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MENNONITE BRETHREN IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF  
CHANGING THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

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The recent publication, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, by John A. Toews traces some of the influences to which Mennonite Brethren have been exposed in the 115 years of their pilgrimage. Under the title "Understanding Biblical Revelation: Developments and Distinctions in Mennonite Brethren Theology" the author outlines the historical roots of Mennonite Brethren theology; characteristic distinctions of Mennonite Brethren theology and some outside influences on Mennonite Brethren theology. The purpose of this paper is to broaden the considerations of these outside influences in their source and their affect upon theology and life of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship in the past and in the present. The source material for the consideration of the subject is drawn from various historical records, personal experiences and observations, the latter gives the paper some biographical style.

Mennonitism in Russia in the 18th and 19th century as a socio-religious culture no longer expressed the relationship of faith and life unique to their forefathers of the 16th century. The Kleine Gemeinde, and the fellowship centers in Orloff and Gnadenfeld testified to a broad concern for a return to the expression of faith recorded in the writings of Menno and the example of life of the early Mennonite community.<sup>1</sup> The cry for a faith and life consistent with the scriptures as a dominant emphasis of the founders of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship is reflected in the statement of cessation and other confessional documents which were recorded.<sup>2</sup>

A scriptocentric position of the Mennonite Brethren was directive for their pilgrimage of faith and life in Russia as well as in North America. A statement in the Mennonitische Blaetter of 1863 speaks to the question of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship in relation to the scripture as follows: "They are better versed in the Holy Scriptures, so much so that one is amazed and pleased at the understanding of scriptures of the lowest and most humble among them."<sup>3</sup> Wesley Prieb notes a mark of the Mennonite Brethren in their early years by writing: "The early members of our church were often recognized by their bulging coat pockets which contained a well worn Bible. The Bible Hour (Bibelstunden) became the basis of their fellowship and worship. Reading the Word was part of their daily family habits."<sup>4</sup> It may well be recognized that the Bible, as the final point of reference for the movement, explains why a small revivalistic movement within the larger Mennonite community remained anchored in the 16th century Anabaptist roots, even though subjected to many theological influence throughout the years of their history.

Influences that have affected Mennonite Brethren theological understanding are numerous and appear like the river basin with a main stream of scriptural Anabaptist commitment fed by many tributaries. Their basic checkpoint "What does the Bible say" provided them with a compass that showed them the way in the exposure of varied interpretations and resulting expressions in life and

practice. The early crisis in the history of Mennonite Brethren (1863-1895) in the phenomena of excessive emotionalism, found its solution in a scriptural orientation recognizing that such expression of faith was of the flesh and not of the spirit. The broader record of major influences that have affected Mennonite Brethren theology will add accumulative evidence that their commitment to the scriptures remained the guiding influence in their historic pilgrimage.

### Influence of Pietism

With its roots in the Anabaptist understanding of the scriptures the Mennonite Brethren became heirs of the early influences of pietism which historically has influenced the renewal movements of the post reformation era. Robert Friedman in his book Mennonite Piety through the Centuries characterizes Anabaptism as "Essentially a movement which insisted upon an earnest and uncompromising endeavor to live the life of true discipleship that is to find expression in fellowship of love to the deepest Christian faith with full readiness to suffer in conflict with the evil world order."<sup>5</sup> The strong influence of pietism on the experiential reality of personal salvation through repentance, faith and a new birth, central to the preaching ministry of Eduard Wuest, no doubt had a major influence on the 1845-60 search for new life among the Mennonites in Russia. In his comparison of Anabaptism and Pietism Friedman makes the following observation:

Many things were common possessions of the two groups. Both groups justified their policy on the basis of leadership of the Holy Spirit which taught them the correct understanding of the scriptures. Both claimed to live strictly according to the Bible, that is neither had confidence in a Christianity of theologians and scholars. Both were seriously concerned with the Christian reality which lies beyond church and worship although they understand the ultimate nature of this Christian reality differently. After all how could it be determined who possesses the right Holy Spirit except through the evidences of the same life.<sup>6</sup>

The context of pietistic writings upon the Mennonite Brethren in Russia needs also to be recognized as being a continuous major influence. The book Wahres Christentum by Johann Arnd was part of the limited libraries of early Mennonite Brethren. My father referred frequently to Johann Arnd, and read portions from this book to us as a family in our devotional exercises and in the Bible Hour (Bibelstunden) as expository emphasis to the understanding of the relationship of faith and life. The description of Mennonite Brethren as being Mennonite in doctrine and pietistic in spirit is well stated.

A strong pietistic influence on the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren continued up to 1914, the first World War. Jacob Kroeker, one of the few theologically trained Bible teachers from the ranks of the Mennonite Brethren, was closely affiliated with the Blankenburg Alliance Conference and provided a continuous channel of communication between the Mennonite Brethren church in Russia and the Alliance movement in Western Europe.

The Blankenburg Alliance Conference was established in 1885 and became the center for the European movement of the Plymouth Brethren in England, the fellowship circle of evangelical believers within the state church in Germany and the free church movements on the continent. Dr. F. W. Baedeker, a close associate to Ann von Welling, a scottish noblewoman, who founded the Bible

conference center, was the major architect of Blankenburg in providing vision, inspiration and leadership. Baedeker was a member of the Plymouth Brethren, also called Darbyites, which originated almost simultaneously at Plymouth, England and Dublin, Ireland about the year 1830. "The Brethren" profess to have no creed, as putting human opinions in the place of the Word of God; and yet, the writings of John Darby are quite dogmatic, saying nothing of McIntosh and his work on the Pentateuch. Their emphasis was strong on the inner spiritual life, sanctification, fellowship and prophecy.<sup>8</sup> Neither Dr. Baedeker, nor the majority of the speakers of the conference through the years, were theologians. The need for serious efforts in systematic theological studies was not part of F. W. Baedeker. He was a charismatic personality, a man rich in spiritual experiences and a gifted pastor. As a witness for Jesus Christ he gave his life to the ministry unreservedly and spent much of his time in a ministry to the population in Russian prisons. This ministry took him all through Russia into the most removed regions of the Siberian labor camps of the Empire. His example of deep devotion and prayer, unselfish self-sacrifice in service and untiring work in teaching the scriptures with the central emphasis on the truth "God loves you" carried an impact and took the place for any effort of theological dialogue.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Baedeker was quoted very frequently by my late father and his colleagues in the ministry.

Other men of the Blankenburg Conference who labored closely with Baedeker were General von Viebahn, Otto Stockmayer, F. B. Meyers, Ernst Gebhardt and Professor Stroeter. Erich Beyreuther expresses regret that the emphasis of the teaching at Blankenburg received a direction of a one sided emphasis, not always in the frame of healthful interpretation of generally recognized hermeneutical principles.<sup>10</sup>

Baedeker served frequently in prolonged Bible conferences sponsored by some of the wealthy land owners of the Mennonite Brethren communities (Steinbach, Apantlee and Vorwerk Juschanlee). In the pietistic movement he was generally recognized as an authority in the exposition of the scriptures. Professor Stroeter is possibly the next most strongest influence in the spiritual development of the Mennonite Brethren church through his repeated series of Bible studies arranged for teachers and ministers for periods of one to two weeks until he became a Universalist and the doors for his ministry in Russia were closed. The writings of General von Viebahn, F. B. Meyers and Otto Stockmayer were widely read and served as a major resource for the ministry of the Mennonite Brethren church. My father's library featured all these publications and became a major source of my theological reading while a college student. According to the late Henry Cornelsen, Coaldale, Alberta, these publications were the main resources for the ministers of the Mennonite Brethren in general.<sup>11</sup>

The influence of Jacob Kroeker, member of the Board of Directors of Blankenburg, provided open channels for leaders of Mennonite Brethren fellowships to attend the Blankenburg conference on a regular basis. Jacob W. Reimer, highly recognized as a Bible teacher among the Mennonite Brethren, is especially mentioned as having been a frequent attendant at the Blankenburg conference.<sup>12</sup> The influences of this close contact with the pietistic movements in England and on the European continent was not without far reaching effects upon the life and development of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.

The contact with the Plymouth Brethren and the "Fellowship movements" (Gemeinschafts Bewegung) in Europe through the ministry of the leaders of Blankenburg Conference added strength to the position of the Mennonite Brethren

stated in the 1902 Confession of Faith, to recognize all true born again believers irrespective of organizational and confessional affiliation as brethren and sisters in Christ.<sup>13</sup> The relationship with Evangelical Alliance movements in the West generated a strong inter-confessional position within the brotherhood resulting in some serious tensions. The close cultural social structure of the Mennonite community in Russia bred an isolationism which was threatened by the closer spiritual fellowship with believers from other confessions. The relationship of the Mennonite Brethren to the broader Mennonite community demanded that they recognize their fellow brethren--born again members--from the Mennonite churches who were baptized by sprinkling not by immersion. J. W. Reimer, called the pioneer in the cause of the Alliance movements within the Mennonite Brethren church, offered untiring leadership in example and precepts in his relationship to believers of other groups as well as in his teaching ministry--expressing the oneness of all true believers. The forming of the Alliance Mennonite Brethren fellowship in Lichtfelde, Molatschna (1905)--later called the Lichtfelder Gemeinde--must be accepted as a direct result of the influence of Blankenburg and the broader contact with the fellowship movement--the Evangelical Alliance movement of Western Europe. This influence, even though strongly resisted by the larger community of the Mennonite Brethren, must also be recognized as paving the way for a more concillitory relationship of the Mennonite Brethren towards their fellow believers in the Mennonite church.

The struggle on the issue of the open and closed communion which has been difficult and long in the history of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship, found also its positive influence in the relationship to Blankenburg. J. W. Reimer with his untiring effort to widen the fellowship of the Mennonite Brethren in accepting believers not baptized by immersion, faced even the possibility of being excommunicated from the brotherhood. A resolution to excommunicate him for his open position towards other believers was introduced to a meeting in Ruekenau at a conference in 1902. It is reported that J. W. Reimer's love and warmth to the brethren expressed in his testimony to this conference with an assurance that his excommunication from the brotherhood would not affect his relationship to them in personal affection, love and devotion, overwhelmed all that were gathered and a motion was accepted to table the recommendation.<sup>14</sup>

The resolution to receive non-immersed believers into the membership of the Mennonite Brethren church passed at the Winnipeg Conference in August 1963<sup>15</sup> thus has a long history which dates back to the contact of the Mennonite Brethren with the Blankenburg Conference and the pietistic movement of Western Europe especially from 1890 to 1914.

The system of Darbyistic interpretation of scripture with a tightly structured eschatology came to the Mennonite Brethren church also through the gateway of Blankenburg. J. W. Reimer, the prophetic voice in eschatology within the Mennonite Brethren fellowship in Russia and Canada, for many years, developed the basic system of interpretation through his contacts with the Darbyistic movement interrelated with the pietistic understanding of the scriptures during the second half of the 19th century. The influence of Darbyistic teaching will be dealt with in a later paragraph.

The wide circulation of the periodical "Das Allianz Blatt" read in many homes of the Mennonite Brethren added much to the influence of Blankenburg towards the gradual acceptance by the brotherhood, that the oneness of all believers in spiritual fellowship was a basic scriptural truth. Additional influences in this area on the North American scene will be suggested later in

this writing. The influences of Blankenburg through the Alliance movement (Die Freien Brueder) recorded also effects which led to serious tensions within the brotherhood.

Pietism with its emphasis on personal experience in salvation, fellowship of all true believers, and eschatology, remained rooted in the state church in Germany and the Confessional Church in England. The concept of discipleship with its relational dimension to lifestyle and the principle of love for all men, remained peripheral for them inspite of an emphasis on sanctification. National patriotism and unconditioned obedience to the state remained part of their basic theological orientation. The German pietists are said to have followed the slogan: "When it comes to war than we shoot."<sup>16</sup> Their loyalty to the Kaiser and country took precedent to that of Christ. Jacob W. Reimer and Jacob Friesen, the latter received his theological training in Germany, influenced by the position of pietism and others became the main advocates of armed self-defense (Selbstschietz) in 1918-1922. The crucial meeting at Reedkenau (1918) which led to the departure of the Mennonites in Russia from their historic position of non-participation in war must be recognized as an affect of pietism on the basic theology of ethics held by the Mennonite and the Mennonite Brethren, presumably rooted in a non-resistant tradition. It is the judgement of the late B. B. Janz that the Mennonites in Russia would not have departed from their historic peace position would it not have been for the leadership of Mennonite Brethren influenced by the Alliance movement of Europe.<sup>17</sup>

Historic honesty demands that we also observe the strong support for military self-defense which comes from some of the wealthy land owners who in the pre-revolution era were the sponsors of the Bible Conferences mentioned earlier. As a teenager I became a personal witness as an observer in the rapid development of a Mennonite army. A factor in the militaristic phenomena of Mennonitism in Russia that we also need to recognize was the influence of the German occupation army in the Ukraine, 1917-1920. The adopted German culture and educational program of the Mennonites in Russia offered a very broad sphere of influence to the Russian Mennonites. The absence of any legal government following the Russian revolution and the roaming of hordes of lawless marauders murdering, plundering and destroying at will with no restriction, or the passions of a wild mob offered the circumstantial pressures which no doubt influenced the theological stance.

The theological openness of the Alliance movement became the occasion of other tensions within the brotherhood. The legalistic trend in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship in the area of ethics, the "Do's" and "Don'ts" to a degree were reactions to the greater ethical freedom advocated by the pietistic oriented Alliance movement.<sup>18</sup> According to B. B. Janz and A. H. Unruh, the pietistic freedom for personal and individual interpretation of scripture in contrast to the Anabaptist understanding of the corporate discerning of the scripture also caused confusion on various principle issues. Janz summarizes the positive and negative effects of the pietistic influence as follows:

In conclusion we cast an overview on the character of the position of faith of the M.B. Church in the latter years under the leading influence of the "Free Brethren" (freien Brüder) when the formerly much rebuked conservative narrowness (Engherzigkeit) had been stripped. Normally there should have been basic growth according to the word of 2 Tess. 1:3: "We ought always to give thanks to God for you brethren, as is only fitting, because your faith is greatly enlarged and the love of each one of you all

towards one another grows ever greater." Through the deeper exposition of scripture, literature for devotional nurture and theology, ministers from abroad, Professors, Doctors, Theologians from the Baltic provinces, Germany, England who served with sermons and frequently with Bible courses of a week duration to larger groups of teachers and ministers with free provisions of lodging and meals supplied by the wealthy brethren in Steinbach and Apanlee, there came much light from above. However, when Professor Stroeter's emphasis on redemptive universalism was noted it came to a sudden halt under the leadership of Peter Unruh. Thus there had come much light and new scriptural understanding. . . . The pulpit ministry had become more effective. The inner warmth, however, with the concern for the lost was waning. There was much criticism. Life and walk had weakened. The struggles within the Conference had affected the unity which hovered like a mildew over the brotherhood especially the leading brethren. In doctrine there were uncertainties. Not considering the exposition concerning the participation at the Lord's Table, there was the teaching concerning the distinction between the Kingdom and the Church, where some parts of the New Testament found no application for us, they applied only to the future of Israel and that quite inclusive. To have an Elder, is not scriptural for the church, there must be several Elders. . . . As proof for the justification of bearing arms, however, the example of Abraham, the father of faith, also for the New Testament, in his expedition with 318 servants to conquer the heathen in order to save Lot, was applicable. . . . That corresponds with the quotation from Brother Unruh of a much criticized word from the old brethren: "It is thus written" instead of saying: "This is how I understood what is written." While the Reformers, including Daechsels Bibelwerk and other works of exposition did not follow a double meaning in expounding the Word, this mastering of the scripture has caused much and serious confusion for earnest brethren, also for me. For a time it weakened my conscience; whether you believe or do so or otherwise, does not matter so much because it can be interpreted both ways. How far can we go in a dual interpretation of the Word?<sup>19</sup>

The depth of the struggles through the influence of pietism in the history of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship is well reflected from the above testimony of a veteran within the history of our brotherhood.

#### Theological Influences Upon the Mennonite Brethren Through Association with the Baptists

The relationship of the Mennonite Brethren with the Baptists in the course of history have been substantial. The years of early beginning following 1860 recorded strong Baptist relationships which somewhat influenced the formation of church polity.<sup>20</sup> This contact may also have provided a point of reference for the early brethren when they faced questions regarding the form of baptism.<sup>21</sup>

The continued fraternal relationship between the Mennonite Brethren and the Baptists was most nurtured through the early cooperative missionary program with the American Baptist Missionary Union. During the years from 1889 through 1914 seventeen missionaries from the Mennonite Brethren churches in Russia served in India under the cooperative arrangement with the Union.<sup>22</sup> The beginning of the missionary outreach abroad from North America received also directives through the relationship with the American Baptist Missionary Union established through the Mennonite Brethren from Russia.<sup>23</sup> The methods and policies for

missionary work which have governed Mennonite Brethren missions in the first 60 years of its development have been patterned after the example of the Baptist program of which they became an integrated part. The early missionaries of the Mennonite Brethren, with a few exceptions, were trained in Baptist schools--Hamburg Theological Seminary for the missionaries from Russia, Rockchester Seminary for the American Mennonite Brethren missionaries. It is logical to assume that our theology of missions, mission strategy and methods of church planting were largely an adoption from the Baptists without an independent search through the study of the scriptures and prayer to determine the New Testament pattern of missions as outlined in the book of Acts.

Accepting the Baptist influence in the development of our mission concept in principle and method as salutary, we need to acknowledge that basic tensions have existed between our professed church concept and the pattern of missionary churches developed abroad. The major area of disparity existed in the positional function of the missionary in a ministry to and for a people instead of a brotherhood relationship which makes no room for the positional concept of leadership but expresses the New Testament ministry as being with a people. The nurture of missionary vision and responsibility through the fellowship with the Baptists, however, is a very positive dimension of their influence upon the Mennonite Brethren development. To this we must also add their contribution to the life of the Mennonite Brethren in evangelism, Christian education and theology. Our resources and inspiration in these areas over a period of years came largely from the Baptist influence for which we remain indebted.

The cultural and economic mould of the Mennonite community for the first 75 years of our history provided favorable circumstances for a teaching ministry in the church from the laity. The concern to discover the gifts within the church was part of their New Testament understanding of a normal congregational life. Their provision for a strong instructional program from travelling Bible teachers (Reiseprediger) to equip the laity for this task, was very significant. The change of our cultural patterns through increasing industrial mechanization and educational opportunities in America moved the Mennonite Brethren closer in their relationship to the Baptists. The early Bible teachers in Tabor College, H. W. Lohrenz, H. F. Toews, were trained in Louisville, Kentucky and in Rockchester, New York, both Baptist institutions. The program in our own schools provided very limited or no emphasis on Anabaptist theological orientation. The absence of any literature on our scriptural understanding concerning the church for the first 75 years of our history in America and Canada speaks loud to this observation. With the arising need for a paid ministry to meet the changing occupational and cultural pattern of our church communities there also came the need for further theological training. Those who sought advanced theological training beyond the Bible institutes and the Bible department of Tabor College, with few exceptions, attended Baptist Seminaries. The years from 1930 to 1955--a quarter of a century--registers a very strong movement to Baptist institutions.<sup>25</sup> The men returning from these schools to accept positions in churches and schools carried with them the tendency to introduce the Baptist concept of church polity. The positional concept of the pastorate and structures of church polity in the course of time were adopted more and more from the influence that came through brethren who received their education in these institutions. The organizational function of the multiple church leadership--the New Testament concept of the elders of the church--was rapidly replaced by a central function of a pastor who assumed the leadership of the church with the church council being a representative body of the functional departments of the church program--Board of Trustees, Christian

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

The effects of these changes in the basic concept of the church found expression in the emphasis on the independence of the local congregation and resulted in the change of the official name of the brotherhood from "The Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church" expressing the interdependence of the brotherhood, to "The Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches."<sup>26</sup> The brotherhood conceptually, organizationally and functionally thus moved in the direction of accommodation to the patterns of American Protestantism. The Mennonite Brethren Church gradually identified with the popular trend of the main stream of American evangelicalism. The described process of change, however, cannot be ascribed only to Baptist influence, but must consider additional tributaries of associations which will be referred to in later sections.

The theological tension of the Armenian-Calvinism controversy, 1930-1945, was again largely nurtured by our exposure to a Baptist Calvinistic theology.

#### Mennonite Brethren Identity and the Bible Institute and Bible School Movement

The Bible Hour--Bibelstunde--a vital part of Mennonite Brethren life in Russia was basic for their spiritual nurture and development. The life line of the movement, as stated in a previous paragraph, was their fellowship over an open Bible. The setting of life on farms in North America replaced the village structure of their social life. This change made the meeting in houses more difficult.

The Bible school movement in America dates back to the second half of the last century. In Mennonite Brethren circles the Bible school movement may well have developed as the alternative for Bible Hour--Bibelstunden--practiced in Russia.<sup>27</sup> These institutions provided much of the needed spiritual nurture to the youth of the churches and generated the motivation for service in the local fellowship and the missionary outreach. The teachers of the Bible schools provided strength to the ministry of the Word in local churches of the broader fellowship.

### Influence of Non-Mennonite Brethren Bible Institutes

The Bible Institutes, Biola in Los Angeles, Moody in Chicago, and Northwestern in Minneapolis, have extended a major influence on the spiritual development of the brotherhood. Biola attracted many of our young people and contributed to the development of leadership for the brotherhood. Strong leaders of the past and the present came from Biola. C. N. Hiebert, known in our circles for many years as one of the most effective evangelists, G. B. Huebert, Reedley, J. D. Hofer, Fresno, Nick Jantz, Herbert, A. A. Kroeker, Winkler, H. K. Warkentin, Fresno, and other men received much of their understanding concerning the scriptures and training for their task of leadership in Biola under the influence of R. A. Torrey and other men of God. The mark of Biola upon these men was a strong emphasis on the experiential reality of Christ as Savior and Lord with a central emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. The filling with the Holy Spirit as a second act of grace emphasized by several of these brethren, especially G. B. Huebert and J. D. Hofer, came as a direct influence from Biola. A. A. Kroeker became a pioneer in the area of Christian education at the Winkler Bible Institute and in the Canadian conference. Nick Jantz was known as an evangelist and a Bible school teacher for many years. The missionary fervor which characterized the latter years of the life of H. K. Warkentin was an expression of the inspiration which came to him through the life in Biola. Aaron Friesen, founder of the mission in Los Angeles which has resulted in the establishment of a church, was also a graduate of Biola.<sup>28</sup> The writings of R. A. Torrey and his ministry in Bible conferences in the brotherhood (for several years the Bible conference speaker in Tabor College) provided spiritual guidance for the life of the brotherhood. The book What the Bible Teaches became the guide for doctrinal studies in the brotherhood, later replaced by The Great Doctrines of the Bible by Wm. Evans.

Moody Bible Institute was the training base for several of our early missionaries, A. A. Janzen, pioneer of the African Mennonite Brethren church, being one of them. The devotional books of D. L. Moody served as a major source of preaching material for the lay ministry in our churches. The Moody Culportage Library books were for many years the major source for devotional reading in our constituency. The book Synthetic Bible Studies by James M. Gray the successor to D. L. Moody, as president of Moody Bible Institute, has served as a basic text in the Bible Institutes during the 1930s and 40s.

Northwestern Bible Institute, under the strong leadership of W. B. Riley, has had a phenomenal influence upon the Mennonite Brethren. The number of students from Mennonite Brethren churches constituted a large percentage of the student body. It is reported that there were more than 40 students from the Mennonite Brethren church over a period of several years. J. J. Wiebe for many years pastor in Corn, Oklahoma and member of the Board of Foreign Missions, Tina Pauls, missionary worker in Minneapolis, Martha Janzen, veteran missionary in Africa, Rueben Baerg, David Wiens and Leo Wiens still in leadership positions within the brotherhood and many workers in local churches received their training and inspiration from Northwestern. The writing of Norman D. Harrison, member of the faculty of Northwestern, have been a major part of the libraries of Mennonite Brethren ministers during the 1930's and up to 1950. The expositions were devotional and instructive. (I personally had the full series of Norman Harrison's writings and so had many of my colleagues.)

The spiritual resources which have come to us through the contributions of the named schools have been tributaries that replenished the stream of

Mennonite Brethren faith and life. The emphasis on biblical content and missionary motivation and a simplistic hermeneutics coming to us through these institutions became a sustaining factor in the spiritual pilgrimage of the brotherhood.

The many benefits which have come to us through the ministry of these schools at the same time had an affect which possibly submerged somewhat the consciousness of our historic identity. Our theology of discipleship was replaced by a strong emphasis on personal salvation in which conversion was nothing more than a private transaction between the individual and God, making it an accomplished dated event."<sup>29</sup> To many people it has become a confirming fact of salvation if they can give the exact date and hour that marked this acceptance of Jesus Christ as Savior and remember the Bible verse which was given to them on the occasion as a basis for their faith.

Evangelism, instead of being the expression of a relationship to God and men, moves in the pathway of a rescue operation to assure men the benefit of a final destiny in Heaven. The relationship of the individual member within the redeemed community as a criteria of a redeemed life has been replaced by a personal experiential event making it the acceptance of a provision without the accompanying responsibility for a life of love, self-denial and service within a community of the church and a bleeding world.

With the major emphasis on the experiential appropriation of the redemptive provision for the personal salvation and the responsibility of missions and the resulting under-emphasis on discipleship and service the Mennonite Brethren community has been caught in the tensions of contemporary process of polarity, that of personal salvation with an emphasis on the individual devotional life on the one hand, and the emphasis upon the life of social service, social action and social justice without the emphasis for personal salvation. This process of influence and emphasis has moved the Mennonite Brethren fellowship into a close relationship with fundamentalistic evangelicalism. Dietrich Bonhoefer in his book The Cost of Discipleship classifies the emphasis on salvation with little or no responsibility for the life style of discipleship as a gospel of cheap grace.

The World Fundamentals Association, organized in 1919 under the leadership of W. B. Riley, Harry Rimer, Arnold Gaebalien and others, brought to the scene of evangelical Protestantism in America a strong emphasis on the propositional truth in defense of the inerrancy of the Bible, the literal interpretation of creation, the virgin birth of Jesus, the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ, substitutionary theory of atonement and the imminent return of Christ with a strong Darbyistic eschatology. The public debates in the 1930's sponsored by the World Fundamentals Association in defense of truth, became a major influence in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship. The books of Harry Rimer were viewed as a sacred sword. The periodical, The Sword of the Lord, by John R. Rice and the Defender by Gerald Winrod became household literature to Mennonite Brethren with the result of a continued process of identification with strong emphasis on propositional truth and creedal doctrine and an underemphasis on the relational character of New Testament discipleship. The creedal emphasis of the right doctrine and apologetical systems to prove the truth of scripture, foreign to our earlier history, became an increasing strong point in the message from our pulpits and classrooms of our Bible institutes, beclouding the centrality of the person of Christ in the life and character of the church, foundational to the gospel of the New Testament.

The influences from the three named Bible institutes find a continuation in the contributions and tensions which come to us from institutions that come into prominence only in the 1920's and 1930's, Prairy Bible Institute, Three Hills, Alberta, Carenport Bible Institute, Carenport, Saskatchewan and to a lesser degree the Bible Institute of Winnipeg which has moved into prominence in recent years.

The emphasis on Missions and evangelism in the Bible institutes had an awakening effect upon us, and accounts for much of the upsurge of missionary vision and commitment in our fellowship during the period from 1930 to 1960. The slogan of Zinsendorf's missionary movement from the 18th century on "Soul saving" --Seelenretlung<sup>30</sup>--without the responsibility of "following Jesus"--Nachfolge Jesu--in the context of growing influence of creedal fundamentalism, had a dual effect on the historic identity of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship. The missionary motivation to evangelize the heathen (missions abroad) had a reviving effect upon the spiritual life of the brotherhood, the emphasis on salvation as a response to the benefits of a provision, security for the life to come with little responsibility for the "now" led to a concept of "cheap grace."<sup>31</sup> The strong emphasis on child evangelism to assure their entrance to heaven with little knowledge of sin and repentance, followed by a general trend towards "child baptism" changed the character of a church built on the principle of repentance, conversion, adult baptism, and responsible discipleship in the context of a disciplined believer's church. The late B. B. Janz speaks to the recorded concern as follows:

The longer the more it moves to child baptism even though it is immersion, and the longer the more there are people without a true conversion experience who make the new life and discipline in the church more difficult. The character of the M.B. Church, inspite of all light of scriptural understanding, and all Christian and spiritual education changes from a deeply pious and pure church to a solemn confessional people's church where Christian ethics becomes private judgement and is impotent for a renewal of life and walk, the hallmark of our fathers in the period of their spiritual health.<sup>32</sup>

With the highest regards for the contributions which have come to us from the Bible institutes outside of the brotherhood, we must also be open to recognize some erosions in the basic commitment to the legacy of a faith which was based on personal experience of conversion, a holy life with a consistent ethics, a responsible relationship to a redeemed and disciplined community and a world in need. The question of spiritual identity has thus become rather crucial in the midst of the various positive influences which have come to us from other sources.

#### Bible School Movements within the Mennonite Brethren Fellowship

The missionary calling of the church--an overarching concern in the historical record of the Mennonite Brethren movement--provided the major motivation for the strong support of Christian education in Bible institutes, Christian academies (high schools) the Bible college and Christian liberal arts colleges. The Bible school movement in the North American Mennonite Brethren fellowship dates back to 1884 when under the leadership of J. F. Harms a small short term Bible school was conducted in Canada, Kansas which transferred to

Lehigh, Kansas in 1886.<sup>33</sup> The founding of Tabor College 1908, Herbert Bible School in 1913 opens the trail of a central Bible institute movement in the history of the Mennonite Brethren fellowship.<sup>34</sup>

The emphasis on Bible studies through the Bible school movement was an expression of the biblicentric orientation of the Mennonite Brethren movement. The absence of formal theologically trained leadership within the brotherhood and the lack of written material to serve as a theological frame of reference in belief and practice, left the Bible school movement dependent on literature from sources outside of the tradition of historic radical reformation.

The courses in the early years of the Bible school era revolved largely around Bible content.<sup>35</sup> The theological interpretation came from sources accessible to the pioneers of biblical interpretation. Wm. Bestvater, who for many years offered dynamic leadership in Bible school development, Bible conferences and evangelism drew from the resources of the C. I. Schofield Correspondence Course, A. C. Gaebelain, Wm. Evans, H. C. Dixon, Wm. B. Riley and Harris Gregg. They shaped his biblical understanding.<sup>36</sup> The Canadian Conference of 1920 recommended a two month Bible course for the ministers to be held for the benefit of the ministering brethren<sup>37</sup> which extended Bestvaters understanding of the scripture to the grass roots of the brotherhood.

The theological influences of this era are well reflected in the two books written by Wm. Bestvater as texts for the Bible schools: Textbuechlein in Glaubenslehre, an organization of material gathered from C.I. Scofield, Wm. Evans and R. A. Torrey;<sup>38</sup> Textbuechlein in Bibelkunde fuer Bibelschulen; a compilation of materials gleaned from the writings of James M. Gray, A. C. Gaebelain and C. I. Scofield.<sup>40</sup>

A series of articles appearing in the Zionsbote in the 1920's under the heading Zeugniss der Schrift (a witness of the scripture) were an effective channel of dissemination of the teaching gathered from the above quoted sources.

The development of the Bible school program in the later 1920's and 1930's record a continual flow of biblical teaching from such texts as: Biblische Glaubenslehre by Theodor Haarbeck<sup>41</sup> for courses in Bible doctrine; Der Dienst am Evangelium in Predigt und Seelsorge by Theodor Haarbeck, for the course in pastoral theology; Das Christliche Leben nach der Schrift, by the same author for a course in Christian ethics,<sup>42</sup> Ringet Recht, by Giesebert Stokmann, an enlarged text on Christian ethics was adopted later--1930 ff.<sup>43</sup>

The flow of literature from the fellowship movement in Europe and the Evangelical Fellowships in North America continued to serve as contributions to the spiritual concern of the Mennonite Brethren movement to stay with the basic teachings of the Bible.

The historic position of the Mennonite Brethren to avoid creedal systems of finality provided the channel for great benefits drawn from the evangelical communities in America and Europe without becoming locked into a theological system of dogmatism. The absence of a claim for creedal finality in the staff of Bible school teachers gave room for flexibility and an openness to see truth in new relationships and accept such variations as a process of growth.

The concluding statement of the 1902 Confession of Faith must be considered as a basic position of Mennonite Brethren in matters of biblical understanding:

Every Confession of Faith, as every other teaching and exposition of scripture, is subject at all times to examination and estimation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit according to the Holy Scriptures . . . the only infallible written preserved resource of the necessary and sufficient revelation of God to humanity for our salvation.<sup>44</sup>

The Bible schools, our own as well as those mentioned in an earlier paragraph, are a provision of God "for a time like this" (Esther 4:14). The program of our schools, institutes, colleges, as well as the Seminary in its earlier years, made little or no effort to provide in their curriculum an historical and theological frame of reference which would give reason why we are Mennonite Brethren. Our commitment of faith in history, in principles and character were generally viewed rather incidental. The mission in terms of a message to proclaim to a needy world dominated the emphasis with good results. The balance of biblical emphasis between "being," "getting" and "doing" however suffered.

#### Observations and Possible Implications

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

Our theological flexibility, a guardian against creedalism, has somewhat served as a floodgate of theological influences which remained unfiltered through the process of a consistent hermeneutics in keeping with our claim of strong biblicism.

The rapid cultural change from a rural agricultural people to a sophisticated educationally and professionally oriented professionalism, has left us unprepared to cope with a new generation that demands answers to the quest: Who are we? What makes us different from the main stream of American evangelicalism? Are we justified to claim a faith and mission different from those who are our brothers in Christ and citizens of a nation we have adopted as our home? Has the purpose of our history as a peculiar people of the Mennonite Brethren with Anabaptists roots been fulfilled?

The focus is one of faith and life. Has the absence of a concerted effort of our schools to give leadership in identifying the foundation stones of our faith in understanding the scriptures beclouded our self-understanding? Are the tensions of 1890-1920 through pietistic influence here again in the exposure to popular fundamentalistic evangelicalism with an emphasis of a gospel to get, to have, to utilize the benefits of a costly redemption in Jesus Christ, with little or no responsibility for "being" and "sharing" in horizontal relationships? Is the content of the gospel to accommodate the human quest to get, to have, to do and to be secure--the focus of the popular church program of the American culture--or is it a call to follow Jesus in keeping with His measurement of

character and purpose expressed in His Word: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mark 8:34-35). These questions of life and faith are calling today for an answer in our struggle for identity. Can the influences from without outlined above be classified as the causes for our identity crisis, or are they merely the occasion of a call upon the brotherhood--especially its educational institutions--to justify their claim for a commitment to give guidance to a biblical New Testament faith in provision, character and purpose of discipleship the cry in the birthpains of our history?

### Some Areas of Tension that Require an Answer

#### 1. The Tension of Bibliology

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

My father was possibly naive when he attended my classes in apologetics in 1934 in which I put forth great efforts to prove the inspiration of the Bible. The proof text method of logical arguments borrowed from the World Fundamentalist Association served the young theologian well as the structure of his teaching approach to the apparent problem, "So is it necessary to defend the Bible" he asked after attending several classes, "would you find it necessary to defend a lion? Would not a lion much better defend himself if he were turned loose? Is not the Bible itself proof enough to prove itself as the power of God to salvation? Is there any need to defend the Bible where the Bible is believed, lived and taught? Is there any merit to prove the inerrancy of the Bible to people who do not believe it and do not know the witness of the spirit?"

What should I say? Am I wrong to let the Bible stand on its own merit, and through the witness of the spirit confirm the Bible is God's word? A. H. Unruh in speaking to this point makes the following observation:

It is striking that our early brethren record no paragraph in their statement of faith in which they declare their position with respect to the scriptures even though they were in possession of the Confession of Faith prepared by Cornelius Ries in 1849 . . . in which the scriptures are declared as the only reliable infallible source of faith. Throughout their struggle for their convictions and answers to the attacks upon the young Mennonite Brethren Church we find with fathers of the movement an unchanging faithfulness to the Holy Scriptures. The Bible was for them the un failing Word of God from cover to cover. . . . In this commitment to the Word of God they reviewed every single truth and formed their concepts from the relationship of its content as they understood it.<sup>45</sup>

Is the separation of truth and life, provision and responsibility in the contemporary message of salvation the creation for the need to prove and defend the propositional foundations of our faith in the Bible? Is the evidence of the gospel primarily in some documents or in the lives of Christ's followers?<sup>46</sup> Is the newness of life, the product of divine grace, a stronger proof for redemptive truth--the Bible--than an unchallenged creed?

## 2. The Tension between the Church Model of an Ecclesiastical Democracy and that of a New Testament Fellowship--the Body of Christ

The church as understood by the Mennonite Brethren is a fellowship in a relationship of love with Christ and with one another, a community of inter-responsibility and discipline. The gospel of grace as a gift to be appropriated without the pathway of the cross in self denial and death was not part of their understanding of the Christian life. The contemporary emphasis of fundamentalistic evangelism--to offer to men a free salvation of grace as the doorway to a life of ease and security in this world and in the world to come, was not known to the early church of the Mennonite Brethren. The church of an ecclesiastical democracy with room for individualistic independence in the local church and in the broader context of a convention or conference, well adopted to our American culture, would have appeared rather strange to the early Mennonite Brethren and possibly more strange to the community of faith of the first centuries. Has the exposure to the influences from without led to a process of accommodation to make us comfortable to be a church that makes provision to ease our conscience towards God, to have our sins forgiven, and nurture the hope of heaven without sharing the demands of an inter-responsibility which governs all dimensions of life as expressed in the prayer of Jesus (John 17:23-26) and exemplified in the New Testament church in the Acts of the Apostles?

Does the struggle for being a true New Testament church find an answer in the design of new models--so generally the trend in church renewals of today? Can a church be the church of Jesus Christ in the world without being in tension with the culture of its environment? Is it the spiritual dynamics of relationships to Christ and to one another that create inner character and models or are the models the womb of character? Will our theology of the church come into focus without an answer to the basic tensions between to popular concept of "receiving Jesus Christ--a mere response to the provision of free grace--and the New Testament teaching concerning "following Jesus" (Nachfolge)?

## 3. The Question of Eschatology

According to the Mennonite Encyclopedia Chiliasm is accepted and taught in the Mennonite Brethren church. The book by Jacob W. Reimer Der Wunderbare Ratschless Gattes mit der Menschiet (The Wonderful Plan of the Salvation of God with Men) is named as the major document of proof.<sup>47</sup> The Encyclopedia does not mention the American sources of this influence through Scofield, Gaebelein and than Wm. Bestvater, as a major proponent of this eschatological exposition in the Mennonite Brethren fellowship. The statement of 1955 historically did not apply to the total brotherhood of the past neither does it apply to the total brotherhood of the present. A. H. Unruh describes the eschatological view of the early Mennonite Brethren as follows: "They exhorted (each other) to watchfulness and to a holy walk. The present views with regard to the rapture and the millennium were apparently foreign to them. However, they joined in the prayer: 'Amen, Come Lord Jesus.'"<sup>48</sup>

As a son of a minister, and Bible school teacher, I received frequent admonitions from my father to view the Chiliastic interpretation of eschatology as a possibility in its major frame, but not to be accepted as a dogma. A large segment of the brotherhood today, especially the younger theologians also question the hermeneutics of dispensationalism so widely held in circles of American fundamentalistic evangelicalism.

Is there room for the questions to the basic truth of eschatology related to the return of Christ, His ultimate triumph and the final judgement? Is the tension in the "how," "when" and "where" of eschatology instead of in the basic truth related to the "who," and the "why," the finality of a sovereign God in whom the destiny of history finds ultimate consumation and purpose? Is it profitable to continue the debate about the "how" and "when" in questions of tribulation, millennium, the role of Israel as a nation and the stages of judgements? The essentials of eschatology must be firm—can we find the focus to direct our path of history as a Mennonite Brethren fellowship.

The questions emerging in our observations and implications are vital and demand an answer to focus a theological identity and bring a renewal in our assignment of mission in biblical perspective.

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>John A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church (Board of Christian Literature of the M.B. Conference, 1975), pp. 26-29.

<sup>2</sup>P. M. Friesen, Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789-1910) Halbstadt Taurien, Verlag Raduga, 1911, pp. 189-192. (Translated by A. J. Klassen, Mennonite Brethren Confessions of Faith, Historical Roots and Comparative Analysis, unpublished thesis Union College of B.C., 1965, pp. 133-35).

<sup>3</sup>Jakob Becker, Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church, translated by D. E. Pauls and A. E. Janzen, 1973. Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest-Documents No. 27, p. 121.

<sup>4</sup>Wesley Prieb, in Century of Grace and Witness, Centennial publication of M.B. Conference, 1960, p. 78.

<sup>5</sup>Robert Friedman, Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries. (Goshen, Indiana: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>Erich Beyreuther, Der Weg der Evangelischen Allianz in Deutschland (Bundel Verlag, Witten, 1969), pp. 61-64.

<sup>8</sup>Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology and Ecclesiastical Literature, Vol 2 (Harper & Row), pp. 306-308.

<sup>9</sup>Beyreuther, op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 63-64.

<sup>11</sup>Heinrich Kornelsen, recorded interview with J. B. Toews, 1973.

<sup>12</sup>A. H. Unruh, Die Geschichte der Mennoniten Bruedergemeinde (Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1955), p. 822.

<sup>13</sup>Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, 1902, Article I.

<sup>14</sup>Unruh, op. cit., p. 825. Also oral report from B. B. Janz, Abram Peters, Wilhelm Dyck.

<sup>15</sup>Mennonite Brethren Conference Yearbook, 1963, pp. 39-39.

<sup>16</sup>B. B. Janz, Grundzuege im Charakter der Glaubensstellung unserer Vaeter, unpublished manuscript, 1955, p. 3 Seminary archives.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., translated by J. B. Toews.

<sup>20</sup>J. A. Toews, op. cit., pp. 366-368.

- <sup>21</sup> Jakob P. Becker, op. cit., pp. 179-181.
- <sup>22</sup> G. W. Peters, The Growth of Foreign Missions in the Mennonite Brethren Church (Hillsboro, Kansas: Board of Missions, 1952), pp. 55-69.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 82-83.
- <sup>24</sup> Roland Allen, Missionary Methods, St. Pauls and Ours.
- <sup>25</sup> List of men who received their training in Baptists schools, list in Archives of Mennonite Brethren Seminary, Fresno.
- <sup>26</sup> General Conference Yearbook, 1963.
- <sup>27</sup> J. A. Toews, op. cit., pp. 255-265.
- <sup>28</sup> J. B. Toews, From personal knowledge through many years of personal co-labor relationship.
- <sup>29</sup> Elton Trublood, The New Man for Our Time (Harper & Row, 1970), p. 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoefer, The Cost of Discipleship (The Macmillan Co., 1960).
- <sup>32</sup> B. B. Janz, op. cit., p. 5.
- <sup>33</sup> J. H. Lohrenz, The Mennonite Brethren Church (Mennonite Brethren Publishing House, 1950), p. 76.
- <sup>34</sup> J. A. Toews, op. cit., pp. 255-265.
- <sup>35</sup> Anna Redekop, Life Story of Wm. Bestvater (unpublished manuscript, Seminary Archives, Fresno), pp. 13-14.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 12.
- <sup>37</sup> Northern District Conference Yearbook, 1920.
- <sup>38</sup> Wm. Bestvater, Textbuechlein in Glaubenslehre (1920), p. 2.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., Textbuechlein in Bibelkunde, p. 2.
- <sup>41</sup> Theodor Haarbeck, Biblische Glaubenslehre, Brunnen Verlag Giessen, Basel.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Giesebert Stochmann, Ringet Recht, Friedrich Bahn, Schwerin, Mecklburg, 1926.
- <sup>44</sup> Mennonite Brethren Confession of Faith, American Edition, 1936, pp. 46-47.
- <sup>45</sup> A. H. Unruh, Die Grundzuege der Theologie der Vaeter der M.B. Gemeinde (unpublished manuscript in Archives of Seminary, Fresno).