

A CHURCH ORDER FOR MEMBERS OF CHRIST'S BODY

ca. 1540

Leopold Scharnschlager composed this brief work to provide Anabaptist churches with direction regarding such topics as regular assembly, proper conduct for a service, providing for the needy, and church discipline. Although it was not written during the genesis of Anabaptism, this document provides a glimpse into the issues dealt with by first-generation Anabaptism and supplies information not always available in other source writings.

"Children, let all your works be done in order with good intent in the fear of God, and do nothing disorderly in scorn or out of its due season." Testament of Naphtali II, 9.

Paul says in I Cor. 14:40: "Let all things be done decently and in order." Likewise Col. 2:5: "I rejoice when I see your order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ." [Marginal glosses beside the quote from Naphtali reads "yesterday," beside the quote from Paul, "today."]

PREFACE

Since our heavenly Father, to whom be eternal praise, honor, and thanksgiving, has in these last days called us from darkness into his marvelous light through knowledge of his holy truth, and since we are all baptized and have decided to become one body in Jesus Christ regardless of where we may be located in the world, therefore if we are to achieve our calling not only in words but also in deed and in truth, it is necessary that we follow the order through which we exist in love and can be exhorted and corrected, since indeed all things exist through order. In the following such an order is written down in articles. Nevertheless daily changes for improvement according to the nature and opportunities of the times we allow for.

THE FIRST ARTICLE

First: because manifold deceptions are everywhere making inroads it is necessary that the called, committed, and obligated members of Christ's body, wherever they may be in the world or in distress, insofar as it is possible, should not neglect the assemblies (Hebrews 10:25), but wherever and however they may, according to the place and the persecutions gather together for the sake of their love for Christ, be their number small or great, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 15, 10, more or less. Such meetings should take place with wisdom, skill, reason, discipline,

friendliness, and quiet demeanor especially since we see the day of the Lord drawing near. The Lord says: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

THE SECOND ARTICLE

Secondly: when they come together, they shall, where there is no special leader (Vorsteher), select someone competent from among them, and admonish him in a friendly and loving manner to read or speak to them according to the gift which he has received from God. One may follow another in speaking according to the way in which they receive something, as Paul teaches (I Cor. 14), and thus exercise his gifts for the improvement of the members, so that our fellowship may not be the same as that of the falsely renowned, where only one and no one else can speak.

Before, however, they begin to speak let them fall on their knees (I Tim. 2:1) and faithfully call upon God that he may add fruit to their speaking. After the talk diligently admonish one another to walk according to the will of the Lord, to remain constantly in him, to watch faithfully and to wait for the Lord until he comes (Matt. 24:42; 26:41; Luke 12:35ff.) that we may be found without blemish before him (Phil. 2:15) and that not only here but much more in the next world we may together be with the Lord and also may rejoice eternally (Isaiah 4:2f.). Furthermore, before dispersing call upon the Lord and intercede for all members, also for cases of special need, and for all men according to the directive of our beloved brother Paul (I Tim. 2:1 ff.) Thanksgiving for all of God's gifts and good deeds (I Thess. 5:17 f.) should also be expressed and upon occasion to convenience before dispersing, bread should be broken together in memory of the Lord (I Cor. 11:24).

THE THIRD ARTICLE

Thirdly: when assembled in this manner, a leader if present (if not, any other elderly brother [I Cor. 14]) shall remember for the sake of the Lord the poor members with words that are wise, sincere, gentle, transparent, not pressuring and yet earnest, emphatic words, that thereby hearts may be moved to a voluntary expression of compassion and grow into the nature and power of love which is genuine and pleasing in the sight of God. Above all, there should always be present a brother with a purse of money known to all the members of the church, so that each member either in the meeting or after, when the Lord admonishes him to, may know where to place his free-will offering and his gift of gratitude so that at all times when the need arises the poor can be assisted according to the amount available at the time. Then the brother who cares for the fund shall distribute it with a good conscience and in the fear of God, paying diligent heed, whether they are needy or not, whether greedy or not, not as the world deals with the poor without testing and inquiring about their manner of life and walk. For this is a holy commission (Acts 6:1 ff.).

THE FOURTH ARTICLE

Fourthly: since there is a shortage of faithful workers who correctly, wisely and in good conscience faithfully seek for the lost and labor for the Lord in his vineyard (1 Thess. 5:12f.) and in turn daily causes much confusion, error and offense, there is an urgent need that when such a faithful worker is found and detected he be given due respect (Hebrews 13:7) and obeyed, for he is worthy of a double honor (according to the words of Paul, 1 Tim. 5:17). Share with him every good thing (Gal. 6:9f.) and all the support possible, as he may need in addition to work he is able to do on the side, so that we may not depreciate the messengers and workers of the Lord for whom we pray daily (Luke 10:2) lest the Lord allow us to be scattered abroad without shepherds. This applies not only for the sake of the ones who have seen the truth but also for the sake of the weak, milk-drinking vegetarians (I Cor. 3:2; Hebrews 5:12; Rom 14:2) and for the sake of those who in the future will be gathered to the Lord.

THE FIFTH ARTICLE

Fifthly: since the example of the primitive church in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32-5:11) is misunderstood by some giving rise to error and contempt, special sects and the like, and some have made of this example a law, a requirement, a fetter, even almost a carnal righteousness, demand, and the like, therefore let us recognize that in the early church at Jerusalem the sharing of goods was a voluntary matter and further observe what took place after the dispersion of the church from there. Even Paul wrote about sharing material possession and community of goods (Rom. 15:25 ff.; I Cor. 16:1 ff.; II Cor. 9:1 ff.) and we likewise in true apostolic character are to pay heed that the bride and flock of Christ be not forced, but may be led and fed voluntarily. Therefore the one who gathers funds (Steuersammler) is to pay heed, to accept the smallest gift without despising it, just as he does the greater (Luke 21:1-4) from both the rich and the poor, and faithfully thank both God and the giver. After that leave it to the Lord. For even though someone says, with worldly wisdom, "Ah, after all everyone has agreed to this and committed himself to it, why not diligently demand whatever is necessary?" We answer: the order of the Holy Spirit will not permit it. This work is not of man, just as it was not the flesh which initially promised or agreed. Therefore it must be sought not in the fleshly nature but in the spiritual. Otherwise we disrupt the voluntary nature of God's relation to his people.

THE SIXTH ARTICLE

Sixthly: when a brother or sister is overtaken by vices of the flesh, false teaching, licentious living and being, or in other cases of word or deed, there shall always be disciplined, modest, sincere admonition and correction from the leaders in trembling and fear of God, in love (Gal. 6:1; Matt. 18:15ff.). Diligent attention is to be paid in each case of transgression be it secret or open, large or small, one warning or more, how the person is dealt with according to gentleness and sharpness, patience and impatience. For correction and excommunication

must be distinguished according to the actual circumstances and according to the witness of the Scriptures, so that everything take place according to the spirit of love and not according to the nature of the flesh (Tit. 3:13; I Cor. 5:1 ff.; Rom. 2:1 f.; Eph. 5:11 f.; I Cor. 6:5). The power of Christ is not a power to destroy or to exercise tyranny, but to improve, that also for Christ his bride may be kept pure, everywhere, both for those within as well as those outside the church so that an honorable inoffensive walk may result and that no one block or make difficult the way and road to Christ and his kingdom.

THE SEVENTH ARTICLE

Seventhly: concerning the teaching, baptizing, and the Lord's Supper, these are to be observed according to the content of the commission and practice of the Lord and his apostles, nor changed or perverted, nor anything to be added or taken from it (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6), as it happens among the antichrists and the falsely renowned. At all times each brother and sister is to be guided in all their actions by the secrets of the essential Christian faith, and whatever the Lord has entrusted to him to bear before the world with a clear conscience, to prevent the blasphemy of Christ's name, Word and honor. Whatever other matters and errors arise in daily life, they are to perceive them and act with godly fear according to the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27), corresponding to the faith and serving for the improvement and edification of everyone. We are to follow him faithfully and renounce all unrighteousness of words, works and manner of life, flee from it, abstain and separate ourselves from it (II Cor. 6:17). To the honor of God and of our bridegroom Jesus Christ in order that when he comes we may joyfully appear before him in holy adornment arrayed in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 24) so that he may fully possess what he acquired for us and prepared through his precious blood (John 14). Therefore we pray to our heavenly father that he may help us to accomplish this and achieve it through Jesus Christ his beloved son, our Lord, to whom be praise, honor, and majesty in the Holy Spirit from eternity to eternity. Amen.

In Christ the Lord, a brother by grace and a servant of the truth, also a partner in the tribulation which is in Christ, *Leupolt Scharnschlager*.⁷⁹⁶

⁷⁹⁶ William Klassen, "A Church Order for Members of Christ's Body," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 38 (October 1964): 354-56, 386.

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