



The Recovery of Brethren Forbearance

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THIS paper reflects on the ways members of the Church of the Brethren have interpreted Annual Conference statements in recent history, and suggests that we have wandered from the unusual approach of formulating statements that allowed Brethren to remain in community while differing on specific interpretations and applications of the statements. Understanding this distinction, which we call “forbearance,” is the foundation for our historic practice of accepting Annual Conference decisions as invitational rather than mandatory, a tradition that raises serious questions about some recent decisions and practices of Annual Conference.

The Situation

There has been a significant change in the way congregational and Annual Conference conversations have proceeded in the last decade or so. Brethren used to cherish courtesy, understanding, and gradual enlightenment in their conversations about faith and action—both in the church council and among delegates at district conferences and Annual Conference. This has given way to rhetoric that sounds like the abusive language of governmental politics. We no longer think of ourselves as brothers and sisters seeking to enlighten or persuade, but as conservative or liberal or progressive or evangelical, seeking to win through argu-

ment or judgment a victory that discounts the person and position of the other. Common ground has become less important than perceived rightness. Simple civility, politeness, and courtesy seem mislaid in community discourse. It’s time to recover some time-honored principles that have governed our life together across the years.

THERE are two important descriptive archetypes reflected in biblical faith tradition that represent each of us at different times in our pilgrimage—obligation keepers and liberation seekers. Obligation keepers tend to be more conservative. They understand their role to be interpreters and protectors of word, law, and tradition. Liberation seekers tend to be more liberal. They believe that God can do new things, and they live with the possibility of new light that may break into the old. Obligation verses liberation, clarity versus charity, law versus grace; they are opposing forces that tend to reflect much of our current conflict. Yet in its fullness the Bible holds in high regard those who protect the law and the tradition, and those who, through openness to the Spirit, search for new light and life. And, of course, there is Jesus who embodied both realities in his life and teachings. He came not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). Many times in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus used the phrase, “You

have heard it said ... but I say unto you ...” Keeping and seeking were one in Jesus. Both are important and necessary biblical realities. Just as any one of us at times may be a “keeper,” so at other times any one of us may be a “seeker.” As individuals, we are stronger for being both, and a faith community is blessed when these two perspectives live in respectful balance.¹

We sometimes envy those congregations and denominations where faith precept and practice are mandatory and diversity is unacceptable. In such communities of faith there is little uncertainty. There are answers to all questions and clear guidelines for all behavior. But unanimity may not be so much a sign of strength as it is a sign of thought control and the comfort of living and worshipping with people of like mind. Historically we Brethren refused creeds because we were not comfortable being keepers only, limited by prescribed historic understandings. We also wanted to be seekers, open to growing in the faith and open to the promised possibility of new light. Openness to new truth requires investigating and studying and listening and talking with one another with openness to the Holy Spirit. Yielding to the Holy Spirit in such an atmosphere of openness and searching sometimes leads to new insight, followed by changes in our polity and procedure. Such changes in polity or position are not necessarily signs of decline and weakness. They may herald new life.

WE have strong agreement that Annual Conference is our highest governing authority. It is not however, as some seem to believe, a kind of legislative body that makes mandatory laws to govern individual and congregational behavior. It is, rather, a delegate body that gives the representative voice of the community at the time the issue is being discussed. It strives for unanimity but does not require it. Historically, we did

at one time require a unanimous vote before any answer to a query could be adopted. But at the time that was practiced, there were only a dozen or more voters, all of whom were presiding elders of congregations. In our time, a voted position is not intended to muzzle seekers, nor, more

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importantly, to require absolute obedience by individuals or specific congregations. We are to take seriously the gathered wisdom of our representative delegates' votes, but since early in the twentieth century, our Annual Conference positions on polity and practice are essentially invitational. Since that time we have tried to avoid drawing sharp lines of distinction that might lead to separation, and we have allowed for a healthy ambiguity that encourages growing in the faith while loving and supporting others when disagreements arise.

History of Responses to Annual Conference Decisions

It may be important for us to remember the ways in which Annual Conference has dealt with differences of opinion in our past. The tenor of Annual Conference pronouncements following the era that lasted between 1700 and 1883 changed, moving away from rigid requirements toward more willingness to be patient with differences. In an 1883 query requesting one form of practice in feetwashing, the Annual Conference answer was, “We desire very much to see a uniform practice in the church. But we see no way of accomplishing that object at the present time in the practices referred to in the query.” As early as 1888, just a few years after the major Brethren split, a con-

troversial item came to conference, and the delegates could not reach unanimity, so their final action was to take no action but to “strongly urge forbearance with each other” (*Minutes of the 1888 Annual Meeting*, art. 12).

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The New Testament Greek words translated “forbearance” carry meanings akin to patience, self control, restraint, mercy, long suffering, and refusal to threaten (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:13; Eph. 6:9; 2 Cor. 12:6). Forbearance does not jeopardize or denigrate individual conviction, but it does place boundaries on the quality and character of individual responses. Forbearance does not require one to accept what another believes, but it does require one to listen and to try to understand what another believes without punishing or taking punitive action to disenfranchise the other. From a New Testament perspective, forbearance is the watchword for those who are tempted to ask the master of the field to allow them to get rid of the weeds lest they infect the good seed. It’s their watchword because they remember the master’s response reminding them that the master will say when the plantings are mature enough for him to allow the separating so that the good seed is not damaged (Matt. 13:24-30). Further, the Good Samaritan story teaches us that the important criterion for community behavior is not whether others behave in a

way that is comfortable for us and that makes them acceptable as our neighbors, but whether or not we prove to be neighbors to them.

In recent years, Brethren have been less prone to use any form of the historic ban.² We’ve come to recognize that banishment from the community is not a positive influence on those banished. Though seldom stated, the primary “benefit” of the ban is one that the community enjoys, namely, the comfort of relating only to those who are in agreement. But where everyone agrees, the witness of the Holy Spirit toward new birth and new life is diminished. If our own faith and practice is strong enough, we do not really need to be afraid to be in community with those who do not agree with us.

Historic Examples of Forbearance

The present interpretation of Annual Conference position papers as invitational rather than mandatory is one of the ways we have learned to practice forbearance. There are many significant examples. We are agreed that all war is sin. (See the updated “Church of the Brethren Statement on War,” 1970.) We affirm that killing other human beings is unacceptable, but we are unwilling (in parable language) to weed out and discard those who disagree. With forbearance we continue to preach and teach peace without separating ourselves from those who choose to do military service.

WITHIN somewhat the same spirit, we are currently living with an Annual Conference statement that allows for the ordination and acceptance of women as ministers within our denomination (“Paper on Ministerial Leadership,” 1999). We do not, however, take punitive action against those individuals or congregations who refuse to follow that decision. The paper is not interpreted as mandating all districts or congrega-

tions to comply. Recognizing that there are those who are uncomfortable with the stance of the paper, with forbearance we have allowed local congregations and districts to choose not to follow Annual Conference action without fear of being disciplined or disenfranchised.

The most recent reaffirmation of forbearance came at the 2004 Annual Conference when the delegates discussed the "Query on Congregational Disagreement with Annual Conference Decisions." Under a section on guidance to the district, the paper suggested that in extreme cases of disagreement, the district could vote to not seat congregational delegates at district conference. The delegate body voted to delete that section. The concluding paragraph in that part of the paper states in part:

The goal of the district response process would be to help the congregation move to an understanding of the Annual Conference action and willingness to support the action, or at least a willingness to refrain from taking any action that would be interpreted as being defiant or insubordinate. *If this goal is unattainable and if there is a lack of reconciliation, an acknowledgement should be made that the congregation continues supporting the larger church in other aspects of its life while disagreeing with Annual Conference in this particular matter. It is expected that reconciliation attempts will continue.*³
[Italics added.]

The practice of forbearance, in this instance, is not to seek punitive action, but to continue conversation with the hope of reconciliation, and acknowledge the congregation's continued support of the larger church while disagreeing on a particular matter.

Our best example of how to allow for differing opinions while continuing to live

together is the 1979 Annual Conference paper on "Biblical Inspiration and Authority." Section IV of the paper honestly accepts differences by affirming where we agree while at the same time confessing where we do not yet agree. There then follows a section V entitled "Holding One Another in

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Love and Fellowship." Among other things, it suggests that:

In spite of essential unity, diversity is God's pattern in creation. ... Conformity is humanity's pattern. It is the way of the world to try to force individuals into a uniform mold. Jesus denounced the Pharisees for doing this. The Pharisees showed their authority over the people by trying to enforce the minutia of every law without themselves lifting a finger to help (Matt. 23:4). ... Individuality requires freedom. Respect for freedom is seen in our traditional Brethren belief in "no force in religion" and so we avoid patterns of enforcement which violate the freedom of individuals and local groups. ... However Christian freedom does not imply an unchecked individualism. Our Anabaptist heritage teaches that no one enters the kingdom apart from one's brothers and sisters. ... Jesus revealed in his life and teachings the way to freedom and at the same time life in community—the way to "unity in diversity."⁴

This is a brief portion of section V, but in its entirety, it is our finest contemporary

statement of New Testament forbearance. It describes with care and perception what it means to be members of the Church of the Brethren who hold one another in love and community while disagreeing and being open to new light.

In the 1920s, the Goshen City Church of

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the Brethren held a very successful revival meeting. The motto for the meeting was “We agree to differ; We resolve to love; We unite to serve.”⁵ We would do well to resurrect that commitment to go along with our current descriptive phrase; “Continuing the work of Jesus. Peacefully. Simply. Together.”

A Present Departure from Our Historic Practice

A stance of forbearance and openness among the Brethren prevailed in recent time until just a few years ago. From 1978 through 1982 Annual Conference encouraged Brethren to study the issue of human sexuality. Then, in 1983, conference discussed a committee report on Human Sexuality. That report was an excellent paper. It exhibits careful biblical study and is filled with scientific information appropriate to that time. It is, for the most part, still applicable today. In the paper’s discussion of the church’s response to homosexuality, there is a clear and forthright prohibition against promiscuous, recreational sex outside of committed relationships, a faith position clearly rooted in the meaning of biblical covenant. But an amendment was added

that states “covenantal relationships between homosexual persons is an additional lifestyle option, but in the church’s search for a Christian understanding of human sexuality, this alternative is not acceptable.” While it appears to many that the amendment is out of keeping with the spirit of the rest of the paper, it is now being interpreted by some individuals and congregations as a rigid requirement that mandates unanimity of practice by all congregations. It is not our specific purpose in this paper to recommend that Annual Conference adopt approval of same sex marriages. That specific direction, or any change in the 1983 paper on human sexuality, would need to come via the accepted route for Annual Conference discussion.

The point is there is little evidence of forbearance in the interpretation of this amendment by Brethren who insist that it requires every congregation to comply. Brethren who insist the amendment is a mandate have made attempts within districts and local congregations to censure those who do not agree with the added amendment. That lack of forbearance denies any interpretation of Annual Conference statements as invitational, and it exhibits gross unfairness on the part of those seeking rigid application of this amendment as being biblically mandated when they are the same people who often expect forbearance on issues with which they disagree. Forbearance on matters of human sexuality has been sadly absent from our denominational conversation and action.

The current Annual Conference paper on Human Sexuality does not say that homosexuality is a sin. It says, “Some persons, for reasons not fully understood, experience a romantic attraction for persons of the same sex. Some of these persons claim Christ as Lord and are actively involved in the life of the church. They need the active support and love of the church as they struggle with God’s plan for their lives. In ministry to

homosexual persons, the church must guard against oversimplifying Christian morality. Instead, the church should endeavor with Christian love and with gentle evangelistic skill to offer redemptive help. Proof texts, condemnation, and a sense of guilt will not empower change."

Careful reading of the paper would seem to suggest that the inclusion of the amendment created an inconsistency. The original paper suggested that the first option, celibacy, "ought to be voluntary and not a requirement." It then recognizes that the second option, conversion, "is impossible for some." If conversion is impossible, then celibacy is not an option but the only remaining choice. According to this logic, only those who believe that homosexuality is chosen have cause to require it to be changed by prayer, discipline, or willed determination; and if such an effort is unsuccessful, the person is then required to lead a celibate life in order to be fully accepted for life and service in the community of faith. In many cases, even that acceptance is severely limited and implies an unspoken but very real second-class membership. The congregation often ignores the gifts of the individual. This deprives the church of significant service, allows very limited participation, and leaves the individual feeling less than welcome at community fellowship events.

CONTINUING to deny any acceptable understanding of covenant relationships excludes many people who have made a covenant agreement, or any who would like to make one, from full commitment to Christ and life in his community of faith. We believe that position is untenable in light of scientific study and short-sighted when considering the spirit of the New Testament and the evangelistic endeavors of the early church. The primary standard for community membership in the body of Christ was the

confession "Christ is Lord." The Pentecost experience certainly did not include a litmus test of acceptable beliefs and social practices for those converted. On the contrary, participants were astounded at being heard and accepted by so many different kinds of people with so many different faith

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perspectives. On what many consider to be the birthday of the church, there was certainly diversity in their unity.

Or consider the conversion and baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch. Not many communities in his or our day would have found him acceptable for a host of reasons. There were issues of race, sexuality, human relationships, privileged wealth, and demonstrable power. Yet when Philip presented him with the good news of Jesus, and he, seeing water nearby, asked what was to prevent him from being baptized, Philip's response was to take him into the water and baptize him. That openness on Philip's part, representing the openness of the early church to individuals who were otherwise unacceptable to some faithful followers, was certainly in keeping with the spirit of Isaiah 56:3-8 in which God makes an equal place among his people for eunuchs and foreigners, those normally considered unacceptable by the faithful. And it is in the tradition of Jesus' comment to the disciples in Matthew when they suggest that faithfulness in covenant relationships is so hard that no one should even consider it. He responded, "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth [that is those who by birth are

unable to have heterosexual intimacy], and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others [that is, those castrated, either as punishment or for specific responsibilities], and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven [that is, those who

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choose to be celibate for religious reasons]. Let anyone accept this who can" (19:12). Tradition says that, due to Philip's acceptance, the Ethiopian Eunuch became the prominent personality in taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to the continent of Africa.

Certainly, standards for behavior were initiated as the early church grew. But we find different instructions and emphases given by the Apostle Paul to the different churches to whom he wrote. We might rightly assume that unanimity of practice among the various communities of faith was not required. In fact, the Apostle Paul reminded them that in Christ, the dividing walls of racial, sexual, social, and religious hostility that separated individuals prior to their acceptance of Christ had been destroyed. And the destruction of those walls was the very foundation of the good news Paul presented to them. Consider! If the Apostle Peter had remained a keeper

and had not responded as a seeker to a vision from God that contradicted his deeply held faith heritage, circumcision (certainly no insignificant human sexuality adjustment!) as a requirement for membership would have prevented gentiles from belonging to the family of Christ. And if the council at Jerusalem had not moved with openness toward both those circumcised and those not circumcised, the Apostle Paul's ministry would have either dissipated and disappeared, or created a separate sect outside the biblical history we cherish.

BEFORE his death in May of 1993, a long-time, much-loved prophet in our midst, Brother Dale Aukerman, sent an open letter on the subject of homosexuality to the elected leaders of the Church of the Brethren and to the Brethren Revival Fellowship. He wrote, "What I deplore in the current context is the push to make this issue the key test of faithfulness in the church. That push, I believe, is very much a disservice to the gospel and is not in accord with the New Testament. ... A more permissive attitude with regard to a covenantal homosexual lifestyle does not, so far as I can see, go directly and basically against the gospel. A case can be made that the biblical passages have to do with promiscuous, not with covenantal, homosexual relations. Even if we see that case as mistake, we should not regard those who make it simply as enemies of God's truth." That kind of thinking represents the best in New Testament openness to keeping and seeking within the faith community. It models a stance of forbearance in relation to continuing conversation in our community of faith.

The Biblical Understanding of Covenant

Covenant is a promise of faithful relationship between two parties. Biblically it

applies to the relationship between God and a specific person (such as Abraham or others); between God and a community of people (the nation of Israel or others); and between one specific human and another, such as the covenant made between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:44-50) and Jonathan and David (I Sam. 18:1-3.) Agreements regarding behavior within the covenant are established by the participants. Ignoring those agreements constitutes the breaking of the covenant.

Honoring promises, the absence of promiscuity, and the presence of faithfulness to the other person are the essential characteristics of covenant. The sexuality of the individuals engaged in the covenant is not an issue and is not prescribed in biblical covenants. From a biblical perspective, we would have the right to expect the same fidelity and the same prohibitions against promiscuity in all covenantal relationships.

Even as the church participates in state marriages, it asks participants to go beyond the requirements of civil marriage to share covenantal vows that confirm their faithfulness to their relationship. While not required by the state, the church chooses to use covenant language in wedding services that are accepted by the state. In addition to the more popular, simple language normally used by the church in standard wedding vows, a rather complete sample of additional covenantal words appears in "For All Who Minister," words essential to what biblical covenant means. After expressing the promise to be a helpmate, the person speaks words such as the following:

I promise to consider your interests and not merely my own. With divine assistance, I promise to show you love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I promise to communicate with you as openly and honestly as I can and will share with you my

life, feelings, hopes, joys, frustrations, disappointments, anxieties, and dreams; and I will listen as you share with me. I will try to meet your needs and will respect your individuality as well as my own. I will work with you to build a lasting relationship of love

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and commitment for the glory and honor of God. I give myself freely to you for as long as I live.⁶

We are living in a time when interest groups are seeking ways to use the law to enforce on churches their understanding of what marriage means. But a solid understanding of biblical covenant should allow for covenant services not necessarily recognized by civil authorities or legally authenticated. The government's primary interest in marriage would appear to be related to legal matters such as taxes, social security, pensions, and estates. The matter of faithfulness within a covenant relationship should be of no concern to the government except when the relationship is terminated through such events as death, abuse, promiscuity or adultery. Any challenge related to broken faithfulness within a state-recognized relationship could then be pursued through legal channels. Covenant services performed by a religious community may not have legal status in the eyes of the law, but neither should they be subject to governmental intervention, except when the performed

covenant has been sanctioned by law.

Many of us will continue to make our marriage covenants within accepted state law. But separation of church and state should allow local congregations to exercise their right to perform both legal and congregational covenants without the threat

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that the state will determine the meaning of marriage from more than a strictly legal perspective. If two single people decide that their covenant is defined by faithfulness in love and support; if the quality and depth of that love is something they wish to limit only to one another; if they desire to seek the blessing of God and the church on their covenant; and if the congregation decides that their covenant would be beneficial to the life and ministry of the individuals and the congregation, then the congregation should have the right to confirm their covenant with a congregationally approved service. Such practice would allow for two people to enjoy the privilege of loving and being loved with the blessing of the church.

Such local, congregational practices in relation to faithful covenant agreements need not jeopardize or intimidate any congregation that disagrees with that position. As we have noted historically, with forbearance we have already allowed much diversity in congregational practices and do not require uniformity of practice as a kind of litmus test for being called a congregation in the Church of the Brethren. Acknowledging the

right of congregations to conduct and support covenant services will deepen the potential for many of our members to participate in the more complete experience of love God has in mind for human beings.

One immediate action that might be taken would be for a district, or for Standing Committee on its own, to bring a query to Annual Conference suggesting a continuing period of forbearance on the matters of human sexuality, and by so doing, officially allow for differences to be conscientiously practiced by congregations who through careful study and prayer are in disagreement with the paper on human sexuality, particularly its understanding of covenant relationships.

A Reminder from Our Past

In 1966, the Annual Conference Resolutions Committee issued a "Statement on Unity in the Church." The closing paragraphs of that paper could well have been written for our day. They said,

It is the hope and prayer of this Annual Conference that all members of the church can continue to work together in a spirit of love as we have done hitherto. This we believe will require dedication to the following principles:

1. A spirit of patience, love, and mutual respect toward those Brethren who differ with us. We have tried to teach reverence for conscience, and this must apply even when some brethren are led by conscience in directions other than our own.
2. Continued awareness of our traditions and what they mean to a considerable portion of our people. Unless over-emphasized, traditions have value because they provide stability and continuity in a body such as the church.

3. Equal awareness that we live in a rapidly changing world. The New Testament church was forced to improvise and experiment in new situations, and today's church must be prepared to do the same.

4. Willingness both to talk and to listen to those who differ with us, and especially with those who differ the most. We urge that this be done between individuals and that church boards seek and create opportunities for group conversation among persons of divergent views, conversation which will be freely frank and conducted in love and respect.⁷

covenant services will be uncomfortable for many of our members regardless of the fact that they already enjoy that kind of forbearance on other Annual Conference positions. As noted earlier, we have continued together as a denomination because we have allowed congregations whose members conscientiously disagree with Annual Conference positions to live out of their own faith understanding. We should continue that tradition in relation to our differences on human sexuality. ♦

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Conclusion

Allowing congregations and districts to respond in different ways to the matter of

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1. Henry G. Brinton, *Balancing Acts* (CSS Publishing Co., 2006), 9 ff. The naming and description of these archetypes are more fully developed in this excellent little book, which traces the reality of obligation and liberation thinking through many of the current Christian conflicts. Brinton is clear that there is a place for time honored certainties in our rapidly changing world. He is also clear that if we had we not had liberation emphases in the church, we would still be in slavery; we would have had no civil rights movement, and no recognition of the gifts of women for ministry.
 2. For an explanation of the ban, see "Ban," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (Elgin, IL: The Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1983).
 3. *Annual Conference Booklet, 2004* (Elgin, IL: 2004), 231 (no. 3).
 4. "Biblical Inspiration and Authority," in *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Church of the Brethren, 1975-1979*, edited by Phyllis Kingery Ruff (Elgin, IL: 1980), see Section IV.
 5. Steve Longenecker, *The Brethren During the Age of the World War* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press, 2006), 86.
 6. *For All who Minister* (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press 1993), 387.
 7. William R. Eberly, *Minutes of the Annual Conferences of the Church of the Brethren, 1965-1969* (Elgin, IL: 1970).