

Donald Stoesz, *Canadian Prairie Mennonite Ministers' Use of Scripture: 1874-1977*. Victoria, BC: Self-Published, Friesen Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 307. Softcover, \$32.99.

The title of Donald Stoesz's book promises a focused historical study. Stoesz, who earned a PhD from McGill University in 1991, seems to have the skills to undertake such a task. The book is the fruit of extensive research, over a fifteen-year period, into sermon manuscripts based on over four hundred sermon texts, and is published with financial support of the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation.

The book itself addresses three interconnected concerns. The first issue is the relationship between a simultaneous shift from lectionary use to extemporaneous preaching and from a traditional episcopal system of ecclesial authority and structure to a more congregationally driven system. The first chapter addresses this matter using the split between the Sommerfelder and Bergthaler churches of Manitoba as a case study.

Second, Stoesz writes about the historical origins of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church lectionary and does so in chapter two. Here he notes similarities and differences among Mennonite, Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic lectionaries. Third, Stoesz outlines themes in texts used by Mennonite ministers as a way to describe the contours of period Mennonite spirituality; he undertakes this task in chapters three and four.

The remaining chapters of the book consist of more detailed examinations of preaching patterns of three particular Mennonite ministers who served in circuits of prairie Mennonite congregations. One chapter is devoted to their sermons, described in terms of theme, text, and use of the lectionary. The final chapter looks at three individual sermons preached on texts from the book of 1 Peter. A total of six appendices contain lists of sermon texts, locations of sermon assignments, and three translated sermon manuscripts.

The book's success in accomplishing the author's aims is somewhat mixed. Although he does document substantial use of a lectionary by Mennonite preachers, Stoesz makes other insufficiently substantiated claims in the book. He overreaches in implying that Sommerfelder Mennonites intentionally attempted to work ecumenically and in the service of a liturgical tradition dating to pre-Reformation times. The cause of the shift from episcopal to congregational polity—Stoesz portrays the contrast as Tradition versus Charisma (15)—is assumed in the book more than it is docu-

mented. The organization of biblical texts into categories in chapter three seems to reflect his own theological perspective more than the documented commitments of Mennonite leaders.

Generally, it is not clear that the trends and emphases Stoesz identifies arise from changes in lectionary use. It could be argued as convincingly that Mennonite engagement with North American evangelical Christianity exerted the effects noted in the book.

As one might expect from a self-published work, the book seems to suffer from the lack of a thorough editorial review. An abundance of material seems unrelated to the book's main topic, and it is often difficult to discern a consistent line of argumentation. Another glaring omission is an index, making searches difficult. Nevertheless, there may be kernels of information that could benefit a patient researcher.

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Bruce Guenther, *The Ältester: Herman D.W. Friesen, A Mennonite Leader in Changing Times*. Regina: University of Regina Press, 2018. Pp. xii + 308. Softcover, \$34.95.

Bruce Guenther holds a PhD from McGill University, teaches church history at Trinity Western University, and for six years was president of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary. As an historian he has expertise in Canadian Mennonite studies, theological education, and the history of evangelicalism and fundamentalism in western Canada. How would this highly educated leader write the story of a people who have been wary of formal higher education and been described as “deluded and foolish,” “culturally retarded” (10), and in need of salvation? In fact, the first Mennonite Brethren Church in Canada began after Mennonite Brethren missionaries from the United States converted Old Colony members and re-baptized them in 1888.

The book provides a wonderfully rich contextual basis for the story of the Old Colony people starting with the migration to Manitoba in the 1870s and the migration to Saskatchewan two decades later. For decades the Old Colony was the largest Mennonite group in Western Canada, but in Canada today they are usually treated as a fringe group. There was a drastic reduction in the number of Old Colony people because of the Manitoba and Saskatchewan gov-