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The Believers' Church

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THE BELIEVERS' CHURCH

It is difficult to ignore a book (Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: the History and Character of Radical Protestantism*, Herald Press, Scottdale PA) reissued after twenty years with commendations from authorities of the stature of Franklin Littell and John Yoder. The original language is Max Weber's creation to describe those who, rejecting the mixed communities of national churches, sought in the Believers' Church a 'community of personal believers of the reborn, and only these'.

Baptists are seen as a major constituent of this tradition, one of the principal early writers acknowledged by Durnbaugh being the Swedish Baptist, Gunnar Westin, whilst one of the two conferences on the Believers' Church was held at Southern Baptist Seminary, Louisville.

Some of the historiography we might wish to question: the line of succession here presented embraces Medieval Sectarians (Waldensians and Unitas Fratrum), Radical Reformers, Separatist Puritans (Baptists

and Quakers), Free Church Pietists (Church of the Brethren and Methodists), New Testament Restorationists (Disciples and Plymouth Brethren), coming up-to-date with the Confessing Church of Nazi Germany, Washington's Church of the Saviour, and East Harlem Protestant Parish. But questions about the way in which the succession is presented, however attractively and persuasively, do not necessarily invalidate the concept.

Does the concept of The Believers' Church helpfully define an important cousinage within the wider Christian family? Do we as Baptists share a common heritage with the groups here mentioned with their emphasis either on believer's baptism or on the priority of personal faith? A heritage defined as acknowledging 'the Lordship of Christ, the authority of the Word, church membership regenerated by the Spirit, the covenant of believers, a need for a perpetual restitution of the church, the necessity for separation from the world, proclamation and service to the world, and a special conception of Christian unity' (p.x). In contrast to this, Durnbaugh cites a statement on church membership issued by the United Church of Christ of Canada which refers to two concepts of the church, one broad and inclusive, as in the *landeskirchen* of Europe where citizenship and church membership were virtually synonymous, and the other narrow and exclusive, demanding a personal decision to accept Christ as Lord as a prerequisite for belonging. The statement concludes that the United Church 'stands at neither of these extremes but like most of the larger Protestant Churches it follows a middle way in this manner... It makes little attempt to lay down minimum standards of religious attainment or to discriminate between 'true believer and nominal Christian... The Church, like the children of Israel, is a mixed multitude' (p.220-21). Such ambiguity is denied to the Believers' Church which is created by the grace of God calling men and women to belief and commitment.

The contribution of Believers' Churches to contemporary Christendom is here explored in relationship to five couplets: Discipleship and Apostolicity, Mission and Evangelism, Church and State, Mutual Aid and Service, The Sectarian and the Ecumenical. Discipleship was central to the concern of the sixteenth century Anabaptists but they saw precious little evidence of it in the contemporary church which clearly had fallen far from its apostolic origins: the moment of fall for the radicals of the sixteenth century, as for John Wesley later, was identified with the Constantinian 'establishment' of Christianity. Restoration even then was an imperative for the serious Christian, a restoration of theological perception which was to be spelt out in the disciplined life of the believing community. The church so gathered is also seen as the church dispersed... in mission and evangelism. Whilst the Catholics of the sixteenth century engaged in missionary endeavour, mainstream protestantism seemed blind to this imperative: not so the Anabaptists who again made the great commission the responsibility of every church member, an insight reinforced by Carey and his colleagues at the end of the eighteenth century. But what is to be the focus of evangelism? - Is it Jesus as 'personal saviour' or the Lord over the 'power structures'? Yoder's both/and approach is cited with approval: 'The error of individualism is not adequately tempered by insisting that saved souls will get

together sometimes or that saved individuals will be socially effective. But neither is it to be corrected by replacing personal change and commitment with the remodelling of society. The complement to personal decision is the "new humanity" of covenant community... This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism but by the work of Christ is not only a vehicle of the gospel: it is the good news. It is not merely the agent of mission: this is the mission'. (p.240-1) Christian compassion then is as interested in proclaiming the gospel as giving aid to the destitute, as maintaining the historic witness of the peace churches (which, of course, makes one line of cleavage in the Believers' Church tradition). Having a proper respect for both religious freedom and the work of the state, the Believers' Church will be wary of attempts to sacralize the state - or to make the church a pietistic ghetto. Born in sectarianism, the Believers' Churches have developed certain ecumenical sympathies from the very beginning - though it is doubtful whether they have as yet made a mark upon the ecumenical movement commensurate with the richness of the tradition or the strength of the constituency in the world today, especially when it is reckoned that many of the churches of the Third World - both independent and mission based - should find a place within such a heritage (indeed it is perhaps the lack of that dimension that dates the analysis here set out). 'The oikumene', affirms Durnbaugh, 'needs the presence of [the Believers' Churches] just as they need to be in closer relationship with their Christian brethren'. (p.302)

Is this where Baptists belong? Would we be more effective in the ecumenical movement, where Baptist isolation is often apparent, if we worked in closer harmony with our closest cousins? As well as cultivating older established branches of the family, would it not now be timely to enter into dialogue with branches of the Believers' Church of more recent origin? What have we to learn from those, whose experience of the Christian pilgrimage is so near to our own, of the working out of discipleship in the modern world?

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