

# Anabaptism *Revisited*

Essays on  
Anabaptist/Mennonite studies  
in honor of C. J. Dyck

(Walter Klaassen, Editor)

HERALD PRESS  
Scottsdale, Pennsylvania  
Waterloo, Ontario

CHAPTER 11

THE "FREE CHURCH?": A TIME WHOSE IDEA HAS NOT COME

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Fritz Blanke, church historian at the University of Zurich in the early 1950s, defined sixteenth-century Anabaptism as the first modern "free church." The concept of the free church, of course, was formulated in contrast to the state and folk Christianity that had prevailed in Europe for more than a millennium. Reviewing the price paid by the radical reformers for abandoning that tradition, Blanke ended his Anabaptist research seminar with the comment, "Their only error was that, historically speaking, they embraced the free church prematurely." The unspoken implications: first, the radical proposition was valid; and second, though premature then, the "free church" was destined nonetheless to be the wave of the future.

In this essay I offer some reflections on Blanke's free church thesis. These reflections, however, will be my own, and thus are not intended as speculations as to what may have been in my esteemed teacher's mind. For the purpose of this essay I accept the notion of sixteenth-century prematurity as a descriptive tool; that is, the sixteenth-century was not ready to listen to the "free church" project, and thus all but crushed it. Our own century, to the contrary, is cupping its ears, but, I shall argue, the churches, now free, are stuttering.

In part the mission of the "free church" has been realized, and this fact alone can give rise to uncertainty. Church and state have been separated, Christianity has been disestablished, states have become "secular," and freedom of religion has come to be recognized as a basic human right. In any event, the ecclesiological idioms available in the religious marketplace are mostly establishment and sectarian vestiges from the past, and these have relatively little to offer to this age. The task of this essay is to critique these idioms, and then to address our current situation. It will be necessary thus to recall rapidly some salient though familiar facets of salvation history.

Biblical Faith as an Aporia

Biblical faith, beginning with the call of Abraham and climaxing in the (New Testament) age of the Spirit, entails a conundrum, perhaps in the end an

aporia, a set of contradictions for which there is no logical solution. On the one hand, Old Testament people encountered God in a qualitatively new mode, and with this came a new definition of humanity. At the same time, however, this Creator God, Yahweh, disclosed himself through a specially chosen people, the Israelites, and eventually through Jesus and his followers, the Christians. Something had gone wrong--the "Fall," "original sin," or whatever--so that action, supplementary to the creation covenant, became necessary.

Thereafter things seem to move on two tracks, one for all humanity, the other for the chosen people (Hebrews, later Christians). There seem to be two orders, one of creation, the other of salvation, one of nature, the other of grace. The chosen people, however, move on both tracks, and matters become rather complicated in all directions. At times the chosen people appear as the center or end of all things, and thus as recipients of special blessing. At other times, however, and fundamentally, they appear as means to a larger end, the salvation of all humanity. They are called apart, with a special identity but only as a means to a larger end, an end beyond themselves. They are constituted an "eschatological" community, rooted in a reality beyond time and space. They are yeast destined to "leaven" the entire "lump" of all humanity. Two impulses, one centripetal, the other centrifugal, stand in unrelieved tension, always shifting in the flux of history, never at rest.

We thus face a series of quandaries. How are the sociabilities of "nature" and of "grace" related among the people of the covenant? How are the covenantally chosen people related to the rest of humankind? And growing from these two questions, how is an eschatological community, a manifestation of a kingdom that "is not of this world" (John 18:36), to express itself historically? Thus far, over the course of more than three millennia of "salvation" history, this problem has been manifest as an aporia. A faith community that is merely "spiritual" possesses no reality. A faith community, organized historically, as other groups are organized, perpetually tends to debase itself. This aporia is the subject of the present essay.

#### Israel and Christendom

The problem arises with the Israelite exodus, the Sinai covenant, and the formation of the nation Israel. The interplay of theocratic vision and primitive (elementary) tribalism in the emerging Israelite social organization is not readily decipherable. Did the covenant in fact contain a blueprint for decentralized self-sufficiency without a central state? Was the monarchy simply the result of the lack of faith or a loss of nerve? Or did the subsequent assimilation of the royal motif in the figure of the Messiah imply a more positive dimension as well? Whatever the answer, we know that the uniquely Hebrew prophetic tradition emerged in juxtaposition to the monarchy (monarchies). The covenant became an ellipse with two foci: the royal institutions, with their corrupting tragedy of power, in ever-heightening tension with the prophet-championed theocratic vision. There are cycles of apostasy and partial repentance, but the general direction is down, leading eventually to the cap-

tivity and collapse of the monarchy. In the end, only Diaspora remains, a phenomenon to which I will return.

Remarkably enough, a parallel mutation occurred in early Christianity, specifically in the fourth century, when the new faith was first recognized and tolerated by the Roman Empire (Constantine) and then late in the same century was made the exclusive state religion (Theodosius). This mutation, however, was not limited to the empire. From Armenia and Georgia in the East to Britain in the West, Christianity "triumphed" in nation after nation as princes embraced the faith and harnessed its energies to state-building. A mutation of this sort, moreover, has not been limited to Judaism and Christianity. Other "founded" religions,<sup>1</sup> notably Islam and Buddhism, have been similarly employed. It may also be noted in passing that in modern times Christian missions have gained hearing mostly where other "founded" religions have not entered previously.

Here, then, an acute question arises. What does it signify that historically Christianity has been a civilizing energy, that it has afforded the spiritual resources for state- and society-building? Roland Bainton, in effect, addresses our above aporia when he distinguishes the two methods by which the Christian faith can be (has been) promulgated. One is "the way of individual conversion with a goodly period of instruction prior to baptism.... The disadvantage of this method is that the Christian converts in a pagan culture become, by reason of their change in faith, deracinated from their own culture and compelled to move into an alien conclave. The other method is mass conversion, and it was this method which converted Europe. Kings like Clovis (early 6th century) embraced the faith." The disadvantage of this method was that it "entailed the paganizing of Christianity."<sup>2</sup> The former method, Bainton observes, was characteristic of the nineteenth-century Protestant missionary movement.

George Mendenhall, an Old Testament scholar, notes the parallel between the rise of the Israelite monarchy and the Constantinian turning point in Christianity. Describing King David as the "Old Testament Constantine," he extends the canvas to include a similar mutation of the original message of Zarathustra by the later Achaemenids (7th, 6th centuries, B.C.). He writes, "All three cases are entirely analogous, illustrating (to put it as provocatively as possible) *the dissolution of religion into politics*. At the same time, the basis of solidarity was no longer the covenant, but the myth of descent from a common ancestor."<sup>3</sup>

More than politics was involved, or rather, this "dissolution" itself was a multidimensional process. Apparently princes espoused the founded religion when it demonstrated sufficient power to appear politically useful. On the other hand, in both the Israelite and the Christian instance, the faithful had "good" reason to accept a political embodiment of the faith. The Israelites thought they needed a king to enable them to cope with surrounding hostile powers. Christians, for their part, had suffered under persecution. A reversal of imperial policy was understandably welcome.

These externally triggered anxieties, however, had deeper roots as well.

Though our common human life is materially rooted and determined, our very humanity consists in our capacity and vocation to transcend those determinisms in thought, in choice and action. We construct tools, buildings, and spaceships first in our minds, and then translate our mental pictures into material constructs. Similarly our perception-based actions give rise to the social cultural order that shapes our existence.<sup>4</sup> But we also visualize possibilities and realities that cannot be thus materialized. We espouse visions and ideals that spur us forward even when they are not directly attainable. Religious faith pertains to the unseen, the "otherworldly"; and the faith experience is profoundly personal, never fully communicable. But religious prehensions are mediated and validated intersubjectively, and this brings them into the world of symbolic culture.

By their very nature, however, religious prehensions are highly precarious. Unexpressed or unembodied, they tend to evaporate. Once culturally embodied, however, they are exposed to other energies and readily assume a life of their own. In any event, authentic "otherworldly" quests have profound "this-worldly" consequences. Christian monasticism, for example, is an example of withdrawal and otherworldliness. At its best it has profoundly impacted events in the world. On the other hand, monasticism has often been corrupted by the very historical processes which it set in motion. This, in the end, may be the root problem. Both the Hebrew and the Christian prophetic visions were so powerful that in effect they generated entire civilizations. Once institutionalized, however, and subjected to the vitalities of nature, they assumed a life of their own, thereby losing contact with the originating vision. It was as if the burning bush which Moses saw was in fact consumed.

If the emergence of Christendom may be viewed as analogous to the rise of the Hebrew monarchy, the rise of Christian monasticism and of medieval sects, by the same token, may be seen as analogous to the rise of Hebrew prophecy. Just as there were false prophets, there were monastic and sectarian perversions. Similarly instructive parallels can be drawn between the decline of the Hebrew monarchies and the decline of Christendom, though these parallels may be less direct. More particularly, the resulting Jewish dispersion (Diaspora), as we shall see, has ecclesiological significance.

Ancient Israel and medieval Christendom both succumbed to the illusion that their respective covenants could be, and in fact were, historically embodied and secured. In the former instance the cult and the temple seemed to make this explicit. The subsequent establishment of the monarchy reinforced this notion. Nonetheless, from the outset these material embodiments tended to suborn the covenant. With advancing apostasy, tension between the prophetic vision and both cult and monarchy mounted. Finally the full truth dawned. The word of the Lord came to the prophet, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings" (Hos. 6:6). Once the prophetic vision climaxes in Jesus, the veil in the temple is rent, and all doubt is removed (Mark 15:38). The kingdom is simply not of this world (John 18:36). On the material plane it employs neither altar nor throne! Altar and throne were provisional didactic measures, leading to Christ (Gal. 3:24). Not

Moses (though he, too, had his prophetic side), but Abraham is the prototypical figure!

Given the historical and cultural context of ancient Israel, and the vulnerability of its tribal polity to surrounding military intrigue, the materialization of the covenant in Hebrew history is at least understandable. But how, without fundamentally misreading the gospel, does one get to imperial Christianity, whether of the Roman or of the Byzantine variety? The path traveled was doubtless complex and cannot be pursued here. Obviously the same human impulses and needs asserted themselves in both instances, the Hebrew and the Christian. Political rule and religious establishment would reduce the insecurities and risks inherent in faith. But there were important differences as well. Whereas the Hebrew state was organized from within the faith community, in the Christian case the state came from the outside. While for that reason one might view the fourth-century establishment of Christianity as the rape of the church by the empire, church life had already become diluted by that time. In the ensuing era many churchmen were only too ready to invoke imperial power in support of their cause.

Less than a century after embracing Christianity, however, the empire, inwardly decadent, collapsed under invasions from the North (476 CE). For more than a millennium thereafter, the notion of empire as a spiritual entity was to haunt European rulers, as one after the other vainly pursued the imperial purple. The problem was to surmount a chaotic tribalism with wider, more stable political configurations. Christendom, the civilization that arose thereby, was a dazzling, though ruthless, achievement. Meanwhile, the struggle to surmount intertribal chaos and conflict that dominated Europe during the Middle Ages has gone worldwide, and in our era is far from resolution. The brutality of society- and state-building processes, of course, is not to be blamed directly on Judaism or Christianity, or for that matter, on any of the founded religions that energized the building of civilization. The scandal is rather that these religions all have been prostituted in the process.

#### Reformation: Freeing the Church?

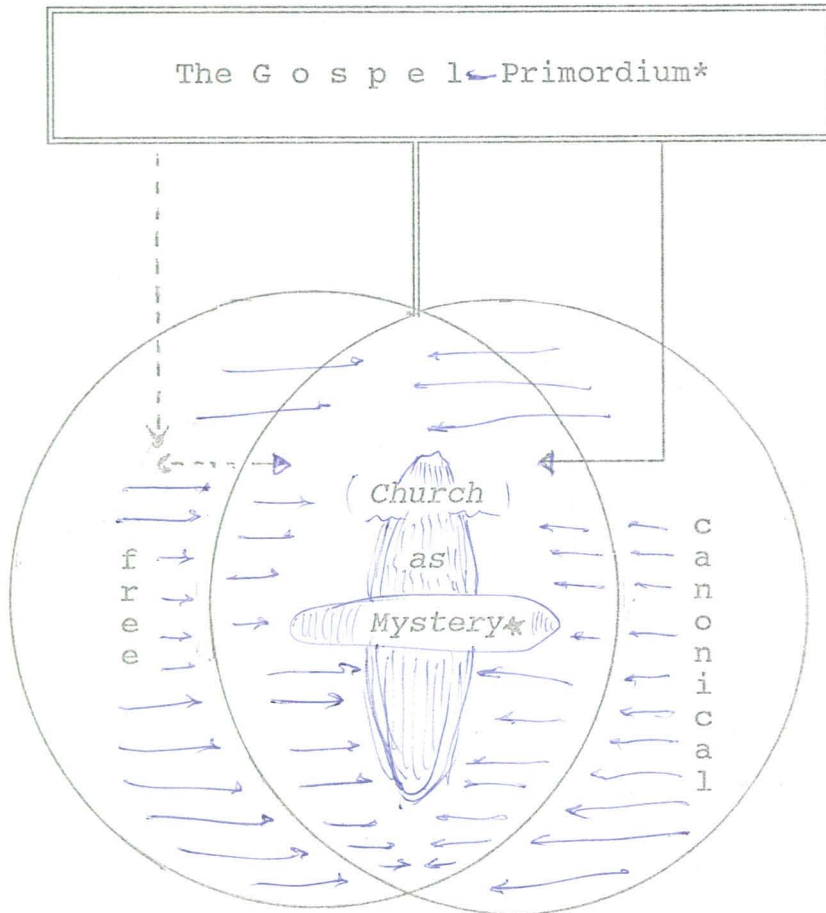
The medieval vision of a universal church, united under one head, admittedly has enormous aesthetic appeal. But it rested on premises, both at the point of departure and of subsequent development, that are far from explicit in the Gospels. Moreover, historical evidence, both in the biblical era and since, speaks against such a project. But if not by such organizational and hierarchical means, how is the covenant or faith community to become historically real and manifest?

This question arose acutely in the Protestant Reformation. The "magisterial reformers,"<sup>5</sup> for their part, presupposed the unity of the church universal as they embarked on their journey. Luther in particular remained thoroughly medieval in his mystical conception of human unity, a conception later known as the *corpus christianum*. He, and others like him, wished to reform, not to divide, the church.

That, however, was not to be. The controversy with the papacy that fol-

EVANGELIZATION AND CULTURE SEMINAR

"Free" and "Canonical" Churches Contrasted  
as Ideal Types



\*e.g.: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." Rom. 10:17.

\* or "mystical-body of Christ" =

lowed, as we know, ended in a complete break between Rome and the Reformers. Once out of fellowship with Rome, the latter acutely faced the problem, theologically as well as practically: Where in the church is authority vested? Indeed, what and where is "the church"? Luther, it has long been noted, toyed with the vision of a believers' church, a gathering of people who wished to be Christian in earnest.<sup>6</sup> But for this, Luther opined, he did not have the people. In any case, concerned as he was for civic order and for the fate of the whole society, such a church was hardly an option.

Zwingli's brush with the free church idea was more serious. Not only was that conception beginning to dawn among his associates, but on precipitating the first disputation in Zurich in early 1523, he found himself on the defensive. Zurich belonged to the diocese of Constance, and obviously, according to church law, only the bishop could convene the clergy. But in the early 1520s, as reform ferment in Zurich mounted, the city council, at Zwingli's prompting, convened a public disputation to consider the first reforms. Zwingli, needing to justify the procedure, invoked the promise of Christ's presence where two or three gather (Matt. 18). The logic, of course, was strained. A meeting of a city council is hardly a meeting "in my name." Lamely he appealed to the fact that council members were Christians, doubtless a claim nominally true, but malapropos. In any case the meeting was not an ecclesial gathering.

For both Luther and Zwingli, given their assumptions, the "free church" was not an option. In the sixteenth century, social and political cohesion was seen generally as dependent on religious uniformity. Moreover, had Luther been seriously tempted by the "free church" model, the Peasants' Revolt would quickly have disabused him of the notion. In the end, he divided the temporal and spiritual spheres, ceding the public activity of the church to the temporal sphere, thus to the jurisdiction of the territorial prince, and retaining matters of faith for the church. While this was intended as an emergency measure, German kings were to carry the title *Notbischof* for four centuries. Swiss reformers, though with different reasoning, followed the same course. In their setting, however, the rule was municipal rather than royal.

In passing, it is instructive to observe that sixteenth-century political conceptions and policies strikingly paralleled important features of Marxist-Leninist rule in the Soviet Union today, the atheism of the latter notwithstanding. Marxist-Leninists, Soviet-style, perhaps in part as heirs of the Byzantine tradition, at least until recently could no more conceive of civic and political unity, and hence stability, without ideological uniformity than could the sixteenth-century reformers. In the Soviet system the party and its dogma occupy a place similar to that held by the church and its creed prior to the October Revolution (1917). Doubtless this displacement of the church by the party accounts at least in part for the severity of the pressure on the churches during the period since 1917.

#### Radical Reformation: The First Free Church

H. S. Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" (1944), and revisionist reinterpretations meanwhile, have provided a fruitful point of orientation in sixteenth-



century Radical Reformation studies in recent decades. Outstanding disagreements in those studies need not distract us here. However turbulent and confusing that now distant era may have been, a distinct movement, surviving into our own time, crystallized around the seven articles drawn up by a group of "radicals" in 1527 in Schleitheim, a village on the Swiss-German border.<sup>7</sup> Not only did this statement shape the original ethos of that movement, the Mennonites, the Amish, and originally the Hutterites, but it offers classic formulas on the issues before us here, namely, those arising from the two-track mode of divine action in human history. These articles, of course, are the source of Bender's "vision."

These articles, compiled under the leadership of Michael Sattler, a former Benedictine subprior, were written under great stress. Felix Mantz, the first martyr of the new movement, had just been executed in his native Zurich. Decrees had been passed prohibiting the activities of the radicals, who later were to be dubbed Anabaptist. The issues they raised now suddenly took on life-and-death significance. Focusing on issues in dispute, the Schleitheim Articles deftly laid bare the fallacies that underlay the medieval synthesis of Christianity as civilization. On the other hand, these formulations clearly presupposed a common body of Christian tradition and understanding that did not need to be spelled out. In no way, then, did the Schleitheim Articles presume to offer a complete theology. In fact, their fragmentary nature was to haunt, in subsequent times, the communities gathered around them.

Schleitheim radically redefined salvation, church, and the fallen created order. Though order and symbolic observances remain, sacrament and hierarchy disappear. The church, now a voluntary assembly, consists of believers, prepared to submit to the disciplines of the gospel. Understood as the dialogical assembly of believers, the church is defined in this document in radically congregational terms. Structures beyond that are simply not contemplated. In a remarkably pregnant yet succinct phrase, the "sword" (magistracy) is viewed as "divinely ordained, outside the perfection of Christ." Overall, the articles are important, not only as an incisive and coherent paradigm in its own right, but also because of their paradigmatic power in the perpetuation of the communities formed around them.<sup>8</sup>

Though the statement appears sharply dichotomous, church against world, ambiguities remain. For example, how does this dualism compare with Luther's famous "two-kingdom" doctrine? Further, as has often been observed, the "sect" is a first-generation phenomenon. The children of parents who have left the host society to form the new community reach maturity under very different circumstances. This fact, of course, the Schleitheim Articles do not address. Nor do they address the problems of wider church polity: How is life beyond the congregation to be structured? In fact, while momentarily reopening the two-track dualism addressed at the beginning of this essay, the articles hardly sense the full consequences of what they are about.

Remarkably enough, until the Amish schism a century and a half later, the communities gathered around the Schleitheim Articles, at least in the Swiss-Upper German region, survived with a merely informal congregational

poity. Visits and informal gatherings of leaders sufficed to nurture the common vision. Withdrawal from the surrounding society and persecution by it, however, abetted the ethnicizing impulses that inhered. Once encysted sub-culturally within the surrounding society, this faith community tended to mutate into an ethnicity.

Those impulses, everywhere incipient among Mennonites, reached full bloom under the unusual conditions offered in 18th/19th-century czarist Russia. Catherine the Great, in the second half of the eighteenth-century, included Mennonites in the extensive colonization by Germans which she undertook to develop her vast lands. Meanwhile, Mennonites living under privileged military exemption in Prussian lands, found their privilege jeopardized for other reasons. As a result many were responsive to the czarina's overtures. The charter given to Mennonites in Russia made them a self-governing colony under the crown, responsible for their own civic as well as religious affairs. Under these circumstances, in less than a century, Mennonites in Russia evolved into a new, albeit miniature, Christendom. Baptism, for those who failed to embrace it by choice, became a compulsory, hence civic, ceremony. Because of the accompanying--and resulting--spiritual laxity, a revival broke out, which, like the sixteenth century before it, led to schism and persecution (1860 ff.).<sup>9</sup> The original Mennonite community had effectively become a state church. Its response to revival in its midst was similar to the responses of the established churches, Catholic and Protestants, to the sixteenth-century radicals. This revival was triggered by the preaching of a German pietist evangelist, who also happened to be an immersionist in his view of baptism. Baptized Mennonites, born again in the revival, were now rebaptized, this time by immersion, an irony, indeed!

#### Modern Free Churches

If the sixteenth-century radicals were the first free church, other free movements were to follow independently in other lands in subsequent centuries. These, such as Baptists and Congregationalists, championed freedom in the minimal sense stipulated above--religious liberty, separation of church and state, and typically, believer's baptism. Most, however, did not embrace the maximal severity included in the Schleithem paradigm. The distinction between the minimalist and maximalist free church paradigms, though important, need not detain us here.

With minor exceptions, free churches in the Western world won toleration only with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and political revolutions. Meanwhile, many establishment conceptions and practices persisted well into the twentieth century even when minimalist freedoms were introduced. In some countries, England and Sweden in the West, for example, and Hungary and the German Democratic Republic in the East, institutional vestiges of establishment remain today. Churches once established have been slow to yield their privileges, or to tolerate, much less to recognize, free churches within their domains.

Many immigrants to the New World came in search of religious liberty.

Nonetheless several of the colonies originally had established churches. When it came to American independence, however, and the new constitution, diversity of traditions and churches in the various colonies precluded the favoring of one denomination over others. Hence the famous First Amendment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The grounding for this solution was chiefly practical and political. There was little theological preparation for this revolutionary step.

Theological justification was to come only gradually, in Protestant thought earlier, in Roman Catholic thought, only since Vatican II. Today religious liberty and separation of church and state are defended, no longer merely on pragmatic grounds, but fundamentally. But do we have a full-blown conception of the "free church" in Christianity in America? In fact, do we possess an adequate ecclesiology at all? I will discuss this question briefly in the final section below. Here, by way of illustration with reference to these questions, I shall note only the denominational problem.

"Free churches," including Mennonites, while repudiating the Roman hierarchy, assiduously construct "denominations," vague replicas of what they ostensibly left behind in the break with Rome. Protestants built denominations after the breakup of Christendom in the same way that kings built ostensibly sovereign realms with the breakup of the "Holy Roman Empire." The medieval Catholic claim enjoyed a degree of plausibility that is lacking in any Protestant case (here I use the term "Protestant" in its loose modern, rather than its technical sixteenth-century, sense). Catholic appeal to historical continuity and universality possesses a certain logic. These claims, coupled with a conception of organic growth that permits the articulation of new doctrine from mere hints in the gospel text, make of the Roman formula a formidable force. Yet the premises themselves, to any but the devout, are implausible.

But what about other "churches," i.e., denominations? To be sure, many can appeal to the renewal movements out of which they arose, and thus, in effect, to the self-authenticating presence of Christ among the two or three gathered in his name. But if that, rather than historic succession, is the basis, whence the mandate for denominational empires? To sense the problem, one need only recall the verdict when the first hint of the denomination arose in New Testament times (1 Cor. 3). *Sola scriptura* was an early, and abiding, Protestant principle; but on those grounds precisely, denominations are ecclesiological nonentities.

In recent years "mainline" churches, denominations all, have declined numerically, while "Bible" and other "independent" churches have burgeoned. No single "cause," of course, can be identified. Some significance attaches nonetheless to the distance between denominational and congregational structures and the primary level of religious experience. If "Jesus saves," why all the other baggage? If we receive salvation *sola fidei*, does it help, or does it rather hinder, when one comes to faith, to be expected at the same time to buy into a particular historical tradition? How does one biblically justify the need to become a Lutheran, a Calvinist, or a Mennonite in order to be a Christian? In

practice, to be sure, "Jesus saves" turns readily into a reductionist slogan. Responsible denominational witness is likely to present a fuller and more robust message than do many freewheeling gospel hucksters. But does that fact of itself constitute a foundation for a denominational ecclesiology? Protestants object to doctrinal accretions by papal fiat, but how does the erection of denominations by non-Catholics differ?

#### What Time Is This?

It was in retrospect that Blanke described the Anabaptist "free church" as a premature proposal for the sixteenth century. Conventional wisdom today regards it as self-evident that church and state should be separate, and that religious commitments are intrinsically free. At least to the people whose views prevailed in sixteenth-century Europe, these notions were anything but self-evident. The change in perception, meanwhile, does not necessarily mean that people today have grown better or wiser—that is not ours to judge, in any case—but that historical circumstances have changed. Now that other bases of social cohesion have emerged, churches can be independent, and religion can be free, without threat to the public order. Thus one can argue that the "free church" is an idea whose time has come.

Before finally assessing that claim, we must take note of several features of the modern free church environment. What specifically has transpired that makes conceptions viewed as seditious in the sixteenth century, axiomatically self-evident today? Events and developments during this period of history, and the records and literature about them, of course, are far too vast for any meaningful summary here. Two broad generalizations only, and their consequences, will be noted. First, social systems (groups, associations, organizations, and the like) have grown too vast, too complex, and too diverse to be forced into homogeneous and centrally controlled configurations. Modern societies are "active,"<sup>10</sup> participatory, and pluralistic. They comprise numerous actors, interests, and values. Only crushing totalitarian force could achieve religious uniformity, and that only in superficial, external terms.

Second, and by the same token, the stabilities sought in the sixteenth century by enforced symbolic consensus are being achieved far more effectively by other means. Specialization, exchange, communication, and hence realized interdependence among vast and diverse population aggregates, are proving to be far more effective as social stabilizers than was compulsory religious uniformity in earlier centuries. In a word, modern societies have outgrown the need for religion as political legitimation and integration. This is but a special case of a general evolution in the course of which science and a variety of empirical disciplines, by virtue of their greater practical effectiveness, supplant appeal to religion and the supernatural.

Yet, contrary to the conclusion that many people mistakenly draw, the religious dimensions of human existence do not disappear. Nor is "human nature" altered fundamentally by these social transformations. Quite to the contrary, the age-old question of the meaning of existence appears in heightened intensity. For the transformations in complexity and scale just

noted entail the attenuation of the primordial solidarities of blood and soil that in the early epochs of our race hemmed in and determined our existence. Modernization means the pluralization, at times almost the atomization, of our communal solidarities. From these emerge, on the one side, the modern "autonomous" individual, on the other, the organization and the vast, role-based systems of contractual exchange. As a result we experience unprecedented freedom and at least potential rootlessness.<sup>11</sup>

#### A Time Whose Idea Has Not Come

I began with a dual question, posed by four millennia of Hebrew and Christian salvation history: How are the sociabilities of "nature" and those of "grace" related among the people of the covenant; and how are the covenantally chosen people related to the rest of humankind? In effect, how is the theologically posited tension between the centripetal ("come ye apart") and the centrifugal ("go ye into all the world") to be worked out historically? The faith community, suprahistorically grounded, enters history, as it were, only to succumb to the forces of nature. This occurred, as we saw, in the rise of the Hebrew monarchy(s), of European Christendom, and of the miniature Mennonite Christendom in Russia.

Is such sedimentation inevitable, or are we missing something in the way we handle our sources, the biblical materials? The reformation upheavals of the sixteenth century remain a fruitful context for reflection on these questions. In this respect, important Radical Reformation research has yet to be undertaken. Retrospectively we can say that the Reformation generally signaled the beginning of the end of Christendom, and was thus analogous to the end of the Hebrew monarchies in Old Testament times, and to the split among Mennonites in Russia in 1860. The break of the Reformers with Rome raised the above question acutely, not merely theologically, but above all existentially and historically. Where, and what, is "the church"? These questions were debated in the sixteenth century intensively, extensively, instructively--and inconclusively.<sup>12</sup>

The notion that the "free church" is an idea whose time has come has a bracing ring to it. History appears to have vindicated, at least in some measure, the courageous act of the little band in an obscure village (Schleitheim) in 1527. Those who consequently gave their lives, rightly join the "cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 11) who spur us onward. Yet as our era engages its inherited battery of ecclesiastical idioms, serious misgivings arise. Instead of an idea whose time has come, we confront a time whose idea has not come. Prevailing churchdom repels many people in our time, and leaves many who still hang on, dissatisfied. If with this history as background we turn attentively and critically to our biblical sources, our anxiety can only mount. We can find there no grounding for much of today's "churchianity." And I refer, not to the absence of proof texts, but rather to the "tenor of Scripture," to the entire narrative.

A claim as sweeping as this must be carefully qualified. It neither implies nor presupposes judgments of church or denominational programs nor of per-

sons who serve in denominational or other ecclesiastical posts. Likewise it is not directed against the faithful in denominationally united congregations. One of the liberating aspects of our faith is the relative indifference of the Spirit to "earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7) in which the waters of salvation are conveyed; "the word of God is not fettered" (2 Tim. 2:9). In any case, the denominational forest is not about to disappear, perhaps least of all the mighty oaks of Rome, Constantinople, or Antioch. From what we can see, church life tomorrow will closely resemble the church life of yesterday. But none of these qualifications relieves us of the responsibility to confront the profound obsolescence and errors of our ecclesiastical ways. The prevailing forms of church life are neither faithful to the gospel, nor do they engage the social configuration of our age. Sinful consequences, to be sure, calling for repentance, may flow in specific instances, and these will need to be dealt with accordingly. But those do not directly concern us here.

No, the problem lies far deeper. The ecclesiological idioms that shape the corporate experience of Christians today still hail largely from establishment times. Church bodies, both Catholic and Protestant, with establishment pasts, largely maintain the traditional establishment-engendered institutional and liturgical modalities. Free church denominations, if and when their sectarian fervor cools, gravitate toward "mainline" liturgical modes. Institutionally neither group, established or free, is responding directly enough to either the new situation or the biblical materials. Past ecclesiological idioms, whether formed to integrate populations and to legitimate power, or in defiance of such adaptations, are little-suited to the psychic needs of modern autonomous but fragmented and rootless individuals. At best, the reification of these earlier idioms distorts our perception of both texts and events.

#### Looking for the Tender Shoots

Given the sweep of this claim, it would be presumptuous to propose the or even a solution in one short essay. Indeed, our problem is profoundly human and spiritual, hence inaccessible to external blueprints. But it would be irresponsible to offer this critique without some clues as to the kinds of responses needed. I shall first note several vital signs among Christians today, and in scholarly inquiry, and then list several areas that call for critical reflection and action.

Despite our ecclesiological helplessness, many tender shoots of new growth are evident. Throughout this century there has been a growing "ecumenical" awareness in the churches, expressed concretely in developments such as the World Council of Churches (founded in 1948), consisting of "communions" other than Roman Catholics, and in initiatives from the Roman Catholics as well. These developments are accompanied by conciliar movements in many lands and at lower levels as well. More important than organizational advances, however, is the fact that many earlier barriers among Christians are softening. Though conflict and schism still inflict the Christian community, Christians are joining hands across boundaries that once seemed insurmountable. Admittedly, the critique offered here questions whether

"oak"

Rootless? individ

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a phrase w/o - oaks

merger is panacea for the denominational malady. Summing illegitimacies will not legitimize. But this critique also entails, as already indicated, a responsiveness to the freedom of the Spirit whenever and wherever, and the Spirit is not bound by or to denominations.

Paralleling these "from above" stirrings is the ferment "from below"—"base communities," "house churches," and the like, in many lands and forms. Generically these have much in common with the sixteenth-century "free church" movements, though they possess their own dynamics. Some of these occur within existing churches, others at greater remove. Beyond this, creative energy continues to burst forth in existing churches and denominational agencies. Thus it must be emphasized: initiatives seeking "end runs" around existing churches, even with their troubled history, must be treated with utmost suspicion. Much of the brokenness in the history of the church stems from separatist attempts to reestablish the "pure church." No, we must stay together, within our broken heritage, but with bags packed for the new trek.

Ernst Troeltsch, in 1911, published a monumental work, eventually translated as *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*.<sup>13</sup> The work was monumental because it shaped or influenced the ways that scholars approached such questions as those raised in the present essay. Spanning the centuries of Christian history, his work identified three social embodiments of the Christian faith, the *Kirche* or church, the *Sekte* or sect, and mysticism (sometimes spiritualism). Against the prevailing view that made the *Kirche* (the folk- or state-church) of Christendom normative, and the other two expressions, especially the sect, mere deformations, Troeltsch argued that all three motifs appear side by side in the New Testament. "It has become clear," he wrote, "how little the Gospel and the Primitive Church shaped the religious community from a uniform point of view."<sup>14</sup>

Troeltsch's project took him through the eighteenth century, following which Christian history entered "a new phase of existence." The "unity of civilization controlled by a State Church" has disintegrated. Modern, scientifically reinforced individualism is fusing with the individualism of the older mystics to become "a refuge for the religious life of the cultured classes."<sup>15</sup> As other writers were to point out later, Christian values had become institutionalized and, in this manner, secularized. These values, now culturally embodied, live on, as it were, without necessary reference to their Christian origin.

This work is cited both because of its fecundity and because of its influence on modern scholarship. It has led the way, for example, in the rehabilitation of the sixteenth-century radicals. One of the promising developments in our own time is the reencounter of the *Kirche* traditions with the *Sekte* legacy of the pre-Constantinian era. This is seen dramatically in relegitimation of the pacifist option (World Council of Churches, 1948; Vatican II), and numerous corresponding actions by various church bodies meanwhile. The importance of these developments becomes evident when we consider that as recently as World War II, pacifists in many churches received no "official" or even pastoral support in the stand they took. Here, however, I am concerned with the ecclesiological rather than the ethical import of these breakthroughs.

Recognizing the disestablishment of the churches generally, George Lindbeck, a Luther scholar, anticipates "a sociological sectarian future in which the exclusivist claims of the orthodox mainstream of the Christian tradition are maintained, even if reinterpreted." Lindbeck follows Rahner<sup>16</sup> in distinguishing the "sociological" from the "ecclesiological" concept of the sectarian. "The mainstream of early Christianity was sectarian," he continues, "in the sense in which we use the term. It consisted of a small, strongly deviant minority, unsupported by cultural convention and prestige, within the larger society." This was true even though it was also 'catholic' in the ecclesiological sense of embracing a wide variety of classes, races, theologies, liturgies and styles of life, and of being unified, rather than splintered into competing groups.<sup>17</sup>

What of reencounters in the opposite direction, free churches with the 'catholic' of the *Kirche* traditions? This will mean something more than the re-assimilation which sets in among many sects as they cool off. And what of Troeltsch's third category, the spiritualist "refuge for the religious life of the cultured classes"? Was Troeltsch right in emphasizing "how little the Gospel and the Primitive Church shaped the religious community itself from a uniform point of view?" Or are these themes unified at a deeper level, ever available when we are able to respond at that level?

As Karl Ludwig Schmidt observes, the New Testament distinguishes the local *ecclesia* (we translate "congregation") from the total *ecclesia* (we translate "church"). He notes also the scholarly uncertainty as to whether the generic reference is to the totality, locally manifested, or to the totality of all those dispersed.<sup>18</sup> There is, of course, no doubt concerning the central significance of the *ecclesia* in the Christian scenario. But it is also of signal importance that numerous other metaphors for the covenant people appear in the New Testament. Indeed 1 Peter, perhaps the most important ecclesiological treatise in the New Testament, does not even use the term *ecclesia*.<sup>19</sup> Even in the Gospel of Matthew, where the term does occur, as a recent study emphasizes, the Christian assembly is household-based. This fact adds to the poignancy and urgency of the hard sayings of Jesus in the same Gospel concerning the challenge of kingdom loyalties to the ties of nature (e.g., Matt. 12:46-50).

When these teachings are properly read against the backdrop of the developmental thrust of Hebrew prophecy, climaxing as it did in the ministry of Jesus, it is evident at once that we move far too quickly and glibly from the biblical materials to our own religious institutions. We must take far more seriously the "iconoclastic" ecclesiology of the primordial New Testament materials—the Gospels, 1 Corinthians, 1 Peter. In the context of Reformation studies, the debate concerning the "invisibility" of the church will have to be re-addressed. In New Testament terms, obviously the Christian person and the assembly of Christians are "visible" and "real." Both, however, exist in and by faith. But is this reality subject to social organization—bureaucracy, legal personality, real estate ownership, professional careers and ambitions, and the like? Can the Presence who appears where two or three are gathered (Matt. 18) be thus organized? What, in fact, is the object to which the term *ecclesia* refers? Have we extended, enriched, or promoted it when we build tabernacles



to trap the transcendent (Matt. 17)?

Modernization, as I noted above, disengages us from the ascriptive solidarities of kinship and place, and both permits and compels us to achieve our own identity and place in the world. This development, though in part a fruit of the gospel, when responsible communally anchored selves are absent, degenerates into acquisitive self-interest. In the gospel the emancipated and autonomous person is a communal being, self-giving rather than self-promoting. The burden of our detached subjectivity may well be the most acute of our personal problems today. Contemporary modes of "church," however, are little-suited to respond to these needs. The machinery runs, whether or not people believe.

Michael Crosby (1988) regards the acquisitive consumerism of our society as "addictive," addictive in the sense that we are powerless to cope with it individually.<sup>20</sup> Hence he concludes that "only by turning over our lives to a greater power (through the religious experience of God's presence in *exousia*) and by creating alternative, house-type communities will we be able to provide the necessary environment for a new order of justice in our lives and that of society."<sup>21</sup> The epistle of 1 Peter<sup>22</sup> makes the same point, by means of the Diaspora metaphor. The faith community, as transforming reality, shines through all the configurations of nature, but can never be incorporated by them. That is the good news.

Conferences?

## NOTES

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4. See D. W. Hamlyn, "The Concept of Social Reality," in *Explaining Behaviour, Consciousness, Human Action and Social Structure*, ed. Paul F. Secord (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982), 198-209.
5. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957).
6. "The German Mass and Order of Service, 1526," in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther 1523-1526*, ed. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 387-426.
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8. For example, Beulah Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Community Paradigm* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987).
9. E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites of Manitoba* (Altona, Man.: D. W. Priesen, 1955).
10. Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society* (New York: Free Press, 1968).
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17. George Lindbeck, "The Sectarian Future of the Church," in *The God Experience*, ed. Joseph P. Whalen (New York: Newman Press, 1971).
18. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "Ekklesia," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, IV (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 501-536.
19. Cf. John H. Elliot, *A Home for the Homeless* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).
20. Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples: Church, Economics and Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).
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# COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY

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October 7, 1992

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FROM: George F. McLean, Secretary *gfm*

SUBJECT:

Supplement to materials for:  
Seminar, "Evangelization and Culture"  
Thursday, Oct. 8, 3:10-5:00 P.M.  
St. Bonaventure Hall, 300, Monroe and Michigan  
Avenues, N.E.

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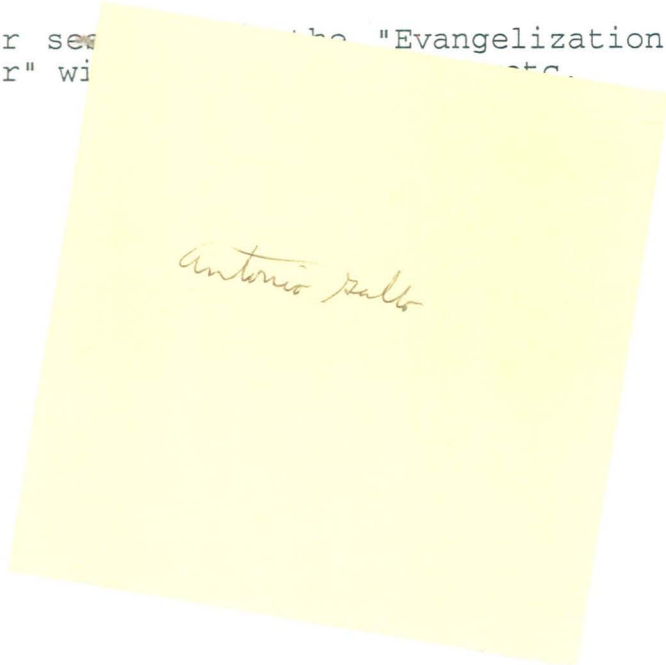
Attached please find the materials of Prof. Paul Peachey, Sociology, for the seminar session on Oct. 8:

"The 'Free Church' Problematic"--and introduction and his paper "The 'Free Church?': A Time Whose Idea Has Not Come

This will be discussed along with the materials of Dr. W. May, previously distributed.

Please note that next week's session (Oct. 15) will be the general program: "Hispanic Philosophy in the Age of Discovery" (Oct. 14, 9.00 a.m to Oct. 17, 12.00 noon) at the Life Cycle Building.

Regular session of the "Evangelization and Culture Seminar" will be held on Oct. 15, 3:10-5:00 P.M.



## EVANGELIZATION AND CULTURE IN THE AMERICAS

### THE "FREE CHURCH" PROBLEMATIC

Paul Peachey  
(Department of Sociology)

I joined the seminar this semester, assuming that due to the press of other duties, I would not contribute a paper. Fr. McLean, however, aware of my "free church" background and involvements, pressed me two weeks ago to introduce a "free church" perspective here, already in this week's session. I yielded, but without knowing how I would proceed.

Only on the afternoon of October 5 was I finally able to start work. By the following morning I concluded it best to forward the enclosed paper rather than to attempt something new. This piece was written about four years ago for a *Festschrift* published earlier this year in honor of C. J. Dyck, a distinguished "free church" historian. This is to provide background for comments that I will offer to the October 8 seminar. I will draw from it selectively and then suggest implications for the evangelism and culture theme.

What does the concept, "free church," signify, and how is it relevant to the focus of this seminar? Without detailing the genesis of the term, it is sufficient to note its European origin and its American "triumph." For while the USA was long regarded as a "Protestant" country, strictly speaking, that term, thus applied, is an anachronism. Protestant referred originally to those communions, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican, separated from the Roman jurisdiction in the course of attempted reforms during the sixteenth century. By extension, as we know, the term came to be applied to non-Roman groups generally.

The original Protestants, however, retained, important features of the Roman tradition, notably, in the Westphalian settlement, the principle of *cujus regio, ejus religio*. In the "new world," with the founding of the republic, the separation of church and state and religious liberty triumphed, and under these conditions, an endless concatenation of independent religious movements--Congregationalists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and the like.

With Christianity thus disestablished, all the older bodies, Catholic and Protestant, transplanted here, underwent redefinition sociologically; i.e., they became "free churches." Moreover, as some historians have underscored, the original "free church" experience, already in England, and then more fully in the US, contributed importantly to the rise of the democratic ethos. Diversity, pluralism, and ecclesiastical autonomy thus far more characterize the American scene than "Protestantism."

The ecumenical impulses flowing from Vatican II have reached out fruitfully, especially to the classical Protestant communions--Lutherans, Calvinist, and Anglican. These "separated brethren," though marred by that fact, nonetheless stand in some degree of recognizable continuity with the Roman tradition. Far more difficult has been an opening to those Christian groups grounded in what they regard, implicitly or explicitly as the self-authenticating power and authority of the Spirit-energized gospel. Yet there is a legacy in Roman teaching and experience--renewal movements absorber in orders in centuries past, liberation, base community, and charismatic movements in our own era--that suggest fruitful possibilities.

My focus here on the "free church" phenomenon here is just that; i.e., phenomenological, rather than apologetic. The vulnerabilities of the "free church" enterprise are readily evident, whether viewed theologically or historically. But the phenomenon is there, and it clearly belongs inside rather than outside the ecumenical ferment. Only in the limited sense of this claim do these comments fall under the rubric of apologetic.