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Source: *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (1983): 257-264.

Published by: Mennonite Quarterly Review.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/583>

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MENNONITE BRETHERN IN THE LARGER MENNONITE WORLD

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The Mennonite Brethren, the third largest Mennonite group in North America, perceive themselves as deeply rooted in the spiritual heritage of the Anabaptists, the left wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation. The political, social and ecclesiological environments of the Mennonite Brethren, beginning in the nineteenth century, offer some parallels to the events and experiences of the Anabaptist beginnings. An analysis of such parallels is given by C. J. Dyck in his article "1525 Revisited? A Comparison of Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren Beginnings."¹ The new wine of spiritual renewal in both eras could not be contained in the old wineskins of the socio-religious institutional structures of a *Volkskirche*. The eruption which resulted from the spiritual ferment in the mid-nineteenth century had a lasting effect on the Dutch-Russian Mennonite stream. For the Mennonite Brethren it meant isolation from the larger Mennonite community for several decades.

Today Mennonite Brethren are more active than ever before in inter-Mennonite activities. A recent study reveals they are participants in 55 of the 70 inter-Mennonite organizations.² The initiative for most of these cooperative ventures came from the General Conference and Mennonite Church. We have tended to allow them to begin various kinds of work and once the program exists, we join. Examples are Mennonite Mutual Aid, the *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, the Foundation Series, etc. A descriptive analysis of this broad participation of Mennonite Brethren in inter-Mennonite interests and programs is well recorded in the writings of the late J. A. Toews.³

Our relationship to other Mennonites through the years has been more restrained than that of the General Conference and Mennonite Church. Part of that must be attributed to the more common roots—Swiss and South German ties—which the General Conference and Mennonite Church share with each other. The historical background of the Mennonite Brethren is limited to the Dutch-Russian seg-

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1 C J Dyck, "1525 Revisited? A Comparison of Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren Origins," in Paul Toews, ed., *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History* (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1977), 55-77

2 Paul N Kraybill, ed., *Mennonite World Handbook* (Lombard, Ill: Mennonite World Conference, 1978), 337-43

3 John A Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), 380-99

ment. For the Mennonite Brethren in Russia there existed only the world of the Dutch-Prussian *Kirchliche* Mennonite Church. The only Mennonite world they knew was the Russian Mennonite colonies and the people who migrated from there. Swiss Brethren and the Anabaptists of the Netherlands differed markedly in their theological perceptions, as was shown by the conferences in Strasbourg in 1555 and 1557.

The General Conference and the Mennonite Church have been able largely to restore the breach of 1847. The coming together of the two conferences in 1983 in Eastern Pennsylvania is a historic moment which represents some rite of passage beyond the Oberholtzer split of 1847.

The Mennonite Brethren-Kirchliche split of 1860 has been perpetuated in America by parallel events and circumstances affecting the Mennonite Brethren relationship to other Mennonite groups. The General Conference Mennonites of North America, of course, are not the Kirchliche of Russia, but the Kirchliche of Russia identified themselves in North America with the General Conference. The Mennonite Brethren thus have perceived the General Conference, in character and relationship, as the continuation of that body from Russia.

The thesis of this essay is that the underlying issues of the Mennonite Brethren and Kirchliche split in Russia and the Mennonite Brethren self-understanding that emerged from that split have largely continued to be issues in the relationship of Mennonite Brethren to other Mennonite groups.

The Mennonite Brethren in Russia

The Mennonite Brethren as a renewal and missionary movement challenged the status quo of the Russian Mennonite *Volkskirche*. The latter equated ethnic Mennonite peoplehood with that of a believers' church. The Mennonite Brethren rejected that equation and called for evidence of a new birth as a condition for church membership. Menno's central emphasis on "born again believers" also became central in the renewal movement. This demand for reformation met rejection and persecution. Only action from the Russian government prevented the expulsion of the Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite community. Groups within the Kirchliche community continued (as late as 1914)⁴ to resist accepting the Mennonite Brethren as part of the Mennonite peoplehood. This resulted in the Mennonite Brethren becoming sociologically and spiritually a minority group (25% of the community). The tension was perpetuated when a continuing flow of people from the Kirchliche Mennonites experienced renewal in a personal conversion and then identified with the Mennonite Brethren.

A major stress point between the Mennonite Brethren and the larger Mennonite community was the issue of baptism. The Mennonite Breth-

⁴ P.M. Friesen, *Konfession oder Sekte* (privately published, 1914).

ren considered the Kirchliche their mission field in evangelism. People who experienced renewal in a personal conversion were rebaptized to join the Mennonite Brethren fellowship. The issue here was the question of adult baptism versus believers' baptism. References in historical writings of non-Mennonite Brethren sources attribute their practice of immersion to the influence of Baptists in the early years of their existence. Though such influences cannot be denied, the explanation fails to give credence to theological understanding and historical circumstances which provided justification for the practice.⁵

"Biblical baptism," the term generally used by the Mennonite Brethren for immersion baptism, was considered a scriptural principle. The testimony of George Miller of England (1844) was also frequently quoted as a confirmation of the correct understanding of baptism in form and practice.⁶ John F. Harms, an early Mennonite Brethren historian, refers to the need for immersion baptism as an identification with a believers' church in contrast to other forms in which baptism did not always imply a personal salvation experience.⁷

The reaction from factions of the Mennonite community to the practice of immersion included violent interference, "driving ministers and baptismal candidates with sticks out of the baptismal waters."⁸ This had a hardening effect on the Brethren, who were convinced that the violence of the people who were baptized members of the Kirchliche Mennonite Church indicated they could not be considered true Christians.

Historically we need to recognize that immersion baptism for the Mennonite Brethren in time became a dogma of pharisaic character, expressing itself in a "holier than thou" attitude which has given occasion for much offense. The claim that immersion was a "believers' baptism" in distinction to other modes excluded many true believers from other traditions. The year 1963 marked the official modification of this position, thus making greater mutuality in the broader Mennonite fellowships possible.⁹

The practice of close communion by Mennonite Brethren had a similar background in relationship to other Mennonites. Without offering an analysis of the Pietistic influences on the birth and practices of Mennonite Brethren, one must recognize that from the beginning of the movement there existed a stream within the brotherhood which strongly leaned to wider spiritual fellowship with all true believers of the Men-

⁵ Jakkob Becker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kan.: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973), 70-73.

⁶ Johannes Warns, *Die Taufe* (Kassel: Onken Verlag, 1913), 267-70.

⁷ John F. Harms, *Geschichte der Mennoniten Brudergemeinde (1860-1924)* (Hillsboro, Kan.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1924), 24-25

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Yearbook of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg, 1963), 38-39.

nonite community.¹⁰ At the turn of the century (1903) the brotherhood came to a mutual understanding in the recognition of true believers from other fellowships.¹¹ This decision paved the way for the founding of the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren fellowship (1905) which practiced communion with all "true believers" and removed the requirement of immersion baptism as a condition for membership,¹² while still retaining immersion as the only form of baptism to be practiced.

Half a century after 1860 the Kirchliche Mennonite Church, the Mennonite Brethren and the Evangelical Mennonite Brethren Church found a common basis to extend mutual recognition to each other. The General Mennonite Conference of October 26 and 27, 1910, resulted in a restoration of functional unity, even though it did not remove all tensions in local group relationships.¹³ P. M. Friesen, reporting the effects of this conference, refers to continued occasions of strain, which he blames primarily on the continued suspicion the Mennonite Brethren had for other Mennonites. "This artificially pious and reserved attitude," he writes, "was one of the most repulsive aspects of the Mennonite Brethren Church." In contrast he refers to "some of the brethren of the Mennonite Church who displayed an admirable meekness and humility."¹⁴

The tempest of World War I and the resulting Russian revolution became the providential moment in history when the Mennonite Brethren recognized their relationships to the wider Mennonite world. A visitation of God in a spiritual renewal in the larger Mennonite community in Russia brought about further healing. The persecuted brethren from the 1860s again found fellowship in the company of their former persecutors, and many common spiritual bases were established. The all-Mennonite Conference of June 30 to July 2, 1918, in Lichtenau reflects a united brotherhood with common spiritual concerns for the church and Mennonite peoplehood.

The outstretched arm of the Mennonite brotherhood from America in the relief work of 1921 and 1922 and the immigration in 1924 through 1930 also fostered unity. The Mennonite Brethren realized that there was room for diversity in spiritual understanding and practice within the Mennonite fellowship without disclaiming the common heritage of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement.

The North American Scene

The Mennonite Brethren in North America continued to be a renewal movement. The identification of the General Conference Men-

10 Peter M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, trans. J. B. Toews, et al. (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 453-59.

11 *Ibid.*, 458.

12 *Ibid.*, 918-21. The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren in Canada and the United States are not to be identified with this 1905 movement.

13 *Ibid.*, 645-50.

14 *Ibid.*, 645.

nonites with the Kirchliche Gemeinde in Russia, though historically incorrect, was for the Mennonite Brethren immigrants a circumstantial deduction. Continued renewal within the General Conference in America, resulting in the founding of new Mennonite Brethren congregations, was seen as a parallel to the Russian experience.

The French Creek renewal movement near Hillsboro, Kansas, created new tensions. A group from this community, including some leaders of the Johannesthal General Conference congregation, became the founders of the Hillsboro Mennonite Brethren Church in 1880-82.¹⁵ Cornelius P. Wedel, a minister from the Alexanderwohl General Conference congregation, with a group of people from that fellowship, became the founder of the Goessel Mennonite Brethren Church in 1881. One son of Cornelius Wedel, C. H. Wedel, became the president of Bethel College. The second son, Peter H. Wedel, was widely known as a very effective evangelist who preached renewal and the need for conversion among Mennonites and became the first Mennonite Brethren missionary to the Cameroons in Africa.¹⁶

The Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada (1886) was the fruit of the evangelistic ministry of Heinrich Voth, a Mennonite Brethren minister among the Mennonite communities in southern Manitoba. Events leading to the organization of the first Mennonite Brethren Church in Burwalde, near Winkler, Manitoba, also provided occasion for tension. The continued growth of Mennonite Brethren churches in Canada and the U.S.A. came from other Mennonites who experienced personal conversion, were rebaptized and joined the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.

Renewal and Revival Emphasis in the Broader Mennonite Community

We need to recognize that the renewal and revival emphasis with a focus on repentance and conversion was not unique to the Mennonite Brethren. The history of the Mennonite community in North America records a broad stream of identical concern, only in a less hostile environment than that experienced by the Mennonite Brethren in Russia. Martin Boehm (1725-1812), with his evangelistic fervor in Pennsylvania, brought to life the Brethren in Christ (River Brethren) in 1770. The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite group was a renewal movement under the leadership of John Holdeman. J. F. Funk (1835-1930), J. S. Coffman, Daniel Brenneman and Solomon Eby are part of the gallery of evangelists in Mennonite history.¹⁷

More recent times have seen the revival movement of the 1940s and 1950s, which crossed the boundaries of Mennonite groupings. The community revivals in British Columbia, southern Manitoba and Ontario, as

¹⁵ Harms, 24-25.

¹⁶ John H. Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kan.: Board of Foreign Missions of the Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church, 1950).

¹⁷ *ME.*, IV, 312-13.

well as in communities in the U.S., enjoyed strong participation from varied Mennonite groups. This form of inter-Mennonite activity was not accepted by some in the General Conference and Mennonite Church circles. The Mennonite Brethren understanding of faith and life in recent years found its parallel expression among General Conference men like Theodore Epp, originally from the Whitewater Church in Kansas; C. H. Suckau in the Bern, Indiana, congregation; H. J. Braun, a missionary to China; and others. In the Mennonite Church the parallel, with some exceptions, may be well recognized in the Brunk Revival phenomenon or the evangelistic theology of Myron Augsburger and others.

In their theological understanding, the Mennonite Brethren consider themselves very much a part of the Anabaptist tradition. The call to repentance and conversion as a foundation to a believers' church and a life of discipleship is seen by Mennonite Brethren as firmly rooted in the Anabaptist understanding of scripture.

The level of inter-Mennonite involvement by the Mennonite Brethren has been conditioned by theological considerations. The recent assessment that "Mennonite Brethren found inter-Mennonite relations most difficult" and references to their "traditional stance of withdrawal"¹⁸ fail to recognize that Mennonite Brethren, in common with many other Mennonites in America and Europe, do not understand Anabaptist theology as leaving room for "a wide range over the theological spectrum," an openness held by some Mennonite groups.¹⁹ The theology of Menno, the major source for the Mennonite Brethren understanding of Anabaptism, has not provided for them a "wide latitude of theological understanding." Theological considerations have made Mennonite Brethren selective in areas of inter-Mennonite cooperation. They have sometimes felt that some Mennonite groups have at times underemphasized essential aspects of New Testament truth as understood by the early Anabaptists.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding

The Mennonite Brethren as a renewal movement challenged the status quo in the Russian Mennonite colonies. Tensions are part of all renewals in history. The renewals which came to us from 1850 to 1875 had their base in the spiritual influence of the Moravian Brethren and the Pietistic community of the west. In the years following we continued to be nourished by non-Mennonite sources. We felt comfortable in the fellowship of other evangelical people who also emphasized personal salvation and evangelism. Baptists who do share something of the larger free church traditions became somewhat our mentors. For example, our

¹⁸ J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1975), 247.

¹⁹ S. F. Pannabecker, *Open Doors: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 383.

trained ministers came from the Baptist seminaries in Hamburg and Rochester, Berlin Mission Institute, now Wiedenest, and St. Crishona, Switzerland. We do not have the category of "outside influences" that H. S. Bender uses to describe Mennonite Church history. The use of that category implies a singular tradition, while ours was more pluralistic from the beginning. We live in the House of Menno strongly pollinized by the Pietistic movement and influenced by evangelical movements in this country. In Mennonite Brethren perception, Pietism brought us a renewed understanding of the existential soteriology centrally emphasized by Menno Simons in keeping with New Testament teaching. The Anabaptist understanding of ecclesiology—the nature and fellowship of an inter-responsible believers church—came from a search of the New Testament and the influence of Menno Simons' writing. The purpose of the church in the given frame of reference was to be a people of God in a testimony of consistency between profession and life (pure life—Menno; *Nachfolge*—Hans Denk), and engaged in evangelism and missions.

The zeal for saving the lost, along with a strong restorationist motive in relation to the church and its past errors, bred criticism and rejection of the past. The struggle for correction created blind spots, with Mennonite Brethren failing to recognize their indebtedness to the past and to other groups in the broader Mennonite community. Our emphasis on separation from the world has in some instances taken the form of an isolation from other true believers, including some Mennonites. The struggle for survival in the cultural transition from 1940 through the 1960s and the search for new forms to maintain consistency between faith and practice in the rapidly changing social and economic environment—from the village to the city—generated a crisis in Mennonite Brethren self-understanding. The General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches in 1951 and again in 1954 called for reassessment of the questions of "Who are we?" and "Where are we going?" The Centennial of 1960 generated a consciousness that became a milestone dividing past and future. Statements by men not from the Mennonite Brethren fellowship—H. S. Bender, Gerhard Lohrenz and others—recognizing the Mennonite Brethren as a provision of God for the larger Mennonite community to call for spiritual renewal and recommitment to evangelism and missions, have helped us reexamine our role in the larger Anabaptist family.²⁰

The Centennial Conference in Reedley, California, heard expressions of deep repentance over past failures in relationships and service. The seventeen messages delivered at that conference echoed a clarion call for a biblical reorientation in questions of being, relationship and

²⁰ H. S. Bender quoted by J. A. Toews and others who attended the Centennial celebration in Winnipeg, July 1960; Gerhard Lohrenz, "The Mennonites of Russia and the Great Commission," in Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *A Legacy of Faith: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Cornelius Krahn* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1962), 183.

service.²¹ The statement to Mennonite Brethren from the Centennial Study Conference of the General Conference brotherhood in Donnellson, Iowa, June 20-23, 1960, read by Erland Waltner, then General Conference chairman, expressing regrets over past broken relationships between the Mennonite Brethren and the General Conference, had an unforgettable impact.²²

The Centennial became the platform upon which Mennonite Brethren began to rebuild their historic identity. The 1960s marked the beginning of historical research. Study conferences, which began in 1957 and continued for the next twenty-five years, recorded serious research to establish historical identity in faith and practice. The Centers for Mennonite Brethren Studies became the focus for such efforts in the 1970s. We perceive ourselves anew as a people of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, committed to a New Testament brotherhood in a culture of extreme individualism which continues to threaten the basic tenets of our soteriology and ecclesiology.

We need a more open dialogue with the larger Mennonite fellowship. Our understanding of Anabaptist faith and history, with primary commitment to evangelism and missions, needs to be tested against the other affirmations of the Anabaptist movement. Our role must be that of a voice as well as a learner, evaluating our understanding and experiences with other elements of the Mennonite community.

Mennonite pluralism recognizes a common core of commitment, but with variations in perception and emphasis. We enrich each other as we bring to each member of the Mennonite family the distinctives that our histories have developed. There is authenticity in the Mennonite world when we recognize our commonness and our diversity as a gift of God, preserved by history to be a peculiar people, God's people in the spiritual crisis of the twentieth century.

²¹ *Yearbook of the Centennial Conference of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America* (Reedley, Cal., 1960), 4-19.

²² *Ibid.*, 37-38.