

THE FREE CHURCH CONCEPT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN THEOLOGY

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Introduction

The "People of God" share the same world with unbelievers. They are expected to keep their separateness in order to be free to do the will of God. From the days of Abraham, the "Chosen People" have had to resist the temptation of total assimilation with people amongst whom they lived; they have had to take a firm stand against seductive religions; and they have had to be firm in their struggle against powerful world-systems which sought to control them.

The struggle for freedom--to be free from those forces which prevent a people from doing the will of God--is a challenge every generation must face. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century provide an excellent case study of how a group of believers came to an understanding of what it means to be free. Central to this view was the belief that God's people must be free to hear the voice of God and obey it. It also meant freedom from the political, social, economic and psychological influences which sought to keep them in bondage.¹ The essence of the "Free Church" then is the awareness of the possibility that the mind can be darkened by the most subtle and dangerous temptation of all--that of being unable to see the truth because of total involvement in the temporary order.

The concept of the Free Church did not originate with the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Millard Lind has demonstrated that the church stands in direct continuity with Israel.² In this view, the roots of the Free Church tradition were already implicit in the Old Testament teaching on the covenant. The New Testament in this perspective traces the continuing fulfillment of the promise of God in the history of the church. When the Anabaptists began to establish what they believed was the authentic church, it was not their interest to be innovative or to construct something that was new. They were simply trying to pattern their church after the New Testament model.

The Anabaptists were indebted to some of the medieval "sects" who were seeking to be free from the systems of the world in order to be able to do what they believed was the will of God. In the struggle for freedom from the state and the established church, tribute must be paid to the followers of Donatus who gave the Free Church the slogan "What does the emperor have to do with the church."³ The Cathari of the eleventh century and the Waldenses of the twelfth are examples of the "People of God" struggling against great difficulties in order to be free.

In addition to these groups which developed alongside the magisterial church, there were large groups within it which developed practices and enunciated ideas which were in some ways similar to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century.⁴ These groups had much in common with Pietism of the seventeenth century in seeking freedom to do what they believed was their mission. They differed however from the Anabaptists in that the movements did not result in a gathered fellowship of believers apart from the institutional church. They chose to remain within the institutional church.

However similar some of the beliefs and practices of the Anabaptists were to these diverse groups in the early history of the church, there is no lineal continuity between the Anabaptists and these groups. Scholarship has demonstrated that the origin of the Anabaptist movement is to a large extent related to the same historical forces that gave birth to the Protestant Reformation as a whole.⁵ As the Protestant Reformers sought freedom from the domination of the Roman Church, so the early Anabaptists wanted

freedom not only from the Roman yoke but also from the state and anything which prevented them from being the People of God and doing His will.

It is beyond the scope of this study to review the history of the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement as a whole. This has been ably done by both European and American scholars. Our primary purpose is to set forth the central emphases of those who were committed to being the "People of God" during the upheavals of the sixteenth century Reformation. It will be our interest to review the basic beliefs of the moderate Anabaptists in their historical Free Church setting. Their beliefs collectively set forth a vision which guided them in their theological orientation and understanding of mission. Their concept of the church and their sense of mission also became an important reference point for those who were later to identify with the Free Church tradition.

I. THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

The central theological concern of the Anabaptists was the nature of the church.⁶ Cornelius Krahn defined the early Anabaptists as "ecclesio-centric."⁷ Referring to Menno Simons' approach to theology, Cornelius Krahn has said: "...the basic lines of his theology can be established, when you work from the center, from which he managed, worked and lived as a Christian and elder in the churches. This central point was for him making actual the apostolic model in the local church. Almost all other questions of Christian life and teaching are determined from here."⁸ In discussing Anabaptist theology, church organization or relation to the outside world, one must properly begin with the Anabaptist understanding of the nature and mission of the church.

A. Church is Visible

The early Anabaptists, unlike the Reformers, insisted that the original ecclesiastical ideals must be carried into actual realization. Vision must be translated into reality. When the Reformers refused to lead the way, the Anabaptists came to believe that it was their responsibility to establish a visible and pure church on earth.⁹ The Anabaptists were not willing to accept the Reformers' distinction between a visible church which is earthly and impure and an invisible church which is heavenly and pure. The practical concern of the Anabaptists was the actualization of a visible and true body of Christ on earth which would be patterned after the New Testament.

In looking to the New Testament pattern for guidance, they were saying that the current models or patterns in organization form (from either the religious or political systems) were not a reliable guide. By insisting that the church be visible and that it be patterned after the New Testament, they were saying that the church must take on a specific visible expression which is distinct from the institutions of either the magisterial church or the state. The visible church must be an expression of the true nature of the church of Jesus Christ.

When referring to the New Testament model, they had in mind the relationship which existed between Christ and his disciples. It was the fellowship between Christ and his disciples which was to be the governing principle in relating the outer to the inner. Whatever the structure or form be, it must be an appropriate reflection of its true new nature which was essentially the fellowship of those who confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.¹⁰

Voluntarism

Central to their understanding of the Believer's Church was the requirement of the Swiss Brethren that no one was admitted to membership except upon his own confession of faith in Jesus Christ. Upon this confession he was baptized and received into the fellowship

of the church. This concept stood in sharp contrast to the Reformers for whom the church was a society of "the baptized" or a "church of the elect." The baptism of infants was thus rejected on the grounds that it was both unscriptural and in violation of their understanding of the nature of the church.

These Radical Reformers also believed that there was a sharp dividing line between the church and the world (society at large).¹¹ As is well known, the Reformers could not make such a distinction, for religious, political and cultural elements were so interwoven in sixteenth century Europe that it was difficult to determine jurisdiction. This ungodly mixture they rejected outright. From the perspective of the Swiss Brethren, the church had been in a serious state of decline for centuries and had fallen into captivity. The church had chosen a course of action and direction which had been rejected by her Lord. To the Anabaptists there was only one way to remedy the situation and gain back her freedom--to follow her Lord in simple obedience.

By stressing voluntary membership and visible evidence of a transformed life, the Anabaptists were bound to establish a church which would be a minority group within the larger population. This church would be free from the domination of the establishment, religious and political, and from the cultural environment. Voluntary membership would sever the relationship with the establishment and a rigorous church discipline would keep the believers free from the seductive influence of the cultural environment. To remain within the establishment constituted unfaithfulness in the views of the Brethren.

B. Brotherhood

The Swiss Brethren, and later Menno Simons, viewed the Christian life as being lived in the context of believers.¹² In a very real sense one could describe the theology of the Anabaptists as being church-centred. For them the church was a brotherhood of love in which the fulness of the Christian ideal was to be expressed. This was in sharp contrast to the structure and organization of the large state churches of that time. In the state supported churches a professional class of clergy, theologians and administrators operated the institutions. The vast majority had very little share in the government, life and service of the church. People went to church to be served by a professional class. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, sought to involve every believer in the life of the church.

Anabaptists used the terms "Brother" and "Sister" as in biblical times. These expressions indicated that members of a church were so closely bound together by love and mutual concern that they viewed each other as members of a great family. In the church there were no classes, no official clergy, no artificial distinctions. Theirs was a fellowship of equals. Robert Friedman attributes the dynamics of Anabaptism to their concept of Brotherhood:

Now then, the central idea of Anabaptism, the real dynamite in the age of the Reformation, as I see it, 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 would be needed) but it is brotherhood, this intimate caring for each other, as it was commanded to the disciples of Christ as the way to God's kingdom. This was the discovery which made Anabaptism so forceful and outstanding in all of history.¹³

Calvin Redekop, in The Free Church and Seductive Culture, attributes the strong feeling of kinship among the Anabaptists to their concept of leadership.¹⁴ It is his view that in this fellowship it was the group which counted, not the leader. The early leaders

were men who had not held important positions in either the church or government before they became church leaders. They were young preachers in the Roman church or humanistic scholars, or persons pursuing rather ordinary occupations. These men were therefore not threatened by change. Redekop further maintains that there was an absence of charismatic leadership among the Brethren. The Reformers, according to Redekop, seldom referred to the individual Anabaptist leaders by name; they were usually referred to in a group and designated as Wiedertaeufer, Schwaermer, or Rottengeister. He thus attempts to explain the origin of the Brotherhood concept to the non-establishment roles held by the leaders and the group nature of the movement.

In addition to this sociological explanation, one may attribute this bond of fellowship which united the Anabaptists to the sense of mission which they shared. This sense of mission united them in a common cause which gave to every member the assurance that he was needed, that he was a contributing member in the church of Jesus Christ.¹⁵

To view the church as a Brotherhood has implications for worship, mutual aid, church government, and inter-church relations.

Worship

The Lord's Supper, like baptism, contributed towards a living fellowship among the Brethren. To participate in the Lord's Supper in an ongoing way was considered essential to the spiritual well-being of the believers. All members who were in good standing with the church were expected to participate regularly.

The Lord's Supper was understood to be a memorial of the Lord's suffering and death. The bread and wine were regarded as symbols of his presence, not in the bread and wine, but in the community of the faithful. Menno Simons attached a strong ethical significance to the Lord's Supper in that members were required to examine themselves before partaking of the Supper. It may be of interest to point out that "worthiness" to participate was interpreted largely in ethical terms.¹⁶ At the heart of this observance, however, was the sense of fellowship with the sufferings of Christ and the sense of a closely-knit Christian Brotherhood.

Mutual Aid

The concern for brotherhood manifested itself also in the area of material things. It was their view that when true Christian Brotherhood exists, all the resources of every member would be enlisted for the common good. While only some of the Anabaptists (Hutterites) actually organized their community around a common purse, all of them adhered in both theory and practice to the principle that the property of all members was at the disposal of any who were in need.

C. J. Dyck describes the attitude of the Brethren to material possessions as follows:

The attitude of believers to earthly possessions was for them a valid test of faith and one which could be easily identified. They did not consider themselves to have been deprived of their rights by fate and develop their theology to compensate for such loss; they knew they had found the pearl of great price which put all other possessions into true perspective.¹⁷

Putting possessions to right use meant, first of all, sharing them with all who were in need, inside and outside the fellowship of faith. Willingness to share was a sign of godly love, without which there could be no true faith. Instead of being forced to share their possessions in the manner of modern communism, they gave what they had voluntarily, gladly, before they were even asked. Possessions were no longer essential to their self-identify; their pilgrim consciousness had overcome covetousness.

Church Government

In their emphasis upon the corporate life of faith, the Swiss Brethren differed not only from Zwingli, who preferred to leave the matter to the civil authorities, but also from all those to whom church order was a matter of insignificance.¹⁸ There were several principles which guided the Anabaptists in relating church organization to their concept of Brotherhood. (1) The church was constituted on the basis of voluntary covenants among persons who confess their faith freely in Jesus Christ. The structure of the church must therefore be of a nature which facilitates meaningful worship and fellowship. The key principle of church organization was the quality of personal relationships. (2) All persons share responsibility for the work and the governance of the congregation. (3) The church was seen as a missionary agency commissioned to preach the Gospel to every creature--the internal structure of the community was organized to sustain this enterprise. (4) Church order was necessary to assure proper order and discipline in the life of the church.¹⁹

To belong to the Believers' Church in the sixteenth century meant applying the authoritative Scriptures not only to certain evident abuses in the church, but even to questions of organization and church order. This meant including the above-mentioned principles, but also meant giving special attention to dimensions of power and voluntarism. John H. Yoder has written extensively and prophetically on this subject. In one of his writings he says, "Within the community of the covenant there is a renunciation of the use of power and the reduction of persons to things."²⁰ Relating the concept of "power" to church organization Ross Bender observed: "The growth in power, wealth and prestige that comes with establishment affects not only the external relationships of the church to government and society at large, but also the inner life and character of the church itself."²¹

Relation with Reformers

The Anabaptists were not only supportive of Zwingli during the early days of the Reformation in Zurich, but were in fact part of the inner circle. When they broke with Zwingli, it was in response to Zwingli's insistence that the civil authorities had final jurisdiction in the affairs of the church as they did in affairs of state. The Anabaptists came to view the Reformers as religious leaders who lacked moral and spiritual courage.²²

The Brotherhood character of the Anabaptist church however continued to influence them in their attitude towards the Reformers. They never abandoned their interest in greater Christian unity. There was no acceptance of the dividedness of the several Christian groups. In spite of the fact that they were being persecuted by various Catholic and Protestant governments, they continued to invite the Reformers to join them in reading the Scriptures. One of the leaders put it this way, "If you call yourselves Christians you must be willing to discuss with us what it is you hold against us, and to read the Scriptures with us."²³

C. Missionary Character of the Church

The historian Littell refers to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century as "the forerunners of modern mission."²⁴ Speaking to the missionary zeal of the Brethren, Ross Bender maintains that no other characteristic of the sixteenth century Anabaptism is more outstanding than its missionary zeal.²⁵ Our primary interest in the Anabaptist missionary thrust at this point is to relate it to their understanding of the mission of the church.

The Anabaptists were alone among the major Reformers who had the will and the conviction to take seriously the Great Commission Jesus gave to his disciples. The mandate to

evangelize the world, the Reformers thought, had been fulfilled during the time of the apostles. Moreover, in their view, Europe had already been christianized. That there was little or no concern for those beyond Europe can probably be explained, at least in part, to the Reformers' concept of "election."

The Anabaptists, on the other hand, believed the Great Commission was binding on the church and must be given the highest priority. This understanding was reinforced by their perception of conversion and belief that the true church must be a separated church. If the membership of the church was limited to those who committed themselves through baptism upon confession of faith, then in every generation, the survival of the church depends upon evangelism. If infants are to be baptized, the church survives and expands predominantly by way of the preservation of a given social group. The concept of a Free Church--a Believers' Church--a minority church--was a great impetus for missionary activity.

The genius of the missionary vision of the early Brethren was that the church was not only missionary in strategy but in its very character. The church as such did not separate its evangelistic activity from the ordinary round of life. C. J. Dyck in a stimulating article, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," shared his perception of the nature of their missionary character as follows:

Most Anabaptists continued in their vocational occupation after joining the movement but it now became a choice opportunity to win others. Tradesmen talked with their fellow workers and invited them to the meeting in an Anabaptist house that night; servants shared their faith with curious employers. These natural contacts and conversations were often more significant than the sermon to which the inquirers would be invited. The Christian calling became more important than the occupation, not Beruf but Berufung.²⁶

The missionary character of the church was also reinforced by the political reality in which the Anabaptists lived. According to the pattern of Reformation thought, each province was already Christian, and the nature of the Christianity in a given territory was determined by the prince or city council which ruled in the area.²⁷ From the Reformers' point of view missionary activity was unnecessary and undesirable. The rejection of this "territorial principle" made it morally binding and psychologically necessary for the Anabaptists to be aggressively involved in missionary activity.

Strategy was not overlooked by these Reformation missionaries. On August 20, 1527, a great missionary convention was held in Augsburg known as the Martyr Synod at which plans were made to evangelize South Germany, Switzerland and Moravia.²⁸ Missionaries were commissioned and sent out two by two to various regions designated as their missionary responsibility. Social, political and economic instability uprooted many people, and the underprivileged in search of stability and security were open to hear the zealous missionaries.

As already indicated above, missionary activity was not limited to those who were formally commissioned. It was expected that all who were on the move, as in New Testament times, be active witnesses. The success of the Anabaptist movement was probably as much related to the missionary involvement of the many who have not left us any records as it was to the ability and direction of its leadership who have.

One final aspect of the missionary vision of the Brethren was the ability to see the need for fellowship with Christians that transcended the boundaries as defined by the "territorial principle." To identify only with Christians of a particular state, they thought, was too limited an understanding of the true universality of the Kingdom. The

accusation of the Reformers that they were sectarian, in the sense of being highly ingrown and particularistic, is not an accurate appraisal of what their vision was for an enlarged fellowship. Their vision for a true church which transcends in its outreach political and cultural boundaries qualify them to receive the recognition given by Littell that they were indeed ecumenical in their missionary outlook and in their concern for fellowship with true believers everywhere.²⁹

II. CONFRONTATION OF CHURCH AND WORLD

The Swiss Brethren drew a sharp line between the church and the world (cultural environment) and between the church and the state. In the "Schleitheim Articles of Faith" Michael Sattler wrote, "A separation shall be made from the evil and wickedness which the devil has planted in the world; in this manner, simply that we do not have fellowship with them and run with them in the multitude of their abominations."³⁰ Some years later Menno Simons wrote: "All the Evangelical Scriptures teach us that the church of Christ was and is, in doctrine, life and worship, a people separated from the world."³¹

This attitude was based on the belief that the church was called out from the world, by which they meant both the cultural environment and the structures or systems of this world. The church could not be a new community of faith as long as it was linked to the world. Furthermore, the citizens of the heavenly Kingdom had an orientation that was other than the citizens of this world. As citizens of the heavenly Kingdom their criteria and norms were no longer to be shaped by the power structures and values of this world, but were to be defined by reading the Scriptures together with believers. The Anabaptists soon came to realize that their new orientation stood in juxtaposition to the orientation of both the Reformers and leaders of the Roman Catholic Church.

State and Church Views

As already indicated, in the view of the Brethren the church was to be a visible community, it was to be a Brotherhood, and it was to be a church that was missionary in character. This orientation led them to believe that the church was called into the new order of the Kingdom of God to represent and promote the interest of this Kingdom. The state, on the other hand, was the necessary instrument to govern the kingdom of this world.³² It was the function of the state to maintain law and order and to establish social justice. To accomplish this end, the state may indeed make certain sanctions and exert a certain amount of force. The church on the other hand does not use the instruments of the state to accomplish her purposes. The only force she exerts in the world is the force of suffering love.³³ The Anabaptists thus not only sought freedom from the dominating influence of the state and church, but also renounced any use of power in both the building of the church and in the winning of converts. The nature of the church demanded that only such methods as were compatible with the inner nature of the church could be used.

It must be kept in view that in the debates between Zwingli and the early Anabaptists the issue was not whether the political order was evil or not; it was a question of jurisdiction.³⁴ The Anabaptists took the position that the state has no jurisdiction over the affairs of the church. As indicated above, it was the ungodly synthesis of political and ecclesiastical forces which brought the Anabaptists to this understanding. This was indeed a radical stance. In denying the state any jurisdiction in matters of faith, they were among the first Europeans to set forth a doctrine of secular government.³⁵

The doctrine of the two worlds which grew out of the Anabaptist attempt to define relations between church and state called for an eschatological view of history.³⁶ In

this scheme of thought, the old age, the kingdom of darkness, which rules the hearts of men and determines their decisions in the social, political, economic and religious spheres, is passing away.³⁷ The new kingdom, which is God's kingdom, is the historically visible church of which Christ is the Lord and sovereign ruler. It was this eschatological hope which sustained the Anabaptists during the severe persecutions.

In this view, the suffering of the Anabaptists was viewed as the inevitable result of the conflict between the two kingdoms. The frequent references to the "even now" but "not yet" indicates that the Brethren were not only aware of their present condition but had an eschatological outlook which reflected their assurance of the ultimate triumph of God. This hope was also a powerful missionary incentive. It was their belief that the church was the historical instrument whereby the sovereignty of Christ would eventually, in God's own time, be established.³⁸

The Anabaptists' insistence on freedom from the controlling influence of the state and the magisterial church was also related to their belief that growth in power, wealth and prestige--which comes with establishment--affects not only the external relationships of the church, government and society but also the inner life and character of the church itself.³⁹ This, as we have seen, is quite in keeping with their understanding of Brotherhood, church order, and missionary mandate.

Vision for Society

C. J. Dyck, in his article "Anabaptism and the Social Order," points out that the Anabaptists advocated a "bold new socio-religious mode."⁴⁰ The church of the believers was for them the new social and cultural option. It was the only theological reality. In God's own time this would become the society of the future. Until that time they were willing to serve and witness in the old society. It is quite clear that their view of the new society grew out of their understanding of the "two kingdoms" doctrine.⁴¹ It is also evident that their social consciousness was heightened by their missionary vision. C. J. Dyck, in the article referred to above, links the missionary vision of the early Anabaptists to their vision for a new society:

It is clear that the missionary response was for the Anabaptists the primary alternative to the methods of the magisterial reformers and the believer's church an attractive alternative to the corpus Christianum. Not coercion, but persuasion, not primary emphasis on reforming society but on establishing a new society, not individualistic salvation but personal experience and corporate faith were their alternatives....This was in a real sense, a program for society; not for the creaking social, political and ecclesiastical machinery inherited from the Middle Ages, but for the people who were caught in it.⁴²

It may be noteworthy that missionary activity in this context was political activity. It was a revolutionary concept and may well explain the intensity of the reaction of the civil authorities against these sixteenth century radicals.

It would be incorrect to maintain that they translated this vision perfectly into the social, political or economic realities of their time. This would be to claim too much. In some instances they even failed to take advantage of the limited options which were open to them. To deny social relevance and responsibility to the Anabaptist vision for society, however, is to fail to understand their view of the church in the light of their new view of the world.

World View of the Anabaptists

We have attempted to point out that the Anabaptists came to view the Reformation in very different terms from their contemporaries. Their understanding of the church and the world, in eschatological terms, had given them another orientation. The Anabaptists came to believe that the Reformers were not only half-hearted in their reform efforts, but were willfully resisting the whole truth of the Gospel.⁴³ The Brethren began to view Zwingli as one who was setting aside the "divine word" and "adulterating it" with the human word.⁴⁴ What the Anabaptists failed to see was that Zwingli was viewing the Reformation within the context of the world view which grew out of the intimate relations between church and state. Calvin Redekop viewed the Reformers as victims of a "total ideology."⁴⁵

The Anabaptists came to promulgate a world-view which was the product of a body of beliefs, a deep commitment to recognize only one authority, a willingness to identify with suffering humanity, and a commitment to use only such methods as were compatible with the inner character of the Gospel and the church. Although the Anabaptists succeeded in freeing themselves from the bondage of the "total ideology" upheld by the Reformers, they, too, were victims of a "total ideology." This ideology, as we have tried to point out, was a radical one and quite out of line with the world in which they lived. Their ideology, even though it was no less total than that of the Reformers, gave to them a greater measure of freedom to practice biblical Christianity at its best. The "total ideology" of the Anabaptists constitutes the vision of a Free Church. This was the vision which earned for them the claim to have been the first Free Church in modern times.⁴⁶

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANABAPTIST VISION FOR MENNONITE BRETHREN

The Mennonites of Europe and North America have been subject to many outside influences throughout the more than 400 years and, according to J. H. Yoder, the Mennonites have been transformed during this time in their very character.⁴⁷ In spite of these influences, some of which, admittedly, have been wholesome, the original vision has not been lost altogether. A biblical orientation, voluntary service, believer's baptism, mutual aid, and missionary activities are some of the evidences of the original commitment.

Dr. J. A. Toews, in his recent history of the Mennonite Brethren, refers repeatedly to the influence of the Anabaptist vision upon the theological and organizational orientation of the Mennonite Brethren Conference. Several quotations follow which point out how convinced he was about this close association.

The Mennonite Brethren church throughout its history has emphasized biblical authority on all matters of faith and practice. The early Brethren recovered much of the biblical orientation of apostolic Christianity and of the early Anabaptist movement.⁴⁸

The search of the early Brethren for biblical patterns and principles for the fellowship of believers did not occur in a theological vacuum, however, but in a definite church related and historical context. In their attempts to understand biblical revelation the brethren were influenced (perhaps much more than they realized) by their spiritual heritage as well as by the literature and ministries of contemporary evangelicals.⁴⁹

This emphasis on spiritual identity with the views of the Anabaptists and especially of Menno Simons is found repeatedly in the correspondence of the brethren.⁵⁰

Although there has been a weakening of the church' theological foundations in recent times, the confessional documents of the Mennonite Brethren church to the present day strongly maintain this historical connection and orientation.⁵¹

It is also possible to find support for this historic connection in the writings of P. M. Friesen, J. H. Lohrenz, F. C. Peters, C. Krahn, R. Kreider and Ross Bender. To what extent the Anabaptist Vision has been a significant guiding influence, however, has not yet been established.

As already indicated, the Mennonite Brethren, like other Mennonite groups, have been influenced by a wide range of theological and ecclesiastical ideas.⁵² Furthermore, the identity with the Anglo-Saxon culture in North America has exposed them to social and cultural influences which they did not face in the Russian or early American experience. When considering all the extraneous influences which have been brought to bear upon the M. B. Conference, one is tempted to reflect nostalgically upon the good old days when the lifestyle, church order and theology were simple. Every congregation had its supply of lay ministers, budgetary problems were simple, and the congregations were unencumbered with structures and organization. It may be more helpful, however, to look at our past. To rediscover our roots, our tradition, our heritage would perhaps convince us that there are things of continuing significance which, if somewhat modified, could guide us in the search for authentic church life.

Those of us who have found renewal in the rediscovery of our heritage keep being haunted by a belief that there is a distinctive understanding in the nature of the church and the church's ministry which should shape the pattern of theological education, church life and ministry for our time. This inclination is also supported by research which has demonstrated that there were instances in the life of the greater Mennonite community when the rediscovery of the Anabaptist Vision was a contributing factor towards church renewal. Robert Kreider in the article, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment," sees in the developments which led to the establishment of the "Brueder Gemeinde" and the "Kleine Gemeinde" the influence of the Anabaptist-Mennonite vision at work.⁵³ In his article, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," John H. Yoder refers to the rediscovery of the Anabaptist Vision as an agency working for renewal within the Old Mennonite Conference.⁵⁴

The rich spiritual heritage of the Anabaptist-Mennonites, which has been the subject of considerable research in the recent past, indicates rather clearly that there were important points at which the Anabaptists differed from their religious contemporaries. Examples would include such areas as: nature of authority, the nature of the church, the meaning of baptism, the mission of the church, the state-church relations and the nature and pattern of church ministry. The shape of these issues was determined by the way in which they read the Scriptures and applied them to their particular historical situation. It may also be well to keep in mind, as this paper attempts to point out, that the early Anabaptists approached questions of theology, ethics, church polity, missions, relations to the cultural environment and the state, from their understanding of the church. Their theology was, to use C. Krahn's term, "ecclesio-centric."

The crucial question begging to be answered is: How then shall we make a judgment about the contemporary significance of our heritage? Or, to put the question in another way: In what ways does that heritage provide guidance in the development of structures for church life, conference planning and mission activities? This Study Conference was called into being to address these issues. This will be a beginning only; much work remains to be done.

As we face this challenge, we need to be aware of developments which suggest that the Free Church concept is more fully understood today than it has been in the past. The list of scholars who have contributed to this cause is long, and includes European and American scholars, many of whom represent other Christian traditions. It is also my view that Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology is more systematically taught in M. B. schools today than it has been in the past.

Another factor which will influence the future of the Mennonite Brethren Church is the reality that Mennonitism is in the process of coming out of its ethnic and cultural isolationism.⁵⁵ During their early stay in Russia, the tendency towards isolationism was strengthened by their aversion to the Slavic culture which they considered inferior to their own. This tendency was reinforced by the close association, if not identification, of German culture with Mennonite faith.⁵⁶ Other factors contributing to their isolationism were: nonconformity, lack of interest in missions, rural environment and the ethnic character of the Mennonite community.

The Mennonite Brethren are no longer bound, at least not to the same extent, by these cultural and ethnic factors as they have been in the past. Most of them have probably lost the conviction that the separate ethnic identity is related to the religious life of the church. The defence of the culture in most areas is no longer linked with the defence of the faith. Nevertheless, there continues to be prevalent the notion that Mennonitism provides something that is distinct to the religious life of a church.

J. A. Toews describes rather fittingly the changes which have been and are at work among the Mennonite Brethren in the following statement:

During the relatively short period of a little more than one hundred years, the Mennonite Brethren have experienced the repeated impacts of tremendous cultural change. They have come from Europe to America; they have changed their language of communication from German to English; they have moved from country to city in large numbers; they have largely left agricultural pursuits and entered the various professions; and they have risen economically from lower classes to middle class in society.⁵⁷

In recent decades many traditional practices have been abandoned or are being challenged. Many of the old cultural barriers have fallen away in the face of other social contacts through educational and professional activities. Today as never before, the M. B. Conference is being challenged to examine its hermeneutical procedures and its practical application to determine the constants and the variables in its doctrine and practice. The extensive borrowings, from a wide range of sources, are affecting the teachings, church government, and mission strategy of the Mennonite Brethren Church. There is also considerable evidence that some are feeling at home in this world and share in a measure the ideals undergirding the Canadian-American way of life.

J. A. Toews, speaking to the dangers and opportunities that confront the Mennonite Brethren as they seek to adapt themselves to the Anglo-Saxon way of life, states:

A sense of nonconformity and separation from the world, which was formerly reinforced by a linguistic barrier, can now be obtained only by a greater effort in systematic teaching of biblical principles and by cultivating a deeper spiritual life. Not all congregations have vision for the challenge of new opportunities on the one hand, and new dangers on the other, provided by the assimilation and the larger "outside language group."⁵⁸

It is my view, however, that the radical changes at work in the Mennonite Brethren Conference have not yet eradicated the historical memory of being a pilgrim and alien

people. This awareness of being a called out people--a free people--needs to be nurtured. An increasing number of Mennonite Brethren long for a return to a form of church life which includes an emphasis on the distinctives of the Free Church. The opportunities to once again become a prophetic church are a historic reality provided for by the complex inter-play of changes at work in the Mennonite Brethren Conference.

In Christendom at large there is also a new openness to the Anabaptist understanding of the Free Church vision. It is a well-known fact that Mennonites have "piggybacked" on the intellectual and institutional traditions of the great churches. As already indicated these borrowings have also brought in new elements, many of which are incompatible with the essence of Anabaptism.⁵⁹ While it is true that the Mennonites are continuing to borrow, they are also beginning to exert an influence on both the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches. John Howard Yoder put it like this:

There are still those who do not really believe that the church-state separation is universally ideal and normative, but the number of those advocating renewal of the classical partnership of throne and altar is diminishing rapidly.

With the Roman Catholic communion now committed explicitly to religious liberty, with most major bodies having made the same move in the course of the nineteenth century, and with the orthodox who historically had been most committed to this model, largely under the control of Marxists and Muslim governments, the case for religious liberty, on the level of theoretical proclamations, no longer needs to be made. What in Michael Sattler was heresy and Roger Williams still a civil offence is now normative Christian political theology.⁶⁰

In the same article Yoder speaks yet more forcibly on the relevancy of the Free Church vision:

The Believer's Church vision is not only biblically mandated, it is of increasingly visible contemporary relevance around the world, and our only regret should be our feebleness in finding for it in every age a new worthy incarnation.⁶¹

ENDNOTES

1. The term "Free Church" was not used in the sixteenth century. The traditional definition of the Free Church, which refers to the separation from the state and other institutions, is only a preliminary approach to the central issue of being free to hear the voice of God and obey it. For a fuller definition of the Free Church concept see: Donald F. Durnbaugh, The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1968), pp. 8-22.
2. Referred to in Ross T. Bender, The People of God (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971), p. 137.
3. Gunnar Westin, The Free Church Through the Ages. Virgil A. Olson, trans. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), p. 20.
4. For a systematic treatment of the groups within the established church which advocated ideas akin to the Anabaptists see Leonard Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964). Also see: Westin, The Free Church Through the Ages, pp. 9-20.
5. John Oyer, Lutheran Reformers Against Anabaptists (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 3
6. For a review of the historians, both hostile and friendly, who viewed the church as central in the life and practice of the Anabaptists see: Franklin H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church" in Guy F. Hersherberger, The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), p. 119.
7. Cornelius Krahn, "Prolegomena to an Anabaptist Theology," MQR, XXIV (January, 1950), pp. 10-11.
8. Ibid., p. 11
9. John H. Yoder, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," Concern, No. 18 (July, 1971), p. 14.
10. Bender, People of God, p. 71.
11. Schleithem Articles of Faith in MQR, XIX (October, 1945), p. 249.
12. Harold S. Bender, "The Mennonite Conception of the Church and its Relation to Community Building," Concern, No. 18 (July, 1971), p. 29.
13. Franklin H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church," in Guy F. Hersherberger, ed., Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), p. 23.
14. Calvin Redekop, The Free Church and Seductive Culture (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1970), p. 99.
15. C. J. Dyck, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," in Jerald C. Bauer, ed., The Impact of the Church Upon Culture (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 220ff.
16. Erland Waltner, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church," MQR, XXV (January, 1951), p. 12.

17. C. J. Dyck, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," p. 26.
18. Littell, Anabaptist View of the Church, p. 95.
19. Bender, The People of God, p. 88, and Waltner, MQR, XXV (January, 1951), p. 12.
20. John H. Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," edited by A. J. Klassen. Papers read at the 1969 Aspen Conference, p. 5.
21. Bender, The People of God, p. 23.
22. Ibid., p. 81.
23. Yoder, Concern, No. 18, p. 18.
24. Littell, The Anabaptist View of the Church, p. 112.
25. Bender, People of God, p. 86. For a full documentation of the missionary expansion of Anabaptism throughout Europe see Franklin H. Littell, The Anabaptist View of The Church, pp. 109-137; and J. D. Graber's article on "Anabaptism Expressed in Missions and Social Service," in G. F. Hershberger, ed., The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, pp. 152-166.
26. Dyck, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," p. 222.
27. Harold J. Grimm, The Reformation Era (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1973), p. 211. The territorial principle was recognized as early as 1520 but was codified in 1555.
28. Littell, The Anabaptist View of the Church, p. 19.
29. Bender, People of God, p. 87. See also John H. Yoder, "The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision," Concern, no. 18, p. 15.
30. MQR, XIX (October, 1949), p. 249.
31. Menno Simons, Complete Works, II (Elkhart, IN, 1871), p. 37.
32. Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds," in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, ed. Guy F. Hershberger, p. 110.
33. Harold Bender, "Anabaptist Vision," in Ibid., pp. 51ff.
34. The early beginnings of Anabaptism are told more fully by: Fritz Blanke in Brothers in Christ (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961), and by John H. Yoder in "The Turning Point in the Zwinglian Reformation," MQR, XXXII (April, 1958), pp. 128-140).
35. Bender, The People of God, p. 82.
36. Robert Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds" in Guy F. Hershberger, ed., The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, pp. 111-113.
37. Ibid., p. 110.
38. Ibid., p. 116.

39. John H. Yoder, "The Anabaptist Understandings of the Nature and Mission of the Church With Implications for Contemporary Mennonite Church Organization" (April 10, 1967), an unpublished manuscript, p. 3. Referred to in Ross Bender, The People of God, pp. 73-74.

40. Dyck, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," pp. 207-229.

41. Friedmann, "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds," p. 116.

42. Dyck, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," pp. 207-229. See also Paul Peachy, "Social Background and Social Philosophy of the Swiss Anabaptists, 1525-40," MQR, XXVIII (April, 1954), pp. 120ff. The Anabaptists were primarily concerned with biblical issues and matters of discipleship. The severe persecutions made it difficult for them to identify with sixteenth century society and it made it difficult for them to establish ordered life of any kind. Paul Peachy and C. J. Dyck have however proven that in spite of difficult times the Anabaptists did contribute to social and political thought.

43. For a fuller treatment of Anabaptist views see Oyer, Lutheran Reformers Against Anabaptists, p. 95. See also Littell, The Anabaptist View of the Church, p. 2.

44. Ibid.

45. Redekop, The Free Church, p. 95.

46. Littell, "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church," in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, p. 120. See also Fritz Blanke, "The First Anabaptist Congregation: Zollikon, 1525," MQR, XXVII (January, 1953), p. 33.

47. Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," p. 37. Yoder is of the opinion that the vision is becoming blurred: "All of us see our constituencies influenced more by mainstream mass media religion than by any specifically Anabaptist type of vision." On p. 20 he says, "...the cultural identity after years of stability has now begun to shift faster than the theological leadership."

48. J. A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1975), p. 361.

49. Ibid., p. 362.

50. Ibid., p. 363.

51. Ibid., p. 364.

52. A most helpful paper on this subject is John H. Yoder's "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," pp. 2-46.

53. Robert Kreider, "Church in the Russian Environment," MQR, XXV (January, 1951), p. 26.

54. Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," pp. 10ff. He also identifies those influences from without which have worked for renewal.

55. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, pp. 324-330.

56. Ibid., p. 324.

57. Ibid., p. 323.

58. Ibid., p. 326. John H. Yoder states in "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality": "It does not suffice to say that the locus of renewal has moved from the grassroots to the center, leaving the grassroots prey to other forces."

59. Ibid., pp. 5-22.

60. John H. Yoder, "The Believer's Church: Global Perspectives," in The Believer's Church in Canada (The Baptist Federation of Canada and MCC [Canada], 1979), p. 4.

61. Ibid., p. 7.