

A CALL FOR RENEWAL OF THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH

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The renewal of the Mennonite Brethren Church! A presumption? A possibility? A happening? A prayer? Following are some observations on church renewal and how this movement might touch our brotherhood.

THE MENNONITE BRETHREN CHURCH—BORN IN RENEWAL

The Mennonite Brethren Church was born in a renewal movement in Southern Russia in 1860. Early renewal movements appeared as early as 1812 when a group of dissatisfied and conservative members left the Flemish Church and established the Kleine Gemeinde. The villages of Ohrloff and Gnadenfeld in Russia became new life centers under the leadership of Bernhard Fast. But in that era of Mennonite history adults were brought into the church through baptism and confirmation; seldom were people “born again” believers. “Everyone joined, and the formality of being initiated into the church bore no necessary relationship to a living faith.”¹

Then came the revival led by the Lutheran Pietist Eduard Wuest (1818-1859), who began his ministry in Neuhoffnung village near the Molotschna colony. Wuest was a tall man with a melodious voice and strong convictions. His preaching demanded a verdict, and no one could remain neutral on spiritual issues. In his initial sermon, delivered September 28, 1845, he said:

In this hour, as I step into your midst as your minister for the first time, I experience what the prophet of old did. From all sides I hear, “Preach!” . . . You require it of me: “Preach!” I ask with the prophet, “What shall I preach?” The answer returns: “All flesh is grass; the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever.” My beloved, I must proclaim this eternally-abiding word of the Lord to you.²

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DIRECTION

He pursued his ministry with deep compassion. Wuest would go into the people's homes and out to laborers in factories and fields, asking them how they stood in their relationship to Christ.

This spirit of revival spread to the Mennonite colonies and is sometimes called "the Great Awakening in Russian Mennonitism."³ People were "born again" and experienced new joy and new life (Neues Leben). This spiritual awakening, although it did not touch all of the churches in the colonies, was the cradle in which the Mennonite Brethren Church was born.

The beginnings of the Mennonite Brethren Church were filled with "storm and stress"⁴ as it faced the question which comes inevitably to every new life movement in the church. Can this new life remain in the apostate church? Will the church absorb it and be totally renewed, or must the people of new life leave the established church? Can the old wineskins contain the new wine? Some believers with new life chose to stay with the church and served there as good leaven for the larger Mennonite community.

Whether rightly or wrongly, many separated themselves from the established church. This "secession of the eighteen" from the larger community in 1860 will always remain a topic of discussion and serious reflection, for the question whether to remain in the established church or to leave it remains a serious question in renewal movements today.

Shoemaker contends that new life movements in the church need the "balancing" influence of the established church, and the established church needs the new fire which the new life movement brings. The organized church and the new life movement need each other.

We need first a vanguard of spiritually awakened and contagious folk. But this vanguard must never get severed from the organized Church, even when it may more truly represent the Church as Christ wanted and founded it, than does the organized Church.⁵

PRESENT SIGNS OF RENEWAL

Now, 119 years later, we are again addressing ourselves specifically to the renewal of the church. The cry for new life is again being heard.

Of course, we are not the only ones issuing a call for renewal. This is the cry of much of the Church of Jesus Christ. Dr. Findley Edge analyzes the stages of church renewal in America today as follows:

First stage — 1950-62 — analytical and critical

Second stage — 1962-67 — theoretical and theological

Third stage — 1967- — positive and practical

What are needed, he says, are positive proposals for renewal. We have

passed through the rebellious and critical stages and are now ready for reconstruction.⁶

While the 1960's were years of turmoil, demonstrations, and rebellion against the establishment, these agonies were also the birth pangs of a new movement in the church. Churches reconsidered their ways when shaken by the holocaust around them. Creeds were redefined, language was updated, and new forms emerged. Even we Mennonite Brethren, after years of toil, "updated" our Confession of Faith in 1975, the first since 1901!

While the roots of this renewal can be traced to other decades, the real effort to renew the church took shape in the 1960's. "During that same decade (1960-70) the church renewal movement took shape," says William Clemmons.⁷ While not all of Christendom in America was touched by this new movement of the spirit, significant things happened. It was during this decade that the Roman Catholic Church called for Vatican II, which has had a profound affect upon that large body. Billy Graham's crusades brought about a broader God-consciousness in America. The World Council of Churches appointed a task force to study "the recovery of the mission of the life of the church." Evangelicals rose to new respectability—1977 has been dubbed the Year of the Evangelicals.

Five substantial signs of Christian renewal in the church will be considered.

Certainly one encouraging sign of spiritual renewal is the emergence of the laity in the life and ministry of the church. With this awakening has come a better understanding of the ministry of laity by the church. William Clemmons writes:

Elton Trueblood in 1952 had said that if the ministry of the ordinary Christian could be recovered in the same manner in which the Bible was opened up to ordinary people 400 years ago, a new Reformation would take place. Likewise, the study of the Bible passage, Ephesians 4:11-12, began a whole new understanding of the role of the pastor as the enabler of the church members for their ministry.⁸

We Anabaptists should certainly find this easy to understand. For do we not thoroughly hold to the "priesthood of all believers"? Yet, we too have been and are being led down the dangerous road of ecclesiasticism and professional clericalism which robs the church members of their priesthood. We talk about "using the lay person" in our churches. Who wants to be "used"? Clergy certainly do not! No, indeed, the "priesthood of all" is a far deeper concept than merely keeping the laity active in the church. Carlyle Marney makes the following pertinent observations:

DIRECTION

We came up with a fatal-to-the-gospel series of substitutes: clergy for laity, rank for brotherhood, learning for devotement, function over relation, prestige for integrity, institution for fellowship, committees instead of service, property for community, and ritual in place of liturgy. . . . Our answer is not a “servanthood of the laity” as a nice additional to round out a hired professional staff; instead, what we are trying to say here is that the lay people must become *the ministry of the church in the world* *The aim of the church is not to enlist its laymen in its services; the aim is to put laymen as theological competents in the service of the world.*⁹

We, of all churches, should not be caught “straying” on this point! But the danger is very real with us. The Lord is again speaking to the church about its true nature—a company of priests! We must hold faith in this basic doctrine of the church. The Lord is bringing it back to many other churches, and it is revitalizing those churches.

Dr. Robert Munger of Fuller Theological Seminary points out that “Christianity, in its beginnings, was a lay movement The awakening of the laity to their high calling in Christ as ministers to his body and his witnesses and servants in the world is, in the words of Rober Hudson, stirring, ‘The Sleeping Giant’.”¹⁰

A number of movements such as Christian Business Mens’ Committee, Campus Crusade for Christ, Churches Alive, Lay Witness Mission, and others are all lay oriented. Renewal for the church is underway when the members once again become priests to each other and priests to the world.

To assist this new sense of the priesthood of all renewal must also touch the leadership of the church. If leadership does not experience a fresh touch from God, it is doubtful if the congregation will. Samuel Shoemaker writes, “The clergy have often become the hired supporters of the institution and are silenced by our own hunger for status and security I have grave questions about the validity of the professional clergy—in many ways they seem to be the major obstacle.”¹¹

While we do not propose that pastors are always the key to all that the church does, we are saying that the leader of the flock must himself know where the greener pastures are. His concern must not be his own welfare and security, but as a true shepherd his passionate concern must be the welfare of the flock. The key issue for pastors is not: can I pass a vote of confidence by the congregation? The question is: do the people grow and prosper in their confidence in the Lord? Are they becoming priests to each other and priests to the world?

Another sign of spiritual renewal today is the existence of closer relationships within the church community. In recent years greater em-

phasis has been laid upon more openness, greater honesty, and more sharing in the fellowship. Many churches have experienced “newness” and “refreshing” as people began to share and bear each others’ burdens and to build deep and meaningful relationships. The emergence of small groups, retreat weekends, and Bible studies, have stressed the relational theology of the church as a covenant community. As “church” became more than a creed to be believed, or rules to be followed, or an institution to be served, and became instead a place for burden-bearing, healing of hurts, and the forming of fulfilling relationships, the church was becoming renewed.

Another sign of renewal is the return of biblical preaching. Return? Yes. Topical preaching has had its hey-day—as has its hero and master, Harry Emerson Fosdick. In many pulpits of the land the new emphasis is on expository biblical preaching. The churches which are experiencing a substantial growth are invariably the ones who give major time and place to solid teaching of the Bible. There is no substitute for this.

Several summers ago I attended a seminar on “The Future of Preaching.” The instructor, Dr. Morgan Edwards, confided to me after having examined my preaching on videotape: “Hiebert, you have some weaknesses; but you have one strong point—your sermon is biblical. You know, this is what’s happening in our seminary. We are returning to biblical preaching! I am a topical preacher, like Fosdick, but we are moving into another kind of preaching—the future will be expository preaching!” A. Don Augsburger, professor at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, writes:

What models in the twentieth century will best enhance church renewal? First, renewal comes through exposure of the truth. It seems therefore that Biblical preaching is a must if renewal in the community of faith is to be realized. . . . The exposure of the community of faith to the living Word empowered by the Holy Spirit will ultimately bring renewal.¹²

Carl H. Lundquist, President of Bethel College and Seminary, recently made a six-month tour visiting 43 “new-life centers” in the United States. Among his conclusions he noted the importance of Scripture. “Although biblical hermeneutics and interpretations varied, I found people genuinely relying on Scripture.”¹³ A return to biblical teaching, and a return to small group Bible study—these are signs of present church renewal.

Another clear sign of spiritual renewal in our day is the charismatic movement as found in both Protestant and Catholic churches. Surely in any kind of new movement there are extremes and “spill-overs.” Unfortunately, such manifestations as speaking in tongues have sometimes overshadowed the other concerns of the renewalists. A positive out-

DIRECTION

come of the movement, however, is the new emphasis on spiritual gifts and their ministries in the church.

Our General Conference adopted a resolution regarding the charismatic movement in 1972 which has been a great help to us.¹⁴ I have shared it freely in the Seminary, not only with Mennonite Brethren but with Pentecostals as well, and received a very favorable response from all of them. The statement, which should be read by all who are interested in the subject, indicates an openness on our part and recognizes the work of God in this aspect of renewal.

A further sign of renewal is the desire for a new life style. The new life style has reference mainly to simpler, less luxurious living and to more sharing with a hungry world. Sometimes this desire and conviction is reflected in communal living or in semi-communal fellowships where more people share in using jointly-owned machinery, utilities, office equipment, etc. The interest in a simpler life style and of more sharing is not restricted to "centres," "houses," "farms," or "Bruderhofs." The movement in this direction touches many churches and families. One of the writings which has stimulated this movement is Ron Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.

One of the manifestations of the Spirit-filled church in Jerusalem was that "they had all things in common," and "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:32-24). This approach to life creates a deeper sense of community among Christians.

RENEWAL AND BEYOND

The basic elements of spiritual renewal are a new and deeper relationship with Christ and a revitalized compassion for serving mankind. The greatest commandment, Jesus said, is to love God and to love our neighbor. "Renewal is the result of encounter—encounter between a person and Christ vertically, and the person and fellow pilgrims horizontally."¹⁵

Renewal often comes through a new commitment to Jesus Christ or through a new filling of the Holy Spirit in one's life.

Naturally they speak of it in different ways, depending upon their particular doctrinal point of view. Some call it "entire sanctification," "holiness," "perfect love," or the "victorious life." Others may prefer to describe it as "the baptism of the Holy Spirit," the "rest of faith," "death to self," or something else. The terminology, however, is not the important thing. What is significant is that there exists among Christian leaders representing many different theological and church connections a basic unanimity of agreement upon the fact—the fact of a deeper and abiding life in Christ entered into subsequent to

regeneration whereby the trusting heart is delivered from the bondage of self, filled with the Holy Spirit, and set aflame by the love of God to serve the Lord with gladness.¹⁶

Personal and local church renewal, however, must not stop with a “refreshing experience.” Renewal is not finished with a “spiritual high.” Such new life must find its way into the warp and woof of daily work and responsibility. There is always the danger that a revival experience remain an end in itself, simply a personally enjoyed spiritual exhilaration. Renewal must go farther. When the renewal is genuine, it will change life patterns and life perspectives. Among other things it will produce a deeper sense of mission and bring a greater unity to the body of Christ.

Renewal, if genuine, will affect the mission of the church. “A renewed sense of mission will accompany any authentic renewal movement—mission that is as broad as human need.”¹⁷ And so this sense of mission must produce a deeper social-consciousness. Revivals have always brought a change in society. The Wesleyan Revivals spoke to child labor problems, the American Revival of 1850-1860 spoke forcefully to the issue of slavery. Renewal movements today must also go beyond personal exhilaration to put their imprint upon society’s needs.

A major call to Christians today is the call for compassion. Compassion for the poor and compassion for justice to be done in society as a whole. Myron Augsburger says,

We must find new ways for involvement in social justice. The Bible is full of references to the poor. There are more references to the poor than probably any other subject in the Bible People are finding the meaning of life in something other than status-seeking, power positions, affluence, dominating others.¹⁸

An embarrassing fact revealed by the study of Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, published in *Anabaptism Four Centuries Later*, shows that in comparison with five other Mennonite bodies, “the Mennonite Brethren placed first in Bible knowledge, but last in ethical-social concern.”¹⁹ Other observations in this study only further substantiate the tendency of Mennonite Brethren to see renewal as a personal experience than as an involvement in human needs.

The new sense of mission must also manifest itself in world evangelization, a ministry in which not only career and “professional” missionaries take part but where lay witness becomes the powerful Christian leaven in society. Renewal and revivals always place a greater burden upon Christians for personal witness. Genuine renewal does not wait for the “witness” to be programmed and structured; it flows forth joyfully from individuals who once again recover their priesthood.

DIRECTION

Renewal, when genuine, produces greater unity in the body of Christ. True, renewal often brings about confrontation and tensions. New fire and new life are always a challenge. We do not forget that the birth of the Mennonite Brethren church in 1860 caused division. And, ultimately, a new-life group may need to be formed when the larger body does not open itself to a renewal experience. This produces birth pangs. But when the issue is solved, we must go beyond the "break" and the initial tensions and flow with the Spirit. Finally, there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is one body and one Spirit" (Eph. 4:1-6). Even though renewal comes through a baptism of fire, beyond renewal the Lord is building His church. The Lord's prayer that "they all be one," is being answered today. The new outpouring of His Spirit today is bringing about a marvelous unity among believers.

We must look with discernment upon the charismatic movement. Is it possible that the Lord is using this means to bring about unity in His body? Is this the way denominational barriers are being broken and bridges of fellowship are being established?

For too many years Mennonite Brethren have so emphasized "separateness" that it has sometimes been listed as one of our "distinctives." The "separated life" has too often been falsely interpreted, and it has closed our doors to a wider fellowship and kept us from involvement in the world's needs and problems. Our history has shown us that we do not keep pure by hiding away from fellowship with others.

Separatism is not the language of the Spirit. Any renewal among us will bring us closer to Christians of other denominations. The movement of the Spirit is to bring His church together. And it may come in ways that will surprise us. Christ's church is an ecumenical (universal) church.

I have attended several Mennonite World Conferences, but the one held in Wichita in the summer of 1978 was different from all the rest. There was a spirit there of praise, song, and jubilation such as I have never experienced before. One can only explain it by saying that the Holy Spirit was moving also among Mennonites. The same is happening in other Christian bodies. The splintered body of Christ is being healed and being melted closer together.

The question is—are we open to this? Can we permit the organized church as we know it to cut short its scholarly, ponderous pronouncements and speak with freshness?

THE CALL FOR RENEWAL

Calls and prayers for renewal among Mennonite Brethren have been frequent ever since our beginnings in 1860. Our foremost

historian of earlier years, P.M. Friesen, spoke about a “new party,” a “new alliance,” and about certain “threatening shadows.” I quote:

A terrible materialism, passionate, indeed wild striving to become rich is spreading more widely and deeply among us. . . . As a consequence, financial and—associated with this—the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of the “children of God” belong to the sad occurrences of everyday life (I Tim. 6:9). . . . We need a “new party,” and “new alliance!” Nothing formulated! Nothing organized! We have more than enough of that. We mean an ideal spiritual union of all those (from all shades and groups of Mennonites) “who love our Lord Jesus Christ immovably,” undeterred and unconstrained by artificially contorted dogmas such as those of the pseudo-scientific critics, who are without piety and without faith; a union of all those who simply, clearly, and essentially uniformly recognize and confess Jesus Christ as we find Him in the writing of the Evangelists and Apostles and in all the old confessional writings of the Anabaptists. . . .²⁰

The “threatening shadows” (materialism, moral decay, secularism) of which P.M. Friesen wrote 70 years ago are all too familiar to us. Is it necessary to repeat his warnings today?

Another “father” among us was the late A.H. Unruh. In his history of the Mennonite Brethren Church he too wrestles with our spiritual condition and insists that for the further healthy development of our church we need an increase of spiritual life, close adherence to God’s Word, a harmony of confession and life style, church discipline, godly seriousness in all endeavors, a spiritual solution to individualism, a deep sincerity in prayer life, a holy life, and a joyous anticipation of his return.²¹ The burden of these brethren is just as pertinent today as in the days of their exhortation.

While we cannot see a deep and general renewal across the brotherhood, there are “pockets” of renewal: churches that are reaching out to neighbors, spontaneous Bible study and prayer groups, mutual caring and sharing, new forms of worship, more joy and praise in the services and daily life, community concern, new awareness for the need of personal meditation and communion with God, and lay witness. These are signs that the Spirit is seeking to lead us to new life, new forms, new ministries in the world. There is a growing hunger for renewal to be fleshed out among us.

I, for one, believe that the great days of the church are not in the past but in the future. The major test before us is openness. Will we be open to the Spirit’s movement, however unique His manifestations and leadings might be? Will we submit to the principles of renewal as stated above? “We must begin by recognizing that God is doing something in our time that He has never done before,” says Noah Martin.²²

DIRECTION

This is a call for renewal in the Mennonite Brethren Church. This is a call for prayer and serious reflection upon our present condition. This writing is a prayer that His Spirit may be free to flow upon our lethargy, our “threatening shadows,” upon our smallness of vision and hardness of heart—a prayer that we permit God to incorporate us into His worldwide renewal by His Holy Spirit.

NOTES

- 1 Peter J. Klassen, “The Mennonite Brethren Church” (Unpublished paper), p. 2.
- 2 P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1978), p. 213.
- 3 A.J. Klassen, “The Roots and Development of Mennonite Brethren Theology to 1914” (Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Wheaton College, 1960), p. 33.
- 4 J.A. Toews, *History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975), p. 38.
- 5 Samuel Shoemaker, *With the Holy Spirit and With Fire* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 23.
- 6 Findley Edge, *The Greening of the Church* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1971), p. 13.
- 7 William Clemmons, “Renewal in the Sixties,” *Faith at Work* 86:11 (August, 1973), 36.
- 8 Clemmons, “Renewal,” p. 36.
- 9 Carlyle Marney, *Priests to Each Other* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1978), pp. 7-8, 14-15.
- 10 Robert Munger, “Training the Laity for Ministry,” *Theology: News & Notes*, (Fuller Theological Seminary Alumni/ae, June, 1973).
- 11 Shoemaker, p. 13.
- 12 Don Augsburg, “Focus on Church Renewal,” *The Seminarian* (Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Virginia, February, 1979), p. 1.
- 13 Carl Lundquist, “Journey to Renewal,” *Christianity Today*, 22:7 (January 13, 1978), 14.
- 14 *General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches Yearbook*, 1972, p. 9.
- 15 Augsburg, “Focus,” p. 2.
- 16 Robert Coleman, *The Spirit and the Word* (Wilmore, Kentucky: Asbury Theological Seminary, 1965), p. 5.
- 17 John Jantzi, “Sign of Authentic Renewal,” *The Seminarian* (Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Harrisonburg, Virginia, February, 1979), p. 3.

A CALL FOR RENEWAL

18 Myron Augsburger, "The Church and Futurism," *Catalyst* (Word Books, Waco, Texas, January 21, 1979), p. 1.

19 Katie Funk Wiebe, "Measuring a Vision," *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 14:3 (June 27, 1975), 3.

20 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 979.

21 A.H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten Brüder Gemeinde* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1964), p. 839.

22 Noah Martin, *Beyond Renewal* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1976), p. 185.

ADDITIONAL BOOKS ON CHURCH RENEWAL

Calian, Carnegie S. *Today's Pastor in Tomorrow's World*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1977. Christian ministry is at a crossroads today. Old concepts are changing, new ones are developing.

Lovelace, Richard F. *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979. This work is a manual of spiritual theology, combining the history and theology of Christian experience with special emphasis on the Protestant and evangelical history of spiritual formation. The author believes that a general spiritual awakening in America began in the 1970s.

McLaughlin, William G. *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. A brief survey of the great awakenings. He proposes that 1960-90(?) might be called the Fourth Great Awakening.

Nouwen, Henri. *Creative Ministry*. New York: Doubleday Co., 1971. Beyond professionalism in teaching, preaching, counseling, organizing, and celebrating.

Richards, Lawrence O. *A New Face for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970. A courageous analysis of the traditional church and of needs for reform. A scripturally based study of important changes the church must make to conform to New Testament standards.

Richards, Lawrence O. *The Churches in Renewal*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975. A specific study of renewal in three churches: Our Heritage Church in Scottsdale, Arizona; Mariners Church in Newport Beach, California; and Trinity Church in Seattle, Washington. He also draws out major principles for renewal.

Theology, News and Notes. Fuller Theological Seminary Alumni/ae, March, 1973. The entire issue is devoted to renewal and change.