

***“Transforming History into Legacy:
The Valley Brethren-Mennonite Story?”****

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We know that Mennonites constituted one of the earliest of the reformation groups as they left the Roman Catholic Church about the same time Martin Luther was advancing the larger Protestant movement. We are also aware that other Anabaptists emerged as faith communities during the same time in the 16th Century. Not all of those were pacifists and pious people. In fact, some were so politicized and radical that they engaged in outrageous and violent conduct, particularly those associated with Jan of Leyden.

The peace-loving Mennonites, however, paid dearly for their devotion to their faith. Many were executed, even more were tortured or imprisoned, eventually most of them had to flee their home countries for more secure areas. By the late 17th Century (1683), some of them had made their way into Pennsylvania where, under the protection of their fellow pacifists, the Quakers, they found their religious freedom at last. It was primarily from those Mennonites in Pennsylvania that Mennonite settlements were eventually established in Virginia in the next century (as early as 1728 near Luray).

The Brethren came much later to the Protestant religious movement. Rather than breaking directly from the Roman Catholic Church, the Brethren actually separated from the established Protestant churches which were part of the original Protestant reformation. The Brethren were influenced principally by the Pietist movement then rampant in Germany. The Pietist movement taught personal piety, holy lifestyles, love and service, a devotion to follow the example and “mind” of Christ. Pietists objected to the institutional church and formal structures. As the early Brethren studied scriptures to learn more about the way of Christ, they, like the Mennonites before them, concluded that there were certain practices within the established Protestant churches that were not authorized by scripture and other practices actually commanded by scripture which were not included within the church ordinances. Like their Mennonite friends before them, the early Brethren concluded that they could not in conscience participate in the established churches. Because this position put them in jeopardy, they withdrew to a safer part of Germany, to the small village of Schwarzenau in Hesse.

Starting in 1708, almost 200 years later than the Mennonites who began in 1525 in Europe, the Brethren also made their way to Pennsylvania. Within approximately 20 years after the group conducted its first baptism in Schwarzenau and befriended to a substantial extent by the Mennonites of the Netherlands, the Brethren joined the American Mennonites in Pennsylvania, mostly in German-town. Like the Mennonites, they also made their way to the Shenandoah Valley in the 18th Century, arriving as early as 1730.

* This address was delivered by Dr. Stone, President of Bridgewater College, on September 21, 2002 at the Bridgewater Church of the Brethren. The occasion was a meeting the Shenandoah Valley Mennonite Historians and the Valley Brethren-Mennonite Heritage Center Board, their guests and the public.

During the first 150 years of their life in the Shenandoah Valley, the Mennonites and Brethren had much in common, particularly their devotion to the simple life, nonresistance, and non-participation in secular power structures. As secular society changed dramatically around them, Brethren and Mennonites retained much of their style of dress, rejection of advanced education, and non-participation in much of the secular community. They became increasingly more than simply “the quiet people of the land;” they became “a peculiar people,” and in many respects, a “separate people,” or as Dr. Steve Longenecker says, an “outsider people.” As their method of dress and non-participation in the general community became more noticeable and contrasted with the development of new lifestyles in the broader community, they felt more and more pressure either to protect their communities from outside influences by separation or to immerse themselves more fully into the broader community while faithfully retaining core values and practices. That tension of living in “two kingdoms” continues to attend the life and work of Brethren and Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley.

Some of the leaders of the Brethren and Mennonites, particularly Joseph Funk, Peter Burkholder, John Kline, and Peter Bowman committed to writing their passionate arguments over doctrinal and religious differences thought by many of us today to be relatively trivial. Even as they acknowledged that argument and division were unseemly, usually apologizing for any offense, they attacked each other’s beliefs. Today, knowing that the Brethren and Mennonite positions on non-violence, simplicity of life, and service to humanity stand in stark contrast to the practices of other religious and secular societies around us, we find it hard to imagine that our leaders ever spent so much time or energy developing those relatively unimportant differences.

During the Civil War, both Brethren and Mennonites suffered for their faith. Many of our faith community actually left Virginia for other communities where they would not be so directly affected by war. Whether seeing their young men arrested because they would not participate in the military, having crops and barns burned by military forces, or even sacrificing one’s life as in the case of Elder John Kline, the Brethren and Mennonites paid dearly for their non-violent positions during the time of war. The first and second world wars in the 20th Century generated such popular support that the Brethren and Mennonites were once again faced with pressures and prosecutions for their refusal to serve in the military.

Today, the Brethren and Mennonites still exist in Rockingham County in significant numbers. They reflect not only the diversity of their own groups (Old Orders, Conservatives, Moderates, and Progressives) and the various denominational branches which previously developed from their groups, but the emergence of new practices, living patterns, and attitudes within their faith groups, and the challenge of living out their faith in a new culture, in a new time.

How shall the Brethren and Mennonites acknowledge, preserve, and further develop their legacy and heritage? Should the heritage even be preserved? Is the heritage valued? Today, Brethren, whose founders left their homes and risked their entire estates and even personal safety and freedom over such fundamental beliefs as adult immersion baptism would not insist on immersion baptism for a person transferring membership into the denomination. There are congregations which believe that a prior commitment to Christ is adequate for a transfer even if the original baptism was not even adult baptism. Clearly, immersion is no longer required even though the Brethren were adamant that persons needed to be baptized in flowing water, immersed at least three times. It was fundamentally important that they be baptized as Jesus was baptized. It was not simply a

preference; it was a rigid, doctrinal interpretation of scripture. Now baptism is seen more as evidence of a declaration of faith; its form does not matter to most of us. Brethren have long since abandoned their partisan arguments with their Mennonite friends. Brethren even accept Mennonite non-immersion baptisms!

Similarly, many Mennonites and Brethren today do not feel that they need to separate themselves from society to preserve the purity of their faith. As to both Brethren and Mennonites, a long-standing hostility toward higher education has been overcome and both denominations now have colleges and other schools. Clearly, for most of us, our personal appearance has changed; we vote in elections; we participate in civic clubs; we have churches with instruments, choirs, professional clergy. Clearly, we are a changed people!

I. Intellectual Interest

One of the reasons to develop a heritage facility is simply to preserve that heritage as a matter of intellectual interest. Like the Ephrata Cloisters community, an off-shoot of the early Brethren, a monastic religious community which died out many years ago, or the Shakers, or other now non-existent groups similar to the early Brethren and Mennonites, it is of historical interest simply to know about our ancestors in the faith. The migration of families and faith communities from one country to another, particularly to and within the New World; their early religious life and activities in Pennsylvania; the challenges of settling the Western lands now known as the Shenandoah Valley, confronting not only the challenge of the Native Americans, natural elements, and remoteness from civilization but also the challenge of becoming a new community integrated with those of other faiths and cultural backgrounds are of significant intellectual interest to us. Just as we seek to learn more about genealogy and local history as a matter of intellectual interest, it is a valuable exercise to learn about the past so that it will not be lost. A heritage center can provide that resource.

II. Show Respect

We also remember heritage as a way of honoring people of the past. There is, after all, little we can do for those who have already passed away. Those who died in the Holocaust in Nazi Germany obviously cannot now be helped. The survivors appeal to all of us simply to re-member what happened. Remembering is a way of respecting. Just as we might put flowers on graves, establish memorials in churches, colleges, and other facilities, pre-serve and display pictures of persons long deceased, plant memorial trees, and engage in many other activities to memorialize people of the past, we know that a way of respecting them is just to remember. Whether they were obedient people living long, useful, and quiet lives or were martyrs to their faith, a heritage center gives us an opportunity as a community to remember those who preceded us in our faith communities. In remembering them, we respect them. We remember not only a martyr like John Kline but all those faith ancestors who tried to be faithful as they lived and worked in the Shenandoah Valley.

III. Commitment and Renewal.

Acknowledging heritage is also a way to commit to fundamental and core values. Throughout the Old Testament, God commanded individuals or the Israelite community to do certain things as memorials, not just to re-member as a matter of intellectual fulfillment or out of respect for some event or person, but as a way of renewing the covenant which the act being remembered evinced. For example, a rock which Jacob had used as a pillow just prior to his struggle with the angel became Bethel, the place of God, and a sacred altar. Presumably, it was to be remembered not only because a special event had occurred but as a way of continuing to honor the special relationship between God, Jacob, and the descendants of Jacob. In Deuteronomy 6, the Jews were taught to “teach the children” about God and their religious ways. They were not only to remember as a matter of respect; their memory was a continuing commitment and covenant. When Joshua led the children of Israel across the River Jordan after the death of Moses, they were commanded to stack up rocks from the river as a memorial of what God had done. They were told that for generations to come, when persons walked by those rocks and asked about them, they would be told that God had done a great miracle for his people there. God wanted more than our memory, respect, or intellectual fulfillment: he wanted the continuing obedience, commitment, and fulfillment of the covenantal requirements. When the Jews in Babylon, as expressed in Psalm 137, thought of Jerusalem, the city of God which had been destroyed, their psalmist cried out: “How can I forget Jerusalem? If I should forget thee, may my right hand wither, may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.” Remembering was more than nostalgia; it was part of the renewing and continuing relationship between God and his people.

As a New Testament people, even though many of the Old Testament dietary laws and other religious requirements are no longer binding on Christians, Jesus, in the most sacred of the church ordinances, said that the bread and cup to be distributed as his body and blood were to be done “in remembrance of me.” There, too, memory is more than nostalgia, intellectual curiosity, or holding on to the past; it is the renewal of faith, the experience of living in Christ’s name.

The heritage center will be a resource for us also to renew by remembering. By remembering our past, we recall the core values and principles held by those who preceded us. At one time, both Brethren and Mennonites believed so firmly in the “two kingdom” approach to the faith that neither of our groups participated fully in secular activities. We were clear that we belonged entirely to God’s kingdom. Our participation in the secular community was transitory and minimalist. It was relatively recently that members of either of our communities ran for office, served on juries, became lawyers and judges, participated in civic clubs, and otherwise participated in the life of the community. Now, with rather limited exceptions, most of us are fully immersed in the general community and provide significant leadership to community organizations. Even 100 years ago, our church leaders would not have permitted such behavior.

Once we believed that our existence in the secular kingdom was just the setting in which we had been placed by God, but we lodged all our loyalty, attention, and energy on the kingdom of God. It made sense for us to live in communities

separated from the general population and to decline full participation, particularly in the power structures. We did not seek secular power and approval; we did not need higher education; it was simply a distraction and a temptation to be pulled away from our faith. We were focused on our faith commitments to non-violence, love and service, fidelity, personal piety, obedience, and God's will as it was interpreted by the faith community. As we made our peace with being fully integrated into a secular community, we struggled with former practices. In some instances, we simply abandoned those practices. We now accept baptism practices we once renounced; we moved into church buildings with the furniture, furnishings, and decorations our ancestors would not have permitted; we have come to enjoy the church musical instruments now found in most of our churches; we want educated and trained ministers; while the prayer covering is still worn by many, it has been rejected by many others; plain clothing is not thought to be a requirement to prove compliance with the faith. For many, particularly the Brethren, it has meant that the pacifist position could be abandoned. Free choice in the guise of conscience has become popular. We speak of "acting in conscience" on matters involving abortion, divorce, military service, and other personal and political choices. Conscience, regrettably, has come increasingly to mean a strongly held personal opinion; not a Luther-like assertion: "Because of my understanding of God's requirements of me, I can do no other." A progressive political agenda becomes easily confused with religious beliefs; the prejudices and passions of politicians and political commentators are adopted as religious doctrine. We struggle with whether to maintain traditional church objections to certain lifestyle options such as divorce and remarriage, homosexual conduct, and participation in the military. Shall we say the Pledge of Allegiance, sing the National Anthem, put flags in our church? As we focus on our heritage, we are also called to focus on values that are so important to us that whether we are in Babylon or Jerusalem, whether in the 18th Century or the 21st Century, whether physically segregated in separate communities with minimal contact with the outside world or being fully immersed in the general community, we are called to live according to God's will in ways that reflect faithfulness, commitment, and obedience. If our changes in practice, doctrine, and lifestyle are made because, after further study of the scriptures, prayer, and discussion with brothers and sisters, we have concluded that former requirements no longer apply, we should not be discouraged about those changes. If, however, we are simply intimidated by the pressures of the secular world, the difficulty or cost of compliance, or the embarrassment of being peculiar, we must acknowledge our weakness and renew commitment to be as courageous as our ancestors who risked all for their faith. Ultimately, a heritage center will be not only intellectually fulfilling for those who are curious about Brethren and Mennonite history, including members of our own group; and it will be more than simply a nostalgic memorial of the past. Ultimately, the heritage center must be a continuing, living, vibrant, and practical resource for the renewing, nurturing, and living out of core values and faith in a new age, in a changing culture, and in a society in which we may still be required to be a peculiar people.