

Evangelicalism in Mennonite Historiography: The Decline of Anabaptism or a Path Towards Dynamic Ecumenism?¹

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The starting point for any exploration of the interaction between evangelical Protestants and Mennonites in North America is the observation that there is no other Christian tradition with which Mennonites in North America have had more affinity and interaction, and which has exercised more influence on Mennonites than evangelical Protestantism. At the same time, neither has there been a religious tradition from which some Mennonites in North America have tried harder to differentiate themselves than evangelical Protestantism.² In North America evangelical Protestantism has always been a diverse and complex movement made up of different denominations, transdenominational institutions and organizations.³ Always it has been remarkably diverse and dynamic, and has been particularly adept at adapting to its cultural environment. As the dominant expression of Protestantism throughout most of the nineteenth century and again during the latter half of the twentieth century, it has exercised enormous cultural influence in both the United States and Canada. It is not surprising then that Mennonites of all kinds in North America have been influenced by evangelical Protestants. While the Mennonite story in North America is much more multifaceted than merely looking at the relationship with evangelical Protestantism, it is safe to assert that there is no Mennonite group in North America that has not been touched in some way by evangelicalism either by the adoption of, or by resistance towards, some evangelical emphasis or practice. In short, one cannot tell the Mennonite story in North America without reference to this movement.

A second observation that could be given the status of a truism is that the response on the part of Mennonites towards evangelical Protestantism has been almost as varied as are the Mennonite groups in North America. The interaction between Mennonites and evangelical Protestants has often been divisive, indicating

how important Mennonites perceived the underlying issues to be. There has never been a consensus over what constitutes an appropriate degree of appropriation from and identification with evangelical Protestantism. In fact, disagreement about things evangelical explains to a significant extent many of the Mennonite denominational options that have appeared in North America, some of which have explicitly appropriated the label “evangelical.”⁴ The response towards evangelical Protestantism has often elicited – and sometimes still does – emotionally charged reactions.

Two polarities bookend the range of reactions and reflect how divisive a discussion about the influence of evangelicalism can be.⁵ On the one hand, there is a veritable litany of complaints against evangelical Protestantism. There are those who contemptuously decry the “awful and terrible destruction” presumably caused by evangelicalism within Mennonite communities.⁶ It is seen as an alien force that has disrupted and “created considerable ideological and theological confusion” among Mennonite individuals, congregations and communities.⁷ Despite their affinity with the strong biblicism manifested by evangelicals, some Mennonites express concern over the way the influence of evangelicalism has apparently led “to an erosion of New Testament and Anabaptist principles of faith and ethics.”⁸ The individualistic accent on personal salvation is overemphasized by evangelicals, thereby minimizing the more corporate, communitarian ideals of Anabaptism and its emphasis on a constant life of *Nachfolge* (discipleship).⁹ Evangelicalism is seen as propagating a message of “free grace,” of “easy-believeism” that emphasizes emotions and that tends to divorce irresponsibly precept and action.¹⁰ Some Mennonites are uneasy about an evangelical Protestantism that they consider tainted by “individualism, militarism, lack of concern for peace and reconciliation, narrow orthodoxy, child evangelism and capitalist, competitive economics.”¹¹ According to others, evangelicalism has left Mennonite groups with a weakened ecclesiology as the result of accepting an inadequate soteriology.¹² One Mennonite scholar laments that “in becoming evangelical . . . we are exchanging our Mennonite birthright for a mess of pottage.”¹³ Persons representing this polarity have zealously guarded Mennonitism from any further infestations of the “evangelical virus.”¹⁴

On the other hand, there are Mennonites who actively nurture a strong sense of kinship with evangelical Protestants. They claim that they have found within evangelicalism the resources for what they perceive to be a rejuvenation and liberation from the spiritual sterility caused by an overemphasis on the maintenance of tradition and the oppressive regimes created by domineering and authoritarian Mennonite leaders. Many testify that receiving “the assurance of salvation” offered spiritual and psychological

relief from the anxiety and uncertainty of merely “hoping” that one might remain a faithful Christian until death. As a result, evangelicalism is seen as having repeatedly provided the inspiration and been the catalyst for spiritual renewal among Mennonites – it has, so to speak, “saved” Mennonitism. It is seen as the essence of biblical Christianity that has in the past lifted – and continues to lift – Mennonites above the unfortunate artificial boundaries created by ethnicity or the prioritization of “non-essential” doctrines.¹⁵ The experience of conversion creates an eschatological unity, a solidarity in Christ among all believers, which is primary and transcends all other differences. Distinctives such as nonresistance are therefore considered secondary or “non-essential” doctrines because they are derived from the primary doctrines of the authority of scripture and the deity of Christ. Some even hail evangelicalism as the biblical foundation on which the Mennonite church was founded, and those who give a less than whole-hearted endorsement are accused of being defectors who have likely been corrupted by the corrosive elements of “liberalism.”¹⁶ Moreover, the Mennonite linguistic, cultural and even some theological perimeters are, according to proponents of this view, a serious obstacle in the evangelistic and church planting efforts in non-Mennonite communities.¹⁷ In short, some Mennonites suggest that evangelical Protestantism is the most faithful expression of Christian spirituality.

To be fair, Mennonite denominations (and individuals) are not always fully aligned on one side or the other of this polarity. Some groups manifest considerable ambivalence towards evangelicalism, in part because of the presence of both polarities under one denominational roof. There is, thankfully, a growing awareness of the need to evaluate Mennonite engagement with evangelical Protestantism in a less polarized and more evenhanded manner.

Understanding the Impact of Evangelicalism on Mennonites in North America

The following section offers a selective and cursory overview of some of the insights and observations made by historians about the interaction between these two traditions, and about the impact of this interaction. The purpose of this abbreviated summary is to identify some of the interpretative trajectories that one might follow when analyzing the intersection between the Mennonite story and evangelical Protestantism. The sheer scope of such a subject means that this overview will be far from comprehensive; it should, therefore, reinforce the observation that a more thorough analysis of the relationship between Mennonites and evangelical Protestants in North America remains a significant lacuna. The final section of the article introduces what Paul Toews has dubbed the “declensive

tendency” within Mennonite historiography, and discusses the implications of this tendency with respect to interpreting the interaction between Mennonites and evangelical Protestants.

One of the most frequently noted consequences of evangelical Protestant influence has been the acceptance of specific theological emphases by Mennonite denominations and individuals. As Mennonites encountered evangelical Protestants in North America they discovered some natural compatibilities: their strong emphases on the Bible, on the necessity of a personal experiential faith, on right living, and on missionary outreach. These emphases resonated deeply with the priorities of certain Mennonite groups.

The specific theological emphases that were borrowed, and the way they were adapted, varied from Mennonite group to group. But the theological ideas that were most commonly absorbed included a more individualistic and less communitarian approach to the interpretation of the Bible and to the priority given to a personal conversion experience. Mennonites influenced by evangelicalism often became more doctrinaire and creedal in their approach to biblical study; salvation came to be seen as culminating in a specific act done to acquire personal benefits¹⁸ confirmed by a subjective assurance of salvation.¹⁹ This often replaced a view in which justification and sanctification were part of a broader, and more gradual, process of discipleship. Evangelical influence sometimes helped to encourage the acceptance of an eschatological schema known as dispensational pre-millennialism, and the prioritization of evangelism and missions above participation in peacemaking and humanitarian aid.

Recognizing the appeal of theological compatibilities does not explain entirely the attraction that some Mennonites felt towards evangelicalism. The Mennonite tradition of “nonconformity” was similar enough to the separatistic antipathy towards culture manifested by evangelical Protestants in North America, particularly during the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Although the two traditions did not always draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable practices in exactly the same places, their mutual suspicion of “the world,” along with the desire to live “holy” lives, created a degree of sectarian isolation that provided Mennonites with a greater level of intuitive comfort with evangelicals than with other Protestant options. Despite the theological and cultural differences between evangelicals and Mennonites, the general suspicion towards culture within the world of evangelicalism felt familiar. Evangelicalism therefore became an acceptable religious environment in which new cultural and moral boundaries could be negotiated in order to determine those aspects of North American culture that could safely be accepted.²⁰

Many Mennonites have criticized evangelical Protestants for

the way they have treated Anabaptist theological “distinctives” as peripheral teachings, thereby diminishing a commitment to Anabaptist faith, ethics and identity among Mennonites. The fear of losing a Mennonite identity has been reinforced by the actions of several Mennonite denominations that intentionally jettisoned their Mennonite identity during the twentieth century in favour of an exclusively evangelical identity.²¹ Still other Mennonite denominations inserted the word “evangelical” into their denominational name alongside the label “Mennonite” to indicate an intentional, dual theological identity.²² Still other Mennonite denominations that were influenced by evangelicalism during the first half of the twentieth century used evangelical emphases and practices as a “transitional theology between inherited nineteenth-century Mennonite theology, [which was] less doctrinal and precisely formulated, and the emergence of a theological biblicism rooted in a rediscovered Anabaptist hermeneutical tradition.”²³ The development of a distinctly Anabaptist theology during the 1950s was in large part an attempt to counter the inroads made by evangelicalism in Mennonite denominations.²⁴

Many Mennonites have argued that evangelical Protestants in North America have sanctioned, at least implicitly, values such as individualism, pragmatism, consumerism, and nationalism, and that these values have inadvertently crept into Mennonite communities alongside theological emphases.²⁵ Such an analysis has legitimacy, but Mennonites err in blaming manifestations of values within their communities entirely on evangelicalism. Mennonite scholars have sometimes unfairly used evangelicalism as a scapegoat by identifying it as the conduit of deleterious influences when it was merely a conduit, thereby neglecting to provide more complex explanations for changing values within their faith communities.

The introduction to and acceptance of evangelical theological emphases often began as Mennonite denominations borrowed and adapted practices used by evangelical Protestant groups. In the nineteenth century these practices included prayer and fellowship meetings, protracted revival meetings, public extemporaneous prayer, new hymnodies and musical instruments, missionary endeavours and Sunday schools. During the twentieth century additional practices came into use among Mennonites: Bible schools, organizational models with constitutions and boards, special purpose organizations, evangelistic techniques and methods used by crusade evangelists and professionalized training for ministers, to name only a few. Some of these practices, such as Sunday schools, Bible schools, and new hymns, served as direct conduits through which evangelical theological ideas flowed into Mennonite communities. Practices borrowed from evangelicals fundamentally changed the forms of

piety and worship that had been used by Mennonites for centuries.

More important than itemizing and cataloguing the specific practices that were borrowed is finding explanations for why such extensive borrowing took place. The reasons are numerous. By far the most frequently cited explanation for the adoption of evangelical practices is the search for spiritual renewal. It is essential to acknowledge the religious motivations of those involved. If one is to take seriously the experience of many Mennonites, the utilization of evangelical practices and ideas did nurture spiritual vitality and a new sense of freedom. But this spiritual emancipation often had other social and cultural dimensions that religious descriptors tended to obscure. For example, Ted Regehr suggests that the use of evangelistic techniques and methods borrowed from American evangelical Protestants served as a means for drawing young people into the life of the church. An emphasis on early conversion was seen as one of the answers to the threat of cultural assimilation, particularly during a time when other means of social control in Mennonite communities were weakening.²⁶ Frank Epp suggests that the imitation of evangelical Protestants meant for some Mennonites “the discovery of an identity that was socially more respectable and personally much more satisfying” than previous styles.²⁷ Still others turned to evangelicalism out of frustration over the resistance to change (or the pace of change) on the part of Mennonite leaders. The example of John H. Oberholtzer, founding father of the General Conference Mennonites, was typical of numerous other leaders of splinter groups in deploring what they thought “was an intolerable spiritual sterility and formality, ecclesiastical standstill, and social separatism.” Frank Epp notes: “Their quarrel was not so much with old theology as with old methods and the opposition to all new trends. English preaching, Sunday schools, extra meetings for prayer and evangelism, better relations with other denominations, involvement in community affairs, changes in clothing styles – none would be sanctioned by the established leadership.”²⁸ In some instances, the frustration over resistance to change was exacerbated further by such incongruities as the lack of a consistent morality despite a high level of religious activity, the lack of spiritual vitality despite successful isolation from the rest of society, and the cultural accommodations permitted to enhance economic growth while adhering to the myth that a static body of beliefs and standards was being preserved.²⁹

Still other scholars have noted how evangelicalism in general and fundamentalism in particular created an environment that effectively assimilated immigrants into North American society. A good example is the work of Joel Carpenter, one of America's leading scholars on fundamentalism, who writes: “One of the great and relatively unexplained ironies of [North] American religious

history is that many people in immigrant-based denominations found in fundamentalism an attractive modern American Christianity.³⁰ While not directed specifically towards Mennonites, Carpenter's observation nevertheless pinpoints one of the central dynamics in the relationship between Mennonites and evangelical Protestants in North America during the past two hundred years. Theron Schlabach similarly observed that "by opening themselves to [nineteenth-century] American Protestantism, Mennonites . . . found a religiously approved way to become more [North] American."³¹ The same could be said for many of the Mennonites who came to North America as immigrants during the twentieth century.

Generally, the second and third generations following a wave of immigration were more open to accepting evangelical influences.³² First-generation leaders were often preoccupied with helping their communities adjust to relocation and to surviving within a new society. The lack of necessary linguistic skills, as well as unfamiliarity with the surrounding culture, often left first-generation leaders unprepared for helping successive generations adjust to a cultural environment in which sooner or later they were going to have to compete for the allegiance of their members. The lack of multilingual leaders and resources created a vacuum that was sometimes filled by evangelical resources. For example, teachers in Sunday schools and Bible schools looking for curricular material in the English language had few Mennonite options and therefore opted for materials written by evangelical Protestants with whom they had some theological affinities.³³ Such material invariably became a conduit for other evangelical ideas and practices into Mennonite church communities. Evangelicalism often offered Mennonites the means, along with a religious justification, by which to engage the broader culture. For example, the desire to be involved in missionary outreach necessitated moving beyond linguistic and ethnic boundaries. Involvement in evangelism helped legitimize the acceptance of new technologies such as automobiles and radios. Evangelicalism offered a religious motivation for learning English, leaving an ethnic enclave, pursuing higher education – in short, for cultural assimilation. Having once moved beyond former boundaries, other cultural amenities became accessible as well as desirable. For many Mennonites, evangelicalism provided an environment in which to learn how to adapt to North American culture.

The question of identity has plagued Mennonites in North America.³⁴ The influence of evangelicalism has been seen as one of many contributing factors to the identity "crisis" among Mennonites. In part, this perception is due to the inclusion of evangelicalism along with other "external" influences that have precipitated change among Mennonites. In addition to the impact of specific theological

ideas identified above, transdenominational evangelicalism in particular weakened the capacity of denominational traditions to retain intact their unique configuration of theological emphases by prioritizing points of commonality as “essentials” that transcend in importance all other differences. The denigration of theological differences between Anabaptism and evangelicalism as “non-essentials” – usually implicitly translated to mean “unimportant” or “unnecessary” – helped transdenominational evangelicalism to become a potent force for both religious and social homogenization in North America.

In part, the perception of evangelicalism as a contributing factor in weakening Mennonite identity is due to the way evangelicalism confronted Mennonites about the way ethnic distinctives sometimes became intertwined and coterminous with matters of faith. The North American environment heightened an awareness among Mennonites of their Swiss-German or Russian-German ethnicity, particularly during times of war. Identification with evangelical Protestants served as means by which some Mennonites responded to the confusion created when the religious meaning of “Mennonite” was overshadowed by cultural and ethnic meanings. Adopting an evangelical identity created the opportunity to distance themselves from a German heritage and identity. Those interested in making such a cultural exchange often assumed that the evangelical identity they were assuming was a transcultural expression of Christian faith, and failed to recognize that evangelical Protestantism was itself not culturally, or ethnically neutral.³⁵

Questions of identity among Mennonites are not likely to disappear anytime soon, particularly as Mennonite churches in North America become increasingly multicultural. Some Mennonite denominations in North America now worship in more than twenty languages. In addition, in a pluralistic, ecumenical, postmodern society people will increasingly bring to Mennonite congregations what Douglas Jacobsen describes as a “polyglot Christian profile.”³⁶ This will make the problem of giving meaning to the label “Mennonite” still more challenging than it has been in the past.

Mennonite Influence on Evangelical Protestants

Although Mennonite observers have been preoccupied with identifying the influence of evangelical Protestantism among Mennonites, several voices have in recent years begun to look more closely for evidence of reciprocal influence. One such scholar, Perry Bush, argues that the heritage of Anabaptism was used by the radical left within evangelical Protestantism to “reinforce a rediscovered evangelical social conscience, thus helping to restore a badly needed dimension of evangelical Christianity that had been missing for many

years.”³⁷ Although there have been sporadic efforts during the mid-twentieth century to impact evangelicals and present a specifically Anabaptist-Mennonite witness (e.g., meetings with Billy Graham, and peace witness sessions at National Association of Evangelicals events), such attempts were met with a range of responses including suspicion (of liberalism), polite indulgence, and total disregard. Bender voiced his frustration and that of other Mennonites in 1962: “we have tried for years to reach the NAE with a peace message, but have been rebuffed every time. We find stubbornly closed doors and closed minds, and a considerable militaristic spirit . . .”³⁸

The successful efforts of C.F. Henry in reviving an evangelical social conscience during the 1950s and 1960s created a new bridge for dialogue. Mennonites such as Myron Augsburger, John Howard Yoder, and Brethren in Christ activist Ronald Sider, had unprecedented opportunities to articulate Anabaptist-Mennonite viewpoints during the 1970s. In addition, several MCC staff workers were a part of organizing a new evangelical social action group called “Sojourners.” As Mennonites emerged from their rural and German ethnic subcultures, and sought out a niche to fill within the North American religious landscape, they began to engage in what Mark Noll called, a “productive cross-pollination.”³⁹ In October 2000, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* devoted an entire issue of twelve essays to a celebration of the influence of Anabaptist hermeneutics, ethics and ecclesiology within a growing ecumenical network of church leaders and scholars.⁴⁰ In more recent years Anabaptist-Mennonite influence has been clearly evident in the work of ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, sociologist and activist Tony Campolo, and the “Missional Church” literature produced by the Gospel and Culture Network series.⁴¹ Anabaptist-Mennonite thinkers are increasingly seeing themselves as “conversation partners” with theological movements and traditions around them.⁴² In Canada Mennonites have played a more prominent role than in the United States in the development and life of transdenominational evangelical institutions and organizations. A few notable examples include – and hundreds of other examples could be found – Clayton Derstine, founder of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Canada, Henry Hildebrand as the first principal of Briercrest Schools, Victor Adrian as president of Tyndale College and Seminary (formerly Ontario Bible College and Theological Seminary), Harold Jantz as founding editor of *ChristianWeek*, a bi-weekly tabloid, and John Redekop’s longtime involvement with Evangelical Fellowship of Canada including a time as president during the 1990s. Harold Jantz rightly notes that it would be “difficult to imagine a host of evangelical agencies in Canada without the support of the Mennonite church communities” (e.g., Youth for Christ, Campus Crusade for Christ, Athletes in Action,

Crises Pregnancy Centres, Canadian Food Grains Bank, Samaritan's Purse, Canadian Institute of Linguistics, Trinity Western University, etc.).⁴³ This more visible presence in Canadian evangelicalism is due in part to the fact that Mennonites in Canada comprise a larger proportion of Protestant demographics than is the case in the United States (attendance in Mennonite churches in Canada represents about 7.5% of the total attendance in all Protestant denominations). It may also be that Mennonites in Canada have found Canadian evangelical Protestants to be less nationalistic and militaristic, and therefore more compatible theological compatriots.

Mennonite Historiography and the "Declensive Tendency"

One of the most striking characteristics of the Mennonite interpretation of evangelical influence is the ubiquitous tendency to employ an Anabaptist theological lens through which to view and critique the interaction between the two movements. As a result, evangelical Protestantism is almost invariably identified as an outside or foreign entity, and the acceptance of any theological emphases and practices by Mennonites are seen as a deviation from some pre-existing Anabaptist norm.

The fact that the two movements have their origins in different places and times does present a plausible foundation for such a comparative approach. However, limiting the comparison to differences established at different historical times obscures not only the fact that neither movement remained static over time, but also that the two movement's areas of natural compatibility made it almost inevitable that the two groups would find and interact with each. This was made even more probable in North America where there was no state church, where there was a greater degree of religious freedom, and where over time all religious groups were forced to respond to the same political events and intellectual currents. The two movements shared in common an emphasis on the importance of the Bible (although they often disagreed on how to interpret it), agreement with orthodox creedal affirmations regarding the Trinity and Christology, the need for transformation in the life of a Christian (although they didn't necessarily agree on how this occurred), an emphasis on right living (they didn't always agree on what this should look like), and a perception of themselves as marginalized from the cultural mainstream particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Highlighting some of the natural compatibilities is not meant to minimize or obscure differences between the two movements; it is an attempt to draw attention to the way that Mennonite historians have been primarily interested in, and particularly adept at pointing out, the differences when telling the story of Mennonite-evangelical Protestant relations.

The starting point in Anabaptist/Mennonite versus evangelical Protestant comparisons and assessments by Mennonite historians is invariably an understanding of Anabaptism against which the disjuncture between a sixteenth-century ideal and the subsequent Mennonite (or Mennonite-Evangelical) reality is measured. A notable example of such a standard used by Mennonites in North America has been Harold S. Bender's famous address, "The Anabaptist Vision" in which he outlined the three emphases that he considered to be characteristic of original and normative "evangelical Anabaptism": discipleship, the church as a voluntary and separated brotherhood, and love and nonresistance in all relationships.⁴⁴ This "Anabaptist Vision" was derived primarily from the experience of the early sixteenth-century Anabaptists in Switzerland. It was driven by the attempt to differentiate the Mennonite Church in the United States from evangelical Protestantism without necessarily disconnecting the Mennonite Church entirely from evangelical Protestant influence.⁴⁵ Bender's vision did much to establish the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as a "progressive" movement that espoused the separation of church and state, freedom of religion, and a communal ecclesiology. It gave North American Mennonites a credible past on which to build an alternative heritage to American Protestantism, which had split into evangelical and liberal camps. It simultaneously also served as a kind of plumbline for determining what could legitimately be called Anabaptist and Mennonite.⁴⁶ Its influence was so widespread that, in the words of historian Paul Toews, it became the "identifying incantation for North American Mennonites."⁴⁷ A more recent example in which a "generic" definition of Anabaptism is used to conduct a theological critique of evangelical Protestantism can be found in the collection of essays edited by Norman Kraus, *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*.⁴⁸ Similar definitions of Anabaptism are either implicit or explicit in all of the histories published by Mennonite denominations.⁴⁹

Paul Toews refers to this comparative historiographical phenomenon as a "declensive tendency" in an insightful article in which he surveys the material published during the first half of the twentieth century by both *Proceedings* and *Concern*, each representing a set of conferences and publications organized by a different generation of thinkers with their unique concerns. Both groups, however, invoked a common historiography in which a version of sixteenth-century Anabaptism served as an "epiphanous moment," a hermeneutical principle and a normative ideal against which the North American Mennonite story became "largely that of absorbing outside influences, acculturation and declension."⁵⁰ Toews identifies multiple ironies in the Mennonite experience in North America that point towards the problematic nature of the declensive

tendency.⁵¹ Pertinent to the subject of this article, is his ironic observation of how frequently evangelical Protestantism is denounced as a contributor to the declension of some ideal Anabaptist vision by Mennonite historians, yet how thoroughly imitative Mennonite congregations have been of North American Protestantism in order to try to maintain their distinctiveness.⁵² Moreover, the dismissive and sometimes paternalistic responses towards those responsible for an alleged declension from some Anabaptist ideal minimizes at best, and denigrates at worst, the motivation of those who made such choices, their dignity as persons capable of making choices they deem to be best for themselves and their families, and their intelligence for handling the issues they were in good faith trying to address.⁵³ In short, the declensive tendency implicitly justifies a selectivity that obscures and marginalizes dimensions of the Mennonite stories that need to be investigated and told.⁵⁴

The historiographical basis for definitions of Anabaptism such as Bender's (that is, monogenesis) has rightly been called into serious question in recent decades.⁵⁵ Even more suspect as thinly veiled ideological constructs are the generic definitions of Anabaptism that are sometimes only loosely connected to the historical particularities of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement. Greater awareness of the complexity and theological diversity among sixteenth-century Anabaptists has drawn attention to the "confessional partisanship" by which Mennonite church historians have selectively identified and endorsed those aspects of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement that they considered to be normative, and suppressed information that might challenge their intended version of events.⁵⁶ The questions that have been raised by the more recent sixteenth-century polygenesis paradigm and that need to be addressed concerning the meaning of Anabaptism and the source(s) of Mennonite identity also have implications for the declensive tendency within Mennonite historiography in general,⁵⁷ and the way in which evangelical Protestantism is interpreted within North American Mennonite historiography in particular.⁵⁸ At the very least, it requires a recognition that it is possible, and necessary, to broaden the category of "Anabaptist-Mennonite" within North America to encompass a greater degree of theological plurality than permitted by some "Anabaptist visions."⁵⁹

Before moving on to consider several arguments that are more explicitly theological in nature, it is worth noting an observation made by Royden Loewen in his exploration of the conflicts among the *Kleine Gemeinde* in the Steinbach region following World War II. These divisions were precipitated by a group of younger leaders influenced by evangelical Protestantism. Loewen concludes that conflict among Mennonites has often been represented too negatively.

Conflict does not always need to be perceived as undermining a healthy social dynamism or as an evil specter in the community, or as somehow antithetical to true Mennonitism. Loewen explains that “conflict arises not from Anabaptism’s weakness, but from its very strength, that is, from its communitarian nature, its lay orientation, its democratic polity and its emphasis on ‘right behaviour.’ Thus conflict is not a descent into dysfunction, but evidence of cultural creation.”⁶⁰ He applies Charles Tilly’s paradigm of “repertoires of contention” to the *Kleine Gemeinde* conflicts to suggest that perhaps “being Mennonite” has “more to do with the process by which (new) identities evolve than with (strict adherence to) the fixed essence of (former) identities.” Such an assessment fails to include a discussion of the theological issues underlying the differences among Mennonites concerning evangelicalism as if theological affirmations have nothing at all to do with the formation of Mennonite identity. Nevertheless, Loewen’s argument does point towards the need to clarify some of the same underlying historiographical assumptions that Paul Toews challenges in his discussion of the declensive tendency.

In addition to historiographical considerations, there are a number of theological themes that ought to nudge Mennonite historians in assessing more carefully the relationship between Mennonites and evangelical Protestants. First, a recognition of the continuous work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church throughout history makes it difficult to set as the ecclesiological standard one fixed point within the history of the church. To use the sixteenth century (or any other period in church history) as the pristine measuring stick against which to judge all subsequent changes in theological expression and church practice minimizes (and perhaps even denigrates) the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit within the church, and represents a truncated pneumatology and an inadequate theology of change.

Second, it is essential to affirm that the Kingdom of God is bigger than both the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition and evangelical Protestantism, and to be willing to recognize other participants in the Kingdom of God; these affirmations ought to be of more significance to a disciple of Jesus than the protection and maintenance of specific historical theological identities. This is not to minimize the importance of specific theological identities, or to ignore the significance of differences between theological traditions, but it is to recognize that a healthy theology of the Kingdom of God drives one towards an ecclesiology in which there is room for dialogue, mutual respect and collaboration with other Christians, and which does not necessarily need to minimize denominational distinctives.⁶¹

The historical reticence among Mennonites towards a healthier ecumenism is due in part to an almost insatiable impulse to define themselves over against other traditions.⁶² The need to exaggerate

differences to make themselves more distinguishable from Protestant groups with whom they have much in common has sometimes led Mennonites to over-react against evangelicalism. This prompted Rodney Sawatsky to warn Mennonite educators in particular to guard against the desire to inoculate students against the evangelical “virus,” and to guard against the desire to liberate students from such “right-wing, nationalistic communities;” these attempts have had, in his view, the ironic result of producing a generation of “secularists.” There needs to be an appreciation for evangelicalism as a dynamic movement that embraces a variety of theological, cultural and ethical orientations, which cannot simply be equated with fundamentalism, militarism or civil religion. “Mennonites could do much worse,” states Sawatsky, “than to participate actively, even if selectively, in the current revitalization of evangelicalism. Here we will find allies in a common agenda. Such ecumenism will serve [us] better than to define ourselves ‘over against’ these fellow Christians.”⁶³ Such ecumenism will not be possible unless evangelicalism is perceived as “the story of many different people with their own distinguishing traditions, history and language” in which each group is encouraged “to recognize the strength of their particularity and nurture it to make a distinctive contribution.”⁶⁴

Such ecumenism is essential for helping Mennonites in North America adjust to changes within global Christianity, namely the remarkable expansion of Christianity during the second half of the twentieth century, which has resulted in a dramatic geographical shift from the north to the south in the centre of gravity for the Christian world.⁶⁵ A notable feature of this twentieth-century expansion has been the prominent role played by evangelical Protestants, making it clear that evangelicalism is no longer merely a western or North American phenomenon.⁶⁶ These trends have been felt by Mennonites: during the 1990s Mennonites in the “global south” began to outnumber Mennonites in Europe and North America.⁶⁷ It is also evident that the aggressively and intentionally evangelical character of many Mennonite communities in the southern hemisphere stands in contrast to the reticence (and even animosity) of some North American Mennonites towards the larger world of evangelical Protestants. A greater awareness of the influence of evangelical Protestantism and an openness towards creative collaboration, will help align North American Mennonites more closely with Mennonites in many other parts of the world (e.g., Africa and India). This is not to suggest that one ought to be uncritical of evangelical Protestantism – far from it: rather, it is to say that the failure to recognize and affirm the strong evangelical ethos of Mennonitism outside of North America may create a wedge in international Mennonite relations and result in the eventual isolation of North American Mennonites.

- Preservings*. Examples such as the following abound in virtually every issue of *Preservings* from 1996 onwards: “. . . even more odious are those puppets of American Fundamentalist religious culture who turned on their own people like hyenas seeking fanatically to disintegrate families and communities which God had wrought,” or “. . . the gentlemen in question adopted Separatist Pietist and/or Revivalist religious culture and then ruthlessly attempted to impose this apostasy on their own people, against the will of their people.” See: “Debate - Mexican Mennonites,” *Preservings* 16 (June 2000): 55, 57. D
15. See Walter Unger, “Mennonite: A Way of Following Christ,” in *Why I am a Mennonite*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1988), 292-298. D
 16. Frank C. Wiens, “This We Believe,” *Gospel Tidings* 9 (August 1969): 1. D
 17. Don Gillett and Ernie P. Toews, “Shall We Retain or Omit the Name Mennonite?” Paper presenting a summary of the two viewpoints, January 1987, Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies Archives, Winnipeg.
 18. See comments by J.B. Toews, “The Influence of Fundamentalism on Mennonite Brethren Theology,” *Direction* 10, 3 (1981): 24-25.
 19. It is remarkable how frequently one encounters reference to “assurance of salvation” among Mennonites influenced by evangelicalism. The term serves as convenient short-hand, a rhetorical “key” for describing the psychological dynamics and theological shifts in soteriology that are an integral part of movement towards evangelical Protestantism. It indicates a new understanding of soteriology, one that centres around the individual sinner receiving confirmation of immediate forgiveness for all sin. Justification is understood as a completed transaction that replaces anxiety and striving with an immediate confidence that “all is well with my soul.” For further discussion see Guenther, “A Road Less Traveled,” 155-157; and Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 245.
 20. For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon see Bruce L. Guenther, “The Convergence of Old Colony Mennonites, Evangelicalism and Contemporary Canadian Culture - A Case Study of Osler Mission Chapel (1974-1994),” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 14 (1996): 96-123. For a study that analyzes the attraction of evangelical Protestantism among defectors from Hutterite communities see Karl Peter, Edward D. Boldt, Ian Whitaker, and Lance W. Roberts, “The Dynamics of Religious Defection among Hutterites,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, 4 (1982): 327-337.
 21. See for example the stories of the Evangelical Missionary Church (formerly Mennonite Brethren in Christ) and the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches (formerly Evangelical Mennonite Brethren) in Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 233-281; Calvin Redekop, *Leaving Anabaptism: From Evangelical Mennonite Brethren to Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998); and Kevin Enns-Rempel, “The Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches and the Quest for Religious Identity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63 (1989): 247-264.
 22. See for example Jack Heppner, *Search for Renewal: The Story of the Rudnerweider/Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, 1937-1987* (Altona: Friesen Printers, 1987); and Harvey Plett, *Seeking to be Faithful: The Story of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference* (Steinbach: Evangelical Mennonite Conference, 1996).
 23. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 21.
 24. Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970*, 215. Dramatic shifts sometimes ensued within Mennonite institutions. For example, the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary’s (Fresno, CA) first decade of operation was shaped by American fundamentalism. Following a leadership change in 1964, the seminary began a much more self-conscious embrace of the Anabaptist tradition. John B. Toews, “Focusing the Vision: The M.B. Biblical Seminary,” in *The Seminary Story: Twenty Years of Education in Ministry, 1955-1975*, ed. A.J. Klassen Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1975, 17-24.
 25. See, for example, John E. Toews, “Theological Reflections,” *Direction* 14 (1985): 61-66.
 26. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada*, 207-208.
 27. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 237.
 28. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920*, 137.

29. Guenther, "The Convergence of Old Colony Mennonites, Evangelicalism and Contemporary Canadian Culture," 119.
30. Joel A. Carpenter, "The Fundamentalist Leaven and the Rise of an Evangelical United Front," in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. Leonard I. Sweet (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1984), 275. See also Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 156ff.
31. *Peace, Faith, Nation: Mennonites and Amish in Nineteenth-Century America* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1988), 296. Elsewhere, Schlabach has remarked that "whatever else it was, revivalism was for American Mennonites a potent agent of modernization." See: "Mennonites, Revivalism, Modernity--1683-1850," *Church History* 48 (1979): 415.
32. This has been noted by several historians: see for example Janzen, *The Prairie People*, 10; and Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market*, 237.
33. See: Bruce L. Guenther, "'Wrenching Our Youth Away from Frivolous Pursuits': Mennonite Brethren Involvement in Bible Schools in Western Canada, 1913-1960," *Crux* 38, 4 (2002): 35.
34. The literature on the subject is massive: a cursory sample includes Paul Peachey, "Identity Crisis Among American Mennonites," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 42, 3 (1968): 243-259; Frank H. Epp, "Problems of Mennonite Identity: A Historical Study," in *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity*, ed. Leo Driedger (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart, 1978), 281-294; Calvin Redekop, "The Mennonite Identity Crisis," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984): 87-103; Calvin Redekop, "Anabaptism and the Ethnic Ghost," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58, 2 (1984): 133-146; and Calvin Wall Redekop and Samuel J. Steiner, eds., *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (New York: University Press of America, 1988). For a glimpse into the struggle created by the acceptance of evangelical ideas within the Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches see Loewen, "Ambivalence in Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding," 5-17; and Kyle, "The Mennonite Brethren and American Evangelicalism," 26-37.
35. Evangelicals who have pointed towards this problem include Robert Webber. See: "To Recover our Apostolic Roots," *The New Oxford Review* (January 1978): 13, and Jon Johnson, *Will Evangelicalism Survive its own Popularity?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 71. See also Rodney Sawatsky, "Mennonite Ethnicity: Medium, Message and Mission," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 9 (1991): 116-117.
36. Douglas Jacobsen, "Anabaptist Autonomy, Evangelical Engulfment, and Mennonite *Mestizaje*: Three Postmodern Options," in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Bieseker-Mast and Gerald Bieseker-Mast (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000), 282.
37. See Perry Bush, "Anabaptism Born Again: Mennonites, New Evangelicals, and the Search for a Useable Past, 1950-1980," *Fides et Historia* 25, 1 (1993): 47.
38. Cited in Bush, "Anabaptism Born Again," 35.
39. Mark Noll, "The Scandal of Evangelical Political Reflection," in *Being Christian Today: An American Conversation*, eds. Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1992), 73. A good example of useful cross-pollination is the exchange among Richard J. Mouw, John Howard Yoder, and Ronald M. Green, "Evangelical Ethics and the Anabaptist-Reformed Dialogue," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17, 2 (1989): 121-137.
40. Contributors included James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Stanley M. Hauerwas, Christopher Marshall, Nancy Murphy, Glenn Stassen, Christopher Rowland, Eoin de Bhaldrathie, Stuart Murray, Richard J. Mouw, Richard B. Hayes, Rodney Clapp, and Michael G. Cartwright.
41. See Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
42. Examples include Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000); and James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 537-552.
43. See Harold Jantz, "Canadian Mennonites and Widening World," in *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Marguerite Van Die (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 335; and Patricia Janzen Loewen, "Embracing Evangelicalism and Anabaptism: The Mennonite Brethren in Canada in the Late Twentieth Century" (M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 2000).
44. "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13, 1 (1944): 3-24; and *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18,

- 2 (1944): 67-88.
45. Rodney Sawatsky argues that Bender's vision of evangelical Anabaptism was an attempt to carve out a "third path" between a fundamentalist expression of evangelicalism and liberalism ("History and Ideology," 293). See also Delbert Wiens, "Mennonite: Neither Liberal Nor Evangelical," *Direction* 20 (1991): 39-63; Albert Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998): 199-242; and Nathan Yoder, "J. Gresham Machen: An Outside Influence on Harold S. Bender's Formulation of the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (1994): 257-270.
 46. For a fuller discussion of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" see Keim, *Harold S. Bender*, 306-331; Albert Keim, "The Anabaptist Vision: The History of a New Paradigm," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (Fall 1994): 239-255; and Walter Klaassen, "'There were Giants on Earth in Those Days': Harold S. Bender and the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 12 (1994): 239-255.
 47. *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970*, 241.
 48. Kraus' "generic" approach defines Anabaptism as a "position that appeals to the New Testament as the final authority for Christians, that calls for radical discipleship under the lordship of Jesus Christ, that offers a radical critique of the social order, and calls the world to repentance and new life in the kingdom of God" (Kraus, "Preface," in *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism*, 8).
 49. See for example John E. Toews, "The Meaning of Anabaptism for the Mennonite Brethren Church," in *Pilgrims and Strangers: Essays in Mennonite Brethren History*, ed. Paul Toews (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1977), 161-169.
 50. Paul Toews, "The American Mennonite Search for a Useable Past: From the Declensive to the Ironic Interpretation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, 3 (1999): 472. The more notable proponents of this meta-narrative of declension include Robert Friedmann, "The Anabaptist Genius and its Influence on Mennonites Today," *Proceedings* (1942); Harold S. Bender, "Outside Influences on Mennonite Thought," *Proceedings* (1953): 33-41; and John Howard Yoder, "Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality," *Consultation on Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology*, ed. A.J. Klassen (Fresno: Council of Mennonite Seminaries, 1970), 1-46.
 51. Despite their attempt to remain as distant as possible from American society, he notes that groups such as the Old Order Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites have nevertheless gained national attention. The experience of war sharpens both "the sense of civic responsibility" among Mennonites, as well as the sense of civic alienation; and the story of Mennonite fundamentalism is the "story of seeking to resist acculturation" as well as the story of "accelerating acculturation" ("The American Mennonite Search for a Useable Past," 482-483).
 52. Toews, "The American Mennonite Search for a Useable Past," 482.
 53. Nathan Yoder similarly notes the interpretative model of "fundamentalism as infiltration" is often accompanied by a victimization of those involved, that is, the portrayal of Mennonites as hapless victims who were without agency in their own destiny, "duped into polluting their pure stream." See: "Mennonite Scholars and Mennonite Fundamentalism," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 117.
 54. Ernest R. Sandeen noted that fundamentalism has fared worse in historiography than in history. See: *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 285. The same could be said of those Mennonites whose choice to adopt an evangelical identity resulted in their denigration or exclusion within Mennonite historiography.
 55. James Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972); and James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49, 2 (1975): 83-121. See also Werner O. Packull, "Some Reflections on the State of Anabaptist History: The Demise of a Normative Vision," *Studies in Religion* 8, 3 (1979): 313-323; James Stayer, "The Easy Demise of a Normative Vision of Anabaptism," in *Mennonite Identity*, 109-116; Werner O. Packull, "Between Paradigms: Anabaptist Studies at the Crossroads," *Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (1990): 1-22; Rodney Sawatsky, "The One and the Many: The Recovery of Mennonite Pluralism," in *Anabaptism Revisited*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Winnipeg: Herald Press, 1992), 141-154; and Rodney J. Sawatsky, "The Quest for a Mennonite Hermeneutic," *Conrad Grebel Review* 11, 1 (1993): 1-20.
 56. Several historians have noted the lingering success of the less-complicated monogenesis

- historiography and the general absence from Mennonite denominational historians of a recognition of the implications of the polygenesis historiography (see Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "Anabaptist Separation and Arguments Against the Sword in the Schleithem *Brotherly Union*," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, 3 (2000): 382; and Arnold Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology," in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 6.
57. The declensive tendency in Mennonite historiography has some of the same problems as the "fall paradigm" (also known as Constantinianism) that was used by the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and subsequent generations of Mennonites, and is still commonly used in Protestant church history. For a fuller discussion see Bruce L. Guenther, "Rediscovering the Value of History and Tradition," in *Out of the Strange Silence: The Challenge of Being Christian in the 21st Century*, ed. Brad Thiessen (Winnipeg: Kindred, 2005), 189-192; and Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 247-271.
 58. Norman Kraus surveys a range of interpretative models of Anabaptism, and notes that "the model of Anabaptism one uses to compare with Evangelicalism will influence the comparison decisively" ("Anabaptism and Evangelicalism," 172).
 59. Thomas Finger argues that it is inappropriate (and perhaps impossible) for contemporary Anabaptists to limit contact with other theological traditions; in fact, they ought to interact positively and in some instances even appropriate elements from other traditions. See: "Appropriating Other Traditions While Remaining Anabaptist," *Conrad Grebel Review* 17, 2 (1999): 65-66.
 60. "Mennonite 'Repertoires of Contentment': Church Life in Steinbach, Manitoba and Quellenkolonie, Chihuahua, 1945-1975," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 72, 2 (1998): 302.
 61. Victor Adrian displays this stance when he writes, "Anabaptist and evangelicalism have much in common. Both the Anabaptist and the evangelical need to learn from each other . . . There is a biblical ecumenism which constrains the Christian to seek his brother. It is for this reason that I—an Anabaptist—wish to identify with evangelicals in our country as elsewhere" ("Anabaptist or Evangelical?" *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, 30 October 1970, 16-17).
 62. Rodney Sawatsky suggests that this impulse is partly responsible for the desire on the part of some Mennonites to differentiate themselves from evangelicals (see "Where in the World? Mennonite Colleges and Nonconformity," Paper presented at a conference on Mennonite Higher Education: Experience and Vision, Bluffton College, June 1992, 2-4). Rachel Reesor's discussion of contextual differences between Mennonite theological reflection in Canada and the United States offers further insights into why the impulse towards differentiation might be stronger among Mennonites in the United States than in Canada. See: "A Mennonite Theological Response to A Canadian Context: A James Reimer," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73 (1999): 645-654.
 63. Sawatsky, "Where in the World? Mennonite Colleges and Nonconformity," 3-4. Various scholars have spoken out against the tendency among Mennonites critical of evangelicalism to "line up Anabaptist strengths against evangelical weaknesses." See, for example, Jacobsen, "Anabaptist Autonomy, Evangelical Engulfment, and Mennonite *Mestizaje*," 286; J. Nelson Kraybell, "Our Future is Evangelical," *Canadian Mennonite* 6, No. 3 (11 February 2002): 6-7; and Yoder, "Mennonite Scholars and Mennonite Fundamentalism," 117).
 64. See Paul Toews, "Recent Interpretations of Evangelical Pluralism," *Direction* 20 (Spring 1991): 24; and Finger, "Appropriating Other Traditions While Remaining Anabaptist," 52-68.
 65. David B. Barrett and others have been tracking this trend since the 1970s. See: David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and the annual statistical tables published in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. A more recent, popular study of this phenomenon is Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
 66. See: Donald M. Lewis, "Globalization, Religion and Evangelicalism," *Crux* 38 (2002): 35-46; and Donald M. Lewis, ed., *Christianity Reborn: The Global Expansion of Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
 67. John Lapp, "'A New Future Requires a New Past': The Global Mennonite History Project," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 23 (2005): 165-167.

