

MENNONITE BRETHREN IDENTITY AND THEOLOGICAL ADVERSITY

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John A. Toews in *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* traces some of the influences which have shaped the theology of the Mennonite Brethren in our 115 year history. Under the title "Understanding Biblical Revelation: Developments and Distinctions in Mennonite Brethren Theology" the author outlines the historical roots, distinctions, and external influences of M.B. theology. The purpose of this essay is to broaden the consideration of these external influences. Both their origin and their affect upon the theology and life of the church need enlarged attention. The source materials for considering the subject are a mixture of historical documents and personal experiences. The latter gives portions of the essay a biographical style.

Mennonitism in Russia in the 18th and 19th centuries had become a socio-religious culture which no longer expressed the relationship of faith and life unique to their forefathers of the 16th century. The *Kleine Gemeinde* and the fellowship centers in Orloff and Gnadenfeld testified to broad concern for a return to the expressions of faith recorded in the writings of Menno and the early Anabaptists.¹ The cry for faith and life consistent with the scriptures was a dominant emphasis in the founding of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship. It is reflected in the statement of secession and other confessional documents.²

This scriptocentric position of the Mennonite Brethren has been a directive for their pilgrimage of faith and life in Russia and in North America. A statement in the *Mennonitische Blätter* of 1863 suggests the Mennonite Brethren fellowship's relation to the scriptures: "They are better versed in the Holy Scriptures, so much so that one is amazed and pleased at the understanding of scriptures of the lowest and most humble among them."³

Wesley Prieb writes: "The early members of our church were often recognized by their bulging coat pockets which contained a well worn Bible. The Bible Hour (*Bibelstunden*) became the basis of their fellowship and worship. Reading the Word was part of their daily family habits."⁴ The centrality of the Bible in the movement may help explain why a small revivalistic movement within the larger Mennonite community remained anchored in the 16th century Anabaptist roots, even though subjected to many theological influences throughout their history.

The influences that have affected Mennonite Brethren thought are numerous. The anchor amidst these divergent currents has been this scriptural anabaptism. The question of "What does the Bible say" permitted a people to navigate in turbulent seas. An examination of the major influences that have affected Mennonite Brethren theology adds cumulative evidence that their commitment to the scriptures was the guiding influence during the historic pilgrimage.

Influence of Pietism

With its roots in Anabaptism the Mennonite Brethren early came under the influences of pietism. Their insistence on the experiential reality of personal salvation through repentance, faith, and the new birth made them natural allies with pietism. Pietism, as modulated through the preaching ministry of Eduard Wuest among the colonists, was present during the 1845-1860 search for new life. The convergence of Anabaptism and Pietism did not necessarily pull the renewal movement in different directions. Robert Friedman has noted many points of commonality in the two traditions.

Both groups justified their policy on the basis of the leadership of the Holy Spirit which taught them the correct understanding of the scriptures. Both claimed to live strictly according to the Bible, that is neither had confidence in a Christianity of theologians and

scholars. Both were seriously concerned with the Christian reality which lies beyond church and worship although they understand the ultimate nature of this Christian reality differently. After all, how could it be determined who possesses the right Holy Spirit except through the evidences of the same life.⁵

Pietistic writings were frequently part of Mennonite Brethren libraries in Russia. The book *Wahres Christentum* by Johann Arnd was especially prominent. My father referred frequently to Arnd and read portions from this book to us during family devotions.

A strong pietistic influence on the Mennonite Brethren fellowship continued up to the first World War. Jacob Kroeker, one of the few theologically trained Bible teachers, was closely affiliated with the Blankenburg Alliance Conference and provided Mennonite linkage with the Alliance movement in Western Europe.

The Blankenburg Alliance Conference was established in 1885 and became the center for the European movement of the Plymouth Brethren. Dr. F. W. Baedeker was the major architect of Blankenburg. He was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, also called Darbyites, who originated around 1830 in Plymouth, England, and Dublin, Ireland. The "Brethren" professed to have no creeds for fear of honoring human opinions too highly, yet the writings of Darby and other leaders were dogmatic.

Their emphases were strong on the inner spiritual life, sanctification, fellowship, and prophecy.⁶ Neither Dr. Baedeker nor the majority of the speakers at the conferences through the years were theologians. The need for serious efforts in systematic theological studies was not part of F. W. Baedeker. He was a charismatic personality, a man rich in spiritual experiences, and a gifted pastor. As a witness for Jesus Christ he gave his life unreservedly to the ministry and spent much of his time in serving the Russian prison population. This ministry took him throughout Russia and into the most removed Siberian labor camps. His example of deep devotion and prayer, unselfish

self-sacrifice in service, and untiring work in teaching the scriptures with the central emphasis on the truth, "God loves you," carried an impact and took the place of any effort at theological dialogue.⁷ Dr. Baedeker was frequently quoted by my late father and his colleagues in the ministry.

Other men at the Blankenburg Conferences who worked closely with Baedeker were General von Viebahn, Otto Stockmayer, F. B. Meyers, Ernst Bebbhardt, and Professor Stroeter. Erich Beyreuther notes that the collective teaching at Blankenburg was one-sided and not always with healthy or generally recognized hermeneutical principles.⁸

Baedeker served frequently in prolonged Bible Conferences sponsored by some of the wealthy land owners of the Mennonite communities (Steinbach, Apantlee and Vorwerk Juschanlee). In the pietistic movement he was generally recognized as an authority in the exposition of the scriptures. Professor Stroeter was probably the second most influential person from the Blankenburg circle. He held repeated Bible studies of one or two week duration for the teachers and ministers. His ministry ceased when he became a Universalist. The writings of other Blankenburg people such as Viebahn, Meyers, and Stockmayer were widely read and served as a major resource for the ministry of the Mennonite Brethren. My father's library featured all these publications and became a major source for my theological reading while a college student. According to the late Henry Cornelsen, Coaldale, Alberta, these publications were the main resources for the ministers of the tradition.⁹

The position of Jacob Reimer, as a member of the Board of Directors of Blankenburg, permitted leaders of Mennonite Brethren fellowships to attend the Blankenburg conferences on a regular basis. Reimer, highly recognized as a Bible teacher, is especially mentioned as a frequent attendant at the Conferences.¹⁰

The influences of this close contact with the pietistic movements in England and the Continent were not without far reaching effects upon the life and development of the

Mennonite Brethren fellowship. It added strength to the position in the 1902 Confession of Faith which recognized all true born again believers irrespective of organizational and confessional affiliation as brethren and sisters in Christ.¹¹ This strong inter-confessional position within the brotherhood resulted in serious tensions. The closed cultural structure of the Mennonite community in Russia bred an isolationism which was threatened by the closer spiritual fellowship with believers from other confessions. J. W. Reimer, called the pioneer in the cause of the Alliance movements among the Mennonite Brethren, offered untiring leadership in example and precept in his relationship to believers of other groups. In his teaching ministry he also expressed the oneness of all true believers. The forming of the Alliance Mennonite Brethren fellowship in Lichtfelde, Molatschna (1905), later called the *Lichtfelder Gemeinde*, must be accepted as a direct result of the influence of Blankenburg. This influence, even though strongly resisted by the majority of Mennonite Brethren, paved the way for a more conciliatory relationship between fellow believers in the Mennonite world.

The struggle on the issue of the open and closed communion, which has been difficult and long in our history, was influenced by Blankenburg. J. W. Reimer in his untiring effort to widen the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren by accepting believers not baptized by immersion even faced the possibility of excommunication. Because of his stance, an excommunication resolution was introduced at the 1902 Ruekenau conference. It is reported that Reimer's love and warmth expressed in his testimony that even severance would not diminish his concern for them stayed the resolution.¹²

The resolution, passed at the Winnipeg Conference in 1963 to receive non-immersed believers into the membership of the church, thus has a long history dating back to the contact of the Mennonite Brethren with the Blankenburg Conference and the pietistic movements of Western

Europe between 1890 and 1914.¹³

This belief in the oneness of all believers and consequent openness to other fellowships was enlarged by the periodical *Das Allianz Blatt*. Published in Germany during the first quarter of the century it circulated widely in Mennonite Brethren homes.

The system of Darbystic scriptural interpretation with its tightly structured eschatology also came to the Mennonite Brethren through Blankenburg. J. W. Reimer, the prophetic voice in eschatology both in Russia and Canada, developed his basic system of interpretation through his contacts with the Darbystic movement.

Pietism, with its emphasis on personal salvation, the fellowship of all true believers, and eschatology, remained rooted in the state church in Germany and the Confessional church in England. The concept of discipleship with its relational dimension to lifestyle and the principle of love for all men remained peripheral for them, in spite of an emphasis on sanctification. National patriotism and unconditional obedience to the state were part of their basic theological orientation. The German pietists are said to have followed the slogan, "When it comes to war then we shoot."¹⁴ Their loyalty to the Kaiser and country took precedent over that of Christ. Jacob Reimer and Jacob Friesen (who received his theological training in Germany) became important advocates of armed self-defense (the *Selbstschutz*) in 1918-1922. The crucial meeting at Ruekenau (1917) which led to the departure of the Russian Mennonites from their historic position of non-participation in war must be recognized as one of the impacts of pietism on basic Mennonite theology and ethics. It is the judgment of the late B. B. Janz that the Mennonites in Russia would not have departed from their historic peace position would it not have been for the leadership of Mennonite Brethren influenced by the Alliance movement of Europe.¹⁵

Historic honesty demands that we also observe the

strong support for military self-defense which came from other quarters. Some of the wealthy landowners who in the pre-revolution era sponsored the earlier mentioned Bible Conferences now supported the Selbstschutz. The German culture and educational programs of the Russian Mennonites offered them a broad sphere of influence with the German occupation army in the Ukraine, 1917-1920. It also encouraged military collaboration. The absence of any legal government following the Russian revolution and the roaming hordes of lawless marauders who murdered, plundered, and destroyed at will offered circumstantial pressures for theological compromise.

The theological openness of the Alliance movement became the occasion for other tensions within the brotherhood. The legalistic trend in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship in the area of ethics, the "Do's and Don'ts," were partially reactions to the greater ethical freedom advocated by the pietistic oriented Alliance movement.¹⁶ According to B. B. Janz and A. H. Unruh, the pietistic freedom for personal and individual interpretation of scripture in contrast to the Anabaptist understanding of corporate discernment of scripture also caused confusion. Janz summarizes the positive and negative effects of the pietistic influence:

In conclusion we cast an overview on the character of the position of faith of the M.B. Church in the latter years under the leading influence of the 'Free Brethren' (freien Brüder) when the formerly much rebuked conservative narrowness (Engherzigkeit) had been stripped. Normally there should have been basic growth according to the word of 2 Tess. 1:3: 'We ought always to give thanks to God for you brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged and the love of each one of you all towards one another grows ever greater.' Through the deeper exposition of scripture, literature for devotional nurture and theology, ministers from abroad, Professors, Doctors, Theologians from the Baltic provinces, Germany, England who served with sermons

and frequently with Bible courses of a week duration to larger groups of teachers and ministers with free provisions of lodging and meals supplied by the wealthy brethren in Steinbach and Apanlee, there came much light from above. However, when Professor Stroeter's emphasis on redemptive universalism was noted it came to a sudden halt under the leadership of Peter Unruh. Thus there had come much light and new scriptural understanding The pulpit ministry had become more effective. The inner warmth, however, with the concern for the lost was waning. There was much criticism. Life and walk had weakened. The struggles within the Conference had affected the unity which hovered like a mildew over the brotherhood especially the leading brethren. In doctrine there were uncertainties. Not considering the exposition concerning the participation at the Lord's Table, there was the teaching concerning the distinction between the Kingdom and the Church, where some parts of the New Testament found no application for us, they applied only to the future of Israel and that quite inclusive. To have an Elder, is not scriptural for the church, there must be several Elders As proof for the justification of bearing arms, however, the example of Abraham, the father of faith, also for the New Testament, in his expedition with 318 servants to conquer the heathen in order to save Lot, was applicable That corresponds with the quotation from Brother Unruh of a much criticized word from the old brethren: 'It is thus written' instead of saying: 'This is how I understood what is written.' While the Reformers, including Daechsels Bibelwerk and other works of exposition did not follow a double meaning in expounding the Word, this mastering of the scripture has caused much and serious confusion for earnest brethren, also for me. For a time it weakened my conscience; whether you believe or do so or otherwise, does not matter so much because it can be interpreted both ways. How far can we go in a dual interpretation of the Word?¹⁷

The struggles brought by the influence of pietism are well reflected in this testimony of a veteran leader.

Influence of the Baptists

The relationship of the Mennonite Brethren with the Baptists has been substantial. The years following 1860 record strong Baptist relationships which influenced the formation of early church polity.¹⁸ This contact may also have provided a point of reference for the early brethren when they faced questions regarding the form of baptism.¹⁹

The continued fraternal relationship between the Mennonite Brethren and the Baptists was nurtured most through the early cooperative missionary program with the American Baptist Missionary Union. During the years from 1889 through 1914 seventeen missionaries from the Mennonite Brethren churches in Russia served in India under the cooperative arrangement with the Union.²⁰ The beginning of the foreign missions movement in North America also received directives through this relationship.²¹ The methods and policies for missionary work which governed Mennonite Brethren missions in the first sixty years of its development were patterned after the example of the Baptist programs.

The early missionaries of the Mennonite Brethren, with few exceptions, were trained in Baptist schools—Hamburg Theological Seminary for the missionaries from Russia, Rochester Seminary for the Americans. It is logical to assume that our theology of missions, mission strategy, and methods of church planting were largely an adoption from the Baptists without an independent study of the scriptures to determine the New Testament pattern of missions.

Accepting the Baptist influence in the development of our missions concepts and principles led to basic tensions between our professed church concept and the pattern of missionary churches developed abroad. The major disparity existed in the positional function of the missionary in a ministry to and for a people instead of a brotherhood relationship which allows no room for positional rankings but expresses the New Testament ministry as being with a

people. The nurture of missionary vision and responsibility through the fellowship with the Baptists, however, was a very positive result of their influence. To this must be added their contributions to the life of the Mennonite Brethren in evangelism, Christian education, and theology. Our resources and inspiration in these areas over a period of years came largely from Baptist sources.

The cultural and economic form of the Mennonite community for the first 75 years of our history provided favorable circumstances for a lay teaching ministry in the church. The concern to discover the gifts within the church was part of the New Testament understanding of congregational life. The strong instructional program from the traveling Bible teachers (*Reiseprediger*) equipped the laity for this task. The change of our cultural patterns through increasing industrial mechanization and educational advance in America moved the Mennonite Brethren into closer relationships with the Baptists. The early Bible teachers at Tabor College, H. W. Lohrenz and H. F. Toews, were trained in Baptist institutions in Louisville, Kentucky, and Rochester, New York. The programs in our own schools provided very limited or no emphasis in Anabaptist theology.

There was an absence of any literature on our scriptural understanding of the church for the first 75 years of our history in North America. With the arising need for a paid ministry to meet the changing occupational and cultural pattern there also came the need for further theological training. With few exceptions, those who sought this preparation beyond our own schools attended Baptist Seminaries. The years from 1930 to 1955 register a strong movement to Baptist schools.²²

Those returning tended to introduce Baptist church polity. The positional role of the pastorate and the hierarchical organizational patterns came through these brethren. The organizational model of multiple church leadership—the New Testament concept of the elders—was

rapidly replaced by a central function for the pastor and the church council as a representative body of the functional departments of the church programs—board of trustees, christian education, deaconry, music department, etc.

The change in the governing structure of the church resulted in a misplacement of the New Testament emphasis that the gifts of the ministry are given for the purpose of "equipping the saints for the work of the ministry." The local church withdrew from the responsibility of selecting from their midst brethren who had the gifts of teaching and preaching. Young men responding to the call of God to enter the gospel ministry seldom received encouragement or confirming support. The schools became the recruiting agency for church leadership. The church for the past three decades (less in Canada) hired their leadership as professionally trained workers. The gradual change in many churches from the principle of plurality in the spiritual leadership to the practice of departmental representation in the government of the church also brought major changes in the decision making process of the brotherhood. The exercise of the believer's community in seeking guidance through a process of discernment was replaced in many congregations by democratic processes.

The effects of these changes on the basic concept of the church found expression in the emphasis on the independence of the local congregation and resulted in the change of the official name of the brotherhood from "The Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church" to "The Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches."^{2 3} The brotherhood conceptually, organizationally, and functionally, thus moved toward accommodation to patterns of American Protestantism. The Mennonite Brethren Churches gradually identified with the popular trends of mainstream American evangelicalism. This process of change, however, cannot be ascribed only to Baptist influence, but was part of a larger pattern of association.

Influence of Bible Institutes and the Bible School Movement

The Bible Hour (*Biblestunde*) of Mennonite Brethren life in Russia was basic for their spiritual nurture and development. The life-line of the movement, as suggested earlier, was their fellowship over an open Bible. The scattered farm life of North America which replaced more intimate village settings made these house meetings more difficult. The Bible School movement may have developed as the American alternative for the Bibelstunden as practiced in Russia.²⁴ It was a new way to provide spiritual nurture to the youth of the churches and generate the motivation for missionary service. The teachers of the Bible schools traveled through the churches in the fashion of the former *Reiserprediger*. The Bible Institute/School movement while fulfilling an old function brought new thrusts to the church. We examine the influence of both non-Mennonite and Mennonite schools.

The Bible Institutes—Biola in Los Angeles, Moody in Chicago, and Northwestern in Minneapolis—had major influences on the spiritual development of the brotherhood. Biola attracted many of our young people and contributed to the development of church leadership. C. N. Hiebert, evangelist; G. B. Hubert, Reedley; J. D. Hofer, Fresno; Nick Jantz, Herbert; A. A. Kroeker, Winkler; H. K. Warrentin, Fresno; and others received much of their scriptural understanding and leadership training at Biola under the influence of R. A. Torrey. The mark of Biola upon these men was a strong emphasis on the experiential reality of Christ as Savior and Lord with a central emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Several of them, including G. B. Hubert and J. D. Hofer, emphasized the filling of the Holy Spirit as a second act of grace. A. A. Kroeker became a pioneer in Christian education at the Winkler Bible Institute and in the Canadian conference. Nick Jantz was an evangelist and Bible school teacher for many years. The missionary fervor which characterized the latter years of H. K.

Warkentin's life was an expression of the inspiration received at Biola. Aaron Friesen, founder of the M.B. mission in Los Angeles, was also a graduate of Biola.²⁵

The writings of R. A. Torrey provided spiritual guidance for the life of the brotherhood. His book *What the Bible Teaches* was the guide for doctrinal studies during several decades. He conducted frequent Bible Conferences in our churches and for several years was the speaker at the Annual Tabor College Bible Conference.

Moody Bible Institute was the training base for several of our early missionaries. A. A. Janzen, pioneer of the African Mennonite Brethren church, was one of the early ones to attend. The devotional books of D. L. Moody served as a major source of preaching material for lay ministers in many churches. The Moody Culpportage Library books were, for many years, part of the devotional reading of our constituency. The book *Synthetic Bible Studies* by James M. Gray, the successor to Moody as president of the institute, served as a basic text in our own bible institutes during the 1940's.

Northwestern Bible Institute, under the strong leadership of W. B. Riley, had a phenomenal influence upon the Mennonite Brethren. The number of students from M.B. churches constituted a large percentage of the student body for several years. J. J. Wiebe for many years pastor in Corn, Oklahoma and member of the Board of Foreign Missions; Tina Pauls, missionary worker in Minneapolis; Martha Janzen, veteran missionary in Africa; Rueben Baerg, David Wiens, and Leo Wiens, still in leadership within the brotherhood; and many other workers in local churches were Northwestern students. The writings of Norman D. Harrison, member of the Northwestern faculty, were a major part of Mennonite Brethren ministers libraries between the 1930's and 1950's. His expositions were devotional and instructive. (I personally had the full series of Harrison's writings.)

The spiritual resources which came to us through the

contributions of these schools have been tributaries that enlarged the original stream of Mennonite Brethren faith and life. The emphasis on biblical content, missionary motivation, and simplistic hermeneutics became sustaining factors in our spiritual pilgrimage.

The many benefits which came to us through the ministry of these schools at the same time submerged the consciousness of our historic identity. Our theology of discipleship was replaced by a strong emphasis on personal salvation in which conversion was nothing more than a private transaction between the individual and God. It became an accomplished dated event. For many people confirmation of salvation lies in giving the exact date and hour that marked acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior.

Evangelism, instead of being the expression of a relationship between God and man, moves as a rescue operation to assure people the benefit of a final destiny in Heaven. The relationship of the individual member within the church community as a criteria of a redeemed life was replaced by a personal experiential event. The provisions coming so easy were detached from a life of love, self-denial, and service within the believing community and a bleeding world.

By over-emphasizing the appropriation of the redemptive provision for personal salvation and the responsibility for missions and under-emphasizing discipleship and service, the Mennonite Brethren have been caught in the tensions of a contemporary polarity. We are pulled between an emphasis on individual salvation with its concern for the personal devotional life and the concern for the life of social service, social action, and social justice. The first pressure moved the Mennonite Brethren fellowship into a close relationship with fundamentalistic evangelicalism. Dietrich Bonhoefer in *The Cost of Discipleship* called the emphasis on salvation with little or no responsibility for the life style of discipleship a gospel of "cheap grace."^{2 6}

The World Fundamentals Association, allied with the

Bible Institute movement, and organized in 1919 under the leadership of W. B. Riley, Harry Rimer, Arnold Gaebelin and others, brought to evangelical Protestantism a strong concern for propositional truths defending the inerrancy of the Bible, the literal interpretation of creation, the virgin birth of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, the substitutionary theory of atonement, and the imminent return of Christ. The public debates in the 1930's sponsored by the World Fundamentals Association gained a good hearing among Mennonite Brethren. The periodicals, *The Sword of the Lord* by John R. Rice, and the *Defender* by Gerald Winrod, became household literature among us. Both identified with the strong emphasis on propositional truth and creedal doctrine and overlooked the relational character of New Testament discipleship. The creedal emphasis on right doctrine and apologetical systems to prove the scripture, once foreign to our history, now became increasingly dominant in our pulpits and classrooms. Their centrality was achieved at the expense of an emphasis on Christ in the life and character of the Church.

The influences that came to the Mennonite Brethren from Biola, Moody, and Northwestern were extended in the 1920's and 1930's by Prairie Bible Institute, Three Hills, Alberta; and Carenport Bible Institute, Carenport, Saskatchewan. More recently the Bible Institute of Winnipeg has moved into a position of prominence and influence.

The emphasis on missions and evangelism in the Bible institutes had an awakening effect upon us, accounting for much of the upsurge of missionary vision and commitment during the 1930-1960 period. But the new evangelism contained a strong emphasis on child evangelism. The subsequent trend toward "child baptism" changed the character of a church built on the principles of repentance, conversion, adult baptism, and responsible discipleship in the context of a disciplined believer's church. The late B. B. Janz addressed the problem:

The longer the more it moved to child baptism even

though it is immersion, and the longer the more there are people without a true conversion experience the new life and discipline in the church becomes more difficult. The character of the M.B. Church, in spite of all light of scriptural understanding and all Christian and spiritual education, changes from a deeply pious and pure church to a solemn confessional people's church where Christian ethics becomes private judgement and is impotent for a renewal of life and walk, the hallmark of our fathers in the period of their spiritual health.²⁷

While the contributions of the Bible institutes, external to our brotherhood, nurtured our souls they also helped erode some basic commitments to a faith based on personal conversion, a holy life with consistent ethics, a responsible relationship to a redeemed community and a world in need. The focus of our spiritual identity was tested by the influences of these various schools.

The missionary calling of the church—an overarching concern in the historical record of the Mennonite Brethren movement—provided the major motivation for the building of our own Bible institutes, Christian academies (high schools), the Bible college and liberal arts colleges. The Bible school movement in North America dates back to 1884 when, under the leadership of J. F. Harms, a small short term Bible school was conducted in Canada, Kansas.²⁸ Many others soon followed.

In all such schools the emphasis on Biblical studies was an expression of the bibliocentric orientation of the Mennonite Brethren movement. The absence of formal theologically trained leadership within the brotherhood and the lack of written material to serve as a theological frame of reference left the Bible school movement dependent on literature from outside the radical reformation tradition.

The theological interpretation came from sources accessible to the pioneers of biblical studies. William Bestvater, who for many years offered dynamic leadership in the Bible schools, Bible conferences, and evangelism, drew from the resources of the C. I. Scofield correspondence

courses, A. C. Gaebelein, William Evans, H. C. Dixon, William Riley, and Harris Gregg.²⁹ The Canadian conference in 1920 invited Bestvater for a two month Bible course for ministers which extended his understandings of the scripture to the grass roots of the brotherhood.³⁰

The theological influences of this era are well reflected in the two textbooks written by Bestvater: *Textbüchlein in Glaubenslehre*, an organization of material gathered from Scofield, Evans, and Torrey; *Textbüchlein in Bibel-Kinde*, a compilation of materials from James Gray, Gaebelein, and Scofield.³¹

A series of articles by Bestvater in the *Zionsbote* in the 1920s under the heading, "Zeugniss der Schrift" (a witness of the scripture), were also an effective dissemination of the teachings gathered from the same sources.

The Bible school programs in the later 1920s and 1930s commonly used texts with similar interpretations. Frequently used were Theodor Haarbeck's, *Biblische Glaubenslehre*, *Der Dienst am Evangelium in Predigt und Seelsorge*, and *Das Christliche Leben nach der Schrift* for courses in Bible doctrine, pastoral theology, and Christian ethics. Giesbert Stochmann, *Ringet Recht*, a text on Christian ethics, was adopted in the 1930s and later.³²

The historic effort of the Mennonite Brethren to avoid creedal systems allowed for benefits to be drawn from the evangelical communities in America and Europe without becoming locked into a theological system of dogmatism. The absence of creedal systems among Bible school teachers retained flexibility and an openness to see truth in new relationships. The concluding statement of the 1902 Confession of Faith illumines this receptivity: "Every Confession of Faith, as every other teaching and exposition of scripture, is subject at all times to examination and estimation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit according to the Holy Scriptures. . .the only infallible written preserved resource of the necessary and sufficient revelation of God to humanity for our salvation."³³

The schools, our own as well as others, were a provision of God. The program of our schools, institutes, colleges, as well as the seminary in its earlier years, made little or no effort to provide in their curriculum systematic study of the historical and theological distinctives of the Mennonite Brethren. Our commitments to historic faith were generally viewed as rather incidental. The mission to proclaim a message to a needy world dominated the emphasis with good results. The balance of a biblical emphasis between "being, getting, and doing," however suffered.

Observations and Implications

The transition in our history from a brotherhood in a rigid cultural mold to a community influenced by broad theological and sociological exposure has enriched us spiritually and culturally. In the larger Mennonite community we have come more into our own in claiming the right to speak and to be heard. In the broad evangelical fellowship we gained recognition as a believer's community firm in biblical orientation and conservative in theological commitment. Within our own brotherhood there exists an uncertainty as to our specific theological identity in relation to the broader stream of evangelicalism, especially its fundamentalistic wing, as well as the larger Mennonite world.

The rapid cultural change from a rural agricultural people to an educational and professional people has left us unprepared to cope with a new generation that demands answers to the questions: Who are we? What makes us different from the mainstream of American evangelicalism? Are we justified in claiming a faith and mission different from those who are our brothers in Christ and citizens of the nation we have adopted as our home? Has the purpose of our history as a peculiar people been fulfilled?

The questions are about our faith and life. Has the absence of a concerted effort in our schools to give leader-

ship in identifying the foundation stones of our faith clouded our self-understanding? Have pietism and fundamentalistic evangelicalism left us with a gospel that doesn't impact our neighbors? Is the content of the gospel to accommodate the human quest to get, to have, to do, and be secure, or is it a call to follow Jesus and His call: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35).

Our theological pilgrimage has left us with three particularly troublesome issues. Our congregations and schools are concerned with questions about the nature of scripture, the proper ecclesiology for the church, and the shape of the future.

The contemporary debate on the inerrancy of the Bible is historically foreign to our people. With our forebearers there was no need to debate the "how" as it relates to the process of revelation, inspiration, and the transmission of the written message of God to people in history. For them the major question was "who?" and "what?" the person and the message of the Bible. The character of the book in the unfolding of God's relationship to men in history throughout the Old Testament, the special revelation of God in redemption through Jesus Christ, the character and purpose of a redeemed community, and the certainty of the future in Christ's return was sufficient ground for their faith.

My father was possibly naive when he attended my classes in apologetics in 1934 where I put forth great efforts to prove the inspiration of the Bible. The proof text method of logical arguments borrowed from the World Fundamentalist Association served the young theologian as the structure of his teaching approach to the apparent problem. Father replied:

Son, is it necessary to defend the Bible? Would you find it necessary to defend a lion? Would not a lion

much better defend himself if he were turned loose? Is not the Bible itself proof enough to prove itself as the power of God to salvation? Is there any need to defend the Bible where the Bible is believed, lived, and taught? Is there any merit to prove the inerrancy of the Bible to people who do not believe it and do not know the witness of the spirit?

What should I say? Are we wrong to let the Bible stand on its own merit and through the witness of the spirit confirm it as God's word?

A. H. Unruh found this position of my father to be common to an earlier generation.

It is striking that our early brethren record no paragraph in their statement of faith in which they declare their position with respect to the scriptures even though they were in possession of the Confession of Faith prepared by Cornelius Ries in 1849 . . . in which the scriptures are declared as the only reliable infallible source of faith. Throughout their struggle for their convictions and answers to the attacks upon the young Mennonite Brethren Church we find with fathers of the movement an unchanging faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures. The Bible was for them the unfailing Word of God from cover to cover . . . In this commitment to the Word of God they reviewed every single truth and formed their concepts from the relationship to its content as they understood it.³⁴

Has our separation of truth and life, provision and responsibility, driven us to prove and defend the propositional foundation of our faith? Is the evidence of the gospel so lacking in our lives that it must be repositied in a document? Is not newness of life a stronger proof for the truth of the Bible than some creed which can be challenged?

The church as understood by the Mennonite Brethren is a fellowship in a relationship of love with Christ and with one another. It is a community of inter-responsibility and discipline. The gospel of grace as a gift to be appropriated without self denial and death is not part of our understanding of the Christian life. The contemporary emphasis of fundamentalistic evangelism—to offer free grace as the

doorway to a life of ease and security in this world and in the world to come—was not known among the early Mennonite Brethren. The church of an ecclesiastical democracy with room for individualistic independence in the local church and in the conference, well adapted from our American culture, would appear strange to our fathers and possibly even more so to the community of faith in the first centuries. Have external pressures led to a process of accommodation within? Have we become a comfortable church nurturing the hope of heaven without sharing the demands of the cross? Will we become a New Testament church by latching on to one of the many current models for church renewal? Can the church be the church without being in tension with the surrounding culture? Will not our theology of church come into focus only when we move beyond a popular easy grace to the New Testament concern for “following Jesus” (*Nachfolge*)?

The question of eschatology has a long history with the Mennonite Brethren. A. A. Unruh describes the eschatological view of the early Mennonite Brethren as follows: “They exhorted (each other) to watchfulness and to a holy walk. The present views with reference to the rapture and the millennium were apparently foreign to them. However, they joined in the prayer: ‘Amen, Come Lord Jesus.’ ”³⁵ The interest of the past several decades in eschatology is a phenomenon of the American Mennonite experience. Dispensational understandings of the end times came to us through the writings of Scofield and Gaebelien. They were significantly spread by the ministry of William Bestvater. For much of his life he carried eschatological expositions to our churches. As a son of a minister and Bible school teacher, I received frequent admonitions from my father to view particular interpretations of eschatology as possibilities but not accept them as dogma. A large segment of our brotherhood, particularly the younger theologians, shy away from the predictive certainties of American fundamentalistic eschatology.

There is no room for questioning the basic truths of eschatology. The return of Christ, his ultimate triumph, and the final judgement are beyond debate. The scriptures are clear that God is sovereign and history will find its consummation and purpose in his plan. But preoccupation with the "how, when and where" questions of eschatology can deflect us from the God-given historical task that is ours. Our task is not to fix the dates of the tribulation or the millennium or interpret the significance of every Israeli political event. Ours is to proclaim that the day of the Lord is coming.

The issues facing us in all three of these areas—hermeneutics, ecclesiology, eschatology—are vital and important and our responses will shape the theological identity of the church. Our response can either renew us and revitalize our mission from the biblical perspective, or they can erode the trust of history that God has given us as one part of his church.

NOTES

1. John A. Toews, *A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975), pp. 26-29.
2. P. M. Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland, 1789-1910* (Halbstadt: Verlagsgesellschaft Raduga, 1911), pp. 189-192; Abram Klassen, "Mennonite Brethren Confessions of Faith: Historic Roots and Comparative Analysis," (S.T.M. thesis, Union College of British Columbia, 1965), pp. 133-135.
3. cited in Jacob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973), p. 121.
4. Wesley Prieb, "Prospects for the Future," in Walter Wiebe, editor, *Century of Grace and Witness, 1860-1960* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1961), p. 78.
5. Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949), p. 12.
6. *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Harper and Brothers, 1869), vol. 2, pp. 306-308.
7. Erich Beyreuther, *Der Weg der Evangelischen Allianz in Deutschland* (Witten: Bundel Verlag, 1969), pp. 61-64.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.
9. Heinrich Kornelson interview, 1973.
10. A. H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten Brudergemeinde 1860-1954* (Hillsboro, Kans.: General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America, 1955), p. 822.

11. *Glaubensbekenntnis der Vereinigten Christlichen Taufgesinnten Mennonitischen Brüdergemeinde in Russland* (Halbstadt: P. Neufeld, 1902), p. 10.
12. Unruh, *Die Geschichte*, p. 825. Also oral reports from B. B. Janz, Abram Peters, and Wilhelm Dyck.
13. *Yearbook of the 49th Session of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1963), pp. 38-39.
14. B. B. Janz, "Grundzuege im Charakter der Glaubansstellung unserer Vaeter," (unpublished manuscript, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies).
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, translated by J. B. Toews.
18. Toews, *A History*, pp. 366-368.
19. Bekker, *Origin*, pp. 179-181.
20. Gerhard Wilhelm Peters, *The Growth of Foreign Missions in the Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Board of Foreign Missions, General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1947), pp. 55-69.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.
22. A list of men who received training in Baptist schools is available in the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies.
23. *Yearbook*, 1963.
24. Toews, *A History*, pp. 255-265.
25. Personal knowledge gained through years of working with these people.
26. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1960).
27. Janz, "Grundzeuge," p. 5.

28. John H. Lohrenz, *The Mennonite Brethren Church* (Hillsboro, Kans.: Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1950), p. 76.
29. Anna Redekop, "Life Story of William Bestvater," (unpublished manuscript, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies), pp. 12-14.
30. *Northern District Conference Yearbook, 1920.*
31. William J. Bestvater, *Textbüchlein in Glaubenslehre für die Herbert Bibelschule* (Herbert Saskatchewan, n.d.); William J. Bestvater, *Textbüchlein in Bibelkunde für Deutsche Bibelschulen* (Herbert Saskatchewan, n.d.).
32. D. Theodor Haarbeck, *Biblische Glaubenslehre für Nachdenkende Christian* (Elberfeld, Germany: 1922); D. Theodor Haarbeck, *Der Dienst am Evangelium in Predigt und Seelsorge* (Elberfeld, Germany: n.d.); D. Theodor Haarbeck, *Das Christliche Leben nach der Schrift* (Elberfeld, Germany: n.d.); Giesebert Stochmann, *Ringet Recht* (Schwerin, Mecklburg: Friedrich Bahn, 1926).
33. *Glaubensbekenntnis*, p. 46-47.
34. A. H. Unruh, "Die Grundzuege der Theologie der Vaeter der M. B. Gemeinde," (unpublished manuscript, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies).
35. Unruh, *Die Geschichte*, p. 18.