

4-1-1975

The National Church in Biblical Perspective

Norman J. Threinen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Threinen, Norman J. (1975) "The National Church in Biblical Perspective," *Consensus*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol1/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

THE NATIONAL CHURCH

IN BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

Is the concept of a Lutheran church in Canada biblically defensible? Is not the church of our Lord, hence also the Lutheran Church, universal in character? Should it not disregard and reach across national boundaries as it seeks to serve Him?

Or are the arguments for or against the idea of a national church totally apart from what the Scriptures say? Is it only a matter of convenience or pride to have a “Canadian” Church? Does it perhaps boil down to a simple question of whether we can afford to have our own church organization in Canada?

The Old Testament People of God

The nation of Israel was virtually identified with the people of God in the Old Testament. Both focused on the call and blessing of Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-8) and the Exodus from Egypt as their points of origin. And, theoretically, the nation was ruled by God. Thus the prophets addressed themselves to the political and social issues of the day in a way that was not possible in the context of other societies.

Yet the theory did not always correspond with the reality. For Israelite rulers often corresponded very closely to their non-Israelite counterparts in the godless way in which they conducted the affairs of state. So, in a sense, the faithful in

Israel functioned as believers in a national context. They constituted the church responding to situations within their nation in a way not dissimilar to the way the church might need to do today.

During the Babylonian captivity the people of God were an identifiable religious and ethnic community within the empire. As a people in exile, the identity of the Israelites still related to the destroyed temple in Jerusalem and their ravaged homeland. And locally it related to the communities which gathered about the reading and exposition of the Old Testament Scriptures. (The synagogues upon which our local congregations are patterned originated in the period of captivity).

Yet there is evidence to support the fact that an identity was also felt which tied together Jews who resided in a particular region by political boundaries. This was particularly true when a crisis of larger proportion arose which had a political origin. An example is the prospect of extermination of all Jews in the empire, brought about by the conniving of Haman (Esther 3:12-13). On that occasion Esther interceded for her people to the King as someone who represented the people effected and was herself involved in the situation (Esther 7:3-4).

The Church in the New Testament

The word “church” (*ecclesia*) is used in various ways in the New Testament. In the broadest sense it is equivalent to all those whom God through Christ has gathered to be His own (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 10:32; etc.). This is the “church” which we confess in the Third Article of the Apostles Creed when we say, “I believe in . . . the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints . . .”

The New Testament further uses the term “church” to denote the world-wide community as it is embodied in localized form wherever a congregation exists (Colossians 4:15-16; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; etc.). Also, churches in a region had an identity, e.g. Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1; Galatians 1:2), Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1) Asia (1 Corinthians 16:18; Revelation 1:4), etc. Proximity to one another was one of the reasons that they were grouped together. However, the common mission which they had within the discernable confines of their province would also have given them a common identity. Regional bishops later became the focus of the regional church.

The political realities were such that the entire world of Paul lay within the Roman Empire. Hence, there is no possibility of talking in terms of “a national church”. But when larger political units and eventually nations developed, the church within these definable political entities assumed differing external characteristics because of the need to function responsibly within its national context.

The Christian and Government

An aspect of New Testament thought which ought to be noted in this regard is the relationship of the Christian to government. The New Testament encourages Christians to be “subject to the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). Those in positions of civil authority are to be the object of Christian prayer (1 Timothy 2:1-2). Paul does not hesitate to make use of his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-29; 25:10-12).

The New Testament admonitions emphasize that political realities are a normal dimension of the Christian’s existence. In a democratic country, the implications of this fact are significant. Christians, individually and collectively, have a serious responsibility to give a Christian witness to their nation. Attention to such a task can only be given by people who are themselves part of the nation.

The National Church

The New Testament Church existed at a time when the Roman government was the ruling power. Nations and regions had very little autonomy. The style of church life was marked with a dimension of sameness.

Also, the government was not democratic. There was little or no opportunity for Christians to be involved in the governing process. All the ordinary person could do was to pay his taxes, keep the laws and pray for the government.

Today the situation is quite different. A mark of people living in different countries is that different autonomous governments rule. Differing emphases by governments mean that Christians living in these different countries are faced with their own distinctive political realities. Inasmuch as social situations and historical happenings are effected by government emphases as well as geography and other circumstances, the setting of Christians and Christian churches in different countries is often substantially different even when people have common origins.

The concept of a church within the nation is therefore a normal development which is also supported by the Scriptures. The national church does not imply that the church is only concerned about itself. It is still only a concrete expression of the church universal within a nation. It cannot escape its responsibility to the church which is in other countries. Yet there is a sense in which the church must be native (and organizationally autonomous) to its nation if it is to have integrity. The proposal to have a national Lutheran Church for Canada is an attempt to have the Lutheran Church be authentically the church in this country.