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# REFLECTIONS ON THE CHURCH CONCEPT OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN

Hans Kasdorf\*

## THE MAIN STREAM AND TRIBUTARIES

The Mennonite Brethren have for the most part shared the Anabaptist view of the Church, especially that of Menno Simons. Both movements sought the restoration of the True Church "as it was in the beginning." Both sought to establish a disciplined Believers' Church of baptized adults who voluntarily lived a life of discipleship under the Lordship of Christ and who separated themselves from the world even at the cost of persecution. And both sought to be faithful to the missionary mandate of the Great Commission.

A careful reading of the Mennonite Brethren Document of Secession shows that the principles stressed by the Anabaptists and by Menno Simons were also major concerns for the Founding Fathers of the Mennonite Brethren Church of 1860. The issues specifically referred to were: 1) believers' baptism, 2) the Lord's Supper as a sign of the covenant and fellowship of believers only, 3) the teachers and preachers as chosen by God and sent out by His Spirit for the ministry of the saints, 4) the principle of separation from the world; 5) footwashing as a practice instituted by Christ, and 6) church discipline and excommunication (even the ban) together with provision to receive a repentant member back into fellowship. For the rest the Brethren said simply, "In all other articles we are in full agreement with Menno Simons." <sup>1</sup>

This very brief description must here suffice to indicate that the theological mainstream of the Mennonite Brethren has its fountain-head in the historical Anabaptist theology of the Church.

There are at least three tributaries whose currents have influenced the thinking of the first generations of the Mennonite Brethren: Pietism, the Baptists, and the Darbyist movement. In all of them, but especially in Pietism, are elements that are both complementary to and reflective of the spirit of Anabaptism. The Pietist Edward Wuest's powerful preaching in South Russia was especially influential.

The contemporary British scholar Stephen Neill accurately described the major characteristics of Pietism as "the demands for personal conversion and for holiness, close fellowship in the Society, and responsibility for witness." <sup>2</sup> These and other Pietistic dimensions have not only left an imprint on the Mennonite Brethren Church, but also (beginning with the first conference in 1872) helped to form an attitude of ecumenism and a spirit of openness to "spiritual forces and views in the church of Jesus Christ which are biblical and which may enrich and deepen one's life, task, and commitment to Jesus Christ." <sup>3</sup> What this means, as Professor Adrian has pointed out, is "progress-

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sivism" which accepts the past—in this case Mennonitism and Anabaptism—without worshipping it; but it was also open to the present—in this case Pietism—and assimilated the best from it.

In the areas of hymnody, church order, and in the training of preachers the German Baptists have made a significant contribution. While it is true that the Mennonite Brethren loved to sing the hymns of Tersteegen, Hiller, Zinzendorf, and others of Pietistic persuasions, no other single singbook has had greater impact on the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and later in South America than the Baptist *Glaubensstimme*. Its first publication coincided with the birth of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. A few decades later it was combined with the *Heimatklaenge* and the *Frohe Botschaft* (1890-1905) and edited by H. Braun and Jakob Kroeker as the *Dreiband*.

In matters of organization, August Liebig from the Hamburg Baptist group made substantial contributions to the Mennonite Brethren. Perhaps he is best described as a man with the gift of the "word of wisdom" who spoke wisely in the church business meetings and other situations where direction was desperately needed.

The influence of the Darbyists (Plymouth Brethren) on Mennonite Brethren doctrine and life has not been sufficiently researched. There is evidence, however, that the writings and personalities from the Darbyist school of thought expressed through the Elberfelder Bible and the Wiedenest Bible School influenced the Mennonite Brethren church view, especially as it relates to eschatology.

## WEAKENED ANABAPTIST CHURCH PRINCIPLES

The spirit of progressivism along with a variety of forces and pressures coming from without and arising from within have markedly reshaped the Mennonite Brethren church concept from what it was in the beginning. Some of the changes are positive; others are negative in nature and result.

### The Principle of *Glaubensgemeinschaft* vs. *Familiengemeinschaft*

In a concise analysis of the church crisis in Russian Mennonitism, pastor A. Braun paid tribute to the Mennonite Brethren Church for its decisive stand on the principle of a Believers' Church (*glaubensgemeinschaft*). "Its earnest endeavors were aimed at receiving only true believers into the Church. That is why the reception of the individual is conditioned by the testimony of a personal salvation experience." <sup>4</sup> It is essentially this phenomenon which Braun elevates as a mark of distinction between the Mennonite Brethren and the larger Mennonite Church. But, alas! this distinction, according to Braun, was soon lost. He asserts, as does professor Robert Kreider, that in the second and third generations a change had come over the *Bruedergemeinde*. In theory the Brethren continued to hold fast to a Believers' Church, but in practice they became more and more an ethnic grouping, a *Familiengemeinschaft* whose membership was largely biologically determined. <sup>5</sup>

Such conclusions drawn by out-group scholars may seem biased.

The disturbing fact, however, is that in-group scholars, who fully identify with the Mennonite Brethren legacy, have reached surprisingly similar conclusions. A case in point is Delbert Wien's analysis in *New Wineskins for Old Wine*. Speaking of the cataclysmic conversion experience of first generation church member, Wiens has pointed out that the converted adult joins a group of like believers from a position outside that group. Such experience, Wiens believes, is only possible for the first generation. "But it does not fit the experience of subsequent generations, especially not where child "conversion" has become the rule. When principle comes in conflict with reality, we will continue to respect the principle, but we practice the reality." 6

To the forefathers faith meant a conversion experience and trust in the atoning work of Christ; to their descendants faith becomes mental acceptance of the truth offered in the description of the real experience. 7 The implication seems clear: many Mennonite Brethren are members of the Church because they were born into a Mennonite Brethren family, making the contention of Braun and Kreider all to credible. With many child conversions and child (not infant) baptisms Christian nurture in Church and family must be upgraded if the gap between theory and practice is to be bridged. Only then will the weakened church concept of a *Familiengemeinschaft*, or ethnic church fellowship, become transformed to a genuine Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren *Glaubensgemeinschaft*, or believers' church fellowship.

### **The Principle of Separation vs. Identification**

Both the Anabaptist and the early Mennonite Brethren were serious about separation from the world. According to the *Schleitheim Confessions*, 8 the teachings of Menno, 9 the M.B. Document of Secession of 1860 and the *Confession of Faith* of 1902, 10 the teaching implied an ethical more than a geographical severance from the world. It meant discipleship, cross-bearing, and becoming involved in the martyr witness; it meant striving to be the Church "without spot or wrinkle" in the world while not being of the world. The motive for separation was based on obedience to the Word of God and the understanding that the Church is radically different in nature from the world. In their view the Church is likened to the kingdom of God ruled by God; the world is likened to the domain of Satan dominated by Satan. 11 One of the reasons the Mennonite Brethren left the Old Church was because it no longer observed the principle of separation.

But again, in the course of time, separation became less and less a matter of conviction based on Scripture and more and more one of legalism and tradition. The result was inconsistency between performance and profession on the one hand, and an abandoning of the principle on the other.

It is true that past generations of Mennonite Brethren have been all too satisfied with mere geographical and physical isolation in closed communities that were largely "unadulterated" by customs and cultures of other peoples. Sins were defined in terms of that culture as much as in terms of more widely applicable principles of Scripture. But when higher education, the mass media, materialism, seculariza-

tion, and urbanization became part of the Mennonite Brethren way of life, some of the old standards began to crumble under the terrific pressures and demands of new life-styles. Today physical isolation no longer exists, at least not in the North American setting. Cultural distinctives, such as language, mode of dress, and special dishes, exist only in fond memories of the "good old days." Modes of authority such as rules, respect for older people, etc., have by and large been abolished without a valid or functional substitute. During this geographical and cultural transition, the teaching of separation has not been taken seriously enough by the majority, and the sense of distinction between the two worlds has been severely weakened. The light has become dim, and the salt has lost its savor. Identification of Church and world is little short of completion.

The diminishing sense of discipleship and the waning concept of the character and role of a dynamic **Glaubensgemeinde** in the world have resulted in a feeble church view. The challenge to the fourth-generation Mennonite Brethren is to search the Scriptures and to find in them the distinction between the Church and the world. Basic to this distinction is a commitment to the way of the cross and the holiness of God on the one hand and a deep realization of the reality of sin and the power of demonic principalities on the other. The biblical mandate is: be not unequally yoked and be not identified with the world (II Cor. 6:14). It calls on Christians to come out of the world and to be distinct from it in the while realm of ethics.

### **The Principle of Discipline vs. Tolerance**

Christian discipline was a distinctive, not only of the Anabaptist, but also of the Mennonite Brethren. In fact, the nondiscipline and tolerance of the mid-nineteenth century Mennonite Church in Russia was a major cause of withdrawal for the Brethren as the Document of Secession clearly states. In 1856 the directors of the **Landwirtschaftliche Verein** (a society for the promotion of culture and agriculture) asked each teacher of the Molotschna Colony to write an essay in which he was to evaluate objectively the moral condition of the citizens. The results were unanimous: the moral life of the people in the Church was in a degenerate state. This decadent condition on the one hand and the tolerant attitude of the church elders on the other motivated the Brethren to take action: "It is tragic to behold . . . when our Mennonite brothers, in the very presence of their neighbors, lead a satanic way of life in market places and at popular social events (**Gastgelagen**) at which the teachers walk about, hear and see what is going on, sit quietly by and watch how people serve the Devil." 12

It is true that church discipline, especially in the severe application of the ban, has not always been exercised in the spirit of Christ. This was true of the early Anabaptists, of Menno Simons, and of the Mennonite Brethren. Legalism and the legislation of rules rather than ethical principles based on inner integrity and scriptural norms have too often determined measures of punitive rather than redemptive discipline. 13 But it is equally true that the spirit of tolerance evident

in the present generation of Mennonite Brethren has posed a serious threat.

These are "times of toleration," laments Littell. We live in an "era of sweet toleration," echoes the great preacher Vance Havner. "Es gibt eine Toleranz zum Tode" (there is a tolerance unto death), warned the late A. H. Unruh. <sup>14</sup>

There have been three stages in our practice of church discipline. First, there was the authentically biblical era. This was a time of disciplinary action based on ethical convictions and scriptural guidelines in the first and second generations. Second, there came the traditional-legalistic era. This may be viewed as a time when the original regulations and guidelines were applied without giving due consideration to cultural change and context. This was seen in the second and third generations. Finally, the Church reached the non-disciplining-tolerant era. This is the time when all rules and regulations per se are interpreted as obsolete and bad, as repressive and impinging on man's liberty. The third and fourth generations cover this period. <sup>15</sup> It can only be hoped that the next era, beginning with the present (fourth) generation, will bring discipline and tolerance into proper focus and balance, lest the Mennonite Brethren Church degenerate into a nondisciplining institution composed of an undisciplined membership in place of a true discipleship worthy to bear the name of its Master.

### **The Principle of a Lay Ministry vs. an Elite Ministry**

The genesis of the Anabaptists and the Mennonite Brethren is deeply rooted in the spirit of the priesthood of all believers, the equality of all saints with their diversity of spiritual gifts. The Brethren of 1860 also broke away from a structured authoritarian hierarchy in which an elite class of clergy was in charge of all administrative and ceremonial functions pertaining to the work of the Church. The Brethren could not reconcile the existing structures with their understanding of the New Testament Church and were looking for a form in which all members would be allowed freedom and spontaneity of worship and participation in service and ministry. What they looked for was a Spirit-directed Brotherhood that would express itself in a gift-oriented rather than status-oriented community.

But again, in the course of time, the lay ministry has been exchanged for an elite ministry. The result has been a grossly distorted concept of the ministry which has blurred the total church view. The term "ministry" has come to mean a "position" filled by one "ordained" who is fully salaried by the local congregation, who stands behind the pulpit to preach the sermon, and who later greets the people at the door. As important as these roles within the total ministry may be, they are far from being the ministry. When people speak of some one who is preparing for the "ministry," they invariably have in mind a person who feels the call to be a preacher. Little wonder that many local Mennonite Brethren congregations have become "pulpit-centered" instead of "people-centered" as Professor Frank C. Peters has observed. <sup>16</sup>

Two years prior to the Mennonite Brethren Centennial, a prominent leader of the group has gone on record as saying that "Our Confession of the Lordship of Christ" must exclude all differences of rank in the Brotherhood:

There are here no valid "official differences," and such designations as "clergy and "laity" have no place within a brotherhood. Higher theological training can easily lead to the development of a theological caste whose members are being addressed as "doctors" in contradistinction to the ordinary brothers. In a brotherhood we renounce all honorary titles, the use of which may be justified in an academic setting. Those in the teaching ministry of the Church should be highly thought of and whole-heartedly loved "because of their work" (I Thess. 5:13) and because preachers and teachers are true brothers. 17

Theoretically and ideally the above is true, but in practice the Mennonite Brethren Church has, perhaps unintentionally and unconsciously, "created a ministerial society of socially superior to which individuals are admitted upon application and presentation of a unique record of achievement," writes J. H. Quiring, a senior leader in the denomination. 18

In "An Open Letter to Abraham Cornelsen" a layman claims that the denomination has become "hierarchical in . . . membership." He feels that the "emphasis on higher and lower orders in the church is, in a large part, the result of the misuse of the practice of ordination." He goes on to say that the lay people expect the "spiritually higher," such as ordained deacons, pastors, and missionaries, to be in charge of communion services, visitation, spiritual counseling, and so forth. Such a view has created a wide gap between the parson behind the pulpit and the person in the pew. The "elite" in the pulpit assume all responsibilities of the "ministry." All these activities are then shirked by the "lower" class in the pew. The latter are characterized as sheep who follow—often blindly—by sitting and listening and by delegating all tasks of the real ministry to the "reverend" or "pastor" or "preacher" or "minister." This practice has resulted in a popular mentality which erroneously believes that the Holy Spirit has actually endowed a person with all the spiritual gifts of the Body of Christ. 19

Such a view is contrary to New Testament teaching on the distribution of spiritual gifts.

Some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:11-13)

A reading of other gift passages (I Cor. 12-14, Rom. 12:3-8) lends strong support that there is a variety of spiritual gifts. This concept is powerfully demonstrated by a first generation Mennonite Brethren preacher of the Word, David G. Durksen (1850-1910). In two sermons on the "Body of Christ," Durksen appeals to the Church not to overlook the important fact that "every old and every young brother has a gift for one or the other kind of ministry in and for the Body of Christ." 20 Thus the work of the ministry is to be understood not in terms of a few who happen to have the gift of preaching but in terms

of the activities performed by those saints in the Church who have been equipped to be "prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastors, and teachers" for the upbuilding of the Church.

A consequence of this restricted definition of the ministry is that much of the work of the Church remains undone. Professor Abram Dueck asserts that there are members in certain committees who serve year after year on the local church and conference level without being creative or progressive, while many nonparticipating members sit idly by. 21 Conferences and consultations and committees meet and decide and act but the needs remain largely unmet. By the time one need has been looked after, two others have arisen.

Meanwhile, the lay people in the Christian community remain "the sleeping giant." It seems the Mennonite Brethren "lower class" has joined its equals in other denominations and retreated for a prolonged siesta.

### Conclusion

Some implications of the Mennonite Brethren church concept as analyzed above cannot be easily dismissed. What is positive must be upheld and guarded as treasures of an irreplaceable spiritual heritage. What is negative must be reformed, if reformation is possible; if not, the Church must be restored to be not only truly Anabaptist, but biblical in nature and expression. But lip-service to the great scriptural concepts of the fathers regarding the Church is not enough. Recovery is overdue.

Here and there, however, are signs of stirring in the camp, and these signs of renewal are encouraging. The Master Architect is still at work, building His Church of living stones. That Church is the Bride of Christ, awaiting the return of her Bridegroom and longing for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. When the musical echo of the final wedding march will resound through hills and vales, across the land and farthest sea, then the blessed of all ages will sing together with celestial hosts, saying: "Hallelujah, glory, praise and honor be to Christ the King for all times and forevermore!" (Rev. 19:6; 4:10-11). That is the Church whose spires arise beyond the horizon of the visible sky. For that Church we now live and love, witness and work, wait and hope.

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 For a translation of the Document, see John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), pp. 34, 35.
- 2 Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 228.
- 3 Victor Adrian, *Born of Anabaptism and Pietism* (Winnipeg: The Christian Press, 1965), p. 6.

- 4 A. Braun, "Die kirchlichen Spaltungen in den russlanddeutschen Mennoniten-Gemeinden," in *Beitraege zur Geschichte der Mennoniten*, herausgegeben vom Mennonitischen Geschichtsverein, Weierhof, 1938, p. 15 (my translation).
- 5 C. F. Robert Kreider, "Russian Mennonite Environment," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, XXV (January, 1951), p. 31.
- 6 Delbert Wiens, *New Wineskins for Old Wine* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1965), p. 7.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 5.
- 8 Littell, *Anabaptist View of the Church*, 2nd ed. rev. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), p. 89.
- 9 Menno Simons, *Complete Writings*, trans. from the Dutch by Leonard Verduin and ed. by John Christian Wenger with a biography by Harold S. Bender (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956), p. 181; Roland S. Bainton, *The Age of the Reformation* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, an Anvil Original, 1956), p. 130.
- 10 *Glaubensbekenntnis der Vereinigten Christlichen Taufgesinnten Mennoniten Brue-dergemeinde in Russland* (Halbstadt: Raduga, 1902), p. 24.
- 11 See Robert Friedmann's analysis of "The Doctrine of the Two Worlds," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. by Guy F. Hersherberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1962), pp. 105-106.
- 12 P. M. Friesen, *Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland 1789-1910* (Halbstadt, Taurien: Raduga, 1911), pp. 189-90 (my translation).
- 13 Hans Kasdorf, "Church Discipline: A Redemptive Approach," *Journal of Church and Society*, Fall 1970, pp. 42-43.
- 14 Cited by Kasdorf, *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 15 An analysis of several articles led to the stated conclusions. Cf. Unruh, "Durchbrechen der ueberlieferten Ordnung," *The Voice*, II (July- August 1953), pp. 12-17. For a listing of other significant writings see Hans Kasdorf, "Church Discipline." *Journal of Church and Society*, Fall 1971, p. 59, note 19.
- 16 Frank C. Peters, "Mennonite Brethren Church Policy," *The Voice*, VIII (November-December, 1959), p. 20.
- 17 J. A. Toews, "Unser Bekenntnis zur Herrschaft Christi," *The Voice*, VII (July-August 1958), p. 4 (my translation).
- 18 J. H. Quiring, "Do We Create an Elite Among our Ministers?" *The Voice*, XIII (September-October 1964), p. 6.
- 19 "An Open Letter to Abraham Cornelsen," *The Christian Leader*, May 30, 1972, pp. 2-4 (Writer anonymous).
- 20 For a biographical record of Duerksen's life and work see *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, I, pp. 493-95. The sermons referred to were preached by Duerksen around the turn of this century. They are on microfilm in the Hiebert Memorial Library, Pacific College.
- 21 Abram Dueck, "Retrospect and Prospect: Reformatio or Restitutio," *Direction*, April, 1972, p. 45.