

## Mennonite Education—What Is It?

### Introduction

In Philippians 3:1-11 Paul talks about his pedigree. He was educated in the best schools at Tarsus and at Jerusalem. He studied at the feet of Gamaliel. One could compare him to a Harvard graduate in our day. But he really wasn't educated until he found Christ. Only after his conversion to Christ did the world come together in an integrated understanding of the created order, life, death and the life beyond.

Christian education is an attempt to put learning together in Jesus Christ.

When we talk about Mennonite education we narrow it down even further. Mennonite education is broader than the Christian school. Only approximately 16% of Mennonite Sunday school enrollment is in Mennonite Christian schools. Who is educating the other 86% and how are they being educated? When we look at education in the congregation we discover educational efforts are minimal in comparison with the amount of time the child spends in school. We have not yet educated sufficiently those who do not attend Christian schools nor have we educated sufficiently the 91% of our high school graduates that do not attend a Mennonite college nor the 76% of our high school students who do not attend a Mennonite high school. All of these persons are thrown into the congregation's lap to educate in Christian values. . . Many congregations cannot handle this task.

So when I deal with this topic on Mennonite education I view it across the total constituency; both the Christian elementary and high school and the congregation.

We are grateful to God for all the efforts teachers, parents, administrators and boards are putting into our Mennonite schools. Yet, I fear some do not know what Mennonite education is all about. We have gotten many of our clues from other sources.

In this address I would like to outline five basic principles of Mennonite education.

#### I. Mennonite Education is Based on a Hebraic Philosophy.

Much of Western society is Greek oriented. The Greeks put emphasis on the mind.

Education for the Greeks meant training the mind so the person could think. Consequently, the Greeks gave the world such great thinkers as Aristotle, Plato, and Alexander the Great. In Greek life sometimes the body was trained. So the Greeks gave to the world sports. They had a two track curriculum; mind and body.

How different is the Hebrew approach to life and education. Children in Hebraic society were taught the fear of the Lord. They were taught that the total personality belonged to God. Instead of the Greek view of body and soul (separating the physical from the spiritual) or body, soul, and spirit, as some of the Greek philosophers taught, the Hebrews considered man a unified personality. Education in the Hebrew family was not limited to the mind or the body. Instead the total personality was to be committed to God. All of life was sacred in the sense that one's daily activities had a tie to the covenant with God and life in the covenant community.

When Jesus came He built on these Hebraic concepts. He had no school, no major textbook, no race track, nor did he start a university. Instead He lived with the twelve. In the context of the totality of life they learned by centering their eyes, mind, and life on Jesus.

By the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. the church was faced with the problem of defending its doctrine logically against neo-Platonism. So the creeds were formed in an attempt to make Christian faith credible to a thinking society. In the process, however, neo-Platonic thought was woven into Christian theology especially by Augustine. During the Scholastic period Thomas Aquinas tried to weave together Aristotelian and Christian thought. At the Reformation the Protestant leaders went back to Augustine with his Greek Neo-Platonic emphasis, the Catholic Church built on Aquinas with his Aristotelianism, but the Anabaptists went back to the New Testament; to Jesus and the Gospels. In doing so they began to view life from a Hebraic philosophical point of view. The Anabaptists discovered the total life is to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ. Instead of educating the mind or training the body, the Anabaptists educated the will so that the total person began to live in obedience to Christ.

## II. Mennonite Education is Based on a Discipleship Theology.

Harold S. Bender pointed out in *The Anabaptist Vision*, that at the heart of Anabaptist theology is the concept of Christianity as discipleship. The Christian is to follow Christ in life. Christian conversion must be evidenced by a changed life.

That basic theological view has much to say regarding our understanding of Mennonite education. We are training the child for living, not merely to pass a test. The Anabaptists said learning is not found in Paris - the center of Medieval educational institutions - but learning is discovered by following Christ in life. They said if Jesus was God in the flesh and if Jesus lived on the highest level of obedience to the will of God of any man on earth (he didn't sin), then if we but follow Him in life we will not err. Consequently, the Anabaptist put a strong emphasis on Jesus Christ and a life of obedience to Him. Their epistemology was based on obeying Christ. He who obeys Christ in life will perceive the truth.

Their approach to the New Testament arose precisely from this perspective. In contrast to Luther who began with man as sinner, and Zwingli and Calvin who began with God, the Anabaptist began with Christ. They moved hermeneutically from the Gospels to the Epistles and developed a discipleship theology which both called for obedience to Christ in life, and the enabling power through the Holy Spirit to live this new life as outlined by Paul in Romans 6 and 8. Anabaptist theology is a Christocentric theology. Mennonite education is education with Christ at the center of one's world view. With Christ at the center our approach to theology is both different from Protestantism and different from Catholicism.

Perhaps this difference shows up most clearly when we face the ethical teachings of the New Testament. The early church placed Christ at the center of its ethical teaching. For Mennonites, theology and ethics are not separated. We have raised ethical behavior to the level of theology. We are concerned not only about right doctrine, we are also concerned about right living. In fact, most of our divisions have come about due to differences on how to follow Christ in life or right living. For us both orthodoxy (right doctrine) and orthodoxy (right living) are important.

Mennonite education is education to produce a life more than a degree. It is education to bring the student into the fullness of life in Christ, to understand the meaning of faith in Christ in terms of day to day experiences of walking with Him in obedience.

This is significant because much of western Protestant thought has separated ethics from theology. Consequently it is important to know right doctrine, but right living is another matter. That is so clearly illustrated in conservative evangelicalism and Fundamentalism's emphasis presently on the authority of Scripture along with the inerrancy debate. What is frustrating to Mennonites, however, is that when it comes to the question of war, for many of our evangelical Christian friends, the Bible has no authority at all - the state has all the authority! Or we find some of the same in the more liberal religious groups where war is a concern, but other levels of obedience are ignored.

Mennonite education must recapture the concept of educating the child to live a life in obedience to Christ. How do we do that, however, when some Christian schools are using curriculum produced by organizations whose view of Christian education is not based on a discipleship theology nor on a Hebraic philosophy?

III. Mennonite Education is Training for Christian Community.

The people of God have always lived in the context of covenant community. In the Old Testament the covenant bond was both with God and with one's fellow persons within that covenant bond. This is reflected so well in the ten commandments where the first four commands describe one's relationship with God and the last six describe one's relationship with others in the Israelite community. That theme is found in the prophets where Israel is condemned because the people have broken their relationship with their fellow men (Amos) and a broken relationship within the covenant community spells a broken relationship with God (Hosea). This theme is also found in the gospels where Jesus called twelve to live together in Christian community. It is found in the early church where salvation in Christ meant coming together in a local body of Christian believers who shared life together in the covenant community known as the church. And that theme is seen in its greatest dimension in Revelation 21 and 22 where in heaven there is a community of people living in God's presence.

For Mennonite education this has interesting implications. The Anabaptists emphasized the visible church. To come to Christ meant, as Robert Friedman points out, to also come to the visible body of believers, the local congregation.

Thus, Mennonite education, following the Biblical and Anabaptist pattern, is education in how to live and relate to others in the context of Christian community. One of the major reasons for the Christian school is for education to take place in the context of a wholesome Christian environment. Here the student learns by who his/her associates are. The child's associates may have more influence in his life than the home or the church. Sociologically the child participates in community on the elementary level but on the Christian high school level. The student participates in Christian community both spiritually and socially. Thus we educate with Christian community in mind so the child lives in Christian community when he/she graduates. We educate the student with the concept of brotherhood clearly in mind. Social, economic, and educational stratification becomes secondary to the importance of wholesome Christian relationships within the Christian community. The old barn raising symbol reflected this concept. We must find both a new symbol and the reality of Christian community today.

The Christian student must discover who he is as part of a great movement of the people of God in history and part of a local fellowship of Christian believers. Our aim in Mennonite education is to produce mature Christians who can live together in peace and harmony in the local fellowship of Christian believers.

#### IV. Mennonite Education is Training Toward Conversion, Training in Conversion and Training Beyond Conversion.

Perhaps one of the most significant differences between Mennonite education and Protestant and Catholic education is our understanding of the status of children before God. In Catholicism it is assumed the child has original sin and needs infant baptism to remove that original sin. From baptism onward you are educating a Christian and this is later confirmed in the child's life when he enters catechism class and is confirmed in the church at which time he supposedly receives, not salvation, but the gifts of the Spirit. Thus Catholic religious education is designed to train Christians.

In Protestantism it is the opposite. You assume the child is lost and hope and pray it will not die in infancy lest it go to eternal destruction. Protestant Christian education aims to educate a sinner to conversion. So the whole emphasis in the Protestant Christian school is to win that child for Christ. Consequently there is emphasis on child evangelism, helping that child accept Christ as soon as one can sometimes even as low as 5 years of age.

In Mennonite education, however, we understand the child is born in innocence. His life is covered during this age of innocence by the atoning work of Christ. If one accepts the view of original sin through Adam's fall affected the child, that sin is covered by the atoning work of Christ during this innocent period which perhaps is from birth through age 11 or 12. Consequently, there is no need for strong evangelistic appeals to children nor is there need for child evangelism. That is why Protestant curriculum for religious courses in our Christian schools does not meet our needs.

Part of that innocent period, however, is more of a twilight period which might be called the age of awareness between ages 6 to 11. During this time the child may have spiritual experiences. These can become frustrating to parents, to teachers, and to the child since the child may assume this given spiritual experience is a conversion experience and then wants to be baptized. It is frustrating to parents as well who feel the child is too young to be baptized. Here we need to carefully work with the child and accept the child's experience as a genuine religious experience, but it may not be the same as Christian conversion. It is possible for a child to have experiences of confession and forgiveness during this span of time which may not necessarily be Christian conversion since the child understands its wrong doings in terms of specific acts of sin (steals a pencil) rather than having a sinful nature. But we must accept the experience as real and help the child discover Jesus is ready to forgive. Helping the child experience forgiveness is very important at this time. We then must also help the child discover he/she can anticipate the calling of Christ a little later in life at which time there is a clear sense of sinfulness in one's being and the need to give one's self more fully to Christ. Normally, the child will have reached ages 12 to 14 when this conversion takes place. And if by age 16 the child has not yet accepted Christ as Savior and Lord we can be quite sure he/she has moved out of the innocent period completely and is now lost in his own sinfulness. Ages 12 to 18 may be understood as the age of awakening, the time ripe for Christian conversion.

Consequently, we need to educate the child up to age 12 toward Christian conversion, being careful not to follow the way of child evangelism or lead the child to a premature commitment to Christ. Then in the teen years educate and lead the child in true Christian conversion, and in the Christian high school lead the child beyond conversion in Christian growth.

These three periods of the child's life; innocence, awareness, and awakening are very important to distinguish and work at in Mennonite education. Our theological understanding of children separates Mennonite education from Protestant and Catholic religious education.

#### V. Mennonite Education is Training for Kingdom Values and Service.

Mennonite education has a goal - to produce servants of Christ who serve Him faithfully wherever they are called. We are achieving that to some degree. For example, 2/3 of the voluntary service people who come from Lancaster Conference are graduates of Lancaster Mennonite High School. LMH, however, only educates 24% of all Lancaster Conference high school aged persons. So out of 24% of our high school youth come 2/3 of our V.S.ers while out of the remaining 76% comes only 1/3 of our V.S.ers. That illustrates what Mennonite education is.

Not only do we educate for service, but also educate to live a Christian life style. Our values are not the same as those of a secular institution which trains to get a good job, to earn a good salary, to live a good life. Our emphasis is on following Christ in our style of life. We follow kingdom values. We live and participate in the eternal purposes of God.

We educate, therefore, in the way of peace for this is the way of the kingdom. Militarism has no place in the Mennonite school curriculum: If we are educating our students in the way of Christ, then our curriculum must follow the way of love and nonresistance.

It is known that the best missionaries and MCC workers come out of our Mennonite schools. Our goal in education is to produce Christians who want to serve Christ wherever he calls them.

Perhaps the best way to instill that motif in the student for life is by teachers modeling that commitment. Consequently in Mennonite education we view the Christian teacher and administrator as persons in Christian service. As teachers and administrators model that kingdom stance, the child learns likewise to give its life to service for Christ.

#### Conclusion.

I have outlined five basic principles in Mennonite education.

- 1) It is education based on a Hebraic Philosophy.
- 2) It is education based on Discipleship Theology.
- 3) It is training for Christian community.
- 4) It is training toward conversion, in conversion, and beyond conversion.
- 5) It is training for kingdom values and service.

I conclude then, with a quote from Daniel Hertzler's booklet, *Mennonite Education Why and How?* (Herald Press, pp. 47,48). He writes:

"The goal of Mennonite education is a person who will be informed about his heritage and articulate about his faith. He will have a sense of identity and vocation as a Christian and will see his occupation as a way in which to serve Christ. He will see himself as a person of value and so will respect himself and others. He will possess emotional independence, the capacity for critical judgment, and willingness to be unpopular. He will be concerned about spiritual, social, and economic opportunity for the poor and the oppressed and will himself not become a slave of affluence. Loyalty to Christ and the Christian values will deliver him from too great devotion to his home country. In fact, he can be at home in any country, for as a Christian he is really a world citizen."

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