

CONSENSUS AND CHANGE IN OUR BROTHERHOOD

Perhaps nothing has vexed our brotherhood more in the last few decades than the phenomenon of change. Those who have viewed traditional positions in social and personal ethics as normative have been seriously threatened by such rapid changes. Since change has always been a characteristic of spiritual growth, the deeper problem involved in change must be one of evaluation. How can one be sure that the changes which are taking place are in the right direction? Is the church gaining or losing ground?

Since this study Conference is to deal with a number of very serious contemporary problems which the brotherhood faces, it would seem quite in order to ask ourselves whether we fear change as such and therefore desire to close ranks against those who would suggest innovations, or whether we are ready to expose ourselves to new situations as well as old in an honest search for better and more biblical ways of dealing with these demands.

Our fathers of Reformation time were known as radical disciples. In this they resembled the early Christians who were accused of turning the world upside down. The early Mennonite Brethren were also known as radicals in their insistence on changes within the church structure.

I. The Quest for Authority

The crucial issue in Christian ethics is that of authority. Unless we are agreed on the ground-rules, this conference will accomplish very little. There is little hope of effective communication among brethren

unless basic premises can be agreed upon.

All ethical judgments are made on the basis of some premise, explicit or implicit. Each choice I make involves a value judgment which in turn reflects my philosophy of life. Some Christians construct an explicit system of ground-rules which becomes part of their philosophy of life and they are able to "give the reason for the hope within them with weakness and fear." Others make choices without really being able to say why they chose as they did. They just felt that this was a better choice. Often it was.

In view of this great need to understand the principles or laws of righteousness by which we live, we ask for the foundation on which our knowledge of right and wrong rests. Knowledge of right and wrong could conceivably be based on desire, on knowledge of reality in general, or on the will of God.

The desire on which the right is based could be either individual or collective. Both individualism and the will of the majority are in vogue today.

If a man is strong and powerful, he might justify his action by simply stating that it is his wish. Here power makes right. Nietzsche was of this mind and he spelled out his principle that might makes right. An action is right because it is the will of those in command.

Desire as the basis of right raises many problems. Why punish, or persuade,

or condemn if man's desires are the measure of right? Certainly the man did what he did because he desired it. If man's desire is the measure of right, how can there be any wrong? If desire operates at the group level we have what might be called the will of the majority. A democratic approach, as spelled out by John Dewey in his relativism in ethics, would see the right as an expression of the will of the greater number at any particular time. There can be no "absolute" right which transcends all moments in history, no "fixed ends" as he called them.

The principle of unbridled expression of human desire leads to its own destruction. One man's freedom becomes another man's bondage. Free way of desire leads only to confusion and anarchy, never to righteousness.

B. A second possible basis for ethical judgment would be knowledge. There are those who are quick to recognize that desire must be guided by something. They suggest that knowledge would be an adequate guide. Socrates taught that if a man knows what virtue is, he will be virtuous. His well-known dictum, "Know thyself," states the first duty of man. To know the truth or to know virtue is to have such a vision of it that one must love it and be devoted to it. To know virtue is to love it.

No one would be so naive as to attempt ethical judgments without understanding. Knowledge alters our understanding of value and, therefore, our desires. However, it can truly be said that knowledge of righteousness is largely in proportion to one's understanding of fundamental human capacities and needs. When we speak of right, we mean what

is right for man; and when we speak of value or of an end being valuable, we mean that it is valuable for man. Value is, therefore, largely determined by man's fundamental nature.

Socrates held a certain view of human nature. He assumed that man's basic problem was ignorance not disobedience. If a person would come to know the truth he would, of course, react positively to it.

Experience substantiates what the word teaches that this view does not hold water. Man does sin against better knowledge. "The heart of man is deceitful and above all wicked." Man has a heart ailment and not a few head problems.

C. A third view, which I espouse, is that ethical judgments are made from an understanding of the will of God. The will of God cannot be known apart from God himself. God's will is an expression of God's nature. To know the will of God we must have an understanding of God. Such an understanding, however, cannot be achieved by man unless God chooses to disclose himself to man. And this he has done. The universe is an expression of the creative activity of God and so is man himself. But man left to himself and to the data of the universe can never know the ultimate will of the creator.

God has revealed himself "at sundry times and in divers manners" and this revelation reached its climax in Jesus Christ. Here was God's last word to men. In Jesus Christ came "truth" but also "grace." Grace enabled man to carry out what truth revealed.

The revelation of God has been inscriptured. The Bible record of the

redemptive acts of God in history is for us the source of our knowledge of the will of God. In this way biblical theology is the prerequisite for Christian ethics. An ethic which is not rooted in biblical theology is nothing more than an expression of man's reason.

II. The Danger of Relativism

Recently I was confronted by the term "ethical relativism" used as a charge against another brother. The impression was given that any change in the application of ethical norms implied that the advocate was an ethical relativist. It would appear to me that most of us have changed in our views concerning specific items of conduct, but does that make all of us ethical relativists?

Perhaps the first step would be to explain the term. If labels must be used, they should be clearly understood and used precisely and honestly.

Relativism in philosophy is the view that truth may vary from individual to individual, from group to group, or from time to time, having no absolute standard. Anyone who believes in a fixed standard for truth, be it found in the Bible, in the Koran, or in the Vedas, is not a relativist in the philosophical sense. The relativist has no final court of appeal which transcends cultures and history. Something is true only in respect to an individual person or a group and that only at a specific time.

If we apply relativism to ethics we have the view that the rightness of an action or the goodness of an object depend entirely on the

attitude taken toward it by some individual or group, and since attitudes vary, the rightness of an action varies from person to person. There is nothing which might sit in judgment over all actions regardless of where and when these actions occur. Again we have no final court of appeal to which all concepts of right and wrong can be relegated and from where a final verdict would be pronounced.

Whether adultery is wrong, according to relativism, would depend on the attitude which a particular group might take toward it. In one culture it is considered wrong and in another it is not wrong. We might also say that at one time it was considered wrong while centuries later it could not be considered wrong.

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There are various approaches to ethical relativism. For instance, there is the approach of the anthropologist and sociologist. The studies of anthropologists in the mores of various primitive groups have led to one popular form of relativism which is much in vogue today. This view is based on rather well-established factual studies which reveal that there has been great diversity in the moral views of different social groups. In particular, some anthropologists have urged that there is almost nothing which today in our society is considered right which has not in some other social group at some time or other been considered wrong.

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community food supply. In our society, killing of one's parents is regarded as one of the most heinous of crimes.

No informed student of culture would doubt that in substance it is correct to say that "almost every form of human behavior has been considered right by some people at some time and wrong by others at the same or some other time." The Christian while allowing such data to stand would, however, question the conclusions which ethical relativists have drawn from these data: The conclusion that knowledge of absolute right and wrong in the field of ethics is impossible and deserves to be challenged. So far we have dealt only with descriptive studies which, while describing accurately what exists among people do not, however, force us to believe that nothing else could or should exist.

The Christian accepts the conclusion that people do have different ideas concerning right and wrong but this does not mean that an absolute standard does not exist which if applied to specific cultures would judge some to be closer to the truth than others.

The Christian believes that the absolute and final standard is found in God's revelation with Jesus Christ in the center. The Christian also believes that reason cannot find God's standard, for "the natural man receives not the things of the spirit of God, neither can he know them."

Another form of relativism goes back to the Greeks. Whether an action

is right or wrong depends entirely on the circumstances of each case and on the nature of the individuals involved. One man's meat is another man's poison. What is moral for one may be immoral for another. It all depends on the circumstances.

This is not entirely wrong. Whether exercise is good depends on the circumstances in which the person may find himself. If he happens to have a heart condition exercise might prove fatal. What we are saying is that relevant circumstances must be brought into the application of an ethical norm. The Bible also says this. While it was wrong for common men to eat the shewbread of the temple, David did on one occasion, under certain circumstances, eat the bread without suffering divine disapproval.

C, The Christian stands firm on divine law expressed in revelation. This law must now be applied to specific cases and in the application, the circumstances are important. Scripture teaches that false witness is wrong but it does not say that the circumstances in which false statements are made are all alike or are of no consequence. False statements may be made in ignorance or they may be made in order to deceive. If we allow for exceptions we do so because there is a standard which enables us to recognize the exceptions. Because lying is such a serious offense and stands under the judgment of God the Christian will examine the circumstances before he accuses his brother of deliberate falsification.

Ethical relativism urges that there is no logical ground for choosing

between ethical alternatives. The Christian, on the other hand, accepts God's Word as absolute and proceeds to specific applications from such a premise. The actual formulation of the application may vary from century to century since the nature of the problem changes. Our insights into the Word may also change. However, the norm for ethical judgment does not change. We are not ethical relativists.

III. Group Consensus in Christian Ethics

One of the ethical presuppositions among Mennonite Brethren is **group consensus as opposed to individual conscience in matters relating to the Christian life.** The question might be framed in this way: Do I act as an individual before God, responsible for **my own** decisions in ethical matters, or do I relate to the brethren **with whom I live and witness in a covenant relationship?**

Before entering into the discussion of group consensus, we must establish a few basic assumptions. We cannot argue these at length, they will be stated briefly.

A. I am assuming that the question of authority in Christian ethics has been settled by establishing the inscripturated Word of God as the absolute authority. This would mean that the absolutes of ethics are actually the absolutes of theology. Ethics follows theology: it dare not precede it. Whenever ethics precedes theology, we have philosophical or religious moralism or perhaps a version of crass legalism. In theology we establish from Scripture

the nature and the will of God. In ethics we relate such knowledge to man's response to the demands of God. Theology sets forth what God has done in history; ethics formulates what man ought to do in answer to God's redemptive acts. I am assuming that group consensus does not operate in areas which are clearly spelled out in Scripture. The matter of adultery is settled in Scripture; no group consensus is needed. However, biblical principles need to be made relevant for our day.

B. I am also assuming that we are dealing with the response of a believer or a community of believers in whom the Holy Spirit has created the "will to do" and whom he empowers to carry out what should be done. This I hold to be most essential to the discussion since we are not studying the secular processes of group dynamics. The group consensus ideal assumes the activity of the Spirit of God in the individual as well as in the Christian community (Gemeinschaft).

Jesus said: "When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth..." "But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."

C. The Church of Christ is a body, an organism. The essential unity of this body is clearly stated by Paul in Eph. 4, "There is one body and one Spirit even as ye are called in one hope of your calling..."

From whom the whole body fitly framed together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

The church is not an aggregate of individual believers. Here, as in other matters, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Without this corporate consensus there can be no church. Fifty Christians whose membership in the local congregations amounts to maintaining their name on the roll hardly make up a church.

I believe that the idea of a covenant-people in opposition to individualism was, in part, the genius of the Anabaptist movement. There was a compelling drive among the Anabaptists to make their community life (Gemeinschaft) a total authority, economic as well as religious. The preaching of the Gospel was an open invitation to any man to make personal absolution and to covenant a new life with God and the community of believers. Littell states that "the idea of a covenantal relationship to God and one's fellows became the foundation of the Anabaptist community and through it came the rise of spiritual government" (The Anabaptist View of the Church; p. 85).

By baptism a believer came under the discipline of a biblical people -- a discipline which he himself helped to make and enforce. This church covenant was undertaken at baptism and was thought to be the highest expression of religious voluntarism short of martyrdom.

B. Ethics and Witness. Most works which have been written in the

field of Christian ethics neglect what I believe to be a fundamental premise. The church and the individual believer have been called to witness to the world. The church is involved in a continuous dialogue with the world with "God beseeching" through the church "be ye reconciled to God." Jesus informed his disciples that they would be witnesses.

The believer is not "of the world" but he is "in the world." Christians have in the past in their desire for non-conformity often manoeuvred themselves "out of the world." By disregarding the world they were able to avoid change. The channels of communication with the world were broken and Christians began "talking to themselves." In this way, many of their ideas remained unchallenged.

Another way of saying this would be to stress the primacy of evangelism for Christian living. Many of the ethical truths which became meaningful to us became so only as we saw them in evangelistic perspective. Many of the changes which are made are also made because of the pressures of evangelism.

Where Christians fail to recognize evangelism and where witness is not demanded there is no deterrent to complete acculturation or stagnation. Witness keeps the Christian close enough to the world to allow for communication but also helps him maintain enough distance to make it clear that he has a different frame of reference and perspective.

A group, then, may change culturally because certain forms and patterns of living make it almost impossible to make any meaningful contact with the world. Certainly Hutterites would find it rather difficult to communicate their faith to a non-Hutterite society. Not always is change the product of "worldliness." In an evangelically dynamic fellowship change could be initiated by the New Testament desire to witness and evangelize.

IV. Specific Issues in Group Consensus

The biblical pattern of change is found in Acts 15. The problem was one of grave concern to the early church. The Gentiles were to have a place in the New Testament fellowship but did this necessitate an acceptance of the Jewish culture-tradition or, at least a partial acceptance? The question was clearly defined in the brotherhood context and "after much disputing" it was answered through the working of the Spirit of God in the context of the believing interpreting the apostolic insights.

A. The problem of authority in the group consensus.

Does the believer community have final authority alongside the Inscripturated Word? Does God channel new truth to men through this community? Truth is settled by God not by men. Men are led into truth by the Spirit.

This means that the group consensus is not ultimate authority. The value lies more in the process than in the product. No one pronounce-

...the group consensus is final; the product is not to be equated with pronouncements of Scripture.

What, then, shall we say about Acts 15 where a letter establishing the product was sent to all churches? The parallel between Acts and our situation is not an absolute one. The Apostles stood in a unique relationship to truth. They might be considered to represent the New Testament in that situation. In a sense they were the authority for the early church as the Scripture represents our authority today.

The problem of change in the group consensus.

It has been maintained that changes come to a group through individual dissent and action. As new dissenting members break ranks, more follow, until a new stand is evolved which is more in keeping with things as they really are. In this way the dissenters finally become the spiritual innovators of new ethical positions in the church.

The problem is that the position of the church at a particular time in the past is accepted as final. Had God not spoken in the brotherhood, can God contradict himself? Such an error in our search for authority creates a situation which allows for no change.

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to might ask, is the group process more fraught with danger than
 individualism, or ecclesiastical despotism? Hardly! Paul speaks
 of comprehending "with all the saints" the full dimensions of
 revealed truth.

Again, if the aspect of witness is retained in ethics, it will be
 readily admitted that the issues to which the church witnesses do
 change. We hardly need a position on "meat offered to idols" today.
 Issues come and issues go but witness goes on as long as the Church
 is in the "midst of a crooked and perverse generation" among whom
 believers are to "shine as lights."

The problem of liberty in the group consensus.
 It is clear that there must be freedom of discussion in the group
 to ascertain the will of God at a particular juncture. Where
 the dissenter is immediately silenced, the status quo becomes the
 "will of the Lord." This does not mean that the Church must listen
 to an unspiritual brother. The dissenting brother is here assumed
 to be in the same spirit as the others but his understanding of the
 problem might be different.

The spirit of the brotherhood meeting must be one of earnestness.
 The group is not engaged in a "discussion" but is seeking the will
 of God in an ethical issue. The earnestness actually comes from a
 prior commitment. Those involved have committed themselves to
 the decision has been reached. Without this prior
 the group discussion lacks the dynamics of discipleship.

the group process more through a group process than through individual or ecclesiastical authority. In the final analysis, the group process is the only way to reach a decision which is binding on all the members of the group. The group process is the only way to reach a decision which is binding on all the members of the group. The group process is the only way to reach a decision which is binding on all the members of the group.

if the respect of witness is retained in ethics, it will be admitted that the factors by which the church witnesses to the world are not merely a matter of "what" but of "how". We hardly need a justification on "what" issues to which we are called. We hardly need a justification on "how" issues to which we are called. We hardly need a justification on "how" issues to which we are called.

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The group consensus binds action not thought. Only the Spirit of God can enlighten and convince. For the sake of group unity and in the interest of more important issues, the dissenting brother acts in accordance with group decision even if he is not entirely convinced. Whenever the issue is again brought up for discussion, he reserves the right to speak in line with his personal convictions. To disregard group consensus and to openly violate what praying brethren have set forth as a course of action is a violation of brotherly love.

Legalism and Group Consensus.

Decisions arrived at on the basis of group consensus cannot be confused with legalism. Legalism is impersonal dogma; discipleship is personal following. In legalism the code stands sovereign; in discipleship the believer seeks to follow the Master. Legalism allows for no exceptions; discipleship seeks to relate individual conduct to the claims of Christ in everyday situations. There are times when discipleship allows for "eating with unwashed hands." Legalism judges all alike. Discipleship recognizes that believers follow Christ in the light of their understanding of the will of God and in keeping with maturity in Christ. The "group consensus" does not recognize that Christians who are not in immediate fellowship with the group may not share the concern expressed by the group and therefore the personal integrity of another group member should not be called into question. Our group has covenanted not to make the agreement is complete abstinence. In following

through on the consensus I do not necessarily judge all other Christians who would drink wine at certain occasions or as a regular beverage in the home. Nor would I want to assume that I were more spiritual because of this particular aspect of group discipline, even though I might feel that the issue which prompted my group to take this action should also be considered seriously by my brother's reference group.

V. Achieving Consensus in the Local Church

The procedure adopted in achieving consensus is, of course, very important. Unless a broad basis for congregational involvement is found, the desired effect will be lacking. In a real sense our brotherhood meetings (Gemeindestunden) have attempted to bring about such consensus through discussion and decision-making procedures.

However, there are several very basic differences between a consensus meeting and a church business meeting. Very often the problems are quite different. In a consensus meeting, the entire congregation seeks an answer or guidance in a matter relating to ethics or polity. In a business meeting, the questions are more often practical and immediate. In a business meeting, the problem is brought very quickly to a decision-making level. In consensus, the entire group works with the problem until a real sense of unity prevails and it can be felt that "this is the way, walk ye therein."

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Procedure for the Consensus Meeting

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...have aided our congregation which has initiated consensus
 ...meetings.

1. The church council suggests the problems which should be
 ...to the entire brotherhood. The problems are carefully
 ...defined but the council does not attempt to answer the questions. It
 ...becomes the responsibility of the council to decide whether it
 ...is really necessary to seek a common mind on a particular issue.
 ...uniformity in all things is neither possible nor desirable.
 ...however, whenever the spiritual well-being of the church is
 ...threatened by diversity, consensus must be sought.

2. One brother, often the pastor, is asked to present a paper
 ...which seeks to present the biblical data which have a
 ...bearing on the issue under discussion. Again, he is cautioned
 ...to formulate the answer but to allow the Spirit to use the Word
 ...toward a consensus.

3. All members are invited to attend the consensus meeting.
 ...in advance what the problems under discussion will
 ...the first session special meetings are held with the young
 ...them with the procedure and encouraging them to
 ...the Holy Spirit to use them as part of a decision-making body. A
 ...sermon explains the procedure to the entire congregation.

4. At the evening of the consensus meeting, the pastor again
 ...the problem and encourages the membership to be open and

...mitted in the discussion. It is agreed that the conclusion arrived at in this manner will be the guide for the entire local brotherhood.

After the issue has been discussed well and both young and old have expressed views and convictions, the matter is brought to a decision. One brother, quite spontaneously, formulates what he feels is the consensus of the group and this is then accepted. Members are then given an opportunity to suggest other areas which they would want to present to the brotherhood in this manner.

Our members, given the opportunity to be heard, have shown a willingness to work to change the old rules which have been inherited by which we have inherited some of our "church rules." Often they look upon these rules with disdain simply because they have been handed down. It has been our experience that such consensus meetings increase the understanding of our youth for our concept of discipleship and makes in them a greater sense of loyalty and involvement.

This procedure has also given us a way of initiating change which allows for group submissiveness. I believe it is possible for a group to change in the areas which are significant to the life of the brotherhood.

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