A SURVEY OF MT. VULTUS FAITH

"RACIQUE HISTOIRE AND THOUGHT"

Instructor: [No Instructor]

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INTRODUCTION

In religion we often see two very different forces at work. On the one hand, men tend to be traditional in religious matters and to retain beliefs and practices little changed from those of their forefathers. On the other hand, as men come to perceive reality differently there can be explosive change occurring in this normally stable aspect of men's lives.

Slightly over four hundred fifty years ago a small band of men began to understand their relationship to God in a way radically different from the majority around them. Their lives were changed to the very foundation and the result was an explosion which shook Europe itself to its foundation.

Today the descendants of these remarkable men are still on the world scene. Some are physically as well as spiritually related to them: Mennonites, Anabaptists and Mutterites. Others are related spiritually to motivated and real: Quakers, Brethren and, a more recent development, the various new communities which are attempting to present to the world and other Christians a model of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Many, if not most, of these groups have suffered much because of their effort to follow Christ as his disciples. Persecution ranging from death to legal restrictions to social snubs has been the lot of these people for most of the time since the beginning of this movement. The cost of serving Christ has often been high and providing one's children with the opportunity to choose the way of discipleship has required much sacrifice.

And that brings me to a question: Where are we today? How do we compare with our spiritual forefathers? Have we kept that one foundation so dear to them and the principles which they rediscovered from the scriptures or have we strayed? In this paper I would like to attempt a brief survey of one observation from the Anabaptist tradition and compare and contrast the beliefs held by our leaders with those held by various early Anabaptists leaders, especially Menno Simons. The comparison I've chosen is my own because of my familiarity
with it and my attachment to it. Of course I feel relatively well informed as to who the leaders and shapers of it, what Amish Mennonite Congregation are and I have some background knowledge concerning its recent history.

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

First, I would like to give a brief rundown of my congregation's history.

There seem to have been Amish Mennonite settlers in the Casselman Valley area shortly before the Revolutionary War began. This settlement acted as a turning off point for Amish groups settling farther west. The Amish Mennonite church here suffered its first split around 1827 and thereafter there existed two groups. The more conservative group became known as the Old Order Amish Mennonites and the other became known as the Conservative Amish Mennonite Conference eventually. Today it is known as the Conservative Mennonite Conference. There was not another split until 1927 when the Beachy Amish Mennonite Church began.

The issue which caused the split was a disagreement concerning excommunication. At that time the Old Order Church had two bishops. Bishop Yoder had retired and Moses Beachy had been chosen as bishop. A member of the Old Order Church had joined the Conservative Amish Mennonite Church and opinion in the church divided as to whether disciplinary action should follow. A certain faction, including Bishop Beachy, felt that one should not be banned for uniting with another Christian congregation. Another faction, including the retired bishop, felt that going over to another church was grounds for excommunication.

In conversations I've had with certain people concerning this split, it seems there were other factors involved even though the point of contention was the use of the law. It seems that there was a reconcileable faction of the church which favored certain innovations, electricity and Sunday School among them. When the division occurred, it developed basically along the lines of innovation versus preservation in practice.

At this time the Old Order Church owned two church houses with one at either
and of the settlement. The church would meet alternately in these houses. As
the controversy came to a head, the members who had been in favor of accommoda-
tions to take action independent of the rest of the congregation. Meeting was
scheduled in the southern church house but those more conservative members had
voted together and decided to have meetings in the other church house, led by the
retired bishop.

There were moves towards reconciliation with ministers from other communities
called in, but the differences were not resolved. Some Old Order Churches
continued to fellowship with the Beachy group until late in 1928 when this group
voted to allow cars and all Old Order groups stopped fellowship. The break
was now complete.

In the course of time more Beachy churches organized and became involved in
mission work. Many of the new congregations were helped to organize by the first
two bishops of the Mt. View congregation.

The Old Order and Beachy congregations continued to own and use the two church
houses jointly until 1952 when the Beachy Amish constructed their own meeting house
and sold their share in the original property to the Old Order Amish. The Old
Order had even allowed the use of removable lights so that the Beachys could
have evening services. Apparently both groups sought to keep their differences
in practice from destroying the relationship between them.

During the fifties and sixties there were many changes. For a time there
was a Christian school run by several Conservative churches and the Beachy
church, but eventually it closed its doors. During the sixties it was decided
to change from using the German language in church services to using English.
At the end of the sixties the church modified its membership standards, but
remained conservative in dress and practice. Television and radio are not allowed.
In 1970 Mt. View began a Christian day school on its own. This enterprise
has been successful and blessed by God, growing from 32 students to over 100
now. An interesting note on the school is that one of the students is the
daughter of an official of the Tanzanian Embassy in Washington.

There is one other factor which I feel is important in understanding the make-up of Mt. View today. Just at the end of the sixties a group of young people (14-20) and a few married couples became involved with the "charismatic movement" and also became dissatisfied with the rules concerning dress and conduct. Eventually this group left and formed its own congregation.

At present Mt. View is composed of three separate congregations. There is the original meetinghouse in western Pennsylvania, a mission church in Cumberland, Maryland, and a small congregation in Cartlett, Virginia, which was begun by a group from Mt. View which had moved to Fairfax, Virginia, and some other people who had been involved in a split in Cartlett.

FORM:

My main purpose in this paper is to survey the beliefs of the leaders of the congregations and, when appropriate, compare and contrast these with "mainline" thought.

Since the more articulate people generally tend to have a greater influence throughout a congregation and indeed are often in positions of official leadership, I selected these people and the ministry for this survey. I asked each of these people to share the essentials of his faith and how he viewed the church, her functions and her problems. I received nine responses and will also use the article in "Mennonite World Handbook," which is written by Mt. View's pastor. In all, six are ministers of the Gospel, two are school teachers, one directs a traveling chorus, and two are involved in "backtrack Evangelism." The oldest is 75 and the youngest is 23. In spite of the differences, there is quite a degree of agreement in emphasis among them, which reflects an essential unity throughout the congregation.

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The first theme that strikes me as I peruse these nine statements is the obvious reliance and commitment to the Holy Scriptures. Even where the Scripture are not quoted specifically as Colossians (two cases), a deep
commitment to this view is obvious from other statements and the repeated use of scriptural references. There seems to be an awareness of the present day debate concerning the inspiration of the Scriptures (Are they inerrant? Do they contain God’s Word wholly or in part?). Indeed, from discussions I’ve heard I know that this awareness is very real. The attitude taken by all the respondents was clearly in favor of a “high” view of scripture, possibly comparable to that taken by the Fundamentalists earlier in this century. One, a teacher, stated that, “God revealed Himself to chosen men whom He inspired to record His will without error.”

Another, also a teacher and very much influenced by Francis Schaeffer, wrote, “When God’s written communication to men, the Bible, is understood to be conveying true truth [a term used by Francis Schaeffer] to man in all it addresses and affirms, a commitment is made possible wherein a person’s life can be changed in a profound way.”

There is one more statement I would like to quote which points out how the scriptures are generally used:

To be a distinctive Christian people, our lives must be built solidly on the foundation of truth, Jesus Christ. The Bible is our only legitimate source of direction and everything that disagrees with it must be considered as a counterfeit and false.  

Here is seen a commitment to the Scriptures as infallible. When there seems to be a conflict between Scriptures and an individual’s position or some non-scriptural authority (e.g., some scientific position of theory) there is either a misunderstanding somewhere or the position which contradicts the Scriptures is to be rejected as false.

Along with this tendency goes a “literalistic” method of interpretation.

“Someone spelled this out in his response, but it shows through fairly clearly in the attitude towards Scripture. “The Bible being inspired, we need inspiration from the same Spirit to understand it...Intellectualism alone can never properly interpret Scripture, but results in relativism...We...see the Word of God as absolute.”

There have probably been several influences on us which have contributed
to this view of scripture, including Fundamentalism. In fact, authors and leaders of Fundamentalist or conservative evangelicalism have had a certain impact on our congregation in recent years. Francis Schaeffer is widely read and many members of his "Ivor" have attended Basic Youth Seminar conducted by Bill Gothard. "Mainline" and "mainstream" with this inclination seem to be well received.

However, I consider the major influence on this particular congregation towards holding this view is actually our Anabaptist heritage. Anabaptism as it developed into Mennonism always has accepted Biblicalism. Throughout our history, our people have known the Bible as supreme in giving direction to their lives. In Mennon's words:

...therefore I pray you, for Jesus' sake, not to climb higher in this incautious Majesty than you have steps, and not to search farther than the word of the Lord has taught, while many a piercing eye has been, and is yet daily dazzled by this delusion. For you can understand as little of the unsearchable mystery and conceptions, how, and in what manner it was brought about from eternity, as you can form an idea of the unsearchable Father himself. 8

In later:

Therefore let not the opinion and flattery of the learned be the foundation upon which you build your faith, but let the undeserving, plain word of God and the testimony of holy John be a sure foundation whereto to build your faith. 6

Mennon also wrote, "[True christians] suit themselves in their weakness, to all words, commandments, ordinances, Spirit, rule, example and measure of Christ, as the Scripture teaches." and, "Store of all innovations and strange tenet..." not contained in the word of Christ and his apostles, nor conformable to the same. Show forth, at all times, Christ and his word." 8

Clearly there is a close similarity in approach, and a definite connection historically. In all likelihood we have been influenced by Fundamentalists and Evangelical Conservatives, in the essential form and influence in our view of the scriptures has been our own perspective. 5
I would like to mention one aspect of belief which is very clearly non-Anabaptist in nature and indeed comes directly from those conservative Protestant viewpoints. Several of our congregational leaders hold very strongly to a millennialist understanding of the end times. Whereas some elements of early Anabaptism held this view, Manno unequivocally did not hold such a view.

The novelty of this position can be ascertained by considering the differences in are in the advocates of the two positions. The younger (with a few exceptions) are millenialists and the older members (also with few exceptions) are amillennialists.

One concept which was mentioned by all respondents either very explicitly or implicitly in touching on another subject was the necessity of faith, repentance, conversion, obedience and baptism for church membership. Most developed on the story of Man's Fall (accepted as literally having happened), God's reaching down to lift and guide Man, and Jesus' substitutionary death and life-giving Resurrection. Over and over again the need for a conversion—either a change in faith and repentance—was emphasized. Clearly God's grace at redemption is viewed as central.

One teacher wrote:

I believe...
That God placed Man on Earth where He might test and develop Man's moral nature...
That Man chose to disobey God...
That, when Man chose to reject God, He set in motion a plan to redeem Man.

The emphasis here is clearly the same as the early Anabaptists exhibited. Of course, at the time of Anabaptism's beginning, the issues were slightly different because of the union of the church and state which then existed and because of this, the Anabaptist emphasis on conversion found expression in their insistence on believer's baptism. Even so, with the situation altered, there is still a strong teaching among us concerning believer's baptism.

One teacher:

In the beginning the gospel was to be preached, not faith
...baptism is a sign of obedience, commanded by Christ, by which we testify, when we receive it: that we believe the word of the Lord, that we are sorry for, and repent of our former life and conduct; that we desire to rise with Christ unto a new life; and that we believe in the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. Not, my beloved, that we believe in the remission of sins through baptism; but no man can; because by baptism we cannot obtain faith and repentance; neither do we receive the forgiveness of sins, nor peace, nor liberty of conscience; but we testify that we have repented, received pardon and faith in Christ, as before said.  

Our present day teaching corresponds to Zeno's. In both situations there is a need for a clear turning point in one's life and then a declaration (baptism) or confession of that change. Interestingly, one of the ministers identified the need of cross-bearing in the Christian's life. We didn't make an elaborate theological statement; we merely recognized that it is part of a Christian's lifestyle. "Those who follow Jesus and His way of the cross are assured eternal bliss and joy with Him."  

A view concerning the separation of church and state was also expressed. Obedience belongs to the government, but the Christian must avoid becoming entangled in it. The tone seemed to be set by a desire not to be tempted to attempt to solve problems through the government. One stated tersely, that one goal of the church is to "get out of politics and minister to the spiritual needs of man." However, this correlates with Zeno's teaching is difficult to say for certain. The other Anabaptists were much more on the subject of the ministry and that is more critical to exactly how the early Anabaptists handled this area, but as it is clear that a separation between church and state was conceptually and to their early baptismal practices.  

Two responses were given to the question, "What problems are challenges
face the church today?" Many recognize the destructive effects materialism
has on the church today. Previously we were denied access to full participation
in society (except in the cases of the Dutch "Hamonites") or withdraw ourselves
voluntarily. Now, gradually, there emerges a new desire to extend beyond the
bounds of the traditional community. With fuller participation comes greater
prosperity and its attendant dangers of spiritual laxity and coldness. Even
though dangers present themselves, we continue to strive to be in the world,
to tell others of Christ, to share our lives, and yet not to submit to the world's
false values.

On the positive side, such things as continual involvement in church work
can learning, "what it means to be a body, i.e., [to] minister to the needs of
the body through confession, prayer, exhortation, fellowship," were listed
as challenges facing us today.

So, where are we today? Possibly I'm too close to the situation to comment
accurately and objectively on this topic. I know that my congregation faces
problems. In day to day living individuals meet temptations and difficulties
which seem to have no easy solutions. From time to time the whole congregation
is confronted with seemingly enormous obstacles. Yet I feel there is a soundness
and a firmness in Mt. View that has come down to us from the early Anabaptists in
our traditions, beliefs and practices but more importantly through a living faith
in, and relationship with, Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Lord of the Universe.

We are not perfect but we are striving for the mark. I like what one
brother wrote: "The challenge I leave [us] is this:

1. Yield completely to God's claim...
2. Show "so" regardless of the cost.
3. Accept God's authority and Word, and
4. Do this daily."


6. Ibid.


9. Marvin Yoder


11. "Manno Simons, [M.I.], p. 27."

12. Noah Yoder, (Covington, Pa.), Minister at Friendship Haven, Cumberland, Md.

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