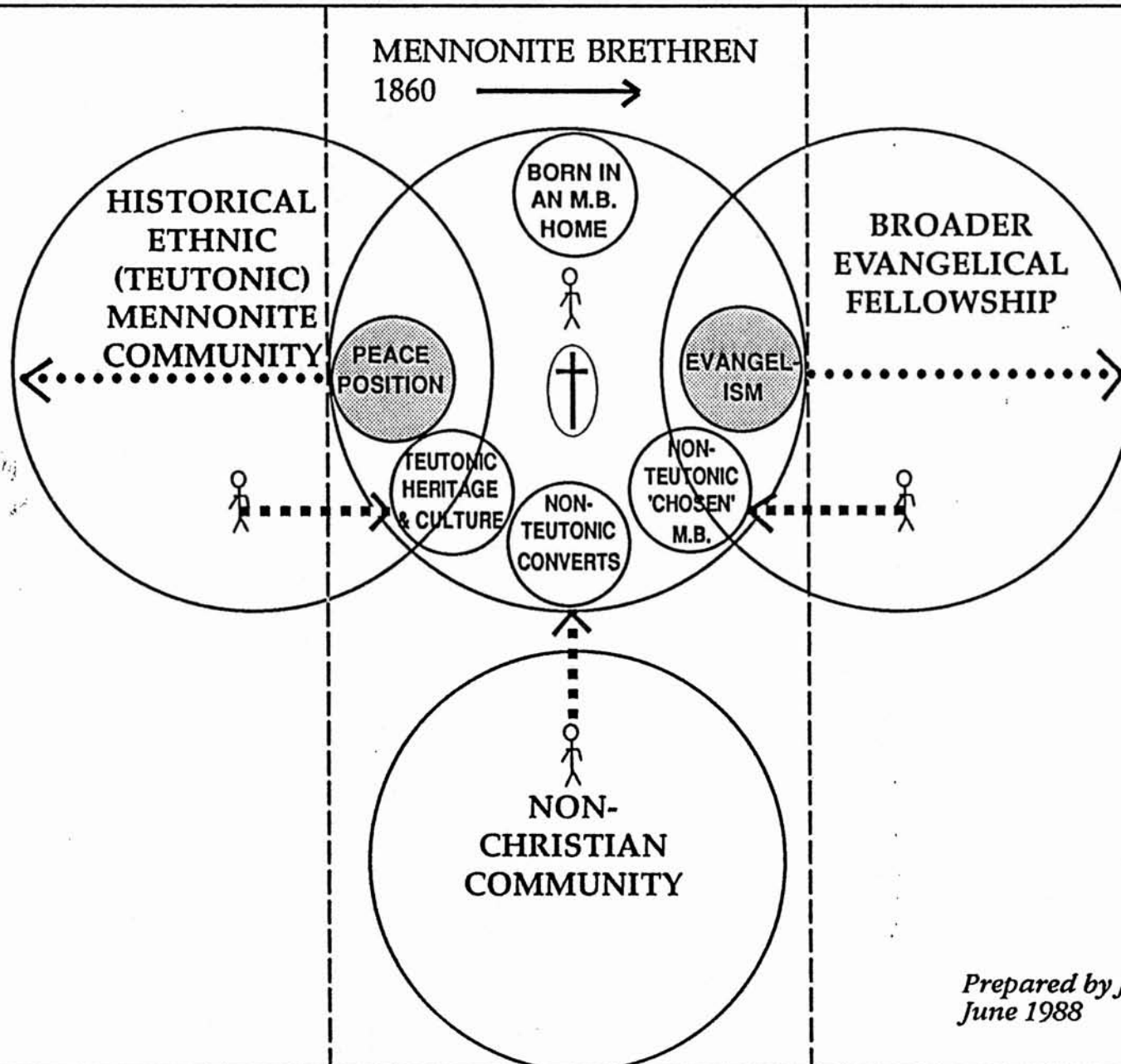


# WHO ARE THE 'M-BEES' ANYHOW??



Prepared by Jim Cunningham  
June 1988

## Editorial

### The way...and the truth

When I first read the paper "The uniqueness of Christ" (page 9), it struck me as a timely and gentle nudge to Christians like me who have become hesitant to proclaim Christ as the only truth for various reasons: the claim sounds so absolute; some evangelists have given evangelism a bad name; people without a Christian commitment sometimes put Christians to shame...to name just a few.

In his paper, Gary Harder calls Christians to a style of witness—a respectful, non-coercive style—that is consistent with the message itself. The paper also puts the emphasis on witness as "confession." That is, Christians are called to declare their own convictions but not to make judgments about the faith of others.

There's enough of a challenge here to occupy most of us for a long time. Harder rightfully suggests that ultimately the judgment about the faith of others belongs to God. At the same time, the questions won't go away. Is Jesus in fact the only way to God? Is God's revelation through Christ the truth against which all other truth needs to be measured?

I was intrigued by the approach to these questions taken in another paper: "The gospel and pluralism," presented by Calvin Shenk to a February meeting of the Mennonite Board of Missions.

Shenk first of all distinguishes between cultural and religious pluralism. He suggests that Christians are to be "radically pluralistic" in terms of culture, but not in terms of religion; even though culture and religion cannot be that neatly separated.

According to Shenk, the gospel always takes root in a particular culture, but it should not be married to any one culture. "The gospel must never be completely domesticated. Faith must retain its strangeness, its power to question us."

In the complex and necessary process of learning to be cultural pluralists, Christians can easily start to apply that mindset to religion itself. That's where Shenk draws the line.

He helpfully outlines three approaches to other religions: 1) "exclusivism" which sees Christ as the "full and final revelation of God...the only way, truth and life;" 2) "inclusivism" which sees Christ as "the unique revelation of God and as the only saviour, but acknowledges the possibility of salvation outside of Christian faith or the walls of the visible church;" 3) "pluralism" which denies any uniqueness for Christ and sees the Christian faith as no more true than any other religion.

In describing the second view, Shenk adds: "But the agent of such salvation is Christ and the revelation in Jesus is normative for assessing such salvation. Jesus Christ is believed to be the centre and other ways are evaluated by how they relate to him."

Later on in his paper, he offers this succinct summary: "Christ is the centre even if we don't know where all the boundaries are."

A similar position was set out by David Janzen in the discussions around Harder's paper at the recent conference. Janzen referred to the Anabaptist leader, Hans Denck, who emphasized that God can speak directly in the heart of anyone in the world. "But it's always Christ speaking...it's never apart from Christ," commented Janzen. "You still have to examine whether it's the same Christ speaking or whether there's a different Christ."

I find Janzen's position and the "inclusive" approach cited by Shenk quite compelling. These views stop short of completely relativizing the Christian faith. At the same time, they caution against boxing Christ too quickly into existing Christian expressions and institutions.

The "inclusive" approach calls us to the "way" of Christ—a peaceful, non-coercive witness. It also calls us to keep testing the many alternate spirits of our time with reference to the "truth" of Christ (I John 4:1-3).—

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*DOCTRINAL FAITHFULNESS IN  
AN AGE OF THEOLOGICAL ACCOMMODATION*

*Study Draft for Board of Faith and Life Executive*

By Jim Cunningham

This paper is an expression of a concern, perhaps singular, of a perceived drift within the Mennonite Brethren Church towards cultural assimilation and theological accommodation with the broader 'Mennonite' community at the expense of diminishing doctrinal faithfulness and weakening identity with the larger evangelical 'non-Mennonite' community.

The question is: How do we as Mennonite Brethren maintain our faithfulness to the Scriptures and a harmonious working relationship with our theological cultural cousins without weakening our strong view of salvation through faith in the shed blood of Jesus of Nazareth and other clear Biblical positions.

I am not looking for a dog fight over semantics nor do I want to sow discord among the 'Brethren' but let me identify some concerns.

On the attached chart, "Who are the M-Bees Anyhow?", I outline four categories of "members" within our broader MB Church (see chart).

1. **Historical MB's:** Individuals with a strong tie to the Historical Ethnic (teutonic: Dutch-German-Russian) Mennonite Community. They usually speak German and hold to distinctive anabaptist teachings regarding doctrinal and social issues such as the peace position. Agreement on these issues often becomes the shibboleth for fellowship and interaction with others in the broader ethnic Mennonite Community (eg. MCC, etc.).

Historical MB's maintained an open attitude to accepting additional waves of MB refugees from the Soviet Union and South America. During their early years in Canada, many of their children sought to establish their distinctive Canadian MB identity by gradually learning and teaching the English language.

However with the switch to English, came interaction and communication with the great unwashed mass of non-evangelical, English speaking Canadians.

Those MB's with their zeal for the Lord saw this as a challenge for evangelism. But what do you do with the 'Anglesh' when they accept Christ? Would you want your daughter to marry one? A Schmidt becoming a Smith almost denies the faith!

(over)

2. **Modern MB's:** Next we have individuals who were reared in an MB home and view life through the lens of traditional MB doctrine within the context of our modern Canadian society. They are usually bilingual in German and English.

Modern Mennonite Brethren often encounter one of three attitudes towards the larger body of Christ:

- a) **Ethnocentricity** - "Hold-to-the-old-ways" - keep the German language, read the German Bible – withdraw – circle the wagons and hold on – the Lord is coming.
- b) **Integration** - "Take-the-best-of-both" - enjoy the platz, laugh at the jokes in low German, but reach out to those around us from other cultures.
- c) **Outreach** - "Bury-the-past-full-steam-ahead-redeem-the-time" - the world is going to hell in a bucket, we must get on with outreach, evangelism and helping others.

3. **Converted MB's** - The zeal of the group in 2c above caused a goodly number of individuals from a non-Christian background to accept Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and join a Mennonite Brethren Church often by reason of their friendship with the person who led them to the Lord. These people usually spoke English only and came from a non-teutonic background.
4. **Chosen MB's** - The fourth group are individuals from 'other Christian churches' who move into the community near an MB Church, or who voluntarily choose to identify with the doctrine and teachings of the MB Church. They may come into an MB Church via a friendship with a current member. their mother tongue is English and they tend to be 'new to the community' (eg. job transfers, etc.). They feel very comfortable with the broader evangelical community (EFC) and tend to retain their ties to inter-denominational missions and projects.

These four categories of individuals combine in disproportionate percentages to make what we know as "the local MB Church" in Canada today. Some churches are predominantly Historical MB's, others may be half Modern and half Chosen/Convert MB's. Plus we have numerous 'ethnic' groups (Chinese, Greek, Punjabi) forming their unique brand of Chosen/Convert "Mennonite" Churches - lacking either an Historical or a Modern MB ethnic identity.

Mennonites in general, and Mennonite Brethren in particular, have witnessed the influx of new members from literally 'the four corners of the earth'. We now have MB's in Canada from many countries representing a wide diversity of cultures and a linguistic variety of services with numerous mother tongues each Sunday morning. Yet we share

in common a personal faith in Jesus Christ plus a commitment to an evangelical anabaptist approach to church government and lifestyle.

My concern is the increasing identify MB's are having with "other" Mennonites, some of whom do not hold to the same doctrines as MB's. J

In the January 12, 1990 issue of the MB Herald, John Redekop identified eight items facing Mennonite Brethren in the 90's. His article presents a challenging agenda for the BFL to grapple with in the 90's (see attached copy).

Notice how many of the items speak to doctrinal faithfulness in an age of theological accommodation.

**1. Coordination and Cooperation In Higher Education**

Why is BC - and CBC in particular, ready to claim an independent distinct society status? Is it perhaps because of CBC's special arrangement with the Canadian Conference of Mennonites? Does the tail now wag the dog?

**2. Theological Unity**

Who will establish the items of our MB Confession of Faith that are primary for unity; secondary for identity - and the ones that are accommodating a dangerous theological drift? } >

**3. Congregational Autonomy**

Is there a Biblical mandate or model for 'doing church' that fits all sizes of congregations; areas of the country; economic-social-cultural groupies and each "age" in church history? If so, BFL needs to consider initiating a resolution - that identifies the doctrinal basics to which we adhere.

**4. Managing Multiculturalism**

What are our theological distinctives as MB's? Those who believe it includes a strong commitment to evangelism, missions, Bible teaching, music/praise in worship, social assistance to those in need, reconciliation and peacemaking see a need for a strong understanding and teaching of these distinctives in our churches and colleges. We have no one to blame but ourselves if we accommodate our theology in order to help newcomers assimilate. /

(over)

## 5. Regionalism

National identity and national unity as a MB Conference has a greater chance of success if we identify and adhere to the distinctive Biblical doctrines we share in common – and in common with the body of Christ – rather than our cultural, social, ethnic commonalty with Mennonites in general.

## 6. Church Discipline

If we do not know (or agree) on the doctrines we supposedly support, how would we know when someone accommodated the same and needed to be disciplined?

Those with a Historical perspective on the errors of excommunicating members for what has now become culturally acceptable mores (life insurance, short hair on women, etc.) have lost zeal for identifying 'doctrinal distinctives' that may be "accommodated" within the next few years.

I believe we have a generation of believers who are theologically confused by the rapid pace of cultural, social and spiritual accommodation.

What is 'in'?

What is 'out'?

And how does one decide?

How can we discipline in love those who "deny the faith" when we lack conviction or process to "identify the faith".

## 7. Dealing with liberal-oriented theology in our anabaptist ranks.

The most pressing area of theological accommodation for the MB Conference is our identity with and support of MCC.

Our MB Conference comprises approximately 25% of the MCC Board and Executive. This means the majority come from other doctrinal frameworks -- some are like MB's but others are quite different.

To work together to preserve the 'unity of the Spirit', we as MB's must become very accommodating when MCC has members "who question the unique efficacy of Christ's atonement" (Redekop); call into question the need for personal repentance and hesitate to teach belief in Jesus Christ as "the way, the truth and the life".

How can we as MB's believe "there is no other name given among men whereby we **must** be saved – and still allow MCC to drift towards a World Council of Churches mindset that the Great Spirit of the North American Indians is the same god as the revealed God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and our Lord Jesus of Nazareth?

One of the most challenging tasks of the BFL is to know it's mandate in helping the Canadian Conference contend earnestly for the faith of our early church fathers.

## 8. **Personal Appropriation of The Great Commission**

Our Board of Evangelism shocked delegates at the July 1989 Canadian Conference in Richmond by revealing our growth of new converts as .6 of 1% (or one new convert for every 75 members).

How long can we as a denomination (or as individuals) kid ourselves into thinking we are "maintaining the faith" when that same radical 'doctrinal faithfulness' teaches us to:

- (1) Pray the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into His vineyard.
- (2) Go therefore and make disciples baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that I have taught you.
- (3) By love serve one another.
- (4) Owe no man anything.

To be involved in serving without sharing the good news of Christ's atonement for our repentance is theological accommodation of the highest order.

To neither 'serve' nor 'share' becomes theological apostasy.

As I stated at the beginning, this paper is an expression of a concern. I am looking for answers. I perceive a change in the MB Church I first grew to know and love some twenty years ago in Winnipeg and British Columbia.

I am neither a prophet, nor the son of a prophet, but ...

Submitted to the BFL  
Winnipeg, MB  
February 2, 1990

from } of Christ is no longer the over-arching  
bottom} consideration. In the 1990s we must  
reverse such trends. The percentage of  
members burdened for the lost must  
increase.

The next decade will bring exciting  
opportunities and challenges. Let us  
pray that by God's grace and the

Spirit's enablement we, as a con-  
ference, will be equal to the task en-  
trusted to us.

**H** John Redekop is a professor of  
political science at Wilfrid  
Laurier University in Waterloo, Ont.



John H. Redekop

## Mennonite Brethren in the 90s

Many good things are happening in  
the Mennonite Brethren churches in  
North America and beyond. Let us be  
grateful for them and not forget to  
praise God.

But as we enter the final decade of  
this millennium let us also face  
squarely the agenda that awaits us.  
There will doubtless be disagreement  
on what constitutes that agenda of im-  
portant issues, but perhaps most of us  
could agree that the following eight  
items deserve high ranking.

These items apply to both the U.S.  
and Canadian Conferences, although  
not always equally. Several are closely  
inter-related. Most have been evident  
for some time but have recently ac-  
quired more consequential dimensions.

1. *Coordination and cooperation in  
higher education.* The U.S. MB college  
situation seems to have sorted itself  
out, at least in terms of jurisdiction  
and conference responsibilities. The  
same cannot be said for Canada. The  
generally strong Canadian Conference  
finds itself fractured on this matter.  
The long-term ownership and status of  
our influential MB Bible College re-  
mains in doubt. The Canadian con-  
ference must settle this question soon.

After almost 15 years of joint  
Canadian-American operation of the  
Fresno-based MB Biblical seminary,  
some fundamental questions are being  
raised. Some Canadian MBs want a  
Canadian seminary. Some American  
MBs state that the American subsidy  
is too high. During the '90s we must  
grapple with these questions.

2. *Theological unity.* The last few  
North American MB Conference ses-  
sions have underscored fundamental  
doctrinal diversification, especially  
concerning the peace emphasis. Opera-  
tionally, many pastors classify the ar-  
ticles in our Confession of Faith into  
primary and secondary categories. Is  
this tendency acceptable or even  
desirable? How far can it go? We must  
deal with this question.

3. *Congregational autonomy.* Partly  
because congregations are hiring

pastors unfamiliar with MB beliefs  
about conference unity, and partly  
because of collective assertions of in-  
dividualism parading as congregational  
autonomy, our conference includes in-  
creasing numbers of congregations  
who pick and choose which con-  
ference undertakings they wish to sup-  
port. To paraphrase the old railway  
adage, "That's no way to run a con-  
ference!" In the '80s we recognized  
the seriousness of the problem and  
even moved in the direction of a  
North American conference name  
change to reflect a common covenant.  
As the problem deepens, we cannot  
delay collective resolution.

4. *Managing multiculturalism.* In-  
creasingly, from Quebec to Texas and  
from Vancouver to North Carolina, our  
MB conference includes people of non-  
Mennonite ethnic background. Some  
worship in distinctive ethnic congrega-  
tions, at times with their own  
language. Others have joined tradi-  
tional Mennonite churches. Like some  
early Jewish Christians, many of us  
ethnic Mennonites don't know how to  
incorporate the ethnic mosaic (Cana-  
dian) or the rainbow society  
(American) into congregations and  
conferences which officially raise one  
ethnic group to pre-eminence.

In the 1980s, we collectively lacked  
the moral courage to grapple with this  
growing problem. Because of our com-  
mitment to New Testament re-  
quirements, we must not try to skirt  
this pressing problem in the '90s. As  
moderator Herb Brandt put it on the  
back cover of *A People Apart*, "the  
truth irks me"; it "makes me  
uncomfortable".

5. *Regionalism.* Fundamentally, this  
problem, more prevalent in Canada  
than in the U.S. involves letting  
secular assumptions about grievances  
and self-interest take precedence over  
unity in our confession and in Christ.  
In the '90s we must reaffirm that our  
identity as Christians and our member-  
ship in a conference takes precedence  
over our identity as Westerners,

Southerners, Easterners, Kansans,  
Manitobans, Californians, etc.

6. *Church discipline.* In the 1980s  
the biblical requirement of redemptive  
church discipline fell by the wayside in  
much of our conference. If in the '90s  
we let such practices become nor-  
mative, then we can no longer speak  
with integrity about being a "sepa-  
rated church".

7. *Dealing with liberal-oriented  
theology in our anabaptist ranks.* The  
statements and views may come from  
MBs or people in other conferences.  
Here is an example of what I have in  
mind. Last March, at an MCC session,  
the eminent Mennonite scholar and  
leader Norman Kraus, in describing  
contemporary equivalents of "first-  
century Judaism's attitudes and  
assumptions", cited the "claim that  
Christianity is a revealed religion in  
contrast to all others, and everyone  
must convert to Christianity in order  
to be saved". For him, the question,  
"Is Christianity the only right  
religion?" has become a "vexing ques-  
tion". He asks, "Has God made dif-  
ferent covenants with the various  
cultural groups in the world? Are  
there different ways of salvation, as  
some theologians are now saying?" He  
observes, "So, the question is whether  
one must belong to the Christian  
religion in order to be included under  
God's covenant." Thus the seeds of  
doubt are sown. (I'm not suggesting  
that the MCC people agreed with  
him.)

Can evangelical anabaptists in the  
'90s continue to stand shoulder to  
shoulder with those Mennonite Chris-  
tians who question the unique efficacy  
of Christ's atonement?

8. *Personal appropriation of the  
Great Commission.* In prosperous,  
middle class, ethically compromised  
North American MB congregations it's  
becoming very difficult to get the  
average member to accept personal  
ownership of the Great Commission.  
Many are willing to give more, but  
want to do less. For many, the cause

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