From Practices to Methods: Pragmatic Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology and the Mid-Century Transformation of the Brethren in Christ

By Zachary Spidel*

Introduction

Denominational identities are elusive things. Bore down deep enough in any given area of belief or practice within a church group and one is certain to find some form of variance over time. Even meticulously preserved rituals take place in changing cultural contexts which lend those rituals new connections and, therefore, new connotations. When asking questions of identity, then, one cannot hope for strict or static definitions. This does not, however, render investigations into religious identity pointless. While static definitions of identity will flounder under serious historical investigation, it remains possible to recognize the identity of a religious group as a gestalt across both geographic and temporal distances alike. Such recognition works in similar fashion to the recognition of persons. I have had the experience, on multiple occasions, of running into friends from elementary school whom I had not seen in years. In these cases, there was a slight pause as we were both struck by a sense that we ought to know the person in front of us, followed by a moment in which actual recognition dawned. Our faces had changed (hence the delay), but they had also remained—in an impossible-to-perfectly-define way—the same. Religious identities are, so this paper assumes, similarly identifiable over time. If this is so, then investigations

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concerning such identities ought to proceed via thick description and narration rather than by attempting to provide static definitions.

With these considerations in mind, this paper will offer an explanatory account concerning a transformation in the Brethren in Christ's religious identity during the middle years of the twentieth century. At the dawn of that century, the Brethren in Christ were a small sectarian[1] denomination who gathered in simple meeting houses, dressed plainly, worshipped without instrumentation, maintained a long-held stance of nonresistance and non-participation in war, and were constituted by a highly committed membership distinct from the outside world. In just a few decades in the middle of that century, all these long-held distinctives had either been abandoned or placed under significant strain. A person attending a typical Brethren in Christ church in 1935 would hardly have been able to predict how remarkably different a typical church in the denomination would be by 1965. How was such a radical transformation possible? What caused this change and how deep does it go?

This paper will attempt to shed light on these questions by (1) providing a basic account of the denomination's historic identity up to and including its transformation in the middle years of the twentieth century, (2) drawing upon the theory of Brethren in Christ theologian Luke Keefer Jr. concerning the nature of that transformation, and ultimately, (3) building on and going beyond Keefer's theory with help from Clifford Geertz's conception of religious symbols as syntheses of a religious group's ethos and worldview. Moreover, it must be noted that the account offered in this paper is primarily an anthropological one[2] and, as such, is incomplete on its own. Committed Christians, including those of us in the Brethren in Christ, will want to ask some important theological questions alongside the anthropological

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[1] Identifying a group as "sectarian" has, since the work of Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch, often carried an implicit negative judgement. Anabaptists—given their traditional refusal to participate in the violence of the state—have long been labeled as "sectarians" or as "separatists." Such groups, so the typical evaluation goes, care more about their inner purity than about any responsibility to the wider society. No such evaluation attaches to my description of the Brethren in Christ as a "sectarian" group at the beginning of the twentieth century. For an able deconstruction of the negative connotations of "sectarianism" see Philip D. Kenneson, *Beyond Sectarianism: Re-Imagining Church and World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). I use the term as Kenneson does, to describe an alternative way of imagining the church's mission within the world.

ones raised here. That theological task, however, intersects with and can be enriched by engagement with the anthropological perspective of this paper. Finally, I must forewarn my readers that the argument which follows is necessarily complex and thus its explanatory power will, if genuine, only reveal itself over the (winding) course of the following account.

The historic identity of the Brethren in Christ and its twentieth century transformation

The original, synthetic identity of the Brethren in Christ

The identity of the Brethren in Christ church has been synthetic from the start. Specifically, the denomination was born out of a "marriage" of Anabaptism and Pietism in late eighteenth century Pennsylvania. More specifically, the denomination was formed by a group of German- speaking Mennonite believers who experienced spiritual renewal in the midst of a Pietistic revival and subsequently found it impossible to let go either of their Anabaptist ecclesiology and its attendant structural forms or their newfound Pietist emphasis on heartfelt conversion and worship. Carlton O. Wittlinger, an influential denominational historian, expresses an abiding consensus on the origins of Brethren identity when he claims: "It is clear that the founding fathers attempted to synthesize the Anabaptist understandings of the church and the Christian life with the Pietist concept of a heartfelt new birth."[3]

Owen Alderfer, another major denominational historian, speaks of this synthesis in terms of an Anabaptist commitment to the church as a "total community" joined to a Pietist emphasis on "the role of immediate experience as the way to salvation."[4] Speaking of the church's first century and a half, Alderfer says that, "To be one of the Brethren a person must witness publicly to the new birth; further, he must come under church order and discipline. Often, the converted individual had to prove himself worthy of the body by a faithful walk over a period of time before membership was

[2] This paper had its genesis in a PhD seminar focused on the use of cultural anthropology in works of theology.

[3] Carlton O. Wittlinger, "Who Are the Brethren in Christ? An Interpretive Essay," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 1, no. 1 (June 1978): 5.

[4] Owen Alderfer, "The Brethren in Christ and the Larger Christian Context," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 17, no. 3 (December 1994): 71.

encouraged."[5] As Anabaptists, then, the Brethren in Christ practiced closed communion amongst a membership that had to demonstrate a commitment to Christ and a transformed life prior to baptism and entrance into that membership. Further, as Anabaptists, they practiced a communitarian form of discernment and discipline in which individuals and individual churches would refer practical and theological questions of all varieties to the wider church for the judgment of the whole body. Finally, the Anabaptist pole of the original Brethren in Christ synthesis was expressed in their commitment to plain clothes, engagement in simple, unaccompanied worship (at first in homes and only later in bare-bones meeting houses), and in a strict adherence to the practices of nonresistance, non-participation in war, and nonconformity to the wider society (which included non-participation in government and/or patriotic displays).

Added to these Anabaptist distinctives, however, was a strong and enduring attachment to the importance of a heartfelt conversion experience as well as an ongoing inner experience of the presence of Christ in one's life. Unlike other Anabaptist groups, whose pre-requisites for joining the membership of the church were entirely a matter of obedience to God expressed through obedience to the corporate order of the church, the Brethren in Christ joined these pre-requisites to the necessity of these two experiences. Revival as a concept, therefore, as well as revivalistic and evangelistic services, were a part of the Brethren in Christ from the beginning in a way that distinguishes them from purely Anabaptist groups. The conversions that occurred in such services were not, however, immediately followed by baptism and church membership as they often were in non-Anabaptist evangelistic settings. Rather, the Brethren were, in the words of a key denominational leader who would later play a pivotal role in changing this fact, "very modest about inviting converts . . . to join the church . . . the Brethren let it be known to converts that they were welcome to join if they would 'conform and be one of us,' but converts had to express their desire to join and give visible evidence of their salvation."[6] Pietist emphasis on personal, heartfelt experience, therefore, served to buttress and funnel people toward an essentially Anabaptist ecclesial structure and life.

[5] Alderfer, 71.

This synthesis persisted for one hundred years before it faced its first major test. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a large number of Brethren embraced the theology of entire sanctification as represented by the American Holiness Camp Meeting tradition along with some of the revivalist practices that went along with this theology—the camp meeting itself being an important example. The Wesleyan Holiness tradition, while consonant with and in some ways a natural development of the Pietistic stream[7] in the Brethren's identity, elaborated that stream in ways that did not mesh well with their other foundational stream—their fundamentally Anabaptist ecclesiology and its particular structures and practices. Luke Keefer Jr. points to the early testimonies of those having experiences of entire sanctification as evidence of the widening cleavage in the church occasioned by the introduction of this novel theology. In particular, the claim of Christian perfection seemed to lead to a kind of individualism which threatened the communitarian nature of the Brethren. Both the advocates of the new theology and its detractors were concerned with this question: "Are the 'perfect' ones beyond the counsel and the control of the group?"[8] Mary Stoner, for instance, shared a testimony in the pages of the denominational magazine, the *Evangelical Visitor,* which seemed to suggest that they were when she "asserted that the Spirit had led her to put off her plain attire as merely a "church-form."[9] This sort of individualism was uncharacteristic of the group's membership up to that time. More than the importance of plain clothes or any other specific, practical divergence from the group's established practices, it was the underlying claim of Holiness

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[6] Charlie Byers, "The Brethren in Christ Church in My Lifetime," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 2, no. 1 (June 1979): 24. Rev. Byers will come back up in the story of the Brethren's radical mid-twentieth century transformation.

[7] This language of "streams" is taken from one of the most influential accounts of contemporary Brethren in Christ identity: Luke J. Keefer Jr., "The Three Streams of our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?" *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 35, no. 2 (August 2012): 331-367. Keefer's account, first published in 1996, includes four theological "streams" which have fed into the modern Brethren in Christ identity: Anabaptism, Pietism, Wesleyan-Holiness Theology, and Evangelicalism. By the last of these terms he means, specifically, the "mildly Calvinist" mid-twentieth century neo-Evangelicalism of the National Association of Evangelicals and other aligned groups and individuals.

[8] Keefer, "The Three Streams of Our Heritage," 340.

[9] As described in Luke J. Keefer Jr., "Holiness: A Brethren in Christ Historical Case Study," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 21, no. 1 (April 1999): 79.

proponents like Stoner to individual discernment which represented a radical departure from the Brethren's historic identity. Such claims pried people lose from an embodied, communitarian ecclesial framework of relationship which had, until then, been of bedrock importance to the Brethren. Given the prominence of Holiness advocates in the denomination during the period from 1880-1910[10] it is remarkable that the sharp internal disagreement over Holiness theology did not lead to a denominational split.

It did not do so, according to Luke Keefer Jr., because over time and with much discussion, the new stream was "domesticated" to the original synthesis. Whereas the first written testimonies of those claiming to achieve entire sanctification, like Stoner's, emphasized those individuals' freedom from the community's standards, later examples of such testimonies worked in a crucially different way. Indeed, later sanctification testimonies from within the Brethren in Christ are unlike any such testimonies in other Holiness groups: "People wrote of their experiences of sanctification and noted that they could not 'pray through' to the witness of the Holy Spirit until they had died to their pride and were willing to take the "plain way."[11] Entire sanctification, rather than serving to disembed individuals from the Anabaptist-communitarian structures of the Brethren's fellowship, was deemed to depend upon yielding in humility to those structures. In this manner, Wesleyan sanctification theology was folded into or domesticated by the original synthesis. Keefer argues that the synthesis was altered by this inclusion, but that it ultimately remained identifiably itself. What had been true remained true: the Brethren in Christ were "Anabaptists with a difference," just as they also remained "Pietists with a difference."[12] This synthesis with its "difference" was "stable" but not "static."[13] Owen Alderfer agrees with Keefer in this assessment, arguing that Holiness theology, in its moments of excess and individualism, produced a backlash that ultimately limited its impact and threatened its continued influence in

[10] Carlton O. Wittlinger identifies these three decades as the first of two great "periods of transition" in the history of the Brethren in Christ. The changes in this first period of transition largely stemmed from interactions with Wesleyan Holiness groups in whom the Brethren recognized an attractive elaboration of one half of their own background (Pietism). See Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Press, 1978), 45-317, especially 227-257.

[11] Keefer, "The Three Streams of our Heritage," 341.

[12] Keefer, 337.

[13] Keefer, 337.

the denomination. It was only "after it had been brought into the historic Brethren in Christ thought-synthesis," that Wesleyan Holiness theology made a lasting but now circumscribed contribution to that synthesis.[14]

The transformation of the original synthesis

In the period from 1910-1950 the denomination completed the "domestication" of Wesleyan Holiness theology addressed above and, in some ways, redoubled its commitment to the Anabaptist practices that marked it off from other Pietist and Holiness groups.[15] In the latter part of this period of adjustment, the denomination became alarmed by a growing problem. Despite overseas missions success (an endeavor the Brethren began in the wake of their contacts with Wesleyan Holiness missions groups), the denomination was not only numerically stagnant in America, it was actively losing its young people to other churches. For an already tiny denomination this was especially distressing. Charlie Byers, a key advocate for change in the late 1940s and 1950s, reflected much later upon the years in which the denomination became conscious of this problem:

> We found that our sons were neither as well indoctrinated nor as much in love with the church and its teachings as we had taken for granted. Many were not in agreement with the church on the peace issue. Some members left the church, and others were dismissed. Our small membership was decreasing, and we found ourselves unprepared to serve the present age.[16]

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[14] Alderfer, "The Brethren in Christ," 76.

[15] These years are identified by Wittlinger as the "period of adjustment" and were looked at, by those who brought in the transformation about to be discussed as years of "legalism." For Wittlinger's treatment of the period see Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, 321-472. For the perception of legalism, see Ray M. Zercher, "'Hard by a Public Road': A Study of Brethren in Christ Church Architecture," in *Windows to the Church: Selections from Twenty-Five Years of Brethren in Christ History and Life* (Grantham, PA: The Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 2003), 236-238.

[16] Byers, "The Brethren in Christ Church in My Lifetime," 24-25. Byers's quote indicates that a generational gap had opened up in the church at this time and that it was the practical catalyst for the changes initiated amongst the church's faithful. Many, but certainly not all, of the generation then rising into the age that membership would have been expected did not embrace the denomination's distinctive practices, including the peace position. Most of these youth left the church, many of them finding Christian fellowship in the less demanding churches with which the Brethren in Christ had grown increasingly familiar since the 1880s.

Byers's odd-sounding reference to "indoctrination" has a specific history. As chronicled by Frank Demmy, the denomination responded to its inability to pass along its peculiar form of the Christian faith to many of its children (an inability seemingly related to the increased exposure of young people in the church to outside Christian perspectives and options) by a series of efforts which were collectively referred to under the banner of "indoctrination."[17] These efforts amounted, in practice, to an increased number of energetic, explicit, and emphatic approaches to teaching the denomination's distinctives to its youth.

This didactic effort was judged a failure in the years during and after the Second World War, and the denominational malaise which ensued was the context for the introduction of a fourth stream into the Brethren in Christ identity. The Brethren in Christ joined the National Association of Evangelicals in 1949 after two years of deliberation over this significant step. They hoped to find a solution to their stagnant and, in some places, shrinking rolls. In 1950 a delegation of leaders from the Brethren in Christ, including Charlie Byers, attended the NAE's national conference and in a late-night discussion following a day's worth of meetings, these leaders became convinced that their church was in need of radical change.[18] These men became catalysts for just that sort of change in the following decade—change that the denomination acceded to with remarkable alacrity. Charlie Byers himself describes what followed:

> Out of that meeting [at the NAE conference] eventually came a restudy committee appointed by General Conference which functioned in the early part of the 1950s. As a result of the committee's work, the brotherhood made some modifications as well as some sweeping changes in the life of the church, including a move away from small districts . . . to large regional conferences and full time, salaried bishops, and soon to a fully supported pastoral system.

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[17] Frank Demmy, "The Spiritual Revolution in the Brethren in Christ Church as a Prelude to a Decade of Reorganization" (undergraduate thesis, Messiah College, 1973), Academic Documents, 1000-0000-2938, Brethren in Christ Historical Library and Archives, Mechanicsburg, PA, 3-7. The denomination even formed the ominous sounding "Indoctrination Committee" to coordinate this attempt to retain the denomination's youth by more direct and intentional teaching of denominational distinctives.

[18] This meeting, which has assumed a prominent place in the denomination's self-consciousness since, is described in Wittlinger, "Who Are the Brethren in Christ? An Interpretive Essay," 479-481.

> More radical changes followed. Musical instruments were permitted and soon all churches had one or more. Church choirs also appeared. Much building construction started . . . . Dress codes came to be used only as guides. Messiah Bible College became Messiah College and [sic] liberal arts.[19]

Byers' list, as amazing as it is, is incomplete. Multi-day, cross-congregational love feasts began to fade away.[20] The new buildings being built were indistinguishable from mainstream Protestant sanctuaries and, consequently, constituted a massive departure from the meeting houses of the previous era.[21] The peace position weakened further—now among the older generations as well.[22] Finally, a new and explicit individualism[23] along with a new sense of attachment to the American nation[24] were evidenced in denominational literature.

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[19] Byers, "The Brethren in Christ in My Lifetime," 25.

[20] See, for instance, the elegiac account of love feasts as they were practiced in the 1940s which concludes the following essay: Clayton Cober, "Brethren in Christ Life in the 1940s," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 23, no. 1 (April 2000): 170-172.

[21] The depth of the changes and the essential break down in any sort of coherent or identifiable pattern or theology discernable in various churches' new construction is chronicled in Zercher, "'Hard by a Public Road': A Study of Brethren in Christ Church Architecture," 227-246.

[22] See David Weaver-Zercher, "Open (to) Arms: The Status of the Peace Position in the Brethren in Christ Church," in *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 22, no. 1 (April 1999): 90-115. Weaver-Zercher gives a detailed overview of the denomination's commitment to peace—including the opening of a generational rift on the question around WWII, a struggle to "indoctrinate" the denomination's young on this position, and an uneven, but ultimately downward trajectory for the place of the peace position within the denomination since then.

[23] An article by Bishop Henry G. Brubaker in the April 9, 1956 issue of the *Evangelical Visitor* is remarkable in its divergence from the past and a harbinger of much that would follow: "Christianity is a religion in which the individual is on his own. Each individual is his own priest, and has direct access to God as a Son of God. He is his own king, and as a consequence rules himself. He is a prophet and is futuristic in his outlook. Christianity is the only religion that specializes in individuals and frees them from all encumbrance." Henry G. Brubaker, "The Central in Christianity," the *Evangelical Visitor*, April 9, 1956, 4. The absolutism of the envisioned individualism here is rather remarkable. Brubaker will appear again in this paper and is the most vocal and perhaps most progressive member of the group of denominational leaders who pushed for change in the 1950s.

[24] J. N. Hostetter, another leading advocate for change and the editor of the *Evangelical Visitor,* began one of his editorials from 1951 in this way: "Thanks be to God! There has been an unusual moving of the Spirit of God in the field of evangelism in the last few years. We are deeply grateful for what has been accomplished. But then, much more must be done if the American way of life is to be preserved as we have known and enjoyed it." It is noteworthy that this language, which was novel in the denomination at this time, appears a mere two years after the Brethren had joined the NAE, in which they mingled with a broader group of Evangelicals who often mixed pro-American and anti-communist rhetoric together with their pronouncements about

In barely more than a decade, the denomination went through more change, arguably, than it had in its entire existence up to that time. Reflecting on this transformation several decades later and employing his imagery of four traditional "streams" in the modern Brethren in Christ identity—Anabaptism, Pietism, Wesleyanism, and Evangelicalism—Luke Keefer Jr. comments, "We believed we could learn from [Evangelicalism] discretely, adopting only what we felt was of value. But the stream had more force than we anticipated. We have not domesticated it as we did Wesleyanism; instead it has domesticated us."[25] Based solely on the observable outcomes listed above, it is hard to argue with Keefer's characterization. Just how such a radical change could occur in such a short span of time and why it did so when an earlier encounter with another outside theological stream (Wesleyan Holiness) led to such a different outcome remain questions of great importance for contemporary Brethren in Christ people.

Luke Keefer Jr.'s account of the Brethren in Christ's domestication by evangelicalism

Luke L. Keefer Jr., whose work has already assumed a prominent place in this paper, was a longtime professor at Ashland Theological Seminary, a committed churchman, and a figure of great importance in the Brethren in Christ Church. Several papers and presentations which he authored served, in retrospect, as turning points in denominational debates.[26] One of his

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[24] the gospel. Hostetter, as editor of the *Evangelical Visitor* also made a habit in the early 1950s of reprinting articles from non-Brethren authors in other NAE denominations in the pages of the magazine; some of these articles contained even more overt or emphatic expressions of patriotism than that just cited. See J. N. Hostetter, "Evangelism: A Church Ministry," *Evangelical Visitor*, December 10, 1951, 5 ff.

[25] Keefer, "The Three Streams of our Heritage," 346.

[26] J. N. Hostetter, another leading advocate for change and the editor of the *Evangelical Visitor,* began one of his editorials from 1951 in this way: "Thanks be to God! There has been an unusual moving of the Spirit of God in the field of evangelism in the last few years. We are deeply grateful for what has been accomplished. But then, much more must be done if the American way of life is to be preserved as we have known and enjoyed it." It is noteworthy that this language, which was novel in the denomination at this time, appears a mere two years after the Brethren had joined the NAE, in which they mingled with a broader group of Evangelicals who often mixed pro-American and anti-communist rhetoric together with their pronouncements about the gospel. Hostetter, as editor of the *Evangelical Visitor* also made a habit in the early 1950s of reprinting articles from non-Brethren authors in other NAE denominations in the pages of the magazine; some of these articles contained even more overt or emphatic expressions of patriotism than that just cited. See J. N. Hostetter, "Evangelism: A Church Ministry," *Evangelical Visitor*, December 10, 1951, 5 ff.

papers, originally authored in 1996, has resurfaced periodically ever since in various denominational contexts and offers an argument which directly raises and seeks to answer just those questions posed above. Keefer's answers are multi-layered, but the following point is of central importance:

> Anabaptism supplied the form and Pietism the spirit of the Brethren in Christ Church.
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> The version of Wesleyanism that we encountered revived and intensified the spirit part of this equation. Now spirit is very malleable; it can be adjusted to many forms. Thus, the Pietist side of us could readily adapt to Evangelicalism. Form, however, is different; it shapes, but is not readily shaped. So as long as we accentuated our Anabaptist heritage, we retained a distinct denominational form of identity. But when we moved from our Anabaptist forms, we lost our capacity to shape the influences that were coming to us.[27]

Keefer argues that Wesleyanism was domesticated because and precisely insofar as its concerns and emphases were made to live within the material forms and practices of the church which were essentially Anabaptist (plain clothes, simple worship, nonresistance, communal discernment and discipline, closed communion at love feasts, etc.). This resulted in significant change, but not the sort of change that might have occurred if those forms had themselves been substantially altered or even abandoned. Evangelicalism, accordingly, was not domesticated by the Brethren because, rather than offer a new way of inhabiting (or a changed spirit with which to inhabit) those same forms, it provided a different set of forms which the denomination opted for over against the old ones.

Keefer offers this account of the relevant dynamics in a paper written for a wide audience within the Brethren in Christ Church and he does so in careful but non-academic prose. "Spirit" and "form" are suggestive terms, but somewhat lacking in conceptual clarity. His argument, however, is highly considered, backed up by significant research and a sharp theological mind, and can therefore reward more specialized forms of investigation. In particular, Keefer's account of "forms" and "spirit" in the construction of the Brethren in Christ's modern identity is amenable to engagement from

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[27] Keefer, "The Three Streams of our Heritage," 348.

an anthropological perspective. One of the most important anthropologists of the twentieth century happens to provide a similar dichotomy which can illuminate, extend, and, in the process, allow us to go beyond Keefer's analysis.

Geertzian religious anthropology and the Brethren in Christ's religious transformation

Ethos and worldview in Geertz's conception of religion

Clifford Geertz famously described religion as a system of shared cultural symbols which serve to coordinate a group's ethos and worldview:

> Sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their worldview—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order. In religious belief and practice a group's ethos is rendered intellectually reasonable by being shown to represent a way of life ideally adapted to the actual state of affairs . . . . [28]

This definition has the advantage of an immediately recognizable plausibility. Religion, and religious symbols, at some level must be oriented toward some understanding of what is ultimately real and what, therefore, ultimately matters. Religious symbols reflect a "picture . . . of the way things in sheer actuality are." These "comprehensive ideas of order" are what Geertz defines as a religious group's *worldview*.

It is important, and a key virtue of Geertz's conceptualization of religious symbols, that he does not regard them simply, directly, or solely as implementations of a religious group's worldview—as if a group has a worldview and then acts it out in its symbols in a self-conscious way. It is a fact that people with very similar worldviews can have sharp disagreements over the practicalities of religious rituals and/or ethical commitments (which can and do, in many religious groups, function as religious symbols). Rather than simply illustrating a religious worldview, religious symbols "synthesize" that worldview with a group's ethos. Defining "ethos"

[28] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89-90.

is necessarily more difficult than defining "worldview." A worldview is concerned with ideas, concepts of order, and mental pictures, and on all those counts a worldview is amenable to conceptual reflection and explicit (and fairly precise) articulation. An ethos, however, is a matter of the "tone, character, and quality" of a religious group's life, of a moral/aesthetical style or mood that typifies that life. Such matters cannot be captured, without serious and distorting reductionism, to explicit conceptual categories. I might read a book about the difference between the baroque and romantic periods of classical music and memorize a standard set of terms intended to describe those musical styles, but without a previous, intimate, and guided familiarity with actual instances of those styles, I would still struggle to differentiate them upon hearing them. I would, in such a case, have a stock of label-words, but find it quite difficult to skillfully and accurately use them. In this way, Potter Stewart's famous dictum concerning the differentiation between pornography and art applies, I believe, in matters of ethos. A religious person or community may not be able to define their ethos precisely, and, if they try, the result will necessarily fail to capture much that matters, but, for all this, deeply formed members of a group know their ethos when they see it. (And, crucially, they can recognize when things do not align with their ethos.)

While an ethos will always be more than any conceptual definition of it can capture, Geertz has provided additional characterizations of what he intends by the category of ethos to help his readers understand his use of the term. Geertz's full definition of religion is helpful in this regard.

> (1) A system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.[29]

Number two above corresponds to Geertz's conception of ethos. An ethos is established by and therefore inheres within a religious group's symbols. Ethos is never abstract, it is never a proposition believed in or a concept held, it is never anything other than that style, character, or tone of life

[29] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 90.

which is concretely realized in a religious group's actual shared practices. Moreover, a group's ethos is made up of both moods and motivations. A motivation, according to Geertz, "is a persisting tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and experience certain sorts of feelings in certain sorts of situations."[30] The immediate example he gives of a motivation, in this sense, is vanity. A vain man is one whom:

> we expect to behave in certain ways, namely to talk a lot about himself, to cleave to the society of the eminent . . . to be vain is to tend to act in these and innumerable other kindred ways. Certainly, we also expect the vain man to feel certain pangs and flutters in certain situations; we expect him to have an acute sinking feeling when an eminent person forgets his name. . . . [31]

Note that for Geertz a motivation is not an explicitly conceptualized goal. "To become the largest religious group in the United States," as such, is not a Geertzian motivation and could not be a constituent element within a religious group's ethos—though such a goal might be a natural one for a group with an ethos marked in part by exclusivist, messianic self-importance.[32] Motivations, then, are not specific or programmatic goals; rather, they are "enduring propensities," "ingrained tendencies," "persistent inclinations," and "are thus neither acts (that is intentional behaviors) nor feelings, but liabilities to perform particular classes of act or have particular classes of feeling."[33]

Moods are highly similar to motivations, but differ in this key respect: "Motives have a directional cast, they describe a certain overall course, gravitate toward certain, usually temporary consummations. But moods vary only to intensity: they go nowhere. They spring from certain circumstances but they are responsive to no ends. Like fogs, they just settle and lift."[34] Motivations, one might say, are propensities, inclinations, and

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[30] Geertz, 96.
[31] Geertz, 96.
[32] Geertz's other examples of motivations all bear this out. He lists "flamboyant courage," "moral circumspection," and "dispassionate tranquility" alongside the already mentioned "vanity" as examples of what he means by a motivation. None of these are conceptually clarified or specifically achievable goals.
[33] Geertz, 96-97.
[34] Geertz, 97.

tendencies to perform certain types of actions oriented toward certain kinds of ends, whereas moods are propensities, inclinations, and tendencies to experience certain kinds of internal states in response to certain types of circumstances. These propensities, inclinations, and tendencies (both moods and motivations) inhere within and are practically established and activated by the specific religious practices and symbols of a group.

To summarize: an ethos is a style that inheres within a religious group's moods and motivations (seen as patterns of both behavior and internal response) as those are embodied within that group's religious symbols. Those symbols embody the group's ethos in a way that coordinates and connects it with the group's worldview (their conceptualization of what is ultimately real). As stated in his definition of religion quoted above, Geertz believes that religious symbols (very often including religious practices) establish a group's ethos and that they do so by formulating a worldview which they subsequently, by their materiality and sociality, make concrete and render plausible. In a group's religious symbols, then, a synthesis of ethos and worldview is achieved.

Major claim: The Brethren in Christ rebalanced worldview and ethos in their religious practices

I now propose to argue that Geertz's conception of a group's religious symbols as a synthesis of their ethos and worldview can deepen and extend Keefer's analysis of the transformation in the Brethren in Christ's religious identity, originally rendered by Keefer in terms of spirit and form. Further, I will argue that Geertz's conception offers such insight if one posits that an important factor in the way a religious group's symbols function is the balance between ethos and worldview struck by the group in their use of those symbols. A group may relate to its symbols and value them because they express particular, explicitly held theological commitments (worldview) and/or because they define, for them, the character of life which they take to be the basis of their fellowship (ethos). In the first case, symbols are seen to be illustrations or applications of the group's worldview. In the second case, symbols are valued just because they embody the group's ethos: this (specific practice) is simply who "we" are. Most groups will relate to their religious symbols in both ways to varying degrees, but the balance between these ways of relating to religious symbols may differ between

groups or within the same group over time.

In the case of the Brethren in Christ, I argue that their religious symbols (largely a set of distinctive practices) were, for most of their history, primarily valued as the embodiment of their ethos (largely an Anabaptist one) and only secondarily seen as illustrations or applications of an explicitly recognized or defended theology. Furthermore, I argue that the transformation in the Brethren in Christ at mid-century occurred for two closely related reasons. (1) The Brethren adopted what they did not quite realize was a new and alien set of theological commitments (in particular a radical new ecclesiology), and (2) they came to see the value of their long-held distinctive practices as deriving almost exclusively from their ability to satisfy criteria set by that new theology, rather than as deriving from the way they embodied a form of life to which Christ had called them. In support of the above, this paper will demonstrate that a key group of leaders sought programmatically and explicitly to make all the group's practices serve as applications of a novel and explicitly articulated theology. If a practice did not work well as an application of this theology, it was to be altered or abandoned accordingly, whatever role it may have played in forming the Brethren's ethos up till then. Before this argument can be made more fully, however, this core claim must be clarified and filled out.

First, let us note that Keefer's notion of a "form" is most naturally identified with neither pole of Geertz's worldview-ethos dichotomy, but with the notion of a religious symbol which connects those two poles. I am suggesting that the Anabaptist religious "forms" highlighted by Keefer as central to Brethren in Christ identity (plain clothes, simple worship, nonconformity, community discernment and discipline, closed communion, the love feast, etc.) are recognizable as religious symbols, in the Geertzian sense. Those distinctive practices embodied and established an ethos while coordinating it with the Brethren's theological worldview.

Second, and related to the above, the Brethren in Christ's forms (or, in Geertz's language, its symbols) were largely a set of practices, as is visible in the parenthetical list in the previous paragraph. Moreover, it is important to note that this paper calls these distinctive activities "practices," in a highly specific sense. I mean something quite close to what the moral philosopher Alistair MacIntyre means by the term.

By a practice I am going to mean any coherent and complex form

> of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.[35]

Crucially, practices (in this technical sense) are not means to some extrinsic ends. They are shared activities whose goods are internal to them. Which is to say, they are done, in some sense, for their own sake. They have intrinsic value. It is in the doing of them—and only in the doing of them—that their goods are achieved. This is so because the means of the practice are its end in the act of becoming. Carpentry and other crafts, along with music and other artforms serve as good examples of practices. The fact that music can be treated as mere means to the acquisition of external/extrinsic goods, like financial profit, only helps to illustrate the marked difference between an activity treated as a practice with internal goods vs. an activity treated as a mere method for achieving some external good.

A musician whose music is mainly a method for the acquisition of fame or money will never be able to achieve those satisfactions and delights in her work or those heights of insight and perception concerning her work which a musician who is dedicated to music as a practice will develop through that practice. In fact, there are whole classes of experience which are only accessible and comprehensible to those who develop deeply in a given practice. Think of one who has given herself over to the study of a particular form of art and who, because of that, can see and appreciate features in instances of that artform which remain invisible to those less initiated. For instance, I have enjoyed listening to trained musicians discuss —in astonishing detail—features of a piece of music which I simply could not hear or identify in the way they so readily did. Such friends hear things I cannot because I have not been formed in the same way by patient and prolonged engagement in the practice of music. The ability to hear such things—and the enjoyment which attends such perception—is a good

[35] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997), 187.

internal to the practice. Thus, practices are valuable on their own terms, rather than being valuable only instrumentally.

The Brethren treated their plain clothes, their nonparticipation in war, their simplicity in worship, their shared discernment and polity, their closed communion in love feasts, and many of their other distinctives as practices in this sense. What was it to be obedient to Christ? How did one grow in holiness? For the earlier Brethren, to be holy was to be peaceful and simple in these particular ways. To be part of the church was to sit at the love feast table as a fully committed co-member of the body. These activities were not means to another set of ends, these activities were the embodiment of the church's one great end—fellowship with and obedience to Jesus. They were valued **not** as easily discardable implementations of a set of truths or values ultimately external to them, but as the necessary bearers of a way of life to which the Brethren believed themselves called by Jesus.

Third, if Keefer's notion of form corresponds to Geertz's notion of a religious symbol, then Keefer's notion of "spirit" may be helpfully thought of as the particular balance in emphasis struck by the religious symbols of the Brethren in Christ between their worldview and their ethos. Such an identification makes it possible to clarify what made such rapid and remarkable change possible amongst the Brethren in the middle of the twentieth century. Under these terms, the Brethren came to value their religious symbols primarily as applications of a new, explicitly articulated theology (an ecclesiology, as we will see) rather than as essentially embodiments of an ethos. Their distinctive activities had functioned as practices oriented toward a set of internal goods, but they came to be treated as mere methods for achieving a set of external goods which were specified for the Brethren by this new theology. This contention goes well beyond Keefer's own intentions but will, I argue, prove a helpful extension of them.

Thus clarified, the major claim given above must now be supported by argument and evidence: To establish this complex claim, the following must be shown. (1) A significant theological change preceded, and was a constitutive element in, the massive changes in the Brethren in Christ's characteristic practices during the mid-twentieth century. (2) The Brethren in Christ's long held distinctive activities (seen as Geertzian religious symbols) had primarily functioned, up to that time, as practices which expressed and embodied a corporate ethos. (3) These practice-symbols

were changed or abandoned precisely because and insofar as they came to be treated as methods for achieving an external set of goods. Treated this way, these activities were judged to be inadequate as methods and thus in need of change. (4) The criteria for this judgment was supplied by the very theology which made the reconceptualization of those practices as methods possible to begin with. The rest of this paper will provide evidence along these three lines.

Supporting the claim

The Brethren in Christ adopted a number of new worldview elements from their contacts with the neo-Evangelical movement of the mid-twentieth century as it was represented by the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and figures such as Billy Graham. Luke Keefer Jr. frames these novel theological elements as stemming from the neo-Evangelicals' "mild Calvinism." Speaking to fellow Brethren in Christ, he argues that "mild Calvinism would most differ from our pre-1950 synthesis at two points: sanctification and the security of the believer,"[36] and he goes on to argue both that the denomination had, in fact, de-emphasized its historic positions on these matters in its doctrinal statements following membership with the NAE and that some subsequent changes in the denomination's practices are expressive of this mild Calvinism rather than the historic Arminianism of the denomination's past. Additionally, Keefer argues that "a different model of the church's relationship to the world"[37] deriving from this new Calvinist perspective was introduced to the denomination at this time. He characterizes this shift in ecclesiology as one from Anabaptist separatism toward Calvinism's more "theocratic approach." [38]

Keefer argues that the adoption of this sort of theology led to the abandonment of the denomination's historic forms which, in turn, constituted a transformation in the church's historic identity. But why did this change in theological outlook occur?

One key aspect here may be the internal sense of need . . . We

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[36] Keefer, "The Three Streams of Our Heritage," 344.
[37] Keefer, 345.
[38] Keefer, 346.

> encountered Evangelicalism [of the NAE variety] at a point when we felt ineffective and it was an apparent success, namely in evangelizing North Americans and retaining youth in their churches of origin.[39]

While I believe Keefer is right that new theological (or worldview) elements were introduced to the Brethren via their association with broader American Evangelicalism as embodied in the NAE and, furthermore, that he has correctly identified a felt need amongst the body for "effectiveness" as a crucial component of this story, I believe he has not put his finger on the determinative theological issues. Further, I believe that his account of the relationship of these theological changes to the abandonment of the Brethren's long-held religious practices requires greater nuance.

We are brought to a clearer understanding of the novel worldview elements introduced prior to the denomination's transformation by an unlikely source. In 1973, Frank Demmy completed a remarkably sophisticated undergraduate thesis at Messiah College on the denomination's mid-century transformation[40] which caught the attention of Professor Ray M. Zercher who subsequently drew upon it at crucial junctures in his own attempt to grapple with a subset of those changes relating to church architecture.[41] In his thesis, Demmy carefully surveys over two decades of General Conference and denominational board minutes as well as issues of the *Evangelical Visitor* in order to paint a portrait of what he refers to as a "spiritual revolution" in the denomination which took place prior to the decade of change in the 1950s. Demmy sees the origins of that revolution, ironically, in the "indoctrination effort" which was launched in the 1930s to preserve the denomination's traditional practices.

> By emphasizing doctrine and tradition, the indoctrination period encouraged the Brethren to become self-conscious and self-critical and to review the grounds for their convictions. This in turn seems to have encouraged a new openness to the possibility that

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[39] Keefer, 347.

[40] Demmy, "The Spiritual Revolution in the Brethren in Christ Church as a Prelude to a Decade of Reorganization."

[41] Zercher, "'Hard by a Public Road:' A Study of Brethren in Christ Church Architecture." Zercher's article was published originally in 1981 and reprinted in this volume..

the Brethren in Christ tradition might not necessarily be the most biblical interpretation of Christian discipleship.[42]

The Brethren in Christ up to this time had simply, directly, and naturally associated its identity-bearing practices with Christian holiness and discipleship. They were not a people overtly concerned with nor well-equipped for nuanced theological articulation of the conceptual or abstract variety. Their practices, as Geertz would maintain, certainly reflected a particular theological worldview (they were oriented by and expressive of an Anabaptist ecclesiology), but the abstractions of explicit, cognitively held ecclesial formulae were not frequently called upon as justifications of the Brethren's practices. Few Brethren leaders pursued higher education prior to the second quarter of the twentieth century. Their preaching was largely a mixture of Anabaptist calls to obedience and Pietist invitations to heartfelt experiences of grace, and all their preaching took place in a context that assumed their practices. Brethren in Christ theology was held and carried along implicitly within those practices—practices which were seen as inherently valuable because they embodied an ethos, a style of life, to which they believe they were called.

That ethos, I propose, can largely but very imperfectly be summarized by three significant elements: the imitation of Christ, warm-hearted experientialism, and communitarianism. This tri-partite summary has a limited use for this project since it serves to roughly describe the ethos in question. However, it is important to remember how inadequately bland and flat this description will prove in comparison to the robust reality to which it refers. If you had asked early twentieth century Brethren what it meant to follow Christ (a question which always resonated with them) they would not have answered with the preceding three dry terms; they would have pointed simply to their distinctive practices in all their irreducible particularity. Few would have been able to give sophisticated, abstract theological justifications of them, but few would have seen the need for such. Theirs was a faith focused on Jesus. Experiencing him and imitating him together happened via participation in those practices which he had

[42] Demmy, "The Spiritual Revolution in the Brethren in Christ Church as a Prelude to a Decade of Reorganization," 6-7.

given to his church—those practices required no justification beyond this.

As indicated by Demmy, however, the "indoctrination" effort launched to preserve their distinctive identity in the 1930s and 1940s caused the Brethren to become doctrinally self-aware. Faced with the rejection by their young of their distinctive practices, they became conscious of those practices in a new way. They saw them no longer simply as the embodiments of the requirement for holiness in the church and fidelity to Jesus. They saw them, in fact, as this paper has treated them, from another angle—as their distinctive practices. With this shift in perspective and under the growing influence of various Evangelical groups, they began to ask new sorts of questions. In particular, they began to ask questions about their church's distinctive practices, framing them now as methods geared toward the achievement of ends which were separable from those methods. Such methodological inquiry at first took for granted the value of their long-standing distinctive activities and sought only how to pass on those distinctives. Yet once such methodological questions were asked—that is, once effectiveness became part of the frame for understanding those activities which had long served as the denomination's primary symbols—it was only natural to extend such inquiries further in a way that would drastically alter or even end many of those distinctives.

A striking example of this process at work is identified by Demmy in the minutes of the 1949 General Conference. Carlton Wittlinger, writing on behalf of the Board for Young People's Work, which had been tasked with addressing the dwindling commitment of the denomination's young, expressed the board's desire "to draw attention to the pressing need for grounding our youth in the principles for which we as a church stand" and continues,

> These principles need to be distinguished clearly from the methods by which they are applied… Therefore, if our youth are not to be confused, the Board respectfully suggests that more attention will need to be given in our teaching to basic enduring principles, as distinct from the methods by which we seek to apply those principles at any given time.[43]

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[43] Carlton O. Wittlinger, "Report for Board of Young People's Work," in *Minutes of the Seventy-Ninth Annual Conference of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: E.V. Publishing House, 1949), 99.

This distinction of principles from methods was not entirely novel. (For instance, something approximating this logic had appeared in limited ways in the denomination's early pursuit of missionary work.) What was novel, however, was the application of such thinking to the Brethren's distinctive congregational practices which took place following 1949's momentous General Conference. The shift involved in conceptualizing their core distinctive practices as "methods" was much greater than the Brethren appear to have understood at the time.

David Weaver-Zercher helps to illuminate this shift and its significance in the course of his reflections on an address delivered by J. N. Hostetter at the General Conference meeting of 1950 in which Hostetter warned the denomination that it may have fallen into legalism via what he saw as over-attachment to some of those distinctive practices.[44] Hostetter stirringly concluded his address by saying that, "it requires less sacrifice to be legal than to be spiritual." Weaver-Zercher, however, points out a problem with Hostetter's simple opposition of these terms.

> That is an interesting point, and rather nicely said, but it is hard to know what Hostetter meant by it. Not only did he fail to define legalism; he did not say what it meant to be spiritual, which allowed him to avoid the dilemma that, from the very beginning of the Brethren in Christ Church, being spiritual meant maintaining certain practices ("scriptural practices" in Brethren in Christ parlance) that less committed Christians deemed optional.[45]

Weaver-Zercher characterizes Hostetter's approach as one that allowed him to avoid the "dilemma" of the denomination's previous identification of its core practices with spirituality itself. Among the Brethren, "spirituality" had not involved a nebulous and mostly individual focus on certain interior experiences. Rather, the Brethren had long accepted the core Anabaptist insight that a spiritual life is one lived in active and practical conformity with Christ. That is, to be spiritual was to participate in a determinate,

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[44] J. N. Hostetter, "General Conference Sermon," in *Minutes of the Eightieth Annual General Conference of Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, IN: E. V. Publishing House, 1950), 12-13.
[45] David Weaver-Zercher, "Improvising Faithfulness: A Brief History of Brethren in Christ Non-Conformity," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 40, no. 1 (April 2017): 126.

shared form of life—a life of, among other things, simplicity, peacefulness, mutual responsibility, communal discernment, etc.

Hostetter and other advocates of change from the mid-century era were unaware of (or, as Weaver-Zercher phrases it, avoiding) just how significant a change they were unleashing. There is no strong evidence that these advocates of change wanted to engage in an identity-level transformation project. They certainly understood themselves to be ushering in significant changes, but only, so they thought, at the level of methods. They did not see that it was precisely this "but only at the level of methods," and the theology which made such a distinction possible, that constituted a revolution in the denomination's identity.

But what was this new theology, from which this distinction and its radical application flowed? Identifying this theology will necessarily involve identifying the criteria by which the Brethren came to judge the effectiveness of distinctive activities. If the Brethren began to demand that their distinctive practices be measured by an external standard of effectiveness, thereby transforming them from practices into methods, one must ask: effective at what? We will have gone a long way toward identifying the theological heart of this revolution if we can find Brethren explicitly articulating a set of external goods and arguing that those extrinsic ends are what their distinctive practices ought to be about. Such articulations are not, it turns out, hard to identify, although their full significance has not, I think, been understood.

The new theological worldview element that supplied the criteria by which to judge the success of denominationally distinctive activities was a new ecclesiology. This new theology was expressed explicitly in many places and ways in the middle years of the twentieth century. It is not a sophisticated theology, but it is a powerful one and it found a committed advocate in Bishop Henry G. Brubaker. Bishop Brubaker's 1954 address to the members of his conference is as clear an articulation of this theology as one could want. This address was printed in the *Evangelical Visitor* the following year and given a prominent location in that issue for denomination-wide consumption. Bishop Brubaker urges the practical application of a radically new ecclesiology (though he expresses no awareness of its novelty). He recommends, from this conception of the church, the provision of specific metrics for measuring the spirituality of all Christians and the effectiveness

of all the church's ministries. That this is no overstatement can be seen from the address itself.

> The main task or business of the church is spiritual. It is the spiritual task of evangelism. All other activities are subsidiary—they are contributory to evangelism, the paramount task of the church. Regarding this we can be utterly dogmatic . . . a Christian manifests his or her spirituality to the extent that he or she is a soul-winner. A church is manifestly spiritual in proportion to the number of souls added each year. A ten percent increase in church membership should not be too much for any congregation. That would be one soul per year for every ten people . . . .
>
> Someone asks: "How can we do it?" That is simple: pray them into the fold through intercessory prayer. Study God's word to learn soul-winning. Know Christ and His word and then do a sell-job for Christ and the church. After a person has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ to the forgiveness of his sins, and has accepted him as his personal Savior, and bears the testimony that he is a born again Christian, then he is a candidate for baptism and church membership. If you have a convert or converts like that take them to your pastor and give him no rest until he administers baptism and church membership. [46]

The scope and nature of the change that this address represented from a Brethren in Christ bishop should be recognizable given the material thus far presented in this paper. Let us draw attention to several key features of this address. **First**, an explicit ecclesiology is being laid out here. It is, to be sure, highly simplistic, but the fact remains that Brubaker is offering a theological account of the church and its mission and then trying to implement and activate that theology in what the church actually does.

Second, Brubaker's ecclesiology is out of step with the Brethren's long but implicitly held Anabaptist theological commitments. All church activities are imagined as subsidiary to soul-winning. Soul-winning (note he does not say disciple-making) is the sort of thing that is amenable to

[46] Henry G. Brubaker, "An Overview of Our Task," *Evangelical Visitor*, January 31, 1955, 3.

counting and rate measurements. The church conducts a "sell-job" for Jesus and everything else the church does, so Brubaker claims, is subsidiary to this task: communion, baptism, love feast, simple dress and worship—all of these activities must be organized as methods in support of this one goal. Furthermore, as soon as souls are won—without further training in the faith, without the person accepting and learning to live in the "plain way" of obedience to Jesus within the church community—they are to be considered candidates for baptism. Note that, on this point, Brubaker attempts to enlist the broader membership of the church against a pastoral cohort that was evidently more reticent about such changes. The members are to give their pastors, who apparently were still concerned about training people in the plain way, no rest until they speedily admitted freshly won souls into the ranks of the baptized. Recall here Charlie Byers's reflections on just this point outlined earlier in the paper. Up until now the Brethren had been slow to include converts into the life of the church, requiring them first to learn and be deeply conformed to the distinctive practices that made up what the Brethren understood to be the way of Jesus. Brubaker's address is also out of step with the Brethren's long held spirituality. Spirituality, previously defined by pointing to the Brethren's distinctive practices, is here equated wholly with soul winning: "A Christian manifests his or her spirituality to the extent that he or she is a soul-winner." This is a highly reductive ecclesiology resulting in a highly reductive spirituality.

Third, this explicitly stated ecclesiology (a matter of worldview, in Geertz's terms) is all that matters in the church's practices (their religious symbols, in Geertz's terms). Any sense of those practices as having some inherent value as instantiations of a communal ethos has disappeared. Bishop Brubaker is directly arguing in this address for the denomination do just what this paper has been arguing it did end up doing. He is inviting the Brethren to see their core activities as methods for achieving a particular external good and to do whatever is needed to increase the efficacy of those activities in achieving that one goal. From Brubaker's perspective, the church's various activities only matter—and only deserve continuation—insofar as they can pass muster before the criteria provided by the new and narrow ecclesiology he has articulated. He is willing to be "utterly dogmatic" about this theology and about its place as the arbiter of spirituality and ministry. The importance and meaning of the church's

practices are exhausted by their utilitarian value as methods contributory to the “paramount task” of evangelism. For this reason, practices that are not conformed to the logic of this ecclesiology, which is to say, that are not treated as mere methods for the winning of souls, are to be transformed accordingly. In this way, the new theology and its radical methodological implementation function together or not at all. In other words, this sort of theology explicitly demands to be seen as the sole source of value with regard to the church's core activities. This theology cannot recognize the legitimate place of ethos in the church’s symbols; it reduces them to its own calculating terms. From the vantage point of this theology, adherence to distinctive practices apart from the specified extrinsic criteria can only appear as “legalism.”

We have finally sketched the crucial new theological element in our account of the Brethren in Christ’s transformation, but we have not named it. In order to be able to discuss this theology, and its attendant methodological radicalism, it will be helpful to supply them with names. I will refer to this sort of methodological radicalism as Pragmatic Evangelical Utilitarianism (PEU) and to the theology from which it emerges and on which it depends as Pragmatic Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology (PEUE).

This methodological-ecclesiological position—represented in such a pure fashion by Bishop Brubaker’s address—is “pragmatic” in so far as it is focused narrowly on the church’s activities as conceived of as methods for the achievement of extrinsic ends. Whatever “works,” whatever is effective at achieving those ends, is what the church must do. This position is “evangelical” in two senses. First, it conceives the extrinsic end of all church activities to be “soul winning,” and second, it is highly influential in and seems to be a marker of American Evangelicalism broadly defined.[47]

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[47] I believe this is an under-utilized approach to the study of Evangelicalism. Evangelical theologians and historians, beyond noting the general importance of evangelism, tend to define their own movement using theological criteria. For instance, David Bebbington’s famous definition of Evangelicalism has four components—three of the four are key beliefs held by Evangelicals. (See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, New York: Routledge, 1989.) Non-Evangelicals, at least in the last several decades, often write about that group from an at least implicitly polemical stance and tend, in their polemics, to foreground Evangelicalism’s enmeshment with conservative political causes over that time. (See, for instance, Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.)

Finally, this position is "utilitarian" in that it believes it has a precise—indeed a mathematically precise—way to calculate the value of all parts of the church's life and activity: an increase of conversions efficiently tied to a speedy inclusion of those converts within the church rolls. If something does not serve to maximize conversions, or worse, serves to hinder conversions, it is to be rejected. It is this theology, Pragmatic Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology, which was first adopted and then, once adopted, explicitly invoked by Brubaker and other leaders as the basis for the alteration or abandonment of the community's religious practices when those practices could neither accommodate this theology nor live up to its narrow and extrinsic criteria.

Brethren in Christ practices (seen as religious symbols) had never before served primarily as applications of an explicitly held theological worldview, but had functioned, primarily, as the embodiment of an ethos. To be sure, that ethos implied a theological worldview, but the implication of a worldview within religious practices which primarily serve to embody an ethos is a very different way of coordinating ethos and worldview than Brubaker's effort to make all Brethren in Christ practices reflect the logic of an explicitly articulated, if simplistic, theological position. The earlier Brethren related to and valued their core practices because they had embodied for the Brethren the character of life—the ethos—to which they believed they were called by Jesus. Many of the post 1950s Brethren, however, came to relate to and value their religious distinctives according to an explicitly held theology, what I'm calling Pragmatic Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology. As such, they were willing to alter or abandon those distinctives when they failed to meet the criteria set by this new ecclesiology. Unlike the stability of the ethos-worldview synthesis of the pre-1950 Brethren, this new way of relating worldview to ethos would seem to require an almost infinite flexibility with regard to denominational practices, now reduced to mere methods continually subject to utilitarian calculations of efficacy.

It is a strong indicator in favor of this paper's interpretation of Brethren in Christ history that one observes just the sort of mixed proliferation of ethoses within the Brethren in Christ since 1950 that its account logically suggests. Today one can attend Brethren in Christ churches constructed in the style of traditional, mainline Protestant sanctuaries, churches constructed like stadiums in the style of modern mega-churches, churches

which foreground a formal liturgy and those that are decidedly unformal. Some still strongly affirm the peace position; others never speak of it and have even placed American flags in their sanctuaries or embraced patriotic displays and messages. In some churches, there are lengthy extemporaneous sermons full of charismatic vigor, and in others sermons are largely full of ethical exhortations, and in still others exegetical and/or doctrinal teaching prevails. Local peculiarities in practice, teaching emphasis, and worship abound. If an outside observer were asked to say which of a group of churches belonged together in the Brethren in Christ Church based purely on the observation of worship style, preaching content, church architecture, the nature of the local liturgy, etc., it would be difficult for that observer to do so. There is not now one consistent ethos that is identifiably Brethren in Christ. In fact, the ethos of an individual congregation can change both drastically and quickly when a new pastor arrives wishing to try new and possibly more effective ministry "methods."

Conclusion

Denominational identities are elusive things, but the modern Brethren in Christ, to whom I happily belong, have found theirs to be particularly so. Papers, conferences, and conversations about who we are continue to proliferate, but fragmentation seems to continue apace. What, if anything, can the present paper contribute after so many prior efforts at identifying, constructing, or recovering a denominational identity? Time alone will tell, but in conclusion I suggest that the core claim of this paper concerning the reduction of practices to methods inside Pragmatic Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology may, if it is true, prove helpful insofar as it simply makes us aware of a previously invisible logic operative in our approach to the church.

Many Evangelical arguments, including heated ones between progressives and conservatives (both of whom are represented in the Brethren in Christ) take some form of Pragmatic Utilitarian Ecclesiology for granted. Conservative evangelicals tend to preserve the maximization of conversion or church growth as the criterion of methodological success, whereas progressives may substitute the achievement of some broader social goods as the ends desired. But Evangelicals of both stripes, within and without the Brethren in Christ, tend to treat church practices as mere methods which are externally related to the goals they must be constantly

calibrated to achieve. The idea that there are distinctive practices whose ends are internal to themselves, and which are to be patiently and enduringly practiced together in development of those internal goods, might just provide an opening for fresh thought and fresh directions, especially if one of the prime internal goods those practices inculcate is a transforming fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Perhaps, if nothing else, the argument of this paper, shared with Brethren in Christ brothers and sisters, could raise the question of whether or not Henry G. Brubaker's logic (which I suggest has been operative in our church in significant but often unnoticed ways) is theologically sound and biblically warranted. If it is found lacking on those grounds (this paper's telling of the story is a historical/anthropological argument against it), then attention might be given to those alternative approaches to the practices of the church available in our own history as well as in the history of the wider church. The past cannot simply be recapitulated in the present, but it can serve as a source of both inspiration and insight. In this case, I believe an anthropologically sensitive understanding of the Brethren in Christ's midcentury transformation might suggest that Christ has not given us a certain set of external achievements to pursue via an ever-changing set of maximally efficient methods which we must invent for ourselves. Rather, Christ has offered himself to us as our Way and has gifted us a set of biblical practices by which we may walk that Way together.