Mennonites, Gender, and the Bible in the 1920s and '30s

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Halfway across the Atlantic Ocean, Vinora Weaver and Vesta Zook threw their bonnets overboard.[1] The two young women were sailing for Turkey, where they would join the burgeoning ranks of Mennonites serving as overseas missionaries. Their new opportunity exemplified the social and religious changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that brought Mennonite women into new spheres of church activity.[2] Women taught in Sunday schools, and enrolled in higher education; they became missionaries, and started women's groups to raise funds for overseas relief. In the Mennonite world, as in the rest of American religious life, such challenges to traditional women's work did not come without community disruption. Eventually, these

gender matters would come to a head in the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy of the 1920s and '30s.[3]

During this time of religious conflict, Mennonites relied on the Bible to guide their response to women's new activities.[4] Articles in the denomination's official paper, *Gospel Herald*, reveal that Mennonites labored to maintain their concept of biblical authority amidst an onslaught of ideas about gender from the wider American debate.[5] The Mennonites' biblicism did not result in a systematic notion of the proper role of women, but articles in the *Herald* on topics ranging from plain dress and motherhood to Bible heroines illustrate how they oriented their debate about gender around their understanding of the Bible's normative demands.

While Mennonites responded to changing gender norms, they certainly noted the rising tide of Fundamentalist speech against women's expanding role in religious and cultural life.[6] Fundamentalists sought to strengthen the church by calling men back to powerful leadership, and by questioning women's ability and authority to move beyond the duties ascribed to them in the Victorian cult of domesticity.[7] Mennonites did not share the Fundamentalists' ideological position on women. But the *Herald* printed some articles from conservative Protestant sources on motherhood and fashion, at least partly because these sources invoked an emphasis on scripture which the *Herald* editors appreciated.

While Mennonites were significantly influenced by conservative Protestants, they also encountered liberal ideas on gender. Protestant liberals justified their call for women's full participation in society based on thematic readings of the Bible that focused on Jesus' relationship with women in the Gospels and strong female characters throughout scripture.[8] Mennonites writing in the *Herald* sometimes sympathized with this liberal notion of biblical womanhood. However, these writers never went so far as to argue for women's authority to preach, because of Pauline injunctions against women's leadership.

Mennonites faced many religious and cultural challenges in the 1920s and '30s. Editors and readers of *Gospel Herald* debated the issues, including the question of proper gender norms. Articles on gender in the *Herald* served two purposes: (1) Mennonites positioned themselves in relation to changing gender ideals in American Protestantism, and (2) Mennonites dealt with more immediate community problems, including some women's rejection of the bonnet. Mennonites dictated plain dress to support community nonconformity, not because modern fashions posed a danger to men. They imagined

motherhood as a special role of Christian nurture, with mothers of the Bible serving as the ultimate models; and they posited Christian womanhood as a possibility for heroic and faithful action by Mennonite women — as long as it did not call for the unscriptural practice of a woman's speaking in church. In the end, Mennonites circumvented the ideological positions on gender typified in Fundamentalist ire and Modernist emancipation. But the articles in the *Herald* also betray how difficult and messy a community's search for strict biblicism in gender concerns could be.

The Conservative Influence: Mennonites on Motherhood and Fashion

The *Herald* of this period featured several articles on motherhood and fashion that seemed to embrace the Fundamentalist's concern with reestablishing Victorian gender norms.[9] Mennonite writers and contributors borrowed many of these articles from outside sources, including conservative Protestant magazines and secular newspapers. Only a small number of articles appeared, and the editors placed them on the "Family Circle" page, not on pages dedicated to doctrine and church news. This placement seems directed at women readers and detracts from the paper's more egalitarian comments on dress found on other pages.

Changes in the early twentieth century threatened to upset the idea of the woman as the "angel in the home." In response, Fundamentalists argued that a mother should use her education to bring up righteous children, lead her husband to faith, and suffer like Christ for the sake of her family.[10] Mennonites followed Fundamentalists in their effort to defend Victorian notions of motherhood.

Articles on motherhood in the *Herald* may come as a shock to the modern reader. A survey of them might lead to the strange conclusion that Mennonites believed there was no better mother than a dead mother. During the period of study, articles on motherhood appeared in more than ten percent of the issues, with an overwhelming number of them on those departed. Predominant were articles containing popular Victorian language praising a dead mother's self-sacrifice, saving qualities, and religious influence.[11] A submission by John D. Burkholder from Harrisonburg exemplified this sentimental turn: "It was mother who nursed me in my infancy, mother who guided me in my youth, and it was mother who gave me safe counsel as I was growing old. It was mother's hallowed influence that guided me into the safest paths, and it was her influence that called to me when I went astray."[12]

The *Herald* also featured many articles on a mother's physical and

spiritual sacrifices for her children. While most articles depicted the daily sacrifices required to raise children, some carried the physical sacrifice even further. In one *Herald* piece reprinted from the Protestant interdenominational magazine, *Illustrator*, a mother burns her arms in an effort to save her baby from a crib on fire.[13] Answering her daughter's question about the incident, she replies, "In rescuing you from the flames I was burned, as you see. I carry these scars because I loved you."[14]

Although Mennonites participated fully in the sentimental language about mothers available in Protestant culture, they also added biblical content to their understanding of motherhood.[15] Mennonites writing for the *Herald* extolled the bravery of Moses' mother, Hannah's prayers for Samuel, Lydia's faithful household, and Mary's ideal motherhood as examples for all women.[16] Mennonite authors also focused on the duties of children to honor their Christian mothers. Although these articles touched on the biblical command to obey parents, they strongly reflected popular language about respecting a mother's sacrifice. From Detroit, Anna Smucker wrote of a child's duty, "Never forget where your mother lost her freshness and youthful beauty — it was in self-denying toil and suffering for your sake."[17]

The *Herald* also printed stories about flappers and fashion that signal a conservative Protestant influence. Fundamentalism's ascendancy coincided exactly with the emergence of the flapper, the dangerous young woman who smoked, drank, and led men down the path to perdition.[18] To respond to her threat, Fundamentalists labeled her immoral and a sign of the end times.[19] Although Mennonites did not spill as much ink as Fundamentalists on the subject, the presence of articles on the flapper and her fashions denotes the community's concern over these women who crossed gender boundaries and followed fashion's dictates. Like the articles on motherhood, writings on flappers and fashion appeared on the *Herald's* "Family Circle" page, most likely directed to women readers.

Herald editors included several articles that decried the flapper's propensity for breaking down necessary social distinctions. In an article reprinted from the Mennonite Brethren in Christ's *Gospel Banner*, the writer called for long hair because "purity and morality can never be maintained except there be a distinct line of demarcation between the sexes."[20] Not only did the sexes need to be distinct, dress should denote a person's character. *Herald* editors included a newspaper article on dress reform efforts in New

York City that stated the ultimate problem: "There was a time when the bad woman could be told from the good woman by her dress. For the last few years this distinction has been made impossible because sweet, pure girls have thoughtlessly adopted the same dress as the woman of the streets."[21] For Mennonites, modern dress posed a danger to a community's ability to rely on dress as a marker of an inner reality.

Fashion, flappers, and Victorian mothering ideals featured prominently on the *Herald's* "Family Circle" page throughout the period of Fundamentalist-Modernist debates. Yet the number of articles on fashion and flappers paled in comparison to the number about plain dress and nonconformity on other *Herald* pages. But when confronted with changing ideals about motherhood and fashion in wider culture, Mennonites borrowed articles from other sources more often than they produced their own. It is clear from the ongoing presence of these articles that many contributors and readers found these conservative ideas compelling.

The Liberal Influence — Mennonites on Womanhood

While Mennonites continued printing articles that borrowed from conservative sources, they also began featuring original articles based on a more liberal idea of Christian womanhood. Protestant liberals shirked traditional readings of the Bible, which determined gender roles according to Paul's epistles. Instead, they looked to female characters in the Bible and Jesus' interaction with women to support their claims for women's emancipation.[22] Mennonites in the *Herald* never called for women's preaching or leadership, for that would contradict their sense of scripture. Yet, these writers, most of whom were women, did develop a concept of biblical womanhood that reflected more liberal claims and determined women's worth apart from their relationship with men.

As early as 1920, Mennonite women wrote reflections for the *Herald* on the positive contribution of biblical women. Some pointed to the women called by Jesus. Margaret Johns wrote, "When Jesus was upon the earth He recognized woman as a being capable of good works and large enough to live that fullness of life which He alone can supply."[23] Contributors called Mennonite women to model biblical characters, including Mary and Martha, Hannah and Miriam, Dorcas and Priscilla.[24] The *Herald* also offered numerous Bible studies and Sunday School lessons on the lives of women in the Bible, including Deborah, Esther, Ruth, Hannah, and Martha.[25]

In the end, *Herald* editors printed articles that hinted at liberal uses of Scripture under two conditions: that they avoid claims to woman's authority to lead, and that more traditional claims about womanhood provide a balance to this liberal understanding. At the same time, these articles on womanhood undoubtedly met a wider readership, as they were not limited to the "Family Circle" page. Editors evenly spread them between the family page, Sunday School lessons, and other church news. Some even appeared in the *Herald's* most prominent section, the "Doctrinal Page." These articles on womanhood, like those on motherhood and fashion, complicate our understanding of how Mennonites used the Bible to determine proper gender roles and how wider cultural disputes influenced the Mennonite debate.

Distinctive Mennonite Concerns: Plain Dress and Coverings

The *Herald* included many articles on gender that borrowed ideas, if not actual words, from both Fundamentalists and Modernist sources. But readers encountered a far greater number of pieces that touched on the distinctive concerns of the Mennonite community and revealed a form of biblicism unknown to their Protestant peers. These articles appeared primarily on the *Herald*'s prominent "Doctrinal Page." There, Mennonite writers argued that nonconformity and biblical authority demanded that both women and men dress modestly and that women observe the New Testament ordinance of the devotional head covering. In these articles Mennonites displayed what historian Theron Schlabach has called their different set of fundamentals, a strict biblicism embodied in a nonconformed community.[26]

"Dress is the most talked about subject in existence," wrote *Herald* editors in 1925.[27] A survey of articles shows that, among Mennonites at least, this truly was the case. *Herald* articles reflect that Mennonites understood how their commitment to distinct dress was unpopular with Christians on both sides. Debates in Fundamentalist magazines and the secular press focused on the immorality of women's dress and its ill effects on society. This danger was an afterthought for Mennonites. Writers in the *Herald* asserted that a biblical standard of dress for both men and women measured each member's willingness to live within a biblical, nonconformed community.

Herald articles consistently affirmed a biblical mandate for plain dress. Some writers touched on God's creation of clothing and how dress signaled a

relationship to the Lord in the Old Testament.[28] Numerous articles emphasized New Testament restrictions and instructions for dress.[29] Others showed how the Bible stood firm against ornaments and fashion.[30] An article on the "Bible Principles of Attire" made the choice between Bible and the world quite clear: "The people of the world think we are foolish to dress as we do. We think that the people of the world are foolish to dress as they do. Which is right? If the Bible is right, then we are right."[31]

In the *Herald*, Mennonites stressed biblical standards of dress for all because the entire community's nonconformity was at stake. Mennonite revivalist George R. Brunk defended the practice of plain dress in a question-and-answer article. He asked, "What is the use of so persistently advocating dress regulation when nearly all the professed Christian world ignores it?" His answer: "For the same reason that we testify against war, secretism, life insurance, etc., because the unpopularity of a subject does not release [us] from our obligation to 'declare all the counsel of God.'"[32] Some *Herald* writers reminded readers that dress regulation and nonconformity were not limited by gender. Alice Miller of Orrville, Ohio recalled a sermon on dress, directed at sisters, in which the preacher claimed that the "Bible doesn't say much to men."[33] In response, Miller called all Mennonites to nonconformity and challenged men to let their clothing identify them. "Brother, if you want men to know you are in business for your King, why not put on a uniform to show to the world, what your life work is?"[34]

Mennonites also displayed a distinctive approach to biblical authority in their discussion of the devotional covering, or prayer veil. Earlier in the century, *Herald* editor Daniel Kauffman listed the covering among the biblical ordinances necessary for right church practice.[35] As a result, most of the dialogue in the *Herald* focused on the biblical foundation for women's head covering. In one of several columns on this subject *Herald* editors gave the standard reason for the practice: "The believing Christian woman should wear a devotional covering because it is plainly commanded in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16."[36] Contributors to the *Herald* wrote about how the covering manifested certain claims of scripture, particularly nonconformity and the order of creation. Some writers extolled it as a sign of "separation from the world" and of being a "peculiar people."[37] Others determined that the covering ordinance required plain headgear, not a fashionable bonnet. A few writers focused on the order of creation found in 1

Corinthians.[38] Articles appearing repeatedly in the *Herald* reinforced the affirmation of women's veiling as a biblical ordinance and sign of distinctiveness.

Herald articles on plain dress and coverings reflected a particular biblicism that set Mennonites apart from the wider American religious scene. Both liberal and conservative Protestants overlooked the mandate for coverings found in 1 Corinthians, and conservatives applied dress standards only to women. While Mennonites could abide some conservative and liberal thought on motherhood, fashion, and womanhood, they had to establish their own position on dress in order to maintain the biblical posture that made them distinctive and expressed their commitment to nonconformity.

Conclusion

In the 1920s and '30s, conservative Protestants agonized about flappers who flirted and smoked. Liberals worried that church and society wrongly restricted women's God-given gifts. But Mennonites had much more limited concerns: young women were throwing their bonnets overboard, and that act defied Mennonites' understanding of themselves as biblical, nonconformed people. Articles on gender in the *Herald* offer a helpful vantage point for considering several questions about the Mennonite experience in the twentieth century.

First, it was difficult, yet possible, for Mennonites to maintain their particular form of biblicism in the midst of heated debates about the Bible's inspiration and authority. As the *Herald* articles on gender show, Mennonites allowed for some encroaching ideas, mostly from the Fundamentalist side. But the vast majority of these articles affirmed a particular Mennonite hermeneutic.

Second, the *Herald* articles provide clues to how Mennonites dealt with changes in the lives of real women. In the 1920s and '30s, Mennonite women increased their participation in higher education and church publishing.[39] But in other areas, church leaders began to restrict women's activities, particularly in the case of single, women missionaries and women's groups raising funds for them; leaders referenced 1 Corinthians as they curtailed women's activities that crossed the line.[40] Mennonites lacked the particular gender ideologies of their conservative and liberal Protestant peers. The issue for them was not to push all women back into the home or out into public life.[41] Instead, they measured every activity against their sense of biblical authority and nonconformity.

Third, an analysis of the Mennonite response to gender questions in the midst of the religious conflicts of the period can shed light on other periods of conflict.[42] The 1970s and '80s presented another era of American religious controversy in which gender questions became a flashpoint.[43] It would be interesting to see how Mennonites both borrowed from and resisted rhetorical resources from the wider conflict, and how a Bible-centered reading of gender norms established in the 1920s and '30s fared throughout the rest of the century.

Finally, the *Herald* articles show us the dynamics of Mennonite borrowing from outside cultural and religious resources. Mennonites could not avoid questions presented by the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy, nor could they escape answers provided by their conservative and liberal peers. In the *Herald*, we can see that Mennonites were willing to borrow, but they did so selectively and sometimes constructively. They resisted both conservative Protestant ideas about women's moral incapacity and the liberal assertion that women had the right to preach. They borrowed Victorian ideas about motherhood, but gave them an added biblical content. In the end, the *Herald* debate shows us that these gender matters in the early twentieth century provoked Mennonites to consider what they were willing to borrow from the outside world and what they needed to produce for themselves. The resulting rhetoric on gender would shape the lives of Mennonite women for decades to come.

Notes

Abbreviations: *GH – Gospel Herald*; *MQR – Mennonite Quarterly Review*

[1] Vinora Weaver Salzman, *Day by Day – Year by Year* (n.p.: James Juhnke, 1982), 26, 17-18; quoted in James Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America*, 1890-1930 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 251.

[2] Sharon Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900-1930," *MQR* 54 (July 1980): 163-207.

[3] See Betty DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) and Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, *Fundamentalism and Gender, 1875 to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[4] Mennonites in the early twentieth century trusted the Bible "as a guide to salvation and the true knowledge of God," according to C. Norman Kraus, "American Mennonites and the Bible, 1750-1950," *MQR* 41 (October 1967): 316.

[5] "'Maleness' and 'femaleness' have meant different things to different generations of American Protestants . . . even while the language of gender has provided a remarkable constant framework for understanding the progression from sin to redemption that is the grand narrative of Protestant experience": Susan Juster, "The Spirit and the Flesh: Gender, Language, and Sexuality in American Protestantism," in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 335.

[6] Although Fundamentalists and Modernists were subsets with the larger groups of conservative and liberal Protestants, I use the terms "Fundamentalist" and "conservative" interchangeably. I do the same with "Modernist" and "liberal."

[7] See DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*. See critique of DeBerg by Michael S. Hamilton, "Women, Public Ministry, and American Fundamentalism, 1920-1950," *Religion and American Culture* 3 (Summer 1993): 171-96.

[8] Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, "American Women and the Bible: The Nature of Woman as a Hermeneutical Issue," in *Feminist Perspectives in Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 11; Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 78-82.

[9] DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*, 13-58.

[10] Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 129-32.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] John D. Burkholder, "It was Mother," *GH* 28, no. 7 (May 16, 1935): 150.

[13] The group that also published the popular International Sunday School Lessons series out of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania printed the *Illustrator*.

[14] "This Is My Blood," *GH* 13, no. 6 (May 6, 1919): 122.

[15] My preliminary research shows that Mennonites writing on motherhood differed from Fundamentalists in this respect.

[16] Salena Wade Miller, "A Mother's Responsibility to her Daughter: How Win her Confidence," *GH* 12, no. 5 (May 1, 1919): 78; Ruth Rohrer, "Mother in the Home," *GH* 15, no. 2 (April 13, 1922): 38; Anna Loucks, "The Ideal Christian — In the Home," *GH* 20, no. 5 (May 5, 1927): 99; Anna Smucker, "An Ideal Mother," *GH* 26, no. 11 (June 15, 1933): 230.

[17] Anna Smucker, "An Ideal Mother," 230.

[18] DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*, 117.

[19] *Ibid.*, 123.

[20] "Who Started this Hair Bobbing?," *GH* 28, no. 42 (January 16, 1936): 886. *Herald* editors printed this piece, submitted "by a sister in Parnell, Iowa," with this editorial note: "It will be seen that the writer is not antagonistic to the fashions of this world, but objects to prevailing styles because of their indecency. Those who have made the matter a study will find in this an added reason for opposing fashion domination among Christian people."

[21] Wallace Farmer, "Indecency in Dress," *GH* 12, no. 9 (May 29, 1919): 155.

[22] Jennifer Graber, "The Life of Jesus as Critical Norm in Nineteenth Century Women's Literature of Christian Protest," 1998; author's copy.

[23] Margaret Johns, "Women of the Bible and of Today — In the Church," *GH* 15, no. 23 (September 7, 1922): 442.

[24] Sadie Brubaker, "How About Martha and Mary?" *GH* 16, no. 14 (July 5, 1923): 278; John L. Horst, "Meditations on Ruth's Decision," *GH* 18, no. 22 (August 27, 1925): 142; Martha E. Hostetler, "The Place of the Christian Woman in the Church," *GH* 24, no. 43 (January 21, 1932): 918; Minerva Kauffman, "Mary," *GH* 26, no. 4 (April 27, 1933): 86; D. E. Cripe, "Naomi," *GH* 26, no. 29 (October 19, 1933): 614.

[25] "Esther Saves her People," *GH* 15, no. 18 (August 3, 1922): 343; "Deborah," *GH* 26, no. 14 (July 6, 1933): 279; "Ruth," *GH* 26, no. 17 (July 27, 1933): 359; "Hannah," *GH* 26, no. 18 (August 3, 1933): 375; "Martha," *GH* 28, no. 19 (August 8, 1935): 423.

[26] Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 114-15.

[27] "Present Day Issues and How to Meet Them," *GH* 18, no. 2 (April 9, 1925): 33.

[28] E. J. Berkey, "Bible Teaching on Dress," *GH* 16, no. 28 (October 11, 1923): 576.

[29] See Susie Hess, "Why Modest Apparel is Fitting with the Christian Spirit," *GH* 15, no. 6 (June 11, 1922): 123; E. J. Berkey, "Bible Teaching on Dress," *GH* 16, no. 28 (October 11, 1923): 576; J. B. Gehman, "Bible Principles of Attire," *GH* 26, no. 47 (February 18, 1932): 1010; T. E. Schrock, "Standards of the Word on Dress — Suggestions on How These May Be Maintained," *Gospel Herald — Christian Doctrine* (July 18, 1935): 358; and P. Hostetler, "The Dress Question Analyzed," *GH* 28, no. 30 (October 24, 1935): 651.

[30] L. C. Schrock, "Bible Teaching on Dress," *GH* 16, no. 20 (Aug 16, 1923): 402-03.

[31] J. B. Gehman, "Bible Principles of Attire," *GH* 26, no. 47 (February 18, 1932): 1010.

[32] George R. Brunk, "The Bible and Dress," *GH* 12, no. 18 (July 31, 1919): 330.

[33] Alice Miller, "The Dress Question," *GH* 30, no. 20 (August 12, 1937): 445.

[34] *Ibid*., 445.

[35] Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War*, 115-16.

[36] "Scripture Light on Oft-Repeated Inquiries," *GH* 18, no. 12 (June 18, 1925): 243; see also D. L. Miller, "The Prayer Veil," *GH* 13, no. 3 (April 15, 1920): 50; Ira Landis, "Prayer Head Covering," *Gospel Herald — Christian Doctrine* (July 2, 1927): 377; and "Christian Ordinances," *Gospel Herald — Christian Doctrine* (October 10, 1935): 610.

[37] "Why the Bonnet?" *GH* 26, no. 4 (April 27, 1933): 81; see also "Report of Y[oung] P[erson's] B[ible] Meeting Program on the Devotional Covering — The Questions and Their Answers," *GH* 20, no. 16 (July 21, 1927): 384; and S. B. Wenger, "That Beautiful Bonnet," *GH* 28, no. 1 (April 4, 1935): 10.

[38] "Our Young People — Devotional Covering," *GH* 12, no. 21 (August 21, 1919): 391; John F. Bressler, "The Devotional Covering," *GH* 15, no. 29 (October 29, 1922): 562; and "Christian Ordinances," *Gospel Herald — Christian Doctrine* (October 10, 1935): 610.

[39] Klingelsmith, 163-207.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Michael Hamilton has shown that conservatives and mainline Protestants did not always stay in step with their rhetoric about gender. Fundamentalists accepted certain kinds of women's ministries, while the more liberal wing of mainline Protestantism often failed to live up to their speech about women's emancipation. The disconnect between speech and action is a fruitful source for historical reflection.

[42] See Stephan Ainlay and Fred Kniss, "Mennonites and Conflict: Re-Examining Mennonite History and Contemporary Life," *MQR* 72 (April 1998): 121-39 and Fred Kniss, *Disquiet in the Land: Cultural Conflict in American Mennonite Communities* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997.

[43] DeBerg argues that Fundamentalists in the 1970s and '80s inherited their language about gender from arguments created during the Fundamentalist-Modernist debates. See DeBerg, *Ungodly Women*, 153.