

MENNONITE - REFORMED DIALOGUE

Mennonites and Reformed in Dialogue

July 17-18, 1984 - Strasburg, France

CONTENTS*

Preface

Introduction

Who are the Mennonites Today? By Cornelius J. Dyck

The Reformed Family: A Profile By Alan P .F. Sell

Who are the Reformed Today? By Jean-Marc Chappuis

The Attitude of the Reformed Churches Today to the Condemnation of the Anabaptists in the Reformed Confessional Documents

A Mennonite View on the Reformed Condemnations By Heinold Fast

APPENDICES:

I. Dialogue in the Netherlands

II. Mennonite World Conference Message

III. An Agenda on Militarism and Development

IV. The Response to the Mennonite World Conference

V. A Message from the International Mennonite Peace Committee

VI. A Covenant for Peace and Justice (WARC)

Contributors

* [NB: we give only the *Preface* and *Introduction*, see below for reference to full text of the booklet]

Preface

To All Mennonite and Reformed Churches

'Mennonites and Reformed in Dialogue' grows out of a day of consultation in Strasbourg, France, more than one year ago. Convened by the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC), Mennonite and Reformed representatives gathered to ask if the time had come to look afresh at our relations with one another and our common calling to confess the Lordship of Christ in a broken world. They concluded that the time has indeed come - and they issued an appeal for dialogue beginning at the local level.

We support that appeal. We urge Mennonite and Reformed Churches to enter into or deepen dialogue with one another. In order for that to happen, we suggest that local or regional church leaders invite Mennonite and Reformed Christians to meet and converse. Let us listen to one another and talk together about our common roots and history, our unresolved differences, and our mission as churches of Christ in the world today. Where it is not possible for Mennonite and Reformed to meet personally, we encourage each to become more familiar with the other through study of this booklet.

The booklet provides resource and study materials for conversations. We hope that it will prompt and facilitate exchange and learning. We believe that those people who already have some theological and historical background will find reading the booklet useful preparation for the encounters; others will likely find parts of it difficult to understand! In congregational and parish settings, therefore, leaders may want to summarize the materials, lift out key issues and some important questions.

MWC and WARC would like to be informed of local and regional initiatives. In approximately two years we will report the development and result of these conversations. At that time also, we will consider appropriate next steps. Please send information on Mennonite and Reformed encounters in your locale or region to the MWC or the WARC:

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Introduction

Beyond Brokenness into God's New Creation

Over July 17-18, 1984, representatives of Reformed and Mennonite churches met in Strasbourg, France, for a day of consultation. They gathered to ask if the time had come for Mennonite and Reformed Christians to look afresh at their relationship to one another. They parted sensing a common call to live under the Lordship of Christ in a changing, divided and threatened world.

The Strasbourg encounter grew out of another consultation, March 5, 1983, held in the place where the two traditions first arose and separated more than 450 years ago – Zurich, Switzerland. On that occasion, delegates of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) met to celebrate ten years of dialogue. At their request, several Mennonites were present to comment on the significance of the Reformed/Baptist dialogue from the Mennonite point of view. The day of discussion and fellowship culminated in Reformed, Baptists and Mennonites joining together in a public service of confession and communion in the cathedral. After reflection on the events in Zurich, the WARC Executive Committee proposed to the Mennonite World Conference (MWC) a Reformed/ Mennonite exchange. MWC agreed to the proposal, inviting Mennonites from several of its constituent churches to meet Reformed delegates in Strasbourg.

Discussion in Strasbourg centred on issues rooted in the history of the Mennonite/Reformed Relations, today's new situation and the possibility of renewed dialogue between Mennonites and Reformed.

THE HISTORY

Mennonite and Reformed Christians meet each other as members of churches with common roots and related stories. In addition to their grounding in biblical and early Christian history, both are rooted in the movement of reform which wanted to bring about renewal of the European church in the sixteenth century. Indeed, some have called the Reformed and Mennonite traditions 'twin sisters'. After all, both claim events of the 1520's in Switzerland and South Germany as foundational. For example, the Zurich Anabaptists – whose heirs are found among today's Mennonites – were literally friends and students of Huldrych Zwingli, one of the fathers of the Reformed tradition. They read the same Bible. They spoke the same theological language. Together they intended to call the Church to live anew in obedience to the unique Lordship of Christ. Later, and in other places too, these two theological currents – Anabaptist and Reformed – were regularly interrelated as neither of them was with other forms of Protestantism.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that a review of Mennonite and Reformed histories reveals agreement on important issues of Christian faith and practice. From the earliest days in Zurich both traditions have held to the fundamental principles of the Reformation. *Sola scriptura*: Scripture alone is the rule and norm of revelation. *Sola gratia*: God's grace, in Christ and by the Spirit, is the only source of salvation. *Sola fide*: justification is given by faith alone in Christ apart from any merit or works. '

In addition, it has been characteristic of both theologies to underline the importance of sanctification as well as its interrelatedness to justification: 'To be a Christian is not to talk about Christ, but to walk as he walked' (Zwingli). Here, faith in Christ means obedience to him – in the public as well as the private dimension of the Christian's life. Further, both traditions – each in its own way – have placed special emphasis on the Church as community: a community opposed to sacramentalism and ritualism ; a community committed to build relations and structures for mutual support and discipline.

In spite of these common roots and perspectives, the history of Mennonite and Reformed relations has been marked by unresolved differences. Classically the debate has centered on issues like the nature of the church, its mission and its relation to society; the meaning and practice of Christian discipleship; and baptism. Sometimes, too, the person and the work of Jesus Christ as well as the relationship of Spirit and Word have been subjects of disagreement.

Underlying many of these divergences have been different applications of fundamental Reformation principles. For example, the early Anabaptists – unlike the fathers of the Reformed tradition – applied the principle of *sola fide* not only to justification but also to epistemology. The words and work of Jesus rather 'than human reason provide normative guidance in *all* areas of the Christian life, including that of social ethics.

Similarly, the principle of *sola scriptura* has often been applied differently. Though it is held in both traditions that the Bible can be understood only in and through Christ, the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament has been seen differently. In the Reformed tradition, with its emphasis on the unity of old and new covenants, all of the Bible stood on the same level. The Old Testament, as much as the New, is a source of valid models for Christian faith and practice. In the Mennonite tradition where the old covenant is understood as promise and the new as fulfilment, emphases are placed on the new, which become examples for faith and practice. Where the New Testament gives a new model the old one has been superseded. For example, Jesus alone and not Joshua or Josiah, is the model for Christian life in the world.

As early as the 1520's differences had appeared and resulted in division. It has been said that the last real opportunity to reach early agreement on the basic differences was an encounter in Strasbourg late in 1526 between leading representatives of the two tendencies. Soon after that 'interchurch' conversation broke off, it became clear that Reformed and Anabaptist-Mennonites would live in separation and, too often, in antagonism.

As time passed, obstacles to Reformed/Mennonite dialogue on the basic differences arose. Reformed and other Christians attempted to crush the Anabaptist movement through persecution and banishment. Reformed confessions of faith condemned Anabaptists. Anabaptist-Mennonites, a suffering minority, withdrew from contact with the world and other believers. Over the years, Mennonite and Reformed understandings of authority in the church, as well as their patterns for discerning and acting on God's will, continued to develop in divergent ways. Then, too, diversity and differences within each tradition grew in time. All of these factors have hindered growth in understanding and agreement.

The Situation Today

But history, with its memory of interrelatedness and schism, agreements and disagreements, is not the whole Reformed and Mennonite story. Today is a new situation.

Between the two Strasbourg encounters – in 1526 where the initial exchange broke off, and in 1984 where representatives convened to ask if the dialogue could begin afresh – the context for conversation has changed. The world in which Mennonite and Reformed Christians live has changed. The setting for the sixteenth century was Europe, because that is where Reformed and Mennonites were located; today both are scattered around the world, neighbors in a variety of cultural environments. The debate took place in the world of European Christendom with its alliances to established church and civil powers; today both Reformed and Mennonite live primarily as minorities in non-Christian and sometimes hostile settings. Whereas the initial conversations took place in the context of a struggle for the renewal of the Church; today the context is the struggle for the survival of human life.

And not only has the world changed; the churches themselves have changed. Through the centuries both Reformed and Mennonite churches have developed and evolved, sometimes in directions not dictated by their theological points of origin. In this new situation the historical debate is transformed. Old issues appear in a new light. New issues appear.

Participants in the Strasbourg encounter agreed that changes in church and world both reinforce the need for and open up new possibilities for Reformed/Mennonite conversations on important issues of Christian faith and practice. Their list of such issues included: the authority of Scripture; the relation of Word and Spirit; the nature of the Church, including models of membership, mutual support and discipline; the mission of the Church in today's world, particularly its relation to the 'powers' (political, social, economic, media); war and peace; violence and non-violence; the shape of Christian discipleship; the meaning and practice of baptism; eschatology.

As Mennonites and Reformed meet and converse with one another, we may find that the traditional confessional boundaries are shifting. Some Reformed Christians take positions on specific issues which Zwingli or Calvin did not take. Some Mennonites hold views which Sattler or Menno did not hold. Some Mennonites and Reformed may feel more spiritual kinship with members of the other church than with members of their own. While certain aspects of these changes could complicate the dialogue, others will enhance it. For example:

A Call To Obedience

While conversation between Christians is important in its own right, it is not an end in itself. Renewed Mennonite and Reformed discussion could lead to the conclusion that the time has come for common commitment and action in specific areas of Christian life and practice. Through the centuries Reformed and Mennonite Christians have confessed the Lordship of Christ over both Church and world. Now the question is: what does obedience to Him mean for Reformed and Mennonite churches today? What does it mean for us in response to the call for Christian unity? Has the time come for Mennonites and Reformed, as twin sisters in the Christian faith, to address the wider church jointly on matters of common concern?

What does obedience to Jesus Christ mean for us today in response to the call for common witness in a non-Christian world? Could Mennonites and Reformed make again, as we did in Zurich more than 450 years ago, a common commitment to Christian witness where Christ's lordship is not recognized? And what does obedience mean for us today in response to the call from the world for peace? Might we join together to make peace non-violently in a world of violence, hunger, injustice and non-respect of human rights?

Debate and Conversation at the Local Level

This booklet is offered to Mennonite and Reformed churches around the world in the conviction that the time has indeed come for us to look afresh at our relationship to each other and our common calling to follow Christ in church and world. It is our hope that the booklet will prompt and facilitate renewed conversation in our worldwide fellowships on these matters.

Theological and practical considerations suggest that the conversation begin at the local level. Our common commitment to the church as community points in this direction. The plurality of local cultural and historical contexts in which Mennonites and Reformed meet today points in the same direction. Mennonite/Reformed relations – the areas of agreement and disagreement, the extent of fellowship or cooperation already established – vary from setting to setting. Each situation calls for its own agenda.

The World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Mennonite World Conference would greatly appreciate being

kept informed of local conversations and the Spirit's leading in this dialogue. (A procedure for this is suggested in the preface.) Where we encounter one another with a common commitment to Scripture as normative and an openness to mutual correction, we can expect to be led beyond our brokenness into God's new creation.

The full text may be found at

[BERG, HANS GEORG VON. Et al. *Mennonites and Reformed in Dialogue*. Studies from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 7. (Geneva: World Alliance of Reformed Churches, 1986).]