

## CHURCH AS THE COMMUNITY OF THE SPIRIT

Jerry Truex; February 29, 2011

---

### A. Introduction

Today we focus on the Anabaptist understanding of the church. It is claimed with that the idea of church represents the center of Anabaptist theology and practice, and it is primarily the idea of church that separates Anabaptists from Catholics, Protestants, and the Eastern Orthodox.<sup>1</sup>

I will focus only on a few feature of that understanding, including:

- The Foundation of the church
- The Agents of the church
- The Nature of the church
- The Power of the church
- The Offense of the church
- The Salvation of the church

### A. The Foundation: Jesus Christ

**1 Corinthians 3:9-11, 16.** <sup>9</sup> For we are God's servants, working together ... you are ... God's building... <sup>10</sup> According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation ... <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ... <sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? (NRSV)

**1 Corinthians 3:9-11.** <sup>9</sup> θεοῦ γάρ ἐσμεν συνεργοί, θεοῦ γεώργιον, θεοῦ οἰκοδομή ἐστε. <sup>10</sup> Κατὰ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεισάν μοι ὡς σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων θεμέλιον ἔθηκα, ἄλλος δὲ ἐποικοδομεῖ. ἕκαστος δὲ βλεπέτω πῶς ποικοδομεῖ. <sup>11</sup> θεμέλιον γὰρ ἄλλον οὐδεὶς δύναται θεῖναι παρὰ τὸν κείμενον, ὅς ἐστιν Ἰησοῦς Χριστός.... <sup>16</sup> Οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ναὸς θεοῦ ἐστε καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ θεοῦ οἰκεῖ ἐν ὑμῖν;

First, Christ is the foundation of the church; the church is Christocentric. In the context of 1 Corinthians, Paul is arguing that the church is "the building of God" and he laid its foundation (1 Cor. 3:9-10). Paul has in mind a certain building, namely, the Temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:20).

In the ancient world of Jesus, the Jewish Temple it was the center of Jewish life. It was regarded as the *axis mundi* of the universe, the point of connection between heaven and earth. The Temple was the place where God *descended* to live among his covenant people and, through the daily sacrifices in the Temple, the place where prayers *ascended* to God. The Temple was the gateway of heaven on earth.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptist Theology* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1973)116.

Now, Paul says, the church is that sacred place on earth. We are the Temple of God. And Christ is the foundation (*themelios*). "The one essential thing about the building is that it depends on Jesus Christ as the foundation of its existence, coherence, and identity."<sup>2</sup>

Just as a building depends on its foundation, so the church depends on Christ. Just as a foundation prevents the building from sinking or colapsing, so Christ prevents the church from sinking or colapsing. Just a a foundation determines the length, the width, and the height of any superstructure built upon it, so Christ determines what the length, width, and height of the church.

## **B. The Agents of the Church: Disciples**

Second, the church is comprised of the followers of Jesus; in other words, disciples makes the church the church. The Anabaptist conception of church begins with people who decide—who make conscious, responsible decisions—to follow Jesus in matters of faith and life. This is a *voluntary* decision and it is a decision that only an adult or self-responsible person can make.

During the Sixteenth Century Reformation, people were automatically part of a church tradition from birth onward. When person was born, they were baptized into the Catholic or some Protestant Church. In other words, they had no choice in the matter. To put it differently, no one ever chose to become a Christian.

Anabaptist emphasized the importance of choosing Christ and taking responsibility for that decision. In this way, Anabaptism is an existentialism—we become what we choose.

## **C. The Nature of the Church: Communal Fellowship**

Third, the Anabaptist conception of the church begins with the notion of the church as a "brotherhood" or, to use gender inclusive language, a "communal fellowship," corresponding to the German word, *Gemeinden* or *Gemeinschaften*.

### **German: *Gemeinden***

#### **1. Communal**

The word "**communal**" stresses a close association of people with common ownership, common interests, and common goals.

---

<sup>2</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 310.

## 2. Fellowship

The word “**fellowship**” stresses a family-like gathering of people that share, care, and celebrate together.

## 3. Family-like

For Anabaptists, the “communal fellowship” of the church is not an impersonal society or association of individuals, but a community of relationships that have strong reciprocal bonds and a common commitment to Jesus. Following Jesus—discipleship—is the reason for covenanting together into this **family-like** community. The church is often described in “family” language; for example:

**John 1:12** But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (NRSV).

**Galatians 3:26** for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. (NRSV)

**1 Peter 2:17** Honor everyone. Love the family of believers (*adelphotēs*). Fear God. Honor the emperor. (NRSV)

“Children of God” language stresses that the church is like a family, which, ideally have close, trusting relationship. This is underscored by the word *adelphotēs*, which is translated “family of believers” by the NRSV; literally, it means a “brother-and-sisterhood.”

## 4. One another

In this type of close communal fellowship, we need **one another**. Consider the dozens of Scripture passages that use “one another”; here is an example:

**1 John 4:7-8, 12.** <sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.... <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (NRSV)

**John 13:34-35.** <sup>34</sup> I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (NRSV)

There are dozens of other “one-another” texts (I counted 44). Each of the one-another texts tells us something about the “communal fellowship” of the church.

Just looking at 1 John 4:7-12 and John 13:34-35, we need each other for at least six reasons:

- 1) To learn how to love
- 2) To be born of God
- 3) To know ("see") God
- 4) To be united with God
- 5) To imitate Jesus
- 6) To witness to the world

## 5. Covenantal

The biblical communalism of the church reflects the covenantal framework of the OT. A covenant is an agreement between God and human beings. God makes certain promise and, in turn, humans have obligations to God and other humans.

- *Creation Covenant* with all humanity at creation
- *Abrahamic covenant* with Abraham and all who, like Abraham, trust God.
- *Mosaic Covenant* with Moses and Israel.
- *New Covenant* with all who receive the Messiah Jesus.

The communal fellowship of the church is conditioned by these covenants:

- *Creation Covenant*: The church is characterized by a *solidarity with all human beings*
- *New Covenant*: The church is characterized by *solidarity with and responsibility toward* Christ and the Body of Christ, which transcends political and geographic boundaries. Our commitment to the family of God, the church, does not know geographic or political boundaries. Such boundaries are human conventions to serve human power.<sup>3</sup>
- The church is further characterized by
  - Its love for God (communion),
  - Its care for the neighbor next door (common good),
  - Its obligation to *care for Christians living in whatever country* they live as if they were Christ himself (world-wide commune).

For these reasons, I believe the communism and socialism the world knows through Marx is a counterfeit to the *communalism of Christ*. They are not genetically related and only the uninformed would confuse them—their metanarratives, memories, metaphors, motives, means, and ends are all different.

## D. The Power of the Church: The Spirit

### 1. The work of the Spirit

In the OT, the Spirit is primarily a future reality, the promise of God's presence and God's deliverance.

<sup>3</sup> Geographic, political, and ethnic boundaries are of no concern to God (Rom 2:11; 3:26-31).

**Ezekiel 39:29.** <sup>29</sup> and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord GOD. (NRSV)

**Jeremiah 31:31-33.** <sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke .... <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (NRSV)

In the NT, the Spirit has come and is fulfilling the promises of the LORD. The Spirit is available because Jesus has sent the Spirit.

**Acts 1:6-8.** <sup>6</sup> So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" <sup>7</sup> He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. <sup>8</sup> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NRSV)

When the Spirit was poured out on the followers of Jesus at Pentecost, the Spirit impelled them to form a new community.

**Acts 2:1-2, 4, 41.** <sup>1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting..... <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability... ..... <sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. (NRSV)

## 2. The Signs of the Spirit

Having formed the New Community of the Spirit, what were the decisive signs of the Spirit?

**Acts 2:42-47.** <sup>42</sup> they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**a. Apostolic Teaching (*didakē*)**

The Spirit moves the church to teach what the apostles taught. The *didakē* or “the teaching” focused on expositions of the OT in the light of Jesus and the apostles’ own thoughts later became the NT. Teaching the OT and NT is one of the signs or marks of the true church.

**b. Fellowship (*koinōnia*)**

The Spirit moves the church to manifest God’s intent for human beings, which is life together, communal fellowship (*koinōnia*). We have discussed. It is the second sign or mark of the church.

**c. Service (*diakonia*)**

The Spirit moves the church to service others. This service is called *diakonia* and includes the radical use of possession and resources, and the wonders of healing as a sign of the in-breaking of God’s reign.

**d. Worship (*leitourgia*)**

The Spirit moves the church toward celebration or worship, which is called *leitourgia*. It includes prayers, songs, meditations, baptism, communion.

**C. Visible church**

Because the signs of the Spirit in the church and SIGNS that bear witness to God’s work in Jesus Christ, the Spirit, and among human beings, the church must be VISIBLE.

During the Reformation, the Spiritualist and the primary reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin preferred to speak of the “hidden” or invisible church. They thought that the work of the Spirit was “inner” and not “external”; no one could know who was a true Christian. Only at the final judgment would God could separate the *wheat* from the *tares* (Matt 13:36-43). So in the meantime, the church was a mixture of both the righteous and the unrighteous.

The Anabaptist rejected this idea. For them, the church had to be a VISIBLE church. How could the church be invisible? It couldn’t, because the church’s task was to manifest the signs of God’s kingdom, to witness to the work of God among humans.

The purity of the church became very important for Anabaptists like Menno Simon; that is, in order to witness to God needed to be “without spot or wrinkle.” The external, visible behaviors of Christians matter; behavior that didn’t fit with Christ—

namely sin—needed to be dealt with using church discipline. In extreme cases, the ban (excommunication) was used.

### E. The Offense of the Church: Economic Sharing

One way that early Anabaptists demonstrated their solidarity with one another in the community fellowship was by economic sharing. They attempted to practice the apostolic pattern of sharing described in Acts 2. The problem they faced was that Scripture didn't give guidelines for the concrete implementation of the economic sharing.<sup>4</sup>

The Early Anabaptist took one of two options when it came to economic sharing:

- (1) Sharing of possession was voluntary and an expression of one's inner regeneration or
- (2) Sharing of possession was "ordered" or "legislated" by the true church.<sup>5</sup>

Felix Mantz, Balthasar Hubmaier, and the Swiss Anabaptists taught that sharing should be entirely voluntary. Hubmaier taught that a person who has been regenerated by the Spirit brings forth good fruit, including sharing material goods *out of love* for needy brothers and sisters in the community, and such sharing helped put to death the Adam and Eve within us. But, Hubmaier said, "There are certainly none who say that one should take what belongs to the other and make it in common."<sup>6</sup>

A slightly different position was held by Hans Hut and the South German Anabaptists. On the one hand, Hut taught that if a brother or sister had more than enough, they should give to the needy members of the community. "The mystical notion of *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness) and freedom from attachment from material things" was "a powerful motivation in economic sharing."<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Hut believed that the Last Days were imminent and, once the Last Days were under way, private property would be abolished.

Between 1528 and 1535, various Anabaptist communitarian groups emerged in Central Europe. The first Hutterite community (Jakob Hutter) emerged in 1528 and consisted of 200 refugees in Moravia. More Hutterite communities followed. The Hutterite communities held all property in common—no private property—and they believe the true church is identified by this practice.<sup>8</sup> Hutterites had profound conflict with the Swiss Brethern who disagreed with them.

In 1528, other Anabaptist communitarian groups also formed in Moravia, including the 1,200-member Gabrielites (Gabriel Ascherham) and the 400-member Philipities (Philip Plenner). Outside of Moravia, the only substantial Anabaptist group that required holding property in common were the Münsterites in Westphalia (No. Western Germany); they practiced a communal theocracy in the City of Münster from 1534-1535, when they were destroyed.

Arnold Snyder writes: "It was axiomatic for Menno and other Anabaptist that being a believer meant that one had received the 'Spirit and mind' of Christ. Believers will not defraud others; believer will care for the

<sup>4</sup> C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora, 1995) 237.

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (1995) 237.

<sup>6</sup> "Dialogue with Zwingli's Baptism Book," quoted by Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (1995) 238.

<sup>7</sup> At one point, Hut wrote: "some people ... sold field, vineyards or other properties and distributed the proceeds to the poorer bothers." Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (1995) 239.

<sup>8</sup> See comments about and quotations from the Hutterite leader Ulrich Stadler in Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (1995) 241-42.

needs of others, not because they are ordered to do so, but because they have been regenerated by the living Spirit of God."<sup>9</sup>

Although there were differences among the different Anabaptist groups—Swiss Brethren, Pilgramites, Münsterites, Hutterites, etc.—as a whole their economic sharing presented a critique of contemporary economic practices.

They saw that they could not separate their economic practice from the process of salvation. If you have been regenerated by the Spirit, then you shared your material possession with the poor, not out of coercion, but out of love. Menno was particularly critical of Protestants and Catholics, who boasted of their salvation, but had so many poor, hungry, and suffering among them.

## **F. The Salvation of the Church: Necessarily Relational**

As I mentioned at the beginning, the theology of the church was the center of Anabaptist theology and practice. This is nowhere more clear in the role the church in the process of salvation. Here I'll contrast three views of salvation: Catholic, Protestant, and Anabaptist.

### **1. Catholic view**

- The way to God and salvation is through the institutional church and the authority structure (apostolic succession) of Pope, Bishops, and Priests.
- The institutional church has a reservoir of divine grace, which is dispensed through the sacraments by the ordained priests

### **2. Protestant view**

- The way to God and salvation is through belief in sound doctrine
- The church's responsibility is to preach sound doctrine
- Each believer is responsible to respond to the preaching of the church
- Each believer stands before God alone in an unmediated relationship with God
- Hence, individual responsibility is emphasized in the salvation process

### **3. Anabaptist view**

- The way to God and salvation is with one's brother and sister.
- A person cannot come to God without his/her neighbor (Mt 22:37-39).
- If salvation means having a right relationship with God and others,
- Then it is impossible to be saved in isolation, impossible to be saved without becoming part of the New Community.
- This does not eliminate personal responsibility to choose, believe, and act; but it emphasizes that choosing, believing, acting occurs within community

---

<sup>9</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (1995) 246.

**G. Summary**

I have focus on several elements that characterize the Anabaptist conception of the church, including:

- 1) The Foundation of the church—Jesus Christ
- 2) The Agents of the church—Disciples
- 3) The Nature of the church—Communal Fellowship
- 4) The Power of the church—The Spirit
- 5) The Offense of the church—Economic Sharing
- 6) The Salvation of the church—Necessarily Relational