

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF P.M. FRIESEN'S HISTORY
FOR MENNONITE BRETHERN
SELF-UNDERSTANDING**

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The publication of *The History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* by John A. Toews in 1975 was celebrated with a symposium whose papers reviewed the historical pilgrimage of the Mennonite Brethren brotherhood and posed questions about its current identity.¹ Such discussions about Mennonite Brethren identity have not been limited to formal occasions like the symposium, however. In recent years numerous articles on Mennonite history, theology and identity have appeared in conference periodicals.² These essays reflect the attempt, on the part of the present generation of Mennonite Brethren leaders, to recover as well as to refocus the character and mission of the church. The importance, even necessity, of knowing the past in order to understand the present and find direction for the future is a normal part of man's quest for continuity and vision. As even a monthly letter of the Royal Bank of Canada recently observed:

We are forever indebted to the past, it is the source of our very identity, observed in the present moment which changes as we live it, the past is all we know. Therein lies the secret use of history. We are not seeking to put history under a microscope, to cut it into slices for critical examination. What we do want is to apply the experiences of the past to events today. A spokesman from another age may illuminate our problem and help us to plot our future course.³

Even the message which God addresses to the many generations of the human race in the Scriptures is clothed in the form of human events that illuminate the unchanging nature of God's character as well as his relationship with and purpose for each generation.

The publication of the translation from the German of

P.M. Friesen's *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* now provides us with another opportunity to examine our present self-understanding in the light of the past. Nor can Friesen's contribution to a self-understanding of the Mennonite Brethren and their mission any longer go unnoticed. Although the full record of his contribution to the life and faith of the brotherhood cannot be adequately covered in the limited space assigned to us, a few selected areas of significance shall be considered.

P.M. Friesen's commitment to historical research and documentation as well as his painstaking concern for objectivity adds to the value of his work. The Mennonite Brethren history he presents is set in the context of the broader Anabaptist and Mennonite pilgrimage, thus providing us with a proper perspective for our own understanding.⁴

A major portion of *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*⁵ is devoted to the birth and development of the movement which became known as the Mennonite Brethren Church. The assignment to write the book came from the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren on the occasion of their 25th anniversary. It is important to note that only 373 pages in a book of more than 1,000 pages address the original assignment. The story of the mid-19th century events in Mennonite history is set in the context of the broader Anabaptist movement. The roots of the Mennonite Brethren are traced to the 16th century radical reformation. Friesen narrates this history from diverse historical sources—diaries of Mennonite martyrs, studies by non-Mennonite (e.g., Freiheim, Reiszitz, Wadzeck), as well as Mennonite scholars.⁶ The works of Menno Simons are accorded a central place in the introduction to the founding document of the Mennonite Brethren Church.⁷ The critical chapters on the history of the Mennonite congregations in Holland and Prussia relate the Mennonites in Russia to their forebears in Western Europe.⁸ The history of the Mennonite Church in Russia from 1789 to 1910 pictures the historical setting of the mother church which gave birth to the Mennonite Brethren.⁹ These chapters on Mennonite history indicate clearly the deep struggle for spiritual renewal that occurred in the decades preceding 1860.¹⁰ A once vibrant evangelical witness had given way to institutional traditionalism concerned mainly

with self-perpetuation by means of cultural exclusivity and economic affluence.

The *Kleine Gemeinde* under the leadership of Klaas Reimer (1812-1819) caused some ripples to run through the Mennonite ecclesiastical power structure in Russia. But, according to Friesen, Reimer did not possess the joyous knowledge of God's grace and his confessional stance in educational and cultural matters was very narrow.¹¹ Nevertheless, Friesen speaks of the *Kleine Gemeinde* as a "messenger calling the Molotschna Mennonites to repentance, but it would appear to us because it was too narrow-minded, too frightened, too isolationist and opposed to education it never made a profound impact."¹²

Serious convulsions within the Mennonite Church occurred as a result of the tensions between conservative and progressive leaders. The relation of Mennonite groups to the Russian Bible Society, differences regarding education, and reaction to the collusion between civil and religious authority plagued the Mennonite Church during the first half of the 19th century.¹³ The spiritual condition of the large Mennonite Church during that period was such¹⁴ that the influence of pietism appeared as a ray of hope for many longing hearts within a spiritually drifting Anabaptist-Mennonite community.

The spiritual awakening which preceded 1860, largely in opposition to the wishes of the civil and religious authorities, gradually withdrew from the institutional church in order to find liberty and nurture within the fellowship of true believers.

The inception of the Mennonite Brethren Church was one of the strongest expressions of this trend. The persecutions that followed from the leaders of the established Mennonite Church and the continuing effort to disenfranchise the newly formed Mennonite Brethren fellowship created tensions which left their mark on the Mennonite Brethren identity. The commitment of the Mennonite Brethren to the principles of faith and life as understood by Menno Simons and the larger Anabaptist community never came into question. The statement of the Document of Secession, "We are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our convictions from the Holy Scriptures,"¹⁵ makes this clear. The question of identity was therefore

never one of basic theological commitment but rather one of relationship, relationship to the broader Mennonite community which rejected it. The expulsion of the Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite community and their possible exile to Siberia in the 1860s was prevented by the Russian authorities in response to the intercession of Elder Johann Harder of Ohrloff.¹⁶ Legal recognition of the Mennonite Brethren as a Mennonite Church fellowship was granted by the Russian government in 1862 over the protest of the majority within the Mennonite ecclesiastical leadership.¹⁷

This rejection of the Mennonite Brethren Church continued during the first half century of its existence. It was once more clearly expressed in Schoenwiese on March 7, 1914. There a larger delegation attempted to exclude the Mennonite Brethren from the official exemption from military service because of the missionary witness of the Brethren, derisively called propaganda efforts (*propagandistische Bestrebungen* — religious propaganda). Having to¹⁸ clarify its position as a Mennonite fellowship before the civil government in response to the concern expressed about its evangelistic and missionary activity by the church after 54 years was a very painful experience for the Mennonite Brethren. This refusal by the majority of the elders from the mother church to recognize the Mennonite Brethren as members of the Mennonite community of faith was difficult for the Mennonite Brethren to accept and was a cause for the growing estrangement between them and the larger Mennonite community.¹⁹

The sufferings and privations that followed World War One (1914-1917) and the October Revolution of 1917 served as effective means to purify the Mennonite fellowship in Russia. These events created a mutual identification not only with regard to historical, but also with regard to spiritual relationships among all Mennonites. The history of the spiritual identification of the two bodies, which developed in the midst of great tribulation, sorrow and death during the years 1918 through 1928, brought healing from the past and a new dimension to their spiritual relationship. This was then followed by mutual recognition and appreciation in the entire Russian Mennonite community.

The tensions described above were brought to the

United States and Canada with the migrations of the 1870s. In their evangelistic zeal, the Mennonite Brethren refused to limit themselves to people outside the Mennonite community and included the Mennonite Church as a field for their evangelism and missions. The tension created by the evangelistic zeal of the Mennonite Brethren has also periodically been a bone of contention among Mennonites involved in the world-wide efforts of MCC, in which Mennonite Brethren have very frequently insisted that the ministry of mercy must be accompanied by the message of salvation. This did not find general acceptance among other Mennonite groups who wished to limit such evangelization to the personal witness of some of the MCC workers.

On the other side of the ledger, we must also recognize that the missionary and evangelistic zeal of the Mennonite Brethren, and their emphasis on salvation as a personal experience—a heritage that has come to the Mennonites from the pietistic movement in Europe—was responsible for the development of an attitude towards other Mennonites which can best be described as “a holier than thou” syndrome. The status of a minority group within the larger community, zeal for missions and evangelism, emphasis on personal salvation and sanctification, stricter church discipline manifested in the exclusion of members who would not walk according to the statutes of the Scriptures as understood by the Mennonite Brethren, their refusal to recognize the forms of baptism practiced by other Mennonite groups, even though these baptisms were now based on personal redemptive experiences in contrast to the mere demand for catechetical instruction in the earlier days, all contributed to the continued tension between the Mennonite Brethren and the other Mennonites in Russia as well as in America. To this day the effects of these tensions have not been fully eradicated.

P.M. Friesen and Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in Faith and Practice

The statement in the Document of Secession, “We are in agreement with our dear Menno according to our convictions from the Holy Scriptures,”²⁰ implies, according to Friesen, that the causes for the separation of the

Mennonite Brethren from the larger Mennonite body were not basically theological but rather issues of life and practice. It was the tension between the confessional statement of belief and its expression in actual life that appears to have been the cause for separation. The major areas of tension appear to have been the following.:

Redemptive faith. According to Friesen, the central issue was Menno's teaching regarding redemptive faith.²¹ The secessionists asserted that the Mennonite Church had, in the early and mid-19th century, departed from Menno's understanding of faith. They expressed this belief in the following words:

All who have received faith from God, have received a tree laden with a variety of good and precious fruits. . . . The true and genuine faith acceptable in God's sight cannot remain idle, it must bring forth fruit and manifest its character. It is constantly active in love; voluntarily enters righteousness; subdues flesh and blood while crucifying the lusts and desires; finds joy in the cross of Christ; renews and gives birth to newness of life, gives life, is candid and peaceable in Christ. Behold, such a faith is a gift of God, Eph. 2:8, by which, according to the Scriptures, the righteous shall live, as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rachel and all pious saints have done. Every good tree brings forth good fruit according to its kind. Matt. 7:17. And every tree which does not bear fruit, though it have many leaves, must be condemned and consumed by fire.²²

Friesen adds: "It is apparent that Menno was equally distant from the Roman Catholic position of works righteousness as he was from the frivolous Protestant position of salvation through faith alone without a sanctified life"²³ The central concern of the Mennonite Brethren before and after the withdrawal in 1860, according to Friesen, was conversion to God through repentance and faith in the reconciling grace in Jesus Christ and a life sanctified according to the rules of the gospel through the gift of the grace and Spirit of God.²⁴ For the purpose of clarity we quote from paragraph E of the Document of Secession dealing with this particular concern:

e) We confess a baptism on faith, as a seal of faith; not on a memorized faith, as is the practice, but on a genuine, loving faith effected by the Spirit of God. For without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). And he that hath not the Spirit of Christ, is none of His (Romans 8:9). And again our dear Saviour says to Nicodemus, John 3:3: Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Baptism is not the new birth, as some of the unconverted maintain, but serves as a sign for the baptismal candidate, that he is really born again.

f) Regarding holy communion we confess that it serves to strengthen the faith of true believers, for they are reminded of their mighty salvation through the death of the Lord Jesus. Yes, it is a sign that they stand in very intimate union with Jesus, their Saviour. I Cor. 10:16. Furthermore, it serves as a sign of the covenant and fellowship of believers with one another (v. 17), and not as a sign of the fellowship of believers and unbelievers with one another, as it is presently practiced. This is likewise stated in Menno Simons' *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. I, pp. 115-121. Page 121 reads: 'If someone errs in doctrine and faith, and walks in the flesh, he can in no case be permitted to fellowship with the godfearing and repentant. . . ' In I Cor. 5:11 the Apostle Paul states: If any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one we are not even to eat. How much less partake of holy communion with him? Unfortunately, there are many covetous, drunkards and blasphemers with whom one shares the Lord's Supper, for not only those are drunkards who are almost continually under the influence of liquor, but also those who occasionally gorge themselves with food and drink at markets and taverns. I. Cor. 10:20-21 says 'that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils.' Likewise also, those who walk in the flesh cannot glorify God in the communion, because they do not know Him, but as usual they serve the devil herewith, for no man can serve two masters. Matthew 6:24. Now the apostle did not want the believers to have fellowship with the devil and the idolater

who serves the devil, and thus become one body, I Cor. 10:17.²⁵

From the above it is clear that the secessionists could not accept a mere profession of faith without the evidences of a spiritual transformation through the new birth. The years of persecution endured at the hand of the mother church following January 1860 provided the proving grounds where the faith of the Mennonite Brethren was tested.²⁶

The reaction of the Mennonite Brethren to the memorization of the catechism—as the only condition for baptism—“We confess a baptism of faith as a seal of faith: not as a memorized faith as it is practices”²⁷—resulted in the adoption of an examination process for baptismal candidates in which the corporate body of a congregation participated. The candidate was required to relate his personal experience of the new birth, to establish the change in character and relationship that had taken place in his life, and covenant to live a life consistent with the character of a new creature in Christ. In addition to the personal testimony of the candidate, testimonies from members of his family, from friends, co-workers in places of employment, and professional associates were required. Such testimonies were not limited to people within the church community, but were also solicited from those who made no Christian profession yet had close association with the candidate. The issue—is the candidate “a new creature in Christ?”—was the crucial concern. Profession and life were to be demonstrated as being consistent.

The emphasis on faith and salvation as a prerequisite to receiving the benefits of Christ's redemption as opposed to no, or only a limited, emphasis on the fruits of being a new creature, or to walk in the newness of life (Rom. 6:4), is a major point of reorientation for Mennonite Brethren as well as the Mennonite community at large. The responsibility for the life that followed the profession of salvation became a very crucial issue in the relationship of the Mennonite Brethren to the Mennonite Church as well as a focal point in the question of the church's responsibility for the walk of its members. The practice of church discipline followed as a natural result of this responsibility.

Community discipline. The belief that redemption finds expression in a new life style placed a responsibility upon the church as a corporate community to guard its testimony and to discipline those whose walk did not conform to its understanding of the standards set by the Scriptures. The Document of Secession gives a rather clear expression to this responsibility.

Regarding the ban we confess that all carnal and reprobate sinners must be banned from the fellowship of believers as Paul states in II Thess. 3:14-15. In the event that someone falls into carnal sin (God save us from it), and the Spirit of Christ, who alone can work through repentance, convicts him of his sin, so that he confesses and repents; in that case, the church has no authority to ban such a repentant sinner, because the forgiveness of sin is not obtained in or through the ban, but by the merit of Jesus Christ. This was also Menno's conviction, as recorded in Vol. 3, pages 334 and 335. However, an unrepentant sinner may not be accepted into the fellowship of believers until he be genuinely converted to Christ.²⁸

Johann Harder, elder of the Mennonite church in Ohrloff, in his letter to the Molotschna Mennonite area administrative office, dated March 29, 1860, pleads for the right of the Mennonite Brethren to exist as a separate fellowship in the larger Mennonite community. At the same time, he underlines the commitment of the Brethren to a responsible disciplining of their church members in contrast to the absence of such discipline in the Mennonite Church of which he was a member.²⁹

Dobbert, a Lutheran pastor from Prischib, responding to the division among the Mennonites in a document dated July, 1864, pointed to the legitimacy of the Mennonite Brethren cause. Theirs, he said, was a call for discipline within the church, a discipline absent in the mother church. "Claassen," he continued, "as was the case amongst his followers, did not enter the battle with carnal weapons. He had openly announced and lamented the collapse of church discipline—the Achilles heel of the church—insisting that it be practiced again."³⁰ Friesen contends that the need for a consistent lifestyle as the testimony of true salvation felt by

many attracted more and more people who sympathized with this goal from the congregations of the mother church to associate themselves with the newly established Mennonite Brethren fellowship.³¹ The emphasis on integrity of character and being which conformed with the witness of a redeemed life must be recognized as the major ingredient of an effective evangelism and growth during the first quarter century after 1860. The parallel to Acts 2:47 is apparent: "They were praising God and having favor with all people and the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

This commitment to the practice of discipline within the church in the early history of the Mennonite Brethren movement (1862-64) became the redeeming element during the great crisis known as the 'Exuberant Movement' (*Die Froehliche Richtung*). Historically, this phenomenon must be viewed as a reaction to the formal, traditional, institutionalized Russian Mennonite Church of the 19th century. It therefore placed an extreme emphasis on the certainty and joy of salvation, an emphasis generally absent in the mother church. Under this influence the young M.B. Church would have faltered had it not been for the corporate discipline initiated under the leadership of Johann Claassen, an action known as the June Reform.³² Though the exercise of discipline in Mennonite Brethren practice on occasion became reactionary and later legalistic, the principle still remained a major dynamic in the life and character of the movement.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in the Ordinance of Baptism and the Fellowship of all True Believers

As an historian, Friesen does not fail to provide a broad background to the issue of the mode of baptism. The Anabaptist movement of the 16th century records variations with respect to the mode, but there is agreement that adult baptism is a seal of faith in Jesus Christ. In his reference to Menno's position, Friesen states the following:

The writings of Menno Simons in the German version that we possess are not at all clear concerning the form of baptism. While his treatment of baptism is entitled 'Von der Christlichen Taufe in dem Wasser' (concern-

ing Christian baptism in water), he also uses the expression of 'handful of water'. As far as is historically known to date, Menno apparently did not practice immersion, and moreover, like most Anabaptists of his time, was quite neutral, perhaps indifferent, in regard to this question, rigorous though he was in demanding a living faith before baptism.³³

The fact that baptism by immersion was not at first required by the Mennonite Brethren is significant. The claim of Jakob P. Becker that the understanding of baptism as an act of immersion came to the early Brethren as a result of their studies, and their determination to return to the biblical practice of baptism, and not from outside influences, is an open question.³⁴ The documented review of the process given by Friesen, indicates that historical relationships played a major part in the final adoption of immersion as the only recognized mode. In taking note of the tensions of an historical setting affecting the relationship of the mother church towards the new life movement in the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren, one cannot escape the impression that the emphasis on immersion as the exclusively biblical form carried with it an expression of a relational rather than a purely theological character. The demand that baptism by immersion be required as a condition for participation in the Lord's Supper which followed³⁵ was used to isolate themselves from the rest and resulted in the dogmatization of a form. Friesen's plea that the M.B.'s recognize pouring and sprinkling as acceptable modes of baptism no doubt reflects the wishes of a large segment of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship after the storm of the initial years had subsided and the Brethren had gradually begun to relate more freely to the larger Mennonite community.

The far-reaching implication of the position held by the Mennonite Brethren on the issue of baptism is well-stated by Friesen:

But if we refuse communion fellowship in our 'Association' to a child of God because of our lack of understanding, then we offend a member of Christ's body. If the M.B. Church as a body cannot yet decide in favor of such fellowship at communion, one should permit it

in love and kindness to those who wish to do it in private circles according to the program given in Waldheim in May of 1903. (. . .) The duty of tolerant broth-part of 'liberated ones,' must be no less categorically and of kind indulgence of the 'aal-too-strict-ones' on the part of 'liberated ones,' must be no less categorically emphasized. We are absolutely 'free' in respect to any difference in understanding of the brother and therefore we cannot understand how anyone can be indignant when others, true to their understanding of God's commandment, cannot agree with him in spiritual matters! This is to demand freedom for themselves but to deny it to the brother and, therefore, to coerce him.³⁶

Furthermore, the Mennonite Brethren requirement that baptism by immersion be mandatory for both partners of the marriage relationship has been the occasion of endless tensions. (Members of the Mennonite Brethren Church were forbidden to marry believers from other Mennonite groups who practiced other forms of baptism.)³⁷ The demand that non-Mennonite Brethren be rebaptized by immersion as a prerequisite for marrying Mennonite Brethren members, reflects a dogmatic rigidity of which the Mennonite Brethren have been guilty in too many areas. Here and in other questions of faith and practice we may well join Friesen in his confession when he states: "the Mennonite Brethren Church could not grasp the fact—O we thick of head and narrow of heart—that not every one else was convinced that we knew it all and had nothing worthwhile to learn from anyone else."³⁸

Friesen refers to the initial years of M B history, in which this protective conservatism took root, as the "mad years during the winters of 1861-62 and 64-65." He describes some of the leaders of that era as follows: "These people never seem to harbor a thought about church history that went beyond the borders of a common Mennonite framework (although they talked of spreading their ideas throughout the whole world), nor had they ever read a serious book on theology. But they did have warm blood and healthy nerves."³⁹

The influence of this conservatism in relation to born-again believers from other evangelical fellowships, not

practicing baptism by immersion, is reflected even in the resolution of the Mennonite Brethren conference of 1963 concerning "Reception into Fellowship of Non-Immersed Believers." The restricting conditions of the resolution—in which such members were limited with regard to transfer to other fellowships within the brotherhood and disqualified from leadership requiring ordination—were necessary to protect the unity of the brotherhood. Even these restrictions were not enough to satisfy a large segment of the conference delegates, as the 120 negative votes indicate (325 voted in favor). One hundred years of history had not proven sufficient to overcome these restricting conditions in questions of baptism instituted in those early days of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.⁴⁰

Without minimizing the effective witness which the Mennonite Brethren have had in the first 50 years of their history, we need to recognize the hindrances which their legalistic attitude toward matters of baptism and spiritual fellowship have created. The birth of the Evangelical Mennonite churches in 1905, also known as the Alliance churches in the beginning of the 20th century, testifies to this fact.

The Alliance fellowship in the Molotschna consisted of believers who came both from the Mennonite Church as well as from the Mennonite Brethren. Its statement of faith and practice was identical to that of the Mennonite Brethren, with the exception that it accepted into its fellowship truly born-again believers irrespective of the mode by which they were baptized. Yet it, like the Mennonite Brethren, also adhered to baptism by immersion.⁴¹

The Altonau Evangelical Mennonite Church at Sagra-dovka, established in December of 1907, grew out of another formal withdrawal from the Mennonite Church—a repetition of 1860—occasioned by the identical concern about the conditions within the church. The historic significance of their action warrants that we quote part of their statement of secession:

Franz Martens, the elder of this fellowship, writes the following concerning its origins. (. . .) Already for some years the majority of the ministers of the Nikolaifeld Mennonite Church of Sgradovka shared the under-

standing and conviction that our Mennonite churches had, in many points, departed from our confession of faith (and especially from God's Word), and that there was a need for a serious and thorough reform in respect to the administration of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and evangelical church discipline. Those ministers who longed for spiritual life in the church had for many years already pointed to the abuses and had pressed for reform in order that our church practices would conform with the teaching and confession handed down to us by our forefathers. . . . Is this not the main reason why in the last forty years most [?] of those who have been awakened to a new life have left the Mennonite churches? Does not the Mennonite Brethren Church in its Confession [1900-02] stress; 'that their organization does not annul the Confession of Faith of other Anabaptist Mennonites in Russia, but that they protest against the church practices of these churches'? ⁴²

All preaching and writing against separation remained ineffectual since the Bible, under certain circumstances, commands separation (II Cor. 6:14ff). Elder Martens, in an aside to the mother church, continued:

The fault, that our congregations have reached their present condition, does not lie only with the present generation; however, it is everyone's duty, and especially that of the elder, to discern and obey what the Lord says to the churches. From my point of view, it was both timely and appropriate, that a brother challenged all the spiritual leaders of the Mennonite churches in 1905 at the General Conference at Memrik, with a sermon that reviewed Christ's message to the church at Sardis (Rev. 3:1-6), to consider the question: 'What must happen in order to bring about change in our churches?'

. . . . Our determined decision is to defend the practice of believer's baptism, the Lord's Supper for believers, and apostolic church discipline, as taught by Scripture and Menno Simons, and as stressed in our own Confession of Faith. At the same time, it is our heart's desire and prayer to God that He would give us grace, in order that those who differ from us on this matter would not

feel grieved by our decision and actions. However, in order to be able to cultivate an unhindered fellowship with all those who are in agreement with us without being put in the position of having to violate the old congregational rules, we have come to the conclusion that, should the Lord lead us to unite into one fellowship, we will not neglect to notify the church and the respective local officials of our decision. . . .⁴³

On May 15th, 1907, the Evangelical Mennonite Church in Altonau was formally established under the leadership of elder Franz Martens. In 1908 one out of every five church members of the Mennonites in Russia was a Mennonite Brethren (7,000 members). The adherents, however, numbered between 16,000 and 17,000.⁴⁴ The demand that those who transferred from the Mennonite Church to the Mennonite Brethren be rebaptized, prevented many people, who were dissatisfied with the Mennonite Church, from formally identifying themselves with the Mennonite Brethren. The birth of the Evangelical Mennonite churches met a need not being met by the Mennonite Brethren.

Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding in the Context of the Broader Mennonite Community

P.M. Friesen, as we remarked earlier, views the Mennonite Brethren and the Mennonite Church within a broad historical context. "Both are really inseparable parts of one collective organism," he remarks.⁴⁵ His personal evaluation of the events of 1860 in this perspective must be taken into consideration in attempting to arrive at a Mennonite Brethren self-understanding. His evaluation of the origin of the M.B. Church in relation to the Mennonites in Russia at large, is contained in the following paragraph, which I quote in full:

2. The author wishes at the outset to present his judgment with regard to the origin of the M.B. Church reached on the basis of the material, personal recollections and diligent inquiry from the 'older generation.'
 - a) The organization of a separate 'M B Church,' based on the Scriptures and the most essential ideas of Menno, given the secularized state of the largest part

of the Russian Mennonites and the inability and partial reluctance of the church councils generally to oppose the corruption, was necessary and proved to be salutary for all of the Russian Mennonites. Generally speaking, however, the founders of the M B Church were neither intellectually nor spiritually well enough prepared for the task: several of the co-founders were decidedly incompetent and were exposed by the subsequent events graciously directed by God; others left of their own accord; still others repented of their mistakes and sins, in the same way in which the whole M B Church now and then has openly confessed and condemned its errors (cf. *Confession of Faith*, 1900/1902, 'Explanation'),—remaining in the church with modest positions brought on by the errors they had committed. But even some of the better elements, through the fault of individuals who sinned, lost faith in the goodness of the cause and could not again, whether through their own fault or that of the church, be reconciled to it. But to the upright and those who humbled themselves a merciful God granted much grace that through them, as through 'broken rods,' a situation has arisen where we today have the honor and the duty to co-operate in the work that benefits the entire Mennonite confessional fellowship in Russia and America, and to participate in building God's kingdom generally. But all of those amongst us who sense our inadequacy (it is to be hoped that the great majority of the M B Church belongs to this group), say with heartfelt sincerity: Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thy name be glory! ⁴⁶

In the summaries of his historical observations, Friesen quotes a leading brother, a very respected personality in both church groups, who had, as a mature person and a serious Christian, left the Mennonite Church and gone over to the Mennonite Brethren Church at that time, some 25 years earlier. His testimony is as follows:

. . . While he was fully convinced of the necessity for the establishment of the M B Church and while his joining with it was an act of obedience in agreement with his clear personal understanding taken for his own spiritual safety and growth, he nevertheless found that

that the spiritual life among our Russian Mennonites developed differently than he had at first envisioned. The spiritual growth and improvement, as far as he knows it, is relatively stronger in the Mennonite Church than in the Mennonite Brethren Church with all its advantages. . . .⁴⁷

In the years between 1860 and 1910, a broad spiritual awakening had taken place within the Mennonite Church. The majority of the ministers of the church had come to a positive evangelical faith, and many churches, consisting mainly of unbelievers, would "call mainly dedicated Christians into the ministry." If someone was called who was not a true believer he would become a Christian out of fear in view of the holy responsibility he was to assume.⁴⁸

The revival of the New Testament emphasis on the personal experience of salvation or "new birth," a responsible consistent testimony of life, a fellowship concept of the church and a sense of responsibility for carrying out the Great Commission, gradually permeated the larger Mennonite community, renewing it in the process. Harold Bender, the well-known Mennonite historian, confirmed the above observation on the occasion of the celebration of the M B Centennial in Winnipeg. There he asserted that the spiritual revivals which had entered the Mennonite community through the pietistic influence exerted on the Mennonite Brethren needed to be recognized as a major influence in turning the Mennonitism of Russia and America away from an ethnic cultural or religious institutionalism to an emphasis on the message and character of the early Anabaptists of the 16th century.⁴⁹ The expansion of the Mennonite Brethren between 1860 and 1910 in Russia, and the growth of the fellowship in North America (1874-1924) before the large influx of Mennonites from Russia (1924-1930), confirms their evangelical influence in the wider Mennonite community. The zeal for evangelism and missions beyond the frontiers of their ethnically related communities became an example for other Mennonite groups, to which they responded as new life came to them through spiritual renewal. Friesen describes the M B Church as indisputably one of the progressive churches which gave strong expression to its inner experiences. He

points to many of its members who became prominent as spiritual and intellectual leaders in the Mennonite society.⁵⁰

In contrast to the broad spiritual contributions made by the Mennonite Brethren, Friesen laments that the "growth in grace has been relatively slower in the M B Church than in the older Mennonite group."⁵¹ He believes that the main error of the M B Church "in relation to the grace received is a lack of humility and unsparing self-judgment, as well as a certain reluctance to acknowledge the good aspects, both old and new, in the Mennonite Churches."⁵² He further laments that church discipline and the walk of many members of the M B fellowship do not correspond with the ideal they set forth in their Document of Secession.⁵³

Friesen's description of the strengths and weaknesses of the M B fellowship at the close of the first half-century of its existence are confirmed in a self-evaluative statement written by the late B.B. Janz in a document entitled: "Grundzuege im Charakter der Glaubensstellung unserer Vaeter", which was read in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the occasion of a study conference in 1956.⁵⁴ In his judgment, the weaknesses which have impaired the relationship of the Mennonite Brethren within the broader Mennonite community are: their legalism, their insistence on making baptism by immersion the 'hallmark' of truth (*Schlagbaum gegen andere Glaebige*), and their strong insistence that their understanding of the Scriptures was final truth. They had not learned, he said, to say 'this is how I understand it to be written,' and to recognize that the understanding of others might also be valid. These traits gave the Mennonite Brethren the character of a "narrow brother."⁵⁵

As we view ourselves in the context of our history as interpreted for us by one of our early forefathers, we cannot but recognize, with humility, God's grace, mercy and patience.

Observations

The investment of a large part of my time and energy during the past three years to guide the process of the translation and publication of P.M. Friesen has created some areas of tension within me. As I view our present situation in the light of the past, I am forced to address

myself to some basic issues which provided the foundation stones in the birth and life of the early M.B. Church. Permit me to release some of the tensions by sharing a few observations which have emerged in this process.

1. The struggle for the preservation of our ecclesiastical and educational institutions can have a blinding effect upon our understanding of the character and purpose of a spiritual calling and mission. Anabaptism was born out of a struggle to regain the freedom to experience the marvels of redemptive grace in a personal relationship to Christ as Saviour and Lord. It was a cry to return to the Bible as the authority for faith and life in a liberation from the bondage of sin, to regain the joy of salvation and be freed from the politically dominated structure of the Roman Church. The history of the Mennonite movement records many such struggles between 1525 and 1860 (Holland, Prussia). Our focus, however, is on the question of our self-understanding as an M B fellowship in the present.

The struggle for the preservation of our institutions, which may have lost the original character and mission that gave birth to them, can pretend a holy zeal for a great and righteous cause, while not recognizing the carnal pursuits for self-preservation. Institutions developed to serve as a spiritual vision may claim to be the continued stewards of such a vision and use that claim to justify their existence while operating contrary to the very essence of their original purpose. Political manipulation, formation of power blocks, provincial desires to retain the advantages of existing institutions and positions are the symptoms of the destructive disease of a once spiritual fellowship. To what degree do the present struggles on behalf of local churches and educational institutions within the M.B. Conference indicate the presence of such processes of spiritual decline?

2. The basic issues in the birth of the Mennonite Brethren movement were the struggle for a redemptive faith—a new birth— and a transformed life in contrast to a form either prescribed or generally practiced in a social order without the evidences of a new life. The Mennonite Brethren in Russia distinguished between genuine conversion—evidenced by a sanctified life at great cost— and a religious profession which accommodated itself to the

cultural and political realities for social and economic advantages. The discipleship of our early brethren in the 19th century, on the other hand, brought with it radical tension with the culture of their day at great economic and social cost. Have the Mennonite Brethren in America found a way to cope with the secular culture in an affluent society without radical tension? Have they found a gospel which benefits them, assuring them of the good life? Do we hope for heaven in the beyond while practicing full identification with the culture now? Do we opt for the gospel of great benefit for 'nothing,' a gospel that brings peace of mind without calling us to be a peculiar people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation which is to show forth the *virtues* of Him who has called them out of darkness into a new life?

3. For the early M.B. Church, discipline brought with it spiritual interresponsibility. Discipleship, as understood by Hans Denk, entailed a corporate responsibility to guard the testimony of the Christ whose name the Christians bore. In some localities, however, concern for the testimony of the church led to legalism, and was applied more to selective standards of social behaviour used to punish those who violated the adopted patterns. But such negative 'punishment' in place of 'redemptive discipline' tended to become an irritant.

On the other hand, an American culture based on the cult of rugged individualism has produced a faith which claims the redemptive benefits of personal salvation without any responsibility for a consistent walk as a member of the corporate body of the church. The Mennonite Brethren fellowship of today does not believe in individual responsibility without a corporate interresponsibility for life and walk. Thus another foundation stone of the 19th century Mennonite Brethren Church seems to have been eroded.

P.M. Friesen describes vividly the tensions which beset our early brethren in questions of baptism and fellowship with believers—who differed from them in their understanding of forms and practices. He speaks of the 'all too strict ones'—isolationists—in tension with the 'liberal ones' who were open to love and recognized their need for fellowship with those who may have differed from them in their

understanding. "We cannot understand," he says, "how anyone can be indignant when others, true to their understanding of God's Word, cannot agree with him in spiritual matters. This is to demand freedom for themselves but to deny it to the brother and therefore coerce him." Does P.M. Friesen here speak only to the brotherhood of 1860-1910, or does he also speak to the tensions in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship related to the present dialogue on inspiration and eschatology? Do the important signposts of our past history have anything to say to the brotherhood today?

P.M. Friesen's call to the people of his day for humility and repentance offers us a very important point of reference for our self-understanding and possible reorientation in 1978.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Paul Toews, ed., *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History* (Fresno, California, 1977).
- 2 F.C. Peters, "Quo Vadis, M.B. Church," *Christian Leader* (Sept. 9, 1969); Peter J. Klassen, "Mennonite Brethren: Baptists or Mennonites," unpublished manuscript presented at the Mennonite Graduate Fellowship Seminar, 1964; Waldo Hiebert, "Who are the Mennonite Brethren?" *Christian Leader* (Sept. 13, 1966); J.A. Toews, "In Search of Identity," *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 10, 1972); Elmer and Phyllis Martens, "Mennonite Brethren: Does the Name Fit?" *Christian Leader* (August 10, 1971). These are only a select few of many.
- 3 Royal Bank of Canada, Monthly Letter, Vol. 58, #3, March, 1977.
- 4 P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, J.B. Toews, Abraham Friesen, Peter J. Klassen and Harry Loewen, Translation and Editorial Committee (Winnipeg, 1978), Author's Preface, pp. xxvii-xxxiii.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 201-574.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3. For additional references, see Chapter I-V.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-232.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 15-18.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 230-262.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 92-109.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 93-95.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp. 92-108.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 241-253.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 233-253.
- 18 A.H. Unruh, *Geschichte der Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde*, (Winnipeg, 1954), pp. 286-308.

- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 248-250.
- 20 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 230-232.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- 26 *Ibid.*, pp. 244-246. See also Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, trans. by D.E. Pauls and A.E. Janzen, (Hillsboro, Kansas, 1973), pp. 96 ff.
- 27 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 231.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 252.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 241.
- 30 *Ibid.*, pp. 384-387.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 347.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 416-441.
- 33 *Ibid.*, pp. 284-311.
- 34 Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 178-182.
- 35 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*. pp. 290-291.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 302-303.
- 37 *Ibid.*, pp. 303-305.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 456.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 457.
- 40 Conference Book, 1963.
- 41 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, pp. 920-921.
- 42 *Ibid.*, pp. 921-923.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 922-923.
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 926.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 572.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 975.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 975-976.
- 49 Harold S. Bender, recorded sermon; F.C. Peters, Waterloo.
- 50 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, p. 977.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 977.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 975.

53 *Ibid.*

54 B.B. Janz, Study Conference paper, Winnipeg, 1956.
Copy in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies,
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55 *Ibid.*