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J. B.'s Prophetic Call to Biblical Discipleship

Henry J. Schmidt

The twenty-first chapter in J. B.'s *Pilgrimage of Faith* is titled, "Call to Commitment." It articulates what he lived, preached, and taught: a threefold call to commitment. First, he enjoins a commitment to biblical conversion. For J. B. conversion is not finding the "right answer" or "right formula." It demands a total change of direction and a new moral orientation. Repentance is the entrance and faith is the new direction. J. B. never separated conversion from discipleship, in contrast to the tendency in some early reformers or current Evangelicals. Salvation is not a commodity or "a spiritual deal" where God balances a moralistic ledger. Conversion is always a surrender, a response to God's redemptive mercy, in which the center of one's life passes from self to Christ. New creatures will always manifest a new way of life.

*Christ's word to the Mennonite Brethren Church
is a call for correction, repentance where necessary,
renewed faithfulness.*

Second, he calls for a commitment to biblical discipleship. Biblical discipleship for J. B. means self-sacrifice and crossbearing (Matt. 18:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24). The radical demands of discipleship are not theoretical for J. B.; they are reflected in his calling, family priorities, service in the church, and global ministry. He took the words of the early Anabaptist leader, Hans Denck, to heart, that to believe in Jesus as Savior meant "to follow Jesus in life."

In J. B.'s theology of mission, "teaching them to observe all things whatever I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20) is the second part of the Great Commission action plan. The clearest expression of the character

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of a biblical disciple, according to J. B., is Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). In a culture of relativism, pragmatism, and religious pluralism, J. B.'s clarion call to Mennonite Brethren has been an appeal to be radical disciples, those who are willing to take an unpopular stance against the comforts, greed, self-fulfillment, individualism, independence, and poverty of our times.

Thirdly, he calls for a commitment in the church to examine its theology, priorities, and lifestyle. In the Mennonite Brethren Church Profile study, J. B. addresses the core issues of personal and denominational life: consistency between faith and life; leadership; peoplehood and covenant community; theological cohesion; and individualism. J. B. concludes his profile analysis on the current state of the Mennonite Brethren Church with some prophetic words:

Mennonite Brethren have strayed from the consistency between faith and practice, profession and lifestyle. These findings are at odds with the character of New Testament discipleship and commitment.

It was not a conscious apostasy. . . . Loss of discernment sneaks up slowly in the form of worldly pleasures, self-indulgence, luxurious living, familial erosion and the desire to please. When we took our first steps into modernity we were not planning to be taken captive; we honestly wanted to evangelize those beyond our cultural boundaries, no matter what the cost. Pastors who withheld from their congregations the warning letters sent by the conference were not doing so out of malicious intent but out of an expression of individualism. They may have meant well, but they erred. . . .

Christ's word to the first-century church in Rev. 2:2-4 was a call for correction—repentance where necessary—and renewed faithfulness. Christ's word to the Mennonite Brethren Church is the same.² ✨

NOTES

1. J. B. Toews, *A Pilgrimage of Faith: The Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia and North America 1860-1990* (Winnipeg, MB and Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 1993), 299-321.
2. *Ibid.*, 318-20.