



# Faith Builders

Discipling the head, heart, and hands

ISS. 151 ∞ SPRING 2024

## Dirk Philips: What Makes a Church?

BY EDSSEL BURDGE, JR.

Edsel Burdge is a researcher at Elizabethtown College and frequent Winter Term instructor at Faith Builders. Edsel introduces us to an old Anabaptist writing by Dirk Philips that explores what makes a congregation and its leaders valid.

About a year and a half ago, I had a conversation with a friend who had left a plain Anabaptist community to join the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike Anabaptist-Catholic discourse in the sixteenth century, our discussion was cordial and respectful. At one point, he challenged me, “Anabaptism is only five hundred years old. Where was your church before that? Catholicism goes back to the Apostles.”

My friend’s argument was built on the idea of apostolic succession, whereby the church is perpetuated through an unbroken line of ordination from the time of the apostles to the current Catholic bishops. If one accepts the premise of apostolic succession, there is really no counter-argument. For as my friend pointed out, despite Thielman Van Braght’s attempt to show an unbroken line of those “defenseless Christians who baptized upon confession of faith,” the historical record gets a bit sketchy at places. Ironically, this sketchiness is due to Roman Catholicism’s ruthless and violent suppression of dissent during the millennium before the beginnings of the Anabaptist movement.

However, does one have to accept the Roman Catholic premise? The early Anabaptists thought not. For them, legitimacy lay elsewhere. One of the clearest and best developed arguments for the validity of the early Anabaptist congregations is found in *The Sending of Preachers* (1559), by Dirk Philips (1504-1568).

Dirk and his brother Obbe were early converts to Anabaptism in the Netherlands, joining the movement before the better-known Menno Simons. Obbe led a small group who refused to make common cause with the violent Anabaptist kingdom in Münster. After the fall of Münster in 1535, Obbe gathered the remnants together into congregations and appointed Menno Simons and Dirk as co-elders. However, Obbe began to have doubts about the legitimacy of his calling because he had been appointed to leadership by Jan Matthijs, later one of the leaders at Münster. Obbe abandoned Anabaptism for Spiritualism.

Spiritualism emphasized inward transformation and holy living. While Spiritualists believed that the church had been

corrupted, they were skeptical of attempts to outwardly reform or restore it. They advocated inward focus while conforming to whatever state-sponsored church was in power. Caspar Schwenkfeld and Sebastian Franck were prominent Spiritualists. Franck argued that if the church was to be restored, it had to be validated by miraculous signs and wonders as in the of days of the apostles, or from a living voice from heaven, as with Elijah. Dirk also tackled this question in *The Sending of Preachers*.

Dirk asked, “But which is the congregation of Christ, which has received such power from Christ, not only to choose teachers, but what is more, to bind and loose, to forgive sins, and to retain them?” He answered:

*Scripture testifies clearly at many places, namely, that it is a gathering of believers, that is of living saints and born-again persons who believe the Word of God entirely, teach the same correctly, bear fruit with it, practice the sacraments of Christ fittingly, correctly maintain the ban, walk in love, and conduct and carry out all things according to the gospel.*

Just as in the time of the apostles, Dirk argued, Christ’s church is brought into being and continues in Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Word of God. In answer to the question, “Where is this congregation?” Dirk wrote:

*The heavenly Jerusalem is everywhere, wherever the Word of God is rightly taught, believed, and kept, and the sacraments of Christ are used correctly according to the Word.*

*Where God’s Word is correctly taught, believed, and kept, for they are Christ’s disciples who have His Word, believe, and keep it. Where now such disciples are gathered in His name, there He is in the midst of them. But if Christ is among them, then they are always a congregation of Christ. If a congregation of Christ, then they must also have the same power which Christ gave His congregation.*

If any organization fails to be guided by the Spirit, to abide by the Word, and if it does not correctly practice believers’ baptism and the Lord’s Supper as a meal of remembrance, it ceases to be Christ’s church, whatever its claims of physical descent from the apostles.

Thus, for Dirk, legitimacy is founded not in “apostolic succession”

“

**Christ’s church is brought into being and continues in Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Word of God.**

but in the gathered body of believers who “through the power of Jesus Christ and the testimony of the Holy Spirit” can call and appoint its teachers and ministers. These leaders, Dirk wrote, “must be faithful according to the example of their Lord and master.” They are known by their unblameable life, by evidencing the fruits of the Spirit, and by leading a Christlike life. Further, they “preach repentance to the people (even as

Christ and the apostles did) and teach them, out of the law, God's wrath and severe judgment upon sin." Then "out of the gospel" they instruct their hearers, "to know God the Father in His eternal love and fathomless mercy, Christ Jesus in His grace and merits, through the cooperation the Holy Spirit." They preside over the right use of the sacraments and they make sure the ban is used for correction.

As far as the claims of both Catholics and Protestants, Dirk held as a "certain and undeniable" fact "that the Holy Spirit sends out no drunkards, nor adulterers, nor misers, nor servants of idols, nor hypocrites, who dissemble for the sake of the belly, and make merchandise with God's Word." He found plenty of examples of the like among both groups. In a poke at the Protestant clergy, Dirk wrote that as false teachers, they preach "even to the unrepentant nothing but grace" thus falsely "proclaiming peace to them." Further both Catholics and Protestants practiced infant baptism and served communion to those who showed no signs of true repentance and amendment of life. Neither did they hesitate to use the sword of persecution. According to Dirk, they were nothing but "false Christians and false prophets."

What then did Dirk have to say in response to the Spiritualist contention that the restoration of the church had to be signaled by miracles or a voice from heaven? No doubt, when Dirk heard this argument, it reminded him of the supposed visions and prophecies

that gave rise to the Anabaptist kingdom at Münster. He was having nothing of that. He wrote:

*God does not now, at the present time, speak with us through an external voice from heaven, nor through visions and dreams as happened in the Old Testament, but He speaks with us through His Son, Jesus Christ, and Christ speaks with us through his Word. And the Word of Christ is Spirit and life. Whenever Christ now grants and impresses his living Word in someone's heart, and thereby calls, that person is without any doubt called of the Lord through His Word. But whereby one shall know that anyone is thus called of God through the living Word and through the Spirit of Christ... namely, that he speaks God's Word truly, bears fruit, and seeks the honor of Christ and the salvation of souls with wholehearted zeal.*

Instead of waiting for a heavenly voice, Christians can move forth in confidence that by heeding the Scriptures and following the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they can "conduct themselves according to the practice and procedure of the first churches." Furthermore, Dirk reminded his readers of Jesus' words, that a "wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign." He also warned that just as the magicians of Egypt did, false teachers can sometimes perform signs.

In the end, no rationale overruled God's Word correctly taught, believed, and kept. Wherever this was present, so was the congregation of Christ.

Source: *The Writings of Dirk Philips, 1504-1568: Classics of the Radical Reformation*, Tr. and Ed. Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, Alvin J. Beachy, published by Herald Press, 1992, pages 198-237



## Spaces remain for two-year studies!

The Training Institute emphasizes whole-person education as we seek to prepare students for a life time of joyful service. Late application deadline: May 1.

Apply at [FBEP.ORG/ATTEND/TWO-YEAR-PROGRAMS](https://fbep.org/attend/two-year-programs).



## Volunteer Positions Open

Volunteers serve a one-year term beginning this summer. They participate in the mentoring program and audit classes. Applicants must be at least 18 and supported by their church.

- FAITH BUILDERS CHRISTIAN SCHOOL** Assistance in home rooms and tutoring
- MAINTENANCE** Building upkeep, janitorial, grounds, and handyman work
- KITCHEN** Food preparation and service for students, staff, and events
- HOUSEKEEPING** Cleaning, decorating, and hospitality
- BOOKSTORE** Customer care, shelf-stocking, and shipping

If you are interested in any of these positions, or can recommend someone to us, please contact us at [fbep@fbep.org](mailto:fbep@fbep.org).

## New Release!

We are developing a 13-lesson study guide on Anabaptist history and thought in commemoration of the 500-year anniversary of Anabaptism. This quarterly study is designed for youth/adult Sunday school classes or other similar contexts. We plan to make it available by December 2024.

## Summer Term

JUNE 24 – JULY 26

Summer Term offers courses designed to equip teachers in K-12 schools. Academic coursework and relational connections provide a rich, growing experience for men and women who teach the rising generation.

Teachers are life-long learners. Learn with us this summer!

For a full list of course descriptions and schedule:

Visit [FBEP.ORG/ST](https://fbep.org/st)

Email [fbep@fbep.org](mailto:fbep@fbep.org)

Call (814) 789-4518, ext. 220

### courses offered in 2024

Foundations of Education  
Steven Brubaker

Principles of Teaching  
Christopher Brode

American History  
Peter Goertzen

Teaching Secondary History/Social Studies  
Peter Goertzen

Beginning Class Voice  
Brandon Mullet

Beginning Choral Conducting  
Brandon Mullet

Reading and Responding to Literature  
Josh Nisley

Modern Church History  
Stephen Russell

Nonresistance  
Stephen Russell

Child Development  
Jonas Sauder

Cross-Cultural Understanding  
Jonas Sauder

Additional courses to be announced.



## Upcoming Events

Open House · APRIL 11-12

Be a student for a day! Find details and registration at [FBEP.ORG/OPEN-HOUSE](https://fbep.org/open-house).

FB Chorale Spring Program & Tour

MAY 19

All are welcome to attend this choir program in the FBCS gym at 7:00 PM. Follow the choir's tour itinerary May 19-26 at [FBEP.ORG/CHOIR-PROGRAM](https://fbep.org/choir-program).

FBTI Commencement · MAY 18

18 students plan to complete their tracks of study and disperse to serve the world!

Summer Term · JUNE 24 – JULY 26

Find the course list and applications in April at [FBEP.ORG/ST](https://fbep.org/st).

College Student Weekend

JULY 12-14

This weekend supports conservative Anabaptist college students. Register to attend at [FBEP.ORG/CSW](https://fbep.org/csw).

Teachers Week · JULY 30 – AUGUST 2

This week provides practical tools for new and experienced teachers. Registration opens in April at [FBEP.ORG/TW](https://fbep.org/tw).

Two-Year Studies Begin · AUGUST 19

Invest two years of preparation for a lifetime of service! Apply at [FBEP.ORG/ATTEND/TWO-YEAR-PROGRAMS](https://fbep.org/attend/two-year-programs). Apply for scholarships at [FBEP.ORG/SCHOLARSHIP-OPTIONS](https://fbep.org/scholarship-options).

## Personnel Needs

We are seeking applications for these staff openings:

- house parents
- mentoring coordinator
- ministry apprenticing coordinator
- student recruitment coordinator

For information about these roles or to request an application, contact Steven Brubaker: [srb@fbep.org](mailto:srb@fbep.org) · (814) 789-4518 ext. 239



# Faith Builders

28527 Guys Mills Road  
Guys Mills, PA 16327  
(814) 789-4518 | fbep.org  
*Address Service Requested*

Non Profit Org  
US Postage  
**PAID**  
Erie, PA  
Permit #227

The Faith Builders newsletter is published quarterly and serves to inform, inspire, and equip its readers. Subscription is free upon request.

JOIN US FOR

## College Student Weekend!

JULY 12-14

How is the world changed? How can our work make a difference that lasts? At College Student Weekend, we meet Anabaptist college students who want to engage these questions with the mind of Christ.

In breakout and plenary sessions attendees hear college graduates who are cultivating effective, sustainable lives of service.

In addition to these sessions, attendees gather in small groups to share their dreams and questions and to pray for one another. Lots of time is built into the schedule for food, relaxed conversations, and recreation.

Find more information and register at [FBEP.ORG/CSW](http://FBEP.ORG/CSW).

### *plenary session*

Finding Harmony When My Worlds Seem to Collide

— Nathan Zook, *pastor, professor of political science*

### *breakouts include*

Humor and Self-Absorption in C. S. Lewis's Fiction: Why Laughter Matters

— Lori Eby, *housewife and lover of literature*

Instant Connections, Buffered Relationships, and Tentative Conversations: Exploring Effects of Digital Technology over the Decades

— Jonas Sauder, *educator*

Maintaining Christian Faith and Witness in the College and Professional World

— Curvin Gordon, *ER physician*

AI and the Sciences

— John Mark Kuhns, *science educator*

Cultivating a Childlike Faith in the Midst of Scientific Facts

— Faith Zook, *biology instructor*

A Perspective on Activism

— Nathan Zook, *pastor, professor of political science*

Care & Feeding of the Student Soul

— Janelle Glick, *counselor*

*Additional breakouts to be announced.*

