

Response to
“Contemporary Applications of Article 12 of the MB Confession of Faith”
By Laura Schmidt Roberts

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I'd like to express my appreciation to Dr. Brensinger for his thoughtful and insightful reflections on the biblical grounding and practical applications of Article 12. Thank you, brother, for these words that both inspire and challenge us.

My task in the next few minutes is to highlight the most significant aspects of this paper in terms of clarifying issues for our further reflection and processing as a community gathered here this evening. This task is both simple and difficult.

In its simplest terms, the paper's broad brushstrokes are clear: a reassertion of the biblical mandate of our singular and uncompromising allegiance to God, which we demonstrate by living as citizens of God's kingdom. The kingdom is a countercultural community that is different from any human kingdom, government or system. God's kingdom community is marked by love and forgiveness, by truth and justice, by transformation to wholeness made possible precisely and only because it is God's kingdom and no one else's. Dr. Brensinger reminds us that in terms of allegiance, devotion and obedience we cannot be of two minds or two identities. God will not have it. The call and the expectation is the singular, uncompromising allegiance to God, from which flow our unwavering devotion and obedience. God “has the say.” Always.

This allegiance determines our identity. And the paper reminds us that the choice to follow God and to take citizenship in God's kingdom community comes with cost and requires reorientation in the world—the ongoing, never-ending work of unlearning and then learning and relearning the kingdom ways. We choose this allegiance as we come to faith, of course. But it's also true that we continue to face the choice for the kingdom every day—the question of which allegiance, really, will determine our identity. We demonstrate where our allegiance truly lies in big ways and small by the way we live out our lives—in our relationships, our attitudes, our actions, our use of resources, our views of the world.

And that's where it gets complicated. The difficulty is born of the recognition Dr. Brensinger makes that we are members of multiple communities which also carry authority and expectations. How do we negotiate these “others” in light of our commitment to God as the one who “has the say”? The language we use here provides some clarification and significant challenge. As part of the opening session this

evening we sang songs proclaiming to God, “You alone are Father/ You alone are good/ You alone are Savior/ You alone are God.” We sang, “There is no one higher, no one greater than our God.” This is language of allegiance.

But, again, we are members of multiple communities which also carry authority and expectations: family, neighborhood, city, region, state, nation and on the list goes. In the face of these “multiple belongings” the paper challenges us to remember that “God has the say.” This calls to mind the image of serving one master that Jesus uses in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a singular image. This is not like the lists we make of the things we love, where we prioritize them—God first, others second and always, in good humble Mennonite Brethren fashion, putting self last. Allegiance is singular. There is no list. In this sense it is not a matter of being first citizens of God’s kingdom and then secondarily having allegiance elsewhere. There is only one—one—Lord. Just the single master. God as king, Jesus as Lord. God as the one who “has the say.”

This allegiance relativizes (not eliminates) all other duties, commitments, obligations. The singular focus of our hearts and minds on God recasts, reshapes, reorients our participation in the other circles. Not as multiple priorities or allegiances on a list where God comes first but other things are placed in very close proximity. This singular allegiance is what the conclusion of the paper drives toward, when it challenges us to “think, feel, live and dream like Christians.” In this sense, as kingdom citizens we are not American Christians, perhaps not even Christian Americans, maybe simply Christians who are in America. The point is not to deny our context, which is inescapable. The point is not to deny the reality and importance of the multiple communities of which we are a part. We love and are committed to people, places, ideas, even institutions and systems. Rightfully so. We feel and truly have love for and duty, obligation, commitment to family, friends, church and other institutions, society, even the global community. The question is how these are configured in relation to our allegiance to God. My point here is singular allegiance, because allegiance determines identity. We have a singular allegiance, not to God first, but to God alone. It’s the difference between a list and a lens, or a center, from which and in relationship to which everything else is reoriented. One center, one allegiance, which determines our identity and relativizes and reorients all other loves and commitments. This is the challenge.

And it’s a challenge complicated by historical shifts that bring us as a community to this question on this day. Ed Boschman’s introductory thumbnail sketch pointed toward a denominational or family of faith history that has included, at points, attempts to separate out entirely from the world in which we live, creating closed communities in isolation, or a “Mennonite Society” segregated from a larger, “foreign” national society. That’s no longer our setting, really. It isn’t even really a goal. In marked ways, especially over the past several generations in the United States and Canada, in settings where we have benefitted in various ways from good government, and religious freedom and the like, we have assimilated. Opting

out of links to the broader society isn't an option. We're in. Here too Dr. Brensing challenges us, not to reject the world but to join in God's work to redeem it. We do participate in society and government and many of its systems and services in ways unprecedented in our history as a family of faith. The cultural and sociological markers that once formed protective barriers for some of us—barriers that once were construed as tangible signs of a pilgrim people's allegiance to God and not to any earthly system—are gone. We are the church in the world. And our world, including our nation, like that of the early Christians, vies for our allegiance. The Old Testament examples Dr. Brensing points to remind us that to give that singular allegiance to something or someone other than God is peril. To do so is to forsake our identity and our mission as kingdom citizens.

This is the challenge. To reimagine and reconstrue our being part of the other multiple communities, including those of society and nation, in ways that reclaim the clarity not of what is first, but what is only, the center in relation to which all else is oriented. This singular allegiance relativizes and reorients our many other commitments, duties and obligations. As the church in the world we live as citizens of God's kingdom, which we know can never be fully equated with any human government, system or institution. God "has the say."

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