

Contemporary Applications of Article 12 (“State and Society”) of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith

By Terry L. Brensinger

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Chaim Potok, the late Jewish novelist renowned for such books as *The Chosen*, *The Promise* and *My Name is Asher Lev*, is among my favorite authors. In many of his writings, Potok explores a central issue that undoubtedly troubled him already during his own formative years as an aspiring writer growing up in a restrictive, ultra-orthodox Jewish home. “What do you do,” Potok asks through the experiences of such characters as Danny Saunders and Asher Lev, “when the expectations of the various groups and sub-groups in which you participate conflict?” Asher Lev, for example, is an aspiring painter who longs to “push the boundaries” of artistic freedom in ways that his Jewish community not only devalues, but considers inappropriate. What is he to do? Stretch the categories, as artists typically do, or adhere to the guidelines of his religious community? What is anyone to do, for that matter, when they participate in groups with conflicting values and expectations?

This same question, of course, surfaces repeatedly in the biblical story, and it likewise provides the backdrop for any serious reading of Article 12 of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. This particular article lays out an understanding of the role of the state in God’s economy and the way that Christians ought to live in relationship to earthly governments. Before pursuing my primary task of exploring various contemporary applications of this article, however, I’d like briefly to reframe Potok’s central question and place it within a biblical context.

Who has the say?

In the Old Testament, there are two terms, “mishpat” and “tzedek,” that are typically translated into English as “justice” and “righteousness,” respectively. In his book, *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition*, J.P.M. Walsh “modernizes” this a bit and insightfully suggests that mishpat actually involves “having the say” and zedek designates those expectations which the people with “the say” place upon those under their authority. Parents, for example, have mishpat over their children, and they likewise have certain expectations—tzedakah—of them. “Be in at such and such a

time. Keep your room picked-up. Do your best in school.” In the same way, employers have mishpat over their employees, teachers over their students, government officials over their citizens and so on. Needless to say, all of these people in authority likewise have expectations (tzedakah) of those under them.

It is at this point, then, that Potok’s question comes directly into play. In reality, all of us are members of multiple communities or groups, each of which exercises some degree of mishpat and institutes a set of tzedakah. As a Brensinger, my parents exercised mishpat over me for many years. That mishpat continues to some degree even to this day, I suppose, because of the ideas and values that they helped instill in me. I likewise live under the mishpat of my employers at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, Brethren in Christ denominational leaders and local, state and national officials, to name just a few. Each of these parties exercises a level of authority over me and maintains certain expectations of me—prepare thoroughly for my classes, live a life consistent with my ordination vows and abide by the laws of the land—and for the most part, my participating in these various groups presents no insurmountable problems so long as the expectations coincide.

Trouble arises, however, when the tzedakah of my groups conflict. Then what? What am I to do, for example, if the expectations of my teacher conflict with those of my parents? Or what if the expectations of my employer conflict with those of my government officials? Most importantly, what am I as a follower of Jesus to do when the expectations of other authorities conflict with those of God? That is the fundamental question. When push comes to shove and I am up against the wall, who really has “the say” over my life?

This matter of mishpat and tzedek, as I said, lies at the very heart of the biblical story. Israel arrived at Sinai following their exodus from Egypt with a desperate need to learn this lesson if they had any hopes of surviving in Baal-dominated Canaan: Yahweh has the say. Likewise, those who seek to follow Jesus face precisely the same reality, as the so-called rich young ruler so abruptly discovered: God has the say. If our friends, teachers, employers, government officials or parents instruct us to do anything in opposition to what God asks of us, the answer is always the same: God has the say. If we fail to make this fundamental decision at the deepest levels of our being, then we ultimately trip over lesser decisions again and again and again. At the risk of redundancy, God has the say.

Contemporary applications of Article 12

This core issue—“Who has the say?”—hovers like a cloud over Article 12 of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith. This article not only raises the question, but forcefully answers it. God has indeed ordained earthly governments and given them an appropriate role to play within society, but he has not

forfeited his authority in the process. When the expectations of the state and those of God coincide, we Christians should be supportive subjects of the state. In cases when these expectations conflict, however, the answer is simple—“God has the say.” This truth—this commitment to the supreme authority of God over that of earthly governments—finds expression in three important concepts that are specifically referred to in Article 12: citizenship, devotion and obedience.

Citizenship

Citizenship addresses the issue of identity—who am I? Which of the groups that I am associated with constitutes my core community? Which group most profoundly shapes the way that I think, what I value and how I act? What macro story serves as my own, primary narrative? Am I, first and foremost, a Brensinger? A Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary employee? An American? A Christian? Which of these constitutes my true identity? Which is my default setting?

In considering this matter of identity—citizenship—think first for a moment about citizenship in the ordinary, political sense of the term. While many of us perhaps take our citizenship for granted—the majority of us here were simply born citizens of our respective countries and are largely content with that—we need only recall the effort that it typically takes for someone from another country to secure a green card, let alone full citizenship, here in the United States. Doing so requires the leaving of one’s country of origin, submitting a previous passport, enduring a lengthy administrative process, learning a new language, and adopting a new way of life with an entirely new set of laws and expectations—not to mention a new ethos and national story. In my many travels, both here and abroad, I have gained a profound appreciation for how deeply many people long to become citizens of this country and for what many people are willing to go through in order to gain that citizenship. Citizenship is no trivial concern for the majority of people in the world.

With this understanding of citizenship in mind, three fundamentally important points of application arise that can help us better understand the relationship between Christians and the state. All three points relate directly to ecclesiology—our understanding of the church. The first focuses on the nature of the church (What image does the church project to the world?), the second on the proclamation of the church (What does the church invite unbelievers to do?) and the third on the equipping of the church (What does the church do to train those who follow Jesus?).

What image does the church project to the world?

People typically long to become citizens of a new country because that country is fundamentally different from their own. Often caught in a seemingly hopeless situation with little opportunity for freedom and

advancement, people search for newness—a place where they can truly live. In the Bible, the church is consistently depicted as just such a place—a countercultural community that is radically different from every earthly kingdom, including our own. It is a kingdom that is breaking into time and space, a kingdom characterized not by hatred and violence but by love and forgiveness, not by deception and corruption but by truth and justice. In this community, the captives are released, the lame healed, the hungry fed and the outcasts embraced. In this community, the God of creation himself welcomes even the worst of people to experience transformation and wholeness. When true to its calling, the church is the core community to which every person longs to belong, whether they realize it or not. This can only occur, however, when the followers of Jesus place their citizenship in God's kingdom above all else and begin to model that kingdom "on earth as it is in heaven."

Think of it this way: Most major cities, including New York, have subcommunities representing various cultural and ethnic groups of the world. You know when you are in Chinatown, for example—the signs, faces and food are sure indicators. If you walk several blocks in Manhattan, however, everything changes. The language, the physical features of the residents, the food—they are all different. You can't miss it. Now, just a few blocks away, instead of dining on egg rolls and sweet-and-sour chicken, people are filling up on gnocchi and lasagna. You've left Chinatown and entered Little Italy.

Imagine further that your experiences in these and other ethnic communities vary greatly. If you find the people in Little Italy to be quarrelsome and the food unappetizing, chances are that you will never plan an extended vacation to Italy itself. Why risk an expensive trip to the mainland if the subcommunity leaves you with a bitter taste in your mouth? You will, no doubt, plan a trip to China instead, since your brief visit to Chinatown was far more enjoyable.

In the same way, our churches are called to be parabolic communities in the world, little "heaven-towns" dotting the earthly landscape. If visitors encounter cantankerous and unloving people there, why would they ever want to join in the journey to heaven itself? If the food is lousy, the relationships shallow, the values corrupt, the issues trivial and the opportunities for change nonexistent, who will express even the slightest degree of interest? People long to be citizens of a country where they can truly come alive and be free. By God's grace, the church is precisely positioned to be such a place—radically different and genuinely transformative. To the building of this church we must devote our primary attention and our most creative juices. We simply cannot compromise our citizenship in this kingdom and offer the world less.

What does the church invite unbelievers to do?

Securing citizenship in a new country is not without cost. People leave behind their countries of origin and at times even their families and friends. They forfeit what is familiar to them in hopes of gaining something far more valuable. Somehow they seem to realize that you cannot gain the new without abandoning the old.

Much the same is true in the biblical depiction of the church. Though rooted in God's grace, participating in this community involves sacrifice, resolve and deep commitment. The call to follow Jesus is in essence a radical call to switch citizenship. When we choose to become Christians, we turn in one passport in order to gain another. We leave behind our country of origin and perhaps even our families. When we decide to follow Jesus, we place ourselves under the authority of an entirely new head of state.

The resulting question, then, is this: How do we invite people to follow Jesus and join the community? In what manner do we present the gospel? This question is particularly significant in our context here where the church is often struggling to find relevance; we are situated far more on the margins of society than we were even 20 or 30 years ago. For those of us who wish to take seriously the biblical mandate to share the gospel with others, the ever-present temptation to make the gospel look attractive and user-friendly can be intense. Whether church planting, expanding our congregation's outreach ministries, or simply sharing our faith privately, we strive mightily to be warm and welcoming. We offer vibrant worship music, inviting fellowship meals, childcare for the kids and so on—as we should. In the process, however, we often run the risk of presenting a tame, unassuming gospel. We find ourselves vulnerable to the same challenges laid before Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness: “Turn these stones into bread”—proclaim a gospel of earthly success. “Throw yourself down”—model a gospel of theatrical glamor. “Bow before me”—announce a gospel void of pain and suffering (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). And as a result, we at times set the table with fine lines, bring out the best china and light the candles, but forget to serve the food.

If we are true to our calling, we must not shy away from proclaiming the demands that switching citizenship involves. Jesus, John informs us, was full of grace and truth (1:14). In our efforts to welcome and embrace others, we cannot neglect to encourage people to weigh seriously the cost of moving from one kingdom to another. We cannot depict conversion as a simple move from one small town to the next town over. “No amount of nurture,” my friend and former colleague, Luke Keefer, once commented, “can make up for a shallow conversion.” There is no way around it. Shifting citizenship involves the death of the old self and the adoption of an entirely new way of life (Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24). The call to follow Jesus is, as Bonhoeffer phrased it, an invitation to “come and die.” If we honestly believe this, then we will resist the urge to conceal the truth. Would we, after all, withhold the demands of political

citizenship from visitors to our country and leave them as perpetual tourists or refugees? Citizenship in God's kingdom costs something, but it is worth it.¹

The Equipping of the Church—What Does the Church Do to Train Those Who Follow Jesus?

With citizenship comes a great deal of learning, unlearning and relearning. A new language. New laws. A new culture. A new infrastructure and way of doing things. Oftentimes, little remains the same. This applies as well to citizenship in God's kingdom. The sheer magnitude of the transition can be overwhelming—and otherworldly. How, then, do we help new citizens in the kingdom adjust? How do we train them? Who do we prepare them to be? What do we equip them to do?

In her book entitled *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, Kenda Creasy Dean paints a disturbing picture of the version of the Christian Faith typically embraced by many young people today: "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." According to Dean, the overwhelming majority of teenagers in American churches, not to mention countless others of all ages, have virtually no idea how to articulate a true, biblical understanding of what it means to be Christians. They typically think in terms of "niceness," not holiness; friendliness, not hospitality; and acceptance, not grace. To be a follower of Jesus requires virtually nothing, according to Dean. Indeed, one can be a Christian and pretty much go on with life as usual.

This news, I suspect, should come as no earth-shattering surprise to most of us. People today are constantly bombarded by the values and beliefs of western culture, whether through music, films, literature, the internet or personal relationships. Indeed, the voices of both parents and church seem to be drowned out by megaphones of contemporary culture blaring at us from all directions. As a result, more and more people respond first as Americans and only second, if at all, as Christians. They think like Americans. They act like Americans. They live like Americans. Indeed, so deeply ingrained is this American mindset in the worldview of many Christians that they, for all intents and purposes, equate the two. To be a Christian and an American are one and the same.

I've noticed the onslaught of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism even among some students at the seminary, students who are specifically training for Christian service. In one class, a young man presented a case study and asked his peers to suggest possible responses to an admittedly volatile event that had recently

¹ I might note as well that we must avoid the idea that proclaiming the challenging aspects of the gospel inhibits the evangelistic efforts of the church. For one thing, the church is ultimately called to be faithful, not simply effective. For another, I have been a part of several churches that emphasized such themes as peace and nonresistance and yet grew significantly in the process. My own congregation in New York City is a case in point, as is my sponsoring church during the years that I served as an international pastor/teacher. That church, the Meeting House near Toronto, Canada, has grown to nearly 5,000 people while enacting the remarkably countercultural message of their teaching pastor, Bruxey Cavey.

taken place in Fresno. Immediately, the students offered political and/or governmental solutions involving everyone from social service workers to the police. They responded, in other words, as Americans, not Christians. No one considered, let alone posed, a collective strategy through which local Christians and congregations might have offered a distinctively biblical witness in the face of such a tragedy. In another class, I finally had to encourage the students to take off their American glasses and examine the issue that we were discussing through distinctively Christian eyes. Although many professing Christians may ask, "What would Jesus do?" or even wear WWJD bracelets, they think and act, first and foremost, as Americans.

Needless to say, those of us who take seriously the call to be citizens of a different kingdom have our work cut out for us. Our calling involves more than merely helping people to feel good about themselves and to connect with others, as valuable as these may be. If we care about discipleship, we must prayerfully, thoughtfully and creatively teach the language of the kingdom, inculcate the values of the kingdom and hold high the expectations of the kingdom. We can no longer be content to offer a random array of classes or other disjointed programs intended primarily to give people something to do. We need a plan to train people to be devoted followers of Jesus, a plan that (1) encompasses the entire life-cycle, (2) incorporates effective pedagogical strategies (3) and addresses matters of head, heart and hands. How can we possibly hope for followers of Jesus to live like him, think like him and love like him in our increasingly complex world if they have no true understanding of what that even involves?

Devotion

Devotion gets at the matter of affection—who do we love and trust? Devotion involves ardent dedication to another person, job, cause or deity. A devoted husband dedicates his time, attention and self to his wife, a devoted artist to her craft and a devoted activist to his cause. In this sense, devotion goes beyond obedience. Obedience involves doing what the other party asks and expects, regardless of motive. Devotion seeks to be and do whatever pleases the other party, whether it is required or not.

If one thing is abundantly clear in the Bible, it is that God does not wish to share the devotion of his people with anyone or anything else. More specifically, he insists that our hearts and minds be focused entirely on him. Yet one increasingly senses that countless Christians here in America, whether knowingly or not, have diverted their affection and devotion at times from God onto any number of things, including the stock market, Hollywood and the insurance industry. For our purposes here, however, let me highlight two areas in which, according to my observations, many who claim to follow Jesus have shifted their devotion from God to the state.

One senses, first of all, that Christians often view the state as their primary source of security. This is hardly new, of course. Witness Isaiah's warning against putting one's confidence in horses and chariots, a warning issued over 2,500 years ago now (31:1-3). Such a view, however, has been particularly evident in the aftermath of 9/11 and the ongoing culture of fear that has grown out of it. Intrinsic to this culture of fear is an "us against the world" mentality that many Christians have sadly bought into. According to this mentality, much of the world, particularly those countries that don't share America's western values, religious beliefs and forms of government, is evil and out to destroy us. The United States, by way of contrast, is exceptional, good, altruistic, pure in motive and intent and free to patrol the world for the cause of good. In this imagined apocalyptic struggle, many people, including Christians, gain their most profound sense of security in direct proportion to America's military might and success. Interestingly enough, the people of Judah viewed Jerusalem in the 7th and 8th centuries B.C.E. in much the same way—divinely appointed, beyond reproach, invincible. It was a view, I might add, that Yahweh found highly offensive back then, and I have no reason to assume that he feels any differently today.

And second, one notices a similar shift of devotion in terms of well-being. Think for a moment about the recent presidential elections, for example. I found striking the level of anxiety attached to the outcome of the voting. For many people, the overall welfare of both the state and their own lives seemingly rested on this election. If their candidate of choice won, the future was bright and all would prosper. If their preferred candidate lost, however, the world as we know it was at grave risk. Noticeably absent in all of this were the spiritual dimensions of our pitiful condition that defy human solutions, not to mention God himself.

If the church today seeks to raise up a generation of disciples who reject such thinking—who reject a sense of false security and well-being rooted in politics and military might—then we need to rediscover and courageously proclaim what the prophets of Israel said with unshakeable confidence. The God of the Bible is neither small nor weak, yet we often imagine him as anything but the Lord over all of history. Rather than being confused by the increased complexity of our modern world, caught off guard by global forces, or left behind by technological advances, God is up to every challenge. With Advent and Christmas still in our rearview mirrors, we must announce a message of truly good news, a message that centers on a big God in whose eyes even the most sophisticated computers are but a child's toy. To place our trust in any worldly ruler or system is not only spiritually perilous, but idiotic. God rules and reigns over the entire world. In God alone lies our security and welfare.

Obedience

Obedience gets at the issue of behavior—who do I listen to? When the expectations of those in authority over me conflict, who do I follow? Who actually has the say? In this particular instance, do we listen first and foremost to the laws and expectations of the state or to those of God when they do not line up?

In response, the Bible is no less clear concerning God's desire for our obedience than it is with respect to devotion. God wants and expects our total obedience, regardless of who or what is asking us to compromise. To obey, in fact, is far superior to sacrifice (1 Sam. 15:22). Stated differently, obedience is more important to God than the performance of endless religious deeds and rituals (Micah 6:8). God, once again, has the say.

With this in mind, four crucial issues arise here that I can mention only briefly. First, elevating God's authority over the state does not make us "anti-government." There is nothing virtuous in and of itself about criticizing and degrading the state for no apparent purpose. Already in the 16th century the early Anabaptists affirmed the God-given role of the state and acknowledged that the state had the responsibility of protecting the righteous and keeping evil in check. When there is no conflict between the expectations of the state and those of God, we are committed to being supportive citizens who participate in society in creative and transformative ways (Mark 12:17).

Second, when the expectations of the state do conflict with those of God, we are called to challenge them. What the Bible requires of us in terms of the state is submission, not unwavering obedience (Rom. 13:1; 1 Pet. 2:13). To obey the state in matters where conflict with God's expectations exists is, in political terms, treasonous. Submission, however, demands that we be prepared to suffer the consequences for our disobedience when they arise. Would a church, for example, be willing to forfeit its tax exempt status for challenging the state and taking a "pro-God" stance on a particular issue? I can only hope that it would.

Third, challenging the expectations of the state in favor of God's must be seen not so much as a negative act of defiance but as a positive expression of witness. One often hears people ask, "How can you enjoy the benefits that the state provides while at the same time refusing to participate?" The answer is simple: "You can't." The issue, in reality, is not so much whether or not one participates in society, but how one participates. In other words, we Christians are called to be salt and light in the world (Matt. 5:13-16). Sitting idly by while the state carries out its calling is not one of the options offered to us. We disregard the expectations of the state, not simply because they conflict with those of the kingdom of God, but because we have a higher calling that we must live out with courage and authenticity.

Think about the matter of military service, for example. It is one thing for the church to talk about "pacifism" and discourage its members from participating in war. It is a far different thing for the church to

articulate a hopeful theology of peace and encourage its members to engage violent situations in reconciliatory ways. Rather than simply decrying the evils of war, we can fund hospitals, send educational kits to war-torn countries, provide resources for impoverished people to start new businesses, and offer counseling and other forms of assistance to veterans who are struggling with reentry issues. It is always easier to say, “Don’t do that,” than it is to offer transformative alternatives. The church at its best is not a community of avoidance, but of redemption.

And finally, this entire issue of obedience underscores once again the need for the church to disciple people thoroughly and effectively. Disregarding the expectations of the state in favor of God’s requires prayerful individual and corporate discernment. We do not simply disregard expectations that are not to our liking. We disregard expectations as an act of worship to God. We must, therefore, have and promote a clear sense of what God’s expectations are and how they differ from those of the world.

Concluding thoughts

There is an old Jewish tradition that suggests that if every Jew in the world observes the Sabbath for two consecutive weeks, the Messiah will come. In a similar way, Article 12 of the Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith presents a sharp challenge to the church to take its God-given calling with increased passion and imagination. Rather than merely providing a biblical foundation for the role of earthly governments and a few precautionary warnings to help Christians relate properly to such governments—“Don’t obey the state uncritically nor offer it your undivided devotion”—these few, short paragraphs present us with an exhilarating exhortation: “Trust in God alone and devote yourselves—your time, gifts, resources and creativity—to building imaginative, compassionate, counter-cultural and thoroughly life-changing churches—little heaven towns—all over the world.” What would happen, I can’t help but wonder, if every Christian in every congregation laid down his or her longings for power, wealth, popularity and security for just two weeks—two weeks!—and sought the kingdom of God above everything else. What if, instead of thinking primarily like Americans, Canadians, Zimbabweans or Indians, we began thinking, feeling and living like Christians? Whether or not Jesus would come again right away I won’t claim to know. This I do know, however: The world would be a far more imaginative, forgiving and hopeful place.

Terry Brensinger is professor of pastoral ministry at Fresno Pacific Biblical Seminary, Fresno, Calif. Before coming to FPBS in 2011, he taught at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa., pastored churches in Kentucky, New York and Pennsylvania, and served as the international pastor/teacher for the International Brethren in Christ Association.