

Sermon: Calling All People Into One Nation Under God

Scripture: Acts 10:34-43

Sunday, January 26, 2020

Last week I preached on Article 9 of the Confession of Faith of the Mennonite church that talked about the Mennonite definition of “church”. I pointed out to you that the Mennonite understanding of church was that it was the “visible representation of Christ” in the world. The Mennonite church depends only on the power of the Holy Spirit. It receives into its membership those who have voluntarily received the saving power of Christ. The Mennonite church also encourages regular attendance to reaffirm one’s identity in Christ, to express one’s highest loyalty to Christ and to seek the will of Christ for one’s life. Article 9 was focused mostly on the identity of the church. Now before I go on, I want to mention that last week I made the mistake of referring to Article 10 throughout the sermon when I meant Article 9. Today I am going to be talking about Article 10, and this time I mean it 😊 Article 10 refers to the mission of the church and that is what we are going to focus on.

Now article 10 opens with the following paragraph. *“We believe that the church is called to proclaim and to be a sign of the kingdom of God. Christ has commissioned the church to be his witnesses, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all things he has commanded”*.¹

As a visible manifestation of Christ in the world, the Mennonite church believes that the mission in the world is twofold. The church’s mission is “to proclaim **and** be a sign of the kingdom of God”. When you look at this, it is really a twofold mission with one objective. The church proclaims the “kingdom of God” in word and when it comes to its actions, there again it lives out its witness as the very “sign of the kingdom of God” in

the world. So when it comes to the mission of the Mennonite church it is really one thing. To “speak” and “be” the kingdom of God in the world.

So how does the Mennonite church go about this mission?

Para 3 of Article 10 reads like this. *“The church is called to witness to the reign of Christ by embodying Jesus’ way in its own life and patterning itself after the reign of God. Thus it shows the world a sample of life under the lordship of Christ. By its life, the church is to be a city on a hill, a light to the nations,⁴ testifying to the power of the resurrection by a way of life different from the societies around it.”*

Well the culture of any organization has to be related to its mission. Because the mission of the church is to introduce the kingdom of God to the world, the culture of the church has to be geared towards “being a sign of the kingdom of God”.

An important part of its culture then is it’s distancing from any dependence on worldly power, be it the power of the state or money or position or authority. Because the state has all three worldly institutions try to co-opt the power of the state for their own benefit. But the Mennonite church believes its mandate is to witness to a different power, the power of trusting God and the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore it strives to function independently of state power or any other worldly power as it goes about furthering the mission of the church.

One of the visible signs of this distancing from the power of the state is that you will not find a national flag in the sanctuary of the Mennonite church. There is no disrespect intended but the Mennonite churches do not believe that the symbol of the state should be placed in the front of the sanctuary where all attention should be on Christ alone.

Further you will also not find a lot of attention focused on those serving the military. Now mind you, the Mennonite church will and should extend all necessary support and

even pray for those in those serving in the military. However, only the church will value the life and sacrifice of its missionaries who give their lives for the cause of Jesus Christ and so we as a church should always be remembering those we have sent into harms way for the cause of Jesus Christ. Let me point out to you that last year, 4305 Christians were killed for their faith. That is the figure from Open Doors, the ministry to the persecuted church. That is a little over 11 believers being killed per day. Now we also remember that there are 245 million Christians living in areas where the church is under persecution. It is the church's responsibility to uphold and support our persecuted brothers and sisters and many of these people are being persecuted by both the governments where they live and even their own families. In those situations, the temptations to compromise are very intense. Yet the church cannot compromise its witness to win relief from the state or from anywhere else.

One last thing about the Mennonite church and state. The Mennonite church does have lobbyists in Washington DC. The Mennonite Church lobbies the government for peace building, preventing gun violence, economic justice, highlighting the plight of refugees and immigrants. Other Mennonite Church lobbying efforts include International conflict and genocide prevention and making legislators aware of the effect of US arms sales on human rights around the world. There is nothing wrong in building relationships with legislators and sharing with them the concerns of the church. ***As long as the church does not sell its soul to get what she wants.***

Article 9 made it clear that the Mennonite church is careful not to depend on the power or benevolence of the state. However the Mennonite church is very much willing to use ***its*** God given power to influence any power center out there including the state to further the mission of the church and even to speak truth to power in areas where the values of the church clash with those of the state. Article 10 puts it this way,

“The church is called to witness to the reign of Christ by embodying Jesus’ way in its own life and patterning itself after the reign of God. Thus it shows the world a sample of life under the lordship of Christ. By its life, the church is to be a city on a hill, a light to the nations,⁴ testifying to the power of the resurrection by a way of life different from the societies around it.”

The Mennonite church believes that she should witness the reign of Christ by embodying a whole different culture from that of the world it is embedded in.

There are three more aspects of the counter cultural mission of the church that Article 10 highlights and I will highlight it for you today. These three aspects are actually 3 equivalences.

The first is the equivalence is between physical healing and spiritual healing. Let me elaborate. The Mennonite church believes that it has a healing ministry because Jesus had a healing ministry. Now whenever Jesus healed the body he wanted people to think about a bigger spiritual healing. In Luke 8 when Jesus heals the woman with the issue of blood, something very interesting happens. The woman is healed when she touches Jesus’ garment. But Jesus in verse 48 tells her, “it is your faith that has made you well”. In the previous chapter in Luke you have story of Jesus being anointed by the so called “sinful woman” the story ends with Jesus forgiving the sins of the woman because of the love she shows him and tells her “your faith has saved you, go in peace”. While in the NLT this woman who anointed Jesus was “saved’ while the woman who had an issue of “blood” was made “well” in the Greek in both instances it is the exact same word (sesoken) which means is to be “rescued or saved”. What Jesus is doing is that whether he is healing the body or the soul he describes his work as the work of salvation. Even when Jesus provided his listeners with physical food in John, there too Jesus makes an interesting leap telling his listeners that as they received physical food from Jesus and were temporarily satisfied, but that they should in fact in fact be seeking from Jesus

spiritual bread that can satisfy them eternally. If you were to see the pattern here, Jesus was always using the physical to point to the spiritual, whether it was food or medical attention. When the church continues Jesus' healing ministry, the church too undertakes its ministry of healing to point to Jesus' spiritual saving power. When the church approaches its "ministry of helps" in this way then it will never separate its ministry of "word" and ministry of "deed". In doing mission the Jesus way and as per Article 10 of the Confession of faith is to always hold "word" and "deed", the work of healing the body and healing the soul together. If we pray for one we pray for the other. If we build a facility for physical healing, there should be arrangements for the spiritual healing as well. So the first equivalence that the Mennonite church recognizes is the equivalence between physical healing and spiritual saving or maturing the way Jesus did.

The second equivalence that the Mennonite church recognizes is between the Gospel and peace itself. Article 10 says in point 4 of the commentary states that "*peace is an integral part of the content of the church's message*". The message of salvation is really a message of the possibility of reconciliation with God. Acts 10:36 states that "***This is the message of Good News for the people of Israel—that there is peace with God through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.***" The commentary goes on to say that, "*The power of gospel is so strong and God's mercy is so wide that it is possible for any person to repent and be saved. No enemy is so evil as to be beyond God's love. The church lives and preaches reconciliation boldly, yet without coercion.*" When you are doing the work of an evangelist, this is a very helpful equivalence to remember because if an individual is drawing closer to the Lord then in the unseen realm much dust is being kicked up. When dust is being kicked up it looks anything but peaceful. Jesus said I come ""Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.³⁵ For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—³⁶ a man's enemies will be the

members of his own household". Jesus knew that when an individual steps into His kingdom much dust is kicked up when family lines are redrawn and Satan pours out his fury. So it is very helpful to be able to preach the peace the receive is not confused between the external and the internal. When a person comes to Christ there may be a dust storm on the outside but you will be able to walk through the dust storm with peace on the inside because if you can have peace with God then everything else is temporary drama. The Mennonite church believes so seriously about its evangelistic responsibility that it reminds its members to not leave home without putting on the shoes of the Gospel of peace. The second equivalence in the Mennonite church is between the Gospel and peace. Ours is a ministry of reconciliation.

There is a third equivalence. And this one may be a bit hard to hear. It is the equivalence between witnessing and matrydom. Let me tell you where it comes from. You see whenever Jesus tells his disciples, you will be my witnesses in Acts 1:8 and other places, the Greek word for "witness", hamartiya is the same as the word for "martyr". There is always a cost and a risk involved in being a witness of Christ in this fallen world. The commentary para 4 puts it this way, *"The church lives and preaches reconciliation boldly, yet without coercion. The missionary church chooses to suffer rather than to force its way"*. You see it looks like this on the mission field. When you try and be a witness to Christ, the people you are witnessing to, depending on their worldly power and hostility to your message may inflict harm on you. You as an evangelist always has a choice to hit back and inflict harm on them or chose to suffer and hold back. If you do hold back you are imitating Christ. If you hit back, you are acting like the rest of the world and at that moment the light of your witness just got turned off. But not hitting back at someone who has harmed you is to suppress a very basic human reflex. Only a dead person does not have the automatic reflexes. So to be an effective witness, you have to be able to

suppress some of your survival reflexes like a dead person. That is what it means to die to your old self. That is why every witness is a martyr. You just gave up your life to be able to be an effective witness. This is what Christ did. This is what He called his disciples to do and this is what the Mennonite church believes the church as a whole should do. The third equivalence in the Mennonite church is between witnessing and martyrdom. Very few people will be physically killed for their faith but remember this friends, every true witness of Christ is also struggling to let the flesh die so that the bright light of their witness can live on.

Let me bring all the elements of the mission of the church by quoting from the last para of Article 10.

“The mission of the church does not require the protection of any nation or empire. Christians are strangers and aliens within all cultures. Yet the church itself is God’s nation, encompassing people who have come from every tribe and nation. Indeed, its mission is to reconcile differing groups, creating one new humanity¹⁰ and providing a preview of that day when all the nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord and be at peace.¹¹”

Remember the mission of the church is counter cultural no matter which culture you live in. The mission of the church brings together physical and spiritual healing, the Gospel and peace and witnessing and martyrdom. All so that we can do our part in reconciling people from every tribe and nation into that one nation, that one day, will be truly under God. Let us pray.