

Community or Brotherhood?

The term “community” has become more prevalent in recent years. One person said that it has become the new buzzword among conservative Anabaptists when referring to congregations or church fellowships. What does the term imply and why has it arisen? There are many assumptions about this development. First, let us look at the definitions of community and brotherhood.

Community: (1.) a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common. (2.) a feeling of fellowship with others due to sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals. (3.) a group of interdependent organisms of different species growing or living together in a specified habitat.

Brotherhood: (1) The feeling of kinship with and closeness to a group of people or all people. (2.) An association, society, or community of people linked by a common interest, religion, or trade: "a religious brotherhood."

Although these dictionary definitions appear to be very close in meaning, their connotations are vastly different. For example, our congregation lifts an offering called Brotherhood Sharing for the financial and medical needs of its members. Suppose this offering were renamed Community Sharing. How would this change the view of its purpose?

A brotherhood can be inwardly focused to the point of ignoring the needs of the surrounding community. A congregation can also be so focused on serving its surrounding community that the brotherhood is weakened.

Anabaptist writers often mentioned the brotherhood in their writings. The Schleithem Confession of Faith was titled “Brotherly Union of a Number of Children of God Concerning Seven Articles.” The terms “Brotherly union” and “Children of God” indicate family and brotherhood. Brethren is the only title used by the Anabaptists among themselves from the very beginning. In all the records the name "Brethren" is applied repeatedly to fellow believers. Occasionally a special designation is added: thus there were

Swiss Brethren, Moravian Brethren, Hutterian Brethren, etc. The term "brethren" has become an earmark of the Anabaptists and like-minded Christians. Luther says in his *Auslegung des Johannes-Evangeliums* (Interpretation of the Gospel of John 1528-29, Erlangen ed., I, 437), "They (Anabaptists) carry this beautiful, lovely word brethren in such misuse, that we can hardly use it any longer." It was adopted particularly by the Waldenses, Friends (Quakers), and mystics of the Middle Ages. It is still commonly used among the Mennonites in all countries as a term of address within the brotherhood, particularly among those who have retained the simpler and warmer style of piety. Is our more casual use of addressing one another by name without the title "Brother" or "Sister" related to our referring to our churches as communities instead of brotherhoods?

In modern times, America has moved to using gender-neutral terms. Flaggers used to be called flagmen. Waiters now serve meals that waiters and waitresses once served. Stewardesses used to help passengers in aircraft; now flight attendants do it. Chairmen used to preside over meetings; now chairs do it. Brotherhoods are now referred to as communities. Does it matter? Is it a move to a more gender-neutral term?

The word brotherhood is only found in 1 Peter 2:17 in the KJV, twice in the NKJV, and four times in Montgomery's New Testament. The word community is not found in the KJV Bible. In the twelve versions I searched, the word community is only found in the Twentieth Century New Testament (TCNT) in Hebrews 12:15 and seems to be assumed by the translators. The Greek text says many but does not indicate who the many are and does not indicate the entire community as the TCNT does. We cannot reject a word only because it is not found in the Scriptures. The words trinity and rapture (except in the sense of ecstasy) are not found in translations of the Scriptures either. But we need to know the meaning and implications of the terms we use.

The term "my brethren" is found in 26 verses in 11 books in the KJV New Testament and is used by Jesus, Paul, James, and John in referring to those who follow Jesus in faith. That indicates brotherhood. Brotherhood indicates family. To be a member of a family, you either need to be born into the family, adopted, or a foster child. In either case, it involves more than moving into a community of neighbors. Every family member has his or her role to fill and is responsible to the others. Anyone can move into a community and never speak to or interact with his neighbors. That does not work well in a family or Christian Brotherhood. This community model does not work in church life.

In Luke 8:21, Jesus identified His brethren as those who hear the word of God, and do it. In Matthew 23:8, "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren." Jesus told Peter, "When thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." Hebrews 2:11 says, "Both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren." There are dozens of more verses in the New Testament referring to Christians as brethren. Does that not indicate brotherhood?

It is clear that Lot misused the term brethren in referring to his wicked neighbors in his community in Genesis 19:7. He should have called them neighbors, not brethren. But are we judging when we decide who is a brother and who is not? What about those who call themselves Christian, but do not believe and practice as we do? We are to greet all the

brethren with a holy kiss. How shall we greet those whose lifestyle blurs their claim to Christianity?

Examples of non-religious brotherhoods include: The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks, etc. These non-religious brotherhoods have a common goal driven by a quest for power and selfish gain. They operate on a worldly motivation, opposite to the humble, holy inspiration of the Christian Brotherhood. The Biker Brotherhood uses slogans to inspire the biker community to a sense of unity, loyalty, and respect. These may be good virtues to espouse in the Christian Brotherhood. But as God called Lot to leave his ungodly community, so we cannot entangle ourselves in opposing brotherhoods. We cannot serve God and mammon.

A community includes those who live in the neighborhood. Our home is in an Anabaptist community. Many of the businesses and schools are operated by Anabaptists. The non-anabaptist-owned businesses in our neighborhood are also a part of our community. Seven conservative Mennonite congregations and several Amish bishop districts are within a three-mile radius of our house. All these congregations have very little to no fellowship with one another. We have limited sharing of pulpits, and hiring of school teachers from the other Anabaptist groups, or other cross-fellowship associations. Our Anabaptist community is loosely bound other than supporting the Anabaptist businesses in our area and being friendly to those of other Anabaptist groups. Certainly, we relate to non-Anabaptists in our Anabaptist community too, but on a different level.

Many Mennonite congregations that no longer practice non-conformity in attire have been deleting Mennonite Church from their congregational name and adopting the term Community Church. One pastor of such a church said their congregation did so because they did not want to be associated with the Mennonite churches that have endorsed the LGBTQ+ people, and neither did they like to explain why they did not dress like the more traditional Mennonites. Community church fits with their congregational relationships with little or no written rules and discipline. But why should conservative Anabaptists drop the central theme of brotherhood and replace it with community?

There are community fire companies, ambulance crews, libraries, and other community facilities and services. Most churches welcome visitors to attend their services. Conservative Mennonite congregations welcome the community to worship with them but deny them the privilege of partaking in communion which is reserved for the brotherhood. Do we confuse our neighbors if we refer to our congregation as a community and then restrict who can participate in conducting the services, especially in the ordinances?

Community implies a looser relationship and responsibility than brotherhood does. The exception to this looseness would be the Hutterite colonies, which have a communal lifestyle. Hutterite Colonies are close-knit communities that share in what has been called a “community of goods.” A brotherhood lives within the communal lifestyle of each of those communities.

Jesus taught in the parable of the Good Samaritan that we are to love our neighbor and serve him in times of need. But our first responsibility is to those of the household of faith – the brotherhood. Brotherhood carries a deeper sense of responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the brothers and sisters than community does. We are our brother's keepers.

Several decades ago, a Mennonite school in our community was destroyed by fire. Every day dozens of Mennonites, Brethren, and Amish came to help with cleanup and rebuilding. Each day, Mennonite women took turns to prepare hot lunches for the workers. One day the ladies' auxiliary from a local Lutheran congregation brought lunch for the workers. The newspaper and Television stations came almost daily to take pictures and report on the progress. The school only missed 14 days of school until the building was restored. This was an Anabaptist community working together.

In the eternal realm of heaven, our brotherhoods will be combined into one community with no distinction of individual brotherhoods. Our Heavenly Father will call all His sons and daughters into the home He is preparing for all His children. In the meantime, let us be our brother's keeper and, as we have an opportunity, minister to the needs of those in our communities.