



Daniel Brenneman

THE BIRTH OF A CHURCH

Rev. Wayne Brenneman

One of the earliest movements to contribute to what is now known as the Missionary Church was led by Daniel Brenneman. This leadership was somewhat thrust upon him against his will.

Brenneman was born in Fairfield County, Ohio, the son of Henry Brenneman, and the great-grandson of Melchoir Brenneman, a Mennonite exile from Switzerland. Daniel's father often read to his family from their large German edition of *Martyrs' Mirror*. The stories told of the persecution and death of many of their ancestors and fellow Anabaptists. In this way, he gained a deep appreciation for the doctrines of his church and the persecution his forefathers had suffered.

Daniel was converted at age 22. One year later, in 1857, he was chosen by lot for the ministry and also married Susannah Keagy. They were the parents of five sons and five daughters.

REVIVAL

As a preacher, Brenneman became known as "one of the ablest among Mennonite ministers." In 1872 he conducted the first revival meetings known to be held in the Mennonite Church. When he moved from Ohio to Indiana in 1864, he was not aware of the more conservative ways of the churches near Elkhart, where he settled his family. Part of his downfall within the local Mennonite Church was the fact he was so well known and in much demand as a preacher and singer in many areas.

He continued to conduct extended revival services at night, preaching in both English and German and singing the bass harmony with his strong bass voice. But some were strongly opposed to these practices, and Brenneman's progressive ways soon became the topic of "much discussion" in the Harrison Township community and in the Yellow Creek Church, of which he was a minister. Brenneman later wrote that when he moved to Indiana, "the idea of anyone being opposed to these things never entered my mind." Daniel wrote in a letter about this time, "some of us ministers became very discouraged and depressed at the slow progress the church was making, as a result of a general lack of spiritual energy."

Upon hearing of revival among New Mennonites of Canada, Brenneman and another leader went there to see what was going on. They tried to be open minded, praying that they would not be misled or deceived. They returned feeling favorable toward what they had witnessed.

EXCOMMUNICATION

In their report to the Indiana ministers, Brenneman spoke guardedly, knowing these things would not be readily received. However, his companion on the trip, John Krupp, spoke in glowing and enthusiastic terms of their experiences. A year later Brenneman made a second trip to Canada and brought back this report: "arriving among those zealous worshippers, I found that their former zeal had not abated. Under the preaching of the Word souls were convicted and pressed through to the King at about every service. What could I say, only that 'this is the Lord's doing, and is marvelous in our eyes.'"

At a meeting of several bishops and ministers back home, Brenneman was told that Krupp had been excommunicated because he favored protracted (revival) meetings and even allowed women to testify. The question was asked, "Are you satisfied with what we have done with Mr. Krupp?" Each one in the meeting gave an affirmative answer. When it came to Daniel Brenneman, he replied, "Brethren, to be honest before God, if our

members do nothing worse than meet together to read God's Word, to sing and pray and thus worship God, I cannot see that this should give us reason to disown them as members of the church." Soon after the meeting, Brenneman was informed that he also had been excommunicated.

According to Dr. J. C. Wenger, Mennonite scholar and historian at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, when Brenneman was told of his excommunication, he fainted dead away. The seriousness of this matter to him is seen in the fact that this was the only time he was ever known to faint (interview with author).

MERGERS

In a letter to a friend, Brenneman stated that after he was expelled from church fellowship, the group who followed him was "as sheep without a fold," and they were confronted with what they should do. The group did not feel they could fellowship with the "popular churches" nor with any of a number of minor groups.

Concerning this period of time, Daniel wrote, "Thus refuge in these directions failed us, and the only sure refuge of safety that seemed to remain was God, who was sought by many prayers to go before us and lead us according to His will. Thus we were led to feel that 'in union there is strength,' and that in order to be successful in the work of the Lord, there needed to be organized effort." This statement shows that Brenneman still believed strongly in the organized church.

Thus, in 1874, the Reformed Mennonites came into existence in Indiana. Later in 1875 this group united with the New Mennonites of Canada and became the United Mennonites. In 1879 they joined the Evangelical Mennonites of Pennsylvania to become the Evangelical United Mennonites. Four years later a third union

Historical Perspective

Lydia Schroedel, a *Gospel Banner* reader from Swift Current, Saskatchewan, wrote (in a letter to the *Banner*) in 1909 of "living in the far west country among strangers . . . no church or meetings to go to and twenty-five miles from town." Recalling God's promise to be present when even two or three gather in His name, she continued, "within our little log shack the Lord has been giving us a great revival with no one present except husband, baby and I."

--*The Gospel Banner*, February 11, 1909, p. 94

occurred when part of the Brethren in Christ merged with them, forming the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. In 1947 the name was changed to the United Missionary Church which merged with the Missionary Church Association in 1969.

PROGRESS

Brenneman later wrote, "in that the step taken has already resulted in some good to God's glory is seen from the fact that a dear Mennonite minister who has since gone on to his reward said to one of our deacons, 'I must confess that your movement has been the means of stirring us (Mennonites) up to greater activity in spreading the Gospel.' "

In some ways Daniel Brenneman was a Mennonite at heart until his death. In fact one of his granddaughters, Naomi Brenneman, long-time professor of English at Bluffton (OH) College, maintained this idea quite strongly. She felt many of the changes which took place in the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church came from outside influences rather than from the ideas of Daniel Brenneman.

Of course it is quite evident that Brenneman did not leave the Mennonite Church of his own free choice. Nor did he set out at first to form another denomination or congregation. When he was excommunicated by the elders of the Elkhart County Mennonites, many of the members of the congregation to whom he had been ministering left the church with him. This group asked him to be their pastor. Eventually a church was organized into what has ever since been known as the Bethel Church. Property was secured on Elkhart County Road 7, some seven miles south of Elkhart, Indiana. This became the first congregation of what is now known as the Missionary Church.

Evidence of Daniel Brenneman's awareness of what was happening in the church at large is seen by his knowledge of and interest in the camp meeting movement which was going on throughout America at that time. Soon after the establishment of the Bethel Church, Brenneman was instrumental in beginning a camp meeting one mile east of the church. This camp, known as Prairie Camp, has continued continuously for 114 years. Except for a few years in another location, it has been held on the original site.

REFLECTIONS

Brenneman's feelings about his excommunication and his continued love of the Mennonite church are seen in several letters written during this period. Also, he wrote an article for the October 25, 1917, issue of the *Gospel Banner* entitled, "The Origin

of the Gospel Banner.” (Brenneman was the founder and first editor of the publication.) The following are excerpts from the article, written shortly before his death.

“Nearly half a century ago, there came a crisis in our dear old Mennonite Church, in which some of us had for years been identified as members and ministers of the Gospel. Conviction increased upon our consciences that as a non-resistant church (whose principles and doctrines we so highly appreciated), we were largely wanting in earnest effort to more vigorously pursue these--to us--sacred principles and doctrines, at home and abroad.

“To this end, some of us began to hold in different localities, revival meetings, resulting in the conviction and conversion of precious souls, which gave encouragement and convincing proof that the hand of the Lord was in the movement.

“This, however, being looked upon by those in authority in the church as being a departure from the custom of the church, the most stringent opposition was at once brought to bear against the movement, resulting in the expulsion from the church such as would not abandon the conducting of revival services, prayer and testimony meetings.

“This resulted in the organizing of the new Mennonite society, now designated as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church. Thus in its infancy this movement was strenuously antagonized and variously misrepresented and wrongfully accused by those who had been esteemed as dearly beloved brethren, who meant it all right, and did what they felt to be their duty in defense of the church. God bless the dear old Mennonite Church, and make them a blessing. They now see differently, and have adopted the same methods which at the time they believed to be wrong in the sight of God.”

It was reported of Brenneman that he was very dignified in the pulpit, always stood quietly, and rarely used his arms in gestures. After preaching, he would pronounce the benediction with a raised hand, always using a Scriptural benediction. With this thought in mind, we can imagine him closing this dissertation thus: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship and communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. AMEN!”

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Historical Perspective

In 1912 the Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ passed a resolution that a Michigan pastor who moved to Florida be discouraged from using his influence to get people to invest in Florida real estate. The resolution also requested "the cooperation of all our ministers in using their influence strongly against our people leaving Michigan."

--1912 Conference Journal of the Michigan Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, meeting in Elkton, Michigan.