

THE QUESTIONS WE FACE

by **Delbert Wiens ***

(for the Editorial Board)

We feel so keenly the problems which we face that we are sometimes tempted to imagine that in no other time has the church faced so difficult a challenge. This is a trick of perspective. That which is close to us looms much larger than does that which is actually larger but is farther away. The church has experienced difficulties as great in the past. And it has emerged from them stronger and truer. Undoubtedly, we worry too much and celebrate too little.

And yet it may be true that we Mennonite Brethren confront immediate challenges greater than any we have yet faced. So far as we are concerned, this may be the most difficult time. So profound are the changes we are undergoing that our minds cannot easily comprehend what is happening. So great are the issues that our will to solve them seems paralyzed.

Under these circumstances the seminary and colleges and Bible schools of the Mennonite Brethren have an increasing responsibility to serve the churches. It is true that there are many gifts in the church besides those granted by education. It is also very probable that answers, when they emerge, will arise outside our places of higher education. But training does bring opportunity. And the attempt to understand what is happening may be a necessary link in that chain of events which leads to unlooked-for triumphs.

The quest for understanding may not be a large role, but it is a necessary one. In that belief the schools, through their representatives at a meeting last August in Denver, asked that this new journal do what it can to help our churches to understand themselves and their world. In the faith that the schools can serve here also, they are underwriting a major portion of the cost of this forum and are offering it to the churches.

But what really are the crucial questions to which we should address ourselves? The faculties of our schools were polled. Their answers are as follows.

I. What Are the Questions?

A. Theological Problems

1. Authority. The nature of authority was consistently mentioned as one of our basic problems. This also involves the question of how the Scriptures are authoritative for us. Even when their authority is assumed there is the question of interpretation. What does inspiration mean? and

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inerrancy? Do Scriptures themselves present a unified set of answers? Not everyone in our churches will agree that this ought to be a problem that needs to be reconsidered. But all who are aware of trends will admit that in actuality our "biblicism" can not be taken for granted.

2. Specific doctrinal issues. Specific doctrines that were mentioned as problematic are those which have to do with the Holy Spirit and with eschatology. Our concept of God was also mentioned as meriting discussion.

In addition to these specific doctrines, questions were raised concerning current theological movements. What are Old Testament and New Testament scholars saying? Closer to home, what are the theological trends among Mennonites? and in our schools? What are our denominational distinctives? Finally, what should be our theology of the church? This issue raised a whole set of questions.

B. The Church in Theory and Practice

1. What was the New Testament church? Should we be like it? What ought the church to be?

2. What is the church's mission? What is evangelism? What ought foreign missions and home missions to be in the future? What is the relation of evangelism to social concerns and welfare?

3. What about the concrete structures of the churches? What should be the shape of leadership? What is the role of the pastor? of the layman? What can be said for the sermon? What new forms of worship and fellowship should emerge? What does it mean to worship and to fellowship? How shall we assess and utilize the small group movement? What about our music and our architecture?

4. What is the justification of our denominational identity? What shall we think of the ecumenical thrust in general? of inter-Mennonite ecumenism? of "evangelical" ecumenism? What about our conference structures and our ecclesiastical "politics"? Why do United States and Canadian churches find cooperation so difficult?

C. Sociological Problems

As the previous questions have demonstrated, it is impossible clearly to separate theological from sociological questions. The relationship of spirit to body is problematic at every level. But some of the issues we face arise specifically out of our cultural heritage.

1. Who are we? That is a central problem for any group, whether or not it has a distinctive ethnic culture. What is the meaning of our history? To what extent should we affirm what we have been? Or should we move even more quickly to lose our ethnicity? How can we keep from losing values developed in rural settings as we become urban?

2. We have long been grateful for our strong family relationships. Can these be maintained? How can the family ties be strengthened? Ought they to be? What about our own generation gaps, both with the young and with the aged? What is the role of the family in Christian nurture and education?

3. More broadly, how shall we relate to the modern world, to nationalism, to internationalism, to communism? How is the Christian to participate in legal and political processes? How do the mass media shape us? How shall we relate to the arts and to the sciences?

D. Discipleship and the Individual

1. What does discipleship mean today? How shall we make vocational and economic decisions?

2. Ethical problems. How are we to respond to violence, racialism, divorce, drugs, and other ethical problems? What is the nature of Christian ethics? What are the trends in ethical thought and in actual practice?

3. Spiritual problems. In actuality, all problems are also "spiritual." But what does it mean to be a mature Christian? What does it mean to be a man? to be a woman? What is a valid devotional life? How shall we pray?

These are the issues which teachers in our schools have listed. Not all are equally crucial. Speaking strictly, some are not even problems. Nor can we address ourselves to all of them. Which, then, are the most important? Or is it our biggest problem that we do not see what the real questions are or how they should be formulated? We welcome the response of our readers. What have we missed? On what issues would you welcome, and contribute to, a discussion?

II. The Question of Answers

That teachers are not the only ones who should formulate the questions was made clear when I asked a veteran pastor and conference leader what was our biggest problem. He thought for awhile and then responded, "You may think this is silly, but the biggest problem we face today is that of dishonesty. Once upon a time we could sit together and disagree openly and vigorously until, before the Scriptures, we found an answer. But now we can sit and talk and talk and get up and still not know what the other one really thinks."

Once stated, this has the shock of truth. If we cannot trust each other and be open, then no problem can be fruitfully addressed. And then the attempt to probe important issues can only lead to greater division instead of to reconciliation and healing. Why is it, then, that we do not trust each other?

In the past our people were almost all quite similar. They shared a German culture and a common Russian homeland. They were farmers and lived around small villages. They shared a common world-view. When they came to a problem, they all could

understand it in the same way. And they all were agreed on what sort of response could count as an answer. Even their differences reflected a deeper agreement on the nature and validity of what was being debated.

None of this can any longer be taken for granted. We are no longer alike. Almost any congregation, or any group of brethren, contains individuals with widely different world-views. One may, in fact, make a case for the thesis that Mennonite churches tend to contain members with a more diverse range of vocational, cultural, and educational backgrounds than is normal in the sort of evangelical churches with whom we most easily identify.

When the normal "evangelical" moves to a new community he will likely try first a church of the same denomination as was the one that he left. But if the members of this new church reflect a different cultural or educational level than his, he is quite likely to shop around until he finds a congregation which he recognizes as like-minded, whatever denomination it belongs to. Moreover, if a member of such a congregation raises his cultural or educational status, he often changes his affiliation. The result is that any given congregation tends to be composed of people who are very like each other. They share a single world-view.

Members of strong ethnic groups, however, have many reasons to remain in a congregation which has ties to the ethnic tradition which they share. Many of these ties have nothing to do with theology. Indeed, they are often stronger than mere theological agreement. Reasons to stay with the church range from the important (strong family ties) to the almost ridiculous (being able to use snatches of left-over Low-German).

Children are not exactly like their parents. Nor are they like each other. In time, any family spans a wide spectrum of vocational, cultural, and educational attainment. Yet Mennonite "children" tend to remain in Mennonite churches. And however narrow Mennonite parents may be, they harbor the secret or not-so-secret hope that their own church will be broad enough to encompass their own children. The result is that we Mennonites are much more diverse than we are willing to admit to ourselves. And it means that brethren in the church and in its ministry may sit side by side and yet be living in entirely different "universes."

This point will not be clear to people who have never been forced to question their world-view. Because they have known only one world-view, they find it almost impossible to imagine what a different one would be like. They would be surprised to hear that one's world-view is to inhabit a different "universe." No problem is quite the same when translated from one universe to the next. Nor do the same things "count" as answers to what is superficially the same question. The result is that two people can "talk and talk and get up and still not know what the other one really thinks." And both may be honest people, deeply troubled by the sense that somehow there has been no true communication.

Of course, world-views are not entirely different. And one person may move freely between several of them. Thus a boy from a rural community can come home from the university and reenter

his former "universe." But now he is both within his old world-view and outside it, understanding and judging it from the perspective of another one. The sentences that have always had a single meaning to those who remained behind now have a double meaning for him. A sense of irony is therefore present. He both is and is not what he was. He understands what the words mean to the others and he knows that he also understands them in a different way. The others sense his ambivalence, and they feel that he has become a stranger, and perhaps a heretic. For what we sense as "heresy" often is precisely the unsettling mystery of another world-view. And so they battle to reclaim his soul while he battles to pass on the truths of his new perspective.

What makes the battle so poignant is that the stakes are obviously very high. We grow up defining our own being in terms of our world-view. And we identify TRUTH with the relative truths of our own "universe." To be forced into another "universe" is something like a crucifixion. One need not be a missionary to undergo this "culture-shock." It happens to many parents who try to understand their children. It is what has only begun to happen in our churches. So far, people with quite different world-views have cared enough to stay within our churches. But they either have not cared enough, or are afraid, or do not know how to seek a confrontation there. Even established leaders are afraid to express openly new truths they have discovered.

One may use, as an example, the way in which we understand the Scriptures. For also our interpretation of them is governed by our world-views. Some of us who take the Scriptures seriously have learned that the world-view of the Hebrews and of the early church were different from ours. We attempt to enter into that world-view so that we may understand the texts as they were originally meant to be understood. This is precisely what the "scientific historical method" of Bible study is all about. The irony is that it is extremely difficult to share what is then discovered. For sometimes it cannot be done unless the brother is willing to enter into ancient world-views. But this is a difficult, and sometimes unsettling, project.

III. Conclusion

Our diversity is itself one of our greatest problems. It is the source of a "dishonesty" which is not always intentional. It makes real communication exceedingly difficult. But it can become one of our greatest strengths. This "problem" is our opportunity to reach a greater Christian maturity. Here we have great need for those in our churches who do not share our ethnic past. They bring the potential enrichment of other pasts and fresh perspectives. Without their active participation in the debate we shall neither be able to see our own past clearly nor to move very far beyond it.

When we become able to meet each other in trust, learning how to enter each other's "universes," we will at the same time begin to free ourselves from the blindnesses inherent in any earthly pattern which pretends to be absolute. Both closeness and diversity are required if a church is to reach a deeper understanding and a higher vision.

Would it not be strange if that which makes us peculiar, the Low-German clannishness which helps so many of us with diverse world-views to stick together, would help us in the end to overcome provincialism? Is it possible that that which embarrasses us could be one factor in helping us become more spiritually sophisticated? Is it not inherent in the Christian faith that in the end that which is foolish turns out to confound the mighty?

No doubt the reality will be less grand than the possibility. And yet, if we fail it will be because we had not the courage or the faith. And because in our blindness we could find no reason to affirm our heritage as God's doing, his gift to help us to transcend all merely human "universes."

Our diversity is our problem—and our challenge. It is in our congregations that this opportunity must be grasped. And perhaps, if we are faithful and loving and bold, a journal like this one can in a small way help us to understand each other, to become honest, and to grow into the maturity of the sons of God.
