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Christian Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights from a Peace Church Perspective (Church of the Brethren)

Jeff Carter

The key conviction and leading question of this chapter is that the Church of the Brethren, by theology and practice, affirms human dignity and supports the protection of human rights. Through a specific scriptural hermeneutic as a Historic Peace Church, and a history and culture of suspicion regarding state authority and institutions, how human rights are protected is a matter of discernment and debate. At what point does military or police action undercut or run contrary to the biblical and theological basis for human rights?

Historical Context of the Church of the Brethren

As the Reformation was in part a call upon the Catholic Church to reform and re-establish the apostolic purity of the church, the Radical Reformation was a reaction to the Protestant establishment of state churches and a call to a more authentic reflection of the New Testament in both personal and corporate piety. Three radical reformed groups, Anabaptist, Pietist, and Radical Pietist, drew upon a primitive interpretation of scripture as they sought to restore the New Testament church and deepen their Christ-centred discipleship.

The Anabaptists, a 16th-century reform movement in Europe, chose baptism as their defining ordinance both in reaction to the state church and in their imitation of key elements of Jesus' life. In polity and structure, the Anabaptists sought to create a visible and disciplined church that conformed to the standards of the New Testament and rejected the conforming spirit of the world. Sectarian by necessity, the Anabaptists often were seen as a threat to the state church in both their belief, centred on non-creedalism, and their practice of believer's baptism.¹ The Anabaptists chose to interpret the

1. Cornelius J. Dyck, "Anabaptism," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 28.

Bible as a communal practice, insisting on the inner Spirit's presence when interpreting the outer word of scripture and regarding the New Testament as the fulfilment of the Old Testament.²

The Pietists, a 17th-century religious movement, focused devotion on the inward call of the Spirit and the regenerative understanding of a teleological (with the eschaton in mind) application of the scriptures.³ In its pursuit of individual and corporate renewal, pietism "tended to elevate practice above doctrine, spirit above form, piety above orthodoxy, active engagement above mere consent, and fellowship above ecclesiastical or socio-cultural barriers."⁴ It is the interplay of the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit and the outward experience of the adherent, both within and outside of the faith community, that led to a subjective biblical hermeneutic. In addition, Pietists felt that the "Bible would best come alive if freed from dogmatic formulations," thereby affirming no creed.⁵

The Radical Pietist movement of the 17th century, owing much to the Anabaptist tradition but in contradistinction to classical Pietism, advanced the notion of the New Testament apostolic church by establishing acts of obedience (ordinances) to include the more radical⁶ trine immersion form of baptism, feetwashing,⁷ anointing of the sick, and church discipline.⁸ The Radical Pietists, with their commitment to nonviolence and emphasis upon a church of voluntary disciples, and the Pietists, with their emphasis upon the Spirit, influenced greatly the separatist notions of the emerging Brethren in the Palatinate region of Germany.

In 1708, five men and three women, in response to their felt call to imitate Jesus, were led to the river Eder in Schwarzenau, Germany, and were baptized by trine immersion. An unnamed person baptized Alexander Mack, the first minister of the movement, and Mack then baptized the other seven. This

2. Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, "Biblical Inspiration and Authority," in *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren 1975-1979*, ed. Phyllis K. Ruff (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1980), 550-66.

3. Dale Brown, *Understanding Pietism* (Nappanee: Evangel Publishing House, 1996), 46.

4. Ernest F. Stoeffler, "Pietism," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 2: 1022.

5. Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, "Biblical Inspiration," 550-66.

6. Radical, in an Anabaptist/Pietist context, defines an act or attitude that is counter-cultural.

7. The act of feetwashing as exemplified by Jesus and as defined in the Brethren ministers' manual, Earle W. Fike, *For All Who Minister* (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1993).

8. C. David Ensign, "Radical German Protestantism," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 2: 1079.

single act marks the beginning of a faith tradition that includes the Church of the Brethren, a community with discernible roots in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Radical Pietist movements of central Europe.

As a reform movement, the early Brethren fashioned their practice in response to what they perceived to be the liturgical coldness and dogmatism of the state church. Brethren worship was simple, without the formal liturgy of the Western Mass, and included Bible study, prayer, and singing. It was a time for biblical instruction and practical interpretation. As the Schwarzenau Brethren gathered, they did so in homes, emphasizing their fellowship and shared call to obedience in Christ. As the movement grew, so did the attention it attracted from the authorities. Seen as a separatist movement, the early Brethren were forced to leave Schwarzenau, sojourn through Europe seeking places of religious tolerance, and eventually leave Europe for the New World and the religious freedom William Penn offered near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. As the waters of baptism birthed the Brethren movement in Europe, so the first baptism on Christmas Day 1723 signified the beginning of the Brethren church in the New World. Within 30 years of its founding, the Schwarzenau Brethren movement was almost exclusively a North American religious movement.

Brethren, historically, are considered “people of the Word” due to their sincere following of the life and teaching of Jesus as illustrated in baptism and found in the Bible.⁹ It is this pre-eminent focus upon the life of Jesus and the rejection of alleged coercive creedalism of the established churches that gave the early Brethren direction in forming their community, often described over and against dominant cultural and religious patterns. The early Brethren relied upon the centrality of the New Testament for faith and life, a theological belief in the apostolic lineage of the voluntary Christian community, the work of the Spirit in inspiring new insight and direction, and the Protestant affirmation of the ability of all members to interpret scripture. These elements—word, community, unmediated Spirit, and the rejection of a formal creed such as the Apostles’ or Nicene creed—are the marks of a Brethren biblical hermeneutic.¹⁰ Stuart Murray states, “In [biblical] hermeneutics, as in many other areas, [Brethren] functioned pragmatically, intuitively, and situationally, not systematically and theoretically.”¹¹

9. Dale Stoffer, “Beliefs,” in *Church of the Brethren Yesterday and Today*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1986), 43.

10. Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 2000), 21.

11. Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 21.

Biblical Hermeneutics in a Believers' Church Context

The Believers' Church, a term coined by Max Weber to describe radical Protestantism, and in distinction from the Free Church tradition, shares an emphasis upon separation from the powers and principalities of government yet more specifically defines a particular hermeneutic community.¹² Accompanying Brethren beginnings was a theological hermeneutic of the Believers' Church tradition that developed in the 16th and 17th centuries and found root in the early Brethren. The Believers' Church, as defined by Brethren historian Donald Durnbaugh, embraces a practical following of the New Testament as regenerate Christians who take Jesus Christ as their example and seek to represent his life, death, and resurrection by the manner of their living.¹³ The community of believers organizes the life of the church by giving form to church practices, admonishment, and edification through Christian discipline on the order of Matthew 18 and by providing the context for biblical interpretation and the boundary between inner and outer Word,¹⁴ the revelation of the Spirit, and the interpretation of the community:

The Word given in the scriptures and apprehended through the Holy Spirit provides the sole authority. Tradition must bow if the clear statement of the Word as understood in the covenant community so demands. On the other hand, the voice of revelation must always be tested by the Word, for there could be no clash between the two expressions. The inner and the outer Word are one in essence, if not in form.¹⁵

Confessional in nature, traditionally the testimony of faith was/is expressed existentially, thereby negating the need for a creed. Noting the lack of creedal and doctrinal boundaries, Frantz places greater emphasis upon tradition, originating from individual and corporate Bible study and prayer.¹⁶ Frantz defines a Believers' Church hermeneutic by enumerating six practice-oriented hermeneutical marks.

12. Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Believers' Church," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 1: 113.

13. Brethren doctrine of regeneration—the action of the Holy Spirit in renewing the lives of those placing their faith in Christ Jesus. Sometimes it is referred to as “the second birth.”

14. The inner Word of the Spirit agrees fully with the outer word of scripture.

15. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1968), 33.

16. Nadine Pence Frantz, “Theological Hermeneutics: Christian Feminist Biblical Interpretation and the Believers' Church Tradition” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1992), 146.

First, there is a correlation between epistemology and obedience.¹⁷ Understanding of and obedience to scripture is revealed in one's discipleship, *Nachfolge*. Such "practice increases understanding and knowledge of the scriptures, and study and prayer increases faithful practice."¹⁸ Second, the congregation serves as the interpreting community.¹⁹ With a practice-oriented hermeneutic, one becomes disembodied when removed from the interpreting community, for it is within the hermeneutic community and its practices of worship and Bible study that participants are invited to engage the Bible and one another for common understanding and direction.

A third mark is the correlation of the inner and outer Word. The outer word of scripture is interpreted by the inner Word of the Holy Spirit and guided by the interpreting community.

Fourth, revelation is understood as progressively historical.²⁰ Biblical interpretation is ongoing rather than static, opening the possibility for new understanding and thus a growing tradition.

Fifth, Jesus Christ is the interpretive focus.²¹ The humanity of Christ Jesus is to be imitated by word and deed as Brethren seek the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5).²² As affirmed by the 1979 Annual Conference, "Jesus Christ expresses God's word in a complete and decisive way,"²³ as attested in the first chapter of John's gospel. In this way, Jesus is the Logos for Brethren.

Sixth, the faithful church is viewed externally as a peculiar people. "Peculiar" in this instance denotes a counter-cultural aspect to the tradition. Taking the community of Acts as the example, a church faithful to scripture will be marginalized and even persecuted by the prevailing culture (Acts 2:44). Therefore, the Believers' Church hermeneutic shapes how a community

17. Pence Frantz, "Theological Hermeneutics," 148. Noting that epistemology often refers to academic reflection on modes of knowing to be second-order interpretation, and obedience refers to a first-order practice, from this point on I shall replace "epistemology" with "knowing" so that both terms are first-order practices and epistemology; "ethics" will refer to second-order interpretation.

18. Pence Frantz, "Theological Hermeneutics."

19. Pence Frantz, "Theological Hermeneutics," 153.

20. Pence Frantz, "Theological Hermeneutics," 161.

21. Pence Frantz, "Theological Hermeneutics," 163.

22. The "mind of Christ" refers to the Brethren practice of mutual discernment, prayer, and sensitivity to scripture.

23. Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, "Biblical Inspiration and Authority," in *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren 1975-1979*, ed. Phyllis K. Ruff (Elgin: Brethren Press, 1980), 550-66.

understands God's relationship to be present and how scripture is used in the life of the church, accepting such particularities as a sign of faithfulness rather than as the stigma of the prevailing society.

Historic Peace Church Designation and the World Council of Churches

With a priority on Jesus Christ as the hermeneutical lens and an emphasis upon orthopraxis, included in the witness of the church is Jesus' commitment to nonviolence and reconciliation. The designation *Historic Peace Church*, coined in 1935, recognizes Mennonites, Society of Friends, and Brethren as sharing a consistent biblical, theological, and programmatic commitment to peace and peace-making.²⁴ While theological kinship, fellowship, and collaboration was present among the three traditions prior to the 20th century, the First World War brought added explicit collaboration. As the title "Historic Peace Church" was gaining acceptance, a landmark assembly in Newton, Kansas, concluded with a joint statement of belief signed by the Mennonites, Society of Friends, and Church of the Brethren. "The assembly appointed a Continuation Committee to plan cooperative efforts in view of the world conflict which conferences-goers foresaw."²⁵ The committee influenced decisions leading up to the Second World War related to conscientious objectors, the draft, and the formation of both the Civilian Public Service and the National Service Board for Religious Objectors.

Following 1945, such collaboration and agreement led to large-scale denominational relief efforts in Europe through the work of the Continuation Committee.²⁶ Brethren leader and future World Council of Churches central committee member M. R. Zigler led the Continuation Committee efforts in Europe on behalf of the Brethren, which put him in close proximity to the growing ecumenical movement that in 1948 became the World Council of Churches (WCC). As a founding member of the WCC, the Brethren, as well as the Historic Peace Churches, influenced the post-war commitments and offered guidance to the central committee in its growing program.²⁷

24. Donald F. Durnbaugh, "Historic Peace Churches," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 608.

25. Durnbaugh, "Historic Peace Churches," 608.

26. Durnbaugh, "Historic Peace Churches," 610.

27. Dale Ott, "World Council of Churches," in *The Brethren Encyclopedia*, ed. Donald F. Durnbaugh (Philadelphia: Brethren Encyclopedia, 1983), 1368.

The Church of the Brethren's influence at the WCC was/is an extension of its corporate commitments made through the Annual Conference. Discerning as one fellowship, Annual Conference statements repeatedly affirm Jesus' two-fold commandment to love God and to love one another (Matt. 7:12). The 1967 Annual Conference paper, "Church and State and Christian Citizenship," stated:

The Scriptures proclaim two principles which are profoundly relevant to the relation of the church and state: God as sovereign and God as love. The first principle holds that God is creator of and sovereign over all of life and not merely its religious dimensions. The second principle affirms that God loves the world. God has made people in God's own image. We, in turn, as members of the church, are called to identify ourselves in all our relationships with the purpose of God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" to save it. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves, that is, to seek for all people the same good life that we wish for ourselves. We are to share the loving concern of the Creator, which extends not only to people's religious but also to their emotional, mental and physical welfare. Clearly, then, it must include concern for justice, liberty and peace for all. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)²⁸

This love and concern for the world is guided by Jesus' admonition to feed and give drink, visit, clothe, and welcome the least of these (Matt. 25:40-45), as well as make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:16-20). It is from Jesus that we learn to care for the marginalized as represented by the poor, the widow, and the orphan. We witness in Jesus the work of the kingdom, both present and coming, through his relationships with humanity and the love and compassion with which he engages saint and sinner. And finally, from the Sermon on the Mount to Jesus correcting Peter's violence in the Garden of Gethsemane, violence is incompatible with the will of God.

This core commitment to the way of Jesus and particularly nonviolence is repeated as the Annual Conference responds to the violence and division in each decade. In the words of the oft-repeated 1918 Annual Conference "Statement on War,"

28. Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, "The Church, the State, and Christian Citizenship," in *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren 1965-1969*, ed. William Eberly (Elgin: Brethren Press, 2005), 248-52.

Therefore, this Conference of the Church of the Brethren hereby declares her continued adherence to the principles of nonresistance, held by the church since its organization in 1708.

- I. We believe that war or any participation in war is wrong and entirely incompatible with the spirit, example, and teachings of Jesus Christ.
- II. That we cannot conscientiously engage in any activity or perform any function, contributing to the destruction of human life.²⁹

The Challenge of Human Rights Enforcement

International human rights law is consistent and compatible with a Brethren understanding of peace and peace-making, the way of Jesus, and the denunciation of violence. We are commanded by Jesus to care for our brother and sister, guard their dignity, and ensure their well-being. While Brethren affirm the protections offered through the rule of law, the concern is found in the methods of enforcement and the sin of “returning evil for evil” (1 Pet. 3:9).

Given that the Brethren were a persecuted people by both the state and the state church in the first decade of the 18th century, institutions of authority were viewed with suspicion both in their motives and the manner in which they act. Theologically, since there is but one kingdom, not two, temporal authority and action conducted on our behalf should be guided by kingdom values and the ministry of Jesus. Therefore, reliance on international human rights law and those who are empowered to enforce and protect is a challenge if the means of enforcement includes violence and doesn’t provide for basic human needs or seeks the fullness of peace.

The best example is the international norm the UN Responsibility to Protect, emerging from the Balkans and the use of UN Peacekeepers.³⁰ Questions and criticism emanate from a commitment to nonviolence and specifically to pacifism. For some Brethren, the call of the gospel and the

29. Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, “Statement on War and Nonresistance” (1918), <https://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/1918-statement-on-war-and-nonresistance>.

30. The Responsibility to Protect is a global political commitment which was endorsed by all member states of the United Nations at the 2005 World Summit in order to address its four key concerns to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

teaching of the church has led to pacifism, an outward witness to the gospel of peace. There is a diversity of thought even among the historic peace church community:

- absolute pacifism, which calls for absolutely no violence and no war
- militant pacifism, which focuses on civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance
- conditional or pragmatic pacifism, which is against war and violence but allows places with conditions for violence when suffering might be limited

While there may not be consensus on a precise definition of pacifism when considering the message of Jesus and the witness of nonviolence, it is safe to say that the motives and criteria for instituting action in the face of human rights abuses must be measured.

Here are questions to consider when evaluating the moral and ethical use of peacekeepers from a Historic Peace Church perspective:

1. UN Peacekeepers—peacekeepers for whom and for what?
2. Is there a threshold on violence when a peacekeeper becomes a warrior?
3. Is peace simply the absence of war or violence; it is maintaining order or the status quo?
4. Or is peace about justice and peace-making, reconciling enemies, and transforming the context?
5. Is the goal for peace momentary or is it a systemic and sustained peace which includes economic justice, land justice, an absence of fear, and yes, peace between peoples?
6. Who is the arbitrator of justice and declares when peace is achieved, and again, for whom? What are the markers for justice—reconciliation, restoration, or simply protection?

Granted, these questions are asked during conflict as human rights are being violated and there is a need for the immediate cessation of violence. Is it possible to be proactive so that the need for military intervention is prevented?

The “Ecumenical Call for Just Peace” is one of the best examples of a systemic, proactive vision for creating cultures of peace and interrupting a cycle of human rights violations and abuses. Rather than a state-initiated or nation-focused approach, often singling out a particular situation of international attention, just peace, as opposed to just war theory, is a grassroots, bottom-up approach that affirms life and offers dignity to all. Noting both the theological and biblical underpinnings of a just peace, the document offers a systemic understanding of peace and the path to peace in four major areas: Peace in the Community, Peace with the Earth, Peace in the Marketplace, and Peace Among the Peoples.³¹ Just peace is a community-focused approach of both peace and justice undergirded by compassion—a compassion for the *oikoumene*—a world God so loves. This value returns us to Jesus’ teaching to love God and love one another and a Brethren commitment to live in imitation of Jesus.

31. World Council of Churches, “An Ecumenical Call to Just Peace” (2011), http://www.overcomingviolence.org/fileadmin/dov/files/iepc/resources/ECJustPeace_English.pdf.