

## **ANABAPTIST INFLUENCE ON UNITED METHODISM IN CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA**

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It is my purpose to show the effect that the Anabaptist movement, particularly the Mennonite Church, had upon United Methodism in this area of the country. Methodism in America is not as monolithic as it once was. There is a stream of thought in the United Methodist Church which was not there before the merger, and those who minister to the churches in this part of Pennsylvania must be cognizant of this.

I would define the term Anabaptist for those to whom it is new. Anabaptist means rebaptizer, and it refers to those who were baptized in adulthood. The German Baptists or Church of the Brethren, the Brethren Church, Grace Brethren and Dunkard Brethren belong to this group. The Baptist churches of English origin belong to this group, and also do the various Amish and Mennonite churches. Churches of Anabaptist tradition practice adult or believer's baptism. In addition, those of German origin practice feet washing.

The effect of this tradition is felt mostly where the former United Brethren Church predominates in our denomination. The Evangelical United Brethren Church was composed of three traditions. The one -- Methodist, influenced by Lutheranism -- was found in the Evangelical Church. The second was the Reformed tradition which came in through Philip William Otterbein and George Geeting; and the third was the Mennonite influence which was felt through Martin Boehm, Christian Newcomer, John Neidig, Felix Light, Casper Sherk, Abraham Kauffman, Jacob Roop and others.

The Anabaptist influence was felt mostly in Dauphin, Lancaster and Lebanon counties. Its influence is still strongly felt in the last-mentioned county. The Reformed influence was felt in Maryland and in York County, Pennsylvania.

The event which marked the beginning of the church of the United Brethren in Christ was the great meeting which was held in Long's barn in Lancaster County about six miles north of the city of Lancaster. It was here that Philip Otterbein of the Reformed tradition clasped Martin Boehm of Mennonite tradition into his arms after hearing him preach and said in German, "We are

brethren." A Roman Catholic church historian of Fordham University said that that event was the beginning of the modern ecumenical movement. Well, it might be so described, for there were two men representing two traditions within Christendom, which were most hostile to each other, speaking of each other as brothers. The event took place on the farm of a Mennonite. In those days it was the custom for a farmer to invite others to his home for a great meeting. People of various denominations, and preachers as well, would come and share in the great service. Here was the beginning of the idea that one could adhere to one tradition and another to a different tradition and still find fellowship with each other.

Let us look at the influence of the Mennonite Church upon the United Methodists in this part of the country. The oldest United Methodist church of the United Brethren background in the state of Pennsylvania is Neidig Memorial Church in Oberlin. It was founded in 1795 by John Neidig. Along with John Roop, he is also credited with founding the Highspire congregation about the same time. Both of these men were of Mennonite background and had been members of Shoop's Mennonite Church near Highspire. Other local United Methodist family names which appear at an earlier date on the roll of Shoop's Mennonite Church are Mathias and Heicher. Probably other families came into these churches from the Mennonite Church.

In this part of Pennsylvania the great revival which resulted from the "great awakening" was led mostly by people of Mennonite background. Those who identified themselves with the movement were referred to as the Universal Mennonites or the non-sectarian Mennonites. Such men as Sherk, Kauffman, Light, Roop and Neidig were the leaders of the Universal Mennonites. Out of the soul of the Mennonite reformation grew the society known as the Allgemeine or the United Brethren. Christian Newcomer was converted as the result of the preaching of Martin Boehm.

The Mennonites do not practice infant baptism and, for the most part, they do practice feet-washing on Maundy Thursday along with Holy Communion. It is said that although Martin Boehm could not join in with the practice of infant baptism when it was practiced by Otterbein, he stood aside and watched graciously with love beaming from his eyes. But lest he would offend his Mennonite brethren, kinsmen of the flesh, Boehm baptized none but adults. We have no record of Otterbein joining in the rite of feet-washing. Otterbein would not look with critical eye, however, on

those of the United Brethren who practiced foot-washing. They refused to let these things bother or divide them. They said that conversion was the important thing, and the mode of the sacraments was of little consequence.

United Brethren historian John Lawrence records the observation:

*Baptism has not made us to harmonize in our religious experience, has not made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ, has not been the means of removing the partition wall which has, until recently, kept us far from each other; it was not water baptism, but the converting power of God, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which caused us to love as brethren, and therefore water baptism shall not separate us. With such views Otterbein and Boehm knew such thing as a compromise -- an agreeing to disagree on this question; their union rested on a surer basis -- on higher and holier principles. They made a distinction between the immutable principles of religion and the forms of religion... Baptism and the remembrance of the sufferings of our Lord are to be in use and practiced in all Christian societies; and... it is incumbent upon God's children particularly to practice them.*

Concerning foot washing, the same historian recorded:

*The early brethren were generally of the opinion that the Savior intended, by this act, to teach his people, in all ages, that they should willingly perform for one another the most humble services which their necessities might require; that he who would be a useful and happy Christian must not be unwilling to stoop to the performance of menial toil, when the temporal or spiritual good of even the humblest disciple demands it. Some of the brethren were of the opinion that the example should be followed literally; and their views were practiced were always respected: and those who gave the words a literal interpretation, on their part, passed no severe judgment upon those who differed with them as to the manner in which the example should be observed.*

Another Anabaptist influence is seen in the following rule which was enacted by the General Conference of 1833.

*We, the United Brethren in Christ, believe that the practice of swearing, either by the Bible or by Almighty God, is contrary to the word of our Lord Jesus Christ. We say swear not at all and that the mode of testifying to the truth when required to do so in a legal form by the way of affirmation is on us solemnly and conscientiously employed and binding before God to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth before God.*

Here we see a similarity to that of the Mennonites in their refusal to take an oath.

Let us look at the statements of faith concerning the sacraments in the earlier disciplines.

In the discipline of 1815, we find the following statement:

*We recommend that the outward signs and ordinances, namely baptism and the remembrance of the Lord in the distribution of bread and wine, be observed, also the washing of feet when the same is desired.*

In the discipline of 1817, we find this statement: *We believe that the external means should be practiced by the Christian societies, namely baptism and the remembrance of the death of the Lord Jesus, among His children. The mode and manner, however, shall be left to the judgment of the individual.*

In the disciplines of 1825 and 1849, the following statement is made in the statement of faith:

*The example of feet washing is left to the judgment of everyone to practice or not. But it is unbecoming any of our preachers to traduce any of his brethren where judgment and understanding in this respect are different from his own, either in public or in private. Whosoever shall make himself guilty in this respect shall be accounted a traducer of his brethren and shall therefore be answerable to the annual conference.*

The church in this part of Pennsylvania was under the influence of the Universal or non-sectarian Mennonites. They continued with their particular practices of believer's baptism and feet washing, but they were willing to accept other people who did not share with them in their views. Today most of the Anabaptist practices have disappeared. However, there are a few congregations in which they still obtain. Some gave them up quite recently. In a few churches

they were discontinued about 35 years ago.

Let us look at some of the United Methodist churches which were once Mennonite churches, or at least their founders were of the non-sectarian Mennonites.

The first one is Light's Meeting House, which was founded by Felix Light, a Mennonite preacher who joined with the movement. The successor of Light's Meeting House was Salem United Brethren Church, which now bears the name of Covenant because of its merger with the congregation which was once known as St. Paul's Evangelical Church. Another congregation which was of Mennonite background is Kauffman's, the land for which was given by Frederick Kauffman, a bishop in the Mennonite Church who came from Berne, Switzerland, to be a shepherd of the Mennonites. Likewise for Sherk's Meeting House, the land for which was given by Casper Sherk, also a Mennonite preacher. The following churches practiced feet washing but have now discontinued it: Cleona, Iona, Rockerty, Ono, Fishburn's, Campbelltown and Avon. Kochenderfer's still practices feet washing on Holy Thursday. The practice had been discontinued for a while, but because of the revival of the charismatic movement it has been restored. In Lancaster County, the Hempfield United Methodist Church continues to practice immersion. They built a baptistry in their newly-built church about 20 years ago. There are no vestiges of Mennonite practices today in any of the Dauphin County churches.

Some of the congregations may practice infant dedication rather than infant baptism. There may even be a few members who wear plain garb. Those who would serve as ministers in these churches must become familiar with their background. While the practice of adult baptism may not always obtain and the practice of feet washing has all but disappeared, certain attitudes still remain. Those who enter the ranks of the Christian ministry from these congregations must also be understood in reference to their background.

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**Editor's Note:** An active member of the Central Pennsylvania Conference Historical Society and Commission on Archives and History, Rev. Earl H. Kauffman passed away October 28, 1991. He was buried in the cemetery of the Kaffuman United Methodist Church, referred to in his paper, north of Annville. THE CHRONICLE is pleased to reprint this article as a memorial to Earl, his interest and expertise in church history, and the Christian testimony he leaves as husband, father, pastor and friend.