

VU University Amsterdam Graduate School Research project proposal

Student name;

Teun van der Leer MA

the names of the supervisors;

prof. dr. Eddy van de Borcht and dr. Maarten Wisse

date of submission;

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the provisional title (and subtitle) of the dissertation;

A Believers Church contribution to the ecumenical ecclesiological debate:
Looking into the other direction.

a brief description of the issue that the research project will investigate;

In this research I want to contribute to the ecumenical ecclesiological debate by investigating the ecclesiological significance of the Believers Church Tradition (BCT). The BCT is a specific form of congregationalism. The term 'believers church' was used for the first time by Max Weber, who introduced it in 1904 (as an *English* term), defining it as 'eine Gemeinschaft der persönlich Gläubigen und Wiedergeborenen'.¹ In 1955 the *General Conference Mennonite Church* devoted a Study Conference on the issue in Chicago for the first time.² In 1967 the first of (so far) sixteen CCBC's (*Conference on the Concept of the Believers Church*) was held in Louisville (USA).³ The results of these conferences will be mapped and be brought in conversation with the ecclesiological project of Faith and Order, *The Church - Towards a Common Vision* (against the background of earlier reports).

the significance of the research project for the chosen (sub)discipline and for theology in general;

The twentieth century has been called the century of the church.⁴ Due to the emergence of the Pentecostal Movement, the Ecumenical Movement, the Evangelical Movement, and Vatican II (1962-65), ecclesiological questions have become a focal point of attention. In this research I will focus on exploring the strong and weak points of the so-called 'third stream' alongside 'catholic' (the church is constituted by the office) and 'protestant' (the church is constituted by the [pure preaching of] the Word), namely 'pentecostal' or 'baptist' (the church is constituted by the gathering of believers).⁵ Whereas within the field of practical theology the interest for

¹ Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, Beltz 1904, 152-153.

² *Proceedings of the Study Conference on the Believers' Church*, Newton 1955.

³ The last one till now was located at the *Canadian Mennonite University* in Winnipeg, organized by the *Canadian Mennonite University Institute for Theology and the Church*, June 11-14 2008. The proceedings of this conference were published in Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder & Karl Koop (Ed.), *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, Winnipeg 2010. For an overview of (almost) all conferences see Appendix A in Barry L. Callen, *Radical Christianity. The Believers Church Tradition in Christianity's History and Future*, Nappanee 1999, 189-192.

⁴ Avery Cardinal Dulles in his introduction of the English translation of *Lumen Gentium* in *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 9. Also compare J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition 5: Christian Doctrine and Modern Culture (since 1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 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'.

⁵ The tripartite division I have taken from Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1953), in whose track James Wm. McClendon jr. talks about 'baptist' with a small 'b', see his *Systematic Theology Vol. 1: Ethics* (Nashville 1986, ²2002), chapter 1, *Vol. 2 Doctrine* (Nashville 1994), 332-345, and 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.

the issue of Congregationalism is increasing,⁶ within systematic theology it hardly plays a role, and, if it is mentioned, it is mostly done as a caricature without the necessary knowledge of its history and content.⁷ The twentieth century has shown a wide interest in ecclesiological reflection,⁸ but it seems that the BCT is still at the margins of the debate. It is important to hear its voice as clearly as possible to be able to assess its value. This is the more urgent in this period that we name as post-Christendom, where we see many new phenomena like 'fresh expressions of church', 'mission-shaped church' and 'emerging church'.

In this project I want to take seriously what Karl Barth already suggested at the creation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948: 'It is obvious that the last remnants of sovereign authority in the idea of a *corpus christianum* are disappearing; this suggests that we should now look in this other (Congregationalist) direction'.⁹ I want to look into this direction with academic attention, without neglecting Barth's addition that 'not even the Congregationalist church order is above criticism'.¹⁰ So I will weigh the arguments for and against.

the methodology to be used;

Central to this research is the study of the literature. The developments in twentieth-century ecclesiology will be studied with the focal question on systematic-theological relevance. Special attention will be given to the significant choices that are constitutive to the development of a believers church concept, either reacting towards them or affirming them, such as (for example) the ecclesial transition from charisma to ministry, the choice for the *corpus permixtum*, the unity of the church as a visible unity, the change from visible unity as institutional unity to confessional unity, the choice for a church of believers and for the baptism of believers. By studying the results of the Believers Church Conferences and the ecclesiological project of Faith and Order, a 'landscape' of focal points for the ecclesiological debate arises, as well as a 'roadmap' regarding a meaningful contribution to the ecumenical debate by the BCT.

the main research question and sub-questions;

How do the defining characteristics of the Believers Church Tradition challenge and sharpen the understanding of the church in the ecumenical ecclesiological debate?

Sub-questions:

- What exactly is the Believers Church Tradition?

⁶ In the Netherlands for example in the work of Dingemans, Hendriks, Heitink, De Roest and Paas.

⁷ See for example my comments in this regard on the work of Bram van de Beek and Gijsbert van den Brink & Kees van der Kooi in *Soteria* 28.3 (2011), 33, 51, 52.

⁸ Cf. Pelikan who concludes that only in the twentieth century the doctrine of the church 'now finally attained ecclesiological maturity', *The Christian Tradition* 5, 289, and Robert W. Jenson, *The Works of God. Systematic Theology Volume 2* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 168: 'It is only in this century (...) that the church has come to see herself as a theological question'.

⁹ The importance of this direction has been emphasized repeatedly since then, for example by G.H. Williams in 1958: '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*' (my italics), in 'Studies in the Radical Reformation (1517-1618)', *Church History* XXVII (1958), 49; by J.H. Yoder in 1978: 'First, let me affirm: The Church of Tomorrow cannot but be a Believers' Church', in '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*, Ontario 1979, 3; and by M. Volf in 1998: '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', in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids 1998), 12, 13.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, 'The Church – the Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ' in *Man's Disorder and God's Design, The Amsterdam Assembly Series*, Vol. 1, New York 1948, 75-76.

- Can the BCT be viewed as a third ecclesiological stream, alongside catholic and protestant, or is it just a variation of the protestant stream?
- What are the defining characteristics of the BCT according to the outcome of sixteen Believers Church Conferences?
- What are the key theological notions and choices in the ecumenical ecclesiological project 'Towards a Common Vision'?
- What contribution has the BCT to offer to the ecumenical ecclesiological project 'Towards a Common Vision'?

a brief description of the content of the planned chapters;

1. This first chapter is about the *status quaestionis* of a Believers Church. I will take a representative sample of ways in which congregationalism and all its different names like (ana)baptist, pentecostal, free church, gathering church and believers church, are presented in contemporary literature. Also the question whether or not the BCT can be seen as a third stream in world Christianity will be addressed.

Through this a working definition of the concept of a Believers Church will be developed, which distinguishes it from other forms of congregationalism.

2. In this chapter I will present and analyze the outcome of sixteen Believers Church Conferences from 1967 up to 2008, with special focus on discovering the defining characteristics of the BCT. I will investigate the arguments in favour or against specific ecclesiological options. A clear picture of this BCT option will be presented and all the questions and 'checkpoints' regarding it will be mapped. What are the choices they make, what is at stake for them and what are their focal points?

3. In this chapter the ecumenical ecclesiological debate of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries from Santiago de Compostela (1993: *Towards Koinonia in Faith, Life and Witness*) up to *The Church – Towards a Common Vision* (2013) will be presented and analyzed, with special attention for its reception from the side of the BCT. Key theological notions and choices that have shaped the ecumenical ecclesiological discussion will be brought to the fore.

4. In this final chapter I take stock of the outcomes of the Believers Church Conferences as well as the ecumenical debate and show a clear picture of where the two of them meet and of misunderstandings, underestimations and remaining differences in the sharpest possible way. This will show what is really at stake and what critique of and contribution to the ecumenical ecclesiological debate the BCT has to offer.

a time schedule including the planned date of the public defense (approx. a half year after acceptance by the supervisors of the final text of the complete manuscript);

2013: proposal

2014: chapter 1

2015: chapter 2

2016: chapter 3

2017: chapter 4

Public defense: June 2018

an indication of the research time per week to be invested by the PhD student during the planned period;

12 hours

(when written in English) an indication of the level of competence in English, according to the TOEFL norms or equivalents;

the PhD student's CV (see attachment);

a provisional bibliography.

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