

A SURVEY OF MT. VIEW'S FAITH

MEMORITE HISTORY AND THOUGHT

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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, Anabaptist Mennonites and Hutterites. Others are related spiritually in motivation and goal: 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 congregation from the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition and compare and contrast the beliefs held by its leaders with those held by various early Anabaptist leaders, especially Menno Simons. The congregation 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 members of Mt. View 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 jumping off point for Amish groups settling farther west. The Amish Mennonite church here suffered its first split around 1800 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 ban. It seems that there was a recognizable section 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 excommunication decided to take action independent of the rest of the congregation. Meeting was scheduled in the southern church house but those more conservative members had gotten 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 1973 Mt. View began a christian day school on its own. This enterprise has been successful and blessed by God, growing from 33 students to over 100 today. 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 Catlett, 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 Catlett.

FORMAN

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 Menno Simons' 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 deacon. In all, six are ministers of the Gospel, two are school teachers, one directs a traveling chorus, and two are involved in "Bookrack 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.

OUR FAITH

The first thing that strikes me as I peruse these nine statements is the obvious reliance and commitment to the Holy Scriptures. Even where the Scriptures are not used specifically as God-inspired (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."¹ Another, also a teacher and very much influenced by Francis Schaeffer, wrote, "When God's written communication to man, the Bible, is understood to be conveying true truth [a term used by Francis Schaeffer] to man in all its addresses and affirms, a commitment is made possible wherein a person's life can be changed in a profound way."² 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.³

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 or 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. No one 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."⁴

There have probably been several influences on us which have contributed

to this view of scripture, including Fundamentalism. In fact, authors and leaders of a Fundamentalist or conservative evangelicalism have had a certain impact on our congregation in recent years. Francis Shaeffer is widely read and many members of Mt. View have attended Basic Youth Seminar conducted by Bill Gotthard. Magazines and authors 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 Mennonitism always has accepted Biblicism. Throughout our history, our people have known the Bible as supreme in giving direction to their lives. In Menno's words:

...therefore I pray you, for Jesus' sake, not to climb higher in this ineffable 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 adulation. For you can understand as little of the unspeakable beauty and conception, how, and in what manner it was brought about from eternity, as you can form an idea of the indescribable Father himself.⁵

and later:

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

Menno 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..."⁷ and, "Beware of all innovations and strange doctrines not contained in the word of Christ and his apostles, nor conformable therunto. Show forth, at all times, Christ and his word."⁸ Clearly there is a close similarity in approach, and a definite connection historically.

Undoubtedly we have been influenced by Fundamentalists and Evangelical Conservatives, but the essential force and influence in our view of the scriptures has been our Anabaptist heritage.

While I believe that the Fundamentalist and Evangelical Conservative influences,

I would like to mention one aspect of belief which is very clearly non-Anabaptist in origin and indeed comes directly from these 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, Menno unequivocally did not hold such a view.

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

One tenet 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--that is a change in faith, and repentance--was emphasized. Clearly God's plan of 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. 9

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, and faith

followed hearing, and baptism followed faith...
[11] who hear and believe the word of God, shall
be baptized (as above stated), publicly to profess
their faith, and declare that they will henceforth
not live according to their own will, but
according to the will of God.⁴⁰

...baptism is a sign of obedience, commanded of
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: by no means: 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.⁴¹

Our present day teaching corresponds to Menno'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. He didn't make
an elaborate theological statement: he 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."⁴²

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."⁴³ How this correlates with Menno's teaching is difficult to say.
Menno, Gema, and other Anabaptists, wrote much on the subject of the magistracy
and there is some conflict on exactly how the early Anabaptists handled this area.
However, it is clear that a separation between church and state was considered
essential to most early Anabaptists.

Very responses were given to the question, "What problems and challenges

face the church today?" Many recognized 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 Mennonites) or withdrew 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 enticements.

On the positive side, such things as continued involvement in church work and learning "what it means to be a body, i.e., [to] minister to the needs of the body through confession, prayer, exhortation, fellowship,"⁴⁴ 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. It 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 Obey God regardless of the cost,
- 3 Accept God's authority and Word, and
- 4 Do this daily."⁴⁵

NOTES

1. Marvin Yoder, (Meyersdale, Pa.), Principal of Mt. View Christian School, Spring, Pa.
2. Luke Sailer, Principal of Faith Christian School, Catlett, Va.
3. Paul Petersheim, Choice Books, Fairfax, Va.
4. Henry Tice, (Meyersdale, Pa.), Minister at Mt. View, Salisbury, Pa.
5. Menno Simons, Complete Works of Menno Simons, "Reply to John a Lasco," p. 155.
6. Ibid.
7. Menno Simons, op. cit., "A Fundamental and Clear Confession of the Poor and Distressed Christians," p. 263.
8. Menno Simons, op. cit., "A Pleasing Instruction and Doctrine How...to Govern, Correct and Educate...Children," p.271.
9. Marvin Yoder
10. Menno Simons, op. cit., "A Foundation and Plain Instruction," p. 25-26.
11. Menno Simons, ibid., p. 20.
12. Noah Yoder, (Meyersdale, Pa.), Minister at Friendship Haven, Cumberland, Md.
13. Marvin Yoder
14. Marvin Yoder
15. Paul Petersheim

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OTHER SOURCES

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Jack Seiler, Principal of Faith Christian School.

Paul Petersheim, Choice Books, Fairfax, Va.

Simon Schrock, (Fairfax, Va.), Choice Books and Minister at Faith Christian Fellowship, Catlett, Va.

Bill Tice, (Grantsville, Md.), Retired Bishop at Mt. View A. M. Church, Salisbury, Pa.

Henry Tice, (Meyersdale, Pa.), Minister at Mt. View A. M. Church.

Lewis Tice, (Grantsville, Md.), Bishop at Mt. View A. M. Church.

Marvin Yoder, (Meyersdale, Pa.), Principal of Mt. View Christian School, Springs, Pa.

Paul Yoder, (Meyersdale, Pa.), Minister at Friendship Haven, Cumberland, Md.

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