and edited by Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney and Alvin J. Beachy.
- **WPM:** *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, translated and edited by William Klassen and Walter Klaassen.

- **WR:** *Recommendations and Resolutions of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches 1878–1963, 1966–1975* compiled by A.E. Janzen and Herbert Giesbrecht
- **WSK:** *Without Spot or Wrinkle*, Karl Koop and Mary H. Schertz, editors.

260.097 H83  
WIT  
Occasional Papers 20, 21  
IMS 2000

---

**Walter Unger** is President Emeritus at Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, BC.

---

Last modified: Apr. 3, 2003

© 2003 Canadian Conference  
of Mennonite Brethren  
Churches.

**Site credits and usage  
information.**

- 
- **Discuss this paper in our forums**