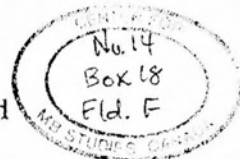




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Mennonite Brethren Distinctives

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Seminar Paper: MENNONITE BRETHREN DISTINCTIVES

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Introduction

The word "distinctives" as used in the writing to follow shall not imply that it makes reference to principle of faith and practice which apply only to the Mennonite Brethren. There have been believers in the past and are in the present who hold, or have held the same convictions of understanding related to faith and life as professed by the Mennonite Brethren. The term "distinctive" in this document only identifies basic Mennonite Brethren understanding of Scripture related to faith and life in historical context.

The ethos of the Mennonite Brethren can be recognized in considering five areas of their Biblical understanding and practice:

1. Their commitment to the Holy Scriptures.
2. An emphasis on the new birth.
3. Their perception of the church as a brotherhood fellowship.
4. The church as a people in the world but not of the world.
5. The church as a missionary movement.

It is important to note that the Mennonite Brethren movement is deeply rooted in 16th century Anabaptism. "In the articles" of faith they say "we are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our conviction from the Holy Scriptures."<sup>1</sup>

They did not propose a new teaching in understanding the Scriptures. They called for a renewal of life in consistent conformity with the teachings of the Bible as understood by our Anabaptist forebears of the Reformation of the 16th Century, who called for a return to the faith and practice of the first century church.

The first international conference of Mennonite Brethren may well serve the occasion where we examine the foundations of Mennonite Brethren

faith and life. After 125 years we again ask the question: Do we live what we profess to believe? Is the exhortation of Paul to the Corinthian church: "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith, prove your own selves" (II Cor. 13:5) a call to the Mennonite Brethren in March 1988? To do so, we focus on the five areas referred to above which can well be recognized as the ethos of Mennonite Brethren in their professed understanding of faith and life, according to the Scriptures.

#### I. MENNONITE BRETHREN COMMITMENT TO THE HOLY SCRIPTURES

Mennonite Brethren "believe that all Scripture is inspired by God as men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit. We accept the Old and the New Testaments as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for the faith and life of Christian discipleship. We believe that the Old Covenant was preparatory in nature, finding its fulfillment in the New Covenant. Christ is the key to understanding the Bible; the Old Testament bears witness to Him and He is the One whom the New Testament proclaims."<sup>2</sup> Ps. 19; 119:105; Lk. 24:27, 44; Rom. 1:18-23; II Tim. 3:15-17; II Pet. 1:16-21; Heb. 1:1-2, 8:5-13.

The above quotation from the 1976 edition of the Confession of Faith is clear and demands no elaboration. The statement also expresses our Christo centric understanding of the Scriptures. The provision of redemption and the life of the redeemed are anchored in the incarnation of God in Christ who lived, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

The community of born again believers under the guidance of the Holy Spirit seek daily nurture from the Scriptures. To understand Biblical teaching in specific questions of life and practice Mennonite Brethren seek to follow the example of Acts 15 - a principle of community hermeneutics. A statement recorded in the 1878 conference of Mennonite Brethren gives expression to this principle as it has been practiced throughout our history: "The Conference has been called for brethren of like faith from our scattered churches to see whether at the hand of the Bible it is not possible to bring into harmony differed views gleaned from the study of the Word of God and then proceed as a church fellowship according to the same rule (Phil. 3:16) under the banner of the cross of Christ." The final application of Scriptural truth related to the life of the believer emerges from the fellowship of the redeemed community as they gather to study the Holy Word together with prayer and dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

"It pleases the Holy Spirit and us" (Acts 15:28). "What does the Bible say" has been a continuous point of reference related to faith and life in Mennonite Brethren history.<sup>3</sup>

## II. UNDERSTANDING OF AND EMPHASIS ON THE NEW BIRTH

The Mennonite Brethren movement was born in a Socio-cultural religious environment. To be born of Mennonite parents was accepted as one of the conditions for baptism and church membership. Many people in the Mennonite church, from which the Mennonite Brethren seceded were only nominal Christians without ever making a conversion experience. Deterioration of moral and ethical conditions in the society from which they withdrew was a major reason for their secession.<sup>4</sup>

The described background sharpened the condition of human sinfulness. They deeply recognized that all men are sinful by nature, guilty before God and in need of forgiveness through Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup> Through the Holy Scriptures they learned that man is saved by grace through faith in Christ. Those who repent of their sin and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord receive forgiveness. By the power of the Holy Spirit they are born again and become the children of God. Saving faith in Mennonite Brethren understanding involves a surrender of the will to Christ, a complete trust in Him and an obedience to His Word in faithful discipleship. The evidences of a new birth for them is more than a profession to accept the benefits of forgiveness through the grace of God. A surrender to Jesus means a new life style that demands self denial in a priority of commitment to Jesus in relationships and possessions (Luke 14:25-27, 33).

True believers who are born again will confirm their commitment to discipleship by baptism - "...buried with Him by baptism into death, that as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).<sup>6</sup>

There is room for Mennonite Brethren to examine the relationship of what we profess to believe with regard to salvation - the new birth - and what is being experienced and practiced in the context of the larger fellowship.

## III. THE CHURCH A FELLOWSHIP OF TRUE BELIEVERS

Identifiable evidences of true faith, rooted in the atonement of Christ and manifested in the transforming power of God in repentance,



conversion, regeneration, resulting in a new creature in Christ is for Mennonite Brethren historically inseparable from their ecclesiology. The central issue which led to the birth of the Mennonite Brethren in 1860 was the concern for the true character of a New Testament church. They rejected the inclusivist church of all people, the "Volkskirche," the traditional church. The practice of Catholicism and the Reformers, who incorporate infants, or a frequent practice of the Mennonite church of that day, who would baptize people because they belonged to their ethnic community but were not truly born again, they recognized as unscriptural.<sup>7</sup> To receive people into church membership who have not experienced a true conversion, according to Mennonite Brethren understanding, destroys the distinction between church and world and creates a religious institution.<sup>8</sup>

For Mennonite Brethren a New Testament church is described as follows: "The characteristics of a true church are: the fruits of conversion and of right faith of Jesus Christ revealed in a life of sanctification according to the right faith of Christ and His apostles; the diligent searching of the Scriptures and the preaching of the pure Gospel in all the world; the practice of the holy ordinances of Christ which are baptism and the Lord's Supper, the free confession of God and Jesus Christ before all men; fervent brotherly love, fellowship and submission among themselves and love of their neighbors; diligence to uphold the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace; taking up the cross in following Jesus; watching with prayer and supplication and thanksgiving for all men and the prayerful and joyful waiting for the coming of the Lord and the establishment of His kingdom."<sup>9</sup>

The church, the body of Christ is not a mere organization or an association but an interdependent fellowship, a covenant community (II Cor. 12). Every member is to be concerned for the welfare of fellow members. Through teaching, encouragement, counselling and where necessary rebuke, the church promotes constructive discipline. Members whose walk is contrary to the teachings of the Scripture, and do not have loving admonition and correction are formally excluded from the fellowship of the church. Local congregations are members of a larger fellowship, the conference of Mennonite Brethren. In this relationship the principles of brotherhood in which the spirit of interdependence, love and submission to one another under the Lordship of Christ is to prevail.<sup>10</sup>

The ministers/leaders of the church are recognized as a gift from God emerging from within the body (Eph. 4:11-16). Their assignment is to equip

the members for the ministry.<sup>11</sup> The church in turn shall love, respect and support them. Mennonite Brethren have historically held to the form of a plurality in leadership - in contrast to the "one man pastor" leadership. The pastor in his assignment serves in the context of plurality - brethren who with him have been called of God and recognized by the church. The stated form of leadership with some other areas of faith and policy of Mennonite Brethren have been in tension with the trend toward individualism so prevalent in our culture of the west.

#### IV. THE CHURCH - A PEOPLE IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD

The words of Jesus in John 17:14-15: "They are not of the world even as I am not of the world. I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world but thou shouldest keep them from evil" is basic for Mennonite Brethren understanding of the church. The movement was born in a time of history where the distinction in character of being and lifestyle in the church had lost much of the distinction between the people who were members of the church and the people of the world. These inconsistencies were the main reasons for the secession in 1860. We cannot claim to be the church of Christ and live in sin like the people of the world, was their cry. The stated doctrinal beliefs of the Mennonite church, the Anabaptist understanding of truth from the 16th century, was in severe conflict with the life many of their members lived. The given background accounts for the concern of Mennonite Brethren for a consistent theology of life.<sup>12</sup> The statement of Robert Friedman that a practical theology cannot be pressed into a theological system, applies to the history of the Mennonite Brethren.<sup>13</sup>

The words of Jesus "in the world but not of the world" for Mennonite Brethren does not mean a separation from the people of the world, but from lifestyle, standards of ethics and value systems that dominate the lives of worldly people.

"Not of this world" suggests an integration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the life of the believer. Mennonite Brethren accept the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5, 6, 7) as the standard of ethics which expresses itself in love, forgiveness, self-surrender, a love even for the enemies. The values in character and relationships of people who are Christians - members of the church - stand in paradoxical contrast to the people of the world. The records of the meetings of Mennonite Brethren for the first century of their history address very seldom issues of doctrine. They struggle with

questions related to the consistency of life - "how do we live after the example of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles" was their concern.<sup>14</sup>

The focus of Mennonite Brethren concerns to harmonize what they believed with what they actually are in life relates itself closely to their understanding of Christ's word "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). The indwelling of Christ in the believer (John 17:21-23) can be recognized only in a corresponding Christlike character.<sup>15</sup>

The second aspect in the theology of the kingdom for Mennonite Brethren is the ongoing conflict between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. I John 5:19, II Tim. 3:13, II Thess. 2:11-12 reflect the Biblical description of the character of the kingdom of this world "...the whole world lieth in wickedness...the evil man and the seducer (imposter) shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived."<sup>16</sup>

The Biblical understanding of being a people in the world but not of the world for Mennonite Brethren can be summarized as follows: The personal character and relationship of the church - the people of God (Gottes Kinder) - is rooted in a personal relationship with God, a response to His forgiving mercy on the basis of the atonement of the cross, and a volitional commitment to Jesus Christ - conversion. The evidences of a true conversion find expression in a new creature (II Cor. 5:17). A life so redeemed cannot conform to the values and lifestyle of this world. It is transformed, changed, in inner character and relationships of life. They live in the world in a commitment to the missionary assignment. "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so I also send them into the world" (John 17:15-18).

#### V. THE CHURCH - A MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

The emphasis on the need for a personal salvation experience - conversion, a volitional commitment to Christ in repentance and faith - central to Mennonite Brethren faith and life, provides the basis for a world view which recognized only two kinds of people, those who are "saved" and those who are "unsaved." For them historically, there is no third category. The redeemed community, the church, carries the responsibility to witness to the unsaved concerning the redemptive provision of God. For them, to be the church and the mission of evangelism are interdependent if not identical. "Anabaptists - the womb of Mennonite Brethren understanding of faith," considered evangelism and missions a call for obedience to the thrust of the Gospel committed to the true church.<sup>17</sup>



The witness of Mennonite Brethren has been a strong contributing factor in the general renewal that came to the Mennonite churches in Russia and North America in the second half of the 19th and early years of the 20th century. The missionary zeal of the movement has been used of God to be instrumental in the birth of the Evangelical Christian-Baptist church in Russia. Their outreach extended itself from Russia and North America to India, Africa, South America, Japan and Europe. Today the Mennonite Brethren churches in the countries named combined exceed numerically the mother churches in Europe and North America. Missions has been and continues to be the heartbeat in the life of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.

### Implications

The basic tenants of faith recorded in the above essay provide the center of Mennonite Brethren confession. The history of a century and a quarter bears testimony of the struggle for consistency between what we profess to be Biblical teaching and what we are and practice in life. James warns against deception in hearing the word - to give assent to it - and not doing, not living; according to the word (James 1:22). Our emphasis on conversion, the new birth, "Except a man be born again," (John 3:3) comes under the scrutiny of II Cor. 5:17, "...if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature, ...behold all things are become new."

Our profession to be followers of Jesus cannot escape the demand... "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). A life of selfishness does not have the right to claim a fellowship with Christ in redemption because "He died for all that they which live, should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them and rose again" (II Cor. 5:15). A people who have been chosen out of the world (John 15:19) cannot again identify with the world nor love the things of the world (I John 2:15-17). Our relationship to the world is defined in the words of Jesus when He says "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you; that you may be children of your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:43-44).

Our understanding of a church is a body relationship as described in I Cor. 12:12-31 which precludes an interdependence in the midst of a culture of extreme independent individualism.



We are known as a missionary movement with convincing evidences in the records of history. The commission for Biblical evangelism however is condition by the declaration "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth therefore go you and make disciples." The Lord of Christ in discipleship is further defined as a demand for absolute priority of devotion to Him above our family (father and mother), our possessions (all that he hath), and our own life (Luke 17:25-27, 33).

The Mennonite Brethren fellowship from around the world on this the first international gathering is called upon to pause for an honest evaluation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit whether our understanding of the Scriptural basics in redemption, faith and life give clear evidence that we are what we declare to be according to what we profess to believe.

The present generation needs to study & affirm the confession of faith for themselves if we are to cont. as HB church.

10. The HB church has experienced a number of shifts - one good, others of concern. The shift from piety to activism. The cultural shift from head-down way of non-HB background in good but the light of them are overshadowing the HB activities and eliminating them from practical living.

11. How do we live between faith & practice? How do we live in a culture that is changing rapidly? We need a new & dynamic profession only & changed lifestyle. Culture & traditional religion & appearance → loss of identity of Christian witness. How can divisions between culture, religion & Christian witness be maintained? Willingness of individual Christians to be witnesses because of their faith.

# Footnotes

1. P.M. Friesen, The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910, translated from the German, "Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland" (1789-1919), in Rahmen der Mennonitischen Samtgeschichte (Halbstadt, Raduga, 1911). Translated by the Historical Commission of the Mennonite Brethren Conference, 1978, Board of Christian Literature, Conference of the Mennonite Brethren, 4824 E. Butler, Fresno, California 93727.
2. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, 1976, pp. 11-12.
3. Mennonite Brethren Conference minutes 1878, p. 2. Manuscript in Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Fresno.
4. P.M. Friesen, ;;. 230-232.
5. Mennonite Brethren Confession, 1976, p. 12.
6. Ibid., p. 13.
7. P.M. Friesen, pp. 230-232.
8. Ibid.
9. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, 1965, p. 16.
10. Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, 1976, pp. 15-16.
11. Ibid., pp. 16-17.
12. P.M. Friesen, pp. 230-232.
13. Robert Friedman, The Theology of Anabaptism, (Herald Press, 1973), p. 31.
14. The Conference records of the first century of Mennonite Brethren are preserved in the archives of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches. Minutes of the local churches in North America are also preserved in the archives.
15. A.H. Unruh, Gleichstellung mit der Welt (Jugendblatt May - August, 1951).
16. H.F. Toews, Zionsbote, August 9, 1922.  
P.E. Penner, Zionsbote, November 11, 1925.
17. A.J. Klassen, ed., The Church in Mission, (Board of Christian Literature, Mennonite Brethren Conference, 1967) quoted by John A. Toews, p. 89.