

## **From Nonresistance to Justice**

*From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric 1908-2008*

Ervin R. Stutzman

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Ervin Stutzman, current Director of Mennonite Church USA, draws from his extensive pastoral, administrative, and academic background to offer a thoughtful interpretation of the contours of Mennonite Church peace rhetoric that adjudicated shifting social forces from 1908 to 2008. “The central focus of this study,” Stutzman tells us, “is to observe the role that persuasive communication played in the midst [of such shifts in the Mennonite Church] from 1) sect to denomination, 2) quietism to activism, 3) separatism to engagement, 4) apolitical church life to political involvement, 5) premodern to postmodern, and/or 6) conservative to liberal theology and politics” (17). The scope of his study is limited to English documents representing official corporate statements by the mainly Swiss-German (Old) Mennonite Church between 1908 and 2008.

Although Stutzman acknowledges “the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between ideas and social structures,” he nevertheless challenges the assumption that Mennonite Church corporate peace rhetoric mimicked societal trends unreflectively. Instead, it adapted to declining commitments to nonresistance due to an abandonment of its counterpart—nonconformity, which was induced by at least three factors: upward mobility (represented by a more professional rather than rural lifestyle) via “higher levels of education and more income”; “greater exposure to the media”; and, important for Mennonite ecclesiology and identity, “the lessening importance of the church” (46). Indeed, subtly interwoven throughout Stutzman’s study is a thread of disappointment about the increasing dilution of Mennonite ecclesiology in more recent decades due to the abandonment of nonconformity. His contribution in this regard is of significant value for reflecting on and shaping Mennonite ecclesiology, for “official” corporate peace rhetoric must take into account the anticipated level of receptivity by its targeted ecclesial community or else run the risk of falling on deaf ears due to excessive novelty or the aggravation of a historical and ever-

present sectarianism stemming from individualistic impulses.

Aside from the seven helpful appendixes, the book is divided into eleven chapters that seamlessly weave together the unique concerns of each distinct era until that bastion of Mennonite identity—biblical nonresistance—had transformed into an unmistakable blend of social justice, nonviolent resistance, and political witness to the state. From the outset, Stutzman holds up the Schleithem Confession (1527) and later Dordrecht Confession (1632) as benchmarks of a two-kingdom theology that “expressed primary concern about God’s will for the church, not for society or culture” (35). Appealing especially to the persuasive powers of the Mennonite General Conference (1898-1971) and the *Gospel Herald* (1908-1998) periodical as “official” outlets of ecclesial policy, rhetoric, and reader forums, Stutzman unpacks the struggle among Mennonite leaders to strike a balance between liberalism and fundamentalism from the beginning of the twentieth century until the dawn of World War II. Of pressing concern was fundamentalism’s dispensational designation of Sermon on the Mount ethics, including love of enemies, as “mandates to be obeyed only in a future age,” which proved too enticing for some Mennonites. In the midst of these competing theological agendas, the Mennonite Church formed the Peace Problems Committee to provide guidance on conscientious objection during World War I, noncombatant alternative service, membership in labour unions, and expressions of patriotism all while attempting to respectfully integrate new concerns for the social ethics of secular pacifism.

Modifications to the biblical nonresistance taught by such eminent Mennonite leaders as Guy F. Hershberger and Harold S. Bender surfaced after rural Mennonites increased their exposure to the outside world—its struggles and ideologies—through participation in Civilian Public Service camps and academic activities in Europe under the supervision of notable theologians who were forced to adjudicate how to properly confront Nazism. Out of these experiences, “Mennonite peace doctrine became more sophisticated” (98) and the voices of an emerging crop of young Mennonite theologians, including Paul Peachy and John Howard Yoder, placed greater emphasis on the cross as “social rejection” rather than interpreting it “in a metaphysical sense” (161). This shift toward accepting the value of witnessing to the state was accelerated by an increasing focus on justice alongside traditional peace concerns, the approval of “middle axioms” as “language of negotiation for determining common ground between the aims of the church and the aims of the state”

(134), and a reinterpretation of the state by Guy F. Hershberger (whose own views underwent a transformation after becoming convinced of the merits of the U.S. civil rights movement) as not only a “minister of good” *à la* Romans 13, but at other times “a beast demanding the worship of men” as expressed in Revelation 13 (139).

The crucible for such theological and political self-examination was at first the Vietnam War, which produced “strange bedfellows” including “peaceniks and dissenters, demonstrators and revolutionaries” (163), while nevertheless refining Mennonite peace thought to “approach war and violence as social problems with a social solution—peacemaking” (167). This refinement intensified focus on justice in succeeding decades among Mennonites who spoke out against ecological violence, nuclear proliferation, military conscription, and unjust and manipulative foreign policies. With increasingly diverse opinions on Mennonite peace thought and involvement and a growing polarization of political allegiances among Mennonites reflective of a more entrenched individualism, the thorny issue of Mennonite identity elicited more attention during the Gulf War (1990-91) and in the post-9/11 era.

After summarizing the “patterns of persuasion” outlined in detail throughout the book, the penultimate chapter concludes, “As Mennonites have assimilated with their society, they have also become more closely aligned with the nation’s political polarities” (280). Stutzman is nevertheless hopeful that Mennonite Church USA can fill the unique role of integrating grace, peace, and justice. Earlier in the volume, the author offers a positive evaluation of Anabaptism’s emphasis on transforming grace as an ontological precondition for peacemaking and a corrective to the forensic understanding of grace by magisterial Reformers that can reduce nonresistance to mere legislated behaviour. Despite a somewhat narrow definition of grace as “God’s action to relieve or help carry the burden of responsibility thrust upon humankind by God’s judgment,” Stutzman nevertheless uses the final chapter as a platform for advising his Mennonite constituents to incorporate the role of grace to “empower peacemakers for their work” (288).

Well-organized, readable, and comprehensive without being unnecessarily encyclopedic, this volume is a treasure-trove of information on and insightful analysis of Mennonite Church peace rhetoric from officially sanctioned outlets of ecclesial counsel and consciousness in the twentieth century. *From Nonresistance to Justice* is highly recommended for those who wish to acquaint themselves with the careful rhetorical

maneuvering of Mennonite leaders who negotiated the shift from traditional biblical nonresistance to a more deliberate focus on justice and political witness.

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