

The Brethren Mindset

By Owen Alderfer

THE BRETHREN MINDSET PART I:

THE WAY OF THE BRETHREN

Recent Brethren in Christ historiography has emphasized three streams in the heritage, namely, Pietism/Revivalism Anabaptism, and Wesleyanism. The first and basic impulse for the beginning of the River Brethren was a Lancaster County revival in the latter third of the eighteenth century. This revival expression had all the characteristics of the First Great Awakening in America, of which it was indirectly probably a part. The revival found its first structural expression in the development of the United Brethren in Christ, an informal fellowship of people who had come to vital personal faith in a heartfelt experience of new birth. This revival experience became and has ever been a fundamental part of the Brethren in Christ mind; it is the same spirit that produced at least a half dozen denominational groups out of that awakening experience.

The people who became the River Brethren, however, were not content with only the pietistic aspects of the revival movement. Probably a number of these River Brethren forebears were Mennonite in roots, ¹ and some of the emphases they brought with them were missing in the new United Brethren movement which was developing with growing enthusiasm. As they studied the word they found concerns for obedience in areas of peace and nonresistance, the simple life, feet washing, and believers' baptism. Those who had been caught up in the revival included people representing backgrounds covering a broad spectrum of religious commitment; as a result, the United Brethren were pluralistic and inclusivistic. Their common denominator was too low for people who held Anabaptist tenets.

As a result, the Anabaptist types eventually joined forces together in the development of the River Brethren. The resultant group which withdrew from the United Brethren in Christ represented a synthesis of elements not generally found together; however, it may well be noted that these elements had been combined earlier in the German Baptist movement, spiritual ancestors of the Church of the Brethren.

Incorporated with these two streams in the River Brethren (now Brethren in Christ) heritage a hundred years later was Wesleyan holiness. The developments here are more easily documented because of a growing literature from the Brethren in Christ; however, we can infer that there had always been a basic concern for holiness among the Brethren in Christ and that this doctrine which assured the possibility for entire sanctification in this life had great appeal for the Brethren.

A fourth stream that has not been detailed into the picture of the developing Brethren in Christ is the influence of the German Baptist Brethren. Intriguing hints of relationship between these two groups appear repeatedly along the way in the literature of the two bodies. The thesis of this study is that characteristics of a Brethren mindset present in both bodies reflect influence of the older group upon emerging River Brethren, and that this strain is equally important to the genius of the Brethren in Christ in comparison with the other three strains noted above. My purpose, then, is to provide background and expression for the Brethren mindset as seen in the German Baptist Brethren (now Brethren groups such as the Church of the Brethren and the Brethren Church, Ashland, Ohio) and to see how this mindset impacts upon the Brethren in Christ both early on and in the present time.

Brethren Beginnings

The Brethren with whom we are dealing had their origins in Europe.² One needs to be specific when using the term “Brethren” in the European setting of the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, for many of the groups who aspired to restore primitive Christianity took that name to associate themselves with the beginnings of the Christian faith. This movement of Brethren took its inspiration from a spiritual awakening associated with

Philip Jacob Spener who fathered a movement called Pietism. The movement is dated at 1675 when Spener's writing, *Pia Desiderata*, was published and became a moving force, first in the Lutheran Church, and later in other churches as well.

Pietism has several basic concerns which find expression in the characteristics of the movement.³ First, it sought to be biblical. Second, it stressed a personal, heartfelt religious experience—the “warmed heart—at basic to entrance into the Christian faith and life. Third, it associated Christianity with living a godly life, expressed in turning from sinful acts and to charitable acts and services. Fourth, it stood over against forms of Christianity it regarded less than adequate expressions of New Testament Christianity. This Pietism affected much of Lutheran Christianity from the time of Spener and forward. Its impact reached beyond Lutheranism into the Reformed (Calvinistic) Churches in Germany and elsewhere.

Around the turn of the eighteenth century, a group of Reformed Christians, including Alexander Mack and others in the area of Schwarzenau near the Eder River in the lower Rhine Basin, was deeply moved by Pietism. The group became acquainted with and influenced by Hochmann von Hochenau with whom the term “Radical Pietism” is associated. Hochmann's pietism was a mystical variety which led to inner personal religious experiences and individualistic expressions, including separation from the established church. For a time it seemed that Mack and his group would become individualistic separatists after Hochmann, each doing rather much his or her own thing in religious expression.

In due time, however, this group became alarmed at the teaching of Hochmann and the directions in which it logically led. Drawn by their study of the Scriptures, this small group of Reformed Pietists espoused many Anabaptist views, including concepts of obedience, simplicity, brotherhood, believers' church peace, and separation from the world. In 1708 this group of like-minded believers, committed to a Pietistic-Anabaptist synthesis, convened together in believers' baptism, baptizing one another in the Eder River. In doing this they formed a fellowship of brethren that was to become the

forerunner of a variety of bodies that exist to this day, including the Church of the Brethren, the Old Order Brethren, the Brethren Church, and the Grace Brethren.

The separatist stance of these German Baptist Brethren brought persecution rather promptly from the established church in Germany. Within three decades most of this rapidly growing group had migrated to America, where many settled in Pennsylvania. The Brethren found a haven in the colonies and settled in to make a new life in the free land where they could develop their convictions and live out their unique religious synthesis.

The Brethren Ethos

In dealing with the Brethren ethos I am considering the characterizing and distinguishing attitudes and habits of the people called Brethren. This is an effort to distill out the essence of a people from what they say and do. At best, such a statement can be little more than a thesis; however, some useful concepts can emerge from the exercise.

The Brethren concept of community is an essential part of their ethos. The very name of the group implies as much: this is a church which is a family, a people seeking to live as brothers and sisters in faith, walking in obedience to Christ. Floyd E. Mallott, Professor of Church History at Bethany Biblical Seminary a generation ago, addressed this issue as follows:

How may we define the Brethren? They are a company of Christians, who, taking the New Testament as their authority, seek by democratic processes to achieve the good life . . . Yet the organization they developed has at times been more of a family fellowship than an ecclesiastical institution.⁴

Interestingly, the earliest extant writing of the Brethren movement is *A Conversation Between a Father and Son*, under the general title *Rights and Ordinances*, guidance from Alexander Mack, the founding father, to his son, Alexander, on the rights and ordinances of the Brethren.⁵ Numbers of early Brethren writings take the form of conversations or dialogues, the interaction of caring persons and family members, in

contrast to the formal theological discourses of much doctrinal writing from Reformation and post reformation times. In this earliest writing, the elder Mack, in his answer to Question 30 from his son, states: “The true brotherhood of Christians has always been founded upon true faith and obedience to Jesus Christ and His gospel.”⁶ The process and content imply a dynamic operative within the body that transcends simple mandates and mental assent. Later, the father answers his questioning son, “... we must help one another until we all attain to the same faith and to that unity of fullness in faith of which Ephesians speaks (4:11-13).”⁷

A further element of the Brethren ethos has to do with their belief system. For the Brethren, creeds and formulas that crystallized or petrified Christian belief into set and rigid patterns were highly suspect. These tended to lock people in to spiritual truth, and to lock them out from new and fresh insights and illumination which the Spirit might want those to receive who are being faithful to God.

This does not mean that the Brethren had no belief structures, that they were careless in what they held as true. Vernard Eller, contemporary Brethren theologian, captures the Brethren way in this regard in a chapter titled “Beliefs,” printed in a collection of essays, *The Church of the Brethren Past and Present*. He observes that a study of Brethren beliefs cannot be treated in the same way that one generally approaches the theology of a body. “The central factor in Brethrenism...is a commitment to follow Christ in radical discipleship.” This thrust immediately skews Brethren thought away from the conceptual, the theoretical, the systematic, the theological, and toward the practical, the applicable, the existential.”⁸

Clarifying this position Eller explains:

...the Brethren never have shown much interest in theologizing. Pretty much as a matter of course they have accepted the general doctrinal stand of orthodox, evangelical Protestantism, but within those limits they have allowed considerable flexibility and divergency. On many theological issues it is simply impossible to speak of

a “Brethren” position; the question, rather, has been, “What is the quality of your commitment and discipleship?”

An immediate result of this emphasis has been the Brethren refusal either to subscribe to the historic creeds of the church or to formulate creedal standards of their own. The insistence has been that the New Testament itself is a sufficient definition of faith and that the attempt to regiment men into closer and finer definitions of the creeds is a distraction from the true work of Christianity.⁹

This does not mean that the Brethren never present doctrinal statements and patterns of belief. As a matter of fact, beginning from the earliest writings such as *Rights and Ordinances* and forward, doctrinal issues such as water baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the reward of believers, spiritual food, and the like are the topics that are discussed. Immediately, we recognize that these are not the topics usually considered under systematic theology; they are concerns of the believer’s relationship to Christ and his everyday walk in the world. Such things represent the heart of the Brethren belief system.

A third concern in the Brethren ethos is that of a holistic life and worship view. With the Brethren, sacred and secular, clergy and laity, worship and work, spiritual and temporal are not sharply differentiated concepts. They may They may represent different functions, exercises, and experiences in living, but all are under God and related to His total scheme. Considering these matters, Dale Brown, Brethren professor of theology, states:

The Brethren style of liturgy is similar to a New Testament usage of the word, which denotes not only the style of worship of the Christian community but also encompasses good works and acts of charity (2 Corinthians 9:12; Philippians 2:30). The sacramental life has been the daily walk. The true mystery has been the presence of the Spirit of Jesus Christ in the total life of his people. Symbols, ordinances, and practices are celebrated both in and outside of church buildings . . . The people of God do not go to church; they are the church.¹⁰

Rather than two sacraments, the Brethren observed a number of ordinances — act-teachings given in the New Testament—which covered the spectrum of living: feet washing, the agape meal, anointing the sick, the holy kiss, the covered and the uncovered head, and nonswearing of oaths.

In summary, the ethos of the Brethren is to be seen in their relation to primitive Christianity. The early church is their primary model; of course, this was mediated to them through radical Pietism first and Anabaptism later. Their goal, however, was to live out the teachings and life of Jesus as fully as possible in the world. Mallott summarizes this as follows:

It is proper, then, to describe the Brethren as a company of Christians who seek to live according to the pattern of the primitive Christians. We almost have to coin a word to feature properly the Brethren. We might say that Brethrenism is imitative *primitive Christianity*.¹¹

The Brethren Mindset

Coming out of my understanding of Brethren roots—the backgrounds, the teachings, and the early views—along with my acquaintance with the Brethren through fifteen years of living with Brethren at Ashland Theological Seminary, I have inferred four characteristics which I wish to call “the Brethren mindset.” I have not seen this term written anywhere nor have I heard it stated or discussed. Primarily, have gained “a feeling” for it through broad readings and acquaintance with various Brethren and Brethren groups.

The Brethren mindset, then, is characterized by the following:

1. ***Christian truth is open—ended; that is, it is not captured in a closed system and articulated in creeds and formal theological statements.*** God may yet illumine the minds of His children to grasp new insights. True Christian faith is more a relationship than a system. We must, therefore, be open to the Holy Spirit that he may bring us new truth as our relationships to God and each other are

enhanced throughout our Christian pilgrimage. We must continually be open to God lest we miss some fresh word from beyond.

2. ***The first characteristic leads into the second: The body of belief held by God's people may well incorporate principles from a variety of sources.*** No one person or group has a monopoly on truth; we need to draw and learn from one another—using discernment and wise judgment all the while—lest our system of truth be dwarfed or truncated.

This characteristic is seen in the early development of the Brethren. The earliest commitments of the people who became Brethren were in Reformed Christianity. Earnestly Christian, they did not find this intense enough, and so they searched for a deeper, richer expression of the faith. This was later modified through Pietism—particularly radical Pietism—from which they drew a personal, New Testament piety of a mystical nature, the immediate experience of the divine coloring all of life by the consciousness of the pervasive activity of the Holy Spirit.

The early Brethren became suspicious of an excessive mysticism in this position and moved toward a more biblically-centered stance by way of Anabaptist principles. This accentuated primitive elements of New Testament Christianity. This characteristic can lead to bizarre and questionable expressions, as that which happened with Conrad Beissel and the Ephrata movement with its asceticism and rigidities; on another hand, it can lead to the enrichment and strengthening of the group.

1. ***The thought system of the Brethren was something worked out in life among the Brethren.*** The characteristic may be stated: a system of doctrine is not isolated from the trusting relationship of believing persons. The Brethren do not hesitate to state their beliefs and to support them with Scripture and argument; still, they are uncomfortable with a rigidly stated system regarded as capturing the entire body of truth and standing as the final measure of orthodoxy. More important is the Christian lifestyle and the caring relationships among Brethren. Minor and lesser differences may exist within a body as long as trusting relationship is maintained and fruitful conversation is progressing relative to the

faith. Doctrine is seen as relational as well as logical; if there are differences between us we can work them out as long as we are under the Spirit and the Word and we maintain a trusting relationship.

2. ***Mutuality is necessary to the existence and development of the body and to the working out of its system of belief.*** Individuality is a valuable reality among the Brethren—the preciousness of the individual and the contribution of one single person to the whole; however individualism is a dangerous heresy which allows barriers to be erected between brethren and cuts one off from the inspiration and discipline of the whole. Brethren need one another in the identification of Christian thought, in the mutual discipline of the sanctifying process, and in life—warming, life-giving fellowship among believers

Conclusion

My judgment from study and experience is that the Brethren way is unique in the manner in which the Brethren approach truth, in the way they work out their faith, and in the way they relate to one another. The key to understanding this is basically in what I have spelled out here as “the Brethren mindset,” a particular way in which the Brethren work out the Christian faith and their lives together.

NOTES

1 Owen H. Alderfer, *The Mind of the Brethren in Christ* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1964), pp. 81-83.

2 These developments are well described and supported with primary source data by Donald P. Durnbaugh in *The European Origins of the Brethren* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1958).

3 F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965), pp. 13-23.

4 Floyd E. Mallott, *Studies in Brethren History* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1954), p. 13.

5 Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The European Origins of the Brethren* (Elgin, 11.: Brethren Press, 1985), pp. 345-405. The work has been published with the spelling as “rites” in several editions; Durnbaugh (page 322) notes that “rights” gives the correct meaning of the original German, signifying “law” or “statute.”

6 Ibid p. 339.

7 Ibid.

8 Vernard Eller, “Beliefs,” in Donald F. Durnbaugh, ed. *The Church of the Brethren Past and Present* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Press, 1971), p. 39.

9 Ibid., pp. 39, 40.

10 Dale W. Brown, “Liturgy,” in Durnbaugh, ed., *The Church of the Brethren Past and Present*, p. 53.

THE BRETHREN MINDSET PART II:

THE BRETHREN MIND-SET AND THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST

By Owen Alderfer

The study of sources and influences that have had impact upon the Brethren in Christ in the beginning and across the years is one of the main interests of historians studying the denomination. What groups and movements have impinged upon the Brethren to make them what they are today in their thinking and life style? As noted in Part I of this study, we have clear evidence of the influence of pietistic revivalism, Anabaptism, and holiness. Is it possible that a fourth major stream of influence, which I am calling “the Brethren mindset “ is equally important with the three noted above?

The Influence of the Brethren in Brethren in Christ Beginnings

Various historians take different positions relative to the predominant influences in the founding of the Brethren in Christ. All would agree readily that several movements were combined in the shaping of the Brethren in Christ, namely, the United Brethren in Christ, the Mennonites, and the Dunkers or Church of the Brethren; which influence predominated—or predominates—remains unclear.

Asa Climenhaga, in the first book-length history of the Brethren in Christ, gave the Dunkers—Church of the Brethren—first place in that influence. He wrote:

This first organization might have been influenced more by one group than another, but on the whole, various groups played a part in the thinking and decisions of this first organization of the Church. The faiths, or sects, which influenced the thinking of the first members of the Church were the Church of the Brethren, the Mennonites, and the Quakers, now known as the Society of Friends. Your author believes that the influence was in the order of the names mentioned. That is, the greatest influence came from the first sect named, a lesser influence came from the second sect named, and still less from the third.¹

From a study of Climenhaga's work, I infer something of an anti-Mennonite bias relative to Mennonite impact in Brethren in Christ beginnings, although he does recognize and discuss Mennonite influence.

Carlton Wittlinger, in the most current published history of the Brethren in Christ, is more favorable to Mennonite influence upon denominational beginnings; however, he fully recognizes and summarizes influences of the Dunkers upon the Brethren in Christ. Wittlinger's list of Dunker practices adopted by the early Brethren in Christ is quite impressive:

...the Brethren [in Christ] showed a marked preference for practices of the Dunkers when these differed from those of the Mennonites. Like the Dunkers they selected church officials by elections rather than by lot, stressed the wearing of the beard, held

love feasts in connection with communion services, had “visiting brethren” (deacons) canvass church members to ascertain their spiritual condition and attitudes toward fellow believers, referred to the disciplinary function of officials as “house keeping,” and baptized by trine immersion.²

Several interesting Church of the Brethren traditions tie the emerging River Brethren to Lancaster County Dunkers. My own research has produced several such stories that suggest a line of influence. Several Church of the Brethren historians recount the visit of the River Brethren fathers to Elder Christian Longenecker requesting baptism. The account of Floyd Mallott in a letter to Carlton Wittlinger is most colorful:

The delegation of “River” Brethren went to White Oak to ask about joining the church and old Eld. Christian Longenecker who was past 80, in senile dementia...was fighting with his colleagues in the White Oak ministry, and the case was being handled in yearly meeting. He met the delegation from the River and upon learning of their query said, “On no account join the Dunkers. They are stiff necked Pharisees, strangers to the Holy Spirit and unregenerated.” They hadn’t heard of mental health (!?) so they believed him and went home and so reported. Alas!!!³

A second tradition suggests that the River Brethren, having decided not to join with the Dunkers, went to them, however, seeking baptism at their hands. Moses Miller, a Dunker writer, reports:

...they came to my grandfather George Miller who was ordained in 1780 Bishop of the old brethren in the big Swatara Church, Pa., and desired him to baptize them but wished not to unite with the brethren hut start a church themselves, Grandfather Miller refused saying that he had no gospel to baptize but to receive them into the church ...they made the second effort for grandfather to baptize them when he said if you want to begin something of your own you would better baptize your selves,...⁴

Apparently the members of the River fellowship took the advice of Miller, for unanimous Brethren in Christ tradition is that the founders exercised a mutual self-baptism. More

than this we do not know; it does seem possible that with some different relationships and more positive counsel in the beginning time, the River Group might well have affiliated with the Dunkers so that there would not have been a River Brethren/Brethren in Christ denomination.

The Impact of the Brethren Mindset Upon the Brethren in Christ

Climenhaga states an opinion of the priority of Dunker influence on the beginnings of the Brethren in Christ; Wittlinger gives clear evidence of significant borrowing of Dunker practices by the early River Brethren. These, along with the traditions relative to Dunker influence on Brethren in Christ beginnings, imply significant interaction between the two bodies at the time of the beginnings of the River Brethren. How deeply did the Brethren in Christ admire the Brethren mindset as expressed among their Dunker contemporaries? How fully did they embrace this and make it a part of their own mindset and style of life? The thesis of this paper, as stated earlier, is that early—and present day—Brethren in Christ ways reflect an abiding impact of the Brethren mindset upon the Brethren in Christ.

Possibly the impact of the Brethren mindset can be suggested in some measure in terms of what the Brethren in Christ are not in the expression of mindset. Clearly, a Reformed mindset does not describe the Brethren in Christ. The Reformed demand for logical formulation, clear definition, and creedal structure are foreign to the Brethren in Christ. The pietistic pluralism of the United Brethren—Methodistic mindset does not relate to the Brethren way. Wesley's statement, "If your heart is as my heart, then give me your hand," appeals only to part of the Brethren in Christ mind, for there are common denominators and boundaries that the Brethren agree upon if there is to be meaningful fellowship. The confessional orientation of the Episcopalians and Lutherans is foreign to the Brethren in Christ as well. Mental assent, which is the core of a confessional mindset, must be complemented by heartfelt experience and Christian discipleship if it is to be acceptable to the Brethren. While some of the elements of the Brethren mindset are shared by the Mennonites, the openness to new ways and

thought, the doctrinal formation by synthesis, and the allowance of differences within trusting relationship tend to be foreign to these.

The point of the preceding paragraph is that there seems to be only one logical source for many of the aspects of the Brethren in Christ mind; namely, the Brethren mindset. Whatever the source, the Brethren in Christ, in their life style and convictional structures, reflect many of the aspects present in the Brethren mindset.

Expressions of the Brethren Mindset in the Brethren in Christ

The earliest extant published historical description of the Brethren in Christ is attributed to “A Familiar Friend” in a volume titled: *History of All the Religious denominations in the United States*, which has a publication date of 1848. In the final paragraph of the article, “Familiar Friend” shares an evaluation of the River Brethren as follows:

The writer cannot conclude this brief article without here noticing, what struck him, in the intercourse with this people, as a distinctive peculiarity of theirs from many other denominations. They are simple, plain and unassuming in their deportment; zealous in maintaining, as all should, what they believe to be truth, they still manifest an unusual degree of kindness and Christian forbearance towards those who differ very essentially from them in matters of faith. They reduce to practice, at least in respect to diversity of sentiment on minor points of religion, toward others, what the doctrines of Christ enjoin upon all his disciples—fearance; for all have, if we are in the right, a claim upon our compassion. They avoid, what appears to have been forgotten by many, harshness and denunciation towards fellow Christians—for harshness, instead of closing the breach occasioned by diversity of religious sentiment, widens it. It has been well said—“Amidst the din of controversy, and the jarrings of adverse parties, the opinions of the head are often substituted for the virtues of the heart, and thus is practical religion neglected.” May all cherish in their minds a spirit of moderation and love towards their fellow Christians.⁵

The identity of “Familiar Friend” is unknown; modesty on her/his part would require that this be a person from outside the denomination looking in and writing with appreciation for what was apparent. Many of the qualities “Familiar Friend” reports are those of the Brethren mindset: the simple life expressed in unassuming deportment; firm convictions, yet forbearance and grace towards those who differ; faith that works out in relationships affecting the whole of life; and a charitable attitude toward those who differ with them rather than a harsh, abrasive spirit—all these reflect something of the Brethren mindset.

The comments by “Familiar Friend” compare interestingly and favorably with those of Benjamin Franklin in his Autobiography as he reflects upon a segment of the Dunkers, writing about a half century earlier than “Familiar Friend”:

Those embarrassments that the Quakers suffered reminds me of, what I think, a more prudent conduct in another sect among us, that of the Dunkers. I was acquainted with one of its founders, Michael Wohlfahrt. Soon after it appeared he complained to me that they were grievously calumniated by the zealots of other persuasions and charged with abominable principles and practices, to which they were utter strangers. I told him this had always been the case with new sects, and that, to put a stop to such abuse, I imagined it might be well to publish the articles of their belief, and the rules of their discipline. He said it had been proposed among them, but not agreed to, for this reason: ‘When we were first drawn together as a society,’ said he, “it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines, which were esteemed truths, were errors, and that others which we had esteemed errors, were real truths. From time to time he has been pleased to afford us further light, and our principles have been improving and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we have arrived at the end of this progression and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge, and we fear that if we should once print our confession of faith, we should feel ourselves, as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive further improvement, and our successors still more so...6

This modesty in a sect is perhaps a single instance in the history of mankind. The Brethren mindset as Franklin saw it has many of the characteristics seen by “Familiar Friend.”

An effort to apply the four characteristics of the Brethren mindset to the Brethren in Christ is an appropriate way of discovering expressions thereof in the life of the Brethren in Christ. Using the characteristics noted in Part I of this study, let us address these concerns.

1. *Christian truth is open—ended.* That the openness of the Brethren mindset is reflected in some measure in the Brethren in Christ is seen in the latter’s consideration and espousal of new ideas and ways across the years. Though basically a conservative fellowship, the Brethren in Christ have incorporated changes so drastic as to alter the shape of the denomination. Though it must be stated that this has been balanced with a closedness to new ideas and ways at many points, the readiness to accept new ideas and ways—if they are adequately supported by proper authority—has repeatedly come forward.

The changes of what Canton Wittlinger calls “The First Period of Transition,” 1880 to 1910, is a powerful illustration: Sunday school, revival meetings, world missions, the Visitor, a college, and holiness all became a part of the Brethren in Christ life and practice in that thirty-year span. Holiness is a particularly interesting example of such change. From the beginning, the River Brethren aspired to be pure of heart and holy of life; however, the evidence shows that few saw much hope of attaining the high ideal this side of heaven. As the Brethren in Christ came more and more into contact with the holiness message and people, the possibilities of entire sanctification here and now presented a hopeful word for the church. Cases could be made for each of the other innovations: each offered possibilities for accomplishing God’s work in this world with greater effectiveness.

Because truth is open-ended it is possible that we have not yet fully attained to God’s ideal for our lives. The appeal of the charismatic movement for some Brethren in Christ

should not be surprising when seen in this light. Nor is it a wonder that some Brethren in Christ have been attracted to heresies as they sought to reach God's highest will.

2. No one holds a monopoly on truth; God's truth, therefore, may come to us from a variety of sources. The case has probably been made and needs no further development that the Brethren in Christ, as the Dunkers/Church of the Brethren, have drawn from various sources in the development of their systems of thought and life. Pietism, Anabaptism, Wesleyanism—and possibly the Brethren mindset—have combined to make the Brethren in Christ what they are.

3. A system of doctrine is qualified by trusting relationships among brethren. The Brethren in Christ have never been without a stated body of belief. It has been established, I think, that the eighteenth century Confession of Faith associated with various church centers from earliest times was fundamental in the thought of the progenitors of the denomination. Still, this was a summary of belief more than a binding creed, and this is the way Brethren in Christ function doctrinally. Our *Manual of Doctrine and Government* is out of date by the time it is published, because it is a dynamic document reflecting the active thought and practice of the people who are Brethren in Christ. Not so with many Christian bodies whose manuals or disciplines represent a rigid set of congealed truth. Change in such bodies represents revolution. In such settings servants of the denomination must sign faith statements—possibly with fingers crossed or tongue-in-cheek—whereas, the Brethren in Christ find it necessary to sit down and work through the issues of doctrine to see whether or not we can work together.

The latter is precisely what I found when I joined the faculty of Ashland Theological Seminary in 1965: I was engaged with an enlarging circle of Brethren leaders at the seminary over a period of time. As we came to know one another, we trusted each other in doctrine and life style so that we could work together in a trusting relationship—minor differences and all!

4. *Mutuality is necessary to the existence and development of the body.* From the beginning, the spirit of the Brethren in Christ has been expressed in the conviction that the denomination is not a collection of individuals but a body of persons united in person and purpose. The church is an organism functioning together under Christ who is its head. Caring and sharing are a part of the lifeblood of such an organism; apart from this the body cannot function. This is the spirit and way of brotherhood—the church as family. This is the form of the body both in microcosm and macrocosm—where two or three are gathered together in His name or where the congregations or their representatives of the whole denomination are gathered together in General Conference.

Corollaries of this conviction include surrounding hurting family members with care and affirmation, material sharing with family members in times of need, thinking and interacting together around the word to discover together the word of truth God has for us today, and interacting together as family at the great decision points of life. The list could be elaborated, but the point is made: mutuality is a fundamental aspect of the Brethren mindset seen in the Brethren in Christ.

Conclusion

If my thesis is adequately stated and supported, and if it is correct, there is a Brethren mindset that has uniquely characterized the Brethren from the time of their beginnings in Europe. This is worked out in the belief structure and life style of the Brethren. The Brethren in Christ exhibit many of the traits of the Brethren mindset, so that we may appropriately infer a line of influence from the Dunkers to the River Brethren—influence that continues down to this day in the Church of the Brethren and the Brethren in Christ.

The Brethren mindset may well represent an additional stream of influence that has contributed to the formation of the Brethren in Christ, helping to make them the sort of people they have been and are in the world.

NOTES

1 A.W. Climenhaga, *History of the Brethren in Christ Church* (Nappanee, IN: E.V. Publishing House, 1942), p. 33.

2 Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1976), p. 19.

3 F.E. Mallott, Personal letter to Carlton O. Wittlinger, August 16, 1960, in Owen H. Alderfer, *The Mind of the Brethren in Christ* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1964), footnote 4, page 35.

4 Moses Miller, "The River Brethren," unpublished manuscript of the experience of Elder George Miller, 1722—1798, grandfather of the writer, September 2, 1881, in the papers of William P. Bucher, Quarryville, Penna., in *The Mind of the Brethren in Christ*, p. 36.

5 Familiar Friend," "History of the River Brethren," in *History of All the Religious Denominations in the United States, Second Edition* (Harrisburg, PA: John Winebrenner, 1848), p. 556.

6 Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, in Martin Grove Brumbaugh, *A History of the German Baptist Brethren in Europe and America* (Mount Morris, IL: Brethren Publishing House, 1899), pp. 527-28.