REVIEWS

The Mennonites and Social Responsibility

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To begin by way of understatement: The published minutes of a denominational general conference session are not normally written in such a manner as to hold the lay reader spellbound. The *Mennonite General Conference Proceedings (1967)* are no exception, for the delegate lists, membership statistics, and financial columns hold little more appeal than does a newly released edition of Webster's dictionary. Yet as one works past budgets and tables to committee reports and resolutions, this Mennonite document allows the reader to participate in much of the excitement and frustration encountered as an extremely conservative and almost altogether rural Protestant group attempts to redefine its relation to "the world."

In this process of redefinition the Mennonite delegates wrestle with the following questions: In what ways is the church, an institution that fosters an eschatological hope, required to exercise a social responsibility in the present order? To what extent is the Christian responsible for the corporate life of the world, and how should this responsibility be expressed in concrete social action? When the individual Christian experiences salvation and reconciliation, are the demands of the gospel such as to call him to witness through social structures and thus to interpret salvation and reconciliation in social as well as personal terms?

The minutes indicate that once these classic questions are probed, delegates are then brought face to face with such specific issues as war and peace, civil rights, economic exploitation, slums, expanding populations, capital punishment, riots, the problem of divided Protestantism, and related social problems.

The fact that these topics are discussed by the Mennonites is especially significant when one realizes that this group has traditionally practiced a highly individualistic ethic, with rigid separatist tendencies that have produced strong negative attitudes toward outgroups. The following excerpts from local conference *Disciplines* of the (Old) Mennonite Church, all of which were issued as recently as the 1940's, illustrate these characteristics.

We deem it inadvisable for any of our members to commune with such who do not uphold the whole gospel.[1]

We recommend that our brethren do not move into near-by districts unless about half a dozen families or more move together.[2]

It is advisable for our members to refrain from all political and civil offices.[3]

Members . . . shall not take part in electioneering or political demonstrations.[4]

Patronizing or taking part in fairs, movies, theatres, regularly organized contesting ball teams, dancing, carnal shows, and such like are not permitted.[5]

Brothers or sisters who are responsible for the sale and/or use of television forfeit their membership.[6]

The mustache and fashionable beard are not tolerated in the brotherhood.[7]

The following are prohibited for sisters: cutting, waving, and fashionable combing of the hair. Wearing of bandannas, soft-turban type headgear, hats or other fashionable headgear (except plain warm headgear for extremely cold weather). Immodest dresses with low-cut necks, short sleeves and short skirts. . . . Jewelry of all types including wedding rings. Make-up, lipstick, and nail polish. The cape-dress which is made modestly and long enough to go well below the knees is the standard, with black shoes and stockings.[8]

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At this point it may be well to place the Mennonites in the perspective of their Anabaptist history. Christians of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage have been described as one of history's most misunderstood groups. Such designation stems from the fact that many historians have been content to refer vaguely to Anabaptism as "the left wing of the Reformation" without troubling to differentiate between the revolutionary and the apocalyptic Munsterites, the communistic Hutterites, and the "evangelical" or "peaceful" Anabaptists. The latter group, from which the Mennonites in America trace their descendance, stressed the doctrine of discipleship as the essence of the gospel, adhered to the biblical principle of nonresistance and nonconformity to the world, and renounced Münster's militaristic and chiliastic beliefs.

The evangelical branch of Anabaptists that migrated to America takes its name from Menno Simons (1492-1559) of the Low Countries, a Roman Catholic priest who experienced an evangelical conversion and struck in opposition to tendencies of both the Reformation and Catholicism. Although his theological ideas were not radically different from those of Luther and the other reformers, he particularly opposed their ideas of the church — especially its relation to and reliance on the state. Seeking to escape persecution, Menno's followers began in 1863 to immigrate to America, settling first in Philadelphia. They came mainly from Germany and Switzerland, and they were characterized as honest, law-abiding, thrifty farmers. In theology they were evangelical and extremely conservative. They emphasized their separatist position by settling in rural Mennonite colonies, refraining from participation in the affairs of the state, and insisting on extreme plainness in their style of living.

Elmer Clark notes in *Small Sects in America* that in proportion to their numerical strength the Mennonites are the most divided group of Christians on this continent.[9] Their 250,000 members belong to at least sixteen separate major sects. In addition, numerous groups choose to maintain no official affiliation. Their strong emphasis on congregational and conference autonomy has given rise to a diversification of beliefs and practices. Thus, the term Mennonite by some definitions may include such sects as the Old Order Amish, who abstain from such modern conveniences as automo-

biles, or the Black Bumper group, who consent to the use of automobiles as long as the chrome parts are painted.

From this point on, my use of the terms Mennonite Church or Mennonite refers to the (Old) Mennonite Church, the largest of the Mennonite bodies, comprising 80,000 North American members in seventeen loosely federated conferences.

In the 1967 *Mennonite General Conference Proceedings* the delegates from these seventeen conferences address themselves to the theme "As He Is, So Are We in the World" (1 John 4:17). In view of the resolutions enacted before the conference ended, the following main points of one of the key sermons might be interpreted to have been presuppositions of the delegates:

THE WORD OF MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

A. The gospel we have received expresses itself in a social structure.

B. The church is to be the first and the best illustration of God's reconciling experience.

C. Ethical implications of the gospel are not optional.

D. We are the extension of Jesus Christ to the world.

E. The servanthood style is the prophetic style. Jesus was identified by his deeds.

F. We have refused to accept our position as the real agents of reconciliation. *Our place is in the world.*

G. Some obstacles that keep us from being ministers of reconciliation are: (1) our unwillingness to become involved, (2) our poor demonstration in life of what it means to be a Christian, and (3) our sanctuary mentality [p. 15].

That the Mennonites recognize the importance of extending the traditional personal ethic to societal proportions is suggested in the following resolution:

Whereas, It is evident that there is a cleavage in the Christian community between those who hold that only individuals can or need be changed by Christ and those who believe that social and political structures are subject to the lordship of Christ and when in error must be challenged and, if possible, changed, and

Whereas, Our faith has always advocated a "third way," namely that of a personal salvation through the merits of Christ's shed blood which obligates us to carry out a prophetic ministry of challenging every social and political structure which hinders the progress of righteousness,

Let us resolve . . . [to] continue in the "third way" by a vigorous program of teaching within the brotherhood and of witness to those without [p. 118].

Such a resolution may be regarded as a natural extension of article nine of the Mennonite Confession of Faith, which notes that a ministry of reconciliation seeks healing not only for man's spiritual welfare but for his total well-being. Thus, "the church should witness against racial discrimination, economic injustice, and all forms of human slavery and moral degradation."[10]

To underscore the general statement that salvation and reconciliation are inseparably personal and social, the delegates proceed to speak to specific issues of social concern. We shall note a few of these.

URBAN RIOTS. A resolution notes that riots in the United States cities have aroused demands for stronger law enforcement measures. Then the resolution flatly states:

(1) As nonresistant Christians we cannot condone that violence and sedition in the U. S. life style which drives the deprived in our midst to acts of violence, (2) the 1967 summer riots are a judgment upon our society, and (3) in penitence we must find ways of going beyond mere charity and handouts to effect healing and reconciliation in the community, encouraging businessmen, educators, and professional people to participate in remolding social structures (pp. 118-119).

PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS. "It is not enough in a troubled time to be good citizens, 'quiet in the land.' " (This statement employs a play on words; the nonresistant and peaceful Mennonite community has long referred to itself as a people "quiet in the land," even singing a German hymn with such a title.) The resolution further terms it "regrettable" that many Mennonites fail to see that most public demonstration on social issues in recent years belongs in the category of peaceful assembly for petitioning, a right guaranteed in the Constitution. The concluding sentence on this subject carries a prophetic admonition: "Let us be vigilant lest our silence in the land *(die Stillen im Lande)* contribute to noise in the land, the noise of destructive conflict" (p. 37).

RACE RELATIONS. Delegates reaffirm in this resolution a 1955 statement titled "The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations." I will not attempt a condensation of this nine-page statement, but two features from it should be noted. They may be considered unique if they are compared with similar statements by other religious groups. First, rather than trying to gloss over the problem by citing support for the assertion that brotherhood has been a longstanding tradition in the Mennonite communion, the resolution bluntly states: We have reexamined ourselves and "humbly confess our sins." Second, the statement is not content to deal in lofty generalities but speaks to such specifics as the question of interracial marriages and stresses the need for the church to "help our people to understand" the irrational character of certain arguments opposing such unions.[11]

DIVIDED PROTESTANTISM. "With sorrow" the delegates note the current tendency to polarize Protestantism into two distinct camps. "Ecumenical" Protestantism, they say, tends to be rigidly identified with such labels as unification, inclusive membership, intellectual and social concern, theological openness, and witness to social structures. Further, "conservative evangelical" Protestantism is stereotyped by organizational nonessentials, rigid definitions, dogmatic doctrinal statements, emotional rootage in the past, and the evangelization of individuals as the only means to social change. Stressing that this polarization is biblically and practically regrettable, the resolution proceeds to outline specific steps for achieving dialogue and mutual understanding (p. 63).

WAR AND PEACE. Previous action taken by the Mennonites (through their Committee on Peace and Social Concerns) regarding the question of Vietnam includes: sending a lengthy telegram from the 1965 General Conference to the President of the United States; affirming their pacifist position and declaring their resolute opposition to the Vietnam war; publishing special peace issues of the official Mennonite periodicals, *Gospel Herald* and *The Mennonite,* and subsequently delivering copies of the same to the White House; and on numerous occasions discussing with presidential aides and Congressmen the moral implications of the country's current

involvement in Vietnam. Further, the executive secretary engaged in several private conversations with the President's pastor, who transmitted to the President a personal letter which challenged the immoral course of the present conflict. *Proceedings* contains the content of a telegram which the delegates dispatched to Mr. Johnson dealing with the topic of Vietnam and domestic issues. The following excerpt of this communication is illustrative of the tone of the argument:

We cherish the values of law and order, but there can be no lasting order where human needs are ignored. It is our sincere belief that the billions of dollars now expended annually for war, if devoted to constructive purposes — for the improvement of housing, for education, for employment, and for human rights — would go far to restore order and to remove the appeal of violence in our own cities as well as abroad.

We plead with you on behalf of those who suffer in Vietnam, both North and South, and of the deprived in our own midst: turn back from the immoral course on which the nation is now embarked in Vietnam. While the bombing and fighting continue, moral forces in America and around the world which could heal and build are hindered. Surely the arts of diplomacy can fashion new courses of action once the moral issue has been faced [p. 38].

It is perhaps significant that alongside these resolutions dealing with current social problems is a reaffirmation of the "Declaration of Commitment in Respect to Christian Separation and Non-conformity to the World." This declaration includes admonitions with respect to material possessions, dress and external appearance, the use of tobacco and alcoholic beverages, "worldly" association, marriage and divorce, and recreation. The statement concludes with a reference to imminent eschatological hopes and a prayer: "May the Holy Spirit sanctify us wholly so that we may not be ashamed before our Lord at His coming."[12]

The minutes record specific measures designed to provide feedback and to ensure that statements and resolutions in turn are woven into the fabric of Mennonite thought and practice. Conference leadership defines its role as educative and thus faces up to the task of the education of those among the laity who are slow to recognize that "personal salvation and social redemption are not mutually exclusive." The official church periodicals published special issues designed to provoke thought in this area, and one quarter's Sunday School lessons were devoted to biblical studies of such topics as "The Meaning of Salvation," "The Church and the World," "The Task of Christian Reconciliation," and "The Christian's Responsibility."

Further, the idea of itinerant and visitation ministries under the designation of "Peace Teams" has been revived so that over the next three-year period there may be continued discussion on the nature and mission of the church in all Mennonite communities. The purpose of this educative emphasis is "intensive conversation in every congregation concerning the public, or social, responsibilities that are implicit in the redeemed life" (p. 37).

Additional efforts to transfer resolutions into action include the development of contacts in legislative circles and the continued encouragement of the layman to communicate to his official representative a prophetic witness of key social issues.

The appeal to the laity is for the purpose not only of implementing programs but

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also of defining problems. To provide "further development of our understanding and expression of the Anabaptist vision in relation to the forces of modern life," the skills of competent lay members are utilized through the Institute of Mennonite Studies:

With regard to the help of specialists, the mandate of the CPSC [Committee on Peace and Social Concerns] covers too broadly diverse areas for the committee officer or even the committee members to develop the necessary competence. At the same time, members of the churches can now be found in many specialized areas — science, economics, international affairs, psychology, sociology, law, etc. — where church concerns or needs may arise. The secretaries of the agencies . . . are currently recruiting a number of consultants who will be able to attend meetings of specialized agencies, report to the executive officers, and then be available as consultants for work in the churches [p. 30].

In seeking to respond to the problem of social responsibility, the Mennonites are addressing themselves, of course, to a complex problem with which the entire Christian church has been continually involved: what is the church to do about the world? The two most obvious solutions have proved equally frustrating. An attempt to remove itself from the stream of history by various forms of withdrawal has not proved to be the answer. Nor has the attempt to impose a Christian world culture been any more successful.

The three main types of Christian thought and organization enumerated by Ernst Troeltsch — the church, the sect, and mysticism — have become classic typologies.[13] All three are seen as having roots in the gospel and the primitive church, and each has a distinct approach to society at large. In addition to other indices, the church is an inclusive religious institution that emphasizes the universality of the gospel. In desiring to coexist with society it accepts the secular order and may become an integral part of existing social structures. The sect, in contrast, is a voluntary religious association limited to believers who have experienced the new birth and who subscribe to a given body of doctrines. It practices a detachment from the world, is exclusive, has no intention of evangelizing the secular order, and takes the Sermon on the Mount as its ideal while laying stress on the simple but radical opposition of the kingdom of God to all secular interests and institutions. Mysticism has no formal requirements but stresses instead a personal and inward experience and assumes no lasting forms or structures.

Christianity as a sociological phenomenon thus faces the paradox of a demand for sanctification of the self and detachment from the world, and at the same time a demand for brotherly love that overcomes in God the tensions and struggles of the external order. "The history of the Christian Ethos," says Troeltsch, "becomes the story of a constantly renewed search for this compromise, and of fresh opposition to this spirit of compromise."[14]

Recognizing the creativity in form and structure that has resulted in history from this tension between church and sect, the Mennonites now appear eager to program conflict into their framework by seeking to incorporate (*a*) those elements of the church that allow it to work within the structures of the social order and to enter the problems of society as a whole, and (*b*) those elements of the sect that serve to

caution against accommodation and interpretation of the Christian ideal strictly in terms of cultural definitions.

Niebuhr in *Social Sources of Denominationalism* graphically points out that one of the subtle dangers of modern democratic life for Christians is to have their social sense cultivated and their responsibility defined by social forces alone.[15] No matter what form social responsibility may take, it must be regarded as an attempt to serve in accordance with the kingdom of God and not simply with the Great Society. Only as this creative tension exists may those church-type attributes that call for witness to and through the social and political structures be tempered by sect-type cautions as the activist is continually called upon to reappraise his basis for involvement.

It may be that the Mennonites are simply making the familiar transition from sect to church after a four-hundred-year hibernation. On the other hand, in view of the present balance that they seek to maintain, there is the very real possibility that Menno's followers are finding answers to a question that more evangelical Protestants might be posing: "How may we make the peculiar doctrines and practices of the faith meaningful to the world and relevant to existing social ills?"

And for the individual who is tempted to suggest casually that the Mennonite is in fact replacing his eschatological hope with "mere" activism in the present realm, the Mennonite has his thoughtful reply: "From our manner in waiting can be judged to which kingdom we belong."

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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2   Mennonite Church, *Discipline* (Alberta-Saskatchewan Conference, 1946), p. 34.

3   Mennonite Church, *Discipline* (Virginia Conference, 1948), p. 9.

4   Ibid.

5   Mennonite Church, *Discipline* (Franconia Conference, 1947), p. 51.

6   Mennonite Church, *Discipline* (Lancaster Conference, 1943), p. 17.

7   Mennonite Church, *Discipline* (Indiana-Michigan Conference, 1951), p. 48.

8   Mennonite Church, *Discipline* (Franconia Conference, 1947), p. 52.

9   Elmer T. Clark, *The Small Sects in America* (revised edition. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949).

10   Mennonite Confession of Faith adopted by the Mennonite General Conference, August 22, 1963. Reprinted in J. C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Church in America, Sometimes Called Old Mennonites* (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1966).

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13   Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (translated by Olive Wyon. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1931). First published in 1911 under the title *Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen*.

14   Troeltsch, p. 999.

15   H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1929), p. 21 ff.