

Which future Church(form)?

*A plea for a 'Believers Church' ecclesiology*¹

- by Teun van der Leer MA -

Ecclesiology is a recent and remarkable element of systematic theology. The term as such dates from the latter part of the seventeenth century and has consistently been used as a specialist term only since 1945². For a long time the Church was an empiric 'given'. There was no reflection about this, yet in the Church faith was received, kept and passed on.

We do come across the Church in early Christian baptismal and confessions, as in Hippolytus' Apostolic Tradition in 215³, in the Apostels' Confession of Faith⁴ and in the confessions of faith of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381)⁵. The church is constantly mentioned in the third question on baptism and in the third part of the confirmation. So always in relation with the Holy Spirit. This last fact seems important to me, as ecclesiology is special in that it conveys an opinion about a reality concerning ourselves, with all its consequent shortcomings. Regarding God, Christ and the Holy Spirit we are able to express ourselves in the most beautiful and most elevated style language. But if we do so in relation to the Church it inevitably calls up embarrassment. The church has not yet developed into what it should be. It is only possible to speak about it with eschatological reservation. At the same time the Church is the most tangible part of professing faith. Whereas we know the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit from 'hearsay', the Church is visible and tangible; *we ourselves are the Church*. This makes thinking about the Church exciting and adventurous.

Believers Church Tradition

In this article I would like to break a lance for a 'Believers Church' ecclesiology. Firstly I will describe its background and characteristics. Secondly I will try to further define it theologically and I will apply it to baptism and the ministry by way of asking questions. Finally I will indicate in which direction further thinking on the subject could take place.

A 'Believers Church' ecclesiology is one that focuses not primarily on ministry and the sacrament or on Word and sacrament but on the congregation as a community of believers as the supreme authority. I label this a 'bottom up' ecclesiology. Without believers no congregation: 'We are the Church'.⁶

¹ I chose to write *Believers Church* and not *Believers' Church* (with '). The last one suggests – wrongly – that the church is owned by the believers. A *Believers Church* too is and remains a church of Christ.

² Michael Beintker, art. *Ekklesiologie*, RGG⁴ Bd. 2 col. 1183. Vgl. Joraszlov Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition 5: Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 282: 'As the twentieth century began, each of the major churches of a divided Christendom was obliged, for reasons of its own, to address anew the doctrine of the church'. According to Pelikan it is not earlier than in the twentieth century that ecclesiology becomes mature (p. 289).

³ The third baptismal question here sounds: *Credis in Spiritu sancto et sanctam ecclesiam?*

⁴ Here in one breath with 'the communion of the saints'.

⁵ *Ecclesia una, sancta, catholica, et apostolica*. Cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1960, ³1976), p. 296-331, and Nicholas Lossky (ed.), *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC-Publications, 1991), p. 727-728.

⁶ The title of a paragraph in Miroslav Volf's study on the church: *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 135vv. In this book he brings the theology of the First Baptist

This so-called third 'type', called 'sect' by Troeltsch⁷, 'pentecostal' by Newbigin⁸, and 'baptist' (with a small 'b') by McClendon⁹, has been lumped together in the term *Believers Church* since the nineteen fifties. The term as such dates back to *Der protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* by Max Weber who in 1904 introduced this (English) term with the words 'eine Gemeinschaft der persönlich Gläubigen und Wiedergeborenen rund nur dieser'.¹⁰ Only in 1955 the *General Conference Mennonite Church* picked up the term and devoted a congress to it in Chicago.¹¹ But the concept was firmly put into the limelight since in 1967 a series of (till now) sixteen CCBCs: *Conferences on the Concept of the Believers Church* started, the last one at *Canadian Mennonite University* in Winnipeg, sponsored by the *Canadian Mennonite University Institute for Theology and the Church*, June 11-14, 2008.¹² It were the Dutch J. Oosterbaan and J. Reiling (members of the Mennonite and the Baptist Seminary respectively) who concluded in the ecumenical debate the voice of 'the third type' was not heard loud enough. According to them the other churches were not to be blamed for it, but the 'Baptistal' churches themselves. In the debates they were too often absent. This led, after contacts in the United States with especially Mennonites, Baptists and Disciples¹³, towards the first CCBC in Louisville (VS) in 1967.¹⁴

It is not difficult to understand that an Anabaptist and a Baptist were the first to promote these contacts: they are members of typical 'believers churches'. Practically all studies on the *Believers Church* consider the rise of the Anabaptist congregations in Switzerland and Germany in the former part of the 16th century as starting point or as the most important milestone. As to the study of the so-called radical reformation an enormous development took place in the latter part of the 20th century.¹⁵ In the wake of it the debate on the *Believers Church* was a logical effect.¹⁶

John Smyth, in dialogue with the Roman-Catholic Ratzinger and the Eastern-Orthodox Zizioulas. See also René Erwich, 'Ecclesiologie van de participatie: de ecclesiologie van Miroslav Volf', *Soteria* 22.4 (2005) pp. 8-16.

⁷ In 1912 he wrote his *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* with the famous sociological threefold church-sect-mysticism, in which he defines sect with these words: 'Verhältnismässig kleine Gruppen, erstreben eine persönlich-innerliche Durchbildung und eine persönlich-unmittelbare Verknüpfung der Glieder ihres Kreises, verhalten sich gegen Welt, Staat, Gesellschaft indifferent, duldend oder feindlich'. Citaat uit 'Gesammelte Schriften', Band 1 (Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1922, ³1977), p. 362. Robert Friedman says about this: 'It was a great step forward when Ernst Troeltsch first so clearly distinguished church and sect – although primarily from a sociological point of view. Church is the institution of salvation for all baptized members; sect is the brotherhood of the regenerate, the congregation of saints, a gathered church of true Christians either for the celebration of the Lord's Supper alone or for a collective life according to the Sermon on the Mount', in: *Hutterite Studies* (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Press, 1961), p. 6.

⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1953).

⁹ James Wm. McClendon Jr., *Systematic Theology: Ethics* (1986, ²2002), *Doctrine* (1994) and *Witness* (2000) (Nashville: Abington Press). See especially the first chapter of *Ethics*. For a summary of his ecclesiology, see René Erwich, *De ecclesiologie van James McClendon jr. Baptisten ecclesiologie met een kleine 'b'*, in: *Soteria* 22.4, dec. 2005, p. 55-64.

¹⁰ The whole book you can find on: <http://141.89.99.185:8080/uni/professuren/e06/a/a/ha/PE.pdf> (Copyright 1999 Institut für Pädagogik der Universität Potsdam / flitner@rz.uni-potsdam.de / Prof. Dr. E. Flitner). Quotation from p. 152 (080212).

¹¹ *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers' Church* (Newton: The Mennonite Press, 1955).

¹² An overview in Appendix A in Barry L. Callen, *Radical Christianity. The Believers Church Tradition in Christianity's History and Future* (Nappanee: Evangel Publishing House 1999), p. 189-192 and on http://www.cmu.ca/church-community/02_BelieversChurchConfPrev.html (080714).

¹³ Members of the *Disciples of Christ Church*. Look at www.disciples.org (080714).

¹⁴ James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers' Church: Adresses from the 1967 Louisville Conference* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1969).

¹⁵ See especially Frank H. Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1957), Idem, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, second rev. ed. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), M.R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985),

According to me this debate is still in its infancy and in our time of discussion on 'Emerging Churches', 'Liquid Church' and 'Mission Shaped Church', it is something of topical interest more than ever before. Yoder remarks: 'The "concept of the Believers' Church", then, is not a mere midpoint on a scale between establishment and chaos, not a *via media* between too much tradition and too little. It is a type *sui generis*, which (...) keeps arising again and again, in every country, taking on similar shapes, *mutatis mutandis*'.¹⁷ Might this 'third type' be looked upon as the future church (form)?¹⁸

Characteristics of the Believers Church.

What are the characteristics of this type of church? It is self-evident that nowhere a definitive definition was recorded, but a closer study of the subject shows that a number of essential characteristics turn up regularly. I will mention six of them:

1. It concerns a congregation of reborn believers.

In this context 'Regenerated membership' is the expression which is used consistently. Believers form the congregation and this only comprises practising believers. It concerns people who 'mit Ernst Christen sein wollen und das Evangelium mit Hand und Mund bekennen.'¹⁹ Membership of the congregation/church is not simply a derivative of the group to which you belong on the basis of birth or origin, but the result of a deliberate choice.

2. It concerns a congregation that forms a brotherhood.

It is quite a misconception to consider the *Believers Church* as the result of the individualisation of faith and spirituality in the (post) modern time. The choice for Christ is a choice for the brother and brotherhood. It implies the care and love for and reconciliation with 'the brother'. The famous and frequently quoted saying 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them' is in essence the theme of the 'unanimous' prayer for mutual reconciliation. *Christ is where people become reconciled with each other.*

According to Matthew 5:23-24 reconciliation even precedes the sacrifice on the altar! He who loves God loves his brother also (1 John 4:21). 'You are my brother' is closely intertwined with 'I am your keeper.'

3. It concerns a congregation of disciples.

For *believers churches* faith is not an aim as such, but a means. The keyword is not faith, but imitation. In his famous *Anabaptist Vision* Bender calls the congregation 'a covenant of

G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) and John H. Yoder, *Täuferium und Reformation im Gespräch* (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1968).

¹⁶ Other 'milestones' that are mentioned in this regard are the Donatists, the Montanists, the Kathars, the Waldensians, the Lollards, the Moravian Brethren and the Hussites. See Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church. The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publ., 1968).

¹⁷ John H. Yoder, 'Believers' Church Conferences and Hubmaier' in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, jan. 1991, p. 12.

¹⁸ What for Barth in 1947 was still a question: 'Who knows of not perhaps, when once the territorial churches of the old world have fallen apart, the Congregational church form will also have a future among us?' (quoted in Littell, *The Anabaptist Concept of the Church* in Hershberger, *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, p. 130), for Yoder it is in 1978 already a fact, according to his opening statement during his lecture at the CBCC in Winnipeg: 'First, let me affirm: The Church of Tomorrow cannot but be a Believers' Church'. (Yoder, 'The Believers' Church: Global Perspectives' in J.K. Zeman and W. Klaassen, *The Believers' Church in Canada: Addresses and Papers from the Study Conference in Winnipeg, May 15-18, 1978*, Mennonite Publ. Service Ontario 1979, p. 3)

¹⁹ Martin Luther in his 'Vorrede zu: Deutsche Messe und Ordnung Gottesdiensts 1526', quoted from Karin Bornkamm und Gerhard Ebeling, *Martin Luther Ausgewählte Schriften Funfter Band* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1983), p. 77.

discipleship', as 'the true test of the Christian (...) is discipleship'.²⁰ Reciprocal correction and discipline is closely connected to it: 'Being a disciple is being under discipline.'²¹ Disciples make each other aware of this. This is not a matter of legalism or morals (though in history it frequently resulted in it) but of love and the acceptance of responsibility for one another. As the conclusion of James's radical letter states, within the congregation it is about stimulating the other to convert and to return (twice *epistrefo!*). His conclusion is both abrupt and promising: this implies saving from death. (James 5:19-20)

4. *It concerns a congregation of people who are equal and gifted.*

Practically all *believers churches* have a congregational structure, i.e. no official hierarchy, but an egalitarian community. Everyone is gifted²² and has their share in the service and testimony of Christ. Decisions are taken by common prayer and consultation inspired by the Holy Spirit.

5. *It concerns a community in accordance with the new-testimonial model.*

Presumably the appeal to the New Testament as fundamental norm is the essence of the *Believers Church*. 'Biblicism' and 'primitivism' are honorary nicknames rather than labels to be ashamed of. When calling 'Biblicism' as essential characteristic, McClendon frankly combines them and states: 'Understood not as one or another theory of inspiration or inerrancy, but as humble acceptance of the authority of Scripture for both faith and practice. *Related terms are "restitution" and "restoration"* (my italics).²³ The latter terms are closely connected with the view that the Church has 'fallen' and that renewal or reformation is insufficient; restoration is necessary.²⁴

6. *It concerns a missionary congregation.*

Even more than Matth. 18 ('Where two or three are gathered in my name') Matth. 28 (The Great Commission) can be retraced in the writings of the Anabaptists. They held the view that the gospel had to be preached in combination with an appeal to faith.²⁵ This is contrary to the reformers who still presupposed a baptized and therefore Christian people. The mission movement which they formed - sometimes unwillingly because of the persecutions²⁶ - brought thousands to Christ. A baptized person was a witness, just as in Acts often in the literal sense of the word: *martus*.²⁷ Baptism by water and baptism by blood sometimes formed a perfect match. Jorg van Passau was baptized by Hut *while* reading aloud the Great Commission.²⁸ Those who were baptized pledged that 'they went freely under the cross (...) and for the Gospel's sake were made pilgrims and martyrs throughout the known world.'²⁹

²⁰ Harold S. Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision' in *Church History* XIII (march 1944), p. 13. In 'The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship' in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* XXIV No. 1, jan. 1950, he calls discipleship 'the most characteristic, most central, most essential and regulative concept in Anabaptist thought, which largely determines all else' (p. 27). In this article Bender also quotes the famous word of Hans Denk: 'Niemand vermag Christum wahrlich zu erkennen, es sei denn, dass er ihm nachfolge im Leben' (p. 32). Cf. 'Denk, Hans (ca. 1500-1527)' in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* op www.gameo.org.

²¹ Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, p. 32.

²² In all three lists of charismata from Paul the 'to all' is emphasized and always the giving of the Gifts is *directly* connected with the service of all. Look resp. to Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Kor. 12:4-11; 27-31; Ef. 4:11-16.

²³ James McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 27.

²⁴ More about this in Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 46-108.

²⁵ Here also more in Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 109-137.

²⁶ Concerning the 'unwillingly' compare Acts 8:1-4.

²⁷ The synod of Augsburg from 1527, during which the anabaptists divided the land 'on a grand map of evangelical enterprise', was later called the martyrssynod, because the majority of the participants died within a few years as martyrs as a consequence of their missionary activities. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 122; Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, p. 72.

²⁸ Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 197, n.18.

²⁹ Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, p. 112.

Pneuma-ecclesiology

The presenting question is whether these characteristics claim fresh attention in a time of Church after Christendom'.³⁰ Though there is no absolute contrast between 'given church' (the church already 'exists' before you are there) and 'gathered church' (The church 'comes into being' at the moment that 'two or three' are gathered in the name of Jesus), it is obvious that the latter is much more in keeping with the New Testament and the (post)modern time. But more importantly, it does much more justice to the fact that it is the Holy Spirit that forms and leads the congregation.

At the start of this article I stated that ecclesiology concerns ourselves and that for this reason it is a good thing that we always confess our faith in the church and our faith in the Holy Spirit together. This Spirit is 'the' promise (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), *the conditio sine qua non* before a witnessing congregation can be recognised. Woe to those who think they can talk about the church without wholly basing it on the work of the Holy Spirit.³¹ So if we want to know how the congregation operates, we ought to know how the Holy Spirit 'operates'. We receive the Spirit as a gift, a present, but we never own him. He is neither available nor manageable and he cannot be manipulated, but we *receive* him. The Spirit is not intended just for some, but for all of us. *All* were filled with the Holy Spirit and the Spirit is visibly active in everybody (1 Cor. 12:7). The Spirit is a first instalment, *arrabon*, a foretaste of what is in store for us.³²

In the sense of ecclesiology this means that the congregation cannot and must never focus on one particular form or shape. It remains aware of its temporary character and its constant dependence on what the Holy Spirit 'says to the churches' here and now. What Zeman says about the *believers churches* in fact applies to every congregation: 'A believers church is only one generation away from extinction. Unless God the Spirit continues His gracious ministry of regeneration, such a church is doomed to death.'³³ Donovan writes that it is not 'revival or reform of the church' which is at stake, but 'the *refounding* of the Catholic church for our age'. He quotes a young student, who says: 'In working with young people in America, do not try to call them back to where you were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. *You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.*'³⁴ Combining Zeman with Donovan it could be claimed that the Holy Spirit creates a new community in every generation. Following Keith Jones I prefer the label of 'gathering' over that of a 'gathered church': 'If we talk about the "gathered" community of believers, there is a sense of finality, completeness about it. (...) So, I have reflected on substituting "gathering" as an active model, suggesting it is not yet complete; others might join; it is in the process of being formed.'³⁵ This process requires a continuous orientation and dependence on the Holy Spirit. We might use the expression pneuma-ecclesiology here; a kind of ecclesiology which is consistently built up from pneumatology. In making this statement I am trying to point out that in each generation or

³⁰ The title of a book from Stuart Murray, chairman of the 'UK Anabaptist Network': *Church After Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). See also his *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004). By the way, Littell already in 1967 talks about a 'post-Constantinian era', a 'post-Christian age' and a 'post-Christendom thought and style'. See James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, p. 18 en 24.

³¹ Karl Barth, *Hoofdsom der Heilige Leer: Voordrachten over de Apostolische Geloofsbelijdenis gehouden te Bonn in de zomer van 1946* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1949), p. 216.

³² Three times in the NT the Spirit is called *arrabon*: 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14.

³³ Dr. J.K. Zeman in: James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, p. 60.

³⁴ Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered. Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2003 [1978]), p. xiii.

³⁵ Keith Jones, 'Rethinking Baptist Ecclesiology' in: *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 1.1 September 2000, p. 8.

even in each period of new developments and challenges it meets, the congregation gathers courage to start anew. To focus once again on the presence of the Living Lord amidst the congregation. In this respect I refer to what James Dunn writes about the Johannine community:

The Johannine community had no sense of being historically distant from Jesus of Nazareth, but of having to live out of the experience of earlier generations as mediated now only through sacrament or office. On the contrary, each generation is as close to Jesus as the first, and religious experience retains its vitality and immediacy because the Spirit is the presence of Jesus.³⁶

I presume that it is exactly the 'Believers Church Tradition' that offers good possibilities here, on its own or combined with and / or as a supplement to a more catholic or more reformed ecclesiology. Nigel Wright claims that the health and the future of the church is to be found in *interaction* and *interpenetration* (my italics) of what he calls 'catholic' and 'baptist.' The former is described as 'the sense of historic connectedness with the apostolic tradition following all the way back to the early church and centred in the common confession of the creeds and in the role of bishops as agents of fellowship and relationship'. The latter finds 'the essence of church not in historic connectedness but in the living presence of Christ by the Spirit among those who believe'.³⁷

As an 'exercise' I will now focus on two 'ecclesiological hurdles' or – to put it more positively - challenges. What (new) questions and chances arise from approaching baptism and profession from a 'Believers Church' perspective? For the purpose of a fruitful debate I will formulate as sharply as possible.

Baptism

When the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4 speaks of one baptism, he refers to the unity of baptism in water and baptism by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who acts in baptism and creates a new reality. Not only is this new reality related to an inner renewal of the individual, but also to creating a new fellowship in which all barriers have been broken down (Gal. 3:26-29; Eph. 2:13-18). Both are being questioned, however, when baptism takes place without an answer of faith induced by the Holy Spirit and made by the person receiving baptism. What then is the relation between 'old' and 'new' in such a situation? If baptism is more connected to birth than to rebirth, will it not become the opposite of its aim, viz. the confirmation of the group identity instead of going beyond it?³⁸ Where can we find the breach and the 'metanoia' to a new walk of life? Baptism is closely intertwined with discipleship (Matth. 28:19) and discipleship is a conscious choice to 'deny oneself, take up your cross and follow Jesus' (Matth. 16:24). Baptism connects us with heart, body (!) and soul to 'Jesus' way'; it forms a total and encompassing connection with him. Is this possible without a conscious individual commitment?

Let nobody suppose that these questions are only intended for 'infant baptizers'. The demand for a new ethic and a new congregation is as much an issue for those who teach and administer a baptism based on faith. More often than not this is restricted to a 'private chat'

³⁶ James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1977), p. 198.

³⁷ Nigel Wright, *Free Church, Free State. The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), p. xxv from the 'Introduction'.

³⁸ See on this the beautiful chapter 'Baptism and the new humanity' in John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics. Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World* (Scottsdale: Herald Press 1992, 2001), p. 28-46.

between the baptized individual and the Lord who saves, and baptism mainly stands for an 'assurance' for this salvation. 'Responsive' but not 'responsible'.³⁹ Moreover, persons receiving baptism do not only bear responsibility for their own walk of faith but also for that of others. According to Burkholder an old Anabaptist baptismal question says: 'Are you prepared to give advice and receive advice?'. He then remarks:

In this connection it may be pointed out that adult baptism is upheld not only because of a Believers' Church view of sin and salvation, but because prophetic discernment presupposes maturity. The question to put the candidate for baptism in not only, 'Have you received forgiveness?' but, 'Will you participate in the attempt to understand what is the meaning of the age?'.⁴⁰

At a later stage Burkholder poses the exiting but fair question if for most people the Believers Church demands a level of devotion and sacrifice which in their opinion surpasses the advantages of belonging to a congregation. My counter question is if this aspect isn't exactly the essence of the Gospel, which can only be received in the way of sacrifice and the surrender of oneself.⁴¹ Here we get at the core of the dispute between the Anabaptists and the Reformers of the 16th century. Whereas the former only accepted this sacrifice and surrender of oneself by *all* who formed a new congregation along this line ('bottom up') the latter preferred a national church ('top down') to 'zum Glauben zu rufen'⁴² by means of instruction, preaching and sacrament. Apart from the issue which of the two parties made the best choice –in that day and context- it is certainly legitimate to pose the question if our present time and context do not explicitly require a way 'from bottom up'.⁴³

The office

The first thing we should ask ourselves with regard to the office is if we must really use this word any longer. Apart from the fact that as such it is nowhere used in the New Testament and that the word *service* seems to be much more fitting, the question is if a 'start with the Holy Spirit' does not imply a totally different challenge, viz. that of a charismatic congregation in which the service of *all* members is starting point (again: 'bottom up'; Eph. 4:16). At Pentecost in Acts 2 Moses' lament in Num. 11:29 is unmistakably fulfilled: 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them.' In 1 Cor. 14:31 Paul openly refers to this with regard to the community: 'For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted.' The Corinthian congregation indeed does not lack a single talent of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 1:7). These gifts were granted to 'all', since 'to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good'. In spite of the unbalanced handling of gifts and the consequent disorder which arose as a result of this Paul does not refer to the office at anywhere in the Corinthian Letters. I have always been fascinated by this fact. At that place and at that time it was really useful to institute offices and a form of church order. However, there is no mention of these at all. Paul corrects, he lays down rules, and sees everything from a perspective of love, but at the same time he promotes

³⁹ McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 268vv.

⁴⁰ J.L. Burkholder in: 'A People in Community: Contemporary Relevance', in: James Leo Garrett Jr. (ed.), *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, p. 176.

⁴¹ Think of Jesus' word in John 12:24, 'I tell you for certain that a grain of wheat that falls on the ground will never be more than one grain unless it dies. But if it dies, it will produce lots of wheat'.

⁴² Luther, *Deutsche Messe*, p. 78.

⁴³ (Reformed!) Stefan Paas writes in: 'Ecclesiology in context. Kerkplanting in de stad' in *Soteria* 24.4, dec. 2007: 'I think that here (in the former sentence he speaks about the 'free churches', the puritans and the Mennonites) there is a development of ecclesiological notions *we can gain from now*. These churches have some important marks *which can be highly relevant* in a modern networksociety' (my italics).

the use of gifts without any restraint: 'Make love your aim, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that ye may prophesy. (...) Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy' (1Cor. 14:1,5). Paul introduces order and structure, *but no office*. It is remarkable that Stefan Paas discusses the benefit of the office in relation to Corinth, obviously overlooking the fact that this is exactly the only element which is not mentioned by Paul.⁴⁴ It is an advantage that Paas subsequently labels the gifts as 'an essential condition' for the office, but at that time the 'damage' has already been done: the latter is being read from a presupposed 'official' perspective. I am quite aware of the fact that there are also 'charismatic glasses', which are not interested in the development of the office in parts of the New Testament (Acts, Pastoral Epistles). In this respect the New Testament is undoubtedly not univocal.⁴⁵ It is also impossible to unambiguously answer the question whether we should consider this development within the New Testament as degeneration or as progress. This question is not of great interest anyway. The issue is whether we are bound to a particular (official) structure, or whether we have or should claim space to start 'afresh'. I do not only have in mind the *priesthood* of all believers, but also the *prophethood* of all believers. So not something or somebody as 'over against' the congregation – even if they spring from the congregation itself - but the Holy Spirit as the critical entity which corrects us *through brothers and sisters* who *together* hear the Word of God and try to understand it.

The power of the Holy Spirit recognizable present

Following Newbigin, McClendon claims that the question 'where is the Church?' is equal to the question 'Where is the Holy Spirit recognizable present with power?'⁴⁶ For the Holy Spirit it is not impossible to work outside the church. But the Spirit does not particularly prefer this, so to speak. The church is not a mere 'coincidence' in the Kingdom of God. It belongs to God's age-old plan.' (Eph. 3:11). In the New Testament it is never about the salvation of (individual) sinners as such, but always about the idea of being added to a new community. Whoever belongs to Christ belongs to the church. And only through and via the church I meet Christ in his fullness ('together with all saints', Eph. 3:18). In a New Testament perspective faith without a church falls short of quality and the believer does not do themselves a favour. In his interpretation of Matt. 18:20, Volf shows that the promise concerning Christ's presence is not given to the individual believer but to the gathering congregation, and only through the congregation also to the individual person.⁴⁷ For this reason, if the Holy Spirit is to be active in a recognizable way anywhere, then it should be there, in the congregation of believers. Whenever there is such a lack of connection between the present-day community and the New Testament that the one cannot be compared anymore with the other, we have a problem. Somehow we must be able to say 'This Holy Ghost he has poured out *this which you see and hear*.' (Acts 2:33). Based on this example McClendon positions the church between the 'past' of the Bible and the 'future' of the eschaton. By doing so he shows her a double mirror: can what we 'see and hear' be connected with the past and the future? The strength of this question is that it offers an opening to identification *and* critical reflection alike. We can and may connect ourselves with the story of the Holy Scriptures as well as be corrected by it.

⁴⁴ Stefan Paas, "'Zo spreekt de Heer". (Kerkelijk) gezag in een keuzemaatschappij', in: *Wapenveld* 58.1, februari 2008, p. 26-34.

⁴⁵ On this point I find very convincing Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, especially the chapters VI 'Concepts of Ministry' and IX 'Spirit and Experience'. See also J. Nauta, 'Flexibele gemeentevormen in de eerste eeuw' in: *De kerk verbouwen: Dingemans' ecclesiologie kritisch bekeken* (Leidse Lezingen; Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1989), p. 11-28 and: A.W. Zwiep, 'Kerk tussen ideaal en werkelijkheid' in: *Soteria* 22.4, dec. 2005, p. 30-44.

⁴⁶ McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 342. Compare Newbigin, *The Household of God*, p. 87vv.

⁴⁷ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p. 162: 'According to this text, Christ's presence is promised not to the believing individual directly, but rather to the entire congregation, and only through the latter to the individual. This is why no one can come to faith alone and no one can live in faith alone'.

‘Where is the Holy Spirit recognizable present with power?’ Is he to be found in our offices, in the administration of the sacraments, in preaching God’s Word? That may be true. No doubt the Holy Spirit may choose to work ‘top down’. I wonder, however, whether considering the Holy Spirit’s work ‘bottom up’ provides equal - if not better - opportunities to be Church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Compare the quotations in footnote 18. Volf writes in his introduction to *After our Likeness*: ‘The understanding of the church seems to be moving away from the traditional hierarchical model to the (no longer quite so new) participative models of church configuration. (...) Today’s global developments seem to imply that Protestant Christendom of the future will exhibit largely a Free Christian form. (...) It seems to me that we are standing in the middle of a clear and irreversible “process of congregationalization” of all Christianity’ (p. 12, 13). Williams wrote already in 1958 in the same spirit: ‘Free-churchmen and state-churchmen, both in lands where a single confession has been established and in lands where the church has been disestablished, are increasingly interested in the experience and principles of the Radical Reformers who were martyrs to a way and organization of Christian life, which, in mitigated circumstances, is or will be the way for almost all Christian bodies almost everywhere in the world today or tomorrow’. Georg H. Williams, ‘Studies in the Radical Reformation (1517-1618)’, *Church History*, XXVII, 1958, p. 49, quoted in Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church*, p. 247.