

INFLUENCES ON MENNONITE BRETHERN THEOLOGY

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The Influence of Fundamentalism  
(Abridged Version)

The assignment is to examine the influences on Mennonite Brethren theology from our exposure to American Fundamentalism and some forms of Evangelicalism. The Mennonite Brethren are a vulnerable people, because they are a people of simplistic faith and an openness to broad theological exposure.

Mennonite Brethren, A People of Simplistic Faith

The Mennonite Brethren are historically rooted in the larger Anabaptist Mennonite family. The character of the movement is classified as Existential Christianity by Robert Friedmann.<sup>1</sup> Their concern was for the reality of an existential faith. Their commitment was to understand the Bible as it applied to the New Testament model of a redeemed community.<sup>2</sup>

For Mennonite Brethren the word "Living Faith" (lebendigen Glaube) was possibly the more common description of their understanding of true faith. The claim of faith was tested against the evidences of "being" and "relationships" measured by the standards described as the fruits of the spirit (Gal. 5:22-25). Obedience to God meant believing the Word of God and living according to it.

The 19th century meetings of Mennonite Brethren show little concern for doctrine.<sup>3</sup> They were more concerned about such issues as ethics, church polity, evangelism, and missions.

The Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith was regarded as descriptive rather than normative; it was never given equal status with the Bible.<sup>4</sup> "What does the Bible say" was the major concern in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.<sup>5</sup> Salvation meant to believe in Jesus as Saviour and to follow him as Lord in life. The model for the redeemed community, the church, was that of the apostolic fellowship as found in the book of Acts.<sup>6</sup>

The Openness of Mennonite Brethren for a Broad Fellowship

The non-creedal orientation of the Mennonite Brethren has meant an openness towards "true believers" of other groups who might have a creedal orientation. Such a non-creedal bibliocentric faith concerned itself primarily with consistency between faith and life. They therefore have had contact and been influenced by Darby<sup>sm</sup>ian, Pietists<sup>8</sup> and German Baptists, in Russia.

All these influences did not affect their basic New Testament faith. Their ethnicity may have helped to temper the effects of these theological exposures in Russia.

The Influence of Fundamentalism on Mennonite

Brethren Theology in North America

Mennonite Brethren in Cultural Transition: A Setting Favorable to Outside Theological Influences

Mennonite Brethren who moved to North America faced a new environment which brought changes in their values. They had never been forced to define the basics of the~~xx~~ theological commitment of their Anabaptist heritage. Their previous resolution made no such demands. Therefore they were easily accepting new influences, from for example, fundamentalism, taught in Bible institutes which members attended and even Tabor College. Even in their own institutions, the distinctives of their faith from their heritage were not taught.

When Dr. P.E. Schellenberg was appointed president of Tabor College in 1942 there was immediate suspicion that since he was not a churchman, he might not give the spiritual leadership required. What was seen as required was now the newly<sup>10</sup> embraced fundamentalism. This caused a great clash which had effects for nearly two decades in this institution.<sup>2, 10</sup> It illustrates the tension between an existential Christianity and one pressed into a creedal theological system. The tension between these two forms of faith can be suggested by looking at the historical Mennonite Brethren understanding of faith and the alterations introduced by N.A. Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.

The five basic premises of the historic faith of the Mennonite Brethren as they understood the Scriptures are:

1. An unqualified commitment to the Bible not in a form of a dogma but as the revelation of God in Christ related to redemption and life.
2. The realization of redemption in Christ expressed in a conversion of the individual that resulted in a transformed life—a new creature.
3. The Fellowship of a redeemed community as a brotherhood in contrast to an institutional church—Kirchengemeinde.
4. A believer's life of an obedient discipleship reflecting the character of Christ as a people in the world but not of the world (John 17:18-23).
5. A people entrusted with the sacred charge of evangelism and mission in calling men and women to the obedience of Christ in true discipleship.

The concern of this paper is a brief consideration how these premises of our spiritual heritage have been affected by the influences of American Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.

#### Our Commitment to the Scriptures

In a day where the orthodoxy of a believer is tested on the issue of an inerrant Bible we may well examine our stance. The acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God for the Mennonite Brethren is "not the end of a chain of logic." "It is much more the discovery of Christ through the witness of the Scriptures that God has spoken first through the prophets and later by His Son." <sup>11</sup> The reality of the supernatural in the understanding of our forefathers defied all efforts of proof. To accept the Bible as the Word of God for them was an exercise of faith that found its verification of genuineness in the obedience to the teaching and life of Jesus. The Mennonite Brethren, in relation to the Bible, were historical fundamentalists with a small "f." There was no room to question its divine origin, character and all inclusiveness as it relates to the redemptive purposes of God. The influence of evangelical fundamentalism has shifted the center of faith in a relationship of obedience to Christ and the Holy Spirit

who bears witness in our hearts that the Bible is God's Word written to a creedal polemic which focuses on the inerrancy of the Scriptures in the original autographs which are non-existent. The effort to produce a system of logic as proof for the absolute trust-worthiness of the Bible and the struggle of defending the "inerrancy" of the Scriptures diverts attention from the center of the Bible, that of the person of God in Christ and the Holy Spirit who is the authority to guide us into all truth. The degree of the polemics related to the defense of the Bible within our brotherhood today has reached a level where it endangers the unity of the fellowship. Men and institutions unqualified in their commitment to the Bible as the Word of God, but unwilling to accept a system of logic as a proof for the divine character of the Scriptures are placed under suspicion as to their orthodoxy. An interesting incident occurred in British Columbia in the 1950s. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible, after it was released, was rejected. The King James Version was the only true version. Yet later, the Living Bible was accepted. Such instability in attitude and judgement must be attributed to a loss of historical understanding related to the issue of the Bible as the Word of God. The historic non-creedal commitment of Mennonite Brethren to the Bible is expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).<sup>12</sup>

### Our Understanding of Conversion

Mennonite Brethren, with their roots in an understanding of the Scriptures which provided the dynamic for the radical reformation of the sixteenth century, understood conversion as a transformation of life. The change of the individual's life when he turns from being self-centered to being Christ-centered<sup>13</sup> served as the evidence for true conversion. To know God in the context of institutional religion without the radical change in the character of being and relationship was insufficient for them. The tension between a religion of "Mennonitism" and the Scriptural demand "ye must be born again" was the occasion for the Document of Secession of 1860. A religious ex-

perience in a profession of faith which did not produce the evidences of a new life in Christ was for them invalid. Their understanding of conversion reflected the statement of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that "Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of the church. Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ."<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the above perception of conversion stands the question addressed to Billy Graham by a Dutch tele-caster Ko Durieux during a press conference in 1977. Note the inquiry:

We read about all the people in America being born again, that this was the Year of the Evangelical, that thousands—perhaps millions—are coming to Christ, yet we also see in America abortion on the increase, deterioration of the family structure, the crime rate increasing. How is it that so many can be born again and your society be so sick?<sup>15</sup>

A large segment of American Evangelicalism has accommodated the gospel to appeal the values of a culture permeated by a benefit syndrome. A call to "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" to be saved and appropriate the benefit of a security for the life to come, with the absence of the second part of the gospel that "whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me," and "For whosoever will save his life shall loose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's the same shall save it" (Mark 8:34-35) is a deceptive accommodation to man's inherent selfishness and does not express the biblical teaching of conversion. "When 34 percent of adult Americans claim to be 'born again' and 46 percent of the Protestants believe that the Bible should be taken literally"<sup>16</sup> without, as it appears, accepting it as the standard for life and practice, then there is reason to question the character and meaning of such assertions. The exposure to the described emphasis in much of the evangelism in large evangelistic campaigns, and over radio and television, is bound to influence the basic biblical understanding held by Mennonite Brethren.

The example of the strong emphasis of child evangelism shows this understanding of conversion. The emphasis is on the benefits of redemption with the demands for obedience and a new life weakened.

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## Our Understanding of Discipleship

Menonite Brethren, not identified with theological systems, sought varification for a genuine conversion in a life of discipleship. Their understanding of discipleship was the expression of the character of Jesus in life. The reference to an experience of "accepting Christ" was for them an insufficient proof for a true conversion. Their understanding of the Scriptures gave no room to separate "accepting Jesus Christ as Savior" and "following Jesus in life." (The centrality of discipleship in the teachings of Jesus today is strongly asserted by recent scholarship.)<sup>17</sup> This central concern of Menonite Brethren<sup>18</sup> is historically well covered in the statement of Hans Denk which defines the evidences of true conversion as "Nachfolge im Leben"—following Jesus in Life.<sup>19</sup>

This understanding of the Christian life had a strong focus in the emphasis of Christians as a "people in the world but not of the world" (John 15:19-20). Their position in question related to participation in politics and war was deeply rooted in the understanding that such identification could not be reconciled with the calling of a people of God "to show forth the praises (excellencies) of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (I Peter 2:9).

In contrast to the outlined understanding of discipleship we note the strong political character of evangelical fundamentalism. The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931<sup>20</sup> and the Defender Magazine Crusade<sup>21</sup> are examples from the past. The Moral Majority under the leadership of Jerry Falwell, The Christian Voice with the slogan Christians for Reagan and The National Chistian Action Coalition are some of the political arms of evangelical fundamentalism in the present.<sup>22</sup>

What have been the effects of a close exposure of Menonite Brethren through their affinity with fundamentalism? The struggle towards modification of our historic position on peace, non-resistance and the swearing of an oath under the cover that accommodations in this matter are justified for the sake of more effective evangelism, is

at the moment on the very surface.<sup>23</sup> The endorsement to recognize non-combatant and combatant participation in war as legitimate options from prominent leaders in the Brotherhood is sufficient to recognize the serious inroads made by evangelical fundamentalism into our ranks. The Canadian political circumstances in recent years have not demanded a principle confrontation with this issue. Whether the historic positions on such basic issues of faith and life would be different than in the U.S.A. remains to be tested.

The influence of American evangelicalism in the area of personal lifestyle in the context of self-denial and cross-bearing foundational to New Testament discipleship can easily be measured by the fluctuating standards of social and personal ethics. A limited analysis related to this consideration is found in the doctoral dissertation of Peter Hamm<sup>24</sup> and in the survey "Anabaptists Four Centuries Later."<sup>25</sup>

The late B.B. Janz in a 1954 Conference message,<sup>26</sup> speaks with a prophetic voice in calling the Brotherhood to a responsible consideration of existing dangers for faith and life of the Mennonite Brethren Church. The loss of evidences of a "new creation" in conversions (child conversions and baptism of children), a trend toward worldliness endangering the Brotherhood as a people in the world but not of the world, and institutional organizations replacing the interdependent character of a New Testament Church, were the areas of his concern. Today, 25 years later there may be a need to modify the identification of symptoms justifying such concerns. The implications, however, could well be more serious than a quarter of a century ago.

#### Our Understanding of the Church as a Brotherhood

Mennonite Brethren understanding of the church is possibly best expressed by Robert Friedman<sup>27</sup> in the statement, "The real dynamite in the age of the Reformation... was this, that one cannot find salvation without caring for his brother, that this 'brother' actually matters in the personal life....This interdependence of men gives life and salvation a new meaning. It is not 'faith alone' which matters (for which faith no church organization would be needed) but it is brotherhood, this intimate

caring for each other, as it is commanded to the disciples of Christ as the way to God's Kingdom." <sup>27</sup>

The character of an interdependent fellowship—a Brotherhood—is reflected from the Conference records of the years from 1864 to the 1960s and from the congregational minutes of local Fellowships. <sup>28</sup> The principle of interdependent responsibility in a local congregation included loving watchcare over the life of each member and personal accountability to the Brotherhood in areas of personal lifestyle, ethics and community relations. At some junctions the central character of Brotherhood became distorted in a spirit of legalism. The principle, however, has stood the test through the 100 years of history. The pattern of a New Testament leadership <sup>29</sup> added to the expression of a Brotherhood. The corporate body shared the concern for the selection of leadership from within the Fellowship. "What does the Bible say" served as the compass for directive and responsibility.

On Conference level the same principle of organizational and functional relationship prevailed. The local congregation, independent in its operational function, was interdependent in relationship to the Conference in matters of faith and life. <sup>30</sup>

In contrast to the position is the emphasis on independence in American Fundamentalism to the individual and local congregation. There was sense of community in the church; then it was a stress on individualism.

Such movements and institutions as Millinarianism Bible and Prophetic Conferences in North America, Bible Institutes, and Mission Societies all functioned as independents. <sup>31</sup> Without minimizing the contributions of these movements towards the propagation of the Gospel, the question remains how the emphasis on independence affects the basic character of the church, the expression of the redemptive purpose of God. The culture of individualism, plus the strong emphasis on independence affects not only the biblical <sup>church</sup> concept of Mennonite Brethren, but undermines also the basic teaching of salvation with respect to a faith rooted in subordinate obedience to Christ, His

Word, and the Church.

Our Understanding of Mission and Evangelism

The Mennonite Brethren Conference historically has been an evangelistic missionary movement. <sup>In</sup> The first 50 years of its history it served as an initiating influence for the expansion of the "True Believer's Church" in the context of an ethnic cultural Mennonite Peoplehood. They were also the instrument in the establishment of the Evangelical Baptist Movement in Russia. <sup>32</sup> God used them to evangelize Mennonite groups in Manitoba and establish the first Mennonite Brethren churches there. The Mennonite Brethren churches in North Dakota were also the fruit of the ministry of our Brethren before the beginning of the 20th century. Their outreach extended itself also to the regions beyond—India, Africa and later to South America. Much of the motivation for the energetic evangelism in addition to the dynamics of their personal faith, came to them from the Darbyistic, Millinarian emphasis on missions. <sup>33</sup> The independent church movements and Faith Missions contributed much to the evangelistic concern among Mennonite Brethren. The vision for a lost world, strongly emphasized in Bible institutes, had a contagious affect in providing methods and models for evangelism. The response of the many young people to the service opportunities under Faith Missions reflects an insufficient degree of leadership for missions and evangelism within the Brotherhood.

The major benefits outlined above, however, must be placed into the context of the strong emphasis on "soul winning" with an underemphasis on the interdependent relationship of the believers as members of the body of Christ. We cannot neglect the strong emphasis in the Scriptures on "perfection." It is estimated that ninety percent of Christ's ministry was instruction related to social, ethical and moral measurements. Paul's writings address themselves largely to doctrinal and social implications of divine revelation. The words of Jesus, "It hath been said, but I say unto you" reflects a past and a present, an old and a new, an imperfect and a perfect moral standard of reference. The need for perfection as a requirement for the fulfillment of the mission in American eveangelism is largely overlooked. The church as the functional organism of the Holy Spirit must be concerned for a high standard of moral and

ethical perfection. This standard, however, should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means to maintain the spiritual fitness to reflect Christ the Savior, and bring others to the knowledge of salvation. The assignment for the perfection of the saints and the salvation of the lost are interdependent. Perfection cannot be accomplished in the pursuit of moral and spiritual perfection but is a natural result of a spiritual growth emerging from the struggle for the life and destiny of others (Acts 11:26; 13:3-4; 11:29-30). The lack of the concern for a biblical interdependent church community in American evangelical revivalism has no doubt served as an influence in the Mennonite Brethren Church to move from an underemphasis on soul winning—to some degree due to cultural isolation—to an overemphasis on soul winning and mission with a lessening concern for the perfection of the church.

#### Concluding Observations

More study and analysis needs to be done. The outlined influence of Evangelical Fundamentalism must not be viewed as being solely responsible for the changes within our Brotherhood. Influences from without constitute only the test for the spiritual health and strength of a body. The degree of shift in character and function which have been recorded have to be assumed as a personal responsibility by the Brotherhood. Our vulnerability to trends which we recognize as inconsistent with the character of the New Testament Church aspired to by our forebearers, is a testimony to the existence of serious ailments within the body. The spirit of tension, suspicion and open attack historically characteristic of Dispensationalism and American Fundamentalism against those who may not share nor accept the understanding of creedal and eschatological formulations held by fundamentalism, today very prevalent in some of our circles, points to symptoms of an advanced condition of spiritual malnutrition. A further review may provide a remedy for the Brotherhood.

Fundamentalism has exalted the "work of the cross" but has been strangely silent about the "way of the cross" and the demand of Christian discipleship. <sup>34</sup> Can that statement be applied as a description of Mennonite Brethren theology today?

## FOOTNOTES

1. Robert Friedmann, The Theology of Anabaptism (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press), pp. 27-29.
2. P.M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910. English translation published by The Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Fresno, Calif., p. 231, d.
3. Bible Conference discussions held at Gnadenu, Marion County, Kansas, February 1-2, 1884. Translated by A.E. Janzen, February 19, 1980. Copy in Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California.
4. Confession of Faith, Mennonite Brethren 1902, p. 53; 1917, p. 47; 1976, p. 9.
5. Observations of J.B. Toews, member of the Mennonite Brethren Church for 60 years with 50 years of service in positions of leadership.
6. Peter Martin Hamm, "Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, McMaster University, 1978. Restorationist thinking, pp. 146-157.
7. Ernest R. Sandeen, "John Nelson Darby and Dispensationalism," pp. 59-80.
8. J.B. Toews, "Mennonite Brethren Identity and Theological Diversity," Pilgrims and Strangers. Paul Toews editor (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1977), p. 136.
9. Report from Mrs. Rachel Hiebert, Head Librarian at Tabor College at that time and a statement from William Neufeld, in Archives of Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.
10. Robert Friedman, The Theology of Anabaptism, p. 31.
11. J.C. Wenger, "The Inerrancy Controversy Within Evangelicalism," in Evangelicalism and Anabaptism. Edited by C. Norman Kraus (Herald Press, 1979), p. 102.
12. Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, with A History and Critical Notes, Vol. III, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1919), pp. 602, 603.
13. Myron Augsburg, "Modern Man and the New Man," in Consultation on Anabaptist Mennonite Theology. Edited by A.J. Klassen (Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), p. 79.
14. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (New York: McMillan and Co., 1967), pp. 45 and 64.
15. Reported by Charles Colson, "Religion Up—Morality Down," Christianity Today, Vol. 22, No. 19 (July 31, 1978), p. 26.

16. J. Lawrence Burkholder, "Popular Evangelicalism: An Appraisal," in Evangelicalism and Anabaptism. Edited by C. Norman Kraus (Herald Press, 1979), p. 25.

17. F.C. Grant, "The Authenticity of Jesus' Sayings," Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolph Bultmann (Berlin, 1954), pp. 110-129. Also A. Schulz, Nachfolgen und Nachahmen (Munich, 1962; H.D. Betz, Nachfolge Jesu und Nachahmung Christi (Tubingen, 1967).

18. The records of early Conference minutes and congregational minutes (1886-1920) reflect the question of lifestyle as the major concern of the Brotherhood.

19. W. Fellman, ed., Hans Denk Schriften, 2 Teil (Gütersloh, 1956), p. 45.

20. Norman F. Furniss, The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931 (Yale University Press, 1954).

21. Gerald Winrod, editor of The Defender published in Wichita, Kansas—later Kansas City Missionry, 1933-1958.

22. Lisa Myers, Universal Press Syndicate, Fresno Bee (July 9, 1980), pp. 1 and 4.

23. Records of United States Conference of Mennonite Brethren in St. Paul, August 14-17, 1980 and the consultation meeting on the peace question in Hillsboro, March 20-22, 1980.

24. Peter Martin Hamm, "Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren," pp. 167-171.

25. J. Howard Kaufman and Leland Harder, Anabaptists Four Centuries Later (Herald Press, 1975), pp. 118-182.

26. B.B. Janz, Canadian Conference Yearbook, 1954, pp. 10-15.

27. Robert Friedman, "On Mennonite Historiography and on Individualism and Brotherhood," Mennonite Quarterly Review (April, 1944), 18:121.

28. All such records are in the collection of Conference and congregational documents at the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno, California.

29. John E. Toews, unpublished paper read at the Clearbrook Study Conference, Clearbrook, B.C., May 8-10, 1980.

30. Constitution of the Mennonite Brethren Conference.

31. Ernest R. Sandeen, chapter 7, pp. 162-187. The Roots of Fundamentalism (University of Chicago, 1970: Reprinted by Baker Book House, 1978).

32. Karev, History of the Evangelical Baptist Association in Russia, mimeographed English translation, Fresno Archives, pp. 4-8.

33. Ernest R. Sandeen, pp. 182-187.

34. ? No reference to source for this footnote given in the original paper. Please ask Brother Toews whether he might have the proper source.