



TO OUR CORE

EXPLORING THE CENTRAL VALUES OF THE BIC CHURCH

WHEN FORM FOLLOWS FAITH

How the architecture of one BIC meeting house reveals an historic commitment of the Church

by E. MORRIS SIDER

For the first 100 years of Brethren in Christ history, members met in each other's homes as testimony to their commitment to simplicity and family-like community. Then, in the 1870s, to accommodate their growing numbers, our BIC ancestors began gathering in meeting houses—buildings constructed specifically for worship. In these new settings, the values of community and accountability that come with family life at its best remained strong, and the meeting houses' architecture was an extension of those theological commitments.

Looking at the Ringgold Meeting House, which was built in Maryland in 1871 and is one of the oldest still in existence, we can see how these early BIC lived out the call to accountability in various areas of faith.

Accountability to living simply:

The simple structure, bare walls and ceiling, and plain, unpadded pews of the Ringgold Meeting House illustrate the unadorned construction and décor of early BIC church buildings. This austerity reminded attendees of the worthlessness of earthly wealth and the call to modest living.

→ We value integrity in relationships and mutual accountability in an atmosphere of grace, love, and acceptance.



Accountability to purity: Typical of all early meeting houses, the Ringgold Meeting House has two separate entrances, one for men and one for women and children. It also had a partition running between the two sides of the room. Both of these measures sought to separate members of the opposite sex and thus eliminate distractions so that full attention could be given to the Word.

Accountability to God and each other:

Unlike most churches today, the Ringgold Meeting House features a floor-level pulpit table. This symbolized the idea of the fellowship of believers and suggested that ministers were not elevated above

the congregants, either in terms of their access to God's truth or their freedom from sin and weaknesses. It was a visual demonstration that congregants were responsible to hold the ministers accountable, just as the ministers were to guide the flock and hold its members accountable.

Accountability to humility: The offering box, which was located at the meeting house's entrance, harkens back to a time when Brethren in Christ did not "lift" offerings by means of offering plates, as they do now. Rather, offerings were deposited in the offering box quietly and in private. This helped congregants remain humble in their giving to God and His kingdom.

BIC church buildings today come in all shapes and sizes, and most look very different from the Ringgold Meeting House. I wonder what our descendants 100 years from now will surmise about our theology by looking at our meeting spaces.

Adapted from "The Ringgold Meeting House as Symbol" by E. Morris Sider in the December 1995 issue of Brethren in Christ History and Life.



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