

A Treatment of the Basic Agreement between Mack, Becker, and Beissel

(A TREATMENT OF THE BASIC AGREEMENT BETWEEN MACK, BECKER, AND BEISSEL)

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"A living dog is better
than a dead lion"
-Ecclesiastes .4

Carl Harter
Lewiston, Maine

When I set out to explore the points of agreement and disagreement between Conrad Beissel, Peter Becker, and Alexander Mack, I was unsuccessful in locating resources for such an analysis. The more I read, the more I have become convinced that these men were in basic agreement, but I was forced to come to my own conclusions based on the materials I had at my disposal. I am therefore grateful to Dr. Dale Brown for reading over this paper and providing feed-back.

Brown explained why I had difficulty finding resources. His history professor was Floyd Mallott (died 1971), who was convinced that the Church of the Brethren was a Pietist movement in the eighteenth century, an Anabaptist movement in the nineteenth century, and an institutional and ecumenical movement in the twentieth century.

Of the next generation, Dale Brown and his peers, the prominent name is Donald Durnbaugh. Durnbaugh grants Pietist influence on Mack, but argues that Pietism was abandoned as the Church of the Brethren became a distinct body. More recently, Bowman has averred in his Brethren Society that the character of the Church of the Brethren in 1860, which featured an emphasis on obedience to rules and uniformity, was consistent with the character of the Brethren from the beginning, i.e. Anabaptist.

Scholarly consensus notwithstanding, a reading of the early history of the Schwarzenau Brethren leaves one with the impression that warm-hearted piety was clearly in evidence at least for the first half of the eighteenth century, and even today conservative Brethren congregations evince more warmth and freedom of expression than conservative Mennonite congregations. Brown sees the Brethren roots in radical Pietism not only in the relationship of Becker and Mack with Beissel, the subject of this paper, but also in the lax attitude of the Brethren toward Sunday worship and in the doctrine of restorationism held by the early brethren. The early leaders of the Brethren were immersed in radical Pietism, and would not easily abandon this heritage.

Introduction

In the Brethren history I have read, Johann Conrad Beissel appears as an enigmatic figure. The usual treatment is that Beissel was a charismatic leader who was baptized somewhat reluctantly by Peter Becker into the company of the Dunkers, and who caused leaders Becker and Alexander Mack much

grief, drawing a number of the members of the Germantown congregation away to the Ephrata Cloister, Beissel's celibate community on the Cocalico.

Further investigation into Beissel and the Ephrata Cloister only complicates matters. It seems that Beissel emigrated to the United States with all his strange ideas intact and lived with Peter Becker and his family as an apprentice for a year before moving to Pennsylvania's wilderness frontier to take up the life of solitary, mystical contemplation. A while later, Becker baptized Beissel on a simple confession of faith. With Beissel were baptized the followers who were already forming what would become the Cloister community. For reasons that are not clear, Becker returned to Germantown sooner than expected, leaving Beissel and his followers to shift for themselves.

Given these facts, two questions arise. First, why did Becker, who had lived with Beissel for a year, baptize Beissel so readily? Second, why was so little attention given to setting the new Brethren congregation on the Cocalico on a firm footing?

The goal of this paper is to answer these questions. The argument to be presented is that Becker readily baptized Beissel and turned him loose because Becker, Beissel, and Mack were basically of the same mind with regard to the ideals for the practices of the church.

Radical Pietist Influences on the Schwarzenau Brethren

To understand the common mind set of Beissel, Becker, and Mack, we need to understand the influence of two Pietist writers, Gottfried Arnold and Ernst Hochmann von Hohenau.

Arnold was an important source for the Schwarzenau brethren because of his book, first published in 1696, *The First Love, that is the True Portrayal of the First Christians* {1}. In choosing to form a new denomination, the Brethren sought to pattern themselves after the early church, and Arnold's book was an important source for understanding New Testament practices {2}.

Arnold also exercised an important influence through his book, *The Marital and Celibate Lives of the First Christians*. In this book, Arnold argues that many of the early Christians followed the apostle Paul's advice in 1 Corinthians vii and remained single. Arnold also argued that there were those among the early Christians who practiced continence in marriage, choosing to put aside worldliness and live as brother and sister {3}.

In agreement with Arnold on this score was a man whom Donald Durnbaugh describes as a "spiritual guide" for the brethren, Hochmann von Hohenau. Mack was introduced to Hochmann in 1705 {4} in Marienborn {5}. In 1706, Mack participated with Hochmann in a mission in the Marienborn area, and invited Hochmann to come to Mack's hometown of Schriesheim, where Hochmann engaged in street preaching and met with local Pietists in the Mack family mill {6}.

Two features of Hochmann's practice and teaching should be noted. The first is Hochmann's commitment to the ascetic life {7}. The second is Hochmann's agreement with Arnold on the issue of celibacy and continence in marriage.

In his writings, Hochmann distinguished between several levels of male-female relationships, ranging from the purely physical, like the relationship of a man with a prostitute, to the purely spiritual, the single life in complete devotion to Christ. Hochmann chose the single life. The Brethren, in constituting their congregation, for the first few years of their existence, chose what was in Hochmann's mind the next best thing: continence in marriage {8}.

Of those first few years of the Brethren in Schwarzenau, we read in the Ephrata Cloister history, the Chronicon Ephratense, that "neither was there any difference between them and the congregation afterwards founded at Ephrata, except with reference to the Sabbath" {9}. The interest of the Chronicon is to show how Ephrata followed the same pattern as Schwarzenau, upholding continence in marriage, the common purse, and occasional refraining from regular work.

The Chronicon is a not unbiased defense of the community that exhibits an almost hagiographic reverence for Beissel, so that Durnbaugh rightly urges caution in appropriating the Chronicon account {10}. It is granted that some of the details of the Chronicon account may bear correction.

The Chronicon, for example, suggests that the Brethren practiced continence and the common purse for "not...longer than seven years" {11}. The truth of the matter was that Mack's son, Alexander Jr., was born four years after the Brethren were baptized in 1708. As Dale Brown pointed out in a phone conversation {12}, we can conclude that practice of continence in marriage was, if not abandoned by 1712, at least not consistent, even among the leaders, and clearly imperiled.

Nevertheless, the substance of the account, that the Brethren practiced continence and the common purse, is very likely accurate. Mack had sold his share of the family mill in 1706 so that he could devote himself to mission work. The proceeds from this sale were used not only to support his family, but also to support the other Brethren as necessary, a policy which finally left Mack penniless {13}.

With regard to the more controversial distinctive, continence in marriage, Mack continued to defend this practice, even after it had been abandoned by the Brethren. In 1715 Mack published his Rights and Ordinances, a description of New Testament practices given as answers from a father to a son {14}. Among the questions placed in the mouth of the son is this: "What is the place of marriage in the New Covenant?"

In answer, the father explains that marriage was ordained of God under the Old Covenant to be conducted in purity and continence, "not in the plague of lust as do the heathen who do not know God." Continence was necessary during times of special consecration (Mack cites Exodus xix.15) and during times of ritual uncleanness (Leviticus xii.5).

Under the New Covenant, marriage is to meet a higher and more holy standard. Echoing Hochmann, Mack asserts that it is "closer to the image of Christ to remain unmarried," "if the unmarried state is conducted in purity of Spirit and of the flesh in true faith in Jesus."

The next best thing to the unmarried state is a marriage conducted in "purity and continence" according to God's will. Mack condemns the marriage that is constituted out of "the lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh, and for the sake of wealth," and not in oneness in "true belief" and "true faith" in Christ. For Mack, that "the two become one" is a description of common faith in Christ not of physical union, which is "after the outward and corruptible flesh," and greatly inferior.

In subordinating physical union, we can see once again a sympathy with Hochmann, who considered a marriage conducted in continence as brother and sister a "much more nearly perfect grade" than a marriage where the husband and wife have sexual relations. Even in the 'lower' form of marriage, sexual union primarily serves the purpose of procreation. Like Mack, Hochmann ranks lowest the marriage where the partners do not have a common faith in Christ, although by Willoughby's description, Hochmann did not take as severe a view of this 'unsanctified' marriage as did Mack, who considered an 'unsanctified' marriage cursed {15}.

Given this sympathy, I believe we can take literally Mack's preference for continence in marriage. Although the grading of male-female relations is not as clear in Mack as it is in Hochmann, both men evidently hold to the same standard. Mack writes first of "purity and continence," second the 'two becoming one' as a spiritual commitment, third of physical union which is "after the outward and corruptible flesh," and fourth of the 'unsanctified' marriage which is accursed.

I believe is no accident that of the two calls to abstinence from physical union in the Old Testament which Mack cites, the context of the first is consecration in preparation for the descending of the Lord. By averring that under the New Covenant believers are to meet a higher and holier standard in purity and continence, Mack has in mind consecration to the Lord by abstaining from physical union.

In this way we can see a common sympathy in Hochmann, in Mack and the Schwarzenau Brethren under Mack's leadership, and in Beissel and the Ephrata commune. Further support for this sympathy may be found in the lack of any record that, twenty years after the initial period of experimentation at Schwarzenau, Brethren who joined the Ephrata Cloister and subsequently returned to Germantown were subjected to any degree of censure or discipline {16}.

In the foregoing we have seen that in the first few years of their existence, as the Schwarzenau Brethren were casting about to determine polity for their church which followed New Testament and early church models, Pietists Hochmann and Arnold were important influences, and that their ideas gave shape to the infant congregation. Hochmann was likely an important influence as well in the life of Conrad Beissel. E. G. Alderfer, in his history of the Ephrata cloister, observes that Hochmann's "views coincided closely with those which eventually shaped Ephrata," and suggests that Beissel may have met Hochmann {17}.

Alderfer is more certain that Beissel became acquainted with the Brethren before they were forced out of Schwarzenau, but only after the direct influence of Hochmann on the congregation had waned and the practice of the Brethren was becoming formalized. Alderfer avers that Beissel would have felt at home with the Brethren theologically, but was turned off by the growing formality under Mack's leadership.

After making this first acquaintance with the Brethren, it seems that Beissel was out of direct contact with them until five to ten years later, when Beissel arrived in Germantown in 1720 and took up residence with Peter Becker {18}. Becker was the leader of the Brethren in colonial Pennsylvania, where Beissel became reacquainted with and, four years later in 1724, baptized into the Gemeinschaft of the Brethren. Therefore, although it is helpful to see a common sympathy between Beissel and Mack, what is more important is the relationship between Beissel and Becker, and it is to a consideration of this relationship to which we now turn.

As noted in the introduction, Beissel spent a year, from 1720 to 1721, in the home of Becker learning the weaving trade. Beissel came into Becker's home recently arrived from Europe, complete with mystical and Pietistic ideas and commitments, and having already demonstrated his charisma as a leader.

Radical Pietist Influences on Conrad Beissel

Beissel was first introduced to Pietism as a baker's apprentice, when he began to attend secret conventicles and gave up church attendance. During Beissel's Wanderjahre as a journeyman baker, he continued to seek out the company of Pietists, and was introduced to what Alderfer calls the "mystical occult, and millennialist underground of European Christendom" {19}. Beissel came into the company of Inspirationists and the theosophical Society of Philadelphians.

With regard to Beissel's charisma as a leader, Alderfer relates that during his stay in Heidelberg, Beissel led Bible studies and taught theosophy, ultimately converting his host family to Pietism {20}. Beissel's powerful influence on women, which was to dog him the rest of his life, is evident throughout the account.

Beissel's Wanderbuch was confiscated because of Beissel's Pietism and clandestine activities, leaving Beissel without a means of livelihood. Unable to provide for himself, Beissel accepted the invitation to stay with the Becker family. It was not long, however, before Beissel moved on, having determined to take up the mystical life of solitary contemplation.

In the wilderness of what is now Lebanon county, Beissel set up a household with three other men, and the four engaged themselves in running a school for frontier families and preaching the Gospel in the back country. By 1722, a year or so after leaving Germantown, Beissel was already attracting a following.

Baptism and Incorporation of the Conestoga Congregation

Meanwhile, back in Germantown, Becker had been working to bring the Schwarzenau brethren back together, a work which culminated in the baptisms of Christmas Day, 1723, and in November of 1724 Becker and some of the other Brethren engaged in a mission to the Conestoga frontier, for which they requested and received Beissel's assistance. It was at this time that Beissel, feeling a need for formal alliance and believer's baptism {21}, was baptized by Becker in the Pequea creek on 12 November.

By Alderfer's account, at the time of his baptism, Beissel was simply preaching the Gospel, since the frontier families needed encouragement and did not have the energy to spare for mystical flights. Nevertheless, Beissel's way of life placed him squarely in league with the other mystics in the area, and Beissel had already declared himself in favor of keeping the Jewish Sabbath instead of

worshiping on Sunday. It seems to me that, having become reacquainted with Beissel, Becker would not have found any change in Beissel's outlook and convictions. Nevertheless, Becker baptized Beissel within days of arriving in the Conestoga frontier.

On 26 November, the Conestoga congregation was organized with Beissel as Vorsteher {20}. Within the next couple of years the congregation began to take the form of a commune. A cabin for Beissel was built in the area, followed by squatter's cabins for the male disciples who chose to follow Beissel in adopting the single life, and then by a cabin for the women who were attracted to Beissel and wished to join the community.

This brings us to the point of asking why Becker baptized Beissel a week after renewing acquaintances, and why Becker left without giving any attention to the organization of the Conestoga congregation. In the writings of Becker which have been preserved for us, I could not find any satisfactory answers to these questions. There are, however, two inferences which can be drawn, which I think are very helpful.

The first inference is drawn from a comment in the Chronicon that Becker "was a spiritual son of Hochmann" and the God-given means by which the Brethren were preserved {22}, although a quiet man not given to oratory. The Cloister, patterned so much after Hochmann's teaching, considered itself in kinship with Becker.

The reason why Becker, in whose home Beissel had lived, felt free to baptize Beissel is arguably that there was a common conviction between the two men at least on the spiritual advantage of the single life and, short of that, the marital life constituted in "purity and continence." Possibly there was also an agreement on ascetic and mystical ideals, so that the divisiveness, stubbornness, and materialism of the Germantown Brethren would have grieved Becker. We do not know all the reasons why Becker took Beissel into his home. Certainly, Becker was concerned for Beissel, who lacked any means to support himself. Perhaps also Becker saw in Beissel a common interest and a charisma and leadership ability which Becker lacked.

The second inference is drawn from the polity of the Schwarzenau brethren. About the formation of the congregation at Schwarzenau, Willoughby writes,

Since they believed in divine ordination of ministers by the Holy Spirit, there was probably no formal election or acknowledgment of Mack's position {23}.

If what Willoughby writes is accurate, this account could equally well describe the Conestoga congregation. On the Conestoga, believers were baptized and left to themselves and to the Holy Spirit to determine who would be the Vorsteher.

Of course, Becker would likely have assumed that Beissel would take leadership. Even while Beissel was living in Becker's home, the former began to preach to the Brethren at Germantown, exhorting them to return to their original holy calling and conviction. Beissel was specifically asked to help with the mission in the Conestoga frontier, because of Beissel's prior success in effecting revival among the frontier families.

The Falling Out of Beissel, Becker, and Mack

One final issue remains. In 1729, Mack arrived in Germantown with the congregation from Friesland. In Alderfer's words, "Peter Becker at once filled the patriarch's ears with lurid tales about the errors and independence of Beissel and the Conestogans" {24}. Mack in turn traveled to the Conestoga frontier to confront Beissel and attempt reunion with the Germantown congregation. What were the errors which so disturbed Becker?

Alderfer lists several features of the Conestoga congregation which had developed by 1728. These included observing the Sabbath, mystical experiences, an emphasis on virginity and continence, avoidance of 'unclean' foods, and the spiritual necessity of poverty {22}. These practices brought conflict with the Germantown Brethren. The Germantowners thought that Beissel and Conestogans had gone off the deep end, while Beissel thought that the Germantown church was spiritually dead. Beissel, accordingly, had himself rebaptized by his followers, and in the spring of 1728 Conestoga had independently planted another congregation (in Becker's 'territory,' which certainly did not help matters).

The independence of the Conestoga congregation about which Becker complained is thus obvious. The errors of the Conestoga congregation are another matter. My reading suggests that Becker might have considered the emphasis on virginity and continence laudable; as a "true son of Hochmann" Becker may even have welcomed the mystical experience. With Sabbath-keeping and the avoidance of 'unclean' foods, however, the Conestogans had certainly 'veered into legalism'. In all likelihood, the account of the Conestoga practices which reached Becker would have been mixed with the rumors that exaggerated the mystical experiences into tales of witchcraft and sorcery and added sordid tales about Beissel's relations with his female followers. In any case, further research will be necessary before I can say for certain whether Mack met with the Conestogans to 'set them straight,' or whether his intent was simply to temper their excesses and attempt reconciliation.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to show that Beissel, Becker, and Mack agreed in some basic and fundamental ways. The record suggests that all three drank deeply from the radical Pietist well, and that all three shared conceptions of the Christian life informed by Hochmann. Mack and Becker did not have a problem with Beissel's call to celibacy and the communal life, although they were arguably disturbed by news of pagan rites, self-mortifying initiation into arcana which drove some to madness, and echoes of Roman superstition.

Commenting on the disagreements of Mack and Becker with Beissel, Brown is convinced that the issues were ecclesiological: their disagreements were over the nature and ordering of the church. Beissel and Mack were most deeply troubled that Beissel undermined and destroyed the unity of the

Brethren at Conestoga with the Brethren at Germantown. What made matters worse was Beissel's authoritarianism and inflexibility. The Germantown and European Brethren were concerned that their members were seen as equals, and they were not overly concerned that one person or class exercise clearly defined leadership.

The issue of ecclesiology was also what led to the split between Hochmann and the Brethren. Philosophically, Hochmann and the Schwarzenau congregation were kindred spirits, but Hochmann would not countenance a split with the established church, and Hochmann did not see as necessary the emphasis the Brethren placed on baptism {25}.

In a way, we can see in this account that what goes around comes around. Hochmann criticized Mack and his followers for failing to maintain the unity of the church and for too rigid an insistence on baptism. Later, Becker and Mack would criticize Beissel for destroying the unity of the Brethren and for his insistence that his own ways be followed.

Ultimately, the concern of the Brethren in their dealings with Hochmann and with Beissel was to uphold the sanctity of the Scriptures, and for this they are to be commended. Even today, the Pietist spirit of warm-hearted religion is most evident in congregations which cling closest to the Scriptures.

Endnotes

1. cf. Durnbaugh, Donald F, *European Origins of the Brethren* (The Brethren Press: Elgin, Ill, 1958): 35.
2. See, for example, Alexander Mack's use of Arnold in his *Rights and Ordinances* (Durnbaugh, op cit: 389).
3. Willoughby, William G, *Counting the Cost* (The Brethren Press: Elgin, Ill, 1979): 71.
4. Ibid: 37.
5. Durnbaugh, op cit: 38.
6. Willoughby, op cit: 38.
7. Durnbaugh, op cit: 36.
8. Willoughby, op cit: 71-72.
9. Lamech and Agrippa, *Chronicon Ephratense*, trans J Max Hark (Lenox Hill Pub & Dist Co: New York, 1972): 2.
10. Durnbaugh, op cit: 123.
11. Lamech and Agrippa, op cit: 2.
12. 23 April, 1999.

13. Lamech and Agrippa, op cit: 2-3.
14. Durnbaugh, op cit: 344f.
15. Willoughby, op cit: 71.
16. Dale Brown, phone conversation of 23 April.
17. Alderfer, E G, The Ephrata Commune (University of Pittsburgh Press: Pittsburgh, PA, 1985): 24.
18. Ibid: 24-25.
19. Ibid: 19.
20. Ibid: 21.
21. Ibid: 40.
22. Lamech and Agrippa, op cit: 248.
23. Willoughby, op cit: 63.
24. Alderfer, op cit: 44.
25. Dale Brown, phone conversation of 23 April.

About the author

Born Oct. 21, 1971 in New Hampshire, Carl Harter grew up in a Conservative Baptist of America (CBA) church. After graduation from Oyster River High School, Durham, NH, in 1990, he took a few college courses, then in 1992 entered BVS and was assigned to the Wayside Cross Mission in Aurora, Illinois. There he became acquainted with the BRF branch of the COB. He also began to feel God calling him to the ministry. Returning home, he enrolled at the University of New Hampshire and in 1996 graduated with a Philosophy major and minors in History and German. In the fall of 1996, he enrolled at the Evangelical Theological School, Myerstown, Pennsylvania, where he simultaneously worked toward an M.Div. and M.A. He was a member of the White Oak COB and assisted in their adult education program.

