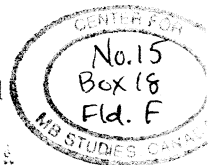


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Seminar Paper: MENNONITE BRETHREN DISTINCTIVES

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I. HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

The Anabaptists of the 16th century, forbears of the Mennonites, were generally misunderstood and terribly persecuted because of their distinctives or peculiarities. In many respects they agreed with the magisterial reformers, but on certain cardinal issues they diverged radically. Among the tenets which those Anabaptists defended, even at the cost of imprisonment or martyrdom, were:

- A. a church of the regenerate only, separated from the state;
- B. an obedience to the Scriptures, even the costly parts;
- C. a committed discipleship, which included the ethic of love without restrictions;
- D. a missionary mandate for all believers.

Since those turbulent times the western world has become much more tolerant of religious diversity, so that deviators are no longer drowned or burned. In addition, some of the notions that appeared to be so strange and radical four hundred years ago are now generally accepted; as, for example, the separation between church and state, or the awareness that Jesus' command to make disciples is still in effect. However, as we approach the close of the 20th century, it is still fitting to review the distinctives of our church in order to verify if they are in harmony with God's design, and to ascertain if we are indeed allowing them to order our lives.

II. MORE RECENT SUMMARIES

Several recognized leaders of the Mennonite Brethren church have on various occasions formulated lists of what they consider to be our denominational distinctives. Thus Benjamin J. Braun, the founding president of M B Biblical Seminary in Fresno, California, included such a list in a

syllabus that he prepared for a class. Braun began with a "strong emphasis on the personal experiential aspect of regeneration prior to church membership," thus following precisely in the footsteps of the Anabaptist forbears. But in addition to the widely-accepted distinctives, he added: home training for church loyalty; simplicity of life; and a persistent love for church-sponsored education.

Abraham E. Janzen, long associated with both Tabor College and the M B Board of Missions, considered conversion as a distinctive spiritual experience to be one of the M B distinctives. That may well reflect the influence of pietism, which has become part of our heritage. Janzen also referred to eschatology as a denominational distinctive, classifying the Mennonite Brethren as premillennialists.⁽²⁾ Regarding the church, he listed baptism by immersion, foot washing, spontaneous prayer and spirited singing as identifying marks. His emphasis on the family also merits notice. Under this heading, Janzen referred to the permanence of marriage, because it is sacred, and to the family altar. Referring to family worship, he provided a personal comment:

"In the course of my duties extending over 30 years in connection with conference, educational, and foreign missions administration, I have had the opportunity to visit about 36 countries. My travels have brought me into hundreds of Mennonite Brethren homes...To God's glory, to the credit of these homes, and as a testimony I am grateful to be able to verify that...I have not been in a single Mennonite Brethren home that did not observe family worship. I am sure the family altar is missing in some homes, but these are the exceptions." (A.E. Janzen, Mennonite Brethren Distinctives, p. 8)

A third writer on this subject, John A. Toews, included brotherhood emphasis as one of our distinctives. He pointed out that even the name, Mennonite Brethren, given to the new group in 1860, expressed the new and vital relationship which the members experienced in their fellowship. According to him:

"In the early M B church there was a real revival of the Biblical concept of koinonia in which the root idea is 'participating in something in which others also participate,' that is, 'a conscious sharing with someone else in a joint possession, usually on a continuing basis'." (J.A. Toews, A History of the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 371)

This brotherhood-consciousness saved the Mennonite Brethren church from individualism and an overemphasis on the autonomy of the local church,

according to Toews. (Ibid., 372) Such an evaluation agrees with Braun's assessment that the concept of brotherhood has kept the M B church together. Decisions were not reached primarily through majority vote, but on the basis of discernment and concensus under the supervision of the Holy Spirit. Such a procedure is Scriptural and acts as a stronger bond than democracy. (Braun, unpublished class notes, 1957)

It is noteworthy that all three of the writers cited include in their lists of distinctives: Biblicism, as the basis for theology and practice; Christian discipleship, including non-resistance; conversion or regeneration, as a transforming experience; and evangelism and missions, as a task for every member. Furthermore, at least two include each of the following items: eschatology; church purity; and the brotherhood emphasis. Hence, a comparison of these distinctives with those of the 16th century Anabaptists reveals that Mennonite Brethren continue to cherish the same tenets, and precepts, although adapted to a different context.

III. FIVE; LIKE THE FINGERS OF ONE HAND

Many people have found it helpful to summarize the Gospel in three or four simple statements, in order to guide them in personal witnessing. Others have reduced their theology or statement of faith to four or five easily-remembered terms. In a similar manner I believe that we can profitably summarize the distinctives of the Mennonite Brethren church under five headings.

A. The authority of Scripture

The Biblicism of the Mennonite Brethren tends to be practical rather than formal. Sometimes it has leaned toward simplicity and even legalism, but in general it has preserved the church from mere orthodoxy. Though Mennonite Brethren accept the whole Bible as divinely inspired, like the reformation Anabaptists they recognize the focus of Scriptural authority in the New Testament.

Although respect for the Bible and even a knowledge of its contents do not save anyone, nevertheless the Scriptures clearly point to the Redeemer. For that reason, both collectively and individually members of the Mennonite Brethren church need to study the Bible in order to make both faith and practice conform to its teaching.

B. A church of the regenerate

Those who have been converted by grace through faith have been made part of the body of Christ, according to the imagery employed by the apostle Paul. They have left the sinful course of this world and have been transported into the kingdom of God. The church is composed of such redeemed people, who identify themselves with Christ through baptism and covenant with other believers to participate in a local church. This involves both the giving and receiving of instruction and admonition.

Mennonite Brethren recognize that imperfection and sin still mar every individual and group, but they believe that the church should strive for purity, and that only those who are truly converted should become members of the church.

C. Committed discipleship

On the one hand salvation is a gift from God, but on the other hand it calls for costly commitment. Jesus referred to this as daily cross-carrying: a repeated, visible sentence of death to the self-life.

Whereas many evangelists stress primarily an acceptance of God's loving offer of salvation, Mennonite Brethren believe that this needs to be balanced by the demands of the Gospel. Thus Christians must be prepared for spiritual warfare and for non-conformity to the standards of the world. This involves abstinence from that which has the appearance of evil as well as walking in the Spirit and producing spiritual fruit. Specifically, Mennonite Brethren understand this to include refraining from entertainment that incites to sin, gambling, profanity, violence, and the use of tobacco or alcoholic beverages. Positively, committed discipleship means taking seriously the teaching of Jesus, including peace making and loving without restrictions.

D. Holistic evangelism

At certain times the evangelistic zeal of the Mennonite Brethren has tended to neglect social concerns and material needs. Historically that can sometimes be explained, if not justified. However, for many years and in many places representatives of the Mennonite Brethren church have also been involved in ministries of relief and general welfare. The recognition that the church must minister to the total needs of humanity (without neglecting the proclamation of the Gospel) has become so generally accepted that it is by now a primary distinctive of our church (Toews p. 374).

E. The blessed hope

Mennonite Brethren emphasize the glorious expectation of the return of Christ. Though there are differences regarding the interpretation of details, our church affirms the central truth. This blessed hope provides the stimulus for practical sanctification, for endurance in suffering, and for perseverance in evangelism.

Conclusion

These distinctives, though not belonging exclusively to the Mennonite Brethren church, nor unanimously accepted by all those who identify themselves by this name, provide a convenient summary of what we believe to be essential. They reflect the desire of Mennonite Brethren to be the people of God in this world: sincerely, obediently, thankfully.

But it is not enough for us to affirm them at this moment; we must make it our goal and task to transform them into daily reality for ourselves and for each member of the Mennonite Brethren church.

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