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1525 REVISITED? A COMPARISON OF ANABAPTIST AND MENNONITE BRETHREN ORIGINS

Cornelius J. Dyck

According to the self-understanding of its founding fathers the Mennonite Brethren movement of 1860 must clearly be identified as a restitutionist effort paralleling that of sixteenth century Anabaptists, particularly the work of Menno Simons. Four references are made to Menno in the January 6, 1860 Document of Secession, followed by the statement: "In all other articles of our confession we are also in accord with Menno Simons."¹ Later in the same year, in a letter of December 27 to the Supervisory Commission, they wrote:

We are not a newly-established sect, as the worthy Supervisory Commission likes to call us. On the contrary, we are the seed of the imperishable Word of God, which was preached to us by the Apostles, explained through the Holy Spirit, and have become a fruit of the living faith of our beloved founder (Stammvater) Menno Simons, who in all his church regulations and confessions of faith practiced and established them even as we; hence we can rightly call ourselves the genuine descendents of true Mennonitism.²

The documents compiled by Jacob P. Bekker confirm this self-understanding, including his own struggle over baptism, about which he wrote: "Not until I discovered that Menno Simons confessed to baptism in water did I have the liberty and joy to initiate this practice."³

This restitutionist understanding is also a basic presupposition of later historiography. In his massive work Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910) P. M. Friesen reiterates this theme in many ways. "Therefore we as Mennonites," he writes, "are heirs in spirit and blood . . . overwhelmingly of the Dutch Anabaptists, for the latter were first named 'Mennonites.'"⁴ He is convinced that "Menno built the house in which we live. . . ."⁵ and after examining the evidence he concludes with the statement: "That the Brethren remained 'Mennonite' has now presumably been sufficiently documented."⁶ More recently F. C. Peters concluded: "It seems rather clear that the Mennonite Brethren revival was meant to be a return to the Anabaptist vision, rather than a deviation from it."⁷ This is also the conviction of J. A. Toews in A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church. While it becomes most central in his discussion of Brethren theology in Chapter 21, it is explicit in many places, and implicit throughout the volume. The first chapter is entitled "Spiritual Heirs of the Early Anabaptists." In it this premise is explicitly stated:

The name, "Mennonite Brethren," which the founding fathers gave to the new church, was not the result of practical expediency, nor a matter of ecclesiastical diplomacy. It was a conscious and deliberate identification of the early Brethren with the historic theological position of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement.⁸

These statements by the Brethren of 1860 and later writers, and particularly the identification of author J. A. Toews with them, have implications for methodology. The norm is not to be Pietism, nor the Baptists, nor contemporary Evangelicalism or other movements, but specifically sixteenth century Anabaptism and Menno in particular. This could have led to an essay in apologetics or hagiography instead of history, but it did not. On the other hand it could have led to a revisionist attempt in behalf of either Anabaptist or Brethren historiography, or both, but I do not think that it did. What we have before us is a faithful, well-documented account of what Leopold von Ranke called so wie es gewesen ist, a factual and carefully interpreted history. Since the Brethren declared their intention to be a return to sixteenth century Anabaptist norms it is methodologically necessary to understand their actions in that context. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the validity of this claim and to comment on the extent to which they succeeded in achieving their intention.

Brethren Knowledge of Anabaptism

Before proceeding to an analysis of 1525 viz. 1536 and 1860, a prior question should be raised: how much did the eighteen signers of the Document of Secession, and those who joined the cause, actually know about Anabaptism? Were they consciously drawing on written sixteenth century documents or was their understanding of the heritage shaped by oral tradition and practice? Did they know Menno's life and thought or genuflect before him for the invoking of authority? Since the special provisions of the Privilegium applied only to Mennonites, and since the colony administration and church elders had informed the Russian authorities that those joining the new movement had left the Mennonite Church, it became a matter of political and economic survival for the Brethren to prove that they were, in fact, Mennonites. Granted that human motives are always difficult to identify and isolate, what knowledge beyond this existential imperative, was there to support the claim and the vision?

According to P. M. Friesen only three items had been published by the Mennonites in Russia before the schism--a preprint of the hymnal brought from Prussia, published in 1844, a polemical tract of 1845 against the Kleine Gemeinde, and an 1853 reprint of the old Flemish-Frisian and High German Confession of Faith.⁹ We note from their references, particularly in the Document and in the memoirs of Jacob P. Bekker, that they had the three-volume Foundation of Christian Doctrine of Menno, published by Peter van Riesen in Danzig in 1834. There are no other explicit references to Menno's writings. We assume Bekker would have found the latter's Christian Baptism helpful, had he known about it.¹⁰ His three page biography of Menno is based on a 23 page pamphlet published anonymously in 1852 under the title Kurze Älteste Geschichte der Taufgesinnten (Mennoniten genannt).¹¹ It appears not to have been written by a Mennonite, which may account for P. M. Friesen's omission of it in his references. It is a meager source. Martin Klaassen's substantial history was not available until 1873.¹²

We need to remember, however, that Mennonite migration from Prussia to Russia continued during this entire period and into the 1860s, and with it an increasingly sophisticated cultural influence. The immigrants to the Trakt settlement, for example, no longer used the Low German language. But we remember particularly the coming of the Gnadenfeld settlers in 1835, bringing with them deep spiritual concerns rooted in Herrnhuter-Pietist, but also Mennonite traditions. Numerous Mennonites also were able to return to Prussia

to visit relatives and may have brought along Anabaptist-Mennonite materials or insights. On the other hand, we do not know of Anabaptist inspired renewal movements among the Mennonites in Prussia at this time either. The renewal begun by Claas Reimer in 1812, which led to the founding of the Kleine Gemeinde, was fed initially by the impact of the Martyrs' Mirror as well as the writings of Menno and Dirk Philips. Some of these works must have been in circulation in the colonies. The educational efforts of Tobias Voth, Heinrich Heese, and Heinrich Franz undoubtedly facilitated knowledge of Mennonite heritage, as did the subsequent work of Johann Cornies 1843 to his death in 1848.¹³

The extent of Anabaptist literature available to the Mennonites in Russia in mid-nineteenth century needs further study, including the sermons, devotional materials, hymnals and fiction brought from Germany. This study should include the literature brought to Russia by the Hutterites in 1770 and their contacts with the Mennonites. This would have been a direct contact with the heritage of the Swiss Brethren. We are led to conclude, however, that the Russian Mennonites knew nothing about Swiss Anabaptism and that "the Fathers" for them meant the Dutch wing of Anabaptism, primarily Menno. A residual, tradition-oriented knowledge of the heritage did exist via that channel, but there was little fresh and concrete awareness of it. The socio-cultural ethnic identity provided the actual frame of reference for life and thought. It may be that the ten articles of the Privilegium served as a kind of surrogate confession of faith, giving identity and a raison d'etre to them as a people.¹⁴ In any case, traditional ethnic Mennonitism provided the form for the renewal efforts of the Brethren, but the essence included social and economic factors as well as Baptist and Pietist elements, including an impetus from the latter to a new study of the Bible.

1525, 1536 and 1860 Compared

In considering the issues surrounding the events of 1860 we are led to inquire quickly about the root causes of the schism. Most reformatory movements in the history of the church stress the primacy of spiritual motives. The Brethren movement of 1860 is no exception. Strong spiritual concerns were indeed present as they were in the reformation movements of the sixteenth century. These concerns, however, do not dilute the significance of economic, social, and political causes, nor the role of the dramatis personae involved.

The issue of morality: An immediate parallel exists between Menno in 1536 and the Brethren in 1860 in their concern over the immorality of members in good standing in the church. In both instances the central concern was the nature of the church. It was no longer the Body of Christ. There was no discipline either among laity or clergy.

The moral indictments of Menno were directed against both private and public issues. The people were profligate and dissolute. Thus he writes: "Turning to the common people we find such an impossible, carnal, blind, uncircumcised horde, that we are astonished."¹⁵ "You eat, drink, dress up, grab, hoard, and scrape, whether legally or illegally. . . . It is the rashest blindness to think that we could be saved and at the same time be avaricious, spiteful, envious, proud, adulterous and idolatrous."¹⁶ The princes too are immoral. "Seeing then that you carry on unjustly and tyrannically," Menno writes, "according to the evil purpose of your heart, without Scripture and without mercy against the helpless and God-fearing, how can you look for any grace and mercy in the day of the Lord. . . ."¹⁷ But his sharpest invective

is reserved for the clergy: "They who pastor us deceive us. And those who pose as pastors are thieves and murderers of our souls."¹⁸ He goes on to describe priests who chant psalms "while beer and wine run from their drunken mouths and noses."¹⁹ And again:

For it is manifest that a portion of them are useless, haughty, immoral men; some are avaricious, userers, liars, deceivers; some are drunkards, gamblers, licentious, open seducers, idolaters, etc. concerning whom it is written that they shall not inherit the kingdom of God if they do not repent.²⁰

These indictments find their parallels among the Mennonites of Russia in 1860. The root cause of this moral decay was blind traditionalism. The lower cultural milieu of the Russian environment fostered ethnic pride and spiritual indifference among many. Though Bekker's memoirs were written much later and in a different cultural context they provide valuable insight into the pre-1860 situation. From his perspective the liquor which was provided for in article four of the Privilegium was the primary villain. Like Menno, Bekker places the burden of responsibility upon the ministers. "They were aware of these drunkards, yet the offenders were allowed to remain members of the church and were admitted to partake of the Lord's Supper."²¹ It was his conclusion that "the clergy had become unfit to promote the spiritual life of the Mennonite community as a whole."²² The Document states: "The teachers do not stand in the gap as of old" (Ezekiel 22:30).

This spiritual decline has been documented briefly in Toews' History and rightly associated with the loss of the New Testament concept of the church.²³ In relation to personal morality any differences between 1536 and 1860 are relative only. The origin of the concern, however, varied. Though Menno had been exposed to Luther's writings and knew the Brethren of the Common Life, the immediate impetus came to him from a study of the Scriptures on the specific issues of the eucharist and baptism. The impetus in 1860 did not come unannounced suddenly with Eduard Wuest, but it did come from his ministry and tended to be more narrowly personal, as was the piety of Gnadenfeld. There seemed to be little awareness that the Privilegium itself had set the parameters for Mennonite peoplehood. Yet the nature of the church, the lack of discipline, the failure of the clergy were the primary concerns both in 1536 and in 1860.

Church and state relationships: While the central concern of the Swiss Brethren was over the nature of the church, the debate with Zwingli and the Zurich city council was over the authority of the council in church affairs. The separation of 1860 was a revisitation of 1525 in the rejection of secular authority, albeit Mennonite, over things spiritual even though the Brethren knew nothing of the events which led to the first Anabaptist baptism on January 21, 1525.

In the October, 1523 debate of the Swiss Brethren with the Zurich authorities Simon Stumpf said to Zwingli: "Master Ulrich: You have no authority to place the decision in the hands of My Lords, for the decision [about the Mass] is already made; the Spirit of God decides."²⁴ The protest of 1860 was more radical. It was a revolt against the Mennonite state and imposed ethnicity. Not only did the secular power have no rights in spiritual affairs, but Mennonites had no right wielding secular power. In a remarkable document

entitled Faith and Reason written in 1833 by Heinrich Balzer, a Mennonite minister in the Molotschna colony and who later joined the Kleine Gemeinde, the suggestion is made that Mennonite secular authority should play only a mediating role between church and state:

Members who serve the worldly affairs of the church should consider themselves only as liaison officers between the authorities and the elders who direct the ministry of the Word. They must never think of themselves as separate, so to speak secular functionaries with any kind of authority to arbitrarily direct the church according to the laws and powers of the state. Inasmuch as they are brethren in the church, such an assumption would mean an act directly against our tenets and would involve the destruction of our spiritual fellowship.²⁵

This concern was thus not unique in 1860. Balzer obviously reflected and elaborated the concerns of Claas Reimer who had protested the use of coercion within the spiritual brotherhood and moved to form the Kleine Gemeinde as alternate.

P. M. Friesen refers to the Oberschulz of the Molotschna colony as the "nearly omnipotent David Friesen of Halbstadt."²⁶ In words reminiscent of 1525 Friesen wrote to the Brethren:

We give you one month to think it over. If within that time you do not return to the church, measures will be taken in earnest to execute church verdicts against you, to disenfranchise you as colonists, and to banish you from our midst.²⁷

The schism might never have happened had a more irenic man occupied Friesen's chair. Nevertheless, the edicts and correspondence directed by Friesen's office against the Brethren are a sad commentary on the bankruptcy of the Russian Mennonite experiment in colonial self-administration.²⁸ They were certainly, in the words of Article VI of Schleithelm, 1527 "outside of the perfection of Christ."²⁹

Coupled with these developments was the growing hierarchical power of the elders and their alliance with the secular office of colony administration. Since ministers were normally chosen from among the well-to-do landowners, they tended to be less sympathetic to the needs of the landless poor. The first step in securing a passport, for example, which was necessary for any travel outside of the colonies, required the authorization of an elder.³⁰ The power of the elders increased with the forming of the Kirchenkonvent in 1850, but suffered loss in 1841, and again in 1847, when recalcitrant elders refused to cooperate with Johann Cornies' educational and agricultural reforms, were deposed by Mennonite secular authority and their church districts divided into smaller units with the support of the Odessa Supervisory Commission.³¹ Nevertheless the colonies became, in fact, a corpus christianum in which membership was acquired by birth and all social, economic or religious privileges were enjoyed by virtue of membership in the group, not by individual right. The anomaly of this situation became clear as it had in Zurich in 1525, but increasingly so since both sides of the issue were Mennonites. This does not mean that a "brotherhood type of church" could not have survived in the Russian context, but only that it did not.³² Later experiences in Russia and in Paraguay were to prove more successful.

Persecution: Parallels between the movements of 1525, 1536, and 1860 are clear in relation to persecution experienced. No lives were lost in 1860, but the fact that the suffering endured was brought about by so-called brothers of the faith, and with the full knowledge and even initiative of the elders, adds particular pathos to the situation.

The migration to the Kuban was tantamount to exile or, in any case, in the noble tradition of Abraham's amicable response to Lot (Gen. 13). Before this could happen, however, the Brethren suffered intense opposition and ridicule. Some suffered physical hardship. Ironically, it was the elders who "insisted that the seceding members be turned over to the District Court for prosecution" since they claimed to have exhausted all means at their disposal to win them back.³³ They did add that "in so far as is legally permissible, more lenient measures be applied first."³⁴

The suffering of sixteenth century Anabaptists is amply recorded in the Martyrs' Mirror, the Täuferakten, and other sources including the writings of Menno. The suffering of the Brethren of 1860 is less amply documented but nevertheless adequate for a comprehensive picture, particularly in the writings of Bekker, Franz Isaac,³⁵ and above all P. M. Friesen. There were repeated threats of deportation to Siberia. Civil and economic liberties were withdrawn. Observation teams were sent to visit Brethren services. Some were banned, which led to economic ruin. The derogatory reports to Russian officials were especially harmful. Many were imprisoned.³⁶ Arrests for interrogation were common. Some endured corporal punishment as illustrated in the following extract from a lengthy description of Jacob Janzen about the experience of his father:

One day in February, 1862 the mayor of the village convened the villagers to reach a council decision. There my father was told that the meetings must cease and he must stay at home. My father said: We must obey God rather than man. . . . Because my father did not promise to stay at home the mayor N. N. became very angry and ran outside to fetch whipping rods. When the assembly saw this they all ran away and nothing happened. My father was jailed immediately. Next day he was again brought before the mayor. He was questioned again but remained steadfast. Thereupon a bale of straw was thrown on the ground and Mayor N, who was a strong man, tore my fathers clothes from his body . . . and began beating him with six rods, ten times, as hard as he was able in his rage. . . . Then he was returned to prison. There was no heat. We were poor. His clothes were thin. N. rolled a block of wood into the prison and shouted: Now you can sit down. But my father could not sit because of the beating he had received. He managed somehow to sit a bit and pull himself together to keep his teeth from chattering so, but he could not sit long and soon had to walk again. But the Lord helped throughout. It was bright in that room though there was no light, and he experienced indescribable blessings. Thus he spent two days and two nights. . . .³⁷

Some spent weeks in prison. The mail of the Brethren was censored or confiscated.³⁸ The official recognition of the Brethren by the Ohrloff congregation and eventually by the Russian authorities ended the persecution. In St. Petersburg Senator Hahn said to Brethren representative Johann Klassen, "You owe your deliverance to Elder Harder."³⁹ The silence of the "good" majority is puzzling and appalling.

The suffering endured by the Brethren was neither as intense nor as prolonged as was Anabaptist suffering in the sixteenth century. No one was burned at the stake. Though the suffering of 1860 was intense it does not, in itself, identify the Brethren with the sixteenth century movement, but their patience in it and the reasons for the suffering do. They suffered for the renewal of the church, for the vision of a Believers' Church "without spot or wrinkle" (Menno). When their time had come they stood firm against the opposition from within their own brotherhood, perhaps paralleling some of earlier experiences in Dutch Anabaptism, or the tension between Hut and Hubmaier in 1526.

The roots of this hostility against the Brethren were many. The schism destroyed the monolithic structure of Mennonite society, with attendant economic, cultural, and political implications. It revealed the spiritual decay which was being indicted by the Brethren, a decay which allowed ruthless men to be in administrative offices in a brotherhood while remaining members in good standing in the church. The schism revealed the close alliance of the spiritual leaders with the economically privileged ruling class and the fear by the majority of this oligarchy. The revolt was a threat to the long standing structure of authority, the beginning of the end of an era, which the administrators and elders sensed. The excesses of the Brethren movement in its early stages were a factor in their initial rejection by many, but they also provided a ready excuse for rejection on personal and other grounds. The persecution remains a tragic chapter in Mennonite history, mitigated only slightly by the courageous defense of Johann Harder and others.

Aberrations: A fourth parallel between 1525 viz. 1536 and 1860 lies in the emotional excesses which accompanied the initial stages of the movements. While the contexts and manifestations varied, the enthusiasm of the Fröhliche Richtung finds its parallels in early Anabaptism. Excesses appeared in St. Gall in 1526 after the movement encountered persecution, including infantile expressions demonstrating "becoming as little children" in an extreme Biblical literalism. Thomas Schugger, who reportedly killed his brother at the command of the Spirit, may have been a marginal Anabaptist. The Naaktlopers who ran naked through the streets of Amsterdam in 1535 to declare the naked truth to all mankind were similarly over-enthusiastic, as were the eschatological visions of Melchior Hoffman. The debacle of Münster reached its violent climax in 1535. Nevertheless, the "false freedom" movement among the Brethren⁴⁰ finds a closer parallel in the antinomianism attending Luther's reformation than in Anabaptism. On the other hand, the "spiritual despotism" of which Toews writes,⁴¹ finds parallels in the harsh banning practices of the Dutch elders. The "June Reform,"⁴² in turn, might be compared to the 1527 meeting at Schleithem in terms of its concern for order and unity.⁴³

In each case the psychological stress attending renewal and persecution led to aberrations which were eventually brought under control, but which left their negative impact on the public image of the movements. The relief of the majority of Mennonites in the colony when the "mad year (Fall 1864 to Spring 1865)," as P. M. Friesen called it, came to an end is described vividly by him. A "broad stream of good will" was extended to the Brethren by all but the "fanatically hostile" among the "church" Mennonites, including particularly many former brothers of the faith, friends and relatives.⁴⁴ In the sixteenth century Anabaptists did not experience this kind of rapprochement within five years of their origin. Aberrations have been a part of most renewal movements

in church and society. They tend to be defined as such by moderates or opponents impatient with evolving leadership patterns and changing objectives. It was easier to start the French Revolution than to stop it.

Sense of Mission: A fifth parallel to the sixteenth century lies in the strong missionary consciousness of the Brethren of 1860. Witnessing to the spiritually lost or impoverished, both within the Mennonite brotherhood and beyond, became for them an inseparable part of the nature of the church of Christ. The primary agenda item of the first Mennonite Brethren Conference, held in 1872, was evangelism.⁴⁵ The statistics given in Chapter 23 of the new History confirm the effectiveness of this vision. The sense of mission in early Anabaptism has been amply documented by Franklin H. Littell, Wolfgang Schaufele, and others.⁴⁶ If the nature of the church was at the heart of Anabaptist concern the missionary vision of the Brethren of 1860 represents the first vital recovery of that heritage, though we should not overlook the earlier influence and activities of Tobias Voth, Bernhard Fast, the Ohrloff and Gnadenfeld churches and others, as Gerhard Lohrenz has reminded us.⁴⁷ Here they indeed shared the spirit of Menno when he wrote:

We could wish that we might save all mankind from the jaws of hell, free them from the chains of their sins, and by the gracious help of God add them to Christ by the Gospel of His peace. For this is the true nature of the love which is of God.⁴⁸

It has sometimes been held that the Mennonite forfeited their birth-right by promising not to engage in missionary activity in Russia. There is no evidence of such a promise. It is true, however, that on July 22, 1763, long before their coming, a law was passed in Russia which forbade all proselyting by anyone on pain of severe punishment. The Mennonites were probably apprised of this law. The presence of this prohibition makes the "civil disobedience" of the early Brethren even more significant. The present volume is unduly modest in this regard. The Brethren took grave risks to life and property in carrying their witness beyond the Mennonites, and some suffered for it.⁴⁹ Gerhard Lohrenz reports:

Thus Ehrt concludes that "the Mennonites were important carriers and leaders of the evangelical movement. Mennonitism was the midwife and tutor of Russian evangelicalism. . . . In the historical-spiritual field this is the most significant contribution of the Mennonites in Russia." Saloff-Astakhoff wrote: "Yet though they [the Mennonites] could not evangelize openly they had a strong influence upon the surrounding Russian population, helping to spread the evangelical Protestant Movement in this country."⁵⁰

The Theological Identity of the Brethren

The historical origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church have been amply documented in the present History. There was clearly a convergence of Anabaptist-Mennonite, Pietist, and Baptist influences in its birth. Economic factors were present but to see these as primary is to commit the same error present in contemporary Marxist historiography about Anabaptism. The evidence does not support the thesis. Author Toews correctly stresses the importance of Ohrloff and Gnadenfeld,⁵¹ and might well have included them under his

subtitle "The Influence of Pietism," together with Eduard Wuest. In view of the growing influence these two centers were developing it may be that the primary significance of Wuest was to precipitate the schism by introducing alien agenda from without. We will never know the extent of the renewal that would have come without him. Some of the most positive and most negative influences upon Mennonites throughout their history have come from outside of the group.

In assessing Anabaptist, Pietist, and Baptist influences upon the early life of the Brethren it should be remembered that they knew little of Swiss Anabaptist history with its roots in Humanism and the Zwinglian magisterial reformation. What they did know was Menno's Foundation of Christian Doctrine and felt an ethnic as well as spiritual kinship with him. Menno's roots were not in Humanism but in the Brethren of the Common Life and Catholic piety. In his self-depreciation, his stress upon repentance and confession (Busskampf), and especially in making a personal conversion experience rather than the nature of the church central to his theology Menno came within a hairsbreadth of classical Halle Pietism. Consequently the recovery of this emphasis by the Brethren through the influence of Herrnhut-Gnadenfeld and Wuest was not so much a detour as a return home, though the latter's antinomianism was a new and probably unwholesome influence. Twentieth century Mennonite historiography has made Dutch Anabaptism and Pietism too antithetical and under-stated the differences between the Dutch and Swiss movements. That the practice of baptism by immersion came about through Baptist influence, and possibly the tract from the Free Evangelical Church of St. Gall to which P. M. Friesen refers, seems clear.⁵²

The identity of the Believers' Church, however, is often determined more by historical discontinuity than by continuity. The appeals of the Brethren to Menno do not in themselves guarantee authentic Anabaptism, viz. Mennonitism. Since the references to Menno seem to be entirely to his 1539 Foundation of Christian Doctrine, something of the shape of the Brethren theological emphasis may be assessed in how they used that document, particularly in the January 6, 1860 Document of Secession. In doing this we need to remember that the Document was drafted quickly and without any intention of making it a confession of faith. It is interesting to note how much more irenic it is in tone than Menno's polemic. Also, though Menno does not tire of identifying himself as a miserable sinner, the Document is by far the more modest of the two.

We are led to ask immediately why the Document chooses to discuss only the ordinances and the ministry, in addition to the preamble, and contents itself with stating twice that in all other articles "we are in full agreement with Menno Simons." Was Menno's statement on the ordinances and ministry inadequate, or did the Brethren consider these issues at the heart of their concern? The latter was most likely the case since they do not add new interpretation to what Menno wrote, except for the addition of article (g) on footwashing. But the issue probably lay deeper in the concern of the Brethren for the organizing of a new spiritual community. Ministry and ordinances are the structure around which a fellowship was to be gathered and where the frustration with the established church was greatest. The Document is, therefore, more organizationally than theologically oriented and stands in considerable parallel to the Schleithem articles of 1527.

Beyond this, the Document seems intended to stress a major point of disagreement with the old church--the absence of a personal conversion experience as a prerequisite for baptism. This lacuna carried with it implicit consequences for the Lord's Supper by defiling the Body of Christ every time believers observed it together with unbelievers. And basic to these concerns was the spiritual inadequacy of the ministers, including the manner of their calling to office. Because of these factors the Document stresses the necessity of separation from "these decadent churches" but commits the signers to prayers for them. It is finally also significant that the Brethren explicitly place the Scriptures before Menno in the wording of article (d). Their convictions are based on Scripture "in agreement with our dear Menno."

There are, of course, many issues discussed by Menno which are not mentioned in the Document except with the blanket statement of agreement with him. This is a strong theological affirmation of Menno's views on Christology and pneumatology, eschatological urgency, stress upon repentance and regeneration, discipleship, reliance on spiritual weapons only, the danger of false learning ("the Word is plain and needs no interpretation"), the place of magistracy, and encouragement to the Bride of Christ to be faithful until he comes.

Footwashing is not mentioned by Menno in this treatise. He refers to it in other places, but without special emphasis, as a "custom of the saints," but does not make it a sign of the true church.⁵³ The renewed emphasis of the Brethren on this Dominical practice is undoubtedly based on Article IX of the Confession of the Flemish, Frisian and High German Mennonites, printed in Odessa in 1853, and which they had available.⁵⁴ Among the Dutch Anabaptists it was Dirk Philips rather than Menno who stressed footwashing in his writings.

In all of these emphases of the Brethren, with the exception of baptism by immersion, the evidence of their congruity with the teaching of Menno is strong and clear. Aside from all historical lineage the theological identity in itself thus confirms, though only briefly tested here, that 1860 was indeed 1525 viz. revisited, both in essence and in form. If this is true it actually becomes unnecessary to speak of practical Biblicism, experiential faith, witnessing, discipleship and brotherhood as Brethren "distinctives,"⁵⁵ but rather to see them as an integral part of the historic Anabaptist-Mennonite definition of what it means to be a Believers' Church.

In Retrospect

It may be that theologically the term schism belongs more to the vocabulary of Cyprian's third century extra ecclesia nulla salus est era, or to a monolithic corpus christianum and the age of the Inquisition, or even to the sociology of a parish church pattern than to Believers' Church congregationalism, but it has been a part of Anabaptist-Mennonite experience from the beginning. Given the ideals of freedom, brotherhood, consensus, and the commitment to love, the term swarming might be more appropriate for separations within the Believers' Church.

From our twentieth century perspective we are tempted to ask whether the tension and suffering, and ultimately the schism, was really necessary either in the sixteenth century or in 1860. Would moderation have achieved the same results in the end without the agony experienced? Zwingli was deeply concerned for reform in 1525. In 1856 the Agricultural Society of the

Molotschna colony issued a query to all teachers in the colony asking for their evaluation of the moral situation. A majority of them (37) reported that moral reforms were very urgently needed.⁵⁶ References have already been made to the deep concern of Elder Johann Harder and his congregation at Ohrloff, as well as the Gnadenfeld settlement and many others who were in real sympathy with the Brethren concern for renewal. Would it have come anyway if they had been more patient?

We will never know, of course. Yet neither sixteenth century Anabaptists nor the Brethren of 1860 were "set" on schism; all wanted renewal of the church, not division. The well-known description of the events of January 21, 1525, which closes with the words, "Thereby began separation from the world and from its evil works," was not written by the Swiss Brethren but by the Hutterian chronicler.⁵⁷ The discussions were terminated by the authorities, not by the Grebel circle. By 1527, however, the actual situation led to a clearly developed rationale for separation, spelled out in Article IV of Schleithelm: ". . . He orders us to be and to become separated from the evil one . . . therefore to go out from Babylon and from the earthly Egypt."⁵⁸

Menno struggled for eleven years before he broke with Roman Catholicism in 1536. It represented a sharp rejection of historic Christianity in both doctrine and practice and a redefinition of the meaning of Christian identity.⁵⁹ Menno wanted nothing less than the restitution of Biblical Christianity, not reformation, but it seemed to him that Rome wanted neither. The break was less radical for Grebel and his circle because Zwingli also had a vision of restitution. The difference between them and him lay initially in how and when it should be achieved.

The 1860 Document of the Brethren includes elements of both of these procedures. Like the Grebel circle they too pleaded repeatedly for renewal. The request that Elder Lenzmann celebrate communion with them shows their initial non-separatist intentions. But their prognosis gave them little ground for hope. They longed for a true Believers' Church where new life in Christ, admonition, and discipleship would be taken seriously. The line of demarcation between church and world had become blurred and needed to be redrawn in the power of the Spirit.

Few schismatics have set out deliberately to destroy the unity of the church. Their descendents see them not as schismatics but as pioneers of the faith. Those who defended the status quo are seen as the real schismatics. An assorted combination of social, economic, political, personal and, above all, spiritual motives have always been involved. Paradoxical as it may seem, the Holy Spirit appears to bring disunity as well as unity to the church, though his primary gift is love. This is the tragedy and, perhaps the necessity of the endless chain of schisms in the church. Undue concern over schisms may reflect an over-institutional view of the church as well. In the inscrutable wisdom of God it appears that he is able to add glory to his name not only in spite of these schisms, but often because of them. 1860 would be a case in point.

Footnotes

¹ John A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Fresno, Calif.: Board of Christian Literature. General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1975., p. 1.

² Ibid., pp. 363-64.

³ Jacob P. Bekker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Hillsboro, Kansas: The Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973, p. 180.

⁴ Quoted in Toews, History, p. 362.

⁵ P. M. Friesen, Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Brüderschaft in Russland (1789-1910). Halbstadt: Verlagsgesellschaft Raduga, 1911, p. 174.

⁶ Ibid., p. 192.

⁷ Quoted in Toews, History, p. 367.

⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

⁹ Friesen, op. cit., pp. 669ff.

¹⁰ Bekker, op. cit., p. 72.

¹¹ Odessa: Franzow & Witsche, 1852.

¹² Martin Klaassen, Geschichte der wehrlosen taufgesinnten Gemeinden von den Zeiten der Apostel bis auf die Gegenwart. Danzig: Edwin Groening, 1873. See also Walter Klaassen, "A Belated Review . . ." Mennonite Quarterly Review, XLIX (January, 1975), 43-52.

¹³ Friesen, op. cit., pp. 569ff. See also Leonhard Froese, Das Pädagogische Kultursystem der mennonitischen Siedlungsgruppe in Russland. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Göttingen, 1949. For a discussion of non-Mennonite literature in the colonies see Jacob John Toews, Cultural Background of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Toronto, 1951, pp. 169-174.

¹⁴ Bekker, op. cit., pp. 10-13 for text of the Privilegium in translation.

¹⁵ The Complete Writings of Menno Simons. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956, p. 402. Hereafter cited as CWMS.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 314.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 334.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 162.

²¹ Bekker, op. cit., p. 19.

- ²²Ibid., p. 21.
- ²³Toews, History, pp. 19-25.
- ²⁴Cornelius J. Dyck, Editor, An Introduction to Mennonite History. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967, p. 29.
- ²⁵Robert Friedmann. "Faith and Reason: The Principles of Mennonitism Reconsidered, in a Treatise of 1833," Mennonite Quarterly Review, XXII (April, 1948), p. 91.
- ²⁶Friesen, op. cit., p. 166.
- ²⁷Toews, History, p. 45.
- ²⁸Bekker, op. cit., pp. 79ff. See also Franz Isaac, Die Molotschnaer Mennoniten. Halbstadt: Druck von H. J. Braun, 1908. Note also the evaluation of Isaac's volume by Friesen in op. cit., p. 164 n. 1 as "einseitiges Buch . . . mit seiner heroischen Offenherzigkeit."
- ²⁹John H. Yoder, The Legacy of Michael Sattler. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973, p. 39.
- ³⁰Bekker, op. cit., p. 33.
- ³¹Toews, History, p. 23.
- ³²Ibid., p. 20. Quoted from Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment," Mennonite Quarterly Review, XXV (January, 1951), p. 22.
- ³³Toews, History, p. 39.
- ³⁴Bekker, op. cit., p. 57.
- ³⁵Isaac, op. cit.
- ³⁶Friesen, op. cit., pp. 276-78.
- ³⁷Ibid., p. 268.
- ³⁸Ibid., p. 355.
- ³⁹Ibid., pp. 212-13.
- ⁴⁰Toews, History, p. 60. Cf: Friesen, op. cit., pp. 347-53.
- ⁴¹Ibid., p. 61.
- ⁴²Ibid., p. 64.
- ⁴³Yoder, op. cit., pp. 27ff.
- ⁴⁴Friesen, op. cit., p. 375.

- ⁴⁵Toews, History, p. 76.
- ⁴⁶Franklin H. Littell, The Anabaptist View of the Church. Boston: Starr King Press, 1958. Chp. IV. Wolfgang Schaufele, Dass missionarische Bewusstsein der Täufer. Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966.
- ⁴⁷Gerhard Lohrenz, "The Mennonites of Russia and the Great Commission" in Cornelius J. Dyck, Editor. A Legacy of Faith. Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1962, pp. 175f.
- ⁴⁸CWMS, p. 633.
- ⁴⁹Lohrenz, op. cit., pp. 179f.
- ⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 182-83.
- ⁵¹Toews, History, pp. 27-29.
- ⁵²Friesen, op. cit., p. 243.
- ⁵³CWMS, pp. 417, 1063. See also William E. Keeney, Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice, 1539-1564. Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1968, pp. 154f., and Cornelius Krahn, Menno Simons. Karlsruhe: H. Schneider Verlag, 1936, pp. 142f.
- ⁵⁴Confession oder durzes und einfältiges Glaubensbekenntniss derer so man nennt die vereinigte Flämische, Friesische, und Hochdeutsche Taufgesinnte Mennonitengemeinde. Ausgegeben durch die Gemeinde zu Rudnerweide in Südrussland. Odessa: Franzow & Nitzsche, 1953.
- ⁵⁵Toews, History, pp. 367ff.
- ⁵⁶Jacob John Toews, op. cit., pp. 154-160.
- ⁵⁷Dyck, op. cit., p. 34.
- ⁵⁸Yoder, op. cit., p. 38.
- ⁵⁹See Cornelius J. Dyck, "The Place of Tradition in Dutch Anabaptism," Church History, 43 (March, 1974), pp. 34-49.