

Concerning Intermarriage: A Dutch-Mennonite Admonition to the Russian Mennonites, 1788

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Ever since the time of Menno Simons (1496-1561) Mennonites in the Netherlands and North-West Germany sought to maintain "pure" congregations, i.e., Christian communities whose members led holy lives. This stress on holiness led to a strict application of congregational discipline, including the practice of banning and shunning members who had lapsed morally.¹ In extreme instances excommunication was followed by marital avoidance, which meant that a banned member was denied his or her spouse's "table and bed."² A member thus shunned was effectively excluded from the community and even family life. Such punishment did not always have the desired effect, which was to bring the straying member back to the fold. While Menno had been more lenient with regard to banning in general and marital avoidance in particular than his fellow elders, he agreed with them that strict discipline was necessary to maintain a "pure church."

The question of how strictly the ban was to be applied, led toward the end of the sixteenth century to the development of several distinct groups. The Flemish and Frisian Mennonites were generally fairly strict with regard to the application of the ban and shunning. They sometimes even excommunicated members who married someone from another Mennonite congregation. The more liberal Waterlander Mennonites, residing in Amsterdam and along the coastal regions, were more tolerant

of other Mennonites and members of non-Mennonite churches.³

When the Flemish and Frisian Mennonites migrated to Poland and Prussia they generally maintained their traditional division and practices, banning members who married outside their particular group. As late as the eighteenth century, on the eve of Prussian-Mennonites' migration to Russia, disunity and tensions continued to plague the Prussian communities. The Russian government worried about this state of affairs. While willing and anxious to welcome as many industrious Mennonite settlers as possible, the Russians feared that Mennonite disunity would lead to social problems in New Russia. The Russian government thus wished that the Mennonites would come to Russia as one united congregation.⁴

The question of Mennonite unity was a major concern of George von Trappe, the Russian government official in charge of the Mennonite settlement programme. On his way to England in 1788 he stopped over in the Netherlands to speak to the Dutch Mennonite leaders about his government's concern, hoping that the more liberal and tolerant Dutch would be able to exert some positive influence upon their coreligionists in Prussia who were about to set out for Russia. Von Trappe visited the Mennonites in Amsterdam, Haarlem, and Harlingen, including such leaders as Pastor Heere Oosterbaan, the moderator of the Friesland Mennonite Conference (Sociëteit).⁵

The Dutch Mennonites were happy to comply with von Trappe's request. J.C. Sepp of the Old Flemish Mennonite congregation of Amsterdam wrote a letter, dated May 15, 1788, to the elders and ministers of the Danzig congregations.⁶ The letter stated that Her Imperial Majesty Catherine the Great "would be happy to see the different Mennonite congregations united as one community and free to intermarry."⁷ A similar but much longer missive, dated July 31, 1788, was written by Pastor Oosterbaan. The missive was the result of a meeting of delegates from the Friesland Mennonite Conference convened to discuss von Trappe's concern. It is this missive which we have translated, the first English version as far as we could determine.

The missive is divided into two unequal parts. The first and shorter part addresses the participants at the meeting which was called to discuss von Trappe's concern with regard to unity and intermarriage among the Prussian-Russian Mennonites. The second part is directed to the Mennonites who were either about to leave Prussia for Russia or who had embarked upon the journey already. The missive addresses the "Mennonite Christians from Danzig who have settled in the domains of Her Majesty, Catherine the Great," but the first group of migrants, some 228 families, did not settle in the Chortitza region until the summer of 1789. It is thus possible that the Mennonite settlers learned of the missive at Dubrovna, north of Kiev, where they had encamped for the winter of 1788 - 89 before proceeding to their destination farther south.⁸

The Dutch argue in this missive that there should be no banning of members marrying from the Frisian into the Flemish group or vice versa. Whereas Christians should be concerned about holiness and purity in the church, the missive explains, banning members who marry "outside" their particular group is neither biblical nor

consistent with Christian love. The missive leaves no doubt about what the Dutch Mennonites thought of applying the ban strictly: As far as they were concerned, a strict application of the ban was a misinterpretation of the gospel which led to unnecessary suffering of members, sometimes even to their spiritual ruin.

There is some reason to believe that the letter of May 15 and the missive of July 31, 1788, bore some fruit. Cornelius Regier, the elder of Heubuden, Prussia, admonished the departing emigrants to strive seriously toward Christian charity and tolerance toward each other. Also, while tension between the Frisian and Flemish Mennonites continued into the nineteenth century, intermarriage between the two groups did take place in Russia.⁹

Originally written in German, the missive was printed in Dutch at Leeuwarden in the printery of Johannes Seydel. It was later reprinted by Blaupot ten Cate in *Geschiedenis der Doopsgezinden in Friesland* (Leeuwarden, 1837).¹⁰ Gary Waltner, director of the Mennonitische Forschungsstelle at the Weierhof, Germany, kindly provided a copy of the missive from which our translation was done.

A few notes about the translation are in order. Doopsgezinde(n) has been rendered throughout with Mennonite; societeit with society; gemeente with congregation or church congregation; gezindheden with persuasion (noun) or Christian communion or Christian community; Uw. Eerw., literally your honours, with respected brothers. The pagination of the original is in square brackets in the translated text.

The missive is a valuable source for helping us to understand an important Mennonite practice that has divided and troubled Mennonites throughout the centuries. It is also a fascinating document, saying a lot about the sophisticated level of biblical understanding and exegesis among the Doopsgezinden. This is, of course, not surprising since the Dutch Mennonites had a theological seminary since 1735.

LETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF MENNONITE
CONGREGATIONS IN FRIESLAND AND GRONINGEN

written
to the Mennonite Christians
from Danzig who have settled
in the domains of Her Majesty,
Catharina the Great, Empress of all the Russias

At Leeuwarden per the
Printery of Johannes Seydel
Bookseller at the corner of
the Koningstratt.

Paid by the Society

[I]

THE ADDRESS GIVEN AT THE EXTRAORDINARY ASSEMBLY OF
THE MENNONITE CONGREGATIONS IN FRIESLAND AND
GRONINGEN HELD AT LEEUWARDEN ON 31 JULY IN THE YEAR 1788.

Respected brothers and ministers in the proclamation of the Word and in the care for the poor in the Christian Society of the Mennonites in Friesland and Groningen: grace and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, and from Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

It is generally known that after the rise of the Mennonites about the middle of the 16th century unfortunate major dissensions arose among them. They disagreed on various issues which were certainly not all of equal importance, and I will not burden your attention by rehearsing them again. The differences were driven by excessive zeal. The great difficulty of holding to a middle path is characteristic of human affairs. [2] A good quality, exaggerated, not infrequently leads to evil consequences. In those days of anxiety in which the proclamation and confession of the truth caused the most severe persecution, and when those who championed the pure teaching of the Gospel were threatened every moment with stake and strangling-post, an unshakable courage and fiery zeal were essential in order to stand firm against the flood of prejudice, to cast off the vain fear of men, and to fear only Him who can destroy soul and body in hell. Through these experiences they became accustomed to applying the same zeal in full measure to dealing with less important issues. In some steadfastness developed into obstinacy, and courage into quick-tempered insistence on particular ideas. Instead of bearing each other in love in issues of little importance, they separated into a multitude of parties. They banned and made heretics of each other over trivialities. The more moderate tried in

vain to persuade hearts and minds toward accommodation and understanding. They were not only deaf to these voices, but made them the objects of intemperate prejudices, and [3] burdened them with hateful names and undeserved reproaches. To enter into a marriage with someone who, albeit Mennonite, held another point of view, was quite sufficient among many of them to be banned from the congregation. The consequences of this ban were the total cutting-off of all relations with those banned, it was expected that the other should not have the slightest contact until the banned spouse was reconciled to the congregation. However, let us not further rehearse these unfortunate errors of earlier times. I should not have said about them as much as I did, were it not that the occasion of this extraordinary gathering made it necessary.

Now to the issue. Her majesty, Empress of Russia, has established a colony of Mennonites from Danzig on a parcel of land along the Dnepr River under the leadership of Prince Potemkin Tauritscheskoi, and [4] given them significant privileges. Among these Mennonites there are still remnants of the old mischievous zeal which elsewhere had totally disappeared, and which in this country has for many faded from memory. The Danzig Mennonites, at least some of them, still ban members who marry outsiders. For good reason the Empress considers this a source of shocking factionalism and as incompatible with the happiness and well-being of her colony. For this reason Herr Trappe, who under Prince Potemkin administers the colony, now advises to use all suitable means to stop this misuse of church discipline, and to convince his friends of its impropriety. To achieve this he contacted a number of congregations and ministers who agreed to cooperate with him by writing friendly letters to the Danzig Mennonites. He wishes that the same can be done by the Mennonites in Friesland, and has had conversation on the issue with some of the ministers. The special committee of the Society, gathered for [5] that purpose, judged the matter of too great importance to ignore, and did not consider themselves authorized to take any action, but rather to consult the wishes of the Society.

These then, brothers, are the reasons for which you were asked to gather here, so that each one may express an opinion as to whether the writing and sending of a letter to these people would be useful. We should have unanimity or at least a majority to proceed.

I do not desire to preempt anyone's views in this matter. Allow me, however, a single comment. Judged by the purposes for which the ordinary gatherings of our Society were established, this matter may seem somewhat unusual. On the other hand, making an attempt to help the spread of love and peace and tolerance is a good work. Should our attempts be successful, we will have the satisfaction of having done our part for the true salvation of our fellowmen. If not, we can at least comfort [6] ourselves with the knowledge that we cannot be blamed for the failure but are assured of God's approval for our good intentions.

I judge that I have said enough, respected brother, to give you a clear picture of the purpose for our gathering. Let us now, before we proceed, call upon the Most High for his blessing and illumination.

[II]

[7] The Mennonite Christians who have settled in the domains of her Rus-Imperial Majesty, we wish grace and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen!

Herr Trappe, her Majesty the Empress of all the Russias' director of a colony of Mennonites in the domains of her Imperial Majesty, who was recently in this country, has told us and our fellow believers in Holland that it is still the practice in your congregations to exclude with the ban all members who enter the bond of marriage with persons of convictions other than yours, and in general with all who do not belong to your congregations, and to cut them off from your fellowship and all association with you. Her Rus-Imperial Majesty regards severance for such reasons as incompatible with the love Christians owe one another, desires that the practice be discontinued, and that those who marry outside the congregation will nevertheless [8] remain on the membership roll and be treated as such.

Herr Trappe urgently requested various of our leaders, indeed whole congregations here and in Holland that, in order to advance to this good and necessary goal, they offer their services to your respected congregations. In our province we decided to call an extraordinary gathering of all the Mennonite congregations which have here been united in a society. After consideration by all we decided to prepare and send a letter on this subject to your respected congregations.

Respected friends and brothers, the matter is so serious and Herr Trappe's intervention in our view so legitimate, that we should explain that we share with you, respected [brothers], our thinking on this issue on this suitable occasion with joy. We request in all friendliness that you would consider our thoughts with nonpartisan attention, and, after you have tested everything, to keep what is good.

We can certainly not approve of marriage between persons of widely divergent views in religion. Experience teaches us that unfortunate consequences are often the result. Sometimes both parties become lukewarm and are in danger of [9] falling into indifference. If they are on guard against it it may happen that one or other of the spouses will attempt a change of ideas. The natural desire, however, is that whatever we hold to be the truth will also so be viewed by others, and tends to increase with married people between whom such a close and ongoing commonality exists, and the love they have for each other increases that desire. However, from this may flow very unpleasant consequences. If spouses cannot convince each other and both remain tied to their own ideas, they go from reasoned debate to the distortion of meaning and bickering. Passions gradually increase and cause a cooling of that love and inclination which first stimulated them and which are so constantly advocated both by natural reason and by God's holy Word. While the danger increases that each becomes more zealous in personal conviction and think to be ever more firmly convinced about the truth they hold, that zeal is not informed and guided by an equal measure of understanding. At the same time the results of such quarrels will have a negative impact on the raising of the children. When some

follow the father and some the mother, estrangements between brothers and sisters will easily happen, whom it becomes above all to live together in love [10] and peace. Again, if the spouses are persons of vehement passions and limited humility, the effects will naturally be much worse, and could finally issue in total aversion, mutual condemnation and complete neglect of nurture.

You understand therefore, respected friends and brothers, that we are far from approving marriages between persons of widely differing convictions in religion. Certainly they are imprudent. But is it not quite another matter to call them wicked, so wicked indeed that a person in whom one can find no other fault should for it be cut off from the congregation? This question we may quite confidently answer with NO.

Although sometimes unpleasant consequences may flow from such marriages, these do not of necessity follow. They can be prevented with little effort through the sensible conduct of marriage partners. Two persons, both of whom earnestly intend to obey the commands of our Lord, and who are united in the precepts and principle truths of religion, may well disagree with each other in their understanding on one or another particularity or some speculative points, and still bear one another in love. [11] It will not often, perhaps never, happen that two people will agree completely on all subjects. Even as differences in facial features among human beings are legitimate, and there are no two persons whose faces are identical, so one will everywhere encounter differences in thinking. This is the case not only between people of different persuasions and confessions, but also between people who accept the same convictions and are members of the same congregation. Now if one were to allow no marriages except between persons who though identically on all religious matters or who could at least be so persuaded, then one might as well completely prohibit marriage, notwithstanding that such prohibition would oppose the intentions and will of the Creator who judged that it would not be good for man to be alone. Even as two good friends, so also married people can bear with each other in their differences in thinking in matters of religion as well as in other subjects. How often preferences over food and drink, dress and lifestyle vary extensively among people who, notwithstanding, live in good friendship and unity with each other.

It may perhaps be said that this can be the case when disagreement concerns a few trifles, [12] but that the case changes radically in its form when two people disagree on principle matters. We readily acknowledge that the differences can be so great that marriage between such persons should not even be considered. Union between a Christian and a worshipper of false gods, or with a Muslim, or a blasphemer of our Lord Jesus Christ and thus, to use the words of the Apostle, "to pull on the same yoke with unbelievers," should be absolutely disapproved of. One could say virtually the same thing in the case where one of two spouses belongs to a community of Christians who expect that everyone should submit to their view of things. These people claim to have the right to pursue those who refuse with the use of force, coercion and temporal penalties, and, if that is not possible, to exclude them from eternal salvation in heaven. But the case is quite different in a marriage

between members of other Christian communions. The points on which they differ are not so important that they would necessarily disturb the peace between spouses, nor expose the one or the other to the danger of being led astray by destructive error. All believe in the one true God, the Creator, sustainer, and ruler of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of the Father, the mediator between God and man, who having appeared [13] in the flesh, submitted himself to all the troubles of this earthly life, underwent the bitterest suffering for our sake, died and was raised up, ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of God. From there, on the last day, he will return to judge the living and the dead. All regard this Jesus as their only teacher, Lord, and King in the spiritual and religious life, to whose commandments alone they are obliged to submit, and who alone has the right to prescribe the laws of faith for his subjects. All know themselves in duty bound faithfully to obey the laws of the Gospel, to love God with the whole heart, and the neighbor as themselves, and to keep themselves unspotted from the world. Living by these truths they may humbly expect the reward of grace, eternal life, which the Most High, according to his mercy in Jesus Christ, has promised to all who love him. Is it not possible that people who generally agree on these basics, even though they may differ in their thinking on some particular points, can live in peace and harmony if they earnestly intend *to do the truth in love*?

It may be objected here that in the law of Moses God specifically forbade marriages of Israelites with the people who lived in the land of Canaan. [14] Exod. 34:16, Deut. 7:3; cf. Ezra 9. This demands a full response.

1. This command, which under Ezra seems to have been extended to include other peoples, actually concerned only the Canaanites, who, upon God's specific command, were to be utterly rooted out in punishment [for their sins] but also as a deterrence for the Israelites, and to protect Israel against the danger of being led astray. Apart from this case the Israelites were free to take as wives young women whom they had taken as prisoners of war and who, according to the usage of the time, had become their slaves. This is clearly seen in Deut. 21:10-14.

2. Second, that commandment was part of the civil laws which God had given Israel, which were not binding on other peoples, and could not be fitted to their circumstances. Undoubtedly these laws, whose origin was in God himself, were the fairest and best that the people of Israel had the capacity to receive. But it does not follow from this that these laws should be accepted in their entirety in other countries with a totally different climate, other customs, habits, and styles of life. Even as the Mosaic ceremonial [15] law, given by God in his wisdom, did not extend to other nations and which, after the coming of the Saviour in the flesh was totally abolished, so also was the civil law given to Israel alone, and disappeared with the fall of the Jewish state.

3. The primary reason for which God forbade marriage between the children of Israel and the Canaanites was the danger of being seduced [to idolatry]. "Do not marry them," said God, "giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your sons from following me to serve other gods." Deut. 7:3-4. Here was the greatest danger whether we consider the

wickedness of the transgression of idolatry particularly in the civil state of Israel, or whether we give attention to the condition of the persons against whom this law was invoked. Worship of false gods is certainly an abomination before God, and one is obligated carefully to avoid all circumstances which could put one in danger of idolatry. In addition, the Israelites were so enslaved to shameful superstitions that even God's clearest revelations and most emphatic commandments were not able to restrain them. Virtually every page of their history [16] from Moses to the Babylonian exile testifies to this. The wisest of their kings [Solomon] fell into idolatry in advanced age. The reason for it was no other than his foolish love for idolatrous women. But all that can never be used to support the view that marriage between Christians of differing views and communities should be forbidden. At least one cannot accuse any Protestant Christians of idolatry. Hence the danger of seduction to idolatry is absent.

4. If we should wish to deduce from Jewish laws and customs authority that can be used against the marriage of people who adhere to the same faith but belong to different church communities, we should first have to show that marriages between Pharisees, Saducees, and Essenes among the people of Israel were specifically forbidden. The question also remains whether such a prohibition was a human invention rather than a divine institution. If it were the latter, did it apply to all nations, or was it only for the Jews? We are not prepared to assert that no shadow of this kind of thing is to be found in all of the burden of Israelite laws and among all the human inventions with which the scribes increased the burden. However, [17] respected friends and brothers, we live above all that, under the Gospel, freed from the servitude of the Law. And what does the Gospel say? It commands us in all earnestness to achieve the sanctification of our souls. It commands us to "seek the things that are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God," Col. 3:1, and to "mortify our members which are upon earth," verse 5. That means to forsake all our foul sins and all uncontrollable passions. Therefore each one of us is obligated to take heed of committing anything through which we would naturally fall into the danger of lusting for the sensual pleasure of this life, and of being led astray into forsaking the truth. However, is this danger in a marriage with someone from a different church community so great that for this reason alone such a marriage should be totally forbidden, identified as illicit and punished, even though no other impediment may be brought against it?

What does the Apostle Paul teach us? "If any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not separate from her. And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to life with her, she should not separate from him." I Cor. 7:12-13. True, the Apostle presents this view as his own conviction, and not as one for which he has a specific command from God. Even so, [18] this conviction of the Apostle Paul is surely more weighty than that of people who do not possess the enlightenment and gifts of the Holy Spirit by which those first disciples of the Lord Jesus were illuminated. It is also true that the Apostle does not approve of entering into marriage with an unbeliever, but only approves the continuation of a marriage that had already begun before one of the

spouses was converted. At the same time it is true that marriage with an unbeliever differs greatly from the matrimonial bond with a Christian who, although perhaps in error at some points, nevertheless is in agreement on that which is necessary for salvation.

Should we not also listen to that same Apostle when he says on another occasion, "Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions?" Suppose we regard the brothers or sisters who marry outside the congregation, but who in all other respects are good godfearing persons, as weak in the faith. Should we for that reason exclude them? Suppose we regard them as in error, as people who are in danger of falling even further, should we not much rather support and protect them through friendly admonitions? The evil they have done, insofar as it is an obvious evil, [19] cannot be changed. The marriage is solemnized. That which has been joined together no man may separate, and certainly you do not desire this. What is the purpose and what the impact of the ban on those who, after all, in obedience to divine and human laws must persevere in a state they are told is sinful?

Beyond that, respected friends and brothers, consider into what confusion such a person must be cast. The separation from the congregation must be trouble- and burdensome. He wishes to fulfil his duties and to practice the ceremonies which the Saviour prescribed for his disciples. These are denied him by judgment on a deed for which no improvement is possible. Will it not naturally follow that he will begin to brood about it, perhaps begin to have doubts about his salvation, and finally fall totally into despair? Or even that he gradually becomes accustomed to thinking of his spouse with aversion and as an obstacle to his admission to the Lord's Table? This could happen quickly depending upon how sensitive and emotive he is. And when it happens, how terrible the consequences could be in respect to the domestic peace of the spouses and their moral conduct. On the other hand, a person who is less emotionally tender and of a stronger spirit may through such an exclusion [20] become completely alienated from the community and arrive at a level of indifference the consequences of which would be no less serious.

We take the liberty to make our views known to you, respected [brothers] that the ban or exclusion from the congregation may only be used to restrain gross sinners who publicly surrender themselves to fleshly pursuits. It is a witness that the congregation of Christ can have no fellowship with those who walk in darkness and who, if they do not repent and turn to God, can certainly only expect eternal destruction separated from the face of God. And who may render such an extreme sentence on a person against whom nothing may be charged except marriage to a person, who at some points in religious conviction, is attached to other views than his own? Such a person would need to answer the question of the Apostle: "Who are you that you judge another's servant?" And if one presumes to do this, but at the same time not to exclude a brother who is perhaps in error at this point from the expectation of salvation, how can we then refuse to admit to the table or the Lord here below along with ourselves him with whom we hope one day to sit at the wedding banquet of the Lamb in heaven? No, worthy brothers and friends; let us not

give room to such a conflict of convictions and practices among us, and especially [21] not against those whose marriages take place within the circle of the Protestant communions. Even less should this happen to those who marry only a Mennonite brother or sister from a group with a different name.

In this our country are many examples of similar marriages, and we believe that we are not authorized to prevent such marriages in any way except through dissuasion if the occasion demands it. We gladly acknowledge that our example in this matter cannot be conclusive, and that you, respected [brothers] are required to act according to the conviction of your conscience and not according to any human example. Nevertheless, we also hope that the above contribution is sufficient to show you the lawfulness and appropriateness of our practice. We hope also to persuade you, respected [brothers], to work with us for the removal of all obstacles which stand in the way of that peace and love which was urged on all Christians at such great cost by their Master. In truth, those things which, without doing any essential good, only serve to increase or entrench schisms, should be abolished everywhere, in all Christian communions so that the whole company of Christians may be of one heart and soul.

After what we have said concerning the ban and separation [22] we should not dwell at length on the shunning which follows upon exclusion. In cases where exclusion does not come into play, shunning also falls away, as is evident. But there are certainly cases in which the Christian congregation is permitted, indeed required, to make visible her rejection of the open evil behaviour of some of her members and to declare that she will have no fellowship with them and their works, not "with anyone who bears the name of brother who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber." I Cor.5:11. To have community relations with such as long as they persist in their error, is certainly not proper, not to speak of the danger of infection by the evil. The Apostle urges that one should "not eat" with them. This prohibition or warning certainly does not include members of one's own household or the nearest relations of the offender. In forbidding a married couple the mutual carrying out of the duties of social life towards each other and daily family intercourse, one would also tear apart all the ties of common living, and, with respect to the banned one, act directly against the intention of the Apostle. For he teaches us: "If anyone is not obedient to our word in this letter, take note of him; have nothing to do with him, so that he may be ashamed.[23] Do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother," II Thess. 3:14-15. The intention of the Apostle was, therefore, the improvement of the offender. Is it, however, likely that this should be achieved by so radical a shunning as was once practiced? Human beings are inclined to sociableness. Abandoned by his natural and nearest friends, a person will find other company in order not to fall totally into dejection and despair. And his company could possibly lead him further and further astray and further and further from that shame to which St. Paul desired to bring him. The command, therefore, "not to eat" with them or having some social intercourse, actually concerns those who are not obligated to live with the offender in social relations because of ties of blood or for other reasons. But to forbid normal

relations to close members of the same household and especially between spouses can never have been the Apostle's intention. In the case of these last the most terrible results would follow, and often bring much more serious offenses in its train than the one that started it all. The Apostle John says it well: "Do not receive into the house who comes to you and does not bring this teaching. Neither say to him 'We greet you.'" II John 10. It is not certain that the discussion here is clearly about strangers [24] and that the 'greeting' likely implies the wish of God's blessing on their undertaking. What is clear is that the Apostle is here speaking about false prophets and teachers, about "deceivers who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh," verse 7. The concern expressed about these totally corrupt people who aggressively opposed the teaching of the Apostles may certainly not be applied to the ordinary failures of those who on the whole accept the teaching of the Gospel.

We could have discussed this matter much more extensively, but agreed that enough has been said to put before you, respected [brothers], the basis and justification for a moderate practice in this matter. Certainly we have commanded your attention long enough. We confess that we have no other intention than the spread of Christian love and tolerance. We trust that you, respected [brothers], will accept it as such. Our efforts would be more than richly rewarded could we contribute to this goal and to your success and welfare.

We end with the heartfelt wish that we may all grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and for ever. Amen. With this wish, respected friends and brothers, we are your obedient friends and brothers in Christ, the Society of Mennonite Congregations in Friesland and Groningen and in their name

Preachers/Teachers

H. Oosterbaan

P. Stinstra

A. Staal

A. Wijtses

Deacons

P. Huiderkoper

B.J. Brouwer

J.v.d. Plaats

B. Haijes

K.O. Gorter

bookkeeper of Three Assemblies

P. Ij. Tichelaar

bookkeeper of the Southern Assembly

Leeuwarden

31 July, 1788

Notes

¹See Menno Simons on the question of banning in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons c. 1496 - 1561*. Trans. from the Dutch by Leonard Verduin and ed. by John Christian Wenger, with a biography by Harold S. Bender (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), pp. 1043 - 45; 1050 - 51.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 1060 - 63.

³C. Henry Smith, *Smith's Story of the Mennonites*. Fifth Edition Revised and Enlarged by Cornelius Krahn (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981), pp. 109-15.

⁴D.H. Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten. Versuch einer Darstellung des Entwicklungsganges derselben* (Odessa, Russland: 1889). Reprint: Steinbach, Manitoba: 1984, pp. 38 - 43. Cf. also James Urry, *None but Saints. The Transformation of Mennonite Life in Russia 1789-1889* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1989), p.65, ft.3. On the relationship between the Prussian and Russian Mennonites, see Adolf Ens, "The Tie That Binds: Prussian and Russian Mennonites (1788-1794)," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 8, 1990, pp.34-51.

⁵*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. IV: 745.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten*, pp. 39 - 40. Translation mine. See also Urry, *None but Saints*, p.67, especially ft.11. Note also Urry, "The Closed and the Open," Thesis, Oxford University, 1978, pp.52,54-55,115.

⁸We have not been able to determine when the Russian Mennonites received the missive. It was probably sent to the elders in Danzig and a lack of leaders among the emigrants may have restricted its transmission.

⁹Epp, *Die Chortitzer Mennoniten*, p. 41.

¹⁰*The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, Vol. III: 717.