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BOOK REVIEW

Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop, eds. *New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2010. vii + 328 pp. Pbk. CDN\$29.50.

This book is a compilation of seventeen presentations and papers delivered at a gathering of scholars and church leaders at Canadian Mennonite University in 2008 concerning the theme “Congregationalism, Denominationalism, and the Body of Christ.” The essays seek to identify and address problems and challenges that the Believers Church tradition faces today. While there was little if any collaboration between the authors before the publishing of the book, they do address some common themes, such as the tensions between localization and globalization and between individualism and community.

The volume is organized thematically into six sections. The first section concerns biblical perspectives and includes two essays. Sheila Klassen-Wiebe explores the significance of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 for the nature and practice of Christian unity as “one and many” (or unity and diversity) and its implications for the Believers Church tradition. Gordon Zerbe discusses the relevance of Paul’s eschatological ecclesiology for ecumenical relations. Zerbe demonstrates the significance of eschatology for resolving the tensions in the church’s catholicity and unity, specifically by exploring the notion that the present church anticipates the eschatological people of God. Two key texts inform his analysis, namely 1 Corinthians 15 (the theme of final or ultimate salvation) and Romans 11 (the theme of part/remnant and whole).

The second section, consisting of three essays, concerns the dynamics of denominationalism. Bruce L. Guenther argues that denominational fellowship is still a valuable form of organization in contemporary culture (though all organizational forms have their challenges), particularly for churches in the Believers Church tradition. However, to thrive in postmodern culture, denominations need to embrace the tension of unity-in-diversity

DUECK *et al.* *New Perspectives on Believers Church*

and allow for the diverse contextualization of congregational life to occur in various local forms. The second essay, by John J. Friesen, traces three periods of the Mennonite church in Manitoba, including the *Gemeinden* or “fellowship” era (1870s–1920s), the formation of conferences (1920s–1950s), and the rising prominence of congregations over conferences (1950s–present). Friesen analyzes how the churches practiced being the body of Christ in each of these historical contexts, noting that while their language of faith has in some ways become more individualistic, the churches nevertheless continue to experience a robust communal life together. The third chapter, by Doug Heidebrecht, analyzes the way in which the Mennonite Brethren Church addressed and resolved the issue of women in ministry. He offers this process as a test case for how denominations might enter into healthy debate while maintaining unity in the midst of conflicting convictions. Heidebrecht offers several helpful practical principles in his conclusion.

The third section of the volume reviews classic assumptions of the Believers Church tradition. Fernando Enns argues that the Believers Church model can both learn from and make significant contributions to ecumenical discussions concerning such issues as the relevance of creeds and confessions, avoiding works righteousness and individualism, the nature of authority and accountability, the significance of sacraments and liturgy, and issues concerning the church’s relation to the state. He notes that the “believed church” (God’s one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church) is wider and larger than the “experienced church” of one’s own denomination or tradition. The second article, by Karl Koop, counsels against the tendency in the Believers Church tradition toward simplistic restorationism (i.e., trying to imitate an assumed ideal or “golden age” New Testament church). He reminds congregationally-minded churches that all modes of inquiry and application are framed within particular traditions and that the Bible itself depicts the church as diverse rather than representing a single model. The third essay, by Brian Hamilton, challenges the conventional portrayal of the Believers Church as over-emphasizing imitating or following Christ to the exclusion of the church’s incorporation in Christ. Hamilton

points to Michael Sattler as an influential Believers Church theologian who demonstrated a profound understanding of the union of believers with Christ, a theme that pervades his writing about the church as the body of Christ. In fact, Hamilton argues that the theme of believers' union with Christ within the body of Christ unites Sattler's theological vision and grounds his thinking about discipleship and ethics. The fourth essay, written by Scott Holland, brings Anabaptism into conversation with Pietism. Holland suggests that Anabaptism could balance its strong focus on community by integrating Pietism's spirituality of solitude, its theopoetics of desire, and its epistemology of the heart.

Section four includes two essays that reflect on the relevance of trinitarian theology for the Believers Church tradition. Fernando Enns proposes a trinitarian foundation for Believers Church ecclesiology. Enns draws on three scriptural metaphors for the church, namely, the body of Christ (a historical reality grounded in the incarnation), the people of God (a chosen people), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (indwelling, animating, and uniting the church). He then reflects on the notion of *koinonia* in order to depict the church as *participating* in the Trinity, a move that he argues holds together the three biblical motifs and grounds the church's communal life, worship, service, and mission. Arnold Neufeldt-Fast examines the Believers Church within a trinitarian-missional framework. He traces important trends in trinitarian theology and ecclesiology and argues that the missional nature of the church is grounded in the loving and sending nature of the triune God. Interacting with theologians such as Barth, Moltmann, Volf, and Enns, Neufeldt-Fast suggests that the Believers Church is best described in missional terms—and being missional is, in turn, best described within a trinitarian framework.

Section five includes two chapters that discuss the Lord's Supper and Baptism. Andrea M. Dalton, in dialogue with Pilgram Marpeck, seeks to get beyond the sacrament-symbol impasse that often plagues the Believers Church. Dalton suggests that Marpeck's form of sacramental theology could help the Believers Church 1) grapple with what it means to be the body of Christ, 2) acknowledge both divine initiative and human

responsive sharing, 3) respect the ethical nature of the supper as a meal of love (“Where love is absent—despite the sharing of bread and wine, or loaves and fishes—a supper is not the Lord’s”), and, 4) possibly reclaim the term “sacrament” for the Believers Church tradition. In the following chapter, Irma Fast Dueck discusses the problem often experienced in contemporary churches of committed Christians choosing not to be baptized. She views this as a disturbing trend, both from the perspective of theology and anthropology (i.e., when a minority community’s defining rituals lose significance or meaning, its identity is threatened by compromise with the dominant culture leading to possible extinction). She discusses possible reasons for the trend and then suggests that a comprehensive solution involves both teaching about baptism in ways that are meaningful and relevant and, perhaps more importantly in our present context, cultivating a church-culture that deeply values and encourages baptism.

The final section discusses recent trends in ecclesiology in relation to the Believers Church tradition. Jonathan Wilson provides the best and most informative essay. He discusses five important movements, including Ancient-Future Christianity (Robert Webber), the *Ekklesia* Project (associated with the ideas of Stanley Hauerwas), the Emergent Church (various representatives), the Missional Church (especially Lesslie Newbigin and the Gospel and Our Culture Network), and the New Monasticism. He suggests that the contemporary Believers Church tradition can learn from each of these movements (though not uncritically), but that New Monasticism potentially provides the most natural and fruitful correspondence. In the next chapter, Gareth Brandt draws parallels between the way Anabaptist theology and the Emergent Church address the problem of individualism. Both movements are decentralized while emphasizing community, both focus on discipleship, and both have a life-affirming posture (emphasizing either peace or the sacredness of all life). Paul Doerksen provides a critique of the Emergent Church (personified by Brian McLaren) in the following essay, arguing that much of the movement ironically continues in the tread of a distinctly modern path—the pursuit of relevance. He

suggests that the Emergent Church has much to learn from John Howard Yoder, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and others about the importance of being a contrast community that exists for others in a cruciform pattern. In the final chapter, George F. Pickens discusses the global shift in Christianity (made famous by Philip Jenkins and others) and suggests that the present time is ripe with opportunity for the Believers Church tradition. Due to the similarities between its faith-language and self-identity and those of the churches in the global South, the Believers Church is in a good place to mediate discussions between Christians of the north and south, so that each might learn and benefit from the other. This will require new attitudes and postures from northern Christians, specifically recognizing the reality of poly-centrism (displacing Euro-centrism) and listening genuinely, openly, and respectfully to the southern churches.

New Perspectives in Believers Church Ecclesiology covers a broad range of themes explored from a variety of perspectives and methods. Those who would benefit most from the book are probably pastors and reflective lay leaders serving within congregational or Believers Church contexts. The book could very helpfully expose such readers to important changes taking place within the tradition, inspired by fresh readings of Scripture and important insights and developments in theology. The authors are passionate in their commitment to the Believers Church model and in their desire to help contemporary adherents to adapt to the challenges of the contemporary postmodern world.

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