

THE NEW CONSERVATIVES

by Melvin Lehman

Those of us who grew up in the 1960's are known as the baby boomers. In childhood our generation felt the cool shades of the early Cold War and the fear of the "Red Scare." We experienced the tension of the Cuban Missile Crisis and were rudely awakened by the assassination of a president. As teenagers we were horrified by the graphic scenes of a war half-way around the world that confused the average American. Many of our brothers and sisters spent time away from home doing a stint of 1-W in obedience to the laws of the land. We experienced the intoxicating effects of the free-spirited rebellious 60's. Many of us attended public schools and so were exposed to the spirit of the age, and there we drank from the cisterns of the popular ideas of the day. Some survived. Many succumbed.

Against this backdrop of popular culture, our own Mennonite communities were convulsed by movements within and without during the 1960's. The solidarity in the conservative Mennonite Church was challenged and finally broken along the fault-lines of these movements. There was significant disintegration from the mid-60's through the early 70's. Conferences dissolved or experienced an administrative metamorphosis that weakened their solidarity. New "alliances" and alignments emerged. Most of this activity was clothed in the garb of "liberal" or "conservative" terminology and practice. In spite of the obvious relativity of these terms, it could be argued that for a while they had real content and real meaning. In my opinion as the years have gone by, the content and the meaning of these ideas have become increasingly obscure.

I remember those days as if they were but yesterday. With clarity I recall my instinctive reaction to the boldest of Mennonite liberal thought and practice. Young and as inexperienced as I was, I knew that this was not the path for me and my family. But the answers were not easy and some decisions not all that clear. Conservative thought and practice had its flaws and snares too that could potentially militate against a genuine spirituality. Giving all due respect to some of our friends who chose differently, my wife and I chose a decidedly conservative path...some may call it moderately conservative. Why? Well, we found that most people on this path took the Word of the Lord seriously. If God said so, then so it is! Of course many inconsistencies can be pointed out and they ought not to be ignored. Nevertheless, a commitment to Jesus as Lord and the subsequent understanding of the call to obedience seemed to my wife and me to be a good "rule" to live by. It was and is our desire that our children and grandchildren would walk in the same path.

Recently, it occurred to me that conservative Mennonite practice has developed along several different lines of thought. There is what may be called the Old Conservatism that has sought diligently to maintain certain baselines at all costs. There is much to be respected and appreciated in this general stream of thought. In my years of work at Faith Builders, I have become increasingly aware that there is also a New

Conservatism that I believe has emerged and found expression in many communities across North America. I coin the term "New Conservatism" to make the point that this stream of activity is rooted in mid 20th-century conservatism and for the most part rejects the primary premises of the liberalizing movements of the 60's and 70's. It clearly is a reaction to the static nature of some conservative practice and at the same time is unwilling to follow in the steps of the old liberal movements.

I became aware of all this through my acquaintance with students at Faith Builders. I feel quite privileged to have the opportunity to interact with some of the finest young people in the world. I have found them to be young men and ladies of sterling character who truly seek a good path. They are not rebels. They have a deep desire to serve God in their communities in significant ways by building on the work of those who labored before them. They respect their elders. They are dismayed when they see the lack of genuine spirituality and frustrated when caught in the middle of petty "political" intrigues. They are attracted to a vibrant, alive conservative way of life. They come alive when presented with a compelling vision for how they can contribute to the cause of the Kingdom in their home communities. They want good things and solid leadership to lead in good directions.

What are the distinguishing marks of this New Conservative stream of thought and practice?

First, the New Conservative **appreciates traditional practice**. He does not react nor rebel simply because something is traditional in nature. In fact, he values it and gives it due respect knowing that the stabilizing traditions of a culture have grown up for a reason. Those reasons should not be lightly discarded even when they do not make immediate sense. On the other hand he does not venerate and idolize tradition in and of itself, knowing that such a position can potentially lead to spiritual deadness and passivity.

Second, the New Conservative **rejects authoritarianism without relationship** as a means of church discipline and maintenance of traditional practices. He believes in Church authority to be sure and seeks a healthy platform for the exercise thereof; the Scriptures are clear on this and must not be ignored. Through diligent Bible teaching and exposition with the New Conservative leader builds conviction and respect for doctrine and practice. He recognizes that a compelling Bible-based vision that is taught patiently and personally to the next generation will outrun an impersonal authoritarianism over the long haul.

Third, the New Conservative **seeks to respect and honor other Bible-believing groups**. He sees no reason to build unnecessary walls of exclusion because of differences in application and practice; especially if those applications and practices are non-essential and perhaps even inconsequential. Rather than walls he seeks to build bridges in keeping with Jesus' command to love one another and seek unity of heart and soul.

Fourth, the New Conservative **values a Christian education**; he encourages focused training for the good of the Church. He respects the inherent dangers of

education in the same manner as the inherent danger of wealth is feared. Christian education is not an enemy but rather an ally in the work of the Kingdom. In all of this, he understands that all educational efforts and understandings must be seen in the light of the fear of God and the wisdom of the Cross.

Fifth, the New Conservative **believes that separation from the world in thought and practice begins in the heart and affects every area of life not just arbitrarily selected areas.** Non-conformity cannot be dictated but must be a reality if the Christian community wishes to prosper in the 21st century. Rather than a static, tradition-based non-conformity, he seeks an active counter-culture lifestyle and boldly bears the name of Christ while identifying himself as a fellow human being with his non-Christian neighbors. He does not fear interacting with culture from his Christ-inspired counter-cultural position.

Sixth, the New Conservative **longs for meaningful Christian community as a basis for personal growth and effective mission activity.** This is most clearly seen in “cell group” movements (or more generically “small groups”), increased congregational involvement in church administration, various approaches to serious discipleship programs, finding personal mentors, and “church planting” mission efforts. It may be noted that the New Conservative young person generally feels negative about large concentrations of Mennonites in large communities. They tend to look out from their large communities with desire to have impact in out of the way places through small communities that have a personal touch.

I make these observations not to endorse them in every respect or to create controversy in respect to their validity or non-validity. I offer them here because I think these positions are unwittingly defining the future of many of our communities. While I view these general positions positively, I am increasingly concerned about how we can make significant changes in the way we think and practice without thoughtfulness and prayerfulness. It is very dangerous when things “just happen” by default over time rather than by deliberate decision based on Bible principles and couched in the wisdom of the ages.

I have the growing sense that the jury is still out in respect to what I am calling the New Conservative perspective. These so-called New Conservatives have yet to demonstrate that they have adequate infrastructure to achieve sustainability over the long haul. For example, the second point made in this essay suggests that the New Conservatives view authority differently than did the Old Conservatives. But it is obvious that no movement has ever achieved sustainability over centuries without an adequate center of authority to give definition to its ideas. Personally, I think the New Conservatives have some work to do here both in thought and practice. Or one could look at point 3 on “respecting other Bible-believing groups” and note how this can quickly turn into a deadly ecumenism that assumes we will all get to heaven by and by somehow. This too must be understood and resisted steadfastly. And then too, I note that point 5 has often been used as a neat argument to open the way and even give credence to a crass worldliness. As much as I personally am in agreement with the New

Conservative understanding, I feel compelled to put forth the warning that without careful thought and prayer coupled with the resolve to come to terms with the inherent weaknesses cited herein, this movement is not sustainable.

Finally, I apologize for not being able to think of a better word than "New Conservative" to define the stream of thought that I have attempted to identify. I personally have a deep respect for the contributions of the "Old Conservative" positions during the 20th century and have no desire to devalue that contribution by suggesting there is a "new" way that we must follow. The path that leads to God is an old path that many saints have trod before us. We are brethren with them...and shall always be as we walk in the ways of the Lord.

Indebted to all...

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