

INFLUENCES ON MENNONITE BRETHREN THEOLOGY

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The Influence of Fundamentalism

The assignment to examine "The Influence of Fundamentalism on Mennonite Brethren Theology" is difficult for two reasons. First the period of such influence in varied degrees includes the time of the 20th century from its beginning to the present. Secondly, the phenomena which we address as Fundamentalism has undergone broad modifications and diffusions.

We cannot refer to Fundamentalism today in the limited political way Norman Furness used the term in the book "The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931."¹ Ernest R. Sandeen in "The Roots of Fundamentalism"² offered an excellent theological corrective, but his discussion does not reach beyond 1930. The religious movement he has described was strongly focused in Millinarianism and in the 20s and 30s in what was known as the World's Christian Fundamentalist Association. Today Fundamentalism, however, is much more complex. It has retained its basic characteristics in terms of dogmatic creedalism, Darbyistic understanding of history and eschatology and an arrogance in its hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures. Its organizational and functional forms, however, have changed. They have penetrated the center of American Evangelicalism and are much more difficult to isolate and define. David O. Moberg addresses this difficulty by stating that "Both evangelicals and fundamentalists are committed to the basic fundamentals of the Christian faith--the deity and virgin birth of Jesus Christ, his vicarious atonement for sin, his bodily resurrection, his personal second coming, and the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures."³ George M. Marsden assists us in understanding the diffusion of the past decades when he writes on the subject "From Fundamentalism to Evangelicalism."⁴ Richard Quebedeaux is further helpful in identifying several distinct ideological subgroups. He speaks of separatist fundamentalists who demand a radical separation from every manifestation what they consider liberalism. A second group he classifies as open fundamentalists who are equally dispensational in theology and separatistic in practice but less vocal and extreme in their position and express some openness to engage in dialogue with other evangelicals.⁵ We need not establish an exact delineation between Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. Our assignment does not require such definitions. Rather we need to broaden the parameter of our considerations to examine the influences on Mennonite Brethren theology from our exposure to American Fundamentalism and some forms of Evangelicalism. To understand Mennonite Brethren vulnerability to these influences, some introductory considerations are necessary. I therefore suggest that we refer briefly to the Mennonite Brethren as a people of simplistic faith and an openness to broad theological exposures.

Mennonite Brethren, A People of Simplistic Faith

The Mennonite Brethren are historically rooted in the larger Anabaptist Mennonite family. They share the character of the movement classified by Robert Friedman as Existential Christianity.⁶ Friedman further maintains that a theological system cannot be pressed into a theological system.⁷ The historical record of the Mennonite Brethren provides confirmation of Friedman's statement. 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.⁸ Their understanding of the Scriptures was identical with Menno Simons'.⁹

For Mennonite Brethren the word "Living Faith" (lebendiger Glaube) was possibly the more common description of their understanding of true faith. The phrase was used as a contrast to the ethnic institutional religion of the larger Mennonite community in Southern Russia during the 19th century. This ethnic religion failed to express the vibrant existential reality of the New Testament church as Mennonite Brethren understood it.¹⁰ The criteria of faith for the Mennonite Brethren forebearers rested in the evidences of a new life--born again (John 3:3, 2 Cor. 5:17) based on repentance, an experience of personal conversion, resulting in an assurance of sins forgiven and the witness of the spirit that "we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:16). 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 the Scriptures in the example of Jesus and the apostolic teaching in character and relationships of life was their commitment of faith. To believe the Word of God was equated with a life according to the Word of God. Menno's "Foundations of Christian Doctrine" served as a point of reference in their effort to interpret the Word of God.

The records of early Mennonite Brethren Conferences and local churches (1876-1900) provide little evidence of doctrinal concerns. The major exception is the record of a joint meeting of representatives from the Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, General Conference Mennonites, and Mennonite Brethren on February 2, 1884. This body, meeting in Gnadenau, Marion County, Kansas, discussed issues of doctrine and church polity. The meeting, however, did not formulate any defined positions that could be called doctrinal statements.¹¹ The recorded discussions of the early brethren relate primarily to issues of 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.¹² The point of reference for Mennonite Brethren historically was not a creedal statement. Study of the Scriptures for answers to questions arising out of the life of the church, "What does the Bible say" was the major concern in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.¹³ Their understanding of salvation was rooted in a "Christocentric Theology." Their faith provided no room to question the Bible as the Word of God, Jesus Christ as God incarnate, His vicarious death and His victorious resurrection as the all-sufficient provision for the redemption of sinful man, and His coming again to receive His own and to judge the world. To believe in Jesus as Savior for them meant "to follow Jesus in life: (Hans Denk). The model for the redeemed community, the church, was that of the apostolic fellowship, the church, as found in the book of Acts.¹⁴

The Openness of Mennonite Brethren for a Broad Fellowship

The non-creedal orientation of the Mennonite Brethren provided for them the liberty of fellowship with people from other evangelical bodies whom they considered to be "true believers."¹⁵ An unconditional commitment to the Bible as the Word of God, an acceptance of Jesus as Savior and Lord, the emphasis of repentance and faith evidenced in the character of a new creature, and an emphasis on a consistent walk in keeping with this profession, provided a sufficient basis for such fellowship.¹⁶

The openness towards "true believers" of other groups in the absence of strong doctrinal theological identification had also inherent dangers. Pietists, Lutherans and Baptists, from the West had free access to the Mennonite Brethren churches in Russia as well as in America. Areas of close similarity in understanding of the Scripture and emphasis between the Mennonite Brethren and the Pietists provided a spirit of close affinity. Robert Friedman speaks to the points of commonality in the two traditions.

Both groups justified their policy on the basis of the leadership of the Holy Spirit which taught them the correct understanding of the Scriptures. Both claimed to live strictly according to the Bible, that is neither had confidence in a Christianity of theologians and scholars. Both were seriously concerned with the Christian reality which lies beyond church and worship although they understand the ultimate nature of this

Christian reality differently. After all, how could it be determined who possesses the right Holy Spirit except through the evidences of the same life.¹⁷

It is to be noted that the non-creedal bibliocentric faith of our forefathers concerned itself primarily with the evidences of a consistent relationship between faith and life. The restoration of the the church according to the New Testament patterns, "to flesh out the New Testament faith and life in our times,"¹⁸ was their concern.

The exposure of the Mennonite Brethren to British Darbyistic Millianianism (1890-1910) which came to them through the ministry of Dr. J.W. Baedeker, an English Millianianist, and the Blankenberg Alliance Faith Conferences became the occasion of considerable study and discussion. The developing views on eschatology, however, did not reach the stage of a creed but were referred to as "Erkenntnis Fragen" --matters of understanding, not issues to be accepted as doctrine. Those who could not share the world view expounded by Darbyism¹⁹ made no attempt to challenge it. They took the position that one cannot be dogmatic on matters of eschatology because such understanding is too strongly influenced by the immediate events and circumstances of history. For them it was sufficient to rest in the certainties of the events concerning the return of Christ, the resurrection of the redeemed and the unredeemed, the great judgement, the final victory of Christ over Satan, the consumation of the Age and finalization of God's plan as described in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.²⁰

They nurtured an ongoing relationship with the German Baptists of Western Europe even to the extent that they shared with them in the Lord's Supper, even though they openly recorded their variance with them on the relation of the true believer to government and war. The Alliance Fellowship of Blankenburg was a doorway which offered a broad contact with the Pietists of the West.²¹ The chief influence that came through these contacts was interest in and interpretation of millianian eschatology. That all these influences did not affect their basic New Testament concept of the church and other central concerns of faith may be due to the fact that in Russia they were not only a believer's fellowship, but also an ethnic cultural entity closely related to the larger Mennonite community. Their cultural "belonging" to a larger community tempered the effects of their theological exposure to the West.

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 in North America (Canada and USA), did not live in colonies as separate cultural and ethnic groups as was the case for 300 years in Prussia, Poland and Russia. The controlled corporate social economic and ecclesiastical setting could not be maintained. For some time the 1874-1900 immigrants and to a lesser degree the migrants of 1920s and 1930s succeeded in maintaining a fair degree of social cultural identity. But for both groups the North American environment resulted in gradual but very essential changes in social and ethical values. Peter Hamm has offered an analysis of this process in which he names education, occupational change, economic ascendancy and mobility as major factors in the process of cultural diffusion.²² Rapid cultural changes invariably create identity crisis.

A major factor in the pilgrimage of the Mennonite Brethren Fellowship rests in the fact that they had not delineated and defined the basics of their distinctive theological commitment of their Anabaptist heritage. Their cultural and social isolation made no such demands upon them. Their commitment to the Bible as expressed in what Robert Friedman calls an "Existential Christianity,"²³ did not demand creedal formulations. They had been open to borrow from many theological sources without diminishing their understanding and concern for "a living faith." They entered the new environment and cultural changes unprepared. In the 1930s to 1960s hundreds of young people flocked to "English" Bible institutes, some of them vanguards of fundamentalism. As they returned to their home churches in cultural transition

they felt a lack of identity. The emerging new leadership of young men in the churches had not the benefit of maturing in years of service within the church in close relationship with the older leaders. The standards of past practice in faith and life proved insufficient for them. They came from the Bible institutes with the question, "What do we believe," and thereby opened the gate for creedal formulations. In response our own Bible institutes introduced major emphasis on doctrine and apologetics. Resources for these courses were largely drawn from authors of evangelical fundamentalist orientation.²⁴ In contrast to this emphasis there was little reference to the original Mennonite Brethren-Anabaptist understanding of faith and life. It is significant to observe that the roster of the annual Tabor Bible College Bible Conferences featured such well known leaders of evangelical fundamentalism as J.G. Drawell, John A. Hoffman, J. Oliver Buswell, and Paul Rood. At the same time there were no courses in Tabor College dealing with faith and life in the context of New Testament discipleship. The curriculum of our Bible schools provided only very limited emphasis on the understanding of our faith in distinction to that of American Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism.

The record of Mennonite Brethren history in North America makes it evident that there was no systematic effort to focus the understanding of faith and life, unique to our spiritual legacy. We had opened ourselves to the spiritual influences of our American evangelical environment without any provision of examining such influences as to its emphasis and assertions. Only during the 1960s and 1970s there came voices which called for an accountability with respect to our spiritual and theological identity.²⁵

How much Mennonite Brethren were affected by the "crusade for the truth" of American Fundamentalism may be illustrated by an episode from our history in the 1940s. Up to that time churchmen were at the helm of higher education in the Brotherhood. In 1942 Dr. P.E. Schellenberg, one of the earliest Ph.D.'s from our fellowship, not a churchman, was called to the Tabor College presidency. His leadership raised immediate suspicion. Is a man with only "a secular education and not a minister-churchman" trustworthy. Can he give spiritual direction to the College. Leaders in the churches with a background of fundamentalism expressed concerns. Students in the Bible department of the College were influenced by the suspicion of their home pastors. A leading student of the department found it necessary to demonstrate his "crusader spirit for the truth." Discovering the books "The Christ of the Indian Road" by E. Stanley Jones and "How to Keep America Out of War" by Kerby Page on the shelves, took them to the librarian demanding that they be burned because they were, in the judgement of a zealous young Christian, "the vomit from Hell."²⁶

The Committee of Reference and Counsel of the Conference was called in to investigate the biblical trustworthiness of the College. The report of the Committee to the churches from the Chairman, Dr. A.H. Unruh, gave assurance that no issues of biblical faith were at stake at the College. The attacks, however, did not stop. The storm spread a spirit of fear. It became a "witch hunt" for modernism in our conference school. The struggle continued well into the fifties. A member of the Board of Education of that era refers to those years as follows:

One of the sadder periods of Mennonite Brethren history lies in the area of higher education in the years of 1941-1958. This was a decade and a half of serious criticism. In my opinion these were years when we dealt with personalities rather than program and policy. During these years the Board of Education was constantly engaged in dealing with persons on the basis of criticism of thought of protecting our school and our youth and our Conference from liberalism and modernism. I'm not sure that much of the time we were very knowledgeable about the meaning and interpretation of these terms. I am sure that hood Mennonite Brethren men were harmed for the rest of their lives. These men were able to a greater or lesser degree to cope with their situations, but much evidence remains that some of them died alone when all they wanted was to be Mennonite Brethren. When I look at that which we expound now and that which some of these men of the past embraced it seems possible that by comparison we have to admit

that the conservatives were eliminated. The false assumption that we are earnestly contending for the faith has a tendency to become a contention against our Brothers. I sometimes carry a deep concern about how those of us who were at least in part responsible are coping with our problem. Can we make of this a learning experience out of which at least some good can still come?²⁷

The incident illustrated the clash between an existential Christianity and one pressed into a creedal theological system.²⁸ The tension between these two forms of faith can be suggested by looking at the historic Mennonite Brethren understanding of faith and the alterations introduced by North American 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."²⁹ 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 historically 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 trustworthiness 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 defence 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 in our history related to the concern of our commitment to the Scriptures as the Word of God occurred in British Columbia in the 1950s when the Revised Standard Version was released. The strong condemnation of this version by the fundamentalists led teachers and students of a Bible institute to join the crusade against modernism. A ceremonial burning of a copy of a Revised Standard Version was arranged with a pledge of commitment to the only true English Bible--the King James Version. The interesting phenomena which has followed the era of the attack against

the Revised Standard Version rests in the most enthusiastic response by the people of creedal fundamentalistic orientation of the Living Bible which is a mere transliteration of the original text. 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 possibly best expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

IV. The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

V. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to an high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent (Latin, consensus) of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and the divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit (ab interna operatione Spiritus Sancti), bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

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-centered³⁰ 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 experience 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."³¹ In contrast to the above perception of conversion stands the question addressed to Billy Graham by a Dutch telecaster 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?³²

A large segment of American Evangelicalism has accommodated the gospel to appeal to the values of a culture permeated by a benefit syndrome. The late President John F. Kennedy addressed this phenomena when he called upon his countrymen not to ask "what can America give to me, but rather What can I give to America." 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 lose 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"³³ 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 strong emphasis on child evangelism, much of it based on the theology of the "Wordless Book" which presents the gospel as a provision to change a black heart (sin) to a white heart (forgiveness) to a golden heart symbolizing the assurance of a glorious heaven, for some has become the level for their understanding of conversion. The centrality of repentance from sin, a volitional change from a self-life to an obedience to Christ, a change in character and values, to become a new creature as the essence of conversion has been weakened. The concept of the new birth as a work of the Holy Spirit to make all things new (2Cor. 5:17) to some degree has been replaced with the appeal of "accepting Jesus Christ as Savior," with an emphasis on the benefits of redemption. To "accept Jesus Christ" thus becomes "a smart thing to do" because it brings peace of mind in relation to one's destiny after death.

Our Understanding of Discipleship

Mennonite 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.)³⁴ This central concern of Mennonite Brethren³⁵ 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.³⁶

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 questions 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" (1 Peter 2:9).

In contrast to the outlined understanding of discipleship we note the strong political character of evangelical fundamentalism. The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931³⁷ and the Defender Magazine Crusade³⁸ are examples from the past. The Moral Majority under the leadership of Jerry Falwell, the Christian Voice with the slpgan Christians for Reagan and The National Christian Action Coalition are some of the political arms of evangelical fundamentalism in the present.³⁹

What have been the effects of a close exposure of Mennonite 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.⁴⁰ 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 Hamm⁴¹ and in the survey "Anabaptists Four Centuries Later."⁴²

The late B.B. Janz in a 1954 Conference message,⁴³ 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 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."⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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 leadership⁴⁶ 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.⁴⁷

In contrast to the above context of a New Testament Church in Mennonite Brethren history stands the character of strong independence in American Fundamentalism applicable to the individual believer as well as to the local congregation. The statement of Wes Michaelson is much to the point in saying that "Because Evangelical spirituality has been so highly individualistic there usually has been little experience of the church as a community. What communal sense there is has resulted more from a legalistic separation from the outside world than from the reality of Koinonia as it is described in the New Testament."⁴⁸

The early character of Millinarianism in Europe and America--the womb of Fundamentalism--was known as a movement detached from all church organizations. The Bible and Prophetic Conferences in North America, Bible Institutes, Mission Societies, all functioned as independents.⁴⁹ The movement of the Association of Independent Gospel Churches, very strong in Canada and U.S.A., attracted many of our young people. Independent Missions became major recruiting agencies in our churches soliciting funds and personnel. The influences of these movements on our commitment to the New Testament Brotherhood-Church concept presents an area demanding thorough research. The impact of the electronic media, widely in use for religious broadcasts is strongly dominated by independent evangelical organizations. The contributions to these broadcasts during the past year exceeded 500 million.⁵⁰ Mennonite Brethren constituencies are known to respond liberally to the appeals for these efforts. 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 affect not only the biblical church 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 mission-

ary movement. 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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² 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 anew, an imperfect and a perfect moral standard of reference. The need for perfection as a requirement for the fulfillment of the mission in American evangelism 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, however, this standard 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 under-emphasis 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

The scope of the assignment is too broad to be covered in the limited space of the occasion. Further analysis to cover the several sections is necessary. The outlined influences 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 of the influence of fundamentalism on Mennonite Brethren theology, faith and life may prove the most revealing diagnosis of an existing need within 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.⁵³ Can that statement be applied as a description of Mennonite Brethren theology today?

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Norman F. Furniss, The Fundamentalist Contraversy, 1918-1931 (Yale University Press, 1954).
- 2 Ernest R. Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism (University of Chicago, 1970: Reprinted by Baker Book House, 1978).
- 3 David O. Moberg, "Fundamentalists and Evangelicals in Society," in The Evangelicals. Edited by David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge (Abingdon Press, 1975), pp. 144-145.
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