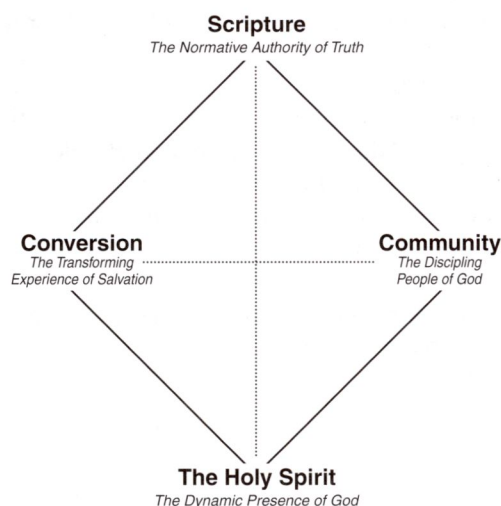

Theological Foundations for Brethren in Christ Core Values

by Luke L. Keefer, Jr.

The following article is adapted from the paper presented by Luke Keefer, Jr., and presented at the Consultation on Core Values held at Roxbury Camp in May 1999.

The pre-conference materials, especially *Reflections on a Heritage*, were most helpful to me as I approached this assignment. Consequently, I have decided to pursue a model which underscores four foundational convictions: conversion, community, Scripture, and the Spirit. Visually the model looks like this:



I want to make several observations, first, about the model itself before undertaking an exposition of each theological foundation. The two core issues for us are conversion and community. We have always been a synthetic people. At our beginning that synthesis was piety and obedience. It still represents our

outlook and defines what is unique about us. We have equal commitments to both conversion and community. That is why we cannot emotionally embrace traditions that magnify one at the expense of the other. We hold both at once, admitting that this creates tension in our theology, but also insisting that no theology can be biblical if it does not achieve such a balance.

Scripture is placed above these because it is the authority over both conversion and community. We approach Scripture functionally rather than dogmatically. We assume the truthfulness of Scripture rather than trying to prove its reliability. Our real regard for Scripture is manifested when we deal with issues of faith and practice. It is then clear that the Bible is the only normative authority over both our understanding of salvation and of the church.

Underlying our individual and corporate experience of God is the reality of the Holy Spirit. We confess that the experience of salvation and the life of the church are both miraculous events. The Spirit is the key to both new birth and new community.

There is a dotted line between Scripture and Spirit because these two are closely related to each other. This is not because we have been greatly concerned over such issues as the "inner word" and the "outer word" as some were in the early days of both Anabaptism and Pietism. Again we embrace both at

once, and see them working conjointly rather than being in tension with each other. Another way of saying this is that we do not see Scripture and Spirit as two different authorities for theology. Scripture is the authority over the questions of truth, while the Spirit is the dynamic source of God's life. Both are equally necessary, but they do not have the same function.

Exposition of the Four Theological Foundations

CONVERSION—The Brethren in Christ were formed in a revival, and that has left a permanent mark upon our collective soul. We believe humans are sinners by nature and need to be born again to enter the kingdom of God. We believe that Spirit-produced conviction, repentance, and faith precede one's experience of forgiveness, rebirth, and transformation. This experience of saving grace realigns all relationships: to God, to oneself, to fellow human beings, and to the world order in which we live. Jesus Christ is encountered as both Savior and Lord. The reborn Christian is subject to the life of discipleship as presented in the gospels. He or she is also working in the power of the resurrection as demonstrated in the book of Acts and explained in the New Testament Epistles.

This is a rather radical view of conversion. It means we have difficulty believing that one has been "translated out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of light" (Col. 1:13) if they have little interest in spiritual matters, are reluctant to dismiss sinful practices, and resist the church's attempts to disciple them. We expect those who profess faith in baptism to be people who are profoundly changed by their relationship to Jesus Christ.

We also believe that new birth (conversion) results in sanctification. To grow in the Lord is to be changed in matters great and small in all areas of life. This involves both natural development and dramatic events where one's life is marked in significant ways by the Spirit of God. Our outlook on the Christian life is marked on one hand by an optimism of grace and on the other by a serious commitment to Jesus Christ and the work of the Kingdom of God. We know that the struggles with sin, Satan, the cares of life, and the fear of death are all very real, but we refuse to believe that the grace of Jesus Christ is unable to defeat these foes. Consequently, we avoid those theologies which accept sin as

the regrettable normalcy in the life of a Christian.

We know that everyone begins the Christian adventure as a "babe in Christ" and that maturity in faith rarely happens within a few years. But the set of the sails can be to the full extent in a small boat as well as in a large ship. We encourage wholehearted love for God at every stage of development, measuring discipleship by commitment to one's level of ability. But we are not content to settle for the lowest common denominator as a measure for Christian discipleship. It is our conviction that Christian movements that settle for easy terms of discipleship seldom produce mature Christians.

The earliest Brethren had a high view of conversion. They expected "lots of spade-work" to precede a public declaration of faith. We, their descendants, want to espouse the same beliefs, but we have several influences which have modified us. First, in the last century we have accepted childhood conversions in large numbers. Inevitably this has reduced the levels of knowledge and commitment which are required for faith. We have also endorsed evangelistic methods that aim for immediate results. Less preparation of the soil often results in shallow root systems in the seedlings. In addition, we desire to reach many people for Christ. There is always a danger that salvation in popular terms may be a discounted sale item.

In theory, we try to compensate for these defects by assigning more to be done in the discipling/nurturing process which follows professions of faith. And there are churches that do this well, but it requires intentional planning and rigorous effort. There is always the danger that we will neglect these discipling ministries by assuring ourselves that, at any rate, "these people are now saved." We must never forget that the great commission (Matt. 28:19, 20) calls us not to gaining professions of faith but to the making of disciples. We should be uneasy with any doctrine of salvation which falls short of making people disciples of Jesus Christ.

COMMUNITY—The earliest Brethren already had community before they encountered conversion. So it was not something they had to decide to add to the personal act of faith. They thus avoided the pitfall that afflicts many Western Christians today, who adhere to the slogan "Jesus definitely but the Church maybe." Our heritage has taught us

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that salvation is both an individual and a corporate event. The same baptism that declares our faith in Jesus also commits us to the fellowship of the saints. We love not only the one who begot us but also those begotten by Him. (1 John. 5:1)

We know that it is biologically possible to produce babies apart from a family structure. But our culture is teaching us how dangerous this is to everyone involved. Existence itself is threatened, and children thus produced often are socially dysfunctional. It is the same in the spiritual realm. It is scandalously unchristian to produce converts who are not tied into a spiritual community. A conversionist theology and an evangelistic program demand a high doctrine of the church. Converts need spiritual parents and bonded siblings. Or, to change the metaphor, the Christian life is a pilgrimage that has recognized leaders/guides and committed fellow travelers.

Evangelism itself depends upon a church which is equipped to do it. In a very real sense the Christian community is prior to conversion, for there must be ambassadors who know the terms whereby people can be at peace with God.

In addition, the church is the community of salvation in that it helps all its members to work out their salvation throughout all the phases of the Christian life. It must be a supporting, loving, caring fellowship. It has the responsibility to instruct in Scripture and to nurture spiritual growth. It must model piety and administer discipline. The community provides for leadership development and ministry involvement as it recognizes and enhances peoples' spiritual gifts.

In order to present all people perfect in Christ (Col. 1:28), the community must give attention to all things Jesus taught his disciples by word, deed, and example. Discipleship is essential to salvation; it is not an optional add-on to conversion.

On the other hand, community cannot exist apart from conversion. There is no church unless people are being united to Christ by living faith. And the communal life of the church stands itself in need of converting grace. For discipline can become legalism, nurture can become moralism, and the life of the church can become mere cultural Christianity. The community must be kept vital both by the revival and reformation of its corporate life, and by the addition of new members through evangelistic growth.

It is for reasons like these that the Brethren in Christ must approach the next millennium with equal commitments to both conversion and community. We dare not elevate one above the other nor divide them into rigid compartments. Biblically and historically they are companions and not competitors. Neglect one and the other also suffers. We must keep these foundations in synthesis as we minister in the future. In order to do so, we must strengthen our community commitment, since it has not had the articulated effort in the last quarter century as church growth has.

SCRIPTURE—We like to keep our theologizing to a minimum. When we do engage in serious theology, we prefer biblical theology to systematic theology. We resonate with the spirit of the founders of our denomination, who wished to stick to the plain teaching of Scripture, using the biblical vocabulary as the vehicle of expression. We have virtually ignored the academic approach to theology, especially when its spokespersons have tried to get "behind the text of Scripture" to derive a meaning contrary to the printed text itself. We believe the Bible as received by the church universal is the revealed Word of God. We devote our primary energies to understanding its message and to obeying its mandates.

Even if one considers the most emotional church issues of the last half century—issues such as paid pastoral ministry, divorce and remarriage, patterns of non-conformity, and women in ministry—it is clear the issues have revolved around the understanding of Scripture. In the end, the church believed the intent of Scripture justified a departure from our tradition. At the same time we have stood our ground on issues like the doctrine of Christ, the necessity of Christ for salvation, and the question of homosexuality. We have sensed that the pressures for change in these areas are socially driven and are not a matter of legitimate biblical interpretation.

We must nourish this denominational commitment to Scripture as we enter the next century. For the more we engage our culture the more we will feel the pressure to conform to the spirit of the times. And our very success in evangelism will test our fidelity to the Word of God. People educated by our public schools and steeped in the popular media will come to us with a prejudice against the authority of Scripture. If there is

any weakness in our fidelity to the Bible, our converts will convert us to relativism rather than us discipling them to the mind of Christ.

This goes much deeper than our doctrinal pronouncement about Scripture. A number one concern in ministerial training must be the recommendation of schools that have a high view of Scripture. Reading, studying, and meditating upon Scripture must be prominent in our lives. What we say about Scripture will not count as much as the practical application it has in our lives as a body.

We know from history that Christian experience can become so subjective that it neglects or negates the voice of Scripture. And we know that the church can become a traditional institution whose decisions rival the authority of the Word of God or even blatantly contradict the Bible. So we must continue to hold to the supreme authority of Scripture over both conversion and community. Here is the clear and certain voice of God addressed to our fundamental needs. Here is the light of eternity that illumines our path to God. If we move from this voice or from this light, there is nothing but the confession of voices and the darkness of deception.

THE HOLY SPIRIT—Paul said it so well: on this side of the cross and resurrection, we cannot know the Christ of incarnate flesh. We know him only by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is both the Father's promise to and the Son's presence in our lives and churches. It is clear that the early church believed no one was a Christian unless his faith was sealed by the Holy Spirit. And the early church knew its very existence and ministry depended upon the Holy Spirit.

I believe this truth is crucial to the future of the denomination. Conversion is a supernatural act wrought by the Holy Spirit. The church is a supernatural community brought into existence by the Spirit, who energizes its worship, its witness, its fellowship, its unity, and its love and compassion. Without the Spirit, nothing happens! Satan will not tremble at our finely-worded articles on conversion and community. But Satan's kingdom will suffer ruin if the Holy Spirit possesses us, thrusting us out to bring lives to Christ and instilling a passion in our souls for the reality of God's Kingdom community. ▶

Pentecost must be more than a day in the church calendar. It must be that overshadow-

ing presence of the Most High whose touch converts, heals, delivers, comforts, and empowers all God's people. Both the challenges that threaten the health of the denomination and the opportunities that call us to wider ministry argue for a strong emphasis upon the Spirit. He is the one Jesus gave to be with us to the ends of the earth and the completion of time.

A concluding commendation

Now let me close with a commendation. I am most appreciative of the emphasis upon prayer, which showed up on all of the five pre-conference core values statements. This has been a conspicuous element of recent General Conferences, bishops' newsletters, and church leaders' directives through the *Evangelical Visitor* and other communications. For Jesus said the Father would give the Spirit to those who asked (Luke 11:13); and in the book of Acts, the Spirit fills the church when it is at prayer.

I firmly believe that if the Brethren in Christ are to be of value to God in the next century, it will depend upon our commitment to the foundational theological connections that have been developed in this model. We can expand the model by a constellation of core values, which make these convictions more definitive and more user friendly.

Conversion and community are something like Siamese twins, organically joined in a way that defies separation. They are ordered by one functioning mind—the Scriptures. And they are kept alive by one beating heart—the Holy Spirit. I believe a church so constituted has a future in the twenty-first century.

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