

Article 6: Nature of the Church¹

Note 1:

The MB Confession devotes Articles 6-9 to the church **because of the church's prominence in the New Testament, in God's mission, and in the Believers Church/Anabaptist tradition.**

First, the church plays a central role in the writings of the New Testament where the key word *ekklesia* is used 110 times in reference to the church. The New Testament writers refer to "church" in three ways: first, as the universal body of Christ, which is expressed both globally and now historically over the centuries (Col 1:18); second, as a collective group of churches in a city or region (Acts 8:1); and finally, as a local congregation or gathering of believers (1 Cor 16:19). Every New Testament book, even those addressed to individuals (e.g., 1, 2 Tim), emphasizes building up the body of believers. The New Testament was written to and for the church and not simply for the personal spiritual nurture of individual believers, as valuable as that is.

A challenge in defining the nature of the church is that the New Testament provides no careful theological definition of the church, but rather paints a picture with rich and varied metaphors (See J.E. Toews, "The Nature of the Church," *Direction* [18:2 Fall 1989]). Toews places these images under four main categories: people of God images, community images, cosmic images, and body images.

- **People of God images** link the New Testament church with the story and identity of the people of Israel in the Old Testament (e.g., holy nation, chosen race [1 Peter 2:9-10]). They also emphasize God's presence (temple [1 Cor 3:16-17]) and his care for his people (sheep [1 Peter 5:1-4]).
- **Community images** point to a "community of disciples" (Acts 6:2) who are set apart from the world (e.g., the Way [Acts 9:1-2], saints [1 Cor 1:2]). The use of terms like "saints," "faithful ones," and "righteous ones," — which are always plural — demonstrate that the Christian life is not meant to be a solo journey but a life in community. Community images also point to the loving family relationships among believers (household [1 Tim 3:14-15; 5:1-2]).
- **Cosmic images** highlight the inbreaking of the new creation (2 Cor 5:16-17) through the work of the Spirit. The church is a new humanity (Eph 2:15-16) that brings together all people through the cross.
- **Body images** involve the church being depicted as the very "body of Christ" where each person is "in Christ" as a member of the body who is attached to Christ, the Head (Gal 3:26-29; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Eph 4:15-16). This reflects the unity and diversity of the church where every believer is part of the body, yet each member has different gifts that contribute to the ministry and mission of the church (1 Cor 12:4-11, 14-31).

The point of all these images is that the church is a plurality of people viewed as a collective whole. In the New Testament, the church—not the individual—is the focus of God's presence and purpose.

Second, it is hard to overemphasize the role of the church in God's ongoing mission. When Jesus said that he would build his church (Matt 16:18), he was establishing the primary means through which God has chosen to continue Christ's work in this world. The church of Christ is God's agent of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:18-19) and the "gates of Hades will not overcome it" (Matt 16:18). **The church is not an optional add-on for individual disciples of Jesus but is central to God's Kingdom work in the world.** The church challenges the structures and powers of this age and is a present witness to and embodiment of the future coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. The church is not a building or a human institution but the very "body of Christ" called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to incarnate Jesus' presence and mission.

Third, because of the prominence of the church in the New Testament and specifically in God's mission, our larger Anabaptist tradition highlights the centrality of the church in Christian discipleship. As the "Introduction to the MB Confession of Faith" (2023) states:

We are...unashamedly Anabaptist, which identifies us with a long tradition of churches centred on and seeking to live daily into greater obedience to Jesus. By means of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Eph 5:18; Gal 5:22-23) and the power and character that the Holy Spirit produces, we seek to be the kind of faithful community demonstrating sacrificial discipleship

that we find in the book of Acts. There are at least two significant implications of this Anabaptist heritage. The first is that we value practical and costly discipleship in the way of Jesus. Articles 10-16 describe this day-to-day path of discipleship, and these articles are not an afterthought or an appendix to our Confession of Faith. The second is that we understand discipleship as necessarily lived in the context of a Jesus-worshipping church community. Discipleship is not a solitary walk with Jesus. The church community does not gather merely to assist individual disciples in their spiritual growth, but it gathers to be the signpost of God's Kingdom on earth drawing people to Jesus until he returns. Articles 6-9 speak about the nature, mission, and ordinances of the church. We believe that being committed to practical and costly discipleship in the context of healthy Jesus-centred and Kingdom-focused church communities is essential for being good news people and part of our fundamental identity as an MB family.

Called by God

We believe the church is the people called by God through Jesus Christ.²

Note 2:

This conviction highlights three things. **First, the key New Testament Greek word *ekklesia*, translated into English as “church,” literally means “called out ones.”** However, disciples of Jesus are not called out to live individually but called out and assembled into a group. *Ekklesia* is in direct continuity with the Hebrew word *qahal* which is used in the Old Testament over 100 times to refer to the assembled people of God. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), *qahal* is normally translated using the Greek term *ekklesia* (Deut 4:10, 9:10). In the New Testament, the coming of the Spirit on Pentecost formed the church as the believers gathered and confessed Jesus as Lord (Acts 2:38-42; cf. Matt 16:15-18).

Whatever we say about the New Testament “church,” we cannot forget that being called out and assembled is key to the church’s very DNA. The church is not a human social club or simply a group of like-minded people. The accent is on God’s call rather than on human effort since God is the initiator and creator of the church. God creates a people (1 Peter 2:9-10; Rom 9:25-26) who belong to him as his “special possession.” The people of God in the New Testament include all true believers, both Jew and Gentile (Gal 3:28). This assembled group replaces the Jerusalem temple as the place where God dwells by his Spirit (1 Cor 6:19; 3:16-17; Eph 2:21). The church as a people, not the temple as a physical building, is “God’s house” (Heb 3:6). Peter calls the church “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Second, the direct connection between the New Testament Greek word *ekklesia* and the Old Testament Hebrew word *qahal* should ensure that we recognize that the church has its roots much earlier than Acts 2. John E. Toews (“The Nature of the Church,” *Direction* [18; 2], 1989) notes four points of continuity between the NT church and the OT people of God. i) The church’s calling out really began with God calling out Israel from slavery in Egypt. ii) The church is not a brand-new community but a “renewed” people of God embracing God’s Kingdom. iii) The church is the renewed “rock” (Matt 16:17-19) where God protects, saves, and overcomes the gates of Hades. iv) Lastly, the church is the community of binding and loosing (Matt 18:15-20) as the church together discerns how to live as the people of God in the world.

Third, the church is called by God through Jesus Christ, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Triune relational nature of God is central to the identity, nature, and mission of the church. There is no New Testament church without God’s call (1 Cor 1:2). There is no New Testament church without the centrality of Jesus Christ through whom we have “adoption to sonship” (Eph 1:5) and “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins” (1:7; cf. Col 1:13-14). Because of this, Jesus is the “head” of the church (Eph 1:22; 4:15; 5:22; Col 1:18). The resurrected and ascended Jesus is present to the church and empowers the church by means of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2; Rom 8:9-17).

People who respond in faith are united with the local congregation by the public confession of baptism.³

Note 3:

There are three key implications of this statement:

- 1) **Every believer is to become part of the church.** Article 6 does not say “some people who respond in faith” or “some very spiritually mature people who respond in faith” are to become part of the church. The implication is that every believer is called to a mutually accountable covenant-like relationship with a church family (this has traditionally been referred to as being a “member” of the church).

As the “Introduction to the MB Confession of Faith” (2023) describes:

...it was not God’s purpose to produce scattered and solo disciples floundering along in isolation. Rather, God has brought disciples of Jesus together into a new family called the church (“the body of Christ” 1 Cor 12:27) so they can play a key role in God’s Kingdom story as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession” (1 Peter 2:9). To be “in Christ” means we have been baptized into one body, His church, by His Spirit. Our identity in Christ means that we are to live out our discipleship in the context of a local community (Acts 2:42; 6:2), which is a part of the larger body of Christ in the world....

- 2) **Every person responding to Christ in faith is to be baptized.** Baptism is an embodied testimony to what God has done in one’s life and is the means by which the local church family incorporates followers of Jesus (see Article 8 [[hyperlink here](#)]).
- 3) **The focus here is on becoming part of a local congregation that physically gathers together for worship, teaching, the breaking of bread, fellowship, prayer, and mission.** While the “universal church” is the collective term for all believers throughout history, individual disciples of Jesus are called to inclusion and participation in a specific local congregation which represents the universal church in its context.

Church members commit themselves to follow Christ in a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit.⁴

Note 4:

The implication of the language of being united through baptism with a local congregation is that each newly baptized believer becomes a “member” in a family-like relationship with all other baptized believers in the local church.

“Member” language describes how individuals belong, identify with, and participate in the body of Christ (cf. Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:12-27). Church membership is more organic than institutional; more relational than legal. It recognizes the new relational commitment of love, mutual obligation, nurture, and accountability that now exists. It clarifies what spiritual family and covenant mean for people who now share the same Father and Lord. For more on the meaning of “membership,” see question 10 in **Article 8: Living the Confession (FAQs)**.

Individual church members covenant themselves to live out discipleship and witness within the local church community, while the church (as a collective group) covenants to express care, nurture, and accountability to each individual member. As a spiritual family, members are to treat others in the community as valued brothers and sisters (2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 4:9-10; 1 John 3:16). **Having a way to express who has entered into this relational commitment (known traditionally as “membership”) should help the congregation assist each baptized believer’s growth in discipleship and help the congregation in its overall mission effectiveness.**

But this full relational commitment from the church to the individual (also called “membership” or “covenant community”) is predicated upon the individual believer a) repenting and responding in faith (cf. Acts 17:30; Rom 5:1; Eph 4:5), b) being baptized upon that confession of faith (Acts 2:38), c) desiring to join with and serve in a local church family, d) and committing themselves to “follow Christ in a life of discipleship and witness as empowered by the Holy Spirit” (Matt 16:24; John 16:13; Acts 1:8; 1 Thess 1:5; Titus 1:16; Jude 1:4). The church at its core is to be a group of baptized disciples of Jesus gathering to worship Jesus and live out God’s mission in the world.

Body of Christ

*The church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class.*⁵

Note 5:

Article 6 highlights several implications that grow out of this body of Christ image. **The first is that the “church is one body of believers, male and female, from every nation, race and class.”** Since we are one body and not multiple bodies, our male/female and national/racial/class diversity is subordinated to our profound shared unity under the lordship of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-31; Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11). It is this shared unity amidst diversity that is part of the miracle of the gospel. The church’s calling is to be a community that makes “disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19) welcoming them into the family of belonging regardless of the dividing lines that existed earlier. Christians have been given the “ministry of reconciliation, that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor 5:18-19).

This ministry of reconciliation means that the local church is an embodied sign of the Kingdom, that invites all people to repent, experience God’s forgiveness, and become part of God’s new family. **As this embodied sign, the church, both local and universal, demonstrates in its own membership the ability to transcend racial, cultural, ethnic, language, class/caste, and national divisions (Gal 3:26-28; Col 3:11).** Because of the reconciling work of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:11-22) and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48), the church is to live today as God’s in-breaking New Creation, leaning into God’s Kingdom future where we find “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9).

Inclusion in Christ’s “one body” is based on one’s identification with Jesus who is the only source of salvation and redemption (see Article 5), one’s commitment to walk in the way of Jesus (see Articles 10-16), and one’s desire to be incorporated and live in the local church’s mutually committed relationship—all symbolized together in baptism (see Article 8). Inclusion is based not on one’s former identity or social standing but upon the “child of God” status bestowed on a believer by the saving and gracious work of Jesus (John 1:12-13; Gal 3:26; 1 John 3:1-2). Everyone who has put their faith in Jesus, is “in Christ” (Rom 6:3-5). The New Testament opposes any sort of second class belonging (cf. Acts 6:1-6) based on other dividing lines, because church families should make “every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). Keeping the unity of the Spirit and transcending these human dividing lines should lead to renewed gospel witness in the world (cf. Acts 6:7).

*The head of this body is Christ.*⁶

Note 6:

The metaphor of the church as the “body” recognizes that Christ is “head” of the body. This has several implications.

First, Christ is head over all things. All things were created through Christ and he has all authority over every ruler, principality and power (Col 1:15-18; Eph 1:20-21; Matt 28:18). Yet Christ has been made head over all things “for the church” (Eph 1:22-23) and the church is called to submit to Christ in everything (Eph 5:24).

Second, the head and body are integrally connected. Christ as head fills the body and the body grows up into the head (Eph 1:22-23; 4:15-16). As members of Christ’s body, we are united with Christ—head and body are “one flesh” (Eph 5:30-32; 1 Cor 6:16-17).

Third, as head, Jesus modeled a life of love—giving up himself on behalf of the church, nurturing, and tenderly caring for his body (Eph 5:2, 25-29). Jesus provides the model for his body to grow into his image, becoming more and more like him (Eph 4:12-13).

The church, united by the one Spirit, makes Christ visible in the world.⁷

Note 7:

This short sentence makes three key assertions. **First, the church needs to be a unified church.** As mentioned in note 5, the church is a diverse group from every tribe and nation who come together in reconciliation because of Jesus. Only a unified church can make Christ visible in the world (John 17:22-23).

Second, it is the Spirit who unifies the church (Eph 4:3-6). This unity is not achievable through human effort, determination, or political will. It is solely possible through the work of the divine Spirit.

Third, it is this Holy Spirit empowered unity, defying human explanation, that makes Christ visible in the world. The church's very shape, ethos, structure, good works, worship patterns, and message proclaim Christ to the watching world. Everything the local church is, does, and says is to demonstrate to the world Christ's alternative way of living life and being human. (See Article 7)

The church exists as local bodies of believers and as a worldwide community of faith.⁸

Note 8:

Local churches are not isolated entities but are part of the larger reality of God's church worldwide. **All local churches that identify with Jesus Christ and his Kingdom mission, are part of God's universal church and thus are "family" members with all other churches, creating a worldwide unity of brothers and sisters in Christ** (cf. Matt 12:50; Phil 4:21). Strangers who are disciples of Jesus are actually spiritual family members worshipping the same Jesus and working together on the same mission (3 John 1:5). See Note 3.

As a part of this reality, many individual churches have joined together into denominations and networks because of their shared theological convictions, histories, and missional leanings. This fits the New Testament's use of "church" that refers to a group of churches in a region. These larger groupings of local churches provide intentional relational connections, mutual support and accountability around theology and ethics, and opportunity for shared educational and missional endeavors not sustainable for a single local church. Mennonite Brethren as a denomination began in 1860 and today exists in Canada at the local, provincial, and national levels. Local MB churches participate together in provincial MB conference groupings and these groupings then form part of the Canadian Conference of MB Churches (CCMBC). This larger collective of Canadian MB churches networks to the global MB family through the International Community of MB Churches (ICOMB). These Canadian MB churches collectively participate in national and international partnerships with other believers as a symbol of how God's global church is larger than any one denominational family.

Worship

The church is nourished and renewed as God's people gather regularly to glorify God.⁹

Note 9:

Worship is at the core of the church's nature and purpose. In the New Testament, church gatherings are not referred to specifically as "worship services," but Acts 13:2 describes the church at Antioch gathering and "worshipping the Lord and fasting." 1 Corinthians 14:26 describes how their gatherings involved "a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." As N.T. Wright notes: "The church exists primarily for two closely related purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world" (*Simply Christian*, 211). Worship in both the Old and New Testaments often involves a physical posture of "bowing down" (Hebrew root *shachah*; Greek *proskuneo*; cf. Gen 22:5; 24:52; 1 Sam 1:3; Matt 2:11; 4:9). Bowing down is a powerful posture that physically demonstrates valuing the other, submission to the other, and service for the other.

First, worship expresses and reinforces affection, zeal, and the valuing/glorifying of the other. God's salvation removes from us our "heart of stone" and gives us a "heart of flesh" (Ezek 11:19). This affection and zeal motivate our valuing/glorifying of God. We worship what we value. Idolatry is the valuing of something that conflicts with our worship or valuing of God. Some of the biblical words translated as "glorify" (Hebrew *kabod*; Greek *doxa*) are about making God "heavy" or "weighty" which is a metaphorical way of saying "important" (Ps 22:23; 86:9; Matt 5:16; John 12:28). Glorifying God involves making God important. Worship involves glorifying God through words and actions that increase God's importance in our lives and decenter and dethrone all competing affections and idolatrous attractions.

Second, worship involves submission to the other. Romans 12:1 highlights that our "true and proper worship" is "to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." In Matthew 4:9, Jesus refused to bow in worship before Satan who offered him the kingdoms of the world. Jesus refused this act of submission. Worship involves the submission of one's body (i.e., head, heart, hands, feet), one's life (i.e., time, gifts, skills, possessions), and one's affections to the Creator of the Universe.

Third, closely related to submitting is the commitment to service for the other (cf., Matt 4:10; Luke 4:8). The Hebrew word *abad* is usually translated as "serve" or "work" (e.g., Gen 30:26; Exod 21:2), but in reference to God (or to pagan idols) is often translated interchangeably as "serve" or "worship" (e.g., Exod 3:12; 4:23; 7:16; 12:31; 23:24). There is no worship without active service done for the one being worshipped.

Worship is not simply about rituals, songs, or even spiritual disciplines but about valuing/glorifying Jesus, submitting to Jesus, and serving in the name of Jesus. Article 6 describes convictions about practices that churches need in order to express this valuing, submission, and service. While worship is expressed beyond the church's corporate gatherings, these gatherings should and must contribute to worship. The early church gathered regularly and this act of gathering should not be neglected (Matt 18:20; Acts 4:31; 11:26; 13:44; 15:6,30; 1 Cor 5:4; 11:17,18,20,23; 14:23,26; Jas 2:2). The apostles encouraged such meeting together (Heb 10:25). (See Daniel Block, *For the Glory of God*, 1-27.)

The early church gathered on the first day of the week to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.¹⁰

Note 10:

While it is not clear how long the transition took from meeting in the temple on Saturdays to gathering on the first day of the week (Sunday), this became the pattern for the early church. The first day of the week, in remembrance of Jesus' resurrection day, became the primary gathering day for the church over the centuries. For a more complete discussion of the Lord's Day, see Article 16.

The worshipping community celebrates God's faithfulness and grace, reaffirms its faithfulness to God, builds up the members of the body, and seeks God's will for its life and mission.¹¹

Note 11:

The worshipping church gathers for celebration, commitment making (e.g., baptism, the breaking of bread, renewal), mutual edification, and teaching/discernment. 1 Corinthians 14:26 describes how their gatherings involved "a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation." Acts 2:42 describes how at the very earliest stage of the church's existence they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer." Additional components such as singing, thanksgiving, prophecy, and mutual edification are evident in other texts (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 14).

The worshipping church gathers for all these activities which are to embody the true heart of worship as the valuing/glorifying of Jesus, submission to Jesus, and service to Jesus (see Note 9).

*As the church observes baptism, and the Lord's Supper, it proclaims the good news of salvation.*12*

Note 12:

Baptism (see Article 8) and the Lord's Supper (see Article 9) are sacred corporate actions with significant spiritual meaning. **While these actions are sacred and meaningful, the MB church refers to baptism and the Lord's Supper as "ordinances" rather than "sacraments."** These ordinances are significant symbolic actions that are neither merely individual "remembrances" of something that happened in a person's past nor "sacraments" that impart divine grace to individuals. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are very important actions that witness to spiritual realities as they build up, strengthen, and renew both individuals and the church corporately in its calling and mission.

Baptism proclaims and celebrates publicly the reality of God's great salvation (viz., forgiveness and the movement from death to life, bondage to freedom) in the life of an individual, the loving inclusion of that individual in God's local church family, and the future eternal hope that is now a reality for them. The Lord's Supper proclaims the death of Jesus, and the need for ongoing forgiveness and covenant renewal within the context of the loving and faithful church community. These two ordinances speak powerfully in word and deed about God's good news for the world.

A note in Article 6 mentions the practice of footwashing as a "meaningful reminder of the humility, loving service, and personal cleansing that is to characterize the relationship of members within the church." Getting down on one's knees to wash the feet of another disciple of Jesus is certainly a significant symbolic action that demonstrates humility, loving service, and personal cleansing. When Jesus washed the feet of the disciples in John 13:1-20, he set aside the privileges of power and modeled true servanthood and commanded his followers to follow his example (cf. v.15). As a result, and in alignment with the model and words of Jesus here, some local MB churches (and numerous other churches and denominations worldwide) practise this regularly. While footwashing was a regular practice among Mennonite Brethren in the past, it is not recognized as an official MB ordinance along with baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Fellowship and Accountability

The church is a covenant community in which members are mutually accountable in matters of faith and life. They love, care, and pray for each other, share each other's joys and burdens, admonish and correct one another. They share material resources as there is need.¹³

Note 13:

The church, local and global, is a "covenant community" or to use everyday language, is a caring "family" (cf., John 1:12-13) with shared obligations and expectations. A covenant community is a group who share a deep sense of mutual love, a commitment to care for each other in spite of the shortcomings and failures of others in the group, and a long-term tenacious desire to stand with each other through whatever they may face together. This is why the family metaphor fits so well for the spiritual body with Christ as the head.

The local church is meant to function in a similar way to a healthy family which loves, cares, forgives, and prays for each member of the family; shares joys and burdens; assists with material needs as they arise; and admonishes and corrects in ways that are for each person's ultimate well-being (see Acts 2:42-47). The larger Mennonite Brethren church and the global church are like one's extended family, assisting and supporting for the well-being of the local body.

But healthy church life (like healthy family life) is often both beautiful and challenging. Just as families can show incredible love, grace, forgiveness, and tenacious commitment, so the church family often demonstrates this by the power of the Holy Spirit. But just as families can be plagued with harmful behaviours and become dysfunctional, the church family is not immune from these challenges. The New Testament provides examples of churches plagued with selfishness (Phil 1:15-18), unconfessed sin (1 Cor 5), disunity (1 Cor 1:10-14), and the dangers of heresy (cf., 1 Tim 1:3-11). This is why church families constantly need to do the work of self-examination and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal sinful patterns and behaviours, so repentance, reconciliation, and renewal can happen. Article 6 is a description of what the local church *should* be like, utilizing the aspirational language of the New Testament writers. **Every local church will fail to live fully into this vision but should continually repent and seek to be the kind of family the New Testament calls it to be (cf. John 13:34; Eph 4:1-6, 31-32; 1 Peter 4:8; 1 John 4:7-10).**

Local congregations follow the New Testament example by seeking the counsel of the wider church on matters that affect its common witness and mission. Congregations work together in a spirit of love, mutual submission, and interdependence.¹⁴

Note 14:

While individual disciples are in a family/covenant relationship of mutual love (John 13:34-35; Rom 12:10; 13:8; 1 Eph 4:1-6, 31-32; 1 Thess 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 4:7-10) and mutual accountability (Gal 6:1; Matt 18) with those in their local church, **Paul implies that each local church also has obligations of mutual generosity (Rom 15:26-29; 2 Cor 8-9) and mutual accountability with the larger church family (cf. 1 Cor 5).**

Individual Mennonite Brethren congregations live in a relationship of mutual obligations toward the larger MB family with shared relational, theological, ethical, and missional commitments. Each local MB church is part of this larger family and participation with and a willingness to be guided by this larger family is part of what the “spirit of love, mutual submission, and interdependence” looks like.

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.¹⁵

Note 15:

Contrary to many today, church discipline is a key component of being a loving biological, adopted, or spiritual family.

For the spiritual family we call church, loving church discipline is not about group power or control over individuals. Instead discipline is about actions intended to help us move back in the direction of Jesus so that we can again experience “life to the full” (John 10:10). If discipline is not motivated by the kind of love that searches for and rescues the “lost sheep” (Luke 15:4-7), it is not worthy of the name. Discipline stands up against all that steals, kills, and destroys—both in the life of the individual and in the life of the church corporately. Neglecting discipline is not a sign of how loving a church has become, but a sign of its lack of willingness to stand up against these destructive forces. **Doing nothing in such cases is neither loving nor gracious.**

Healthy, truly loving, and ultimately redemptive church discipline practices emerge from explicit New Testament teachings that exhort believers to be accountable to each other (Rom 12:3-8; Gal 6:1-5). Jesus provides a process for addressing sinful and destructive behaviours within the church (Matt 18:15-20). A faithful church cannot ignore Jesus’ direct instructions even though Holy Spirit wisdom is needed for each situation.

Jesus instructed the church on how to be a disciplining community (Matt 18:15-25) with a restorative/redemptive rather than a punitive purpose. The goal is always to restore your brother/sister (Matt 18:15; cf. Gal 6:1-2; Eph 4:25; 1 Cor 5:3-5; 2 Cor 2:5-11). “To bind and to loose” (Matt 18:18) recognizes Jesus’ authoritative presence in the community as the church engages in a process of discernment and seeking consensus about what it means to be faithful.

Mutual accountability that is redemptive for both the individual believer and the church family must be marked by a love that cares deeply for the well-being of the other while at the same time is faithful to the church’s identity and calling. We must seek a heart of repentance and acknowledge that much of what has been practiced as accountability in our history has lacked this love and turned into something punitive rather than redemptive. But these historical failures must not stop us from aspiring to live into mutual accountability in the way of Jesus.

Church accountability is about obedience to God by loving and speaking humbly into each others’ lives, and inviting them to repentance, healing, and reconciliation. It is also about each of us hearing and respecting the voices of others who are doing the same for us because each of us will sin (Luke 17:1, Rom 3:23) and we may, at times, require intervention from the community of believers before choosing to repent (Matt 18:15-17).

However, those who “refuse to listen even to the church” (Matt 18:17) should no longer be treated as members of the community but as a “Gentile or a tax collector” (NRSV). This is not a permanent or irreversible declaration since it is not a person’s sin that leads to their formal placement outside the church family (if it were, no one would be worthy of inclusion in the church at all), but only their refusal to respond to the church’s invitation to repentance, healing, and reconciliation. But without a positive response to the invitation, the church must consider the person in the category of an outsider, visitor, or neighbour (viz., “Gentile or a tax collector”). **However, since Jesus, known as a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt 11:19), constantly expressed loving invitation to just such people even eating with them, the church must never stop embodying this same loving invitation.**

Gifts for Ministry

Through the Holy Spirit God gives gifts to each member for the well-being of the whole body. These gifts are to be exercised in God’s service to build up the church and to minister in the world.¹⁶

Note 16:

1 Corinthians 12:5 describes “different kinds of gifts” which verse 7 calls a “manifestation of the Spirit” given to “each one” for the “common good.” 1 Corinthians 12-14 highlight how all these gifts are to be exercised in the context of love. These three chapters provide key implications for how spiritual gifts should function in the church today:

1. Each and every believer (male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, etc.) has received at least one gift from the Holy Spirit for ministry in the church and in the world (cf. 1 Cor 12:11; 1 Peter 4:10). Therefore, the hope is that every believer will become a member of a local church using their gift(s) “to build up the church and to minister in the world.” Local churches wanting to function at the highest capacity will need to encourage widespread involvement from each and every member as they use their individual spiritual gifts.
2. The Spirit has distributed church leadership gifts (e.g., apostles, prophets, evangelists, teachers, pastors, cf. Eph 4:11-12) to many people rather than concentrating them on only one or two individuals. Therefore, local church leadership structures should include multiple leaders who meet together regularly to pray, discern, and serve the congregation, rather than placing all leadership and decision making into the hands of only one leader.
3. No one should take individual credit for the spiritual gift they have received since this would be a fundamental denial of the nature of a “gift.” While we want to be people of gratitude to those serving well in our churches (cf. Heb 13:17), excessive veneration of certain individuals with very public spiritual gifts loses sight of how God’s gifts have been given for the well-being of the church and its mission (cf. 1 Cor 3:21-4:1). Disciples of Jesus have been given gifts so that “in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 4:11). The emphasis is on the praising of God and the building up of the body.
4. All spiritual gifts are to be exercised in the “way of love” (1 Cor 14:1; cf. 13:1-3) “to serve others” (1 Peter 4:10). Gifts are to nurture and strengthen the entire church rather than function to benefit solely the one entrusted with the gift (Phil 2:3-4). Individuals who lose sight of this larger purpose are betraying the Holy Spirit’s purpose.

When all the New Testament texts about the Spirit’s gifts are brought together (1 Cor 12-14; Eph 4:11-16; Rom 12:3-8; 1 Peter 4:10-11), it becomes clear that the Bible does not provide a single comprehensive list of these gifts. It could well be that the Spirit gifts individual believers in many ways beyond those mentioned in the New Testament, based on the specific needs of the church at a given time.

While some believers have argued that some gifts (e.g., tongues, miracles, prophecy) were only present in the early church and that the Holy Spirit later ceased giving them out to individual believers, Mennonite Brethren affirm the Spirit’s distribution of all the gifts to the church today.

God calls people to equip the church for ministry.¹⁷

Note 17:

While it is positive for disciples of Jesus to “aspire” to serve as leaders in the church (1 Tim 3:1), God through the Holy Spirit is the one who calls people to lead in the Body of Christ and the leader’s purpose should always be “to equip the church for ministry” (cf. Eph 4:11-13). While everyone in the church has been gifted by his Spirit to serve (“ministry” and “service” mean the same thing), Christ has gifted leaders specifically with the purpose of enabling others to use their gifts. The word

“equip” can mean “to put in order,” “to prepare,” or “to restore,” which carries the sense of coaching, training, and discipling (cf. Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*. [Herald Press, 2002], 183-184).

Leadership in the church is not about power or ruling over others, but about serving others for their ultimate spiritual growth and well-being (John 10:42-45; 13:12-17; Matt 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-26; Phil 2:3; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Church leadership is a divine calling and not a right based on one’s own feelings of giftedness, educational achievements, charisma, or personal calling. While a sense of divine calling is an important element in the discerning of ministry leaders, this should be submitted to the prayerful discernment of the local church community (Acts 13:1-3; 15:22). The final affirmation of a God-given call to leadership and to a specific ministry location is not in the hands of the individual but in the hands of the prayerful local church community.

Leaders are to model Christ in their personal, family, and church life. The church is to discern leaders prayerfully, and to affirm, support, and correct them in a spirit of love.¹⁸

Note 18:

The New Testament teaches that the church needs leaders (Phil 1:1; Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3). The purpose of church leadership is to enable and oversee the diversity of gifts through teaching, correction, encouragement, and loving service. Church leaders are to be mature Christians who model Christlike character in their personal, family, and church life (1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Leaders are “servants of Christ” (1 Cor 4:1-2; cf. Titus 1:7) entrusted to shepherd God’s flock on behalf of the “Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:2-4; cf. Acts 20:28).

The New Testament does not prescribe an absolute form of church organization, but it does teach that the church should do all things decently and in order for the purpose of building up the whole church (1 Cor 14). It also speaks regularly of shared leadership by using the plural for the equipping gifts (Eph 4:11), “deacons” (1 Tim 3:8; Phil 1:1), and “elders” (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; Jas 5:15). Mennonite Brethren, at the local level, have also understood “covenant community,” “family,” and “body” to involve congregational involvement whereby church “members” come together as the body of Christ seeking the unity of the Holy Spirit in mutual accountability and discernment.

The relationship between church leaders and all others in the local body is to be characterized by love that involves the sacrificial desire for the other to grow more into the person God has called them to be. For leaders, love means that their actions are done not for personal gain, but to “equip [God’s] people for works of service” (Eph 4:12; cf. Phil 2:3-4). For the congregation, love means that the actions of supporting, affirming, and correcting local leaders are not done for personal interests, but always to further God’s larger mission for the local church.

1 Corinthians 13 was originally addressed to congregations facing challenges in their relationships. The “spirit of love” mentioned in Article 6 requires love that is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, and not easily angered—the kind of love that always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. This Holy Spirit empowered mutual love that should exist between a church and its leaders will not stop difficult conversations in both directions but it should change the way those conversations are both delivered and received. So leaders are called to serve from a posture of love.

But 1 Corinthians 13 also has implications for each member of a local church in relation to the leaders who are serving there. Church life in community must also include some level of “submission” to leadership for that community to be healthy and unified together. Hebrew 3:17 exhorts the readers to “[h]ave confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, nor a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” While these commands to “have confidence” and “submit to...authority” are present here, church leaders must not wield these verses for evil and selfish benefit—but must live lives in Christ and exercise leadership in ways that are worthy of this confidence (Matt 18:6; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). These should be seen as very sobering warnings against leaders who exploit and harm those within the church family.

Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20; John 13:1-20; 17:1-26; Acts 1:8; 2:1-4, 37-47; 11:1-18; 15:1-35; Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 5:1-8; 12-14; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; Gal. 3:26-28; 6:1-5; Eph. 1:18-23; 2:11-22; 4:4-6, 11-16; I Thess. 5:22-23; I Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:7-9; I Pet. 2:9-12; 5:1-4.

* One form of the church's worship is the practice of footwashing which can be a meaningful reminder of the humility, loving service, and personal cleansing that is to characterize the relationship of members within the church.

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