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Response to

J. B. Toews'

"The Influence of Fundamentalism Upon Mennonite Brethren Theology"

Dr. J. B. Toews has correctly analyzed the Fundamentalist/Evangelical influences on Mennonite Brethren theology and indicated the consequences of these influences for the M. B. brotherhood. This prophetic analysis will have to be taken seriously by all those Mennonite Brethren leaders, teachers, writers and editors who are concerned about the gradual but certain erosion of Mennonite-Christian principles and values in their constituencies.

The paper indicated (but did not develop the thought) that the traditional Mennonite Brethren openness to pietist-evangelical influences dates back to the early history of the Mennonite Brethren Church. The paper also suggested that the Fundamentalist/Evangelical impact upon the Mennonite Brethren in North America was greater than upon the other Mennonite groups. This leads to the obvious question why the Mennonite Brethren have been historically more susceptible to these influences than their non-M.B. brethren. It seems to me that the paper's brief but perceptive references to the origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church need to be explored more fully in an attempt to understand Mennonite Brethren vulnerability with regard to Fundamentalist influences in North America.

In examining the documents and histories relating to early Mennonite Brethren openness to pietistic-evangelical influences, at least two observations deserve some consideration.

First, there were many factors which contributed toward the eventual withdrawal of the eighteen brethren from the general Mennonite brotherhood in 1860, but according to all accounts the powerful preaching and spiritual influence of

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the Württemberg Lutheran-Pietist Pastor Eduard Wüst were among the most important reasons for the awakening and renewal that occurred among the mid-nineteenth century Russian Mennonites. (See also James Urry, "Melville and the Mennonites," M.Q.R., Oct. 1980).

Jacob Bekker, one of the Eighteen, speaks highly of Pastor Wüst's evangelistic work among the Lutherans and Mennonites, and P.M. Friesen significantly elevates Wüst and Menno Simons to the status of pillars of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Friesen writes, "Next to God's Work and His Spirit, Menno and Wüst have actually made the M.B. Church what it is and will be in the Church of Christ" (The Mennonite Brotherhood, p. 212). Friesen then goes on to explain: "If the joyous doctrine of justification is overly predominant in Wuest's Christian teaching, it counterbalances Menno's very serious, somewhat melancholy theology, which is, however, based on justifying grace, and in their amalgamation, the two streams achieve an apostolic balance" (Ibid.).

While early Mennonite Brethren hailed Wüst as a Moses who was instrumental in leading the Brethren out of the spiritual desert of Mennonitism, there was from the very beginning an expressed uneasiness among them about Wüst's emotionalism, his one-sided theological emphasis, and the possible consequences of his non-Mennonite influence for the Mennonite brotherhood. Jacob Bekker, for example, expresses concern about Wüst's non-Mennonite concepts of the church and discipleship and his involvement with the chiliastic temple movement (Origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church, pp. 28, 29, 31). P. M. Friesen also expresses "warm love and respect [for Wüst], though not without Christian and objective criticism" (The Mennonite Brotherhood, p.211). In a footnote in this connection Friesen speaks directly to the danger of outside influences among the Mennonites: "The 'Mennonite Church Brethren,' the 'Mennonite Brethren,' and 'Evangelical Mennonite Brethren' should not acquire so much from elsewhere and incorporate it as to displace that

which is specifically Mennonite!" (The Mennonite Brotherhood, p.999).

With the wisdom that comes from hind sight and a knowledge of what happened to the Mennonite Brethren church later, J. A. Toews writes in his history of the Mennonite Brethren Church: "---it was perhaps providential that the man [Wüst] to whom so many Brethren were emotionally attached had to leave the scene at that particular time ... by training and experience he was not equipped to be the 'Joshua' to lead these redeemed people into the promised land of a believers' church" (A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p.31).

But when Wüst was gone there were other non-Mennonite individuals and groups to which the Mennonite Brethren turned for counsel, cooperation and support. Especially the German Baptists and their institutions helped to shape, according to J. A. Toews, the church-concept of the Brethren (p.32). And Victor Adrian believes that the M.B. church was "born of Anabaptism and Pietism" (M.B. Herald, March 26, 1965). Adrian's assertion may be open to question, as J. A. Toews rightly observes, but the point seems to be that the Mennonite Brethren from the beginning of their history were more open to Pietist, evangelical, and Baptist influences than were the rest of the Mennonites in Russia. In North America, as we have seen, these influences became even stronger.

Secondly, J. B. Toews points out that while the Mennonite Brethren in Russia were exposed to Pietist, Lutheran and Baptist influences, "these influences did not affect their basic New Testament concept of the church and other central concerns of faith ... due to the fact that in Russia they were not only a believer's fellowship, but also an ethnic cultural entity closely related to the larger Mennonite community. Their cultural "belonging" to a larger community tempered the effects of their theological exposure to the West" (pp.7-8).

In North America where Mennonite Brethren did not live as separate cultural and ethnic groups, Toews goes on to suggest, the influence of Fundamentalism on Mennonite Brethren theology became more pronounced and damaging.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this observation is fairly obvious. As ironic as this may appear to be, the cultural and ethnic insitutions against which the early Brethren reacted so violently (and with some justification), helped them (inspite of the strong non-Mennonite influences) to maintain and cultivate their Mennonite identity. P. M. Friesen observes most eloquence in this regard when he writes concerning Johann Cornies' achievements: "Menno and Cornies have given us Russian Mennonites, both in Russia and America, our ecclesiastical and cultural character for all time.... We see in Cornies' reform the healthy body (cultural and civic community) for Menno's spirit (the heart of Christianity and church community). And we call upon our more than a hundred-thousand brothers and sisters in Russia and America: Let us remember our two teachers, Menno and Cornies! Let us acquire what we have inherited from our fathers!" (The Mennonite Brotherhood, p.199).

The ethnic/cultural aspects of the Mennonite Brethren must clearly remain in a subordinate position if the M. B. church hopes to remain (or become) a New Testament community in the spirit of Menno Simons. But this cultural body cannot be discarded at will without eventually losing Menno's spirit which indwells this body. For example, our church papers write about the need to reemphasize and teach the traditional principles of peace and non-resistance. This is indeed needful and most important. But it seems to me that these pleas are less than convincing if our teaching, preaching, and writing continue to minimize and even undermine the total Mennonite Christian structure and identity. Why should Mennonites, it might be asked, feel strongly about Christian pacifism when they are exposed to, and even urged to be like,

Evangelicals who do not share the Mennonite historic peace position? To come back to Friesen's metaphor, once the Mennonite body is destroyed the spirit must find another home - and this home may well be found in the quarters from which the Fundamentalist-Evangelical winds have been blowing through the Mennonite Brethren Church for some 120 years.

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