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## The Crisis Years of 1915-1930

It is impossible to understand the problems of the two conferences between 1915 and 1930 without an awareness of the struggle which the Mennonite denomination was facing in nearly all of its institutions and programs. The struggle was not a unique one for the Mennonites, as anyone can see who studies the social and intellectual impact of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rural religious groups in America were undergoing vast changes which brought them more and more into the mainstream of American life. The decades immediately following 1890 are considered by many as the watershed of America's social, religious, and political institutions.

As noted above, the Mennonite and Amish churches had a spiritual awakening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that led to the establishment of missionary, charitable, publishing, and educational institutions. These various institutions came to be controlled by relatively few persons in what was actually a small denomination. Considerable overlapping of personnel existed in the controlling bodies of the church institutions and conferences. This "establishment" was a dedicated group of leaders committed to an unfolding mission of the church but also committed to certain separatistic values and patterns which they deemed necessary for the ongoing life of the Mennonite and Amish churches. The formation of a Mennonite General Conference in 1897 was one corporate expression of these ideals. Both the Mennonite and Amish conferences united with the Mennonite General Conference.

Ventures into missions, relief, publication, and education soon posed problems for the church. With the founding of the early educational institutions (Elkhart Institute in 1893, which became Goshen College in 1903, and Hesston College founded in

1909) it seemed inevitable that tensions should arise between the younger or the more educated, on the one hand, and the older and the more traditional members on the other hand.

#### *Impact of World War I*

It was in the aftermath of World War I, however, that the church as a whole became involved in controversy over the control of church institutions, the question of discipline and church authority, the problem of what constitutes "soundness of faith," and how the Mennonite Church in particular should relate to the "world." For some decades there were those in the church who were impatient with the slow growth of the mission spirit, the lack of enough vital church literature, and the paucity of educated leaders. It was especially believed by many that a stronger educational program could do much to remedy the situation in a church that, for historical reasons, had lacked educated leaders and institutions of learning. As always, there were those favoring "progress" while others were "cautious."

The progressive movement in the Mennonite Church received considerable impetus from the experience of its young men in the reconstruction and relief units that operated in France, Russia, and America after World War I. As noted above, the conference held at Clermont-en-Argonne in Meuse, France, in June of 1919 issued a many-sided concern for the mission, relief, education, publication, and youth work of the Mennonite Church.

The zeal and ability of the reconstruction unit men (all conscientious objectors) was supported by a number of the church's missionaries, educators, ministers, and laymen. In the years immediately after World War I a many-pronged effort was made to "reconstruct" the Mennonite Church along more progressive lines. A committee was formed whose goal was to found a Mennonite theological seminary that, preferably, would serve all branches of the church. A young people's movement was launched that would, hopefully, involve many of the church's youth in a wider program of mission and service for Christ.

A semimonthly, sixteen-page periodical, *The Christian Exponent*, was published from January 1924 to August 1928, with the aim of helping the church "to understand and appreciate the historic principles of our Mennonite faith." In its first issue it affirmed belief "in the mission and destiny of the Mennonite

Church" and stated that it "accepts the Bible as the divinely inspired Word of God, as, we are sure, do all its readers." The *Exponent* favored openness and freedom of discussion on church issues and problems. Its editors were convinced that if the Mennonite Church was to fulfill its mission it would need to distinguish between traditional customs and permanent gospel principles. By conferring together perhaps its members could find the way it ought to go. It promoted inter-Mennonite cooperation and unity-something it considered necessary if the world was to be convinced of the validity of the Mennonite interpretation of Christianity. Throughout the existence of the *Exponent* its two editors, Vernon Smucker (1924-26) and Lester Hostetler (1927-28), were both Ohio men from the Amish Mennonite communities of Wayne and Holmes counties respectively.

#### *The Conservative Reaction*

It was thus during the decade of 1920-30 that the Mennonite Church, and the Ohio and Eastern Amish Mennonite conferences in particular, polarized into two conflicting groups. To those in control of the church's institutions and in conference leadership the issues became as clear as they were for the major Protestant denominations in the heyday of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. They saw their position and program threatened by the movement of the younger and more educated group who advocated changes and updating in missions, journalism, relief work, and Christian education. Accordingly at Garden City, Missouri, in 1921 the Mennonite General Conference adopted a statement on *Christian Fundamentals.*' The viewpoints on cardinal Christian doctrines were here stated in fundamentalist language, and the document became something of a test for soundness in faith though it was hardly a radical departure from previous doctrinal statements. Mennonite conferences and the controlling bodies of Mennonite institutions were in the main supportive of the Garden City statement, though the conference expressly declared that "this statement does not supersede the eighteen articles of the Dort Confession, which the Church still confesses and teaches."

The controversy that raged in the Mennonite Church during the decade of the 1920's perhaps reached its climax in the decision of the Mennonite Board of Education to close Goshen College for the academic year of 1923-24. This oldest college of the church was

strongly patronized and supported by the churches in Ohio of both Amish and Mennonite background. Its closing caused much distress and alarm among church leaders, students, and prospective students. When the college reopened in the fall of 1924, changes in faculty and policy were such as to harmonize more closely with the conservative stance of the Mennonite Church.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Fundamentals Conference*

The alignment of Ohio Mennonite and Amish leaders with the conservative side in the controversies of the 1920's can be seen in various ways. Perhaps the most conspicuous and most important was in the 1924 Fundamentals Conference held in February in the Central Church at Archbold, Ohio. Attending the conference as speakers were D. H. Bender, Daniel Kaufman, J. B. Smith, Oscar Burkholder, B. B. King, J. M. Shenk, E. B. Stoltzfus, J. S. Gerig, A. J. Steiner, David Garber, J. S. Hartzler, and C. F. Derstine. The two-day conference discussed such topics as the inspiration of the Bible, the deity and humanity of Christ, the Christian life, and maintenance of a pure church.

What is noteworthy is the emphasis implied in the following topics: Predicted Apostasy; History, Nature and Methods of Modernism; Results of Modernism; Meaning and Importance of Orthodoxy; Orthodoxy as Related to Fellowship and Service; Clarifying the Issues; and topics on authority and discipline. The findings of the resolutions committee noted that "a wave of blighting liberalism is sweeping over the religious world engulfing many of the churches of the land, even threatening the unity and future welfare of the Mennonite Church."

That the leaders of the two conferences (both had strong representation) were in agreement with the General Conference statement on Christian Fundamentals is clear from the following resolution:

Resolved that we see the need of our members acquainting themselves with the position of the General Conference on the fundamental doctrines of the Word and the Church. Moreover we believe that in order to counteract these harmful influences our ministers should publicly declare themselves with reference to the menace of Modernism and kindred evils, faithfully teach the fundamental truths, and warn their congregations against the destructive results of all these false teachings.<sup>1</sup>

The conference, held during the academic year when Goshen

College was closed and in the month following the appearance of Volume I, Number 1, of *The Christian Exponent*, was therefore set in a strategic time of the crisis years. Attended by men from Kansas, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ontario the conference may be viewed as significant not merely for the Archbold community but for the Ohio Mennonite and Eastern Amish Mennonite conferences, and in all probability for the Mennonite Church at large. Daniel Kauffman's presence as editor of the *Gospel Herald*, the official Mennonite organ, doubtless added a wider church dimension to the occasion.

The importance of such meetings was recognized in the Report of the 1924 Eastern Amish Mennonite Conference of June 4 and 5. This conference passed the following resolution:

Resolved, that we favor the holding of special meetings, where the fundamentals of the Christian faith are intelligently taught. To this end we recommend that this Conference appoint two members who are to work in connection with a similar committee appointed by the Ohio Mennonite Conference whose work it shall be to outline a plan and cooperate with any congregations in the District desiring to hold such meetings. A. I. Yoder and S. H. Miller were appointed as a committee on this resolution.

That the Ohio Mennonite Conference continued to align itself with the Mennonite General Conference can be seen by the next resolution of the 1924 session which endorsed the 1923 position of Mennonite General Conference on modernism and "the various educational problems.

In the wake of the Fundamentals Conference a few congregations were suspended from conference membership. The Chapel and Zion congregations in northwestern Ohio had for some years not been favorable to certain regulations which they considered excessive. Apparently the issues had to do in part with the question of respecting conference regulations on dress, for in a letter dated October 10, 1924, E. F. Hartzler, Daniel Kauffman, and John Y. King (members of an investigating committee) said: "If the dress question is all that stands between you and conference, then we advise that you waive your personal opinions on this matter and do your best to maintain the standards of the Church." The same letter intimates that there may have been other differences, perhaps in regard to church polity and doctrine.' In any event the congregations and the pastors were suspended by the executive committee of the Ohio Mennonite Conference in a communi

cation dated October 28, 1924, in which the suspension was cited as a "painful duty" but one necessary as a "safeguard to the church and conference."

Both the Chapel and Zion congregations felt their congregational rights had been ignored and that procedures had been irregular. They affirmed their loyalty to the church and its confession of faith and hoped for a reconsideration which was not granted." There was also the feeling that the investigating committee was inconsistent and was in actuality "straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel." In the same year the Sugarcreek Mennonite Church was disowned by the conference, a congregation which had been formed by a group which withdrew from the Walnut Creek congregation. The pastor of the Walnut Creek Church tendered his resignation and later became pastor of the Sugarcreek congregation."

#### *Defensive Literature*

The role of the Mennonite Publishing House during these critical years can now be seen as an important if not a decisive one. Daniel Kauffman, as editor of the church's organ, wrote pamphlets which strengthened the conservative cause and opposed the forces of change. In 1918 he published *The Conservative Viewpoint: A Message to Members of the Mennonite Church*. In 1923 he wrote a work on *The Mennonite Church and Current Issues*, followed in 1924 by *The Two Standards*. Kauffman was a widely respected church leader and his forthright conservative position on education, missions, publication, youth, and other problems was persuasive and stabilizing to confused leaders. He reaffirmed historic and traditional Mennonite views and attacked vigorously the modernistic trends as he saw them in the religious world, and especially as they threatened the Mennonite Church on various fronts.

Also important were the writings of John Horsch, the Germanborn Mennonite historian, who for some years had been rekindling interest in the historic background of Mennonitism. In *The Mennonite Church and Modernism* (1924) Horsch came into sharp conflict with those persons, influences, and writings which he was sure were inducing the American Mennonite Church to "go the way the Church in Holland and North Germany had gone." He saw no middle ground; he could tolerate no compromise, for he saw the very

life of the church as the issue. His writings were widely read and were influential.

Thus by conferences and conference actions, by expulsions and disciplinary measures, and with the aid of polemical church literature, the numerous congregations passed through a critical period not unlike that which larger Protestant bodies faced during the same years.'

*The Passing of the Crisis*

Beginning in 1930 S. E. Allgyer, I. B. Witmer, and E. L. Frey, as an official conference committee, visited many churches to study trends and to offer counsel on how best to meet the forces which were working against spiritual vitality. They dealt with the threats of modernism, and unequal yoke, and worldliness. " By 1931 the committee was able to report that it had visited twenty-seven congregations." It would appear that these efforts, after years of internal struggle, were well received by the ministry and laity alike. The worst of the crisis seemed past.

A thorough study of the 1915-30 period in the history of the Mennonite Church has yet to be made, together with an interpretation of its meaning to the church. There is evidence that the entire Mennonite Church, its institutions, missions, programs, and emphases have been profoundly influenced by what happened in this period, much of which focused in the Ohio Mennonite and Eastern Amish Mennonite conferences. The exodus of many Mennonite youth from the church of their parents during this period would doubtless make a fruitful, if unpleasant, study. There is evidence to show that this departure, deeply lamented by the churches, took many talented and educated youth into other denominations.

Though a theological seminary was not founded by the progressives in the early 1920's, the Bible school of Goshen College was expanded and reorganized (1933) so that this goal was reached. In 1944 the school was organized under its own dean. In 1946 it was renamed the Goshen College Biblical Seminary, offering the full Bachelor of Divinity degree program, based on four years of liberal arts."

Though *The Christian Exponent* was short-lived, Mennonite publications of many and vital types have proliferated since then. Missions have greatly expanded in many quarters of the world and relief and reconstruction programs have become a part of the

church's mission. Youth programs were sponsored through young people's institutes in the 1930's and 1940's and in 1948

The progressive movement of the 1915-1930 period may have been ahead of its day. New viewpoints, new programs, new methods all come slowly and guardedly into the life of a church with the historic faith and orientation that has characterized Mennonitism throughout its four and one-half centuries of existence.