

Merging and Diverging Streams: The Colorful and Complex History of the Missionary Church

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Introduction

The topic of church history is seldom perceived by the majority of Christians as either inspirational or relevant for the contemporary church. At the same time, most of us admit that as we age, our historical roots, be they personal or institutional, take on greater value. Generally speaking, believers who find little value in the study of church history are usually those with a concern that an obsession with the past leads to excessive traditionalism and even ancestor worship.

The fact is, developing a strategy for the future, complete with a vision for reaching the lost for the cause of Christ, can best be accomplished by first having a firm grasp on the church's historical roots. An old adage oft repeated by historians states that "Those who refuse to learn from the lessons of history are condemned to repeat its mistakes." While a look at church history does not guarantee a mistake-free future, it certainly does guide us in our journey as individuals and as the corporate body of Christ.

Examining one's denominational roots is like looking in the rear view mirror while driving down the road. If you look in the mirror too long, you are bound to run into something ahead of you. However, if you totally ignore the rear view mirror, you could get hit from behind. For this reason we need to take an occasional "glance backward."

The Anabaptist Reformation (1525-1536) and Mennonite Roots

The Missionary Church is a child of the Anabaptist Reformation in the early 16th century. Essentially over a period of 1500 years the church of Christ had developed from a radical, vibrant, persecuted sect in the first century to a widely accepted, complacent, diluted state-church of the 16th century. When Emperor Constantine was converted while going into battle in 312 AD, the persecuted, despised church immediately became a legal entity and converts were conscripted into the church by virtue of mass baptisms. Over the next 1200 years the church went from being a fellowship of martyrs to the most politically powerful and wealthy entity on the European continent. In fact, it got to the point that if one was not a member of the church one was not legally a person. Infant baptisms were synonymous with a census count. No baptism meant no legal existence. Of course this meant that there were church members who were apostates and lived lives of gross immorality. Additionally, there was a lapse in the personal piety of priests. Some had children out of wedlock (by church law priests could not marry); others were illiterate and unable to read the Bible; others abused the power of the church and became wealthy through the heavy taxation of peasants. Corruption in church leadership was not restricted to the priests: certain popes were just as guilty of immoral behavior. Guarantees of salvation was primarily restricted to works and paying penance. To complicate things, the Bible was generally unavailable to the laity. Mass was repeated in Latin. Rarely did people hear the gospel in their own vernacular. Most couldn't read, so if the Bible had been translated from the Latin (Vulgate) it still would have done them little good.

Before the Anabaptist reformers arrived on the scene there were other voices crying in the wilderness. Peter Waldo, John Wycliffe and John Huss were the precursors of the Anabaptists in preceding centuries. However, it wasn't until Luther, Calvin and Zwingli arrived on the scene that a

genuine reformation of the church began. These reformers opened the door that the Anabaptist subsequently smashed down. What the reformers failed to address, the abolishment of the state-church and the practice of baptizing infants, fell to the Anabaptists. Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, Michael Sattler and later Menno Simons became the leaders of what Protestant and Catholic historians alike would refer to as the “Radical Reformation.”

The Anabaptist called for a church of practicing believers, one in which the believer was baptized upon the confession of faith. Since the early converts were rebaptized (they had already been baptized as infants), their critics called them “rebaptizers” or “anabaptists.” It was intended to be a derogatory term and it stuck. Anabaptists clamored for nonconformity to the world. They practiced the true brotherhood of the book of Acts and refused to take up arms, either in defense of themselves or in activities of war. They called for the separation of church and state, something not even the German Lutherans or the Reformed Dutch understood. Several years after the first Anabaptists were burned at the stake or drowned in the rivers, a Catholic priest by the name of Menno Simons converted to the Anabaptist faith and lent strong organizational leadership to the persecuted church. His followers soon became known as “Mennonites.”

Mennonites were persecuted for their faith. In 1528 persecution reached its peak. Interestingly enough this was also the year in which there was the greatest growth among the Anabaptists. Due to their unwillingness to conform to the state church, Mennonites usually emigrated to avoid persecution. From Holland, Switzerland and South Germany they accepted invitations from William Penn to settle in Pennsylvania and from Catherine the Great to settle the Russian steppes of the Ukraine. Because they believed in hard work, large families and the avoidance of war, Mennonites were constantly on the move, looking for more land and exemption from military service.

In America these persecuted peoples encountered something with which they had little experience tolerance. Without the threat of martyrdom they prospered and became desirable residents in the land of the free. However, the absence of persecution and the arrival of prosperity eventually contributed to what Mennonite historian, C. Henry Smith calls “church membership . . . as a matter of birth . . . no longer based on a personal experience of conversion. The lack of stimulation from the outside,” says Smith, “. . . brought about spiritual decline . . . external compulsions took the place of inner sanctification, and gradually morals declined in many respects.” Smith adds that the lack of opportunity for evangelism and missionary work contributed to cutting the nerve to the impulse to witness and turned Mennonite energies in the direction of building “Mennonite culture” instead of winning converts to the cause of Christ. (C. Henry Smith, *The Mennonites and Their Heritage*, p. 69) This is about the time that various Mennonite preachers like Solomon Eby (1834 -1929), William Gehman (1827-1917), Daniel Brenneman (1834-1919) and J. E. Ramseyer (1869-1944) arrived on the scene with a clarion call for revival and evangelism in local Mennonite churches.

German Pietist Roots

Pietism, with its German roots in the 17th century, made inroads into Mennonite communities with its emphasis on practical holiness. Phillip Jakob Spener, Auguste H. Francke, Count Zinzendorf and Peter Boehler actively promoted the pietist agenda. Foremost in these emphases was the need for a personal conversion experience, daily Bible study, evangelistic preaching and missions efforts. Pietism frequently manifested itself in revival movements.

The major conflict between Anabaptist thought and Pietist leanings was that Pietists resigned themselves to finding inner peace while Anabaptists emphasized a peace that came primarily from being a community at odds with the secular world and normally produced persecution. A good

number of the revival movements that influenced the early Missionary Church leaders were Pietist in nature and origin.

American Holiness Roots

The American Holiness Movement traces its origin to 18th century John Wesley and the formation of the Methodist Church. There were two basic strains that influenced the 19th century formation of the Missionary Church: Wesleyan Holiness and Keswickian Holiness. Both strains emphasized a “second blessing” or “crisis experience” in the Christian life subsequent to salvation. In this second work the Holy Spirit completely fills the wholly consecrated believer. The primary difference between Keswickian Holiness and Wesleyan Holiness has to do with precisely what takes place at the point of the second work or entire sanctification. Keswickians believe that the Holy Spirit counteracts the nature of sin which continues to remain in the heart of the believer while Wesleyans contend that the nature of sin is cleansed from the heart by the Holy Spirit. The teachings and writings of A.B. Simpson, F.B. Meyer, R.A. Torrey, Andrew Murray (all Keswickian), Joseph H. Smith, C.W. Ruth, Phoebe Palmer and J.A. Wood (all Wesleyan) had significant influence on the early leaders of the Missionary Church.

American Evangelical Roots

The 19th century in American church history has often been characterized as the “Evangelical Century.” This is essentially attributed to the ongoing occurrence of revival and resulting social movements that emerged in America. Charles Finney and D.L. Moody were among the leaders of 19th century evangelicals. Frequently these same revivalists were at the forefront of the abolitionist effort, the women’s suffragist movement, the temperance movement, the city mission effort and other social movements. It is no small wonder then that Brenneman, Eby, Gehman and Ramseyer should be influenced by American evangelicals and promote like-minded causes.

Other Influences

In the 20th century two other American movements, albeit to a lesser extent, exerted some influence on the emerging Missionary Church. American fundamentalism, with its strong emphasis on the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, also influenced our denomination. The “fundamentalist leavening” of the Holiness Movement is at least in part responsible for limiting the role of women in the church and introducing at least the hint of Calvinism into the Missionary Church.

The American Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement in the 20th century has not been without impact on the Missionary Church. Early denominational leaders adopted A.B. Simpson’s “seek not, forbid not” position on tongues following the Azusa Street Revival (1908). While the Missionary Church at the beginning of the 20th century rejected the concept of a “third work of grace” in response to the growth of Pentecostalism in America, by the late 20th century it had embraced (not without some reservation) a more charismatic style of worship in many of its churches.

Founding Issues

In the latter half of the 19th century, while revival was spreading across America, a restless spirit existed in several American Mennonite congregations. In part this restlessness was due to an emotionless lethargy that had developed in an unpersecuted, prosperous church. In part, some Mennonites were restless because many had heard reports of a vibrant American revival that encouraged the deeper life, evangelism and missions. There were also cultural issues involved in the unrest. Young Mennonites desired to hear preaching in English, their adopted language of interaction with the “English” population. The attractiveness of singing in four-part harmony occasionally accompanied by a musical instrument, allowing women to testify in church services,

attending Sunday School classes and camp meetings all American evangelical innovations shunned by the majority of 19th century Mennonite churches put Gehman, Brenneman, Eby and Ramseyer at odds with Mennonite Church leaders.

Not all issues were cultural. An emphasis on the deeper life, that of entire sanctification, healing services, unsanctioned prayer meetings, baptism by immersion, a strong emphasis on the eminent return of Christ all these proved too much for various presiding Mennonite bishops. One by one, ministers were dismissed from fellowship for promoting practices and teachings contrary to the teachings of local Mennonite churches.

Merger and Growth

Gradually the disenfranchised Mennonites found each other and formed a series of mergers. Daniel Brenneman from Indiana encountered Solomon Eby from Ontario and established the Reformed Mennonites in 1874. A year later Brenneman and Eby joined with expelled members called the New Mennonites and formed the United Mennonites. In 1879 William Gehman from Pennsylvania brought his followers (Evangelical Mennonites) into the fold with Brenneman and Eby and created the Evangelical United Mennonites. Four years later in 1883 a group from Ohio called Brethren in Christ joined to form a fourth union and the denomination became known as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, a name that would stick for 64 years. In 1947 the MBC changed their name to the United Missionary Church and the Pennsylvania Conference chose this occasion to withdraw from the denomination over issues of doctrine and polity.

The Missionary Church Association was founded in 1898 when J.E. Ramseyer was expelled from the "Egley Amish" (later the Defenseless Mennonite Church) when he was baptized for a second time (by immersion) at a non-Mennonite revival meeting. Initially Ramseyer attempted to merge his movement with the Christian and Missionary Alliance group, only to discover that the C&MA was only an alliance and not a denomination. The MBC and the MCA had fraternal relationships with each other for seven decades before consummating a merger in 1969. The most difficult years of the union were immediately following merger as the new denomination struggled to resolve the matters of supporting two colleges within 90 miles of each other and the appropriate alignment of district boundaries. The two greatest periods of growth in the Missionary Church have been the first two decades of its existence (late 19th and early 20th century) and the last decade of the 20th century. The same can be said of periods of transition in the Missionary Church. The first two decades were a time of dramatic change as educational institutions were founded, mission organizations established, church governance developed and aggressive evangelism implemented in church and city mission planting. At the same time the last ten years have been a significant period of change as well. In 1987 the Missionary Church of Canada withdrew and six years later merged with the Evangelical Church of Canada to form the Evangelical Missionary Church with two colleges: Rocky Mountain Bible College in Alberta (the product of a merger between Hillcrest Christian College and Mt. View Bible College) and Emmanuel Bible College in Ontario. At the point of the departure of the Canadian Church in 1987, World Partners was formed as the official mission agency of both the Canadian and American Missionary Churches. Ten years later the alliance between the Canadian and American church officially dissolved while World Partners continued to serve as the mission agency for the Missionary Church of the United States. In 1989 Fort Wayne Bible College changed its name to Summit Christian College and three years later merged with Taylor University leaving Bethel College as the sole American college of the Missionary Church.

The Contemporary Missionary Church

So how does one describe the Missionary Church as we approach the end of a millennium?

With its history of mergers and splinters this can be a fairly challenging matter. (Besides the Canadian departure in 1987 and the Pennsylvania Conference departure from the United Missionary Church in 1947, there was a loss of Missionary Church Association leaders in 1923 over a doctrinal debate regarding the Holy Spirit.)

An oversimplified but highly functional description is given in the preamble to the Constitution of the Missionary Church (p.3):

. . . the Missionary Church will be better understood by the reader who recognizes that a singular commitment of our early leaders was to the position that the Scriptures were to be the primary source of doctrine and life. In addition to this commitment to be a biblical church, we recognize the contribution of John Wesley's emphasis on "the warmed heart"; A.B. Simpson's fourfold emphasis on Jesus Christ as Savior, Sanctifier, Healer and Coming King; the Anabaptist concepts of community and brotherhood; the evangelical emphases of the lost estate of mankind and redemption through Jesus Christ. The Missionary Church, then, is a unique blend of the thought and life of a people who have sought to build their church according to Scriptures and who have appreciated their historical roots.

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