

“Good Works” According to Menno Simons

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While the concern with “good works” was central to Menno Simons,¹ modern scholarship seems to have generally overlooked that the very centre for Menno’s theologizing was — “bad works”. Obviously, Menno was staunchly opposed to “bad works” and at the same time convinced that both traditional Catholicism and the magisterial reformers failed to share his own concerns. More accurately, even their so-called “good works” were, in fact, none other than “bad works”.

Before we recoil in embarrassment of Menno’s “intolerance”, it is useful to observe that Menno wrote from within a situation of an acute intolerance. He and his followers were being mercilessly persecuted! A true theological dialogue — even though there were a few debates — could not take place as long as the potential Anabaptist participants were viewed as outlawed heretics, meriting extermination. The number of Anabaptist martyrs for the Netherlands has been estimated to be between 1,500 and 2,500,² indicating that Menno’s fears were based on fact.

Menno’s attention to the moral misbehaviour of the persecutors, therefore, dare not be misinterpreted either as mere quarrelsomeness or just meddling. The bitter cries of the martyred and the anguish of the community from which the martyrs were snatched was not a self-induced activity, but an inevitable response. Silence would have been immoral and cowardly, — and praise clearly impossible.

I

First of all, in assessing his contemporary situation, Menno observes how it differs from “the usages and doctrine” of the Early Christian Church. The latter “hurt no one for matters of faith, much less did they kill them. But the erring and heretical they faithfully admonished, and those who would not return were then expelled from the church’s communion.”³ It is, therefore, appropriate to raise a very serious question: “Say, my dear people, where do the holy Scriptures teach that in Christ’s

kingdom and church we shall proceed with the magistrate, with the sword, and with physical force and tyranny over a man's conscience and faith, things subject to the judgment of God alone? Where have Christ and the apostles acted thus, advised thus, commanded thus? Ah, Christ says merely, Beware of false prophets; and Paul ordains that we shall avoid a heretical person after he has been admonished once or twice. John teaches that we shall not greet nor receive into the house the man who goes onward and does not bring the doctrine of Christ. But they do not write, Away with those heretics, Report them to the authorities, Lock them up, Expel them out of the city and the county, Throw them into the fire, the water, as the Catholics have done for many years, and as is still found to a great extent with you — you who make yourselves believe that you teach the Word of God!"⁴ In asking the question, Menno is, of course, also making an accusation: the persecutors are "much more diligent" in observing "the Law of Theodosius," as well as "the Mandate of Charles V, and the Imperial Condemnation decreed in our times concerning the so-called Anabatpists, than they are concerning God's Word". The Christian emperor Theodosius had decreed on March 21, 413, that re-baptism is a punishable crime, although he had not specified the death penalty.⁵ The sixteenth-century persecutors of Anabaptists radicalized this precedent. At the same Diet which offered religious freedom to magisterial Protestantism, the Emperor Charles V, on January 28, 1528, decreed "that each and every Anabaptist and rebaptized person, man or woman of accountable age, shall be brought from natural life to death with fire and sword and the like."⁶ Menno's anguished outcry, therefore, did not point to occasional abuse, but to established use by imperial law — which to Menno looked like legalized murder. He asked: "Where have you read a single letter in the whole activity of Christ that men should punish to the blood for the sake of faith, and execute with the sword? Where have the apostles ever taught or practiced such?"⁷

The violence that Menno speaks about is variegated. But it is never an easy experience on any of its several levels. In anguish and compassion, Menno cries out: ". . . how many pious children of God have we not seen during the space of a few years deprived of their homes and possessions for the testimony of God and their conscience; their poverty and sustenance written off to the emperor's insatiable coffers. How many have they betrayed, driven out of city and country, put to the stocks and torture? How many poor orphans and children have they turned out without a farthing? Some have they hanged, some have they punished with inhuman tyranny and afterward garroted them with cords, tied to a post. Some they have roasted and burned alive. Some, holding their own entrails in their hands, have powerfully confessed the Word of God still. Some they beheaded and gave as food to the fowls of the air. Some have they consigned to the fish. They have torn down the houses of some.

Some have they thrust into muddy bogs. They have cut off the feet of some, one of whom I have seen and spoken to. Others wander aimlessly hither and yon in want, misery, and discomfort, in the mountains, in deserts, holes, and clefts of the earth, as Paul says. They must take to their heels and flee away with their wives and little children, from one country to another, from one city to another — hated by all men, abused, slandered, mocked, defamed, trampled upon, styled ‘heretics.’ Their names are read from pulpits and town halls; they are kept from their livelihood, driven out into the cold winter, bereft of bread, pointed at with fingers. Yes, whoever can wrong a poor oppressed Christian thinks he has done God a service thereby, even as Christ says.”⁸

And all this cruelty is done so quickly and casually. Menno complains that a thief or a murderer is not led away to execution, until his guilt has been fully ascertained: “He is not condemned by the judges as long as they have not grasped fully the basis and truth concerning his evil deed.” Not so in the case of an Anabaptist. Menno explains: “But if an innocent, contrite Christian, whom the merciful Lord has rescued from the evil, ungodly ways of sin, and has placed in the way of peace, is accused by the priests and preachers, and placed before their court, they consider it not worth their time to investigate what reasons or Scriptures move him so that he refuses to hear his priests and preachers, to have his children baptized, to attend their services, to no longer eat and drink to excess with them, and to serve the devil. Nor do they care to know why he reformed his life and received the baptism of Christ, or what drives him so willingly to suffer, or even to die, for his faith. They only ask, Is he baptized? If he answers in the affirmative, the sentence is already pronounced that he must die.”⁹ The incongruity of the situation is obvious to Menno, and he thinks, to any objective observer: while the authorities “boast one and all” that they “are Christians and have the Word of God,” they, nevertheless, “daily shed human blood like water.”¹⁰ At the same time, the clergy, boldfacedly and shamelessly, continue “to write, talk, and slander against us.” And this is no mild or objective criticism that is being offered. Instead, they are “recommending and inciting persecution, slaughter, and bloodshed.”¹¹ One can sense the hatred echoing even through Menno’s guarded report: “Heretics! Heretics! Drown them, slay them, and burn them!”¹² Hence Menno sees no grounds to differentiate between secular and religious authorities, recognizing that both are conscious participants in planned persecution. Menno writes: “the kings, princes, prophets, and priests — have consciously thirsted after the innocent blood of the true witnesses of God”;¹³ “their hearts, mouths, and hands drip and reek with blood.”¹⁴

Precisely because crude words are followed by cruel deeds, Menno strenuously objects to the kind of name-calling that he and his fellow believers are experiencing: “We pass for every man’s deceiver, heretic,

Anabaptist, knave, footstool, and prey, and endure the stake, gallows, wheels, sword, fire, water and everything else."¹⁵ On another occasion Menno offers an expanded list of magisterial expletives: "Anabaptists, fanatics, seditionists, factionists, bootleg preachers [winckel-prediker], deceivers, heretics, rebaptizers, new monks, knaves, and miscreants."¹⁶

The persecutors, notes Menno, are both Catholic and Protestant. In addressing them at times individually Menno is careful to note that the specific criticisms of one applies to the others as well. E.g.: "And although I have written this especially of the Roman Catholic priests, the reader must know that I do not consider innocent those who make their boast in the Word. By no means."¹⁷ At the same time the Protestants are bluntly informed: "But what does it avail if they expel the pope if they themselves step in his place? It is true indeed that many branches of the tree of antichrist are hewn off, but the roots and trunk still remain."¹⁸ Thus while aware of the variety of religious expressions that existed in his day, Menno's real concern was with the one and true religion which he believed to hold with his followers. Menno wrote: "There are Roman Catholics or papists, Lutherans, Zwinglians, erring sects, and the Christians who are revilingly called Anabaptists."¹⁹ Before Menno is criticized for his un-ecumenical characterization of the various forms of Christendom, it has to be noted that Menno's situation left him no other choice but to record the demarcation line between the persecutors and the persecuted. Unless this line is observed, Menno's claim will sound hollow: "Railing and ranting are not my interest."²⁰ But how does the persecuted cry out in anguish, so as to sound acceptable or even pleasing to later generations who live under different circumstances? How does one record the injustice done and measure the moral turpitude of the persecutor? Menno's opponents in his day offered no constructive counsel. They sought to overcome by argument and by violence, without celebrating any redeeming features in the Anabaptist movement.

II

Their totalitarian violence evoked a totally negative response by Menno: he could not recognize any "good works" among the persecuting churches. Menno's prior judgment, however, was no mere prejudice, but a hermeneutical pre-understanding that had been shaped by the experience of persecution. The modern ecumenist may indeed wish that all divisive issues would be discussed calmly in front of a warm fire-place. The ancient controversialists preferred a setting where the opponent could be quickly placed in the fire! In witness of those co-religionists who had been maligned, mistreated and even executed, uncertain of his own future, Menno, a man of peace, nevertheless employed a fiery language in describing the wicked works of his opponents.

Menno's writings abound with detailed criticisms of the established churches. While it is not possible here to give a full account of Menno's critique, some sampling is in order.

Menno's headlines are vivid: "Those who pose as pastors are thieves and murderers of our souls."²¹ So is his general charge: "you sustain and protect as shepherds of the flock of Christ and keepers of your souls, false prophets and deceiving priests, largely public drunkards, seducers, and idolaters, full of unrighteousness, with hearts shot through with covetousness; men whose belly is their God, blind watchmen and dumb dogs, thieves of God's honour; murderers of poor, miserable souls".²² A more detailed description, if not more telling, is certainly shaped with rhetorical craftsmanship of impressive intensity: "... we will imagine an extremely corrupt, ungodly, carnal scoundrel, called a priest however by men, a pastor, vicar, or prebendary. This same unchaste man full of all manner of tricks and deceit, covers his damnable knavery with such a fine exterior that no one thinks evil of him, just as the ravening wolf was covered with the harmless pelt of a sheep. Matt. 7:5. His head is carefully shaven, as proof perhaps that in a similar way he desires by all means to shave off and destroy all lusts and desires of his wicked, sinful flesh. His robe reaches the floor, as Christ says (Luke 20:46), as if he were pious, holy, and of honourable conduct. He reads his prayers with folded hands and uncovered head, with clocklike regularity, as if he were very ardent and fervent in spirit. He kneels and burns incense before blocks of stone and wood, which he calls Peter, Paul, Mary, and before the worthy crucifix of the Lord. I tell you this verily, without facetiousness, of which God is my witness. Judge now whether this is not the way it goes."²³

Immediately follows an account of such a clergyperson in action — first recorded liturgically and then in real life: "Moreover he buys a hundred wafers for a nickel, takes one at a time, consecrates it as he says, and that mentally without saying a word; he nods to it, he worships it, he prays to it, and he eats it and digests it. And this same thing he believes and teaches to be the true flesh and blood of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Almighty and living God. Besides he must be so pure and chaste in his conduct that he is not allowed to marry a wife, although the holy Scriptures allow it. But the pope has forbidden it. All these and other abominations he calls a very holy religion, the most holy Christian faith, etc. And these fruits are begotten and produced by this evil tree, by the faith which is in him. After he has performed his man-made holiness in an orderly, illustrious, and careful way, then he reveals his real self by seeking the best wine, women, and beer; and he drinks, and vomits, he sings, he dances, he laughs, he weeps, he quarrels, he fights, he curses, he swears, he brags, he flirts, he fornicates, whether with his own mistress or with his neighbor's daughter or wife whose own

husband is away from home at another place to earn his living at his trade."²⁴

Of course, such clergypersons also preach. Not surprisingly, "They preach nothing but the grace, the favour, the mercy, and the love of God . . ." ²⁵ And they apply such a message as follows: "We are poor sinners. Who can live as the Scriptures teach? Christ died for sinners, did He not? and the like consolations, whereby they forsake Christ and His Word, and encourage the whole world, rich and poor, small and great, in their wayward and wicked life."²⁶ Such "peace-preaching" and "cushion-making"²⁷ is not effective; hence "their doctrine is nothing but vain prattle without point or power."²⁸ Explains Menno: ". . . they do not convert a usurer from his usury, nor a miser from his avarice; they do not bring their disciples beyond a profession in name and appearance, remaining unchanged in their hearts, hating and opposing true righteousness, walking on the broad way, and earnestly pursuing the world's flesh, money, and possessions. The pompous remain pompous; the proud remain proud; and liars remain liars, as is manifest."²⁹

At the same time Menno does not deny that the persecutors have retained some biblical insights. However, these are not pure and hence not effective: "They have deceitfully mingled the precious fine gold of the divine Word with the dross of human doctrine, and the pure wine with the polluted water of their foolish wisdom."³⁰ Similarly, Menno does not deny that the Reformers have done some good; he just does not think that it is much or enough: "Yes, we know that you have demolished some of the little idols of Babylon, such as indulgences, invocation of deceased saints, unclean sanctity, distinctions regarding food, and the like self-righteousness, idolatry, and other superstitions. But alas, the fearful blasphemy and abominations are retained, such as accursed unbelief, stiff-necked obstinacy, earthly mindedness, unscriptural infant baptism, the idolatrous Supper, and the impenitent old life which is of the flesh"³¹ In other words, the more life has changed, the more it has remained the same. Along with their leaders the common people continue shamelessly at their accustomed sinning. Menno's description is eloquent: "The common people run as a frantic heifer, as the prophet laments [Hosea 4:14, according to the Dutch translation]. They lie and cheat, curse and swear by the wounds and sacraments of the Lord, by His judgment, hand, power, suffering, death, and blood. I am ashamed that I have to record these blasphemous abominations. They gamble, drink, and fight. In short, the wicked excess of their lives is not to be turned and their great folly cannot be obstructed."³² Again and again, Menno sets down the sins of the people; his numerous lists vary but little, e.g.: "These are not Christians but an unbelieving, carnal, earthly, wanton, blind, hardened, lying, idolatrous, perverted, malicious, cruel, unmerciful, frightful, and murderous people, who by their actions and fruits show that they neither

know Christ nor His Father."³³ Consequently, "the bride of Christ, the glorious church"³⁴ is not to be found among them. Instead we may see "the Babylonian, Sodomite, harloting, adulterous, idolatrous, bloody, unbelieving, blind, and unclean wench with which they have for centuries fornicated in wood, stone, gold, silver, bread, wine, false doctrine, and of the very vain, accursed works of their own hands, contrary to Jesus Christ and His Holy Word."³⁵

Such is Menno's account of his contemporary situation — not only with a keen eye recording the obvious abuses brought about by a persecuting society, but, in principle, offering a clean-cut rejection of the culture of his day. H. Richard Niebuhr, carefully analyzing the various Christian responses in regard to culture, includes Mennonites in the chapter entitled "Christ against Culture." Niebuhr observes: "The Mennonites have come to represent the attitude most purely, since they not only renounce all participation in politics and refuse to be drawn into military service, but follow their own distinctive customs and regulations in economics and education."³⁶ J. Lawrence Burkholder has echoed this evaluation: "Anabaptism tried to cast aside all historical adaptations to the institutions of society which were regarded as a compromise of the pure Gospel."³⁷

At the same time it needs to be noted that Menno's negative stand had also the potential for some very positive effects. Roland H. Bainton, the famed Yale scholar of the Reformation, has summed up: ". . . the Anabaptists anticipated all other religious bodies in the proclamation and exemplification of three principles which are on the North American continent those truths which we hold to be self-evident: the voluntary church, the separation of church and state, and religious liberty. From the days of Constantine to the Anabaptists these principles, to us so cardinal, had been in abeyance."³⁸ Yet before one leaps for joy in hearing such a substantive praise, it is useful to read Bainton's next sentence, terse and to the point: "[these principles] were not, however, transmitted to us by the Anabaptists, but rather by the Puritan revolution and the French revolution."³⁹ Obviously, the persecuting magisterial Reformation and traditional Catholicism were not aware, how much they failed by their very success in suppressing the growth of Anabaptism!

Menno's efforts, however, were not in vain. While aware that absolute perfection was not in the human reach while on this side of the judgment day, Menno nevertheless regarded the "new birth" and sanctification as an actual possibility. In Menno's view, the "new birth" imposed much needed standards and brought about a decisive break with the relative morality of the world. While at times speaking very harshly⁴⁰ and very much out-of-tune with contemporary ecumenical dialogue, Menno nevertheless presented a sound warning even to those who do not share his theological position: the editing out difficult and

inconvenient texts from the Holy Scriptures attacks the Christian faith at its very centre — and not merely at the margins! Such a defense of the Scriptures, however, in the final analysis is not to be seen as merely an expression of personal conservatism, but above all as a sign of a pious celebration of Christian perfection in faith and in life!

III

Turning to this central theological concern, the doctrine of sanctification, it should be admitted beforehand that this is a particularly difficult point from which to begin theologizing. If in regard to *justification* it is possible to draw a clear line between theologies that regard the starting point to be the divine initiative in grace (so Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin), and theologies that underscore the priority of human effort, preparation, and merit (Pelagius, and to some measure the followers of Scotus and Ockham) — sanctification, almost by definition, includes both grace and works. Sanctification assumes an existence within which the Holy Spirit is constantly operative and therefore excludes an autonomous and sin-oriented self. Put in another way, by merely looking at a doctrine of sanctification, cleanly excerpted from one's entire theological framework, it may be very difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether we are dealing with an Augustinian or a Pelagian, that is, whether the prior doctrine of justification has been formulated with emphasis either on *sola gratia* or merit!

Hence it should not come as a surprise that due to his apparent lack of concern for justification Menno's understanding of sanctification has been approached and interpreted in a variety of ways. Thus Cornelius Krahn⁴¹ has noted that Menno did not intend to write a coherent systematic theology to begin with. The implication is that one should not address to Menno's writings such questions that are in principle systematic. Robert Friedmann⁴² has called attention to the fact that Anabaptist thought in general did not locate its centre in the doctrine of justification. The issues that it consequently deals with are bound to be different from those of magisterial Protestantism. At the same time there have been claims, for example by Walter Klaassen,⁴³ that traditional Anabaptism has taught justification by grace through faith. Such a perspective would not rule out a traditional analysis of Menno's key categories. Now in such a situation of claims and counter-claims the more helpful may very well have been the succinct observation by William E. Keeney: "Menno and Dirk (Philips) were somewhat contradictory when they attempted to recognize the paradox of a freely sovereign God, and man created with sufficient freedom to remain morally and ethically responsible for his behaviour, and, therefore, of his destiny."⁴⁴

Indeed, on the surface it may appear that Menno's position is

somewhat ambiguous: while on the one hand celebrating the gift of grace that opens for humans the possibility of salvation, Menno on the other hand at times seems to attribute some freedom of initiative to the human will before grace has been received. Here two methodological observations are in order. First, we shall suggest that Menno's apparent ambiguity is actually a rather coherent adaption of a general stance, well known in Dutch mysticism. Second, we will then explore Menno's exegetical efforts in order to observe the faithful concern to follow a more explicit scriptural guidance.

Turning first to Dutch mysticism we shall record the assumption that Menno's hermeneutical presuppositions were shaped by that movement. I do not suggest that in writing his tracts Menno necessarily re-read texts from the mystical tradition. I am, however, claiming that Menno's position coherently reflects an outlook that is observable in Dutch mysticism in general and John Ruusbroec (1293-1381) in particular. According to Ruusbroec, human salvation was constituted of three elements: "God's prevenient grace, a will that is freely turned toward God, and a purified conscience." Comparing God to "a radiant light," he is prepared to say that this light shines on all people: "All persons receive prevenient grace, whether they be pagans or Jews, good or bad." This is so on account "of the love which God has toward all persons in common."⁴⁵ On the one hand, the gift of the prevenient grace is an act of divine initiative. In numerous ways prevenient grace can "move a person from without or from within." On the other hand, Ruusbroec does not view this movement as forcing a person, but rather as eliciting a response from within. Humans are capable of such a response on account of the soul's essential and active affinity toward God. In Ruusbroec's words: "... a person has a natural and fundamental inclination toward God through the spark of the soul and through the higher reason, which always desires what is good and hates what is evil."⁴⁶

This initial stage of prevenient grace, according to Ruusbroec, is followed by a second stage. Ruusbroec explains: "When a person has done all that he can and is able to proceed no further because of his own weakness, then it falls to the fathomless goodness of God to bring the work to completion. Thus there arises a higher light of God' grace which, like a ray of sunlight, is cast upon the soul without its being merited or desired in a way commensurate with its worth. In this light God gives himself to us out of his gratuitous goodness and beneficence, a gift which no creature can merit in advance."⁴⁷ Dependent on the traditional late Nominalist pattern, Ruusbroec is asserting that in this second stage grace is not granted according to *meritum de condigno*. Understood literally, no natural effort can earn supernatural reward! Yet when grace is given, it is not given arbitrarily but only conditionally. Ruusbroec obviously translates the traditional *ficientibus quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*:⁴⁸

"When a person has done all that he can . . . then it falls to the fathomless goodness of God to bring the work to completion."⁴⁹ While salvation then cannot be according to *meritum de condigno*, it is obtained according *meritum de congruo*.

Obviously, Menno has not taken over Ruusbroec's entire outline, but abbreviated it by editing out two key concepts which he found unscriptural: the so-called "spark of the soul" and the idea of merit. At a first glance, such a revision of Ruusbroec reduces the degree of human input. If *sola gratia* will not be viewed as a Calvinist irresistible grace, then the freedom of the human will is either an immediate creation of grace, or a natural capacity. Either concept would then need to be further explained.⁵⁰ Finally, the rejection of the idea of merit, while not reducing the opportunities to work, seem to take away the incentive. A more thorough look, however, may offer real possibilities for a creative and scriptural revision of Ruusbroec. As we shall immediately note in more detail, the New Testament provides two complementary options: with Paul one can celebrate the grace which initiates salvation and frees the human will, and with James one can acknowledge an already present freedom of the will without telling how it was obtained. Menno accepts both of these options, even though giving more attention to Paul. This may explain why Menno can so heartily reject the idea of merit. The experience of the "new birth" is so beautiful and attractive, that it requires no added attraction through the idea of merit. Rather, virtue is seen as fully its own reward!

Now, admittedly, the turning to the New Testament may not always produce quick answers and an easily organized theology. Yet one may be assured that in such turning the complexity that is obtained will not be a confusion, but a perception of depth. We shall now follow Menno on this route.

In the first place, then, we shall note that Menno explicitly celebrates the role of grace and forcefully denies merit and work-righteousness. The statements that describe the experience of salvation invariably underscore the divine initiative, e.g.: "The eternal, merciful God . . . has called us from darkness into His marvelous light";⁵¹ "the children of God . . . are by grace converted in their hearts and with Christ born of God the Father."⁵² Not surprisingly, Menno records a key Scripture text: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. Eph. 2:4-10."⁵³ Echoes of this text reverberate through Menno's writings: "There is none that can glory in himself touching faith, for it is the gift of God,"⁵⁴ and "Faith, says Paul, is not every man's possession, but it is a gift of God."⁵⁵ But the same insight can be also stated in other ways. Menno asks: "What do we,

miserable sinners, have that we have not received from Thee?"⁵⁶ And having rejected the idea of a means of grace, Menno specifies: "For if our reconciliation depended on works and ceremonies, then grace would be a thing of the past".⁵⁷ Even faith itself is not one of such means.: "Not, dear reader, as though we believe that faith merits his on account of its worth; by no means."⁵⁸ Having once more asserted that salvation is "not by our own merits and works, but by grace through Christ Jesus,"⁵⁹ Menno protests against the designation "merit-men and heaven-stormers"⁶⁰ and the claim "that we think to be saved by our own merits and works."⁶¹ Particularly distasteful to Menno is the designation "new monks."⁶² Forcefully, Menno affirms: "we plainly teach that we cannot be saved by outward works, however great and glorious they may appear."⁶³ Moreover, Menno's entire concern with the centrality of grace is further underscored by his appeal to the biblical notions of election and covenant as the ultimate grounds for sustained belief.⁶⁴ Last, but not least, Menno's definition of grace seems to assume the fact of a divine initiative,⁶⁵ seen nowhere more clearly than in the incarnation. Menno writes: "All those who by the grace of God clearly and intelligently perceive and confess this doctrine of the incarnation of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ grasp and confess correctly the unspeakable grace, favour, compassion, mercy, and the inexpressibly great love of God the Father expressed and manifest in Christ Jesus."⁶⁶ Explicitly Menno states that the entrance into the divine covenant is by grace: "we are all accepted into the covenant with God, not by any signs but by grace."⁶⁷ Likewise Menno makes it clear that God's offer precedes human quest: "All those who accept this proffered means of divine grace, Jesus Christ, with believing hearts, enclose Him in the treasure box of their minds."⁶⁸ And as grace has been first granted through a divine initiative, so also the continued presence of grace is explained by Menno in reference to God's ongoing concern: "We will . . . through the grace of God, abide in the Word of the Lord";⁶⁹ "He . . . keeps and sustain us by His grace in the midst of a crooked and ferocious generation."⁷⁰ Similarly, "everyone," notes Menno who relies on authentic examples of Christian faith, "will undoubtedly not lose courage, but in all miseries, crosses, and sufferings, will by God's grace remain standing, and will abide pious and strong to the end."⁷¹ On occasion Menno is even prepared to use the concept of *sola gratia*: "We are to be saved solely by grace through Christ Jesus, as has been said before."⁷²

"Good works" in this perspective are necessarily the effects and not the cause of grace. When Menno is reminded by his opponents that Obbe Philips had claimed that "the justification of man results not from faith alone, but from faith, love, and good works," Menno immediately distances himself from such a view: "Does it follow that because Obbe Philips formerly advocated this doctrine, therefore Menno and the others also follow

it?”⁷³ Menno’s ordinary way of stating this insight is with a thorough reliance on the scriptural text: “It cannot be otherwise than that a good tree bringeth forth good fruit. Matt. 7:18.”⁷⁴ Numerous echoes follow, e.g.: “Faith which comes by the Word of God cannot be without fruit except in those who grieve the Holy Ghost”;⁷⁵ “Christ Jesus cannot be without fruits, but whoever has put on the humble, patient, merciful, lovely, peaceable, sober, chaste, and obedient Christ, in such a one the before-mentioned accursed works are not found”⁷⁶ “It is all in vain to boast of faith where the godly new fruits and works of faith are not in evidence”;⁷⁷ “the church of Christ also brings forth the fruits of Christ.”⁷⁸ And there is no doubt at all: “good works are therefore the result of the presence of grace, rather than the means to obtain grace. Proclaims Menno: “Thus by His grace we bade farewell to the world, flesh, devil, and all and freely entered upon the path of peace, beneath the easy yoke of the Gospel. Methinks this is grace, if ever there was any.”⁷⁹ And in another purple passage Menno announces: “the true, Christian faith, thanks to grace, is the only living fountain whence flows not only the penitent, new life, but also obedience to the evangelical ceremonies, such as baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”⁸⁰

In the second place, however, it also must be noted that Menno does not address the problem of grace⁸¹ with scholastic precision. That is to say, Menno does not answer a key question that we would like to know: is the *free choice*, which Menno attributes to the person confronted by the Gospel message, the *result* of the encounter, that is a *grace-enabled-freedom*, or is it a *human capacity*, embedded in the human selfhood? Is this freedom natural or supernatural?⁸² Do human beings have it before God grants it? It seems to me that instead of accepting only one of the options, Menno writes as if he had accepted them both. Namely, in one set of passages Menno lists such human activities as listening and repenting as conditions which a person is able to meet in preparation for receiving the gift of faith.⁸³ Here Menno exhorts: “let us lift our hands and hearts to God in heaven and say, We have sinned.”⁸⁴ Or he puts it conditionally: “He will not save you nor forgive your sins nor show you His mercy and grace except according to His Word; namely, if you repent and if you believe, if you are born of Him, if you do what He has commanded and walk as He walks.”⁸⁵ While “believing” has been previously designated as a gift of God, what is the status of “repenting”? Clearly, the undertaking is crucial: “If you do not repent there is nothing in heaven or on earth that can help you, for without true repentance you are comforted in vain.”⁸⁶ Admittedly, while the majority of such statements occur early, they are not totally absent from Menno’s later writings. In the *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*, 1539, we read of the sequence: “If you repent not, and are not born of God . . .”;⁸⁷ similarly in *Reply to Gellius Faber*, 1554: “I have always taught that all sins which are repented of are pardoned in the

blood of the Lord, be they what they may,"⁸⁸ and "Without penitence, neither water, bread, nor wine, or ceremony, avail in Christ."⁸⁹

Another set of passages, definitely more numerous and ordinarily after the first few years of Menno's conversion, reverse the order: now the grace-evoked faith enables repentance! Here human freedom is seen as a grace-restored reality. In the *True Christian Faith*, 1541, Menno informs us what had happened to Zacchaeus: "But as soon as he believed the Word of the Lord, repented through faith, and turned to love, from that hour he was granted citizenship by Christ Himself."⁹⁰ Similarly the malefactor on the cross first believes and then repents: "For as soon as he heard the Gospel of grace he received it in pure conscience through faith and became penitent, regenerated, and pious."⁹¹ And further in the same tract Menno notes the same sequence of events: "He that believes and is rightly baptized, truly repents, circumcises his heart, dies to sin, rises in Christ to a new life, etc."⁹² In *Reply to False Accusations*, 1552, Menno writes: "If now the power of original sin is to be broken, and actual sin forgiven, then we must believe the Word of the Lord, be born again by faith and by virtue of the new birth, and by true repentance resist original sin and die unto actual sin if we were to be pious."⁹³

To put it in another way, the issue is not whether a human being has some authentic freedom in relation to God: the question is just *when* this freedom is seen to operate: *before* the cleansing by grace, or *only after* the reception of the gift of grace? Insofar as Menno pays more attention to the outward activities of the person in question, he may be said to have avoided the issue.

Yet two qualifications are in order. *One*, Menno had a good scriptural precedent: while Paul proclaims the absolute priority of grace, James seems to assume the presence of human initiative and activity. In not taking sides and accepting the insights of both Paul and James, Menno merely sided with the Scriptures — and should hardly be scolded for doing so. *Two*, as the Scriptures have allotted far more space to the wisdom of Paul, so also has Menno. The insights of James remain a minority report in the writings of Menno as well. It does not appear to me that this distinction has been properly made within Menno scholarship.⁹⁴

IV

The observation that Menno has paid far more attention to Paul than to James has far-going ramifications. Here we shall limit ourselves to the discussion of "good works" and observe that in Menno's writings there are very few detailed prescriptions just what these "good works" should be. I suggest that what is at stake here is not Menno's love for generalities and a lack of attention to detail, but rather his deep concern for Christian creativity and freedom. Unlike later Puritans — and, maybe, even Men-

nonites — Menno did not engage in casuistry. Law-abiding and faithful, he sought not to be a legalist. The sanctified life was to be lived in a quest for an in-depth perfection.

As Menno meditates on the final results of the incarnation, namely the "new birth" of the Christians, he rejoices in the accomplishment: ". . . they are in the second birth by the word sown: their hearts begotten by God and born again, bring forth the fruit of life. Whereby they as children born of God are one with the Father, of one mind and disposition, having the divine nature of their Father who has begotten them. Their thoughts are heavenly; their words are truth, well seasoned; their works are holy and good, acceptable to God and man; for they are holy vessels of honour, useful and ready to every good work."⁹⁵ These "good works" are best described, it seems, not by enumerating them as by observing the new dynamic force with which they are carried out. Menno writes: "God's work is not keeping a dead letter, an imitation, nor is it the sounding of bells and organs and singing; but it is a heavenly power, a vital moving of the Holy Ghost which ignites the hearts and minds of believers; pervades, comforts, anoints, encourages, rouses, and stirs, makes joyful and happy in God."⁹⁶ The ultimate goal is not described merely by the final results of such Christian striving, but more often precisely through the daily surpassing of one's accomplishments. Menno counsels: "Although thou art pure, make thyself purer still; although thou art righteous, make thyself more righteous still. Adorn thyself with the white silken robe of righteousness; hang about the neck the golden chain of every piety; gird thyself with the faith girdle of brotherly love; put on the wedding ring of a true faith, cover thyself with the precious fair gold of the divine Word; beautify thyself with the pearls of many virtues; wash thyself with the clear waters of grace and anoint thyself with the oil of the Holy Ghost; wash thy feet in the clear, sparkling flood of Almighty God. Let your whole body be pure and immaculate . . ."⁹⁷

At other times, in less poetic language, Menno continues to emphasize the dynamic of growth. The believers, notes Menno, "are driven solely by the love of God,"⁹⁸ "press on to all righteousness, love, and obedience,"⁹⁹ "seek,"¹⁰⁰ "always strive,"¹⁰¹ "pursue in power and deed,"¹⁰² and, of course, "gladly keep His commandments."¹⁰³ How concretely and therefore practically Menno thinks of such a dynamic may be noted by what he singles out as an authentic miracle and worth reporting: "Many see or hear such miracles of Almighty God that a poor, unlearned man, yes, sometimes poor frail women or girls, are so fortified in God that they fear neither Judge nor executioner; that neither fire nor water, halter nor sword, life nor death, can frighten or deter them from the faith."¹⁰⁴

That Menno here does not merely have in mind mere passive admiration, but that he challenges to active following, may be noted from

the following statement in which he describes the faith of truly believing parents: "All properly believing parents are thus minded toward their children, that they would a hundred times rather see them jailed in a deep, dark dungeon for the sake of the Lord and His testimony than sitting with the deceiving priests in their idol church or with drunken dolts in taverns, or in company of scorners who despise the name of the Lord and hate His holy Word. A hundred times rather would they see them, for the sake of the truth of the Lord, bound hands and feet and dragged before lords and princes, than to see them marry rich persons who fear not God, neither walk in the ways of the Lord, and so be feted in dances, song, and play, with pomp and splendour, with pipe and drum, with lutes and cymbals. A hundred times rather would they see them scourged from head to foot for the sake of the glory and holy name of the Lord than to see them adorn themselves with silks, velvets, gold, silver, costly trimmed and tailored clothes, and the like vanity and pomp. Yes, a hundred times rather would they see them exiled, burning at the stake, drowning or attached to a wheel, for righteousness' sake, than to see them live apart from God in all luxury and carnal pleasures, or be emperors and kings and therefore sent to condemnation. Woe to all who are not so minded concerning their children."¹⁰⁵

Having celebrated the beauty of holiness in general terms, Menno is, of course, quite able to speak to specific issues. The chaste simplicity in clothing we have already noted, as well as the generally upright behaviour. For example, this means that the believer "will never drink talk, sing, and dance with shameless women."¹⁰⁶ In the community of true believers "murder is unknown." Also, "we know of no thieving, much less do we teach or permit it."¹⁰⁷ At the same time, there will be authentic hospitality. Menno offers a specific advice: "Do wash the feet of your beloved brethren and sisters who are come to you from a distance, tired."¹⁰⁸ At the same time, *Gastfreundschaft* is not to be abused: "True Christians ought not to burden each other with unnecessary expense."¹⁰⁹ Generally, there should abound "prudence and considerateness, politeness, fidelity, and piety." Likewise, Menno counsels to "avoid all useless bickering and disputations."¹¹⁰ And most certainly one will not engage in acts of violence.¹¹¹ Further details in regard to moral injunctions can be obtained from Menno's various comments on the use of the ban.¹¹² Yet it seems that in the midst of such details, Menno has been able to avoid paying attention to sheer trivia. In the last analysis his concern with "good works" is a way of celebrating the fruits of the once experienced and continuously maturing "new birth".

Notes

¹In Mennonite scholarship there has been a tendency to overlook that the magisterial Reformation in general and Martin Luther in particular ascribed a significant role to "good works," e.g. J. Lawrence Burkholder has stated that "If Luther rediscovered the Biblical doctrine of faith, the Anabaptists rediscovered the Biblical call to holiness." In Guy F. Hersherberger, ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1962), p. 148. Myron S. Augsbarger was convinced that "Menno does not write of good works in the same way Luther does, for in Anabaptist thought the new life is a fruit of the Spirit rather than an addition of good works to express faith." "Conversion in Anabaptist Thought," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 36 (1962): 245. In a more radical form, Menno Simons himself had set the precedent: "The Lutherans teach and believe that faith alone saves, without any assistance by works. They emphasize this doctrine so as to make it appear as though works were not even necessary; yes, that faith is of such a nature that it cannot tolerate any work alongside of it." *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561*, trans. from the Dutch by Leonard Verduin and edited by John Christian Wenger, with a biography by Harold S. Bender (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1956), p. 333, (Hence MS). For my earlier response, cf. "Luther on Sanctification: Humility and Courage," *Consensus; A Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology*, 10 (1984): 3-16 and "The Meaning of Good Works: Luther and the Anabaptists," *Word and World*, 6:2 (1986): 170-180.

²*Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 3:523-524. Cf. John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists: Luther, Melancthon, and Menius and the Anabaptists of Central Germany* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964); John Horsch, "The Persecution of the Evangelical Anabaptists," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 12 (1938): 3-26, (subsequently listed as MQR); Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History*, 13 (1944): 3-24, MQR, 18 (1944): 67-88, and in Guy F. Hersherberger, Ed., *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute To Harold S. Bender* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1957), pp. 29-54; Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618*. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 358-422; Claus Peter Clasen, "Execution of Anabaptists, 1525-1618: A Research Report," MQR, 47(1973): 115-152.

³MS, p. 65.

⁴MS, p. 537.

⁵MS, p. 525; cf. George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), p. 239, referring to *The Theodosian Code*, lib. XVI, tit. vi, 6, trans. by Clyde Pharr, *The Corpus of Toman Law*, I (Princeton, 1952).

⁶*Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 1:549-550.

⁷MS, p. 612, cf. 920-921, 926-927.

⁸MS, p. 612, cf. 920-921, 926-927.

⁹MS, p. 385.

¹⁰MS, p. 726-727, cr. 286, 1023.

¹¹MS, p. 27.

¹²MS, p. 232.

¹³MS, p. 295.

¹⁴MS, p. 557, cf. 208, 315, 330, 551, 561.

¹⁵MS, p. 201.

¹⁶MS, p. 400, cf. 526, 545, 562, 600, 610, 627.

¹⁷MS, p. 173.

¹⁸MS, p. 652, cf. 600-603.

¹⁹MS, p. 190, cf. 399, 762.

²⁰MS, p. 894.

²¹MS, p. 91.

²²MS, p. 360.

²³MS, p. 250.

²⁴MS, p. 250-251, cf. 151.

²⁵MS, p. 167.

²⁶MS, p. 368.

²⁷MS, p. 660.

²⁸MS, p. 508.

²⁹MS, p. 651.

³⁰MS, p. 159.

³¹MS, p. 168, cf. 502, 559.

³²MS, p. 99, cf. 185, 213, 529.

³³MS, p. 584-585.

³⁴MS, p. 84.

³⁵MS, p. 410, cf. 517, 901

³⁶*Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), p. 56.

³⁷Guy F. Hershberger, p. 137.

³⁸*ibid.*, p. 317.

³⁹*ibid.*, p. 317.

⁴⁰e.g. when Menno thought of his opponents as necessarily servants of the Anti-christ, cf. MS, pp. 179, 195, 317, 651, 665.

⁴¹Menno Simons (1496-1561) (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1936), p. 178.

⁴²*The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), pp. 78 and 87.

⁴³*Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1973), p. 29.

⁴⁴William Echard Kenney, *The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice from 1539-1564* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1968), p. 72, cf. p. 71, and Alvin J. Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1976), pp. 46-47.

⁴⁵John Ruusbroec, *The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works*, Introduction and translation by James A. Wiseman, O.S.B., Preface by Louis Dupre, (New York, Mahwah, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 44.

⁴⁶*ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

⁴⁸For the most lucid interpretation of this term, cf. Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 131-145.

⁴⁹John Ruusbroec, p. 45.

⁵⁰It should not be overlooked that not all sixteenth century churchmen recognized this need. Thus Erasmus, eloquent and detailed defense of the freedom of the will contained only this entirely too brief statement that he sides with "those who attribute entirely to grace the first impulse which stirs the soul, yet in the performance allow something to human choice which has not withdrawn itself from the grace of God." *Erasmus: De Libero Arbitrio*, translated and edited by E. Gordon Rupp in collaboration with A.N. Marlow, in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 17), (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 90.

⁵¹MS, p. 33.

⁵²MS, p. 411.

⁵³MS, p. 504.

⁵⁴MS, p. 116.

⁵⁵MS, p. 605.

⁵⁶MS, p. 76.

⁵⁷MS, p. 397.

⁵⁸MS, p. 398, cf. 569, 685.

⁵⁹MS, p. 504.

⁶⁰MS, p. 509.

⁶¹MS, p. 545.

⁶²MS, pp. 566-567.

⁶³MS, p. 654, cf. 659.

⁶⁴MS, pp. 132, 294, 318; cf. the insightful comment by John C. Wenger: "Menno Simons found great comfort in the Biblical doctrine of election. Believers may have the assurance that it was God Himself who loved them with an everlasting love. This eternal love of God moved Him to choose us in Christ before the foundation of the world," *MQR*, 35(1961): 65-66.

⁶⁵Cf. J.A. Oosterbaan, "Grace in Dutch Mennonite Theology," in Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *A Legacy of Faith* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1962), p. 81.

⁶⁶MS, pp. 429-430.

⁶⁷MS, p. 261, cf. 262.

⁶⁸MS, p. 505.

⁶⁹MS, p. 107.

⁷⁰MS, p. 338.

⁷¹MS, p. 592.

⁷²MS, p. 506.

⁷³MS, p. 760.

⁷⁴MS, p. 240.

⁷⁵MS, p. 267.

⁷⁶MS, p. 269.

⁷⁷MS, p. 328.

⁷⁸MS, p. 738.

⁷⁹MS, p. 328.

⁸⁰MS, p. 396, cf. 307.

⁸¹J. A. Oosterbaan, p. 82 supplies an insightful definition of grace, without, however, clarifying the problem of grace and free will.

⁸²John C. Wenger, "Grace and Discipleship in Anabaptism," *MQR*, 35 (1961):50, formulates the precise question: "Did our Anabaptist fathers believe in some sort of synergism, and did they hold a low view of grace of God?" Harold S. Bender, *MQR*, 35(1961):97 comments: "The life here described is not one of moral self-endeavour and legalism, but one in which grace, faith, and the Spirit's power unite with the human will to produce a life of holiness before God and man." Yet the ambiguity remains, as Bender does not describe the status of the will before the gift of grace. A similar ambiguity is present in William Keeney, in Walter Klaassen, ed., *No Other Foundation: Commemorative Essays on Menno Simons* (North Newton, Bethel College, 1962), p. 15.

⁸³Alvin J. Beachy, p. 69 unduly generalizes: "While Dirk Philips and Menno Simons do not . . . explicitly connect the freedom of the will in otherwise fallen man with the universal grace which Christ, as the second Adam, has won through the atonement, such a view is implicit in many of their statements. A strongly voluntaristic tone colors all of their writings and forms the background of all their thought."

⁸⁴MS, p. 60.

⁸⁵MS, p. 92.

⁸⁶MS, p. 92.

⁸⁷MS, p. 225.

⁸⁸MS, p. 715.

⁸⁹MS, p. 719.

⁹⁰MS, p. 370.

⁹¹MS, p. 372.

⁹²MS, p. 394.

⁹³MS, p. 563.

⁹⁴Of course, the central role of justification has been at times recognized, e.g., Cornelius J. Dyck, "The Life of the Spirit in Anabaptism," *MQR*, 47(1973):318.

⁹⁵MS, p. 58.

⁹⁶MS, p. 149.

⁹⁷MS, p. 221.

⁹⁸MS, p. 236; cf. Willis M. Stoesz, "The New Creature: Menno Simon's Understanding of the Christian Faith," *MQR*, 39(1965):5-24.

⁹⁹MS, p. 307.

¹⁰⁰MS, p. 320.

¹⁰¹MS, p. 482.

¹⁰²MS, p. 611.

¹⁰³MS, p. 394.

¹⁰⁴MS, p. 385.

¹⁰⁵MS, pp. 386-387.

¹⁰⁶MS, p. 183.

¹⁰⁷MS, p. 200.

¹⁰⁸MS, p. 417.

¹⁰⁹MS, p. 1028.

¹¹⁰MS, p. 1034.

¹¹¹MS, pp. 175, 423, 424, 556.

¹¹²MS, pp. 23-28, 406-418, 455-485, 723-734, 959-998, 1043, 1050-1051, 1060-1063.