

The Believers' Church

**A "Natural Resource"
Worth Conserving**

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**The Center for Theological Research
March 2006**

White Paper 4
Published by the Center for Theological Research
at www.BaptistTheology.org

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The Believer' Church: A "Natural Resource" Worth Conserving

Conservation as a National Duty

Gathering together in May must have seemed a bit peculiar to America's nobility. Rarely before had the Governors of each state convened at the White House at the request of the President. Never before had they met to discuss the topic at hand. The air in the East Room surely stirred when the President, full of energy and vision, stood and explained through his trademark clenched teeth:

This Conference on the conservation of natural resources is in effect a meeting of the representatives of all the people of the United States called to consider the weightiest problem now before the Nation; and the occasion for the meeting lies in the fact that the natural resources of our country are in danger of exhaustion if we permit old wasteful methods of exploiting them longer to continue.

With these words, President Theodore Roosevelt not only began the address, "Conservation as a National Duty," but also brought national awareness to the fledgling Conservation movement.¹

It was the first time the 132 year-old nation had to face the depletion of its natural resources. Land, forests, and fuels were seemingly in abundance, yet Roosevelt saw the expansion of industry and increasing population as very real threats to a limited supply. Roosevelt was not concerned with any immediate threat to the existence of the growing nation, but rather the present population's reckless indifference toward a vital problem that threatened its future existence.

This culprit called indifference lies at the root of many of the difficulties present throughout the Christian world today. Believers, acting under various constructs—from liberalism to ecumenism to even evangelicalism—have also engaged in "old wasteful methods" with regard to the "natural resources" of the doctrine of the church. What exists today largely within evangelicalism is a climate of ecclesiological relativism. Indifference abounds toward doctrines that many claim are biblically ambiguous. While there is room for debate in any discussion related to the doctrine of the church, the distinctive that is more often overlooked than deliberated is the doctrine of the believers' church. The believers' church is the resource the Bible gives for serving as a vehicle to protect and deliver the Gospel to future generations. To follow Roosevelt's lead, this present situation of indifference toward a biblical natural resource, the believers' church, "calls for common effort, common action."² What is needed is a new movement of a different kind of conservationism. The people of God need to take action to preserve and protect the doctrine of the church.

¹Theodore Roosevelt, "Conservation as a National Duty," in *Conference of Governors* (Washington: G.P.O., 1909), 3-13.

²Ibid., 6.

Is Ecclesiology a Non-Essential?

The present evangelical environment rightfully regards the Gospel as the culmination of biblical essentials while it simultaneously disregards the biblically-designed vehicle for protecting and carrying the Gospel to the next generation—the believers' church. The result of this lack of emphasis on the local church has been impure churches that more often self destruct from internal disputes and doctrinal deterioration than they are compromised from an outside attack. As a result, the testimonies of these churches are lost in their communities and the Gospel is often carried by individuals independent of the local churches rather than by the churches themselves. Scores of believers today are more likely to have trusted Christ through an evangelistic rally or a college parachurch outreach event than through a local church within close proximity to their home. While one would be foolish to criticize the fruitfulness for the Gospel of these other ministries, it appears their success is the result of an exception to the New Testament pattern rather than the biblical example of local church-based Gospel witness.³ While the Gospel still thrives in this climate of ecclesiological relativism, an undefined doctrine of the church leaves no guarantee that the next generation will have the opportunity to say the same.

The current climate developed as the result of evangelicals embracing a modified ecumenism that relegates doctrines such as the believers' church to the realm of "non-essentials." Citing the popular seventeenth-century slogan, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity,"⁴ many find broad agreement for exercising liberty with "non-essential" doctrines such as ecclesiology and eschatology. Certainly, lock-step uniformity over the majority of doctrines traditionally classified under these headings are not essential for salvation or necessary prerequisites for eternal life with Jesus Christ. However, it appears that this relegation of many ecclesiological distinctives to the realm of acceptable ambiguity is not consistent with the New Testament.⁵ By recovering or conserving ecclesiology, and especially the believers' church, not as Gospel essentials, but rather as the vehicle to protect the Gospel essentials, contemporary believers can have a sure foundation through their local church not only to proclaim their faith to their neighbors but also to deliver to their children's generation the faith they received—the faith that was initially delivered to the saints (Jude 3), protected (2 Tim 1:14) and passed down through the churches (Eph 3:10, 21).

³For one example, see 1 Thess 1:6-8.

⁴Often attributed to Augustine, Hans Rollmann rightly posits the genesis of this saying with Peter Meiderlin of Augsburg followed by increased popularization by Richard Baxter. See "In Essentials Unity: The Pre-history of a Restoration Movement Slogan," in *Restoration Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (1997):129-139. Also available at http://www.restorationquarterly.org/Volume_039/rq03903rollmann.htm.

⁵The commands of the Great Commission are intrinsically ecclesiological (Matt 28:16-20). For instance, the book of Acts is centered around the establishment of local churches. Paul's foundation for and recipients of his theological commands are local churches (e.g. Rom 16:4, 16; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:2; Col 4:15-16; and 2 Thess 1:1) as he provides clear instructions for the ordering, structuring, and practice of local church ordinances, leadership, and congregational life. And, John's instructions to send the contents of his vision to the seven local churches in Rev 1.

The Anabaptists: The First Ecclesiological Conservationists

Perhaps the greatest champions of the believers' church since the days prior to the Constantinian Synthesis were the Anabaptists of the Sixteenth Century. In Zurich on January 21, 1525, the first Anabaptists left the prevalent and state-mandated tradition of infant baptism and followed their biblical convictions that true baptism should be administered solely to believers,⁶ and that believer's baptism should function as the entrance into membership of the local church.⁷ William R. Estep recounts the significance of this event:

On this fateful night the concept of a Believers' Church based upon a voluntary confession of faith confirmed by the act of public baptism found concrete realization in history. Thus, from a handful of radicals in Switzerland and South Germany who preferred to call themselves Brethren in Christ, the Free Church movement sprang.⁸

But in Switzerland and South Germany in 1525 the distance between believer's baptism, the believers' church, the Gospel, and death was short. The Anabaptists lived in an ecclesiological environment that did not tolerate those who advocated and advanced biblically-driven ecclesiological absolutes. The price to be paid for defending ecclesiological distinctives in this climate was more often than not the ultimate price. In the truest sense, the Anabaptists were the pioneers of ecclesiological conservatism in an age not of ecclesiological indifference but of ecclesiological intolerance.

Leonard Verduin describes the developments among the Anabaptists as the "second front" of concern for Magisterial Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin. On the one hand, the Magisterial Reformers' first front of concern was clearly the actions and reactions of the Roman Catholics to their call for Church reformation. The Magisterial Reformers desired to *reform* the Catholic Church in all areas of corruption by rightly establishing the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ by faith alone as the center of faith and practice. On the other hand, the Magisterial Reformers were concerned with the Anabaptists' desire to move beyond Church reform to complete *restoration* of the church to its New Testament origins.⁹

By and large, the Magisterial Reformers were not looking to make many ecclesiological changes. They saw the economic and political ramifications of separating

⁶The early Anabaptists in Zurich were trained by Zwingli in the humanist tradition of returning to the original sources for doctrinal development. Thus, careful study of the Bible in its original languages led several of the Anabaptists to press Zwingli for New Testament fidelity when it came to ecclesiology.

⁷The Anabaptist leader, Pilgram Marpeck, articulated in light of the order given in the Great Commission that one was made a disciple (i.e. is conversion as the result of the placing of one's faith in teaching received) before receiving baptism. Combined with the statement of Jesus inaugurating the church upon the confession of Peter in Matt 16, believer's baptism served as the public confession of faith for the believer's entrance into the local church. See Pilgram Marpeck, "The Admonition of 1542," in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978), 227.

⁸William R. Estep, "A Believing People: Historical Background," in *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Addresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference*. Ed. James Leo Garrett, Jr. (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1969), 45.

⁹Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Sarasota: The Christian Hymnary Publishers, reprint 1997).

the church from the state and looked to the melding of these two under Constantine as a fit exercise for Christian civil and religious expression. Therefore, the Magisterial Reformers retained two things as a part of their ecclesiology. First, membership in the Church (as well as recognition of citizenship with the State) was contingent upon one's baptism as an infant. Second, just as the State carried the sword for the purpose of maintaining and establishing justice, so too did the Church support the sword for the purpose of maintaining and establishing truth. Capital punishment was the sentence for acts or beliefs that many evangelicals today freely endorse. The Anabaptists attempted to conserve the doctrine of the believers' church in a climate far more hostile, yet they did so not because they saw it as a Gospel essential, but because they realized that the believers' church functioned as the vehicle to protect Gospel essentials.

The Believers' Church: The Vehicle for Essentials

While Western theologians today are quick to place doctrines such as ecclesiology, eschatology, and perhaps even variances of anthropology on the lowest rungs of what is essential for twenty-first century New Testament Christianity, it is a mistake to view the cultural climates of past centuries, such as the Anabaptists', as operating under the same doctrinal classifications. To be sure, in modern America where differences over the doctrine of the church do not merit the sentence of capital punishment, such issues are not as essential as to how one answers the contemporary evangelical question, "If you died tonight, how certain would you be that you would be in Heaven?" However, because the Anabaptists' cultural milieu was far more complex and costly, ecclesiological distinctives became the battleground for conserving the Gospel essentials.

The Anabaptists saw the marriage of Church and State under Constantine as both harmful and unbiblical. One can articulate a pure Gospel as the Magisterial Reformers did with great effect, but to do so within the confines of a corrupt and false church only convolutes the message one hopes to proclaim. In addition, by allowing and mandating individuals into the membership of the church that are not regenerate, the Magisterial Reformers left themselves open to further corruption.

For the Anabaptists, the only way to accomplish biblical purity in the Church was to separate completely from the existing institutions and establish a believers' church. The Anabaptist churches no longer supported the use of the sword and refused to call for the death penalty even for those with divergent doctrinal views. Entrance into these new churches was by profession of faith (something infants could not do) in the form of believer's baptism. Furthermore, the purity of these churches was protected by the regular practice of the ban, or church discipline, on those members who continued in unrepentant sin and thus showed themselves not to have believed what they said to have professed.

Therefore, one can see how the organization of a believers' church was not only a radical departure from the societal status quo but also the symbol of one's commitment to a greater ideal of church and Gospel purity rooted not in the sacral tradition but rather in the text of the Bible. The Anabaptists were not fanatics so preoccupied with their specific preferences that they no longer saw the forest for the tree in front of them. They did not represent the type of Christian who is so enamored with his peculiar theological eccentricities that he alienates himself and thereby ruins his Gospel witness. Furthermore, Anabaptists were not experimenters in the avant-garde simply going against the grain to

stir up trouble or draw attention to themselves. Rather, these believers were standing under the conviction of what they perceived to be the biblical means for protecting Gospel essentials: the preservation and right articulation of the Gospel can only be accomplished through the preservation and right articulation of the church.

A church comprised of an unregenerate membership several generations removed will no longer care about proclaiming such essentials the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the way to salvation. One only has to look at the results of the Half-way Covenant among New England Puritans in the seventeenth century or mainline Protestantism's increasing indifference to the Gospel in the twentieth century to see the effects of the failure to maintain a pure church. The Gospel ministry of John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and George Whitefield strengthened and established various denominations, but the churches within these groups failed to use the vehicle of the believers' church consistently to deliver a pure Gospel message to the future generations of saints.

Ecclesiological Conservation as a Christian Duty

At the 1909 Governors' Conference, President Roosevelt called the nation to awake from its reckless indifference toward the wasteful use of America's natural resources. The nation responded and a system of National Parks, new legislation, and general awareness of the importance of conservation was born. Likewise, viewing the present climate of ambiguity toward the doctrine of the church through the spectacles of Anabaptist history, contemporary believers can see the importance of conserving certain distinctives such as the believers' church. For the sake of preserving what is essential for salvation for the next generation, a new call is needed to awaken evangelicals from a state of indifference toward ecclesiology and the believers' church. Just like Roosevelt's address that called on the Governors and the nation to see "Conservation as a National Duty," a new address is needed today to call on believers to see "Ecclesiological Conservation as a Christian Duty."

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