Concern for Holiness in the Brethren in Christ

by Owen H. Alderfer

Of the beginnings of the Brethren in Christ Church this much is known: The communion had its rise in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in the latter part of the 18th century. The impulses underlying its rise were associated with a pietistic revival which took root in that area as early as 1760, continued through the end of the century, and produced several different fellowships including the Evangelical Alliance, the United Brethren in Christ, and the Brethren in Christ. Further, there were Anabaptist and German Baptist Brethren elements involved in the formation of the body as reflected in the ideas and practices early associated with the emerging group and in the names of persons involved during the founding years. Specific details are lacking as to precisely how these elements came together and how they were shaped into a body-consciousness in the early years of the fellowship. Indeed, nearly a hundred years passed before there was a written literature which gave any documentation or clear picture of the ideas, principles, and practices of this group.

Beginning with inference from the 75 “silent years,” from the scanty documentation of the early years, and the clearer records of the last hundred years, a picture emerges of a fellowship deeply concerned with sanctification and committed to wholly following the Lord. Evidence implies that those concerns were inherent within the body from its origins by way of the sources from which it arose. Rooted in concern for holiness, it is of interest that the Brethren in Christ moved in directions of espousing the form of Wesleyan Holiness they encountered in Mid-America around the turn of the century. Gradually, the holiness doctrine spread across the denomination to influence the concept of sanctification and

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the holy life within the body.

Roots in Concern for Sanctification

When revival came to Lancaster County in Pennsylvania in about 1760, it awakened sympathetic response in the hearts of some whose Anabaptist roots were in a soil of perfectionist concern. That revival may be regarded as the backswing of the First Great Awakening in America\(^1\) from New England by way of Virginia and Maryland. From this direction Methodist influences ultimately came into the area through Francis Asbury and Methodist Circuit Riders. Along with this came Pietistic influences through Philip Otterbein, German Reformed minister and friend of Asbury, whose spiritual warmth led many to evangelical awakening in this region.\(^2\)

Mennonites and German Baptist Brethren were the people in Lancaster County whose roots were in Anabaptism. At the time, this was an Anabaptism grown nominal.\(^3\) Still, the Anabaptist's concern for sanctification was present (though somewhat modified by the 1760's). Claus-Peter Clasen, Anabaptist historian, addresses concern for sanctification as characteristic of this people:

> The thinking of the Anabaptists was dominated by an unusually intense desire for sanctification . . . It was due to this desire for sanctification that the Anabaptists rejected as unchristian any government office, the use of arms, and the rendering of oaths.\(^4\)

Evidence on the point could be multiplied. Though we are not speaking of holiness doctrine in the Wesleyan form, the concern for sanctification in heart and life present among the Anabaptists is in close parallel to the concerns of those espousing holiness in the Wesleyan sense.

The passion for sanctity and holiness of life present among the Pietists quickened and complemented what was innately present among the Anabaptist groups. The very essence of Pietism, as articulated by the noted scholar of the movement, F. Ernest Stoeffler, shows a deep concern for sanctification.\(^5\) Along with convictions that Christianity is personal and heartfelt and that the Bible is central for Christian faith, Stoeffler notes the religious idealism present in Pietism. This was the conviction among Pietists that religious ideals are attainable.\(^6\) Worked out in terms of
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sanctification, this allows that since God has called us to holiness in the here and now, there is every possibility for this to be realized in present life.

The forces of Anabaptism and Pietism converged in Lancaster County. Their synthesis strengthened the concern for sanctification and gave hope for the attainment of a high degree of sanctity. This is the soil in which the Brethren in Christ took root. With them the concern for heartfelt experience in terms of purity of heart [Pietism] united with the conviction that the whole of life must be lived under obedience to God’s purposes [Anabaptism]. The product which emerged from that soil exhibited its own kind of evidence of concern for sanctification in the expression of its faith and life.

The earliest confession of faith associated with the Brethren in Christ incorporates concern for sanctification:

In short the Light reveals unto us the fall wherein Adam and we have fallen, and this causes within us longings, praying, weeping and calling upon God through the promised Redeemer, who, bleeding, died for such poor sinners, and in such a poor sinner’s opened heart the Lord Jesus will then enter in and sup with him and he with Him. That is consolation, love, peace and trust bestowed. Then is our sinful record as the guilt of Adam erased. That is consolation, forgiveness of sins and receiving of everlasting life and that feels and experiences every poor sinner that comes to God through Christ.

We also acknowledge a growth in grace according to the Holy Scriptures, cleansed, sanctified, and saved by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost.7

The earliest testimonies extant from members of the Brethren in Christ witness to a renewed life and expectation of holy living. A translation of one of the oldest pieces of Brethren in Christ writing of which any record has survived, written about 1825, touches this matter. This is in a letter from an early Canadian bishop, John Winger, to a young convert:

I was highly rejoiced to hear of your conversion dear child and sister in the Lord; be comforted and not fearful and let yourself not be made weak through the temptations of the
enemy for conversion is variously experienced. As I perceive from your writing that you have found peace and comfort and consolation in your God and that you wish to remain true to your God...8

A later statement of conversion experience expresses the nature of total commitment which was a part of the Christian experience. Bishop Jacob N. Engle of Kansas, reflecting back upon his experience, wrote in his personal diary on January 1, 1903:

My conversion took place in the winter of 1875... How well I remember the time and place where I was willing to make the last confession... I realized the shedding abroad of God's love in my heart by the Holy Ghost which was given unto me, being made a new creature in Christ-Jesus...9

A piece of correspondence from 1878 reflects even more specifically the Brethren in Christ awareness of the need for sanctification. An elder, writing to two young converts states:

... None but the pure in heart Shall see God. Yes, to be sanctified, is to be cleansed and set apart for Holy and divine purposes, But we must be justified by faith in the Son of God, and then we are cleansed by being washed by his Blood, So then we are Sanctified already in a degree, But not Holy Sanctified, untill we are with Paul Crusified unto the world, and the world unto us.10

The Holiness Doctrine Embraced

The Brethren in Christ concern for sanctification — a pure heart and holy living — continued through the first century of the existence of the denomination in the pattern of the Anabaptist-Pietist synthesis out of which the body emerged. Confronting the revolutionary changes of the latter part of the 19th century, the denomination took a stand that it would not surrender to the forces of change which threatened faith in the Word and offered temptations to new dimensions of sinful practices. The Brethren determined to hold fast to purity of heart and life as they had known and taught it. Herein they would maintain their quest for sanctification. It was this kind of passion for holiness that opened the
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door to movements and doctrines new to the body as members began
to associate with people of the American Holiness Movement in
contexts of Brethren in Christ congregations.11

Although the Brethren in Christ had a concern for sanctification
inherent in their mindset, it seems evident that there was among them
little promise of attainment of the ideal in this present life. Now,
representatives of the Holiness Movement in America were ready to
point the way to interest the Brethren in this experience. With their
implicit faith in the Bible as God’s word, their sincere effort to do the
will of God perfectly, and their earnest pursuit of a consciousness of
God within, some of the Brethren in Christ were likely candidates for
holiness as taught by the proponents of the holiness doctrine active in
America at the end of the 19th century.

A growing interest in entire sanctification as a second work
subsequent to regeneration is evident among the Brethren in Christ
from before 1885. By 1886 a resolution was adopted in General
Council that a committee be appointed “to set forth the sentiment of
the church on sanctification.”12 The committee report, which came
to General Conference in 1887, had much of the ring of the
contemporary Holiness Movement. Still, the denomination as a
whole was not ready to espouse the doctrine. The door was opened,
however, to lively dialogue within the denomination as reflected in
the Visitor, the official denominational publication which had been
started in 1887. Indeed, by 1894, Elder Henry Davidson, first, and to
this time, only editor of the Visitor, was ready to throw up his hands
on the whole issue of entire sanctification as a second work. He
wrote: “... We have heard the advocates pro and con, by letter and by
conversation, until we are tired of the advocation of it, and wish that
the Christian people would find more useful employment for their
time and talent.”13

But advocacy of the holiness doctrine was not to stop. There were
those who had found meaning in the doctrine and confidence that
this was the answer to the concern for holy heart and life that had
been a part of Brethren in Christ thought.

Evidence clearly indicates that progress in the doctrine of holiness
began among the Brethren in Christ within the Kansas churches.14
Decidedly holiness doctrine articles had come to the Visitor from
Kansas as early as 1892. The first such article drew from the Upper
Room experience of Jesus and His disciples at which time He washed
their feet:
He tells them of every salient feature of the “second blessing” — the Pentecostal experience which should come to them in fifty days. . . . They could not understand the future blessed experience of holiness. No one can until after they receive it . . . .

Every Christian ought to have a day of conversion and a day of sanctification as clearly and definitely as a day of birth and a day of marriage . . . .

A writer from Abilene sent a supporting article a few months later. Such articles lead one to believe that there were in Kansas people who claimed entire sanctification by this time; however, it was to be several years before the church became generally involved in the Holiness Movement as such.

In 1895 such views as these were to bear fruit in at least one Kansas church. An aged member, Mrs. Katie Bollinger, in 1963, testified that in 1895 “there was definitely a moving of the Spirit of God among the church at Bethel” [near Abilene, Kansas]:

As for myself, my hunger for God was inexpressible. . . . As I stood to my feet and tried to give expression, I saw God's great hands. There He was, He was holding in His right hand a pitcher of water, in the other hand He held a funnel, and from this pitcher He was pouring water into this funnel. The water overflowed and all came straight down on me. . . . I fell helplessly backward and I shouted the praises of God. No one present had ever witnessed such a scene. I myself did not understand what had happened.

The theological views relative to the experience were not yet familiar to the Brethren in Christ generally; nevertheless, there was positive movement toward the holiness experience and thought.

A bit later than the outpouring at the Bethel Church, David W. Zook, who had been resident at the Hephzibah Faith Missionary Association headquarters in Tabor, Iowa, stopped by in Abilene to visit his parents, the Noah Zooks. Hephzibah was a center of radical holiness typical of rural America at the time; David had been there in preparation for missionary service. Here, en route to India in early 1896, Zook reported, “The time was spent in holding meetings at Zion’s Church.” Having been exposed to more than a year of
holiness doctrine teaching and living in Tabor, Zook now preached the holiness doctrine in a situation ripe for the message. These were the results:

While there the Lord wonderfully manifested his power. Many were convicted of their need of the second definite work of grace in their hearts. Many were at the altar and sought to have everything taken away that would hinder them in receiving the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Many that were sick in body were gloriously healed. Praise the name of our God forever.

This is the earliest use of the term “second definite work” in connection with a Brethren in Christ service. Later that year the testimonies in the Visitor reflected the impact of the meetings.

About this time the writings of Evangelist Noah Zook took on a new ring in his reports to the church paper. Through more than a decade of service as missionary and evangelist throughout the church, Zook had previously been cautious regarding the holiness doctrine. By August, 1896, there seemed to be a new emphasis upon the Holy Spirit and a new “ecstacy” in his writing. Within a year he was concerned for the Brethren of Hummelstown, Pennsylvania, “that the good work may go on until many are saved and sanctified.” From this time forward he was known as a minister of the holiness doctrine.

The same pattern could be traced through the writings of other Brethren in Christ ministers from the Midwest during this period, for example, A.L. Eisenhower, firey preacher from Kansas, and J.R. Zook, pastor and church administrator from Iowa.

The ministry of D.W. Zook had proved to be the spark which kindled the flame of holiness teaching and experience in the Kansas church. From the Zion Church — supported by Bethel Church — the movement spread to other Kansas churches. In December of 1896, Henry Engle, then editor of the Visitor and a resident of Abilene, could write:

The meetings in this county during the past month have been of unusual interest. Although some things were difficult of interpretation by the carnally-minded and even to such who are believers, yet the real stirring up of the Spirit
in many — the conviction of sin — the leadings to consecration and separation — are features in this work which our soul cannot but admire.24

Within a year the Visitor would carry an announcement of "Pentecostal Meetings" to be held in Abilene by Rev. B. Carradine.25 Men such as Elder George Weavers of the Hephzibah Association26 and B.H. Irwin of the Fire Baptized Holiness Association27 were soon sharing in the services of the Brethren in Christ, and the publication of the Hephzibah Association, Sent of God, was coming into some of the Brethren in Christ homes.28 The acceptance of the holiness doctrine in the Kansas churches was not without some resistance on the part of ministers and laity; however, from Visitor reports of meetings throughout the state, the holiness doctrine had become a prominent part of the message and concern of all the churches by 1897.

Early in 1896, before departing from the editorship of the Visitor, Henry Davidson allowed that there was something new going on in the church in Kansas. He wrote:

We are well aware that there is just now an apparent breaking away from the old landmarks, and the introduction of something new. Whether these things will tend to glorify God, we do not know. We do not want to stand in the way of the work of the Lord, but we want to accept the right even though we may have to give up some things that we formerly cherished as dear to us. Yet in no case can we give up the doctrine of the Bible.29

Before the end of the next year the Visitor had carried testimonies to entire sanctification from church members in three widely separated points in Pennsylvania; Glendale, Arizona; Des Moines, Iowa; Chicago, Illinois; Vilott, Oklahoma; and Canton, Ohio. By the end of 1898 Michigan and Canada also had members who were testifying to the blessing. Under the newly appointed editor, H.N. Engle, an ardent holiness advocate, the Visitor became a "holiness journal." In 1897 there were at least 35 articles of all types in the little biweekly magazine which could be classed as having holiness interest; in 1898 there were 36. These figures compare with 8 in 1894, 3 in 1895, and 7 in 1896.
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Noah Zook preached the holiness message throughout the church, wherever there was a door open to him. His widow recalled that in 1895 he had felt called to give himself fully to evangelistic work. She stated: "Husband was specially called to stir up the church on the line of Holiness and the missionary work . . . and divine healing, and the Second coming of Christ."Visitor testimonies to entire sanctification may be traced along the route of his evangelistic tours. Other effective holiness evangelists of the period from 1897 to 1910 supplemented the work that Zook was doing. The names of J.R. Zook, Des Moines, Iowa, and J.B. Lehman, Upland, California appeared frequently in the Visitor in connection with the holiness awakening throughout the church.

The gradual spread of the holiness doctrine to the various church centers was accompanied with considerable drama as people found renewal of life and spiritual empowerment through response to the message. The developments can be documented through the pages of the Visitor as they reflect the dynamics acting upon the several congregations. Recorded interviews of many now gone recount vivid memories of the coming of this new message — "the teaching from the West" and "the wild-fire from Tabor, Iowa" — to less adventurous centers of the church.

The progress of the holiness doctrine in the church was accompanied by a number of views and expressions that were new in the denomination and that should be noted. Among such views was the idea that entire sanctification as an immediate experience is central for salvation. One reporter recalled that proponents of holiness felt called to counsel those not yet in the experience to "get right with God," implying that until one has attained Christian perfection he is not in that position. Editor Engle believed that the Brethren were in a movement of cosmic significance. He wrote, "This movement is here to stay. It is the forerunner . . . of Christ's Millennial reign on earth. . . . The sifted Holiness Movement will conquer the world for Christ." Those who attained the blessing of entire sanctification felt that this was the means by which all division would be ended. One correspondent to the Visitor put it, "Praise the Lord, when we have the spirit of Christ we belong to his church; and then, let come what will, we do not fear division, because Christ cannot be divided. . . ." Here is faith in the direct activity of the Holy Spirit uniting the church through immediate inspiration of individuals.

The systematizer of the holiness doctrine for the Brethren in Christ
The Asbury Seminarian

Church was Bishop J.R. Zook of Des Moines. Besides numerous Visitor articles, he published a small book and a pamphlet clarifying the ideas of the holiness doctrine. The writings of Bishop Zook include much of the thought and spirit of other writings of the contemporary holiness movement in America. Zook sees sanctification as both act and state. "Be ye holy for I am holy" indicates a state of being, or condition, as the effect of sanctification the Act... Sanctification as a State largely reveals what sanctification as an Act does;..." In sanctification as act the carnal mind is "exterminated," a new idea which approaches the eradication doctrine, the view that the sinful nature of man is completely obliterated in the experience of entire sanctification. Sanctification is "relatively completed" at the point of unconditional surrender to God. "This is perfection in purity." Zook differentiates between holiness and empowerment. The former refers to purification and deliverance from the tendency to sin; the latter applies to the enabling grace which qualifies us to do the whole will of God. The two, however, are inseparable. All of this is completely by faith. "The moment we doubt our entire sanctification, or empowerment, we dishonor God, and lose assurance." Though all this is of faith, the sanctified man must control the senses and passions. Man never gets beyond the point of having to confess mistakes or of giving his best personal effort in the service of the Lord. Sanctification completes the restoration of fallen man morally and spiritually to his state and condition before the Fall. Resurrection completes the work physically. The work of the Fall is reversed. In his "A Guide for Instructors," Bishop Zook made a complete break with the past history of the denomination in providing a formula and pattern to lead the seeker to salvation and sanctification. The booklet included questions and answers, prayers the seeker should pray, and comments that the guide in personal work should make at the appropriate time to the seeker after holiness.

The crucial point in the statement of new concepts was that of sanctification completed in a second definite work. Acceptance of this idea brought one into the camp of the holiness doctrine in the denomination; rejection of it kept one out. The critical issue is that as one accepts the view of sanctification as a second definite work coming by way of a crisis experience, the seeker may pursue this as an immediate experience. In contrast, those of the traditional Brethren in Christ view insisted that sanctification is the result of a process of
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discipline and obedience to God, and is not attained in a moment.

The Impact of Holiness
The holiness doctrine advanced in the Brethren in Christ Church across the first third of the 20th century; still, there was resistance to official adoption of the complete Holiness Movement terminology in regard to "sanctification as a second definite work subsequent to regeneration." It was ultimately a difference between the historic Brethren position that sanctification is a grace worked out in the believer through the process of life and the newer position associated with the developments of the turn of the century that entire sanctification is wrought in an experience of an instant and provides the power for a sinless life from that point forward.

It was not until the General Conference of 1937 that the Brethren adopted in full a doctrinal statement that encompassed the position of the Holiness Movement. The statement declared:

This deliverance is received in the experience of sanctification which is obtained instantaneously and subsequent to the new birth. . . . As the believer meets divine requirements, confesses his need, makes an unreserved consecration, and exercises living faith . . . he is definitely cleansed from the carnal mind, the old man, etc.42

Fear of unregulated individualism had been a concern of the Brethren in Christ from the beginning. It was this which had drawn them away from the revivalistic United Brethren in Christ in Lancaster County in the beginning: the Brethren felt the need for a regulating emphasis upon obedience and community as characterized by the Anabaptist groups. This unique synthesis between revivalistic warmth and corporate Christianity was fundamental to the very nature of the body. Would the new emphasis on experience promote a dangerous individualism that would threaten body life and rend the synthesis?

Time showed that this would not be the case; indeed, holiness took on roles within the body which in some measure enhanced the synthesis. The first aspect in the role was related to the attainment of the experience itself. There developed a pattern by which one attained the experience. Tendencies toward individualism were modified as the seeker for holiness was led through the proper steps.
to the attainment of the experience. There were steps of confession, prayer, and exercise of faith at the various stages of the seeker's progress toward attainment of the blessing.

Another aspect of the role of holiness involved the use of the doctrine and the related experiences as a means to insure conformity to the principles and practices of the body. Holiness — as in much of the Rural Holiness Movement in the nation — became regulative in that the candidate for entire sanctification was brought to understand that one cannot "get through" apart from conformity to the whole will of God. The "whole will of God" was interpreted through the understandings of the church. A worker in the Roxbury revival of 1935, out of which emerged the Roxbury Holiness Camp as a Brethren in Christ institution, reported to the Visitor: "Many of the young ladies had to remove their jewelry, such as watches, bracelets, rings and beauty pins, before they could get through to victory."43 As early as 1920 the terms "holiness" and "separation" were appearing together. A report to the Visitor, describing a meeting at the Cross Roads Church, near Florin, Pennsylvania, wrote: "The Word presented was plain and distinct, pointing the saints to Holiness and separation from the world, ..."44 A sister in the church summarized the impact of sanctification upon the life as follows:

The baptism of fire will burn out of our hearts selfishness and hatred. It burns out the desire to look like the world, gives a real hatred for it, burns out the desire to be someone great in the eyes of the world and it keeps on burning till it has everything out of the heart . . .45

Holiness became a vital force among the Brethren in Christ, impacting the body with renewed energy and providing basis for common ground. A person came to this "second definite work" in a personal experience of vital reality. This represented abandonment to the will of God and rejection of the world, so that now the individual became a tool in the hands of God to be used in the accomplishment of his purposes. Holiness became a separating, insulating, and empowering agent which helped the believer to be faithful to the practices of the Christian community and separated from the world even in the new age with all its allurements. At the same time, entire sanctification was a power working through the believer in outreach and witness to the new age.
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Footnotes


6Ibid.

7“The Confession of Faith.” The origin of this significant document is not precisely known; however, all scholars of Brethren in Christ history regard it as having association with the beginnings of the denomination. Separate copies of virtually the same document, all in German, have been discovered from points as widely scattered as Ontario, Canada, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and Chicago, Illinois.


9Jacob N. Engle, Personal Diary, in the possession of his descendents, Abilene, Kansas.


11A list of holiness denominations and groups contacted by Brethren in Christ leaders from 1890 to 1896 and reported in the *Visitor* includes Methodist, Free Methodist, Salvation Army, Christian and Missionary Alliance, The Fire Brand or World’s Missionary Society, the Hephzibah Faith Missionary Association, a holiness mission, and a holiness meeting in a home.


14Much of the material in the balance of this article is drawn directly and indirectly from the doctoral dissertation of this writer, Owen H. Alderfer, *The Mind of the Brethren in Christ . . .* (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1964).

15Daniel Fike, “Jesus’ Last Sermon,” *Visitor*, V:19 (Oct. 1, 1892), pp. 292, 293. The writer was from Hope, Kansas.


Ibid.


Visitor, IX:15 (August 1, 1896), p. 234.

Visitor, X:8 (April 15, 1897), p. 122.

This was the case, according to Adda Engle, daughter of Bishop Jacob N. Engle of South Dickinson District, born in 1881. Personal interview, 1963.


"Pentecostal Meetings," Visitor, X:22 (Nov. 15, 1897), p. 386.

Sent of God, VI:13 (July, 1897), p. 4. This was the publication of the Hephzibah Faith Missionary Association, Tabor, Iowa.

Visitor, XII:17 (Sept. 1, 1899), pp. 334, 335. Personal interviews during 1963 with aged members from that area indicated that Irwin was in Dickinson County prior to this time.

Jesse Haldeman, Personal Interview, Upland, California, 1963.


Mrs. Mary Zook, Letter from Tabor, Iowa, February 3, 1924. A.W. Climenhaga Papers, Brethren in Christ Archives.


Ibid., pp. 9-13.

Ibid., pp. 16, 17.

Ibid., pp. 25-29.

Ibid.


Visitor, XXXIII:596 (March 8 and 22, 1920), p. 14. The term "separation from the world" would have carried considerable meaningful content for the readers at the time.
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