

## Sermon- By God, for God and in God

Scripture: Eph 4:1-16

Sunday, January 19, 2020

Today I am going to start a sermon series on the Confessions of the Mennonite Church. We live in a time when many people don't want to be associated with a denomination. Sometimes it is because the presence of different denominations look like unnecessary divisions created in the larger faith community. But as I explored the different denominations myself as a seminary student I came to recognize that there was a fascinating story behind each denomination. When you look a little closer you see that faith in Jesus Christ did not spontaneously arise out of thin air. Every single person of faith is connected to someone who made Jesus Christ real to them. And someone made faith real to that person and so on. In other words, just like you and I have biological parents and a biological ancestry that goes back to Adam and Eve, we also have a spiritual ancestry that goes all the way back to Jesus' own disciples. And this ancestry is our faith history. And when we trace our faith history we will find along the way that our faith story passes through some really great men and women of faith. These great men and women have taken their call to make disciples so seriously that whole moments were birthed from their work. These moments over time have become denominations. And these denominations have addressed some issues they saw in the church at the time, in their own unique Holy Spirit inspired ways. So when you look at the different denominations, think of it as the byproduct of the different movements that arose in church history. Visually the church is like a beautiful piece of marble with different veins of colors. Each of those veins represents different minerals that entered into the soil at some point in history which then got transformed through amazing chemical reactions over long periods of time resulting in stone that when we look at today is simply breathtakingly gorgeous. And you look at it and say, I did not know that you could have such depth of color, such reds and blues and yellows occurring in nature.

It is what the whole faith community looks like now. And when you focus on a specific vein in the marble, or one particular denominations you will find that this denomination has been inspired by the Holy Spirit to pick up on some aspects of the kingdom of God better than all the others. The Mennonite Church through its unique faith history, being birthed out of extreme persecution has picked up on certain aspects of the kingdom of God particularly well. This is what I want to present to you in this sermon series on the Mennonite Confession of faith.

Now the Mennonite Confession of Faith that we will look at, comes in a long line of faith statements starting from the Schleitheim Confession written in 1527 in Switzerland. The North American Mennonite church got organized and recognized historical confessions of faith in 1898. These were added to over the years and today the Mennonite Confession of Faith that I will be referring to was the one published in 1995. One of the committee members who put this together, David Garber was my personal mentor of mine and taught a class on the confessions to a small class of pastors like me who came to the Mennonite church as outsiders in Pittsburgh, PA. There are 24 articles in this document and today we are starting at article 9, titled the Church of Jesus Christ. Now you might ask why we starting at article 9, almost half way through the document? And the answer is because the first 8 articles have to do with God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and Sin and Salvation and all of that are things that the whole church agrees on. So if you are looking for what makes the Mennonite church different you are not going to get it in the section that deals with the basics of the Christian faith. Which is a good thing! In spite of all these different denominations, the larger church agrees on all the essentials of the faith.

Ephesians 4:1-5 puts it like this. ***with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope***

*of your calling; <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism; <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in <sup>[c]</sup>you all.*

In spite of all our divisions most denominations agree on the essentials of the God of the Old and New Testaments. Of course most is not all. You have to do your research because there are many cults out there. Never forget that the difference between the real and the counterfeit is very small.

Within the legitimate denominations there are many differences in the non-essentials but nevertheless very important aspects of faith. A positive way to look at these differences is almost as a gift. Eph 4: 7 and 8 say, ***But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. <sup>8</sup> Therefore He says:***

***“When He ascended on high,  
He led captivity captive,  
And gave gifts to men.”***

Today we are going to focus of the specific gifts given to the Mennonite church as seen in the Confessions. And the first thing we are going to focus on is the gift of understanding the very definition of what it is to be “church”.

This is what article 9 says, *“We believe that the church as the body of Christ is the visible manifestation of Jesus Christ. The church is called to live and minister as Christ lived and ministered in the world. As many members belong to one body, so all believers have been baptized in one Spirit into the one body of Christ. There are varieties of gifts and ministries in the church, all given for the common good. Believers are to love each other and to grow toward the likeness of Christ, who is the head of the church.*

*The church exists as a community of believers in the local congregation, as a community of congregations, and as the worldwide community of faith”. End of quote.*

Now when you look at this statement by itself, you will say, what is uniquely Mennonite about this? Most denominations will be able to affirm that the church is the “visible manifestation of Jesus Christ”. But the way denominations function will tell you a different story. For example the orthodox churches, prioritize following their traditions and ancient liturgies over anything else including the ministry of preaching and teaching the Word. Some denominations in the reformed tradition in baptizing infants prioritize upholding the fact that God’s people are the predestined covenant community and so they understand church as a group of people who **they** have baptized and this could include new borns. But when you get too pre-destination heavy, they believe that sharing the Gospel is not that important because what you do makes no difference as it is all in God’s hands 😊 Some denominations swing the other extreme and say, it is completely in our hands and so they go super aggressive and put up billboards like we saw on highway 65 in Alabama which said Go to Church or Go to Hell 😞 What they are saying is, going to church is what saves you.

Do all these denominations believe that church is the body of Christ? I am sure they will not deny it, but how they “do” church reflects a whole different theology.

When the Mennonite church talks about the church being the “visible manifestation of Jesus Christ”, this is what we believe we have to do. We believe that we have to look at how Jesus Christ acted and what he taught and seriously follow his example individually and collectively. So when he taught about who God blesses in the sermon on the mount, he is talking about how the church should act now. He is not talking about what will happen when he comes again and the kingdom of God is fully established as some people believe. Because when he returns there will not be any mourning or peacemaking or persecution. The mourning and peacemaking and persecution are realities of our world right now and to be the body of Christ we have to follow Christ’s example. But this is a process, even for the church.

Article 9 states “The church is the new society established and sustained by the Holy Spirit. The church, the body of Christ, is called to become ever more like Jesus Christ, its head, in its worship, ministry, witness, mutual love and care, and the ordering of its common life.”

In other words if church is a group of people who are in our collective actions are working on representing the attitude and blessedness of Christ, then there is a growing Christlikeness that the whole church should exhibit. That means a humility and identification with those who are suffering. That also means the church is not afraid to speak truth to power. It means not being full of pomp and show because Jesus did not allow external grandeur to come before the mission he came to accomplish. There will be glory and grandeur for the church, but God will chose the time for that, when the mission of the church is complete. If the church is a visible representation of who Jesus is than we need to be His very hands, His feet and His voice in the world we live in today. This is what Eph 4:11-13 says this <sup>11</sup> ***And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,*** <sup>12</sup> ***for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the <sup>[e]</sup>edifying of the body of Christ,*** <sup>13</sup> ***till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;*** Eph 4 is very clear that the church is both already the “body of Christ” and moving towards the full stature of Christ. Our ministry as a church is ultimately to edify the body of Christ. In that process we individuals are being perfected so that we get to the end goal of attaining to the stature of the fullness of Christ. In other words, the church is Christ in the world today. But we are a witness of Christ in a very limited sense but the goal is to attain to the fullness of measure and stature of Christ. And to get to this full Christlikeness, the Mennonite church believes that church should be Christlike to the fullness of our understanding of Christlikeness today.

Now you might ask how can an organization be Christlike in every aspect of its being?

Article 9 addresses this in two ways. Firstly, by a complete dependence on the Holy Spirit. And I quote,

*In times of suffering as well as tranquility, the church depends on the Spirit's presence and power, rather than on the power or benevolence of government, for its preservation and mission. End quote.*

This statement is particularly relevant in the North American context when the church is in a position of power. When church goers are a significant voting block, even the president has to be mindful of how they treat this voting block. On the other hand, with such power, the church can get intoxicated with political power. Today a majority of evangelical leaders glorify the President not because they share his values. Before this president became president, only 39% of evangelicals would have voted for him. But after he made a deal with key evangelical leaders that percentage jumped to 81% evangelical support. Today, the leaders of the church in the US, not only support electing the president but praise him as the “anointed one” and Messiah of the church, thus associating the church to this president to the whole world overlooking every lie and criminal act this president is committing for personal gain. The church of Jesus Christ should never compromise its values to get a worldly power. But Satan will always try. Jesus was promised the whole world if He bowed down to Satan. Jesus resisted that temptation and so should we. How do we stay clear from worldly temptations? But depending on the Holy Spirit and paying close attention to the price we are being asked to pay for admission to ride on the wide and easy road. The church of Jesus Christ must never compromise dependence on the Holy Spirit for dependence on any earthly power, whether it is the power of money or guns or social status or even something as grand as the power of the American presidency. In Acts 1:8 Jesus told his disciples, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses in

Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The Mennonite church believes that our job is to be witness, our resource in the Holy Spirit. *“In times of suffering as well as tranquility, the church depends on the Spirit’s presence and power, rather than on the power or benevolence of government, for its preservation and mission.”*

### So Who can be part of the church then?

I quote article 9, “The church is the household, or family, of God.<sup>4</sup> Commitment to one another is shown in loving one another as God loves, in sharing material and spiritual resources, in exercising mutual care and discipline, and in showing hospitality to all.<sup>5</sup> The church welcomes all people who join themselves to Christ to become part of the family of God.<sup>6</sup> Mark 3:33-35 New King James Version (NKJV)

<sup>33</sup> But He answered them, saying, “Who is My mother, or My brothers?” <sup>34</sup> And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! <sup>35</sup> For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.”

Ephesians 2:19 New King James Version (NKJV)

<sup>19</sup> Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,

The Mennonite church believes that the church is spiritual family. And spiritual family is stronger than biological family especially when the biological family does not share the spiritual connection. And families, provide belonging, identity and support of every kind to its members.

So how do we do church then?

This is what the Confession of Faith says, “The church's identity as God's people of faith is sustained and renewed as members gather regularly for worship. Here the church celebrates God's boundless grace, reaffirms its loyalty to God above all else, and seeks to discern God's will.”

In other words Article 9 states that we come to church to do 4 things. To renew one's identity as a member of the household of Christ. We come to church to extend to each other boundless grace. We come to church to affirm our loyalty to God above all else. And we come to church to discern God's will. We also share resources with each other as a true family would do.

There is one more aspect of being church that Article 9 mentions that I think is important to note. It says, “The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God, **while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance.**” To be aware of one's own imperfections is a tremendous gift. And when we have the Holy Spirit in us, we do have the capacity to see your own flaws. That is what it means for the Holy Spirit to convict us. That means the church as a body should be constantly examining itself and repenting of its own sins. In the book of Revelation, the church is critiqued by Jesus Christ Himself. The Mennonite believes that the church is a self-aware entity that should be constantly working to repent and be transformed. This will automatically give it a humility that is so attractive in a world full of pride.

So the Mennonite church believes that church is the “visible manifestation of Christ on earth”. We depend on the Holy Spirit and not on any worldly power. We are made up of those who voluntarily affirm our own dependence on Christ's saving power. We are and act as a family of God. We come to church to renew our identity in Christ, to affirm our

loyalty to Christ above all else, to discern God's will and finally, we recognize our sins and live in repentance.

That my friends is the Mennonite definition of "church". Next week we will look at the "mission of the church" which is Article 10. Until then let us hold on tight to our identity and dependence on Christ and go into the world looking a little more like Christ because we spent time hanging out in His house today. Let us pray.