

MENNONITE: NEITHER LIBERAL NOR EVANGELICAL

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Forty years ago I returned to Reedley, California, from Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas, during a regional meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals. Three or four of its best-known leaders were at our very humble home for lunch. While mother proudly served, my father began to play the role of an awe-struck yokel. They rose to the bait, eagerly jostling each other aside to boast of their importance and to recount incident after incident in which they had slain liberal Goliaths and confounded out-matched modernists. After they left, I turned angrily to my father, "Why did you make us look like hicks?" His eyes twinkled, "I thought it was time for you to learn that the great of this world have feet of clay like the rest of us." It was one of the few times that he miscalculated. He wanted me to accept them as heroes while accepting that they too were flawed. I made up my mind to seek the great of this world elsewhere.

I tell this to make my bias clear. Although I have placed myself in the line of those who have sought to understand and to restate the orthodox Christian tradition, I have never been able to identify fully with "Evangelicals." During the last two decades it has gradually become

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clearer to me that both Liberalism and Evangelicalism (with Fundamentalism) are two sides of a particular kind of modernist coin. And both, for good reasons, began by accepting "the spirit of this age." Of course, this charge does not wholly apply to many Christians who sincerely take themselves to be either Liberals or Evangelicals. No doubt all of us are more complex than is hinted by the labels we use. But it does apply to basic attitudes and thought-forms which have characterized the way these two movements have struggled to be Christian in a post-Christian age.

Twenty-five years ago I made a first attempt to analyze and criticize the modern attitudes and practices we Mennonite Brethren had adopted by contrasting them with our older ways. Though I knew that we could not relive the lives of our grandfathers, I insisted that we had to learn how to reincarnate an older spirit and wisdom that was being lost. And so I titled it, "New Wineskins for Old Wine."

On one level, that essay helped me to discover that we could let go of some of the "official pieties" that had become spiritually destructive. On a deeper level, that essay failed to chart a way to do what I called for. As one reviewer complained, I had not been clear about the "old wine" which I desired. Nor had I shown the cut and materials needed to construct new wineskins adequate for the old wine. That failure was symbolized in repeated comments to me about "your piece on old wineskins and new wine."

About eight years later I tried again. In "From the Village to the City"² I attempted to describe traditional Mennonite Brethren attitudes and ways of thinking, to show how they had changed, and to point to what they might become. In that piece I implied that Evangelical and Liberal forms of Christianity belonged to a transitional ethos which I labeled "town."

I now intend to make my critique more explicit. I realize that those who defined the "right" and "left" sides of a Christian causeway over the modern turf were trying to safeguard the claim that God is our creator, sustainer, and redeemer and that Jesus Christ is God's self-revelation for our redemption and enlightenment. Those of us who continue to affirm this have a very great deal to learn from those who labored to save Christians from getting bogged down in modernity. My objection is to the road itself or, rather, to the fact that most of us have so taken it for granted that we cannot see that this road

has been constructed of the same materials it was meant to surmount and that it does not lead out of the swamp. As such, those who continue to move along it necessarily move deeper into heresy. Mennonites do not belong on that road. In becoming either Liberal or Evangelical we are exchanging our Mennonite birthright for a mess of pottage.

I will make my case by arguing first that both of these forms of modernism change the quality of our piety, altering what traditional Christianity and our own forebears meant by holiness. Then I will argue that these modernisms move us away from an older rationality to “rationalisms.” In this context I will describe a shift from our attempts to be a biblically shaped people to biblicistic rationalism and to our present inability to take the Bible seriously. In the third place, I will insist that what we need is, precisely, new wineskins in which to blend newer vintages with our “old wine.” Since few Mennonite Brethren need to be warned against “Liberalism,” I will concentrate on Evangelicalism as the heresy that tempts us.

From Piety to Pietism: “Be Ye Holy”

Many of us can still remember what it was like to live in small communities that were bounded in a qualitatively pre-modern “time” as well as in a quantitatively limited “space.” Then our communities were “concrete.” The second part of that word refers to something living; the prefix means “together with.” Concrete community is one in which the material, the social, and the spiritual aspects of life are all grown together into a living organism. A few of us whose psyches were mostly shaped in those earlier “times” and “spaces” can still live out of a Mennonite spirituality. The rest of us may find it almost impossible to imagine the kind of piety which was sought by our forebears.

In this section I will attempt to evoke the sense of the holy — and the special kind of sanctity — which was implied by the lives of our past and present saints. I am specially thinking of my father, H. R. Wiens. It is true that when he was a young man he found our earlier ethos confining, and he reached out to grasp the undoubted advantages offered by modernity. It is also true that he sometimes thought he was a Fundamentalist and that some of his rhetoric was shaped by the Evangelical books he eagerly read. But his heart had been formed accord-

ing to an older vision and his ministry had been shaped by our older lay ministers and elders.

The Comprehension of Godly Concreteness

Like the ancient Hebrews and the early Christians, our forebears could instinctively understand the significance of the fact that when God determined to grow a people, he began by shaping a new kind of family with Abraham, a new kind of tribes with the twelve patriarchs, and a new kind of ethnos (people) around the covenants which came through Moses and Jesus. Nor did they imagine a docetic Jesus forming an invisible church. For them the body of Christ was composed of communities made up of local clans which were, in turn, integral parts of tribes which spread out into other near and distant communities to form a people of God.

They could also understand that each of these units was more than the sum of its parts and had an identity which became a profound part of each citizen's identity. Each individual imbibed the ethos of a community — a "Henderson" (Nebraska) or a "Winkler" (Manitoba) or a "Corn" (Oklahoma) as part of their Christian nurturing. For these places had a common spirit — a group *Geist* — which a seer like John would have called "the Angel of the church at — Coaldale" (Alberta). Individuals are not primary in the Kingdom of God. They are the "living stones" which comprise the larger "living temples" which unite to form the concrete Body of Christ. The parts exist to serve the whole.

This layering of concrete social units was always accompanied by the temptation to become idolatrous. As John also knew, such collective *Geists* can turn in upon themselves and can lose their first love. But when our ancestors sincerely intended to allow the God who had chosen them to make his rule over them effective, the Holy Spirit was freed to shape their peoplehood into patterns of "ethnic peculiarness" which would "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9-10).

But when recognizing that the group exists for God's sake and not its own, our communities also knew that their collective aspiration to become a "holy ethnos" implied that all members had to have their own spirits claimed by God. To be a "good" member of the group was not enough. Then it became the will of the whole that each of them should respond to the

Spirit's call to seek God beyond the group. And then it is true that the whole exists to serve the parts.

These collectivizing and individuating processes produced a particular kind of person and a particular kind of piety. The growing of disciples of Jesus Christ was a life-long process with its own rhythms in both space and time.

There was a basic plot for each person's journey through time. "No one paid any attention to us while we were growing up," explained my mother. She meant that the church, acting "churchly," did not sponsor "youth groups" or "summer camps" and had not yet begun to worry much about their "conversion." "We were just expected to grow up." That last sentence left a great deal unexpressed. The community itself was the context for the life pattern that it could mostly take for granted. It is true that there were few options. The life plot of most people was given at their birth. But there was a compensation. Life had a definite shape in time and one knew what counted as success and when one's task was done. With the cycle completed, death would be the beginning again at the same time that it revealed the full beauty of the story which had ended. And so it was possible to grow in the ability to experience one's own life story in the act of living it, to encompass it in memory and expectation and to offer it to God who is its shaper and its judge. Therefore, one learns to know God at the same time that one is learning to know oneself, and one learns that the deepest self is that relationship to God which reveals itself in all of one's relationships.

In addition to this enacted life-story which could be partially transcended in "time" there was another story of the upward and outward growth of selves in their relational "spaces." As do all, each first entered the intimate space of a family before progressively "graduating" into the spaces of the clan, community, tribe, and people, expanding to encompass the larger sets of natural, social, and spiritual relations which were the vehicles of the spirits and Spirit of each. Each new level came with the bright promise of a larger becoming and each, when mastered, pointed upward and outward to a larger space. In all this one was not a *given* self experiencing all these things. Rather, one was a *nexus* of expanding relationships and was becoming ever more capable of encompassing richer dimensions of life and spirit.

So long as our Mennonite ethos superintended the tran-

scendence of our “times” and “spaces,” it fostered strong and wonderfully diverse individuality. But external expectation could crush rather than nurture.

The Low German proverb “Like a stinkweed growing under a bushel basket” was a tragically apt comment on the pale, drooping travesty of a life granted enough light and water to live but not enough to flourish. Finally, whether regretfully or rebelliously, it was necessary to step outside the secure but finite borders of the community to confront God. It was this experience of the ultimate failure of one’s church to grant the “salvation” to which it pointed that largely defined what we originally meant by “conversion.” Before my mother was out of her teens, the church was indeed “paying attention” to its youth. Revivals were adopted to redefine and to “manage” this transition before they left home.

But, in fact, neither the group nor the individual had been primary. God was primary. And God was the Holy One, whose ways and thoughts were not our ways and thoughts, who could be both terrible and gracious but who, in both guises, could finally be recognized as the God who was shaping them to become “joint-heirs with Christ.”

Those who stepped outside the “sacred canopy” that threatened to become a smothering “bushel basket” and who came to possess their souls through being claimed by God were free — both to leave if called to do so or to stay. Those who stayed “returned” as stewards of God to care for the well-being of the community. Only these, who could now see it “from the outside,” could rightly understand it and could now accept it as a gift of God while refusing to make that gift into an idol. These became its saints and its ministers and leaders. But they were earthy saints, with a firm grasp of the limitations of the physical and human material they had to work with. The stewardship they accepted was the “building up of the body.” What they sought was “the beauty of holiness,” not “progress.”

A Basic Leadership Vocabulary

Once I asked my father to describe the elder who had taught him about ministry. He wrote back that the man had embodied *Gottesfurcht* and *Gelassenheit*. The first named the trembling awe that was not quite terror before the holiness of God. The other was the calm confidence of those who moved in the power of God’s Spirit.

Such leaders did not force their way. The whole belonged to God, and they willed to be instruments of God's will, however inscrutable it often was. Their God could be both endlessly patient and shockingly abrupt. And so they knew how to wait for the God-given patterns of time and space to work themselves out in the life of their communities and in the lives of its members. There would be crises in these rhythms: a storm that destroyed a year's patient labor, the untimely death of a loved one, even rebellion at the apparent futility of one's own life-plot. It was out of this understanding of the patience and urgency of God that my father spoke one of his deep utterances. "Delbert, the ministry is a waiting game. You wait and you wait and you wait. Then when the Holy Spirit says 'kick,' — you kick hard."

For such saints our ethos was, after all, a law to be applied. But it was a law functioning as a schoolmaster from which all were to be delivered. Principles, like proverbs, were true, but like the Sabbath they were given for the sake of the people of God and not the other way around. Even the best recipes for blessedness could be creatively applied. And so they knew how to wait and how to "kick hard" when the time was right. A few days before his death, my father reflected on the many cases of church discipline in which he had participated. "I can't remember any," he told me, "who were not ultimately reconciled." I knew there had been more than a few cases, and I was willing to believe that his memory was faulty. But I also remembered that he could wait a long time and that he could kick effectively.

Until threats to our ethos made our leaders into anxious legalists, their reluctance to take up worldly weapons, whether psychological or physical, did not stem from the rigid application of a doctrinal principle, not even a supposedly "Anabaptist" principle. Nor was it the pacifism of a more far-sighted but still this-worldly politics. It certainly was not the passivism of those who cannot "kick" at all. And though they gladly comforted the brokenhearted and bandaged the wounded and fed the hungry, they could hardly have imagined a duty to defend the "abstract rights" of "abstracted individuals" which derived from some purported "state of nature."

Their leadership was simply another implication of the particular style of piety which flowed out of the life of a concrete people of God who intended to pattern themselves

after the original *Gottesfurcht* (awe of God), and *Gelassenheit* (confident yieldedness) of the Jesus who had become their Christ. He also had come only to do the Father's will. But also, like their Lord, they knew that God intended to bring harmonious and holy order to the entire world. It was the mission of God's people to transcend all parochial loyalties and to be agents in building and shaping families, clans, tribes, and communities after the order God wills. And so, paradoxically, these who were the meek of the earth were also to be those who inherit it.

Perhaps they did not often achieve the piety I have described. But I think that they sought the beauty that God intended for the world and the cosmos. It was a comprehending kind of piety, the loving embrace of larger realities on the way to becoming joint heirs of the Jesus Christ who sits at the right hand of God in the heavens. The repose they sought in God was the confidence of those who trusted that the tensions and contradictions of life were resolved in the intentions of God and could be partially understood through comprehending larger realities. Therefore the wisdom these sought was simply to know the mind of Christ in and through their relationships with the earth, with each other, and with God.

The Pietism of Abstracted Moderns

One of the original meanings of Liberalism was precisely the "freeing" of the individual from the "bondage" of concrete societies. In principle, all of us — whether Liberal or Evangelical or Fundamentalist — are liberal. But then a new economy (the Industrial Revolution) and new ways of thinking (as consolidated in Enlightenment rationalism) produced a new kind of "liberation." Individuals were abstracted from their concrete communities to concentrate on abstracted tasks in new kinds of functionalized settings. And so modern society is no longer a layering of concrete communities on the way to peoplehood. The nuclear family is now the last vestige of the older way of organizing peoples, with the result that no concreteness stands between it and that replacement for peoplehood which is the modern state. But the state is also no longer concrete; it is based on a contract (a constitution) tacitly adopted by individuals. On the one hand everything is supposed to exist for the sake of the individual. On the other hand, the individual has to fight to resist being swallowed up by

“mass society” and the bureaucracies which service the “functions” which have been abstracted from what was once “all-grown-together.”

It is ironic that those Christians who recoiled from the debilitating social consequences of modernity and tried to alleviate them (the Social Gospel) have been saddled with the name “Liberals” while those who fled that title have most resolutely pushed a gospel of religious individualism which is the result of modernity. It is true that Evangelicals more firmly resisted some of the heterodox results of the application of the thought forms of functional rationalism into doctrinal matters; but, in fact, the reason that theological liberals and conservatives could fight so hard on how best to preserve Christianity under the new conditions is that both had accepted the demise of concreteness and welcomed the basic thought forms of modernity. They disagreed on tactics and in specifics, but they shared the same turf.

Evangelicalism seldom questioned whether the abstractive, functionalizing spirit of modernity should have been countered. Nor did it understand that it was transforming churches into mere congregations. One result is that Protestants, and especially Evangelicals, have little understanding of the real character of the biblical peoples of God or of the biblical understanding of the corporate nature of the Body of Christ. As a movement it has been suspicious of religious “tribes” and “peoples” — and even of denominations, that half-way house between the *corpus Christianum* and autonomous congregationalism.

Dispensationalists argued that the church was an “unforeseen” interlude in God’s history with the Jews and that the spiritual “invisible church” made up of converted individuals took priority over concrete worshipping communities. Evangelical leaders in the late nineteenth century were so habituated to the forms of modernity that they largely relinquished their affiliations, finding their “real church” in summer conferences. Then the Bible Institute movement created the institutional structures which focused Evangelical activity. Since then, an incredible number of para-church organizations have specialized in the abstracted aspects of nurture and mission which were once the “all-grown-together” aspects of concrete Christianity. A result, not surprisingly, is that the exploited, already weakened congregation, becomes ever more fragile

and irrelevant.

The modern congregation is not a coherent context which can teach us how the abstracted aspects of our lives fit together to create a unified reality. It is itself an abstraction, that institution which has the function of servicing the “spiritual” aspect of life. Because an individualist society is a mobile society, the congregation loses the power to superintend the lengthy rhythms of the creation of a self. Indeed, the sense that life is related to larger natural and social and spiritual rhythms — or that it is itself such a rhythm in time — is gradually lost. Nor can the growing self experience the older crises through which we once stepped outside and then above our concrete “spaces” to a self-transcending individuality before God. Therefore there is really nothing tangible against which one can even rebel. Instead of dramatic rage against a very real but too-confining group identity or life-plot, there is that interiorized amorphous anger which we name *depression*.

The Meaning of Piety Changes

These modern conditions produce a different kind of person and a different kind of piety. I have insisted that in our past one’s basic individuality was constituted by the interrelations which in turn made deeper levels of self-consciousness and freedom possible. What is left, the interrelations of the nuclear family, is now being discovered to be incapable of completing the task of the healthy formation of character that was once shared by the clan, tribe, community, and ethnos.

Moreover, the modern individual moves through the day and the week from one functionalized secondary association to the next, playing in each the role which it elicits. Since no context embraces these roles in a “comprehending” way, the modern treats these relationships as external, as “layers” of one’s consciousness which have to be peeled away to discover the true “inner” self which supposedly retains its integrity from one context to the next and from birth to death. Though radically freed to move at will from one “space” to another, moderns are at home nowhere. They can “have” experiences, but self-transcendence as comprehension is almost impossible.

Therefore the meaning of holiness and piety also changes. Holiness loses its connection with wholeness, either the wholeness of a completed life story or the stewarding of a

concrete people of God. Instead of the comprehension of larger wholes and the care of them for God's sake, piety is sought in "focus" and in "centering" into one's purported "inner core." External relations are shut out in the attempt to feel "one thing" intensely, for conversion is not so much the beginning of a larger story as the initial occasion in which the divided self *feels* coherent. The Christian life to which such a modern looks forward is more the search for contexts in which to repeat this emotional intensity than a life-long process of working out the upward-reaching rhythms of an "organic" spirituality.

Now the biblical Psalms cease to be the primary "devotional aid." The communal Psalms express petitions and praise out of a sense of corporate identity that we can scarcely understand. Even the personal Psalms, which sum up the worshipper's story of the movement from faith to faith via loss and doubt and despair, are too "comprehending" for modern sensibilities. And so we are urged to read brief "devotional aids" which "focus" on one mood or idea — perhaps built on Bible verses abstracted from their contexts. In the same way "with it" congregations sing fewer hymns (which express comprehension by exploring the varied facets of a larger theme through three or more verses) in favor of mantric choruses. When such Christians gather, their worship is not that of a covenanting body presenting its concrete life to God in praise and petition. Instead, individuals who share the sensibilities of a "life style enclave" come to create a mood which helps them to achieve emotive focus. Here worship does not sum up the whole of one's life or even the whole of oneself. Rather, one escapes that life into the "sacred." The style of contemporary Evangelicalism is fully modern, whether or not Evangelicals recognize its similarity to that of the "New Age" they claim to despise.

And so *Gottesfurcht* (awe of God) ceases to be a Christian virtue. When life no longer presents itself in comprehensive patterns, the notion of God as a judge of those patterns does not make sense. What we now crave is a friendly God who comforts us during those brief times when we attend to the spiritual function. Now we do not expect the manifestation of God's power to excite a shuddering awe. Instead we crave it as a guarantee of our "health and wealth."

Nor does the confident yieldedness of *Gelassenheit* make sense. The whole point of separating out the functions of life is to bring the aggressive techniques of rational management to bear upon them. This does not change when we move from “secular” to “sacred” entities, be they the congregation or the para-church organization or even oneself. And so, instead of the contemplative comprehension which envisioned the whole of a concrete reality and which led to insight into how to seek its welfare, we now have analytical management techniques. Instead of the hard-won yet God-given wisdom by which our saints learned to decide hard cases, “Christian” psychologists offer us recipes. Evangelical book stores are full of manuals telling us how to manage our families and our psyches. Churches try one technique after another to promote that sort of progress which they call “growth.” And instead of the communal statesmanship that sought holiness, we have religious entrepreneurs creating para-church empires or shaping congregations around themselves.

The end result of our modern pieties is the addictive personality. Since the whole of life is no longer *comprehensible*, we seek to focus on one thing and, in mastering it, to experience ourselves as wholly a single being. Then we shape our lives around work or body building or dieting or a hobby. We may dedicate ourselves to some single cause, from saving the whale to saving the fetus. Or we may seek truth in focused and defined sets, the mastery of which gives an illusory certainty. Or we may give up on even these minor masteries and block out the pain of fragmented consciousness through drugs or alcohol or loud, throbbing music. Perhaps the reason we are so horrified at drug addiction is because it threatens to reveal to us that addictiveness is endemic while permitting us to pretend that we are still immune. But the modern lifestyle, not least that of contemporary Christians, leads necessarily to addictions and some of these addictions focus around the ways we express our spirituality.

If the piety I have ascribed to our Mennonite past was realized less often than I have hoped, it may also be insisted that contemporary pietists are not as “modern” as I have described. I have presented “idealized” abstractions. Can there be any doubt, however, of the direction in which most of us are moving?

*From the Logos to the Logical:
"No Other Foundation"*

Many of us can still remember that how we lived was more the test of our faithfulness than what we professed. Indeed, that test tormented me and my friends when the adults in our small church grilled us whether our conversions had been real. The results of the adult spiritual crisis which had been experienced by some of them were now demanded of us nine and ten year olds. How had we changed? What sort of rebellious behaviors had been purged? Some of us had only peccadillos to confess, but at least we knew that they were sins and we could say that we felt forgiven. Even the most righteous of our elders did not ask about doctrines or if our conversion included a decision to "believe the Bible."

In this section I will try to describe the place of doctrine and the nature of the authority of the Scripture in my Mennonite past and to show how these have changed under the impress of modernism in its Liberal and Evangelical guises. As in the previous section, my argument depends upon the assumption that a concrete whole is always something more than the sum of its parts.

The Concreteness of Godly Comprehension

One day my father was telling me about his struggle for education. After two years of high school, he was "hired out." At nineteen he was managing a grain elevator. Until he was twenty-one the money he earned had to be turned over to his father. I was in the upper grades when he finally received a college degree. "I wanted so badly to go to seminary The people loved me and kept voting me into offices [for example, he was on the General Conference Board of Reference and Counsel for about twenty-one years] I think I had good ideas; but the others [leading ministers] didn't pay much attention to them because I had never been to seminary."

I hurt to see his pain, and I blurted, "I'm glad you didn't. It might have ruined you." It was a stupid thing to say. This was not long after I had completed seminary and I suppose I was trying to sort out the meaning of it for myself. Fortunately, the seminary I attended had given me a respect for the Christian tradition, and I had left it disposed to respect my own tradition. After seminary I returned to Corn, Oklahoma, for one year to

teach and to assist in the church. During that year I learned to listen to the older people and was beginning to discover the “Mennonite” piety that I have been trying to describe. I was also learning to listen to my father and was beginning to puzzle over the wisdom and grace of his responses to people. It had moved me that people whom he had known long before would grasp my hand and speak feelingly of him. It even happened that tears would appear and they would briefly choke up. I tried to explain to my father that I thought that the era in which he would have gone to seminary and the kind of seminary that would have been available to him would not have respected our tradition and piety and that H. H. Flaming had been a better mentor and model than he would then have gotten in school. Perhaps I did not wholly understand what I was trying to say, but I had become convinced that something profound had been lost in the shift from “lay” to “educated” ministers.

It seems to me that one of the things that was lost was an older understanding of truth and of its authority. The lay saints I knew had reflected much on the ways of God, but they would have denied that they were theologians. That Mennonites “are not credal” is almost a cliché. “Instead we are a people of the Book.” But in what sense was that true?

A Different Kind of Biblicism

The mostly Fundamentalist and Evangelical approach to the Scriptures that I was taught while growing up did not always jibe with the ways in which our older saints had handled the text. It was true that our forebears did not appear to doubt that Adam and Abraham and Moses and Jesus did and said exactly what was written about them. But it also seems to me that they were not “literalists” in the modern sense of the word. They were free to argue with the text and, sometimes, to treat it with “shocking” looseness. The answers they derived from it sometimes appeared to be wholly arbitrary. Somehow, there was a different “spirit” in their biblicism than in the biblicism I was being taught.

For them, the text was not primarily a source of “facts” and “truths.” It was a story of the ways of God with human beings like themselves. The Hebrews also were organized into families and clans and tribes. They too were mostly farmers. They too had been exiles struggling to create a godly homeland. The

story of Jesus was a revelation of God's atoning graciousness, and the crucifixion and resurrection was both a paradigm of their own struggle with a sometimes hostile world and the guarantee of their own participation in the victory described in The Apocalypse. The Epistles recounted the possibility for Gentiles like themselves also to become a people for God.

The Bible was a window into a world which, like theirs, was more than the sum of its parts. Those who read it over and over lived themselves into that world. When they prayed they could become David pleading for healing and trust. When they worked, they became Adam struggling with ground that was more willing to bear weeds than wheat. When they had to make decisions about life and relationships, they moved naturally between Solomon's proverbs and their Low German ones. The world of the Bible was both real and ideal. The struggles and failures of the biblical saints might even be more sordid than their own. Yet the whole of that world was suffused with the brooding, sometimes dramatically active, presence of God. In one sense, it was not about the far past at all. It paralleled their own world, hovering above their world and intersecting with it. Its patterns could impress themselves upon their own world. They too could be God's chosen people. And so their imaginations could roam freely back and forth between that world and their own. In time, the patterns of their thinking could be molded by the biblical patterns. In the end the most important thing they learned was not the ability to think biblical "truths." It was rather that they had learned to think about everything in ways corresponding to the biblical patterns. The best of them learned to think "in" the truth rather than simply "about" truths.

In part, I am trying to express what is implied in the words "common sense." Someone with that gift is capable of understanding the whole of a thing or a process. Standing "outside" or "above" it one "apprehends" it as if in a single picture. (Some theorists like to say that this is a "right-brained" way of perceiving; others speak of grasping a *Gestalt*.) Such a person can then enter into the process and think out how to make the process work better. If there is something wrong, one can fix it without needing a recipe. One can, in fact, recognize when the manual may have it wrong and can then improve upon the official specifications out of the recognition of the creator's

intentions. I have heard employers complain that, "You can't hire people with common sense anymore." If so, this must be the result when people grow up without the ability to comprehend the concreteness of a complex reality.

Growing One's Way Into a Vision

The "thing" and "process" that our saints were mainly about was the building of a life and a community. Through growing up in such communities and through growing their way into the vision of a people of God as presented in the Scriptures, they could comprehend its contours. From "outside" it they could then accept the call to be God's ambassadors, following whatever guidelines they had been given in the tradition and improvising where the guidelines were no longer applicable or when they conflicted in "hard cases." For the ordinary course of events they could live out of experiences and memories shaped by having "lived" in both their own and the biblical time and space. For difficult decisions they sat down together before the Scriptures and prayed their way into the recognition which story or insight could best help them to solve the present problem. Because the general contours of the biblical world and their world were understood, none of this needed to have been systematically worked out. So far as they theologized, they said confidently with the early Christians, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..."

When the Hebrews tried to express how the patterns of reality were related to both God and to themselves, they talked of Wisdom as the divine female who was present with God at the creation and who was also able to instruct those who walked bravely and humbly before God (*Gelassenheit*). And they also were sure that "The fear of the Lord (*Gottesfurcht*) is the beginning of wisdom." The Gospel of John begins with the Wisdom passages from Proverbs in mind and uses a Greek word with much the same meaning to declare that Jesus Christ is the *logos* of God who was with God in the beginning and who is now present in the church through the Holy Spirit, guiding the church into the concrete patterns which express the order God wills. And so, living, praying, and studying together they participated in the divine *logos*, and were built up into "the mind of Christ." This became the concrete "common sense" out of which they worked.

Of course it was not always like that. Often they clutched

minor rules and distinctions to use as weapons against each other and to distinguish themselves from their nearest neighbors. Especially when the abstractions of modernity began to disrupt their communities and when new complexities challenged their wisdom, they began to turn hard and brittle. And so we remember all too well the legalism which was always their temptation. And we forget that this decay could never have happened if there had not first been something living and beautiful which could be distorted.

The Abstractness of Modern Pietists

When our elders affirmed, with Menno Simons, that there was “no other foundation,” they were speaking of Jesus Christ and of the concrete comprehension made possible through moving in the truth of Christ. The modes by which their wisdom worked were not formally “philosophical” or “scientific,” and so its rationality was not apparent to those who had entered into the abstractions of modern rationalisms. These abstractions had made science possible, and technology, and vast amounts of knowledge that were not even dreamed possible prior to the Enlightenment. And so the elders were unable to defend what they had known. The depth of their insight could not be recognized by those who knew that the old knowledge was now entirely too limited.

Progress had become possible by abstracting the facets of reality and, apparently, from giving each of its aspects a foundation of its own from which to deduce corollaries until entire bodies of knowledge had been systematically worked out. And so theologians sought the fundamental spiritual principles from which to explicate spiritual reality. Just as scientists had gone to physical nature to discover the facts and the fundamental principles from which the material sciences could be elucidated, so Liberals sought to discover these principles from “spiritual-nature-as-experienced.” Evangelicals sought for them in Scripture as the “book-of-revealed-spiritual-nature,” treating it as a repository of facts and truths which could be reassembled into a scientific history and into systematic theologies.

Neither attempt took the Scripture seriously in its own terms. The attempt to establish the reliability of the “facts” changed the living story of the biblical peoples into mere historical data to be tested by archaeologists. The attempt to

pull out moral and spiritual principles and to apply them directly to our own or any other “time” obscured the specific meaning they had had for the biblical peoples. The result, for Evangelical scholarship, was more than a century of arbitrary and increasingly irrelevant exegesis and theologizing. By now, Evangelical theologians can only agree *that* the Bible as source of foundational truths *ought* to yield a coherent interpretation and theology in terms of the Foundationalist historicism and rationalism they had accepted. And so the laity, reading apologetic works which gloss over the failure to complete this project, assume that it is still viable, grasping some partial set of truths which they take for the whole or working out their own provisional solutions while waiting for their leaders to come to agreement.

Getting By Without “Common Sense”

Meanwhile, life has become so complex that, as James Davison Hunter has explained, many people cannot understand the basic patterns of our own culture. And so they get through the day and the weeks applying sets of recipes that they have learned to apply to specific circumstances and which make it possible for them to more or less “get by.”³ But they do not have “common sense.” They do not know how to alter the recipes when it becomes necessary to do so. And it is certain that they are incapable of the statesmanship which begins with the comprehension of a holy community and which can also envision the sequence of steps needed to purify the incarnation of that vision.

It is not just that this Foundationalism failed to explain and defend Christian orthodoxy. Most philosophers agree that it has also failed to account for and protect the sciences. In fact, many are insisting that the modern attempt to give the separate aspects of reality their own certain beginning principles has resulted in relativism and skepticism. Insofar as our forebears possessed a comprehensive understanding of a given life-world, it was simply “rational” to understand the relation of the true, the good, and the beautiful; for each of these aspects of the whole made sense as integral components of just that sort of whole. But in an abstracted world, the proposed foundations for these spheres have not been able to support the weight they must bear. And so, for example, it has proved impossible to find an accepted basis of this founda-

tional sort for morality. Moderns are left with “values,” which one just “has” and for which one can vigorously argue, but which remain unacceptable to those with different equally unjustified “values.” For there is no “common sense” of a coherent life pattern in concrete communities from which these values can be recognized to be appropriate.

The same is true for Evangelicals and Liberals arguing doctrinal issues. Apparently it was once possible for a single, magnificently structured theology to sum up a profoundly comprehensive world view. Not since the Renaissance and the Reformation shattered the intellectual, spiritual, and social world which made the work of Thomas Aquinas possible has that feat been repeated. Meanwhile, with their theological ship sinking, many Evangelical theologians continue to try to salvage concepts like “literal,” “plenary,” “infallible,” and “inerrant” which have less to do with traditional scriptural authority than with making the Bible a source for the kind of “foundations” demanded by their world view.

New Wineskins for the Aging of Wine

We cannot repeal modernity, even if we wanted to. And we do not want to. It has given us too much that is valuable. Yet its rationality and individualism must be put in their place, if for no other reason than to preserve what is good in them. For the same reason we must, I think, prepare for ways of living and thinking Christianly which go beyond Liberalism and Evangelicalism.

Living Christianly

In the first place, it is essential to recover the concreteness of human communities. The growing child needs to move from the family through the clan and tribe on the way to comprehending the kind of peoplehood which the Kingdom of God is about. We need these levels, finally, in order to “out-grow” them in a way that frees us to hear God’s call to be ambassadors of the order God intends for all of creation.

Few of us will be able to continue to live in small rural communities, and those who do are immersed in the culture of cities. Like almost all of the early Christians, we will have to find out how to construct households and extended families and “tribes” while living in and around modern cities. We

Mennonites have the great advantage of our relative "backwardness." We have come so late to full modernity that we can still remember what it was like to live concretely. We have ethnic ties that grant us access to the reality of peoplehood. Some of us can still remember what it can be like to live *in* the truth.

Nonetheless, those are right who protest that our past ethnicism can be an illicit temptation. On the one hand we can recognize the importance of the connectedness which our Mennonite culture made possible and cling to aspects of it while actually living as individualists. By separating out the various aspects of life, we can be fully in and of the world while maintaining enclaves in which we play out part of our "Mennonite" role. Even if this could be maintained for more than a generation or two, which is doubtful, it would not preserve the comprehending spirituality of authentic Mennonitism. On the other hand we can refuse to be culturally distinctive and lose both the old skins and the old wine.

There are two legitimate ways to use our past. We can study how its cultural forms carried, or did not carry, the treasure which God has given. Then we can together work out the forms which will accomplish for our time what was done in theirs. It is undesirable to strive for complete concreteness. Boundaries must always be permeable. But it should be possible to construct forms of quasi-concreteness able to deliver us to larger concretions and, ultimately, to responsible individuality. This will include, I think, exploiting the possibilities for the construction of "villages" inherent in condominiums and planned unit developments. The "co-housing" alternatives which are spreading in northern Europe offer a way to embody the benefits of modernity with what was health-giving in earlier communities. Like our elders, and learning from them, we can become the builders of a "layered" people of God.

In addition to learning from our past, we can appeal to what is left of our sense of mission. Our mutual aid agencies learned how to apply modern techniques to abstracted aspects of the economy of concrete communities. Now they must help us to address the task of reconstructing those kinds of concreteness. Our Mennonite businessmen have banded together to provide economic assistance to marginalized third world individuals. Now they must realize that some of us —

and especially our youth — are being marginalized here at home. Our foreign missionaries have almost always known that the spread of the rule of God implies building Christian community. Now we must recognize that we are ourselves becoming the mission field.

The economic and social reasons for such reconstructions are sufficiently compelling that fully secularized moderns are moving in this direction. There are also signs of hope on the edges of what I have called heresies. Authoritarian “cults” attempt to recreate social structures analogous to the clan and tribe. Pastor-dominated “super-churches” which absorb most of the recreational, cultural, and educational life-functions of their members represent the yearning for a new kind of “village” and “town” in the midst of the city. I have been profoundly moved in a Costa Rican church whose hour-long singing of choruses “off the wall” had a musical and religious integrity similar to that of an oratorio. The congregation was also planning a housing project which could include its poorest and its richest members.

It is most important for us also to construct contexts which make it possible again to incarnate the more concrete piety of our own forebears. The conditions for their understanding of the life-long rhythms of nature and of the spirit and their cultivation of the piety of *Gottesfurcht* and *Gelassenheit* can be renewed. And we can move to a larger and active peace-making which is more the result of training in becoming “super-conductors” of the Holy Spirit than in religious, political, or moral idealisms.

Thinking Christianly

If those are right who insist that the capacity to “comprehend” is crucial to rationality and to common sense and if it is true that growing up with concreteness is necessary for comprehending, then thinking itself — as something more profound than abstractive rationalism — is at stake. But here I am concerned with how we are to think about what it means to be followers of Jesus Christ.

We have always claimed that the primary source and authoritative guide to our theologizing is the Scriptures. I have argued above that there are two ways we have tried to make that claim good. Like our elders, we can try to live ourselves into the world of the biblical peoples until we think *in* the

truth. Or we can insist that the essence of biblicism is to abstract its “facts” and “truths” in order to “believe” them and to apply them directly to our lives. This second way, I have argued, is more modern than Christian. And the first way may well be impossible for most of us. Our forebears had two advantages we have lost. On the one hand their life on the land and in villages was sufficiently like that of the biblical peoples that they could live themselves into the biblical thought-world. On the other hand, they had little access to texts which presented other sorts of world views. To become again a people of the book will require us to take both it and our own distance from it very seriously.

I have argued that today we cannot automatically and literally repeat the cultural forms of our ancestors, not even if those forms were then vehicles of life. Rather, we must understand the relationship between “skin” and “wine” in an earlier age and then think through afresh what sort of “skin” will now safely carry that sort of “wine.” We must make the same sort of double translation of the biblical materials. In the first place, we must work hard at understanding how biblical peoples responded to God to become the people of God. That cannot be done anymore by “naively” living ourselves into the text. For that we require the help of scholars who devote their lives to understanding the text within the ancient context through their mastery of ancient languages and cultures. It is their task, then, to tell us what the text *meant*.

The second translation is all of our responsibility. God continues to work with us externally through the conditions which confront us and internally through the Holy Spirit. We can then bring our condition and our questions and our insights to the text (as reopened by the scholars) for insight into what is now required and to test whether our understandings (and even the understanding of the scholars) are faithful. We are not alone nor are we the first to engage in this double translation. And so we also test what we discover with other Christian communities and with what has been learned through the ages by those who also built upon the foundation which is Jesus Christ. In all of this we discover how the text is to *mean* for us in our time and space. The modernist attempt to lift the text out of its time and to apply it simply and literalistically does violence to the way God has historically worked. A more profound biblicism, one which fulfills the

promise of the naive biblicism of our forebears, is demanded of us if we are to be guided into the way of truth.

Mennonite Thinkers and the Anabaptist Vision: An Excursus on the Anabaptist Vision

I realize Mennonite thinkers in the recent past have thought that they were moderns, contributing to the Liberal or Evangelical projects. And it is certain that many of our laity have assumed that Evangelicalism is the most faithful form of contemporary spirituality. I wish to insist that this does not truly represent Mennonitism, not even Mennonite Brethren — whose beginnings in Russia constituted, as I have argued elsewhere, a religious appropriation of Enlightenment rationalism.⁴ Yet we have been protected by a long history of persecution and isolation. We have come late to modernity, and therefore the older forms have persisted to the present.

But these older forms can be lost even in the self-conscious effort to stress our tradition. It has been possible to claim the sixteenth century Anabaptists as the prophets of modernity who stood for the separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, and voluntarism in religion long before modernity rediscovered these principles. But it is most unlikely that the original Anabaptists meant by these what abstractive individualism takes them to mean. H. S. Bender, in his classic 1943 essay, *The Anabaptist Vision*,⁵ insisted that these do not name its essence. That, he said, consisted of a new conception of discipleship, of the church as a brotherhood, and of an ethic of love and nonresistance.

His discussion of discipleship, however, speaks of “the transformation of the entire way of life of the *individual* believer and of *society*” (emphases mine). His entire discussion is cast in terms of an individualist piety and morality. Though he says that love and nonresistance apply to all human relationships, he discusses only its application to war-making. Even his discussion of the church begins by naming voluntary membership and commitment to holy living and discipleship as the essential heart of the concept of the church. It is true that Bender went on to point out that such a church would have to separate from the world and would inevitably be a suffering community. Later he says that “the practice of true brotherhood and love among the members of the church” is also basic. But the tone even here is that these are the sorts of

things that *formed* Christian individuals go on to do.

Bender's essay became a manifesto for modern Mennonites. It was also a platform for giving them full status within Protestantism. According to Bender, the original Anabaptists completed the logic which Luther and Calvin and Zwingli had accepted and then betrayed. It was not, however, a self-conscious antidote to modernity, and it has mostly been understood in modernist terms. Had Bender foreseen the 1990's, I think he would have taken greater care to overcome the spirit of the age. I trust that he would have deplored the way modern Mennonites of both the Evangelical "right" and the prophetic "left" have interpreted the Anabaptist vision in terms of the social contract, stressing either the voluntary choices of pietistic religious individualists or their claims of "rights" and "justice." But he was writing for those of us whose selfhood was still formed by an older Mennonite sense of covenant concreteness. He did not have to think about and to say out loud what we still took for granted.

A full generation later, exactly thirty years from the publication of Bender's essay, Walter Klaassen published *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant*.⁶ Though it builds on the work of Bender and others, it seems to me to be a fundamentally different interpretation. Anabaptism is not a perfected Protestantism nor is it "modern." It is a third way. Moreover, he is fully aware that the tension between a corporate communal self and the individuality which Mennonite reality sought when at its best had frequently broken down, with the tragic result of sectarian splitting. Moreover, the speed by which Mennonites were succumbing to modernity and to its abstracted individualism even while they were proclaiming the "Anabaptist Vision" had no doubt stimulated Klaassen to look again at the sixteenth century and to notice that our forebears were not fully moderns. They did not think that one is saved and *then* joins a congregation. Salvation is achieved *in* community. The life of discipleship is not an ethic for individuals; it is, in fact, a matter of learning how to live in the Christ-shaped community. Here is the locus for the social and physical and spiritual interaction by which our character is formed for wisdom, moderation, good sense, discipline, and love. Anabaptism is not, he says, an idealism (idea-ism) by which one begins with an ideology, not even if it is a theology, not even if it is a "true" theology, and then tries to force life to

fit it. Revelation, mediated by the Scriptures, moves the people who wrestle prayerfully together on what is important to their common life. Truth, and theology, is discovered in living. The best theology is what we do together in our concreteness. Even if early Anabaptists did also open a door to individualistic modernity, persecution helped to keep Mennonites from speedily passing through it.

I think this also means that even “Anabaptism” becomes false, becomes merely another ideology, if treated as foundational principles for modern individualists and their congregations. Indeed, our tradition will not last long unless we learn how to recover our *Mennonite* recognition of the need for concrete contexts for *Gottesfurcht* and *Gelassenheit*. The church as the people of God can acknowledge and proclaim the Anabaptist Vision, but what we have understood as that vision is not a sufficient foundation for the establishment of such a church. We modern Mennonites have worked hard to discover the life, thoughts, and spirit of the sixteenth century Anabaptists. It is now essential to put equal effort into understanding our Mennoniteness.

Rethinking and Reliving

I do not know what my father would have said to all this. I suspect he would be very surprised, perhaps even shocked. And yet I vividly remember *my* shock at his response to my “Wineskins” piece the first time we met after its publication. It had proved to be controversial, and I was apprehensive whether he too might condemn it. “I had thought,” he mused quietly, “that I had done a better job of keeping my thoughts to myself.” It was as if he was blaming himself for having too long kept quiet and then having his secret thoughts projected through me. “Oh, no!” I protested, “those were *my* thoughts.” And so they were. But sometimes I wonder where I got them.

He, and many of his generation, knew that our old cultural skins were too limited and could not, in any case, survive our entrance into the modern world. And so they borrowed “relevant” wineskins which seemed to preserve the essential claims of the gospel but which were, in fact, inadequate to nurture the old wine by which they had themselves been nourished. What they did was necessary, no doubt. It is time, however, to go beyond them. Whether or not we can reclaim old skins, we must give voice to the older wisdom which had

been set aside. What is needed is new skins which permit new wines to blend with the old and to become mature.

My father too had "feet of clay." And I did not always accept his judgment on whom to admire and what to think. But among the few "greats" whom I have found, none are more important for me than he. And I hope he would accept this as my tribute to him and to the saints and elders who have transmitted to us a goodly heritage.

ENDNOTES

1. *Christian Leader*, (Oct. 12, 1965).
2. It filled a combined issue of *Direction* (Oct. 1973/Jan. 1974).
3. This analysis is taken from Hunter, who quotes Alfred Schutz. *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983. See p. 10. Also see his brief comment on p. 8 that the Anabaptist tradition is less subjectivistic and more communal than the main Evangelical traditions. This book and its sequel (*Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation*. Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987) are extremely important analyses of Evangelicalism's "bargaining with modernity."
4. Delbert Wiens, "Incarnation and Ideal: the Story of a Truth Becoming Heresy" in *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History*. (Paul Toews, ed. Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1975, 32-36.)
5. H. S. Bender. *The Anabaptist Vision*, Herald Press, 1943.
6. Walter Klaassen. *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant*, Herald Press, 1973.