Three Hundred Years of Pietism, Anabaptism, and Pluralism

Scott Holland

This year [2008] we in the Brethren movement are celebrating 300 years of Pietism, Anabaptism, and Pluralism. Here in Canada there is sometimes confusion about the varieties of Brethren identity, so let me provide the historical context of this anniversary celebration of the Brethren. We are not the Plymouth Brethren or the Brethren in Christ. Canadian Mennonites know we are certainly not the MBs, the Mennonite Brethren! Who are we?

We trace our 1708 origins to eight adult baptisms in Schwarzenau, Germany. Inspired by the spiritual leadership of Alexander Mack, this renewal movement blended elements of Anabaptism, learned from Mack's Mennonite friends and neighbors, with the influences of Radical Pietism that were sweeping across Germany. Two very different but fine resources could be recommended this year for a window into Brethren history. Donald Durnbaugh's final book, *Fruit of the Vine,*[1] is the standard scholarly source. Myrna Grove has published a children's book for this year of celebration. Grove's *Alexander Mack: A Man Who Rippled the Waters*[2] offers a very helpful historical summary of the rise and evolution of Brethrenism.

Let me read from Grove's book to give an indication of how diverse the Schwarzenau Brethren have become in three hundred years:

> The earliest church members were known as New Baptists, and later, German Baptists and German Baptist Brethren. An Annual Meeting to discuss the beliefs and policies of the church has been held every year since 1742. In 1908, a main branch took the name, Church of the Brethren. Besides the Church of the Brethren, several other branches of Brethren trace their roots to Alexander Mack's vision. Among them are the Old German Baptist Brethren (1881), The Brethren Church (1883), the Dunkard Brethren (1926), the Fellowship of Grace Brethren (1939), and Conservative Brethren International (1992).

The denominational diversity within the Schwarzenau Brethren movement began with a three-way church split in 19th-century America. The division resulted in three different denominational bodies: the Church of the Brethren (the main branch), the Progressive Brethren (now known as the Brethren Church, headquartered in Ashland, Ohio and marked by a theology more evangelical than the main branch), and finally, the Old Orders.

In total, there are currently more than 20 different Brethren bodies with over 4,000 congregations located in 23 countries. It is interesting to note that there are now more African Brethren in the Federal Republic of Nigeria than Brethren in all of North America. The Brethren were never numerous in Canada, and although there are some churches and programs representing the Brethren Church, mainly in Ontario, in 1968 the Evangelical United Brethren Church in Canada became part of the United Church of Canada.

I am a seminary professor and ordained preacher in the Church of the Brethren, and thus my reflections on themes for the anniversary year will be somewhat specific to my context and concerns. A member of another Brethren body would likely have different stories to tell.

Solidarity, Ecumenicity, Citizenship

When students enter my office at Bethany Theological Seminary, beyond the stacks of books, journals and papers, they are greeted by several visual images. They first see a large portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech. My students know that we German Baptist Brethren have deep respect and warmest affections for the witness, work, and theology of this Baptist preacher and civil rights leader. King's dream of a beloved community where persons are not judged by the color of their skin but rather by the content of their character is likewise our dream for the church and society.

Students' eyes quickly turn to the nearby framed poster announcing the ecumenical Feast of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the martyred pastoral advocate for El Salvador's poor and oppressed. This poster was a gift from Salvadorian Baptist pastor Miguel Thomas Castro, a visiting scholar at Bethany. Pastor Castro taught us that in Salvador, Protestants and Catholics celebrate together the Romero Feast as a symbol of their spiritual solidarity in the quest for national and international economic justice. The Church of

the Brethren is committed to this kind of ecumenical spirit. We are active members of both the World Council of Churches and the National Council of Churches.

Many are curious about a large picture calendar displaying the portraits of men and women who are members of the EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria, studying theology at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria. Our large and growing churches in Nigeria have become very involved in the past two decades in the Christian-Muslim dialogue as a path to peacemaking and seeking the common good in a society marked by many tribal and religious conflicts. I take our American seminary students to Nigeria to learn intercultural theological competency in the context of an emerging global Peace Church.

We at Bethany Seminary are in partnership with the Earlham School of Religion, a Quaker graduate school and seminary. Thus, I have a print of Mary Dyer, whose image also adorns other locations on campus, including the Friends Meetinghouse. Mary Dyer was an outspoken Quaker in Puritan New England. Governor John Winthrop and other Puritan fathers sought to silence her as a heretic. However, Dyer refused to recant her awakened spiritual positions and likewise refused to retreat into silence. This unauthorized woman preacher in a dark cape dress and plain bonnet was led to the gallows by American Puritan pastors and politicians, and was hanged as a heretic on Boston Common in 1690. May God save us all from American Puritanism and all expressions of theocratic, Constantinian religion!

Visitors to my office soon observe the large, framed art poster featuring a bearded man in a black, wide-brimmed hat. More than one student has asked, "Is that Alexander Mack?" Most are surprised when I answer, "No, it's Walt Whitman." Why Walt Whitman in a theology professor's office?

For some of us, Walt Whitman has come to symbolize the possibility of deep democracy and inviting plurality in the American experiment. I have presented many Brethren heritage lectures this anniversary year at congregations and colleges across America. In these lectures, I have been inviting audiences to consider what it might mean to "Enter Whitman's America." After all, we do not simply live in Mack's church but in Whitman's America. My audiences learn that I'm not calling them to become mere

generic citizens, placid pluralists, or patriots of civil religion. Instead, I'm inviting them to revisit what it might mean to be Christians and citizens of a pluralistic public square.

Particularism and Universalism

The classical dilemmas of particularism and universalism have concerned Anabaptists and Pietists from the emergence of these religious renewal movements. Like Jews more than Greeks of the ancient world, we have tended to begin with particularism. The Jewish novelist and essayist Elie Wiesel reminds us that it is only when we live out our lives in passionate particularity that our lives can hope to take on universal significance.

Jews are good at the cultivation of particular identities, and so are Brethren and Mennonites. Indeed, the Berkeley scholar Daniel Boyarin has commented that we Anabaptists are more like Jews than Presbyterians! Yet Boyarin, as a Jew fiercely committed to justice for Palestinians, also notes the dangers of identity politics, tribalism, and sectarianism. In the rise of the early Christian movement, the Apostle Paul likewise articulated the importance of a particular religious identity finding more universal connections and confessions. Really, Christian theology began when Greek questions were first asked about a Hebrew narrative.

This challenging rhetoric of particularism and universalism requires a poetics more than a logical syllogism. Aristotle's *Poetics* can help us move beyond the temptations of sectarianism, for the philosopher insists that "to see the similar in the dissimilar is the mark of poetic genius." Walt Whitman as a strong poet can likewise help us celebrate the gifts of particular visions and voices within the context of a commitment to a deeply democratic understanding of religious, cultural, and political life. Following this poetics, in this 300th Anniversary year I'm inviting members of the Brethren movement to consider what gifts and graces we might carry into the public square of Whitman's America – or into the market of Chinua Achebe's Nigeria.

My readers must recognize that I am not inviting them into an exercise of ecclesiology or churchly theology proper. Instead, I am inviting them into a public theology or a theology of culture. We are really pondering the philosophical question, "Do particular traditions bear public resources?" Of

course they do; thus we ask, "What gifts do we carry from the sanctuary into the many streets of our civic lives?" I would like to suggest three themes from the heritage: Non-Creedalism, No Force in Religion, and Service for Peace and Justice.

Non-Creedalism

The early Brethren movement welcomed two streams of spiritual and ecclesial renewal into its theological formation: Anabaptism and Radical Pietism. Although the Anabaptists were certainly theological dissenters from mere churchly orthodoxy, the Radical Pietists offered a more developed theology of non-creedalism. Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) was a Pietist preacher and poet who taught a stubborn but enlightened non-creedalism. His work and witness is seen in Brethren expressions of this view.

Arnold argued that the formal language of creedal Christendom had been used in the history of the church to punish dissidents and nonconformists who were often the true believers. His massive historical work, *A Nonpartisan History of Church and Heresy,* contends that "heretical movements" had actually perpetuated the true church, while the orthodox church that had disciplined and punished them was in reality the anti-church. Arnold's preaching, poetry, and historical writing proposed that a "love theology" or a mystical theology of first love (*die erste Liebe*) must be the hermeneutical lens through which all teachings of the Christian life are understood and practiced.

One night the great Christian existential philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, was reading about Brethren non-creedalism. What he read pleased him so much that this melancholic Dane threw back his head and laughed. He was reading about the Brethren in the *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. Franklin was friends with the Dunkard preacher Michael Wohlfahrt. Franklin thought Brethrenism might do much better if it had clear and concrete creeds, like other religious bodies, so that members and nonmembers alike might understand the rules of their discipline. Franklin records Preacher Wohlfahrt's response:

> He said that it had been proposed among them, but not agreed to, for this reason: "When we were first drawn together as a society", says he, "it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so

> far as to see that some doctrines, which we had once esteemed as errors, were real truths. From time to time He has been pleased to afford us farther light, and our principles have been improving, and errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we have arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that, if we should print our confession, we should feel ourselves as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive farther improvement, and our successors still more so, as conceiving what we their elders and founders had done, to be something sacred, never to be departed from." This modesty in a sect is perhaps a singular instance in the history of mankind, every other sect supposing itself in possession of all truth, and that those who differ are so far in the wrong.[3]

This principle of non-creedalism is clearly related to a companion theme in Anabaptism and Pietism: nonconformity. To be counter-cultural or nonconforming to the creeds, moral codes, and sacramental systems of establishment Christendom and its chaplaincy to various expressions of political empire is really to raise a question that is profoundly spiritual, ethical, and aesthetic at once: Will we be consumers of culture or creators of culture?

Indeed, Brethren non-creedalism is not suggesting that we believe nothing; rather it calls for more contingent yet deeply spiritual and artful epistemologies. Gottfried Arnold proposed a theopoetic lens of love piety or love mysticism through which all theology and church history could be read and interpreted. In the evolution of Brethren thought, this love mysticism, which early leaders discerned most clearly in the Sermon on the Mount, became a broader hermeneutical principle summarized by the phrase "No creed but the New Testament."

"No creed but the New Testament" is not a call for a flat Biblicism but instead invites a hermeneutics of the priesthood of all believers. In the heritage, there is a sense that the solitary heart of the Pietist is further edified, exhorted, and enlarged by the Anabaptist communal hermeneutic. In this model of spiritual and theological discernment, believers gather together around the texts of the NT with the faith that the Holy Spirit will offer new

light and life to the scriptures. Some read as careful scribes, some read as prophets, others as strong poets, still others as pastors. Yet the goal of this committed, communal reader response is to discern "the mind of Christ" in the text and its message for the church in the world.

Brethren Old Testament scholar Christina Bucher has recently suggested that this affirmation of "No creed but the New Testament" is not quite true to the complexity of Anabaptist-Pietist habits of scripture reading, teaching, and preaching. Although we have viewed the Sermon on the Mount as a canon within the canon, we have likewise been instructed by the rich narratives of the Hebrew Bible, inspired by the Psalms, and called to personal and public responsibility by the OT Prophets. Bucher's insight offers a helpful corrective to any tendency or temptation to make even the decree "No creed but the New Testament" another flat creed or disciplinary code. Indeed, in recent years many in our communities of faith have noted that the prophetic, Jewish Jesus challenges all the claims of a mere Constantinian Christ of the Empire as he carries the truly Jewish message of shalom, mercy, and justice into the church and society. The religion of Jesus reflected the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Bible.

No Force in Religion

The testimony of "No force in religion" of course invites us to be peacemakers in a broken world, but it is also marked by a progressive politics. We in the Believers' Church tradition have resisted Constantinianism with the reminder that the church is not the *Corpus Christianum* but rather the *Corpus Christi*. We are not those christened by the State's Church and thus received into the body of territorial Christianity, but we are instead a voluntary association of believers committed to another way of being church. The current denominational tag line for public witness seeks to capture this: "Another Way of Living: Following the Way of Jesus – Simply, Peacefully, Together." Brethren practice believers' baptism by triune immersion as a sign and symbol of this spiritual journey, yet it is also an ordinance of the church with progressive political implications.

When the Anabaptists and Radical Pietists said "No!" to the emperor's baptism, they also said "No!" to his economics, armies, morality, and politics. In other words, they signified through baptism that religious faith and the

sword of the state must not be united to promote the emperor's, prince's, or president's religious agenda nor any pope's or preacher's political ideology. "No force in religion" celebrates the deeply democratic doctrine of separation of church and state, yet at the same time it does not counsel the separation of religion from public life. If space permitted, I could offer much more on this point of religion and public life. (Readers interested in a theological treatment of this issue can see my recent article, somewhat playfully titled "How Would Jesus Vote?"[4])

The political implications of the "No force in religion" testimony are well understood within the Believers' Church guild. This assertion also has ecclesial implications. In 1908 Martin Grove Brumbaugh was preaching "No force in religion" as a core Brethren value. The first member of the Church of the Brethren to earn a Ph.D, he was a preacher and a church historian, authoring an important history of the Brethren movement in 1899. He served as the president of Juniata College, and because he understood that Brethren live not only in Mack's church but in Whitman's America – although Brumbaugh was more inspired by Lincoln than Whitman – he ran for political office and was elected governor of Pennsylvania in 1915.

As a churchman, Brumbaugh was distressed that the Brethren in early 20th-century America were applying the principle of no force in religion to political and public life but not to churchly life. Church was sometimes a mean place where Communion or Love Feasts were being used as punishing tools of church discipline. If a member in his belief or behavior did not neatly conform to the expectations of pastors and elders of the church, he could be shunned from the Lord's Table and exiled from full fellowship with the Brethren. Alexander Mack learned this theology of the ban from his Mennonite neighbors in Germany.

To this practice of church discipline, Brumbaugh declared, "No force in religion!" Living in Lincoln's America taught him the value of unity in diversity guided by freedom of conscience and loving forbearance, in the church and in the world. Several of our Brethren historians believe Brumbraugh was wrong to apply this testimony or principle to the realm of the church when it was first formulated in the heritage for the sphere of political life. As a Brethren theologian and practicing pastor, I think he was correct to connect the quest for peaceful forbearance to the life in the

sanctuary. My grandmother, Lilly Leitchman Holland, stated rather bluntly, even in her final, 103rd year of life, "Because Brethren and Mennonites don't believe in war, they must nevertheless find some way to shed blood in church!" She had not even read Sigmund Freud on the anatomy of human aggression.

Service for Peace and Justice

Brethren, along with our Mennonite and Quaker colleagues, have been actively involved in a decade-long international project of "Seeking Cultures of Peace." The World Council of Churches declared the first ten years of the 21st century a "Decade to Overcome Violence." Leaders from the Historic Peace Churches were invited to work with WCC partners in this decade of programs, projects, and consultations. In important ways this ecumenical work continues and extends the aims of the Puidoux Conferences of the 1950s and 1960s in which John Howard Yoder and Donald Durnbaugh, key leaders of the Believers' Church guild, actively participated.[5]

We have called this international and intercultural work in peacemaking "Seeking Cultures of Peace" rather than seeking doctrines, ideologies, or even theologies of peace to signal that peacemaking is a way of life, a culture, a mode of being in the world. Peacemaking is not merely protesting war, nor is peace the absence of conflict; peacemaking in the heritage of the Historic Peace Churches is engaged in seeking the presence of God's reign, God's Commonwealth, God's Kingdom, on earth, in history, in life, even as it is in heaven.

Thus, the church is called to service for peace and justice as we unite with God's work in the world. We agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer that the church is in the world *for* the world. Therefore, we do not only ask ourselves, "What is God doing in the church?" We also ask, "What is God doing in the world?" The answer to this second question really calls us to a worldly holiness.

What is God doing in the world? My neighbor boy Miguel lives in a single-parent household. His mother asked me if I would be willing to take him to the barbershop with me and do other "guy things" with him for some male bonding. I happily agreed. One day, on the way to get haircuts, Miguel said, "Scott, sometimes when you are not around I feel like talking to you.

But Mom says you are in Africa or Indonesia or Belgium or Canada. You are away a lot." Miguel continued, "I get this funny feeling in my stomach and something just doesn't seem right. Then one day it came to me! Now, Scott, I know you can't say anything, because it's top secret, but I believe I have figured something out. Mom says you are a professor and a preacher, but that's a cover, isn't it? You are really a spy!"

I laughed and said, "You know, Miguel, in a sense you are right. As a preacher and theology professor my assignment is to explore what God might be doing in the world. Therefore, I must track down God like a spy in all of life – for God is active in both the church and the world."

Like Mennonites and Friends, the Brethren have worked for peace and justice in various arenas from protesting war to involvement in local and national political action to developing rigorous peace studies programs in our academic institutions. One of our greatest gifts to the world is the long, distinguished tradition of service for peace and justice through voluntary service programs, from Civilian Public Service (CPS) as an alternative to military service to various assignments of Brethren Voluntary Service around the world. We know that the John F. Kennedy administration developed the Peace Corps after studying the successful work of the voluntary services programs of the Historic Peace Churches. Some service programs started by the Church of the Brethren, such as the Heifer Project, are now ecumenical, interfaith, and international. This is truly a theology of service that seeks global cultures of peace and nurtures cosmopolitan affections.

In the progression of Brethren tradition, the Service Cup and the Communion Cup became companion symbols of the centrality of service and worship in our theological vision. The Communion Cup is a symbol of a doxological consummation of theology. At bread and cup communion during morning worship and likewise during special evening services of Love Feast, the high ritual signifying love and service to God and neighbor in the Brethren heritage, the Communion Cup reminds us that the spiritual life comes to us from God as gift and grace, not as mere doctrine, duty, and discipline. In the 20th-century the Brethren also created a Service Cup, crafted out of beautiful myrtle wood, as a reminder that communion with God finds expression in gracious and generous service to the neighbor.

For some of us pastors in the Brethren movement, the Communion

Cup and the Service Cup are often placed together on the Communion Table during times of worship. Indeed, in recent years I have officiated at the funerals of church members who were in CPS during World War Two or served in international Voluntary Service in the years following the war. Their families have requested that I discuss and display these two cups during the eulogy as deep symbols and root metaphors which acknowledge that communion with God and service to humanity have been the core testimonies of their departed loved ones and of our denominational theological heritage.

We have had a deep understanding that the Lord's Prayer is as much about earth as it is about heaven. "May thy Kingdom come, may thy will be done, *on earth*, even as it is in heaven." When we pray this prayer we are longing to see hope and history rhyme. The Pietist tradition often expressed its most profound theology in poetry and hymns. Thus, I would like to close with two contemporary poems. Seamus Heaney won a Nobel Peace prize in literature because his verse understands how hope and history, in moments of grace, can in fact rhyme.

From the Cure at Troy

Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
can fully right a wrong
inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols
beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
on the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
and cures and healing wells.

Call the miracle self-healing:
The utter self-revealing
double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
of new life at its term.[6]

Poet Marge Piercy understands from her Jewish heritage that the Hebrew prophets often expressed themselves with poetic vision and voice. Piercy, along with the Poet-Prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, understands that spiritual life expresses itself in the *tikkun olam*, the healing or mending of our blessed, broken world. I shall use her timely peace poem as a benediction as we leave these banquet tables and go out into the night.

Peace in a Time of War

A puddle of amber light
like sun spread on a table,
food flirting savor into the nose,
faces of friends, a vase
of daffodils and Dutch iris:

this as an evening of honey
on the tongue, cinnamon
scented, red wine sweet
and dry, voices rising
like a flock of swallows

turning together in evening
air Darkness walls off
the room from what lies
outside, the fire and dust
and blood of war, bodies

stacked like firewood
burst like overripe melons.
Ceremony is a moat we have we have
crossed into a moment's
harmony, as if the world paused –

but it doesn't. What we must
do waits like coats tossed
on the bed, for us to rise
from this warm table,
put on again and go out.[7]

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Notes

[1] Donald F. Durnbaugh, *Fruit of the Vine: A History of the Brethren, 1708-1995* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 1996).

[2] Myrna Grove, *Alexander Mack: A Man Who Rippled the Waters* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 2008).

[3] Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1912), 128-29.

[4] Scott Holland, "How Would Jesus Vote?" *Brethren Life and Thought* 53.1 (Winter 2008): 1-14.

[5] See Fernando Enns, Scott Holland, and Ann Riggs, eds., *Seeking Cultures of Peace* (Telford, PA: Cascadia; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press; Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2004).

[6] From the Web Archive of Panhala postings: www.panhala.net/Archive/Index.html.

[7] "Peace in a time of war" from THE CROOKED INHERITANCE by Marge Piercy, copyright ©2006 by Middlemarsh, Inc. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc. Page 153.