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**Ellipses . . .**  
**in *J B: The Autobiography***  
***of a Twentieth-Century***  
***Mennonite Pilgrim***

*Paul Toews*

**I**t is unusual, admittedly, for a son to participate in a festschrift for one's father. Familial judgments are normally thought of as fileopietistic and as protective of the family honor. Each reader will judge whether this essay is so or not.

What perhaps makes this less unusual is that my brother John and I have worked with our father, J. B. Toews, in the historical and theological enterprise of the Mennonite Brethren (MB) world. We have written on overlapping topics related to the evolution of MB identity. We have worked in the same institutions; we have been colleagues who exercised, with each other, the same freedom to disagree as we would with other faculty members. In these institutional relationships we have worked under the supervision of our father and he in later years worked under our supervision. We have been family around the dinner table but academic colleagues in faculty and committee meetings. In those working relationships we have referred to our father as "J B," just as other colleagues addressed him. So use of that designation in this essay is not a term of disrespect but rather a sign of this wonderful congruence of familial and professional relationships.

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*J. B. struggled to hold together and integrate three  
theologies central to Mennonite Brethren beginnings:  
Anabaptism, Pietism, and Evangelicalism.*

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**J. B.'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

What makes *J B: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* a fascinating account is that his life story embodies many

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of the struggles of the Mennonite Brethren world. He knew some of those who established the MB denomination in 1860 and now, 138 years later, he remains in conversation with some current denominational leaders. His ninety-plus years, rightly positioned between the generations, make him virtually the last surviving link to the founding fathers. So in a somewhat unique way his personal biography, and the reflections about people he knew and worked with, overlaps with the entire sweep of his people's story.

The other factor that accounts for the popularity of *J B* is that it is a more candid and revealing self-portrait than most similar works of his generation. People of his vintage have a deeply ingrained sense of probity and reserve. Likewise, J. B. shares that reserve and so there are also many things that are left out of the autobiography. And in this, J. B.'s generation is not alone. Benjamin Franklin, who wrote one of America's most popular autobiographies, noted that "one does not dress for private company as for a public ball." J. B.'s autobiography, like virtually all such writing, is dressed for the public ball. Even so, it does reveal more of the private company than most MB autobiographies.

I wish not to redress the autobiography for a private party but rather to examine two events or issues that were personal, but had public meanings. I have suggested elsewhere that the Mennonite Brethren, since their inception, have worked with a diverse theological inheritance. Anabaptism, Pietism, and European Evangelicalism were all present at the 1860 birth of the denomination.<sup>1</sup> Those theologies have sometimes existed together in complementary ways and at other times created fundamental tensions in the MB world. J. B.'s own pilgrimage contains elements of all three of these theological emphases. In significant ways his last two books—*A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America 1860-1990* (1993) and *J B: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* (1995)—are extended reflections on the interplay of these theological currents.<sup>2</sup>

Two crises in J. B.'s professional life are covertly discussed in the autobiography. When more fully revealed, they can contribute to our understanding of the tensions introduced by the presence of these divergent theologies.

#### **ANABAPTISM AND PIETISM**

The autobiography sums up a decade (1953-1963) of administration in Mennonite Brethren missions with several observations. Among them is the following:

The personal relationship to the missionaries over a period

of a decade provided unlimited opportunities for close fellowship. Missionaries are not saints. Their calling requires continuous affirmation and spiritual nurture. In general they are a lonely people, often separated from their children and extended family. Singles feel this isolation most keenly. Maintaining a continuous sense that their assignment is a service unto the Lord is difficult. The weakening of this priority expresses itself in personal spiritual struggles which generate many tensions in inter-personal relationships. Providing a spiritual ministry to the missionaries, though rewarding, constituted the most difficult aspect of my ten years in mission leadership.<sup>3</sup>

My recollection, as a teenager and young adult, during that decade of mission administration was that J. B. was frequently troubled. At the heart of those troubles were what he perceived as those "tensions in inter-personal relationships." Extensive travels to the mission work in various countries frequently revealed imperial relationships between the missionaries and the nationals and antagonistic working relationships between missionaries.<sup>4</sup>

J. B., when back in North America, would frequently be gone for weeks at a time, traveling by car together with missionaries for deputation visits to the churches scattered across the western half of North America. The "tension" on those trips was the frequent dissonance between the demeanor inside the car and the churchly presentations. Inside the church the stylized litanies of MB piety were rehearsed and out flowed prayers of great fervency and sermons/reports of great passion. Inside the car the warmth and light gave way to bickering and personal pettiness.

The problem may be accentuated with missionaries, given the difficulties they face, but it is a problem that runs deeply among many Christian traditions (and, one might add, in human nature). It is the age-old problem of finding congruence between profession and lifestyle, between belief and behavior. In the MB context it is partly the problem of Anabaptism and Pietism creating differing expectations.

Pietism was part of the renewing impulse that gave birth to the MB movement in 1860. In South Russia, as in other parts of Western Christendom, Pietism was a protest against a religiosity gone legalistic and formalistic. With its emphasis on inner spirituality and the joyous expression of faith, it was a corrective to the stifling legalism that had come to dominate sectors of the Mennonite commonwealth in Russia. Furthermore, Pietism, with its insistence on the vitality and personally

transforming power of grace, redirected many individuals and congregations. A renewed spiritual vitality was certainly part of Pietism's gift to the newly emerging Mennonite Brethren denomination.

But as J. B. learned, if Pietism had the ability to inspire, it also carried the potential for a discontinuity between piety and ethics. The dichotomous missionary behavior was but one example of that discontinuity. Many who heard J. B. preach in recent years will remember that a theme which increasingly dominated his preaching was the concern about "salvation as a benefit" without the concomittal responsibilities of Christian discipleship evidenced in the very practical routines of life. In *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, J. B. framed the issue this way:

Discipleship was supplanted by an overwhelming salvation emphasis in which conversion was seen most visibly as a personal experience assuring eternal life. . . . Evangelism, instead of being a call to a disciple relationship with Christ in the context of a believing community, degenerated to a rescue operation to assure people the benefit of a final heavenly destiny.<sup>5</sup>

J. B. increasingly felt that for too many, salvation had become a one-way ticket to eternity, a Christian escapism from the obligations of this world. Other interpreters have shared this concern about the relationship of a piety nurtured by Pietism and the ethical expectations of Anabaptism. At least since the publication of Robert Friedmann's *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* (1949),<sup>6</sup> there has been a wide-ranging discussion about the way in which these two theologies interlink with each other.

## ANABAPTISM AND EVANGELICALISM

J. B.'s acceptance, in 1964, of the presidency of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS) in Fresno opened the door to another crisis that was personal but with denominational consequences. The crisis, hinted at but not fully revealed in the autobiography, was the need to reshape the theological orientation of the seminary. J. B. calls that section of the autobiography the "Struggle for Anabaptist Identity."

That struggle had its roots in the evolution of theology among the United States Mennonite Brethren. The first generation of Mennonite Brethren to seek theological training in the United States did so at seminaries that stood in the historic center of the orthodox tradition. The early graduates of Tabor College attended Rochester Divinity School (a Baptist Seminary) and Yale Divinity School.

But in the era immediately following World War I such schools came under attack from certain quarters of the American Fundamentalist

movement. The history of that movement is beyond the bounds of this essay. Suffice it to say that Fundamentalism was a distinctly American response to a series of both social and theological issues that emerged in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Its American-ness should have made it unattractive to a small immigrant group still speaking German. But in a world of Protestantism sharply divided into two camps—liberal and conservative—the Mennonite Brethren were clear about their loyalty to the conservative side. As the Mennonite Brethren shed their immigrant qualities and became more at home in the society, they increasingly identified with this brand of theologizing.<sup>7</sup>

During the middle decades of this century many sectors of Fundamentalism moderated toward less extreme positions and metamorphosed into what is usually termed Evangelicalism. For both, the maintenance of Christian creedalism was a central focus. By the 1990s both Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism (as American theo-cultural movements) have a long history in the MB Church, particularly in the United States. Their emphasis on the maintenance of a conservative theology was surely one of the reasons that theological liberalism never gained any appreciable influence among the Mennonite Brethren. But their doctrinal emphasis frequently neglected the life of Christian discipleship and Christian ethics. Anabaptism historically insisted that orthodoxy, unless translated into orthopraxis, could easily be an empty creedalism. For Mennonites, intellectual assent needs to be linked to behavioral change.

An additional problem for Anabaptists was that many sectors of both Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism confused the role of the church and the state. An easy identification with Americanism resulted in a cozy church-state relationship foreign to the strong Anabaptist doctrine of the church as a separate and distinct entity.

### **J. B. AND THE SEMINARY**

J. B. came to the Seminary in 1963 with hopes of teaching, reading, and writing. He came exhausted from ten years of mission administration and extensive travel. He anticipated that it would be a “quieter assignment.” That quietness was rudely interrupted during the first semester by several realities.

The seminary, begun in 1955, had both a curriculum and a theological stance thoroughly congruent with that of leading American Fundamentalist seminaries. In fact, J. B. frequently referred to it as a “mini-Dallas”—a reference to Dallas Theological Seminary. That theological posture, while in keeping with the drift of the Mennonite Brethren during the previous several decades, was not in keeping with the longer his-

tory of the denomination.

J. B. had also been nurtured by Fundamentalism and at various points in his career had identified with Fundamentalist causes. The conservative theologians that in many ways shaped his thinking—Augustus H. Strong, E. Y. Mullins and Carl F. H. Henry—were part of the larger Fundamentalist camp. But they are also generally understood as “mediating figures” rather than militant Fundamentalists. They sought to mediate between the concerns of historic orthodoxy and the more rigidified doctrines of Fundamentalism as exemplified by the Dispensationalists at Dallas Seminary.

The second reality that J. B. encountered was a student generation increasingly restive. This restiveness, particularly among some of the best and the brightest students, was rooted in an awareness that the seminary’s theological stance was more truncated than the denomination’s history. Some of those students had gained familiarity with Mennonite Brethren history from course work at the denomination’s colleges. Others were acquainted with the Goshen school of Mennonite history, particularly as defined by Harold S. Bender, and the way in which a rediscovery of the past had recentered the Mennonite Church.

The third reality that faced J. B. was that the seminary was looking for a new President. He had hardly arrived when Rueben Baerg, the acting President, notified the seminary board that he would not continue. Members of the Board of Education began pressing J. B. to assume the presidency and he did so in the summer of 1964.

In the fall of 1964, under J. B.’s leadership, the seminary issued a document—“A Mennonite Brethren Seminary”—that sought to reposition the identity of the school as more clearly Anabaptist. As J. B. recalls in his autobiography, the statement called for “graduate-level theological education that was committed to a bibliocentric curriculum, an experiential faith, an Anabaptist concept of a disciplined church, and a New Testament understanding of mission and evangelism.”<sup>8</sup>

It was a call for a different kind of seminary, whose theological identity would be anchored in the Anabaptist part of the Mennonite Brethren past rather than in its Pietistic or Evangelical past. The logic of that posture rippled out to create a series of curricular and faculty changes. But that was only the beginning. The reorientation of the seminary became part of a larger movement, particularly focused in Fresno and Winnipeg, that sought to reclaim the Anabaptist elements of the MB past.

Closely allied with this effort at theological recentering were the Board of Christian Literature, the Historical Commission of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches (the bi-national confer-

ence), and the rewriting of the Confession of Faith. These agencies and the confessional reworking were lodged at the seminary during the late 1960s and into the 1970s. The high-water year in that effort to rediscover Anabaptism may have been 1975, when John A. Toews' *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church*<sup>9</sup> was published and the General Conference convention adopted a revision of the Confession of Faith that was clearly Anabaptist in its articulation.

### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS INTERPRETATION

Any autobiography is an interpretation of one's experiences. It is an interpretation that is cumulative. From the perspective of nearly ninety years, the events are connected to a framework by which they become intelligible. Differing events and experiences give differing weights to that perspective. One event which I think helped to focus an understanding of the tensions between these differing theological postures was a research project in the early 1980s which J. B. conducted with Abe Konrad, professor at the University of Alberta, and Al Dueck, a colleague on the Seminary faculty.

In 1972, Mennonite sociologists J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder undertook a survey of the beliefs and practices of the five largest progressive Mennonite-related denominations, including the Mennonite Brethren, that was subsequently published as *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later*.<sup>10</sup> In 1982, Toews, Konrad, and Dueck replicated the study among the Mennonite Brethren. They published their findings in *Direction* three years later under the title "Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile, 1972-1982."<sup>11</sup> Behind the replication were what the authors termed "some disturbing trends in Mennonite Brethren faith and life which . . . demanded further consideration."<sup>12</sup>

For J. B., who originated the research project, what demanded "further consideration" was the discontinuity between piety and ethics that *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* had revealed. Most troubling to him were data that revealed the Mennonite Brethren scoring high on the scales of practicing piety but low on the ethical scales. Piety, nurtured by Pietism, had etherialized into words, and theology nurtured by Evangelical creedalism was no longer transforming behavior. The religious individualism of both Pietism and Evangelicalism was undermining the communal and corporate nature of the church as a discerning and disciplining body. At issue was precisely the same condition that had given birth to the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860—the discontinuity between piety, creed, and ethics and the place of religious individualism in the body of Christ.

The findings of the Church Membership Profile study only validated those “disturbing trends” rather than offering much encouragement. The Mennonite Brethren Church did indeed seem to be drifting away from its historic moorings in Anabaptism, ethical faith and a corporate polity.<sup>13</sup>

An autobiography may be likened to a prism, which refracts and disperses light. Many differing colors can be refracted through a prism and the ones that become dominant depend on the angle of vision. *J B: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* and his earlier book, *A Pilgrimage of Faith*, reflect the insights and passions of over sixty years of work in a great variety of denominational positions. But like all writings, they also refract the light of a particular angle of vision on the prism.

The angle of vision that increasingly dominated J. B.’s view, particularly during the last fifteen years of his active work in the church, was the belief that Anabaptism, more than Pietism or Fundamentalism, offered a greater possibility for reinvigorating the Mennonite Brethren Church. Two crises identified in his autobiography, and briefly elaborated here, helped to fashion that understanding. But that understanding, like the theology of his people, was always coupled with the persistence of both Pietism and Evangelicalism.

Deep personal faith and creedal clarity have always been important to J. B. and to the Mennonite Brethren. J. B. struggled to hold together and integrate these three theologies that were present at the birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church. There are ample signs that some leaders following in his wake are not as eager to work towards that integration. The limitations of piety and creed, unhinged from highly visible forms of discipleship, seem more acceptable. ✨

## NOTES

1. See Paul Toews, "Differing Historical Imaginations and the Changing Identity of the Mennonite Brethren," in Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C. J. Dyck* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992), 155-172.
2. J. B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America 1860-1990* (Winnipeg, MB and Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1993); J. B. Toews, *J B: The Autobiography of a Twentieth-Century Mennonite Pilgrim* (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995).
3. *J B*, 164-65.
4. See Peter Penner, *Russians, North Americans and Telugus: The Mennonite Brethren Mission in India, 1885-1975* (Winnipeg, MB and Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1997).
5. *Pilgrimage of Faith*, 192.
6. Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries: Its Genius and Its Literature* (Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949). For a discussion of the influence of Pietism on Swiss-American Mennonites see Theron F. Schlabach, "Mennonites and Pietism in America, 1740-1880: Some Thoughts on the Friedmann Thesis," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (July 1983): 222-40. A similar examination of Pietism's influence on the Russian Mennonites and their North American diaspora still awaits its historian.
7. Some elements of this story are examined in Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1996), chapter 3.
8. *J B*, 170. A fuller discussion of the origin of the statement as well as an interpretation of its meaning is in J. B. Toews, "Focusing the Vision," in A. J. Klassen, ed., *The Seminary Story: Twenty Years of Education in Ministry, 1955-1975* (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1975) 17-24.
9. John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church: Pilgrims and Pioneers* (Fresno, CA: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975).
10. J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1975), was an extensive survey of the Mennonite, General Conference Mennonite, Mennonite Brethren, Evangelical Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in the United States and Canada.

11. John B. Toews, Abram G. Konrad, and Alvin Dueck, "Mennonite Brethren Church Membership Profile, 1972-1982," *Direction* 14 (Fall 1985). This entire issue of the journal was devoted to reporting and interpreting the findings of the replicated survey.
12. *Ibid.*, 7.
13. *Ibid.*, 23-24, 41-42, 82-88.