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# Pilgrims & Strangers

Essays in Mennonite Brethren History

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## MENNONITE BRETHREN: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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"Mennonite Brethren past, present and future." The topic calls for a post-mortem of the church that was, for a diagnosis of the church that is, and for a prognosis of the church that is to be. It is a task impossible for ordinary mortals. Moreover, the topic implies a definite relationship between prophecy and history. Many preachers read prophecy as pre-recorded history, but it is doubtful whether historians can do something similar and read history as prophecy and make predications for the future on the basis of an historical analysis. On the one hand, it is difficult enough to tell it like it was, and even more so, to tell like it is or like it might be. On the other hand, I fully appreciate the significance of a larger, more comprehensive approach to historical analysis. H. Richard Niebuhr, correctly claims, that all attempts to interpret the past are indirect attempts to understand the present and its future. It is unfortunate that modern existentialism, which has influenced our Christian thinking so much, tends to rob us of both the past and the future. I find that the present Christian experience can become meaningful only in the context of both history and eschatology, in a faith that has both the historical and eschatological dimension. The person who can identify with the past, who can identify not only with the Christ of personal experience but also with the Lord of history, with the God of our fathers, is much better equipped to face a difficult present and an uncertain future.

I would like to consider several aspects of our past and of our present and make some observations about the future of our church. These will be cursory observations; they will be glimpses into the past, present, and future. What I suggest might more accurately be described as reflections of a concerned churchman rather than the

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objective analysis of an historian.

### I. Mennonite Brethren in the Past

I would like to analyze the past in both positive and negative terms and follow this pattern in looking at the present and the future. What are some of the positive aspects in our past? What are the positive forces that have shaped our history? I begin with what has been repeatedly emphasized and what is a very basic factor in the understanding of our past: that is the practical biblicism that motivated our forefathers and shaped their lives. The M.B. church was born in fellowship centers such as Gnadenfeld and Ohrloff, and these *Brudertums-Kreise*, as they were called, were given to Bible study and prayer. Our early Brethren certainly could be called a "congregation of radical Bible readers." They read the scriptures, not in order to construct a theological system, but to find answers for Christian faith and life. They did not read the Bible in order to revise the Mennonite Confession of Faith but to find some very practical guidelines for the work of the church. We read of the *Biblestunden* which they conducted and of the *Bibelbesprechungen* which they carried on. Wesley Prieb has effectively characterized the early Brethren when he describes them as people who were known by their bulging coat pocket in which they carried a well-worn Bible. Our forefathers have always put the Bible into the center of things and have even institutionalized their biblicism. We have built Bible schools, Bible academies, Bible institutes, Bible colleges and finally a Biblical Seminary. It was important that the word Bible be part of the title in order to give it the proper image; and we have been very reluctant to change it to something different.

A second major factor in our past has been the emphasis on the church as a covenant community. Like their Anabaptist forefathers, the early Brethren could not conceive of the Christian life apart from the fellowship of the believers, the redeemed community. They felt it was a vital

part of the Christian life. They wouldn't have gone as far as Cyprian who taught *Extra ecclesiam, nulla solus*, but they came very close to it. Every believer must belong to the church, to the covenant community. Members made a voluntary commitment to Christ, but they also made a voluntary covenant with one another. This commitment found expression in the name of the association which they formed.

They called their first assembly not "general conference," but the *Bundeskonferenz*, or covenant conference, which was composed of *Bundesgemeinde* (covenant churches). One entered this community of the redeemed by making a baptismal covenant or *Taufbund*. This emphasis on covenant had far-reaching implications for our concept of the church and of the Christian witness. Our Brethren believed in a corporate witness, and there was no provision made to "do your own thing." They felt that they had to come together, and together they tried to comprehend the length and breadth and height and depth of the will of God. Thus we have the strong emphasis on the covenant. Only on such a basis can we be effective in both our Christian ethics and also our Christian witness. We find it increasingly difficult to carry on any church discipline. It is difficult largely because we have lost this concept of a covenant community where we take real responsibility for one another, as the early brethren did. They united to walk according to the same rule and when they found that smoking was a bad habit they agreed not to smoke. Those who didn't agree, were put out of the church. They took a united stand. We find it very difficult today to take a united stand on ethical questions. The ability to do so is important for the maintenance of our corporate witness.

The early brethren also manifested a strong missionary concern. At the first *Bundeskonferenz* held in Andreasfeld, Chortitza, in 1872, they elected one committee and that was for evangelism. At first this evangelism was largely restricted to the immediate community but it later extended

to the regions beyond. In *The Legacy of Faith* Gerhard Lohrenz writes that many of the people from the Mennonite Church joined the new Mennonite movement because they shared this vision for evangelism, especially among the Russian people.

Having noted the strengths of the early movement I would like to point out certain limitations in their understanding of the Christian life and of the Christian community. There was an almost complete internalization of the Christian faith among our early brethren. Every religious movement faces two great dangers. One is the complete internalization of the faith, the other is the complete externalization, where faith becomes a matter of mere form. One sees this especially in later Judaism and also in the Roman Catholic Church. Every church tends to become more formal as it continues to exist. It happened in the Mennonite Church. The reaction was an internalization of Christian experience due largely to the influence of the Pietists on 19th century Mennonitism. This internalization as a corrective to mere formalism and barren orthodoxy is a wholesome thing. It was necessary at the time. But when one experiences God's grace only internally and not in all areas of life, then this eventually results in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Some of our brethren suffered from this emphasis in earlier years.

Another negative tendency among our brethren of the past was a tendency toward isolationism. Separation from sin was often interpreted as isolation not only from things but from people and even from other believers. We have often been concerned more with the preservation of our faith than with the propagation of the good news and sharing of our faith with others. We have separated ourselves from other Evangelicals and from the larger Mennonite brotherhood.

Closely connected with isolation was an inclination toward legalism. We have defined sin very often in terms of acts rather than in terms of attitudes and disposition. The

Mennonite Brethren pilgrim on his way to Zion could find his way rather easily if he would by-pass certain institutions. If he could avoid the dance hall, the beer parlor, and the movie theater, he was well on his way. This attitude has been unfortunate because the sins of the spirit are much more difficult to overcome than the sins of the flesh. We have often been lopsided in our ethical emphasis.

Moreover, we have in the past also displayed a negative attitude toward culture. Mennonites in general, and Mennonite Brethren in particular, have manifested a certain *Kulturfeindlichkeit*, a certain cultural narrowness, both in education and in the fine arts. Education was often equated with worldly wisdom, and we did not want to become involved in man's philosophy or in worldly wisdom. We have found it increasingly difficult to reconcile Christ and culture, scripture and science. As a result of the *Kulturfeindlichkeit* we have often robbed ourselves of a richer Christian life and of a more effective witness. We have not used cultural tools for an effective propagation of the faith and for sharing our Christian concerns with others. The intellectual horizon of many of our brethren has often been very narrow. A friend told me that when he was pastor of a church in Western Canada composed mostly of rural people, "I find it difficult to really speak to these people and share with them my faith because the only thing they read is the Bible and the Western Producer, a farm paper." Reading little literature or history has permitted us to inhabit a small world.

## II. Mennonite Brethren in the Present

The living faith of the dead can become the dead faith of the living. It has happened before; it can happen again. There are trends in our present Mennonite Brethren Church that require our attention. We have reached the stage of almost complete acculturation. Formerly we emphasized isolation from culture, now we rapidly move toward complete conformity to culture. I don't know which is the

greater evil, complete identification or complete isolation from culture. It is difficult to identify Mennonite Brethren outside of the church building. A study of their economic and recreational activities, of their political involvements and their lifestyle, would not give us many criteria to distinguish them from other Canadians or Americans. We are so much like them. This is an indictment. Niebuhr, Miller, and Pauck some years ago wrote a booklet pointing out that the church must be against the world to save the world. There must be tension, there must be non-conformity in lifestyle. We find it difficult to attract people to our churches and to our faith because they see no difference between church and world, and they are indifferent because we are not different.

A second problem in our present Mennonite Brethren Church is our great material affluence. Perhaps the present economic crisis will help us to solve this problem in part and lead us back to a simpler lifestyle. We have moved rather rapidly from the lower class to the middle class and even into the upper economic and cultural class of society. As a brotherhood we have learned to cope with poverty, but have we learned to cope with wealth and affluence? John Kenneth Galbraith, the famous Harvard economist, wrote some years ago that it is much more difficult to deal with affluence than with poverty. Material wealth in our brotherhood can be a source and a potential for great blessing if it is used in the expansion of the Kingdom, but it can also be a great liability and a great curse if it is used for self-indulgence and self-glory. We all know the old saying that piety gives birth to prosperity, and then the mother turns around and devours the child. So often piety is devoured by prosperity.

Another trend that raises concern in the present M.B. Church is a shallow evangelicalism. This shallowness is somewhat related to acculturation. We preach and sing a message that does not disturb people in their comfortable pews. We offer them God's gracious provision, God's peace,

God's forgiveness, without calling them to commitment and Christian discipleship. With a strong emphasis on the vertical relationship of man to God, we have failed to stress the second part of the Great Commandment: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. A shallow evangelicalism finds expression in our worship services, in a sentimental kind of church music which does not challenge us to action. We are very open to any new fad that comes along. Our roots in theology and history are not deep, and when a new movement comes along we accept the whole package, whether it comes from Campus Crusade, Bill Gothard, or someone else. I am in favor of receiving as much as possible from these movements, but with discernment, with discrimination. We will not retain our identity, we will not be effective in our witness, unless we exercise this discernment.

On the positive side of the ledger there is the churches renewed search for historical and theological identity. Who are we? What is our role and mission in this world? Such questions surface constantly. This symposium has revealed such a concern. In the (Old) Mennonite Church the rediscovery of the Anabaptist vision led to renewal, to reorientation, and to a new interest in service and witness. I trust that this will also be the case in our brotherhood. I find a great interest in our theological and historical roots, especially among college and university students. They are often more interested in our heritage than their fathers and mothers, and this augers well for the future. There is great concern for historical and theological identity. This interest is expressed by people who have seen the options, who have not been kept in a sheltered brotherhood, but who have become interested again in that which they feel has more depth and meaning than contemporary evangelicalism.

Another hopeful feature is a search for true *Koinonia*, for true fellowship. Our early brethren were very much concerned about true fellowship. We have many members today who are not satisfied with just sitting neatly in rows

during a Sunday morning worship service. There is a desire to enter into each other's lives and to bear each other's burdens. The cells that emerge in many communities, the Bible studies in the homes, are meeting a deep need for more intimate fellowship. During the early years our brethren didn't have any churches but met in private homes. They used the low German language for about twelve years in their services before they changed to high German. This may have also led to a greater formality, and in some instances, to a loss of *Koinonia*.

Further encouragement and hope emerges from today's search for meaningful witness. There is a revival of an early form of evangelism—personal evangelism. The early brethren all came from the laity, there was not an ordained deacon or minister among them, but they were great personal workers. They shared their faith, they were what our brethren used to call *Knogflock-Missionare*, they used to button-hole people and ask them: Are you already a follower of Jesus? Do you know him as your savior? In that way they shared their faith with others. This mode of evangelism appears to be coming back. Lately, we have come to realize that this is possibly the most effective and the most fruitful way to build the church and to expand God's kingdom.

But we also have a new interest in a Christian witness which finds expression in a prophetic voice. We have prided ourselves in the past that we were *die Stillen im Lande* ("the quiet of the land"). But silence can sometimes be criminal silence, especially in view of social, economic, and religious injustice. There is a real need to speak out against social injustice, against discriminations of minority groups, against the violence, war, and materialism of our age. We have a definite prophetic witness to give and there is an increasing concern that we give it now as a part of our total witness to society. There is also a new and increased interest today in practical ministries of love and reconciliation. When I reflect on the last 55 years since MCC came into being, I cannot help but accept this agency as a gift of God

to our present age and to our church of this day. It is the kind of witness that is heard and seen also by people who have no interest in what we preach in our churches. It is an effective witness, and we should thank God for the increased interest in such ministry in our brotherhood.

### III. Mennonite Brethren in the Future

Daniel Webster when asked to predict the future history of America said, "I shall do that in five words: rise, prosperity, luxury, decline, fall." History does not need to repeat itself. It's only for people who learn nothing from history that history repeats itself. What are the prospects for the future? There is an increasing polarization of theological perspectives in our brotherhood. We have a left wing and a right wing in our churches. We have a left wing that is very much interested in famine relief and welfare. These people usually identify very closely with the Mennonite Central Committee and with similar agencies. They are also very much interested in a positive peace witness, although occasionally they may drift away from the New Testament basis. In this group there is an emphasis on social services, social action, social concerns—the Christian church must always have that concern. We also have those who feel that this is not a part of the gospel. All they desire is a traditional evangelism, an "old fashioned Gospel." This is coupled usually with a strong emphasis on Christian doctrine, on the fundamentals, on man's vertical relationship to Jesus Christ, but with very little emphasis on the social implications of the Gospel, and on the peace witness. They would much rather identify with militant nationalist Christians than with those who emphasize peace, relief, and social service. Both of these extremes can be dangerous. There need be no serious tension between evangelism and the peace witness. The peace witness has always been a part of the total Gospel. Jesus taught us to observe all he commanded. An over-emphasis of social concerns can lead to a shallow humanism. An over-emphasis on personal

salvation can lead to a barren fundamentalism. It is uncertain which is the greater evil. The two must be kept in proper balance; we must bring the whole gospel to the whole man.

A second concern that needs our attention is the increasing proliferation of our missionary effort. This tends to divide loyalties. Our churches and families are bombarded with appeals from every quarter for help. Many missionary agencies have found that the Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren churches are a fruitful field which they diligently cultivate. If they can only get into our Mennonite communities they know that they will get financial support because we have a heart for the needy and for the lost. One of our little country churches in Canada at one time supported 13 missionaries, and I don't think one of them served under M.B. missions. In such a church there is very little interest in M.B. mission work. I believe we can make our greatest impact by concentrating our efforts on our own program under our Board of Missions and Services. It is a good program and deserves our whole-hearted support.

What are my hopes for the M.B. Church? I hope that there will be a recovery of the Anabaptist vision of Christian discipleship. I find this the same as New Testament discipleship. Sometimes we hear voices which exhort us to go back to the New Testament and not to the Anabaptist movement. One can understand that. Simultaneously, the Anabaptists made an attempt to realize the New Testament vision. We need to identify with the historical church, and I'd rather identify with the Anabaptists than with the Lutherans or the Reformed of the sixteenth century, although we also can learn very much from the latter. So I hope that there will be a recovery of Christian discipleship, which is just another way of stating that we must have a new commitment to Christ's lordship. It is so easy to drift away from the faith of the scriptures and from the faith of our fathers. Basil Wiley in his book *Christianity: Past and Present* claims

that the first generation of Christians has a deep and profound experience. The second generation has a shadow experience, and the third generation has only the shadow of a shadow. I wonder whether there are not many shadows around us, where there is little evidence of genuine commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord of life. Sebastian Frank who turned from Catholicism to Lutheranism noted that as Catholics we were work saints, as Lutherans we became word saints. He found no difference between *Werk-heilige und Wort-heilige oder Mundchristen*. We must combine the emphasis on word and on work by emphasizing a new model, and that is the model of discipleship. The Christians of the book of Acts were known as people of "The Way," not people of a certain work. They had a certain lifestyle, they acted and walked in a certain way. We need to become more and more a people of "The Way."

We also need a recovery of the Anabaptist vision of the covenant community. I am rather pessimistic about the future of our church unless we overcome all the centrifugal tendencies, all the tendencies that tear us apart where everyone does his own thing. Unless we can unite again in a covenant community where we share common goals, common aspirations, common hopes, and common programs of action, our total mission program will be undermined and might even collapse. I trust very much that we will unite again as a *Bundeskonzferenz*, as a covenant community.

What does the future hold for us? It is as bright as the promises of God for the Mennonite Brethren Church. This hope is not based upon reflections of the past nor on an analysis of the present. I sometimes am a little impatient with the critics of our church who say that unless we become more relevant we will soon be swept under the rug. The church is not of man's making, however. The church is Christ's church, and the promise which inspires our hope is the promise in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." I was again

impressed with this truth when I had the opportunity to visit the Soviet Union and there met Mennonite Brethren who have not had all the props that have sustained and inspired us and that have influenced us in the last 50 years. They have gone through suffering and martyrdom, and God has preserved them. They sometimes wonder whether we are the true church since we live in peace and prosperity. They have experienced persecution and suffering, which puts them into the true "apostolic succession" that we find in the book of Acts. I have hopes for the church because Christ is going to continue to build his church through his Spirit in the renewal of the individual as well as in the renewal of the whole body. By the grace of God the prospects are bright for the Mennonite Brethren Church.