

# The Spirit Says Go!

## Mission and Early Charismatic Expressions among Russian Mennonite Brethren

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### Does Spirituality Foster Mission?

Mission is first and foremost God's mission. And the prime agent of the *missio Dei* is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Lord of mission, the *dominus missionis* (2 Cor 3:17).<sup>1</sup> With his coming to earth, the mission of the church became reality. Jesus even commanded his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait until the Spirit came, because this would make them witnesses "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Personal experience of the Spirit fosters mission. This is what the New Testament claims, and this is what most of us Christians believe. Hans Kasdorf puts it correctly when he states, "Wo Gottes Geist Erweckung wirkt, da wird der Ansporn zum missionarischem Wirken geben."<sup>2</sup>

But what about the history of the Mennonite Brethren churches? Were our churches born in times of spiritual revival? Is our mission motivated by the Spirit of God? What is the correlation between spirituality and mission in our story? By turning to the early history of the Mennonite Brethren church, which claims to have been born in spiritual revival,<sup>3</sup> I will try to give answers to these questions in this essay. The revival in South Russia was in all regards the turning point for German Protestants in Russia.<sup>4</sup> This was especially true for the Mennonite churches in the region.

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1 See the discussion in Johannes Reimer, *Die Welt umarmen: Theologie des gesellschaftsrelevanten Gemeindebaus*, Transformationsstudien Bd. 1. 2. Auflage. (Marburg: Francke, 2013), 185–90.

2 "Where the Spirit of God initiates revival, missionary engagement will follow." Hans Kasdorf, *Flammen unauflöslich: Mission der Mennoniten unter Zaren und Sowjets 1789–1989* (Bielefeld: Logos, 1991), 73.

3 Ibid.

4 Johannes Reimer, "Zwischen Tradition und Auftrag: Historische Wurzeln russlanddeutscher Glaubensüberzeugungen," *Freikirchenforschung* 16 (2007): 15.

## It All Started in Dark Times

Mennonite churches in Russia in the early nineteenth century strayed away from the spiritual vitality of the early Anabaptists. “This house of Menno, says [P. M.] Friesen, became ‘nearly empty, cold, and barren.’”<sup>5</sup> He blames this on “the confines of the inherited, one-sided Prussian system,” which he calls the “unwholesome system of the Dutch Mennonites.”<sup>6</sup> Hans Kasdorf reads Friesen as referring here to “the exclusive orthodoxy and narrowness of Mennonite traditionalism on the one hand and the inclusive broad mindedness of theological liberalism on the other.”<sup>7</sup> The church’s identity at this point was based less on theological convictions than traditional lifestyle. The system “reduced” the majority of “the Mennonite church in Russia to a mere sociocultural institution based on ethnic identity and historical privileges rather than on the dynamic Christian faith and a vital relationship to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”<sup>8</sup> Spiritually dry, the church had lost her missionary vision.

It is undoubtedly the contribution of German Pietisms that changed the spiritual condition in Russian Mennonite circles in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> Friesen refers to Philipp Hiller, Gerhard Tersteegen, Ludwig Hofacker, Friedrich W. Krummacher, Eduard Wüst, and others, who brought “new light, new warmth and new food” into the church.<sup>10</sup> The rediscovery of both life in the Spirit<sup>11</sup> and the missionary calling<sup>12</sup> of the church is due to these Pietists. “Jacob P. Bekker speaks of ‘great spiritual awakenings [that] were taking place’ in the 1850s, particularly in the village of Gnadenfeld.”<sup>13</sup> Copying

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5 Hans Kasdorf, “Pietist Roots of Early Mennonite Brethren Spirituality,” *Direction* 13, no. 3 (July 1984): 48, quoting P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789–1910)*, trans. and ed. J. B. Toews et al. (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature General Conference of Mennonite Brethren, 1978), 47.

6 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 37–38.

7 Kasdorf, “Pietist Roots,” 49.

8 Ibid. See also Jakob P. Bekker, *Origin of the Mennonite Brethren Church*, trans. D. E. Pauls and A. E. Janzen (Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren Historical Society of the Midwest, 1973), 32.

9 See the discussion in Kasdorf, “Pietist Roots,” 44–55.

10 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 47.

11 J. B. Toews, “The Significance of P. M. Friesen’s History for Mennonite Brethren Self-Understanding,” in *P. M. Friesen and His History*, ed. Abraham Friesen (Fresno: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1979), 158, 231.

12 Victor Adrian, “The Mennonite Brethren Church: Born of Anabaptism and Pietism,” *Mennonite Brethren Herald* (March 26, 1965): 9; Kasdorf, “Pietist Roots,” 51–53.

13 Kasdorf, “Pietist Roots,” 50, quoting Bekker, *Origin*, 25.

the Pietists, Mennonites met in *Stunden* (house meetings) during the week for edification and prayer, Bible study, and spiritual fellowship. As Bekker points out, it is precisely here where their interest for mission grew,<sup>14</sup> and so Kasdorf concludes that “the Pietists restored both the missionary dimension and the missionary intention to the Mennonite Brethren in Russia.”<sup>15</sup>

### Eduard Wüst: The Second Reformer

Of the Pietist leaders who influenced the Russian Mennonites, none was as influential as Eduard Wüst (1818–1859).<sup>16</sup> Friesen calls Wüst the “second reformer” of the Mennonite Brethren and compares his historic role with Menno Simons.<sup>17</sup> The Russian Baptist official history calls him an “apostle of the revival in the South of Russia.”<sup>18</sup>

Wüst arrived in Russia in 1845. The independent Lutheran Church in Neuhoffnung, Berdiansk, had invited him to serve as their pastor. It seems to be mostly Wüst’s vivid preaching, devoted to radical discipleship, that attracted the minds of the Mennonites there.<sup>19</sup> Abraham Kroeker calls him a “spirit filled, like minded, proficient preacher.”<sup>20</sup> At the center of his sermons was the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, with whom a relationship could be established. Wüst described this relationship as life in the Spirit: a powerful, joyful, dedicated, and missionary existence.<sup>21</sup>

Soon after Wüst’s arrival in Neuhoffnung, a spiritual revival spread among the younger Lutheran Pietists in Berdiansk.<sup>22</sup> A year later, many Mennonites were spiritually aflame.<sup>23</sup> In his foundational work, P. M. Friesen includes a number of testimonies from Mennonites who were touched by the preaching

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14 Bekker, *Origin*, 25.

15 Kasdorf, “Pietist Roots,” 52.

16 See, among others, Hans-Christian Diedrich, *Entstehung des russischen Freikirchentums* (Erlangen: Martin Luther, 1985), 25–30.

17 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 211–12.

18 All-Union Congress of Evangelical-Christian Baptists, *Istoria evangel’skich christian-baptistov v SSSR* (Moskva: VSECHB, 1989), 41.

19 *Ibid.*, 55.

20 Abraham Kröker, *Pfarrer Eduard Wiist: Der grosse Erweckungsprediger in den deutschen Kolonien Südrusslands* (Leipzig: H. G. Wallmann, 1903), 37.

21 See, for instance, Wüst’s commencement sermon in Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 174–75.

22 Kröker, *Pfarrer Eduard Wüst*, 60, says the revival began three months after Wüst’s arrival.

23 *Ibid.*, 77.

of Wüst.<sup>24</sup> The high acceptance of Wüst's preaching among Mennonites was not accidental. Viktor Doerksen states correctly, "Wüst proclaimed a radical gospel of decision, boldly formulated and dynamically preached. To mid-century Mennonites used to hearing traditional sermons read in their services, this approach to religious proclamation with its Methodist fervor was new and convincing, and they soon became a part of the revival movement which swept the colonies."<sup>25</sup>

Wüst preached with divine power. Mennonites listening to him sensed the power of the Holy Spirit. Kröker reports that it was this dynamic spiritual appearance that raised a desire for more and deeper spirituality and a personal experience of the Spirit in their own lives.<sup>26</sup> Here lies the main source of the intensive search for charismatic expressions that characterizes the early history of the Mennonite Brethren.

Wüst preached personal piety combined with vivid missionary involvement. The "mission festivals" where he preached soon became places of renewal and inspiration for many. Kasdorf summarizes his ministry with the following words: "Wenn er auf Missionsfesten predigte, rief er zur Bekehrung auf; wenn er evangelisierte, forderte er seine Zuhörer zu missionarischem Einsatz heraus."<sup>27</sup> Missionary motivation consequently followed evangelism; spiritual renewal moved into missionary engagement. Bekker reports that as a result, revival spread through Mennonite homes, and heartfelt prayers were offered for and financial support was given to the first missionaries despite harsh critique by Mennonite elders.<sup>28</sup>

## The Mennonite Brethren Church: Born in Revival, Sent to the Nations

The revival among Mennonites led to the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860. She is a firstfruit of this revival.<sup>29</sup> All attempts of Menno-

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24 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 169–75.

25 Viktor G. Doerksen, "Eduard Wüst and Jerusalem," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 56, no. 2 (April 1982): 169.

26 Kröker, *Pfarrer Eduard Wüst*, 60–61; Reimer, *Zwischen Tradition und Auftrag*, 17.

27 "He preached in mission festivals and called people to conversion, and he evangelized and motivated his listeners to engage in missions." Hans Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 68.

28 Bekker, *Origin*, 35–39.

29 Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 72.

nite historians to write “Wüst out of Mennonite history altogether”<sup>30</sup> represent misinterpretations of historical facts. Sure enough, revivals do not come overnight—there is always more to history—but there is also what we may call the initiating factor. The Wüst revival must be seen as such. The revival reinforced both the role of the Holy Spirit and the importance of mission to the Mennonite brotherhood.

The newly founded Mennonite Brethren Church was keen to discover the work of the Holy Spirit. Its new relationship to the Spirit is portrayed in the Mennonites’ accusations—reported by P. M. Friesen—that the new church claimed to have the same gifts of the Spirit as the apostles did. Agreeing with the Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren leaders responded positively and referred to 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 28–30, and Ephesians 4:7 as their theological point of departure. Every believer, they pronounced, has received some gifts of grace. Further accused of naming preachers and leaders as apostles and prophets, as well as claiming to be in personal relationship with God himself, the Brethren referred to Ephesians 4:11, stating that God had indeed granted all those gifts to the church, adding, however, that the gift of prophecy had not been given to them yet. Moreover, they emphasized their enjoyment of their fellowship with God as having been granted by the Lord himself (1 Cor 2:10–12). Finally, accused of rejecting science as guide for life, they proudly responded that they build their life upon the lessons of the Spirit of God, who enlightens their mind.<sup>31</sup> The centrality of God’s Spirit in these statements is clearly evident.

The work of the Spirit in the newly founded Mennonite Brethren Church was best expressed in its missionary actions. Mission became one of the primary themes discussed early on among the believers. At the first Mennonite Brethren General Conference, in Andreasfeld, Chortitza, in May 1872, the question of evangelism and mission was central. As a result, the conference appointed an itinerant preaching committee, selected five itinerant evangelists, and decided to support them financially. The committee was commissioned to publish a motivational newsletter in order “that the congregations become aware of the labors of the brethren and that interest for missions be awakened more.” In addition, the committee was assigned to “consider the foreign missions in India, which is relatively large and demanding in personnel and mon-

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30 Viktor G. Doerksen, “A Second Menno? Eduard Wüst and Mennonite Brethren Beginnings,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 74, no. 2 (April 2000): 312.

31 P. M. Friesen, *Die Alt Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft in Russland (1789–1910) im Rahmen der mennonitischen Gesamtgeschichte* (Halbstadt, Taurien: Raduga), 282–87.

ey.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, the ministry of these preachers, as J. J. Toews notes, “stimulated soul-winning and a growing missionary spirit in the churches.”<sup>33</sup>

It is fascinating to see how rapidly the mission work developed. Members of the young and tiny Mennonite Brethren Church began by leading Mennonites themselves to a fresh experience of faith. Soon, they crossed over to other German and Russian neighbors and abroad. As early as 1860, Heinrich Bartel and Benjamin Becker, members of the newly founded Mennonite Brethren Church in the Molotschna, evangelized German colonists of Lutheran background in the Volga region.<sup>34</sup> Becker then went on to work as missionary alongside Gerhard Wieler among German colonists in Neu- and Alt-Danzig.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, we read about missionary attempts among the Russian-speaking population, consequently leading to what is known today as *Stundism*, the first expression of East-Slavic Protestantism.<sup>36</sup> Only twenty-nine years later, in 1889, the young Mennonite Brethren sent their first missionary couple, Abraham and Maria Friesen, to India.<sup>37</sup>

All in all, we can see an amazing movement of a missionary-minded church. Others have carefully documented this story, so it is not my intention here to unveil the many missionary actions of the early Mennonite Brethren Church. This brief overview should suffice, however, to illustrate how mission and a Holy Spirit-led spirituality played a decisive role in its early development.

## But Wasn't There Also

Critics will point to the fact that most of the missionaries mentioned above, including Eduard Wüst himself, were also involved in dangerous heresies. The revival in South Russia was closely connected to the so-called Joyful Movement (*Bewegung der Fröhlichen*). In early Mennonite Brethren history, this movement created many problems, including church splits. A. H. Unruh called the move-

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32 Friesen, *Mennonite Brotherhood*, 475–76.

33 Jacob J. Toews, “The Missionary Spirit of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia,” in *The Church in Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J. B. Toews*, ed. A. J. Klassen (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), 144.

34 Heinrich Löwen, *In Vergessenheit geratene Beziehungen: Frühe Begegnungen der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde mit dem Baptismus in Rußland—ein Überblick* (Bielefeld: Logos, 1989), 51–52; Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 78.

35 Löwen, *In Vergessenheit geratene Beziehungen*, 54.

36 Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 79–84; Löwen, *In Vergessenheit geratene Beziehungen*, 61f.; Diedrich, *Entstehung des russischen Freikirchentums*, 55–56.

37 Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 109–11.

ment *falsche Richtung* (wrong direction).<sup>38</sup> Hans Christian Diedrich blames the movement for having stopped the revival altogether.<sup>39</sup>

The Joyful Movement represented a new discovery of God's presence among the people. The worship services, which included elements of witness, testimony, clapping hands, dancing, and joyful singing, differed radically from what Mennonites were used to.<sup>40</sup> Both the newly discovered freedom in the Spirit and the claim of authority to act in the power of the Spirit came out of personal convictions seemingly granted by the Spirit. Some of the leaders even named themselves *Die Starke* (The Strong), developing a spiritual dictatorship in their congregations. Among them were Gerhard Wieler, Benjamin Becker, and Bernhard Penner, who excommunicated a number of members—even those who had participated in the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church, such as Jakob Reimer and Heinrich Hübert, the first elder of the church.<sup>41</sup> The Joyful claimed total freedom from sin, and personal strength in the Spirit in all matters.<sup>42</sup> This led to a number of cases of sexual misbehavior. They burned books, rejected theological advice, and claimed to rely only on God's Spirit, who was promised to lead the believers in all truth (John 16:8). Whoever refused to follow them was considered disobedient and subject to punishment and excommunication. The movement became the most dangerous threat to the young church.

The Mennonite Brethren Church battled against the teaching of the Joyful until 1865 when a number of brothers under the leadership of Johann Classen formulated what has become known as the "June Protocol,"<sup>43</sup> in which the "wrong beliefs and doings" of the early years in the church were named and rejected. In regard to the questions discussed in this article, there are a number of issues of importance.

- The June Protocol addressed the question of leadership authority. Apostolic authority as it was exercised by the Strong was rejected. In the future, all executive authority was to be given to the congregation.<sup>44</sup> No individual leader, whatever calling or office they claimed, was allowed to

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38 A. H. Unruh, *Die Geschichte der Mennoniten-Brüdergemeinde* (Winnipeg: The Christian Press, 1954), 122, 109.

39 Diedrich, *Entstehung des russischen Freikirchentums*, 116.

40 Ibid., 110–12.

41 Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische mennonitische Bruderschaft*, 233.

42 Ibid., 230, 237.

43 See the original full text in Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, 362–65.

44 Ibid., 364.

exercise spiritual authority over the church. Mennonite Brethren congregationalism was born. The opinion of the majority became a point of departure for life and mission of the church.

- Edward Wüst's so-called *Freiheitslehre* (teaching on freedom), based on the reformed understanding of *sola gratia*, was theologically questioned and exchanged for the Arminian teaching of the need to live in obedience and be sanctified. Accordingly, the freedom of direct communication with God became a questionable concept. Questioning the voice of the Spirit, who tells our spirit that we are children of God (Rom 8:16), led to an uncertainty about salvation that is typical in Mennonite Brethren circles.
- The joyful worship with its expressive elements of music, dance, and shouting was challenged because it brought so many divisions among believers. These elements were not prohibited, but warnings were issued not to create any offense among churchgoers.<sup>45</sup> Charismatic expressions were thereby equated with spiritual pride and blamed for all kinds of misbehavior.<sup>46</sup>

It seems that the decisions of the authors of the June Protocol followed a clear line: less spirit, more reason. The document established order in the Mennonite Brethren churches, and the majority of Mennonites welcomed it.<sup>47</sup> But, as Friesen states, it also turned the Mennonite Brethren Church in years to come into a puritan and formulaic Pietist—rather than vividly charismatic—reality.<sup>48</sup> And even A. H. Unruh, who in principle welcomed the decisions of the June Protocol, warned that formalism can never be a substitute for the joy in the Lord.<sup>49</sup>

## Reform Is Good but Not at the Expense of the Spirit

The June Protocol brought order to the church, but did it intensify mission? Some of those Brothers who risked their freedom going to Russian neighbors, evangelizing and baptizing them, for instance, belonged to the party of the Joyful. Gerhard Wieler, who is often praised for his work among Russians,<sup>50</sup>

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45 Unruh, *Die Geschichte*, 122.

46 Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, 361; Unruh, *Die Geschichte*, 125.

47 Friesen, *Die Alt-Evangelische Mennonitische Bruderschaft*, 375.

48 Ibid., 366–67.

49 Unruh, *Die Geschichte*, 134.

50 Gerhard Lohrenz, “The Mennonites of Russia and the Great Commission,” in *A Legacy of Faith: The Heritage of Menno Simons: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to Cornelius*



was even one of the movement's leaders.<sup>51</sup> He and others with him did not sign the June Protocol. Most of the Joyful left the church. The loss of such men after 1865 can be seen as a clear decelerating factor for mission work. Historians point to the fact that evangelical mission to the Slavs started with the Mennonite Brethren, who may have been the "midwife" for the Russian Evangelical church, as A. N. Ipatov puts it,<sup>52</sup> although they obviously reached only a few individuals with the gospel.<sup>53</sup> Even the famous baptism of the first Russian, Efim Zymbal, in 1869 by Abram Unger, the elder of the Mennonite Brethren Church, did not take place in a Mennonite Brethren Church but rather among converted Lutherans in the Baptist Church of Alt-Danzig. Unger baptized Zymbal without recognizing him as a Russian person. Would he have done it anyway?<sup>54</sup> There is no historical evidence that Unger was interested in evangelizing Russians. We do not know for sure how motivated Unger was to baptize a Russian convert, and it is therefore historically problematic to praise the Mennonite Brethren for their Slavic mission where sources are rare and evidence missing.

The majority of Mennonite Brethren steadily lost their missionary interest after 1865. In 1882, the church's mission work came to a low point. That year, Johann Wieler, who was actively involved in planting churches among Russians and Ukrainians, invited all evangelical churches to a conference in Rückenau, with an invitation to form a joint Evangelical Movement in Russia. Wieler proposed to his fellow Mennonite Brethren to concentrate on evangelism to Russians and Ukrainians as the foremost task of the church.<sup>55</sup> His proposal was rejected, and Mennonite Brethren churches have never again attempted to plant a Russian Mennonite Brethren church. The churches instead concentrated their energy on internal development and supported mission work outside Russia.

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Krahn, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck (Newton, KS: Faith and Life), 178–79; Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 80; Löwen, *In Vergessenheit geratene Beziehungen*, 62–66.

51 Cornelius Krahn and Richard D. Thiessen, "Wieler, Gerhard (1833–1911)," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (December 2007), accessed September 13, 2016, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Wieler,\\_Gerhard\\_\(1833-1911\)&oldid=123790](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Wieler,_Gerhard_(1833-1911)&oldid=123790).

52 A. N. Ipatov, *Kto takie Mennonity?* (Kazachstan: Alma-Ata, 1977), 63–64.

53 Diedrich, *Siedler*, 56.

54 See the discussion about the baptism of Zymbal in Löwen, *In Vergessenheit geratene Beziehungen*, 66–67.

55 Waldemar Gutsche, *Westliche Quellen des Russischen Stundismus* (Kassel: J. G. Oncken Verlag, 1957), 65; Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 82.

Kasdorf is surprised about the 1882 decision and additionally notes that until 1906 there was little Mennonite Brethren missionary activity in Russia itself.<sup>56</sup> Where did this inactivity come from? Was it due to a fear of losing the state privileges granted to Mennonites by the Russian Czar upon their promise not to proselytize Russian citizens? Did the Mennonite Brethren value their societal status more than God's call? There is much evidence for such an interpretation. Only after the Russian government lifted the ban on proselytism, with the Edict of Tolerance in 1905, did the Mennonite Brethren Conference reenter evangelism and mission in Russia.<sup>57</sup> Given the preceding accounts, it may also be asked if fear of the new charismatic expressions robbed the Mennonite Brethren of their missionary passion. Or, to put it in even stronger terms, it might have been a fear of the Holy Spirit as such.

The following arguments can be made to support such a claim. First, early Mennonite Brethren missionary activity was motivated by personal reception of a call by the Spirit of God. People made decisions by listening to God. This dependence on people individually hearing God led to deep commitment to mission but also to some misbehavior and heresy. A critical instrument of control was needed. The June Protocol introduced congregational authority as the final decisive voice in all matters of faith and life. The Spirit was no longer understood to lead Christians directly, but rather the church led by the Spirit determined the way to go. But how does the Spirit lead the church? The documents produced after 1865 by Mennonite Brethren say almost nothing to this issue. What is left is the common sense of the discerning community trying to orient her own decisions according to what the Bible and church tradition say. And tradition protected first and foremost the Mennonite identity and status in Russia. Tradition did not encourage mission since mission endangered the special status given to the Mennonites.

Second, missionary activity prior to 1865 was done by individuals. The June Protocol, however, limited individual calling by advocating congregational control over all matters of faith and life. Claims of personal experience with the Holy Spirit became rare and were viewed as potentially heretical. Even after the 1917 to 1929 revolution—with its unprecedented freedom for evangelical evangelism, a period we call “the golden years” of evangelism in Russia<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> See, among others, Unruh, *Die Geschichte*, 258; Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 83; Wilhelm Kahle, *Evangelische Christen in Russland und der Sowjetunion* (Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1987), 56.

<sup>58</sup> Johannes Reimer, “Ostslavischer Protestantismus: Quellen, Wege, Prägungen.” Unpublished Wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit (Hamburg-Horn: Theologisches Seminar

and Kasdorf calls the “missionary heyday,”<sup>59</sup> with many Mennonite Brethren involved in active evangelism and mission<sup>60</sup>—it was less the church that initiated projects than Mennonite Brethren individuals, often against their church’s advice. Kasdorf points, for instance, to the Russian Tent Mission, initiated and led by Jacob J. Dyck (1890–1919), as one of the most exiting missionary projects of the time.<sup>61</sup> There is no question that this missionary project leaves us speechless—and, of course, many Mennonites then supported the venture. But the church as such? There were many warnings instead of support.<sup>62</sup> In the end, most of the team was killed, most probably by former Mennonites now engaged in the army of Nestor Machno.<sup>63</sup> Another initiative Kasdorf praises is the mission to the Osiaks in Western Siberia led by Johann Peters from the Orenburg Colony.<sup>64</sup> It deserves much praise, along with Martin Thielmann’s work in Central Asia among the Muslim Kyrgyz. But as research shows, here again both of these great Mennonite missionary ventures were less motivated and initiated by Mennonite Brethren churches than by individual actions.<sup>65</sup> Martin Thielmann was so deeply disappointed in his fellow Mennonites who refused to integrate converted Muslims into their church that he finally founded an Evangelical Christian church.<sup>66</sup> The fear of being ethnically polluted by Kyrgyz was much deeper than Mennonite passion for mission.

The June reform was obviously needed, but the Mennonite Brethren went too far in their search for order—with the reform they formalized spirituality and ethnocentricity followed. The new spirituality was less charismatic, less unpredictable, less disordered, and obviously less missionary. The reform was needed but could have followed other criteria.

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des Bundes Evangelisch Freikirchlicher Gemeinden, 1983), 120.

59 Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 113.

60 See an overview in Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 115, 156.

61 *Ibid.*, 124–31.

62 For more information on the tent mission, see my book Johannes Reimer, *Evangelisation im Angesicht des Todes: Jakob J. Dyck und die Russische Zeltmission* (Lage: Logos Verlag, 2000), 55–86.

63 *Ibid.*, 100.

64 Kasdorf, *Flammen unauslöschlich*, 145–56.

65 See in detail: Johannes Reimer, *Bis an die Enden Sibiriens: Aus dem Leben und Wirken des Osjaken Missionars Johann Peters* (Lage: Logos Verlag, 1998); Johannes Reimer, *Seine letzten Worte waren ein Lied: Martin Thielmann; Leben und Wirken des Kirgisen Missionars* (Lage: Logos Verlag, 1997).

66 Reimer, *Seine letzten Worte*, 89–92.

## Here We Are: Baptomennonites between the Chairs

Most Mennonite Brethren left the Soviet Union at the end of the twentieth century. The majority of them settled in Germany. Here they established a great number of churches divided into different conferences,<sup>67</sup> and mingled and mixed with Baptists, representing what has been named “Baptomennonitism.”<sup>68</sup> There are many issues these churches battle with. Among the most prominent are (1) relationship to God’s Spirit and charismatic expressions in the world today and (2) cross-cultural mission.

The issue of the role of the Holy Spirit in the church and her mission has hardly ever left the church agenda among the Russian Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren. Particularly after World War II, there was a renewed search for a deeper spirituality. Openly raising the issue in the church, however, has normally led to splits. Given this, it’s surprising that the newest studies on Russian Pentecostalism identify a relatively high number of Mennonite names among leading Pentecostals in the former USSR.<sup>69</sup> Of the fourteen Pentecostal bishops installed among Russian Germans in the USSR, five carry Mennonite names,<sup>70</sup> and the pastors in 24 of 95 Pentecostal churches with German members seem to be of Mennonite origin.<sup>71</sup> Obviously, there was a substantial group of Mennonites deeply interested in spiritual matters who did finally find their way to live out their Spirit-motivated passion. In Baptist and Mennonite literature, this phenomenon has largely been overlooked and unnoticed.

Only now, with a rapid spread of the Charismatic movement among Mennonites, have the issues become virulent. The reaction to charismatic phenomena among Mennonite Brethren in Germany has been harsh and strict. Charismatic expressions are banned from churches, and those who raise questions about this are isolated and even excommunicated. Nevertheless, hundreds of young people are leaving the churches and joining the ranks of Charismatics and Pentecostals, as can be seen in the growing *Evangeliums Kirche Glaubens-*

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67 See an excellent overview in John N. Klassen, *Russlanddeutsche Freikirchen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Grundlinien ihrer Geschichte, ihrer Entwicklung und Theologie* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2007).

68 Johannes Reimer, *Auf der Suche nach Identität: Russlanddeutsche zwischen Baptisten und Mennoniten nach dem zweiten Weltkrieg* (Lage: Logos Verlag, 1996), 99.

69 See, for instance, Leonard Frank, *Gemeindegewachstum der Pfingstgemeinden im 20ten Jahrhundert* (MTh dissertation, University of South Africa, 2012) and the literature discussed here. See also Leonhard Frank, “Die Russlanddeutschen Pfingstgemeinden” (unpublished paper, 2016).

70 Frank, “Die Russlanddeutschen,” 20.

71 *Ibid.*, 25–28.

generation in Duisburg under the leadership of Pastor Alexander Epp<sup>72</sup> or the Pentecostal *Lebensquelle* in Osnabrück led by Pastor Jakob Neufeld.<sup>73</sup> The old questions are back more than 150 years after the June Protocol, and they are hitting the church with more strength than ever.

At the same time, mission in those churches is stuck.<sup>74</sup> The churches prove unable to reach out to the German population at large, staying ethnoconfessional in spirit and growing to a large extent only by childbirth. And even their own children are leaving the church in large proportion.

It seems to me that, without forcing the issue, it might be high time to return to the correlation of Spirit and mission if the Mennonite Brethren Church, which started as a revival, does not want to lose ground in countries like Germany and Russia. For too long, voices from inside and outside the movement have problematized the issue. The famous Evangelical Christian Pastor William Fetler (1883–1957) of Riga, Latvia, wrote to his fellow Christians in Russia in the beginning of the twentieth century: “The teaching of the Holy Spirit is the dynamic which is lost by the church today.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, Ivan V. Kargel (1849–1937), the prominent Evangelical Christian theologian in St. Petersburg and a great friend of Mennonites, complained about the notorious inability of Evangelicals to assign the most important role to the Spirit of God.<sup>76</sup> The German historian Wilhelm Kahle, reflecting on the rapid growth of Pentecostal churches in the former USSR, noticed that it was precisely the search for the gifts of the Spirit that led people to join Pentecostals.<sup>77</sup> Even atheist authors notice that the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the USSR directly correlates with the role of the Holy Spirit in these churches.<sup>78</sup> It should be of paramount interest that even modern-day Ukrainian historians specifi-

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72 [Http://www.glaubensgeneration.de/about.php?sprache=de](http://www.glaubensgeneration.de/about.php?sprache=de), accessed September 9, 2016.

73 [Http://www.lebensquelle-os.de](http://www.lebensquelle-os.de), accessed September 9, 2016.

74 See my article, Johannes Reimer, “Mission der Aussiedlergemeinden in Deutschland—was bremst den Aufbruch?” *Evangelikale Missiologie* 25 (Giessen: AfeM, 2009), 154–62.

75 Vladimir Frančuk, *Prosila Rossia dozdia u Gospoda*, Tom 1. (Kiev: Svitankova Zoria, 2001), 317.

76 Frančuk, *Prosila Rossia*, 269–74.

77 Kahle, *Evangelische Christen*, 255.

78 Aleksei Moskalkenko, *Piatidesiatniki* (Moskva: Politiceskaia literatura, 1973), 69; Aleksandr Klibanov, *Religioznoie sektantstvo i sovremennost'* (Moskva: Nauka, 1969), 149; Anatoli Belov, *Sekty, sektantstvo, sektanty* (Moskva: Nauka, 1978), 88; Valeri Graždan, *Kto takie piatidesiatniki* (Alma-Ata: Kasachstan, 1965), 29–30.

cally point to the revival in South Russia in the nineteenth century as one of the foundations these churches build on.<sup>79</sup>

Spirit and mission go together. It is dangerous to neglect the work of the Spirit, just as it is, of course, highly problematic to misinterpret spiritualistic phenomena as the Spirit's work. Critical reflection is needed. But such a reflection requires more than reasoning; it requires a spiritual gift to discern Spirits. Not an established function- and image-preserving order, but rather a life in obedience and mission seems to be the imperative of the day. We can do better today, as our brothers did in 1865.

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79 Frančuk, *Prosila Rossia*, 224–27.