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Introduction

In light of recent developments in Mennonite circles, the subject of Anabaptist groups realigning themselves with others, both within and outside of the Mennonite family of faith is most timely. On the larger North American scene, plans have been laid for the merger of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church. Regional integration of the two groups already occurred in the formation in February 1988 of the Mennonite Conference of Eastern Canada.

Mennonite Brethren response to inter-Mennonite mergers has traditionally been cool. M.B.'s seem more open to aligning with smaller evangelical Mennonite conferences. Canadian M.B.'s are active members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and the U.S. Brethren of the National Association of Evangelicals. At the May 16-20, 1990 Vision 2000 National Leadership Consultation on Evangelism in Ottawa, Mennonite Brethren were represented by some seventy delegates. The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren was an official member of Vision 2000. The Mennonite Brethren, together with the Evangelical Mennonite Conference were the only two Mennonite groups to officially endorse the event.

The largest Mennonite body in Canada, the General Conference Mennonites has for years debated whether it should join the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada but at its annual sessions of July 6-11, 1990, held in Edmonton decided against joining the E.F.C., as well as against joining the Canadian Council of Churches.

Mennonite Theologies

There is a great diversity of theological thinking among North American Mennonites.

A. James Reimer describes 14 distinct theological approaches among Mennonites and his list is not exhaustive.¹ J. Denny Weaver places the various Mennonite theologies into three clusters. Cluster One affirms that Mennonite theology is Christian theology, and assumes that Mennonites have little theological tradition of their own. They therefore borrow from and stress agreement with other traditions on core doctrines. Weaver sees three subgroups within this cluster - those comfortable with earlier Fundamentalism, those who emphasize Mennonite agreement with Evangelicals and evangelical theology, and those who stress the classic creeds of Christendom.²

A second cluster consists of various kinds of liberation and feminist theologies which express the justice and social concerns of Mennonites. Weaver comments: "If Cluster One holds Mennonite theology up to the bar of a theory of Scripture or to creedal statements from the fourth and fifth centuries, Cluster Two evaluates Mennonite theology at the bar of the human experience of liberation."³

Cluster Three follows the lead of John H. Yoder, and according to Weaver "offers the most promising option for the development of a systematic theology for modern

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Mennonites."⁴ This cluster affirms the story of Jesus as the foundation and the norm for Christian theology.

In light of the aforementioned diversity in the larger Anabaptist scene and the limitations of length imposed on this paper, I will focus mainly on North American Mennonite Brethren and their relationship to North American evangelicals. I realize there is a considerable variety of theological thinking among the Mennonite Brethren as well, with some belonging within all three clusters (or subgroups within them) listed by Weaver. The task of this paper then is explicate the diversity among Mennonite Brethren as well as the diversity within Evangelicalism and then give a rationale for affirming that M.B.'s be both Evangelical and Anabaptist and ought to continue in cooperative endeavours with Evangelicals.

Assessing North American Evangelicals

The Spring, 1991 issue of Direction is devoted to the topic "Mennonite Brethren and Evangelicals." That tension and ambivalence characterize the relationship between M.B.'s and North American evangelicalism is a theme which runs throughout the various articles.

Although there may be some difficulty in clearly defining who Mennonite Brethren are, defining and assessing evangelicalism is considerably more challenging.

From a New Testament perspective, the evangelical is the authentic Christian. He is one who believes and shares the "evangelion," the term first century believers used as their word for "good news" or gospel of Christ.

From this simple understanding of "evangelical" has emerged a movement that is anything but monolithic. The term was actually not used widely until the early part of the sixteenth century. The Reformers, in breaking from the Roman Catholic Church, believed they had recaptured the true gospel of the first century. Thus the Lutheran and Reformed churches were called Evangelical to distinguish them from Roman Catholic.

In the eighteenth century, "evangelical" took on some additional shades of meaning. The great awakenings which swept over England and the American colonies were called evangelical revivals. It came to be understood in a new way that an evangelical not only believed certain truths, but also shared that faith with others who were lost without it. Evangelism once again became an essential part of being an evangelical, as it was in the early church.

Evangelical Protestantism was the dominant force in North America until shortly after the U.S. Civil War. Then an amalgam of at least five theological strands came together to combat new theological and scientific thought seen as a threat to orthodox Christianity.

The elements coming together in the emergence of what was soon to be called Fundamentalism coalesced as a common front to defend the faith against the liberal accommodation to modernity. The five elements were Puritanism (the oldest strain and by 1875 the one most modified); the Arminian impulse, which filtered through to North America via Wesleyan theology; revivalism, no longer confined to rural and frontier communities but, by the end of the 19th century very much urban; millenarianism taught

mainly in its dispensational form inherited from John Nelson Darby; and Biblical literalism with the Princeton theologians leading the way in its exposition and defence.⁵

Unfortunately, by the early twentieth century, Evangelicalism, spearheaded by reactionary forces and given the name Fundamentalism, began a slide into becoming what has been called a ten-ring circus.⁶ Fundamentalism developed an enormous penchant for controversy and this, combined with a strong strain of anti-intellectualism made it a backwater movement.

In the 1940's a self-conscious New Evangelicalism emerged out of Fundamentalism. It retained many of the doctrines of Fundamentalism but turned from a schismatic and defensive mode and sought to "retrieve Christianity from a mere eddy of the main stream into the full current of modern life."⁷

The evangelical periodical Christianity Today was founded in 1956 as part of the new thrust to intellectual and theological respectability. The objectives of this revived Evangelicalism were clearly articulated by National Association of Evangelicals president Harold Ockenga in 1960. He declared:

(The evangelical) desires to win a new respectability for orthodoxy in the academic circles by producing scholars who can defend the faith on intellectual ground. He hopes to recapture denominational leadership from within the denominations rather than abandoning those denominations to modernism. He intends to restate his position carefully and cogently so that it must be considered in theological dialogue. He intends that Christianity will be the mainspring in many of the reforms of the societal order.⁸

The distancing of the resurgent Evangelicalism from hard-line Fundamentalism continued throughout the 1960's. By the mid 1970's the evangelical movement crested so much that in 1976 a cover story of Newsweek was titled "The Year of the Evangelical." George Marsden succinctly places current Evangelicalism in its historical context by noting that in the shorter perspective of its Fundamentalist past, Evangelicalism today appears to be "the somewhat moderate outgrowth of an essentially eccentric and separatist religious subculture."⁹ However, viewed in the perspective of a century ago, contemporary Evangelicalism can be seen as "embodying some of the most deeply rooted traditions and characteristic attitudes in American culture. At times it appears as a beleaguered sect; at other times it still poses as the religious establishment."¹⁰

Evangelicalism then, defined broadly in terms of historical lineage and adherence to cardinal Christian tenets is a movement which is transdenominational. It includes all those who have personally experienced Christ as their Saviour and seek to share him with others. Thus defined, evangelicals currently number 66 million in the United States (Gallup Poll) and 500 million worldwide (statistician David Barrett).

Growth in numbers notwithstanding, all is not well with the movement, particularly in North America. With such rapid growth comes the concern that Evangelicalism may not survive its own popularity. Blurred distinctives and unethical conduct, it is feared, may take the potency out of the movement.

Theologian Carl Henry recently expressed the concern that whereas some ten years ago North American Evangelicalism was heralded as a dominant, positive force, it is now perceived in terms of Elmer Gantry exploitation, manipulation, and confrontational politics. Its cognitive content and its life-ethic have both suffered to the point that the vitality and even survival of the movement may be questioned.¹¹

Recently Christianity Today carried a series of articles by six noted evangelical scholars on what has been called an "Evangelical Megashift."¹² In the lead article, Robert Brow, without naming individual authors and theologians (with the exception of the frequent mention of C.S. Lewis as the most influential transitional figure in the shift from "old-model" to "new-model" thinking) delineates seven terms that he believes have been completely changed their focus in new-model evangelical theology. The latter is characterized by a picture of God as three persons held together in a relationship of love and "instead of being dragged trembling into a law court, we are to breathe in the atmosphere of a loving family."¹³

Hell is no longer seen as a place to which unbelievers are sent by judicial sentence. Hell (as well as heaven) is a destination freely chosen. Faith, in the new thinking, is a direction of looking, not a particular decision. The old idea of God as judge was derived from a Roman court of law; the new model sometimes merged with the Old Testament portrayed of the ideal King David, is a father of his people who loves and defends them.¹⁴

In new-model theology wrath connotes not angry punishment but the bad consequences which God assigns, as any loving parent might, to wrongful behaviour. It never means sending people to an eternal hell. In old-model theology, one sin is enough to condemn us to hell. New-model evangelicals think about sin not in terms of judgment and hell, but in terms of bad behaviour requiring discipline and correction in order to bring about change, but never exclusion.¹⁵

Similarly, in new-model thinking, the church is one of the instruments of the love of God and not merely a stockade for the saved or an agency to save souls (old thinking). The new view produces a difference motive for missions. The old model saw all the heathen as lost until they heard the gospel and made the right "faith decision." This gave a tremendous compulsion to go out and "reach the lost." The new form of missions follows Jesus' model in Matthew 28, i.e. teach all nations enrolling by baptism any who want to learn and then training them, forming them into church families.¹⁶

Finally, there is a subtle shift in the meaning given to the title Son of God. Old-model theology stressed that our forgiveness was not purchased until Jesus actually died on the cross. The new thinking, based on C.S. Lewis's Narnia stories, views the Son as eternally both Lion and Lamb. The cross is not seen as a judicial payment for our sins, but as the visible expression in a space-time body of Jesus' eternal nature as Son.¹⁷

Five scholars respond to Brow's "megashift" delineation. They all agree that a shift in evangelical theology has occurred. They do not all uniformly see the shift as negative and indeed, would differ on the new definitions given by Brow.

Don Carson asks: if we admit that old-model evangelicalism has in some measure been hostage to antiquated notions badly in need of reformation, to what is new model evangelicalism hostage?¹⁸ David Wells simply argues that what we are seeing is not the emergence of a new model, but rather the dismembering of the old by the forces of modernity.¹⁹ Robert Webber wholeheartedly agrees with Brow's megashift thesis and adds his own personal testimony. He writes, "I have experienced the shift from the old to the new model and seek in my work to assist those making a similar journey."²⁰ Webber is professor of theology at Wheaton College.

Clark Pinnock of McMaster Divinity College agrees with most of the new-model theology and states categorically that Brow's 'new' evangelical thinking is really the old Arminian or non-Augustinian thinking. He states what is new is that the dominance of Calvinist thinking is being challenged by a wave of Arminian thinking breaking on its shores. The real issue, argues Pinnock, is one of control. He challenges: "Will the Augustinian old guard that dominates the structure of official evangelicalism gracefully surrender some of its power to a resurgent wave of Arminian thinking? Or will it fight to

retain control?"²¹

The most irenic voice in the megashift debate, as it is in his book The Future of Evangelical Christianity - A Call For Unity Amid Diversity,²² is Donald Bloesch. He gently critiques elements in both the old and the new model and calls for each to be willing to learn from and be corrected by the other and for each "to submit cherished beliefs to the searing criticism of the transcendent Word of God."²³

Mennonite Brethren Diversity

It is at the triennial conventions of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches that the theological diversity among M.B.'s surfaces. Recent conventions have dealt with confessional issues and of the 1987 sessions as well as the 1990 sessions, Don Ratzlaff's characterization holds true - "diversity and difference of opinion tested conference unity."²⁴

Lack of unanimity on the basic understanding of the church as a covenant community plagues the Mennonite Brethren. This diversity of thought on the nature of the church gives rise to diverse opinion and practice regarding the relationship of baptism to church membership and the Lord's Supper.²⁵ Thus Conference leadership has wrestled with Article X of the M.B. Confession of Faith on The Lord's Supper.

Confessional integrity has also been sought on Article XV - Peace and Nonresistance. When a revised version of Article XV which was more positive and inclusive was presented on the floor of the 1990 convention it soon became evident that certain segments of the denomination wanted the peace position removed from the Confession of Faith or at least worded so vaguely that M.B.'s who don't hold the position would feel free to take up arms.

Other areas of diversity are in understanding the role of women in the church and whether they should be ordained, styles of leadership, and the emphases and methods by which evangelism and church growth should be practised in M.B. churches.

The General Conference Vision Statement affirms that the central issue facing M.B.'s is one of identity - what does it mean to be a Mennonite Brethren Church? What are the bonds which hold such a diverse group together?

The Statement proceeds to answer the question of identity and bonds in the following manner:

A church (denomination) is a group of congregations bound together by a common faith, a common mission and trusted leaders. In the past these common bonds defined our identity and held us together. We believe they still do. Mennonite Brethren identity is spiritual and theological. We believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, we believe the church is a covenant community of adult believers. We believe the mission of the church is to help all members follow Jesus in a life of discipleship. Our identity is also historical. We have a history of persecution, struggle, migration, missions and commitment that goes back to the Reformation of the 16th century.²¹

In addition to a bold challenge to missionary vision which is integrated with ministries of compassion and service, the Statement calls for confessional integrity. "We believe it is imperative that the leadership of the church - the pastors, teachers and conference officers - be in agreement with the Confession." It adds: "We intend to work toward a new consensus about the Confession of Faith within the church."²¹

What M.B.'s are seeking is a unity of confession and mission. It is explicitly stated that this can only be realized "as Mennonite Brethren leaders agree with one another on the essentials of a faith and practice that is both Evangelical and Anabaptist" (emphasis mine).²¹

It is precisely on this point that North American Mennonite Brethren are divided. One group focuses in on an Anabaptist-Mennonite identity, strongly emphasizing the legacy of their 16th century forebears - the believer's church, discipleship, nonconformity, and peace and social concerns. Another segment sees itself more Evangelical than Mennonite. They are drawn to evangelical ministries such as Focus on the Family, Charles Swindoll, Charles Colson, Campus Crusade, The Navigators, and organizations such as The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada and The National Association of Evangelicals in the United States. This segment feels a stronger affinity with mainstream Evangelicalism than with other Mennonite groups and even at times, with institutions (schools, mission agencies) within their own Mennonite Brethren denomination. Their emphasis is on the pietistic tradition with a focus on individual salvation, personal spiritual growth, and verbal witness.

The question is: can Mennonite Brethren be both Evangelical and Anabaptist? If the answer is in the affirmative, which I believe it is, then they must relate to the best insights of both, all the while allowing Scripture to be the ultimate arbiter of faith and action.

Anabaptist and Evangelical

There is no doubt in my mind that North American Mennonites in general and specifically Mennonite Brethren are to be identified as Evangelicals. If, however, a particular Mennonite group consciously dissociates itself with its theological roots in 16th century Anabaptism, then that group would not be identified as evangelical.

Definitions are all important. Defining Evangelicals broadly, as we have sought to do, as those who are caught up with the good news of what God has done for us in Christ, and vitalized by the personal experience of new life through faith in Christ, being eager to share this experience, and holding firmly to the cardinal doctrines of Scripture

squarely places the mainstream Anabaptists of the 16th century within the Evangelical framework. Thus those who claim the Anabaptist lineage, unless they consciously, or in practice deny it, are also Evangelical.

What disturbs many Mennonites who see the name Evangelical more as a libel than label is the excesses of certain segments within the large and very diverse Evangelical camp as we see it today. Indeed, who would want to identify with the health-and-wealth teachers, flamboyant faith healers, and fly-by-night evangelists who preach a superficial gospel, all under the umbrella of being Evangelical? The solution to this dilemma is to be cooperative with the positive efforts of mainline Evangelicals which impact our society for Christ while at the same time being consciously critical of anything which is being done or taught by Evangelicals which is contrary to Christ and the Word.

Ron Sider affirms that if Evangelicals were consistent, they would be Anabaptists and if Anabaptists were consistent, they would be Evangelicals. He further argues that Mennonites need Evangelicals and Evangelicals need Mennonites.²⁹ I will pursue these two lines of thought, with particular application being made to Mennonite Brethren.

As already stated, today's Anabaptists who are true to their sixteenth century roots are Evangelicals. Anabaptists have historically affirmed the central doctrines of the creeds regarding the Trinity, the full humanity and full deity of Christ, the atonement, and the bodily resurrection - all of which are central concerns of Evangelicals. Anabaptists have historically also had a strong emphasis on evangelism and missions. They are also committed to the full authority of the Scriptures as the final norm for faith and practice. All this is fully consistent with being Evangelical.

If today's Evangelicals were consistent with their own commitment to biblical authority, they would stress far more than they do the Anabaptist insistence on the importance of not only belief, but also of behaviour; not only of justification but of sanctification and the costly life of discipleship; not only the church as a cozy fellowship of the redeemed but the church as the community of Christ the King, living out the ethics of the Kingdom. Furthermore, Evangelicals who took the Anabaptist cue on the ethics of the Kingdom would follow the way of non-violence in all human relationships.

It is essential to underscore again and again that the aforementioned views on discipleship, the church, and nonviolence are not merely Mennonite, but biblical. Therefore, anyone who wants to have a fully biblical theology should eagerly embrace such teachings (without necessarily officially becoming Mennonite).

Furthermore, Evangelicals need Mennonites and Mennonites need Evangelicals to complement and help each other. The common affirmation of both groups is that the center of Christian faith is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Evangelicals and Mennonites need each other to correct distortions of how one's experience of Christ is expressed. Evangelicals stress the experience of Christ in personal, individualistic, and in some cases privatistic terms, insufficiently emphasizing the horizontal aspects of becoming a part of the church as the community of faith.

Mennonites, with their theology of conversion which leads to baptism, discipleship and church membership, can correct this.

The danger many Mennonites face is substituting their ethnicity and culture for a true conversion and a living relationship with Christ. Their imitation of Christ in the way of peace and social service is also in danger of becoming the essence rather than an expression of the Gospel. Evangelicals, with their emphasis on the centrality of the new birth can be a constant reminder to Mennonites to keep this truth in perspective. If Mennonites knew Menno better, they would not lose sight of this, for Menno was known as the theologian of the new birth.

Evangelicals and Mennonites need each other to maintain a holistic emphasis in evangelism. Mennonites tend to be strong in presence and weak in proclamation when it comes to evangelism. Evangelicals can remind Mennonites that people are lost unless someone tells them of God's redeeming work in Christ and how this can be appropriated by faith (Romans 10:17). Mennonites have too frequently been swift to speak about peace but slow to proclaim how peace is made possible through the blood of the Cross (Ephesians 2:13-16).

On the other hand, Evangelicals need Mennonites to help them preach a biblical gospel. The gospel of easybelievism proclaimed by some Evangelicals is heretical in its individualism and its lack of call to costly discipleship and commitment to the community of faith, the church. Mennonites can remind Evangelicals that the Christian faith is not merely a vertical encounter, but an experience which leads to new horizontal relationships vis-a-vis brothers and sisters in the church and a needy world.

Finally, Evangelicals and Mennonites need each other to maintain a balance between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Evangelicals stress correct doctrine and belief, but have often made doctrine and belief more important than ethical living. This is a valid criticism Mennonites can make of Evangelicals.

Evangelicals, on the other hand, wisely caution Mennonites of the danger of "works righteousness" and of making orthopraxis more important than orthodoxy. This is a much needed caution, for as Ron Sider observes:

There are some Mennonites who have demonstrated in their lives a very costly commitment to following the ethical teachings of Jesus and to living out the reality of the new society of Jesus' followers in intimate community who nonetheless seem to think that the historic Christian emphasis on the full deity of Jesus Christ and His bodily resurrection from the dead are dispensable doctrines. The essence of Christian faith is really the ethical life of following Jesus' teachings and the Sermon on the Mount is the canon within the canon.³¹

Conclusion

I believe Mennonite Brethren can and must be both Evangelical and Anabaptist. Therefore, I believe M.B. cooperation in evangelical associations like the National Association of Evangelicals and the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada is both natural and wholesome. One wishes other Mennonite groups, especially the Conference of Mennonites

Canada, would have been willing to join in E.F.C.'s endeavours, especially such enormous helpful ones as the recent Vision 2000 Consultation on Evangelism. A closer look at positive developments within Evangelicalism, especially within Canada, would go a long way toward convincing non-participating Mennonite groups of the value of association.

An Ontario Mennonite Church pastor who admits that he had been treating the evangelical wing of the church with some distance and suspicion, attended the Vision 2000 consultation and reports a change of heart. He writes:

In the midst of listening to speakers such as Ray Bakke, Michael Green, Don Posterski and Reg Hollis, I realized that the evangelical caricature I had painted for myself was not realistic and maybe never was a true portrayal. I sensed a shift taking place concerning evangelism.

Their emphasis is now on relationships which the gospel is presented in many different ways by different people over a period of time. Mass evangelism and the four spiritual laws may still be used, but the emphasis is on friendship and lifestyle evangelism.

Word and deed need to go hand in hand. Credibility will be found when the church touches society in a physical/material way where it is hurting.

Canada is a pluralistic society and we need to accept this fact by respecting the views and rights of others, said the speakers. Having done that, we need to present our views in a clear manner, defending our worldview and inviting people to join us.

Humankind and creation are good, but fallen. We need to begin to treat the environment and people with respect, seeing it all as a gift from God....

With the theological shift taking place in evangelical churches in Canada, I see possibilities for us to work together and learn from each other. Also, with the church in Canada decreasing in size in proportion to the Canadian population, we no longer have the luxury of "fighting" one another.¹¹

Bearing in mind the creative cross-fertilization which can take place between Mennonites and Evangelicals, an interaction which can only occur as both groups voluntarily associate, and bearing in mind the unity in truth and in love for which our Lord prayed in John 17, I urge continued association of Mennonite Brethren with Evangelicals. The goal of our coming together ought to be to help each other to greater faithfulness to Christ and to the mandate "that the world may believe" (John 17:21).

In this process of cooperation, new networks will be formed, new agencies established, and creative new ways of impacting the world with the Christian message discovered. Let us be bold, even to the point of altering some of our denominational structures and changing some of our traditional approaches in the way we "do church" and go about our mission of reaching people for Christ. I agree with Donald Bloesch when he states that "the future belongs to that branch of Christendom that is willing to make itself expendable for the sake of the evangelization of the world to the greater glory of God."¹²

The basis of our coming together must be a unity in the truth of the Gospel. Surely we need to "come together in believing what we should believe," observes J. Ward Shank in the August, 1989 issue of The Sword and Trumpet. He adds: "The major cohesive factor is a subscription to Anabaptism, and that concept itself is undergoing revision by the new generation of historians. It has become an uncertain standard by

which to appeal."³³

Without ignoring this "uncertain standard" and the newer interpretations of Anabaptism, as true Christian ecumenists, let us draw from the best of the entire tradition of the church - Apostolic, Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Lutheran, Pietist, Revivalist and Evangelical for those special insights into God's truth they share with us. Above all, let us remain anchored in Scripture, God's authoritative Written Word, and in Christ, God's redeeming Living Word. As Donald Bloesch reminds us, there is hope not only for a unified evangelicalism but for the unity and renewal of the church at large "if each recognizes that the one foundation for faith is not a set of beliefs but a living Person who speaks anew in every age through the Bible and the church's commentary on Scripture."³⁴

"For no other foundation can any one lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Corinthians 3:11).