

Mores, Morals, Morale And Hard Cases

OR

“Whatever Happened To Consensus”

Delbert L. Wiens

Once upon a time, some Mennonite Brethren communities had elders who could clear with authority what was right and what was wrong. They could also change their minds and agree together that some things that were once wrong were now right, or that some things that were once right were now wrong. They could even allow exceptions to these rights and wrongs in difficult cases.

Today, Mennonite Brethren organize study conferences to consider what is right and what is wrong. Scholars debate the issues by reading papers to one another.

What does this change mean? Three different ways of being and thinking will be illustrated to clarify the changes that have occurred. This analysis will then be used to show why it is so difficult to agree on what is right and what is wrong.

The Context for Ethics

THE MORES OF A COMMUNITY

The evangelist paused to wipe his brow while the members of a small community began another verse of “Come home, come home; ye who are weary, come home.” And then, whether fleeing from the picture of Christ the righteous judge or melted by the image of Jesus the lamb whose blood would wash them clean, some who came to test their toughness found themselves moving to the front pews.

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But, on the human side of reconciliation, what did it mean to “come home?” There were usually habits that had to be abandoned. Always there were wrongs to be confessed so that forgiveness could be given and received. Most importantly, it meant that a willful, self-imposed exile was over. But it seldom meant that beliefs had changed or that a different set of values had become acceptable.

No, many a rebel knew the way to salvation as surely as did the preacher and was as convinced as any deacon that the sins gloried in were certainly sins. Change of heart did not mean change of mind. It meant the end of a stubborn isolation. It meant the prodigal had “come home.”

Having made the decision to be a full member of the community of the faithful, people seldom found it necessary to ask what was true and false or what was right and wrong. The truths believed were authorized by time and tradition. Daily walk was guided by the actions and expectations which characterized “our way of life.” People had something larger than ethics: they had an ethos. It would be more true to say that Mennonite Brethren mores were generally healthy than that morals were carefully thought out.

Mennonite Brethren knew that the larger world was both dangerous and seductive, and so they built “our ways” like a wall around themselves. The bricks in that wall were the elements of the tradition and, as protection from enemies and temptations, the ways people ate, courted, and played, settled firmly into their necessary places beside the teachings of the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount.

So long as the wall looked firm people could be remarkably patient with the reverse hypocrisy of those who pretended to be rebelling against it. If they remained in the community everyone knew that they were subconsciously agreeing and that they were making an almost conscious promise to themselves that they would indeed “come home.” The truly rebellious person committed the one unpardonable sin; he simply walked away from the community.

Even if it rarely happened, even ethical dilemmas could be turned into occasions for grace so long as the wall was strong. When either personal failure or unfortunate circumstances forced a choice between wrongs, the elders (who had been chosen for their sure instinct in the discerning of hard cases) could deliberate and judgment could be made. The community which had been the context for decision could also be the community where grace was offered and healing was received.

The Scriptures were used to justify the elements of the wall and to guide decisions. The Scriptures were the larger world which offered precedents for and insights into the smaller world of the community.

Somewhere among its proverbs and principles the needed truth would stand out against countering truths. Somewhere in these books there was a story in which God's people had struggled with a similar problem, and their solution could suggest a solution for the present.

THE MORALS OF CREEDALISTS

The evangelist surveyed the throng in the auditorium while the choir behind him sang, "Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt . . . O Lamb of God I come, I come." Then, whether fleeing inner uncertainty or attracted by the promised truth of "what the Bible says," some who came out of curiosity found themselves moving down the aisles and out to the waiting counselors.

But, on the human side of faith, what did it mean to "believe in Jesus?" Though "decision cards" were referred to the churches, there was rarely a profound sense that one was returning "home." Inner certainty had been promised, not community integration. The Jesus they came to was the eternal Word who could be "the way" and "the life" because he was "the truth."

The disbelief from which they fled may have been a system of a larger rebelliousness and restored belief may have had an element of the joy of "coming home," but the setting itself testified that the walls had crumbled. What "we have always said" could not help those who were searching for truth and struggling with the questions of right and wrong. Now a credo was demanded—and a logic for morals—which could safely guide those who no longer had firm mores.

Since the world remained a dangerous place, people needed roads, traffic rules, and maps to guide them safely along the way to the eternal home. They prayed for help in thinking truly, and they studied the Bible. But the Bible was no longer a divinely sanctioned source for precedents and insights which guided them to judgments. It was now a divine word which yielded up principles to be arranged in logical order to produce a theology for behavior. Church Bible study conferences disappeared and theologians appeared instead to show how Bible verses could be arranged along the strings of their systematics. Now the truly rebellious person was the heretic who denied the truth of the system and the adequacy of the foundation on which it was thought to rest.

So long as the chosen system of beliefs and rules seemed firm, it was possible to be tolerant of the lapses of sinners. So long as there was "weakness of the flesh" to explain evil, there was no need to question the dogmatics that told how to label what was sin and what was not.

Repentant sinners could be forgiven and helped, for confession and forgiveness were also an implicit celebration of the rightness of the system. However, it was almost impossible now to turn ethical dilemmas to occasions for grace, for the existence of such dilemmas was a sign that the systematics were either incomplete or incoherent. The walled-in persons had been free to grow toward the maturity needed to judge hard cases. But now rule books were written to minimize the need for judgment. And so technologies of behavior, like all technologies, led to expertise, but not to wisdom. The casuistic attempt to define a rule for every possible case breeds cleverness while destroying common sense.

THE MORALE OF CULTISTS AND CRUSADERS

The camp leader paused as his young audience chanted "alleluja, alleluja" with mantra-like effect. Then, whether tired of the lack of focus in their lives or attracted by the proffered image of Jesus the guide and friend, some of those who came because someone they liked invited them found themselves agreeing to allow Jesus to give meaning to their lives.

But, on the human side of discipleship, what does it mean to make Jesus one's guru? It may be that no church discovers that an assent was given, nor was credal clarity insisted upon. Denied the security of a home and the certainty of a theology, many moderns have discovered Jesus as the ever-present friend who guides along the unknown way and who reveals, when needed, whatever portions of the hidden truth may be required.

No doubt any possible way of affirming Christianity can embody also all of the other ways, or can eventually lead to them. But it does make a difference where one begins. More and more Mennonites are discovering that the walls have crumbled, that the code books are inadequate, and that the maps cannot guide when destinations are uncertain. Or, if they still do function for the older people, they fear that they will not do for their children.

By now most have moved far enough from the walls to know that although the world is dangerous it is also extremely interesting. Many would like to explore it more fully if they can do so and still be safe. Most are not willing to return to the enclosing walls, even if they still existed. And yet they know too much about the relativity of rules and maps to trust themselves wholly to any.

Few, however, are able or willing to risk the journey of the explorer, not even those who claim to believe that Jesus will be with them to the end of the world. Only those with very great faith and ex-

traordinary discipline continue to hew their lonely way forward when the unseen guide withdraws the sense of his presence.

The rest turn aside, unwilling to press forward and unable to turn back. For awhile they may find help in some “new morality” which cuts through casuistries by referring each decision to an absolute and ultimate ideal. But without the sanctions of the wall to sustain them, a high ideal, like abstract principles, proves too vague in the face of moral dilemmas and too weak before a strong temptation. Then they act on the basis of feeling rather than of rules or taboos. If individuals are their own contexts for decision, not even an ethic of love, the highest and profoundest of all ideals, is capable of preventing personal tragedy.

And so many seek others like themselves and move around with their group. And, quite often, they seek out a tour guide who packages “trips” for “tourists.” Some gravitate to a leader with charisma who speaks so dogmatically that they are sure he has succeeded in thinking the thoughts of God after Him. They may even vicariously participate in his truths by nodding faithfully, if half-comprehendingly, along with him. Others seek the charismatic whose connections with the Spirit seem much closer than theirs and whose revelations can direct their steps while his fire warms their hearts.

Some of these guides sense their power to create new kinds of walls around themselves and a wide range of cults emerge at the extreme edge of our common need. Most people are not ready to move wholly under the spell of any single guide, and they go from one to another, admiring one for theology, another for spirituality, and temporarily following yet a third on a moral crusade against some current vice that is blamed for the mess the world is in.

It remains true for tourists that neither the mores of a traditional community nor the morals of principle rule behavior. What emerges is the morale of groupies—“When in Rome, do as the Romans.” Now cues on what to do are taken from the tour guide or from fellow tour members. If they are allowed days off to do their own sightseeing, it is out of no basic change of character that they easily begin to take their cues from what in fact the Romans do.

Unless people place themselves wholly under the care of a single guru, they struggle with ethical dilemmas in silence. These can hardly occur while under the spell of any given guide, for he is a specialist in some aspect of the journey, rarely addressing the way the whole of life fits together. Within each specialty all looks clear. But conflicts and dilemmas often rise in the spaces between them. Then people seek out one more specialist, a psychologist perhaps; or they discuss their problems with a group of people who are brought together by similar prob-

lems and with whom they feel “free to share”—for in all other ways they are strangers with whom they will not have to live.

The Contradictions of Creedalism

Though the pluralist chaos of a world of cultists and tourists has created nostalgia for the walled communities, it should be clear that they cannot be rebuilt in their ancient form. It is much less obvious, however, that the systematic creedalism of the next stage is also incapable, in itself, of providing answers. Therefore we must focus on the problems of this second way of being moral and thinking ethically.

The philosophically sophisticated book, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Zondervan, 1971), by Norman L. Geisler will be taken as a model of evangelical creedalism applied to ethics. Dr. Geisler, a philosopher/theologian at Trinity Evangelical Seminary, Deerfield, Illinois, has written a book which has the merit of grasping firmly the inevitability of hard cases.

In his first chapter, Geisler rightly contends that normative rules turn out to be inescapable and necessary. Systems of rules (deontologies) are made up of “oughts” which must be followed because they are right. They come either from “above” (God as lawgiver) or from “behind” (the immanent laws of nature) and have the form of *drive on the right, speed limit 55, and no left turn*. In the rest of the first half of his book (chapters 2-7), he discusses possible solutions to the questions of whether there are any such norms (yes), whether there is more than one (yes), and what one is to do when absolute (always right) and universal (they apply to all) norms conflict with each other (moral dilemmas).

His own solution is that normative principles must be hierarchically ranked. When a “lower” principle conflicts with a “higher” one, the person facing the dilemma is absolved of responsibility for the lower. Hence no sin has been committed and no repentance is called for. Thus, a Chicago judge was right to dismiss the patrolman’s citation of my “otherwise” forbidden left turn when I was able to prove that it was the only way I could avoid a bus illegally entering my lane.

Geisler argues this position over against another “evangelical” solution which holds that one is held responsible (and forgiven) for the wrong that is necessarily involved in making a right choice between competing norms. Perhaps the judge should have said, “I forgive you your illegal turn.” Or, he should have fined me and then given me a reward for sparing the bus passengers possible injury and saving the city the cost of repairing the bus.

Geisler’s discussion of this issue would be of great value to those

who have not explicitly come to terms with the nature of moral dilemmas and with the possibility that *some* lies and *some* killings and *some* adulteries may, after all, be morally justifiable (he discusses specific moral problems in the second half of his book).

But a warning is in order. Those who are looking for a complete and satisfactory ranking of principles will be disappointed. The principles and their rankings are somewhat tentatively given and are explicitly offered as “guides.” In other words, even if moral rules are absolutely true, it will still require judgment to know when such a rule is actually to be obeyed. He rightly rejects the one position which thinks it possible, at least in principle, to work out a calculus of decision in which norms will never overlap.

Furthermore, Geisler’s discussion presumes that such dilemmas arise when one lower and one higher norm conflict. But he does not explain what to do if two or more lesser rules conflict with one higher one. Nor does he offer any help on how many lesser goods would outweigh fewer higher ones. Indeed, one quickly begins to wonder whether a hierarchical listing of principles is any more helpful than a list of proverbs was for a precreedal society. In both cases the list may assist insight; but, as the book of Proverbs reminds us, one difference between a wise man and a fool is the sure instinct, or spiritual gift, which guides the wise to the appropriate proverb (or absolute rule?) for a specific situation. Since life turns out to be more complex than theory, even the best logic for morals turns out to be a better servant than a master.

I believe that two things prevent Geisler from grasping this last point with sufficient boldness to make it an asset in ethical decision making. The first is that nowhere does he make use of the church as a “loosing and binding” community which can offer judgment and grace in hard cases.

The second is that judgment between competing principles also requires the use of a form of ethical thinking that he described—and dismissed—in barely eight pages of the first chapter. This second form is the ethics of maps (teleologies). Here it is first necessary to ask what is the destination (the good that is sought). Then “the right way” is what best ensures that one will arrive there. “If you want to drive to Clearbrook, then follow this route.” Traffic rules (the ethics of rules as “oughts”) are inescapable and necessary. But they are not sufficient. They need to be supplemented by the ethics of maps so that we can know where to drive as well as how. But it is notoriously difficult to combine the two modes in a single and coherent ethical system.

And so we are constantly forced to smuggle in the “ethics of maps” to make an “ethics of traffic laws” work. How else could we know which ranked principles to apply to a realistically complex situation? Geisler

even uses what appear to me as “ethics of maps” arguments to justify his attempt at a biblical derivation of his hierarchical ranking.

Perhaps it would not be wholly unfair to suggest that it is as if a certain kind of Calvinist were to attempt a survey of systematic theologies in which he got rid of Arminianism in eight pages, spent several chapters debating the virtues of other theologies as well as several versions of Calvinism, asserted his “freedom” to choose one of those versions as the right one, and then constantly smuggled Arminian assumptions into the last half of the book to make plausible his recommendations for evangelism and other issues in “practical theology.”

The upshot is that a fully self-consistent rational systematic for ethics (as for theology) is incompatible with the attempt to develop an ethic (or theology) that will be complete and adequate. Life is more complex than theory. The Word transcends any possible “ology.” I would argue that the theological disarray among evangelicals is partly due to their refusal to come to terms with the necessity of dialectical thinking. Any rational systematics curves reflexively back upon itself to reveal its own limitations precisely at the point of its greatest sophistication. And so, like the cultists or tourists discussed previously, evangelicals either retreat to a stubborn attachment to one possible but partial systematics or they abandon their theological creedalism (except perhaps for a ritualistic attachment to “fundamentals”) and clothe their gospel in the garb of psychologisms and sentimentalisms.

The Impasse of Biblicistic Casuistry

When Mennonite Brethren leaders discussed theology and ethics, they concentrated more on the biblical arguments for or against the creedalist systematics they accepted than on a philosophical analysis of their formal structures. But in ethics, as in theology, similar contradictions emerged. The impasse to which Geisler comes is paralleled in their own attempts to apply biblicistic casuistry to hard cases.

When dilemmas become too difficult, they are referred to the Board of Reference and Counsel (the committee which has been given the responsibility to oversee faith and morals). One can sympathize with the Board’s frustration when local jurisdictions which are much more capable of judging the entire context pass on their problems. So the Board may first respond by referring the cases back to the churches with copies of conference resolutions dealing with the problems.

But that is not helpful when the local jurisdiction knows what judgment it wishes to make and finds that the conference resolutions are the barrier to making that judgment. What the churches then want is change in the resolutions. Because Reference and Counsel members are just as sensitive to the conflicting pressures as is any pastor or

parent, they commission someone to prepare a position paper. The problems recur, and eventually a study conference is called.

Almost always these papers review the biblical data pertaining to the problem at hand. Usually the writers struggle to soften the principles that they extract from the texts and that are enshrined in Conference resolutions. For example, it is clear that the pastoral hearts of the writers of the papers on the subject of divorce and remarriage yearn to the recognition that both divorces and remarriages involve wrongs and may yet, in certain cases, be the best possible solutions. Starting with the allowance of divorce "for adultery," they labor mightily to work and rework every text that might allow still more lee-way for hard cases.

Implicit in these papers is the assumption that biblical principles do not contain tacit exceptions. That is, they assume that the principles were meant to be applied rigorously to every situation to which they seem to speak. The only "exceptions" to the rule that were allowable were those which were explicitly built into the rules. Then, of course, these "exceptions" were not exceptions because they were a part of the rule itself.

Also implicit is the assumption that stated biblical principles are not expected to conflict with each other in concrete situations. In other words, the Scriptures are exegeted under the rationalist assumption that either there can be no conflicts or that they intend to deliver a fully explicit casuistry for decision in cases of apparent conflict.

Finally, it is assumed that the principles that are derivable from the Bible can be directly applied to contemporary hard cases.

But what if some or none of these assumptions are true? As procedural assumptions, they have not been derived from the text itself. They are brought to the texts. Is there any way of assessing them? It may be noted that the church elders did not necessarily make these assumptions. Their search of the Scriptures often stopped when they found a text which resonated with what they "knew." Other precedents and principles could be ignored until needed for other cases.

In fact, one has only to ask how such texts and such principles functioned in the biblical societies to realize that these assumptions may not be automatically made. Once this point is understood, it is immediately apparent that all sorts of tacit "exceptions" were allowed, even to sacred taboos. It was the complaint of the Pharisees that Jesus was unnecessarily free in finding them. Proverbs that point in opposite directions lie close together. Finally, principles were even then reshaped to fit new contexts, as can be seen in the two versions of the Ten Commandments given in Deuteronomy and Exodus.

The recent increase of knowledge about the thought processes and

cultural pattern of biblical peoples makes it clear that biblical prescriptions cannot automatically be transferred to us, even assuming that their grammar has been properly understood. It is not enough to understand what Moses or Jesus or Paul said. We must understand that what they said fit into the larger network of meanings that could be taken for granted by the speakers and their original hearers. That is, we must understand what was communicated. And we must also understand how this communication was intended to function. Until this is done, the attempt to apply biblical principles to moral decision-making has more the appearance than the reality of a biblical understanding.

We may take the question of divorce as an example. How may our understanding of first century Judaism (and of the canons of rabbinic debate) increase our understanding of the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees as reported in Mark 10:2-12? Whatever the full answer may be, it is apparent that Jesus was responding both to their question and to their attempt to trap him in an unfortunate response. And it is equally clear that he avoided the trap by stressing the truth of God's primary intention for marriage. He then stated that Moses allowed divorce because of the people's "hardness of heart." But did either Jesus or his opponents think that Moses was wrong to do so? If Jesus had intended to say that, they would hardly have failed to respond warmly. And do we believe the "hardness of heart" no longer exists, even among us? At least we can be sure the Jesus' response was a rebuke to the often trivial reasons for which divorce was granted in first century Palestine. But we may be allowed to wonder whether the basic intention for marriage can be automatically and simplistically applied to every present situation. Jesus affirmed the principle. But did he condemn every divorce and remarriage? Did his "sin no more" to the Samaritan woman mean marrying her present lover or going back to her first husband or remaining celibate the rest of her life or finding yet another with whom she would be faithful?

These questions about meaning and context do not fit easily into the usual systematics of codes and maps. They assume that communication is more complex than verbalizations and that interpretation is a great deal more interesting than fixing a text and analyzing its grammar.

These perceptions are a part of the perspective that is given by the fact that we may no longer see the rest of reality from the once-privileged stances of the dwellers within walls (all other ways of being are either like ours or are heathen) or of creedalists (the validity of any other mode of ordering thoughts is simply unthinkable).

All this is, of course, another version of the insight that missionaries and mission boards struggle to flesh out in current theory and practice. They no longer assume that Western forms of faith and order are in-

herently more Christian than other forms of faith and order. They also realize that the attempt to translate Western methods and answers directly to another culture guarantees that they will be mostly ineffective or that they will be effective in ways not intended. Therefore, missionaries are encouraged to analyze the forms and processes of both their own culture and that of their hosts. Then they can assist their converts to fashion ways of speaking and doing which will function in that society as analogous but different ways of Christian speaking and doing function here. This is often described as the problem of transplanting the gospel from Western pots to other cultural pots.

More recently, Bible translators have demonstrated that this analysis is still too simple. All moderns are a foreign culture in relation to the biblical peoples. And so we must pay a great deal of attention to their cultural contexts and to our own if we are to be able to hear what was being communicated in and through and around the words that were spoken.

It may be difficult for us to come to terms with this. Fortunately, we are already learning to do so in our own homes. We are learning from our children (as our parents learned from us) that translating meaning between culturally different generations is a difficult task. The problem is not simply that we misunderstand each other's words. What has changed are the assumptions and contexts that tell us how these words function.

Conference Resolutions, Consensus, and Church Discipline

A General Conference resolution, passed in Vancouver in 1969, states that Mennonite Brethren agree together not to drink any alcoholic beverage. What can this mean to those who still live as if enclosed by traditional walls? Quite likely they voted for it if they were delegates. But, as with all their proverbs and general principles, they would take for granted that it has tacit exceptions. It would not apply to the home brew that was carefully put up each year by many older saints. It would not apply to the medicinal use of various wines. Nor would it apply to the "sacramental" use of wine at special family celebrations. And certainly it would not apply to those few churches which used wine for the Lord's Supper until fairly recently. But it would certainly apply to any excessive use, and the presence of the rule would still serve symbolically to distinguish Mennonite Brethren from other Mennonites who permitted drinking.

The creedalists understand this rule to be an absolute prohibition. Since the resolution itself notes that it cannot be supported by biblical data, they tend to justify adherence to it on the practical grounds of the enormous dangers of alcoholism and, as a last resort, will urge abstinence because "we have all agreed to it." This last statement is an

impossible claim. It assumes that a convention vote constitutes a consensus, forgetting that the theological description of consensus speaks of it as a congregational process (which often did not happen), and forgetting that a very large minority of Mennonite Brethren adults occasionally imbibe. (A recent Canadian survey put it at nearly 40%. The percentage reported in *Anabaptists: Four Centuries Later* is smaller, but even there only half the Mennonite Brethren thought that moderate drinking was “always wrong.”)

Those who have moved off the beaten roads as individuals would have their own reasons for what they do or do not drink, and the tourists would mostly do so or not depending upon the group with whom they are associated. Study papers and conference resolutions, even if known, have little effect on these persons.

In the face of such varied perceptions it is difficult to argue that such resolutions represent a genuine consensus. But there is a more profound reason why even resolutions which might be agreed upon by almost everyone are largely unenforceable. Behind most resolutions is a small group which has worked through the rationale for the statement. But no one, in recent times, has made any systematic attempt to represent the process which could lead to the internalization of that rationale among a significant section of the laity. Yet intellectual conviction is the only possible way to secure legitimate assent at the creedal level. What has been done is to pass on the result of a process undergone by a small group with the apparent expectation that these results will have the moral authority once accorded the conclusions of recognized and trusted elders. In other words, conference resolutions have been designed by code-book makers in the hope that they will become bricks in the old walls to protect members who are actually enjoying excursions into alien meadows.

When the once legitimate disciplines of older communities are used for creedal codes, church action is perceived as “policing” and not as discipline. Churches which cannot make judgments and offer grace in hard cases lose their legitimate moral authority. The best that creedalism can do then is to offer reasons. But, for most people, moral reasons are abstract in the best of times and are weakest during the emotional crises when they are needed most.

In sum, until Mennonite Brethren come to terms with the profoundly different sets of perceptions which actually exist, attempted solutions will only increase confusion.

The Hardest of Hard Cases

Every way of being a moral order implies at least one unforgiveable sin. Most of the issues which persistently trouble Mennonite Brethren

churches emerge from the “unforgiveables” of the older, “walled” communities.

The unforgiveable sin in walled communities was the rejection of the community. Though individual rebelliousness creates sorrow, it does not constitute a moral dilemma as long as the one who rejects also leaves. What does constitute a dilemma is that which poses a continuing threat to the internal coherence of the community, for the mores which constitute its wall depend upon that unity. On such conditions the elders were not free to budge.

As in most all primary communities in Western societies, infidelity and divorce and remarriage were fundamental threats to the coherence of ethnic community. Such a community is made up of an interrelated network of families and family groupings (clans), and each new pair had to be intergrated into the network. Indeed, the stronger the walls, the more likely it was that pairing was not left to the chances of “love.” Mate switching was so grave an offense that not even if one mate disappeared was it possible to allow the remaining spouse to remarry, for the clan of the one who disappeared retained a sense of alliance with the remaining spouse as well as an emotional tie to its own black sheep. The way had to be left open for a possible return.

And so the earliest conference resolution on record (1883) stated that a remarried person could not be granted church membership until God revealed which one was the “innocent party” by causing the “guilty one” to die first. Whether or not this was a safe guide to innocence, it did have the merit of protecting inter-clan relations. Ordinary infidelity could ultimately be forgiven. Totally miserable marriages could be “carried” indefinitely. But divorce, and especially remarriage, was taboo. (It should be noted that even on this issue exceptions were worked out by the elders for extreme situations—as among the Russian emigrants to South America.)

It was not biblicism alone (or even primarily) that made divorce taboo. Nor is it a lack of biblicism that now creates the need to deal so often with it. The underlying cause is the disappearance of mores-as-walls, the parallel weakening of our clan networks, and a new definition of the meaning of marriage. But the way the Scriptures were used to shore up the clan realities continues to the present and has so far made it very difficult to deal with this problem redemptively or even biblically, in the larger sense. So long as these underlying causes remain, the only real question is how many lives will be embittered before the church discovers that here too it must extend judgment, absolution, and new beginnings.

The same underlying cultural realities can go far to explain the current debate on the role of women in the church and in the larger social

sphere. The question is not whether or not women shall be allowed to do the work of men. The truth is that they always have: ask any of our older farm wives. Nor is the question whether women shall be given power over men. They have always had that too. But we need to become clear about the way community leadership functioned in different social settings.

When mores and clan linkages were intact, decision in the church was only superficially a matter of the ballot in a church meeting. In fact, the church meeting was not a place for debate between individuals; it was a place where families and clans integrated their positions and ideals with each other. Those who spoke with power were those who were spokesmen for their group. Since families and clans must then speak unitedly to count, it was important for them to be represented primarily by a single voice. And it has long been a cultural convention that the male should be that representative voice. In fact, everyone knew that in a fairly large percentage of families and clans a wife or matriarch possessed the real power. In that case, the spokesman voiced a family or clan consensus which may not have been his own "secret" position.

These patterns of spokesmanship became artificial when Mennonites became more creedal. What counted now was the power to reason and the ability to speak that reason persuasively. Of course the old patterns and the biblicistic rationales for those old patterns continued to function. But in a world that is now moving beyond the natural groupings of families and clans, it has become impossible to maintain the fiction that both men and women are either all leaders or all followers. Again, unless there is some yet unforeseen change in the direction of our cultural shifts, it is only a question of how long we will deny ourselves the free exercise of spiritual gifts and embitter those whose talents are artificially squelched.

Toward a New Consensus

It is not true that any communities or any individuals are wholly defined by either "walls" or "creeds." "Tourists" are not only aimless wanderers nor are cultists uncritical followers forever. These terms are metaphors which are meant to stimulate insight. They are not logical categories into which anyone neatly fits.

It is also not true that a new consensus would do away with any of these ways to think and live. Each of the modes which I have described has too much of what is essential to moral and intellectual and spiritual health that it could ever be absent from whatever larger synthesis would combine their virtues while minimizing their inadequacies.

Nor is this attempt to analyze the ways we have "done ethics" the

place to attempt an outline of that larger synthesis. That will require more wisdom than is possessed by any one of us.

But I am quite sure that a new synthesis will free the church to stimulate rigorously because it will also refuse to define a set of moral behaviors which are identical for everyone. We will have to agree that different levels of maturity are present among us. The same moral achievement could be one person's victory and another's regression, and we would rejoice with the first while admonishing and encouraging the second.

I am quite sure that this larger vision will help us to rediscover the church as the community of the Spirit which has the power "to loose and to bind." With renewed minds we may then, at all levels in the church, "test what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). Then no dilemma will be so great that we will be unable to discern the greatest possible good and to offer absolution and healing. And then we shall again receive the power to discipline redemptively.

When we grasp the vision of helping each other to move to the perfecting of the Christ in us, more of us will be helped to grow into the freedom of the saint for whom everything is permitted—except the unforgiveable refusal to be one's truest self.

A Pastor's Response: Stories that Mystify yet Help

Marvin Hein

I have a haunting feeling, substantiated more by intuition than facts, that what Delbert Wiens has said is largely true. My initial response was to use the format of the article's sub-title and ask: "Whatever happened to story-telling?" The article is woven around stories and yet I found myself not understanding the intent or lesson of the stories. Unless we have more philosophically minded persons among us than I suspect, only a handful will comprehend what he has intended to say. This is only to confess that my response to the article may well be askew, for no other reason than I have not understood it to any great depth.

In the early part of the article I sense some nostalgia for the past, which Wiens has admitted in previous writings. Perhaps that surrounds some elements in our history with a halo that is not completely justified.

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For example, I do not recall the discipling community of my childhood being particularly marked by grace and healing (p. 6). My own recollections tell me that the sword of discipline wielded by the believing community often severed but rarely healed. Nor am I certain that the world outside the believing community today is as different from that same world back in the days when Mennonite Brethren lived within the “walls” (p. 4).

I respect Wiens’s unraveling of the process through which we have gone—from the security of the “walls” to the way of the creedalist, that emphasizes principles, to the unsteady “tourist” approach, where convictions originate more from spiritual gurus than from carefully considered bases for moral judgments. That analysis, in my judgment, is the most valuable part of the paper.

The section based on Geisler’s thesis on evangelical creedalism is helpful for understanding what we have done in the past and for pointing out how difficult it is in a complex, modern society to establish what is right and wrong. His alternative—the use of maps—begins to approach the problem with an answer, but leaves me grasping for solid, positive remedies. A sentence like, “Any rational systematics curves reflexively back upon itself to reveal its own limitations precisely at the point of its greatest sophistication” (p. 10) doesn’t help me clarify what Wiens is proposing in this section.

In discussing the contemporary “hard case” and the approach we use today (local churches appealing to Boards of Reference and Counsel and subsequent study conferences), there is truth to what is said. I sense, however, that a few years of pastoral experience, where one could witness and experience confrontation and healing might temper the implied criticism of our inability to deal with the hard cases.

I am interested in a strategy for allowing local congregations to “represent the process which could lead to the internalization of that rationale (that arrived at by a small group such as a board overseeing spiritual matters) among a significant section of the laity” (p. 14). The lack of specificity in terms of solutions, after a rather keen analysis of the problems, is probably what troubles me most in the paper. Less than a page is given to what could be called a suggested solution. Even that last section, which speaks of a “larger” or “new synthesis” for *doing ethics*, Wiens admits, is not spelled out. In this respect the article is too typical of much that is written—an abundance of analysis but a scarcity of suggested remedies. That is the weakness, to which I am also prepared to plead guilty, that is all too typical of many today.

An Educator's Response: Overstatements and Omissions

Peter M. Hamm

Presumably the purpose of Wiens' essay is to show the difficulty of making ethical decisions. It is, in fact, primarily an expose on how Mennonite Brethren have dealt with ethical decisions in times past when they were "walled", "creedalistic", and/or "cultic". Wiens comes down especially hard on the creedalists. Although Wiens, in conclusion, points in a direction which would lead to a solution, he, in keeping with his purpose, does not really provide a solution to our current dilemma in ethical decision-making.

Like a poet-philosopher, Wiens artistically caricatures the contexts for doing ethics in times past. And it is indeed insightful. Yet, the neat portrayal of the church as "community", "creedalists", and "cultists" in alliterative progression from "mores", to "morals", and "morale", respectively, is too stereotyped to represent Mennonite Brethren historically. Although he cautions in conclusion that these metaphors are not logical categories into which any community or individual neatly fits, he elaborates only the "human side" of reconciliation, faith, and discipleship, and overstates the case sufficiently and applies the metaphors so forthrightly to Mennonite Brethren that Wiens appears reductionistic. This is my first criticism.

Let me explain. The categories Wiens uses are helpful tools in analysing how ethics may be fashioned in different communities. Inasmuch as the metaphors help us better to see ourselves, we are thankful to Wiens for this heuristic device. Where these metaphors misrepresent Mennonite Brethren in times past, they do not help to bring clarity to the present dilemma. While I concur that ethos is larger than ethic (it always is because of the cultural accretions from which no community can fully divorce itself), I would be reluctant to explain even the "human side" of reconciliation as a mere termination of a self-imposed exile. It may have been for some religious communities, but Mennonite Brethren from the outset held to an understanding to conversion prompted not merely by a longing to return from isolation to community, but primarily by the divine working of God's Spirit producing a genuine remorse for sin. To explain even the human side of reconciliation as a sociological phenomenon, a homecoming after a self-imposed exile, is reduction-

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istic. Again, Wiens so depicts the moral principles derived from Bible study that they become a mere “logical order to produce a theology of behavior.” To reduce Biblical principles, which can indeed transcend generations and cultures, to a casuistry in which confession and forgiveness become “an implicit celebration of the rightness of the system” is again to yield to reductionism.

Wiens identifies and questions three assumptions which explain the present impasse of Biblical casuistry in our study conferences: the principles do not contain tacit exceptions, the principles do not conflict with each other in concrete cases, and the principles can be applied directly to contemporary hard cases. Again Wiens overstates the case, for good contemporary hermeneutics does not necessarily make these assumptions. A good hermeneutics will discover such Biblical principles which are sufficiently dynamic and applicable to real life that they need not be reduced to casuistry and ethical dilemmas need not be a sign that “systematics were incomplete or incoherent.” Fortunately, most Mennonite Brethren are not such injudicious followers of tour guides or gurus with their short-range promises, and the portrayal of the morale of cultists or crusaders does not really apply to most Mennonite Brethren, however convenient the metaphor for the purpose of his argument.

My second criticism has to do with Wiens’ understanding of consensus. He appears to be trapped by the very categories he has employed to analyse decision-making in the past. As a result, he sees the 1969 Vancouver resolution on abstinence from intoxicating beverages to be endorsed by those enclosed by walls (which allow for exceptions of home-brew, etc.) and the creedalists (who are strict teetotalers). His system does not allow for a third category of those who hold the brotherhood concept so dearly that they choose to uphold the resolution, not because of legalistic casuistry, but on the grounds of brotherhood consensus. Wiens’ understanding of consensus does not allow for decision-making at this level; he has absolutized consensus to the extent that a “theological description of consensus speaks of it as a congregational process.”

Failure on the part of many to practice a brotherhood decision does not invalidate the consensus process. Why need brotherhood work only at a congregational level? Whether in a koinonia group, local church, or provincial or area conference, decisions usually are shaped by the influential leadership of a few. Can it not be argued that the collective insights of a wide range of experts is probably more reliable than those of a parochial group whose insights were largely shaped by a few influential spokesmen? To have tacit approval by a direct democracy in which all vote (although such membership meetings are non-existent) does not necessarily guarantee a workable consensus.

Despite my criticisms, I actually concur with Wiens' conclusion that we must find a synthesis (for I agree that we must carefully examine the sociological and psychological components that go into theological and ethical formulations); however, without reductionism. I agree that the solutions may not be the same for all, however difficult to enforce. And certainly the church must loose and bind, but who determines the size of the church, be it a koinonia group, a local congregation, or a whole conference? Ethical decision-making should be possible at all levels, the level depending upon the nature of the decision to be made.

The Author's Reply: Achieving Clarity

Delbert L. Wiens

After writing the article, I remarked to several people that I wished that my analysis would be shown to be wrong. I too am frightened by the intellectual and moral confusion that I have tried to describe. And so I do not know whether to be happy or sad that the respondents have not been more critical. At least I am happy that their comments forced me to clarify for myself some of the issues they raised.

It is helpful of Peter Hamm to describe my categories as "heuristic devices." They are more aids for discovery and learning than complete descriptions of what is to be learned. I intend my "stories" to help the reader to see that we think and act at different levels. They certainly do not reveal the whole truth about each level and no one level is ever the whole truth about any of us. If they are so taken, then my discussion would indeed be "reductionist." If the different levels are not illustrated by these "stories," then I apologize for my poor storytelling. I think that Marvin Hein's fear that he has not understood my essay "in depth" stems from his desire for something that is not there. I also seek fuller understanding of these ways of seeing our realities.

Of course I cannot hide behind the disclaimer that these categories are *only* "devices." To be useful devices they have to reveal something that was and is true about us, even though they do not reveal the whole truth. And so I agree with Hamm when he points out that we have always intended conversion to be more than merely "coming home." But my claim is that very many of us were still struggling to appropriate the "more" a long time after our conversion as "coming home" and "blessing in Jesus." I also agree that "good" contemporary hermeneutics" does not make certain simplistic creedalist assumptions. But my claim is that most of the exegesis we have done on ethical issues has not been that kind of good hermeneutics.

In connection with this, Hamm raises the very important question of the relation of the human and the divine and of the appropriateness of applying psychological and sociological analysis even to the “human side” of faith and morals. I am sure that to be “human” means to be the fitting subject of such analyses, but I am far from clear on what all happens to the “treasure” when it is contained in “earthen vessels” and would welcome an essay containing his reflections on this topic.

I think that this leaves the nature of consensus as the only significant disagreement that might remain. Hamm’s discussion helped me to realize that a fuller description of consensus would have to include the process from “experts” to congregations as well as from congregations to the General Conference. But deferring to the expertise of experts would be cultic behavior unless we learned from them what we need to know in order to make good judgments of our own. For only the local community can know the entire context out of which decision must be made in hard cases.

Both responses contain additional observations which appropriately temper certain of my descriptions. I was especially glad for Hein’s witness to the confrontation and healing that is actually occurring. It would be fortunate if this discussion could free us so that no past sin, or previous marital status, or our gender, or baptismal form would automatically hinder any congregation from calling forth the fullest expression of all our ministries to each other and to the world.