

Experience vs. Obedience?

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Introduction

In the last issue we looked at the Moravian mission to the American Indians, beginning with missionary Christian Rauch stepping off a ship in New York in 1740. In this issue we want to step into a farmer's field just south of Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 1756 (population approx. 2000)—just one decade after Tschoop was planted as a seed in God's Acre at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

As you read this story, you may well find yourself and your situation transplanted two centuries back. We want to look into the drama that was unfolding since it is *exactly* the same situation we often find ourselves in today. Someone has said that if we fail to learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it.

With these short words of introduction, we now step into a field being plowed by a young farmer of about 30 years of age. We do not know the exact details of some things that day, such as the weather, but we will use our imagination a little ...

Plowing in hope

The sun is shining brightly, lifting the last of the morning haze on this beautiful spring day. At the south end of the field the little creek gurgles and giggles over the stones, frothing its way to Pequea Creek less than a mile to the southeast. The squirrels jump from budding tree to budding tree, and a crow circles lazily overhead, cawing loudly. At the sound of the caw, a turkey gobbles on the wooded hill. Nearby, a small waft of smoke languidly curls from the chimney of the little house that the newly married couple of two years calls home.

It is a beautiful day to be plowing!

Back and forth the young farmer goes. The horse plods faithfully along, turning the rich soil over. When his forefathers had settled in these parts less than fifty years earlier, they did not realize at the time that they were settling on what was some of the best farm ground—literally—in the whole world.

Known in Switzerland as the “Swiss Brethren,” their movement had started in 1525 when a small group of men had rebaptized each other in Zurich. Persecution in the following two centuries had forced many of them down into what is now western Germany and eastern France. Beginning in 1710, some of them found their way to Pennsylvania, into what is now Lancaster County. Here they began to be known as Mennonists, and later Mennonites, from their use of the Dutch Mennonite confession of faith known as the Dordrecht Confession. They had presented this Confession to the Pennsylvania civil leaders as a way to show their nonresistant interpretation of Scripture, requesting exemption from military conscription. Their use of this Confession helped them to become known as Mennonists, even though they were formerly known as Swiss Brethren.¹

At first the immigrant flow was a trickle, then a stream. By the end of the 1700s, some 3000 of these Swiss Brethren had arrived in Philadelphia. Martin Boehm, the man handling the plow, was a second-generation Swiss Brethren immigrant in Lancaster County. His grandfather had been a Swiss Pietist, but had joined the Swiss Brethren in Germany.² His father had come to America, probably in hopes of religious liberty.

As he plowed, Martin may have turned up stone arrowheads. Less than ten miles away, at a small reserve on the banks of the Susquehanna River, lived a friendly group of Conestoga Indians. In his childhood, it is probable that Martin had played with the Indian boys, or at least had seen them around.

But that day, Martin had no interest in arrowheads, nor even the beautiful, quiet scenery that was bursting to life all around him. There were no airplanes roaring overhead, no tractor-trailer trucks barreling down the turnpike, not even a chainsaw to provide any noise pollution. If he heard anything of his neighbors it was probably only a neigh of a horse or the sound of an axe ringing through the morning stillness.

¹ In this article I will use both names, to get ourselves used to the idea that the “Mennonites” of Lancaster County were for the most part descendants of the Swiss Brethren. It was during this era that their identity was being changed to “Mennonite.”

² Some sources indicate that they were descendants of the famous German mystic Jacob Boehme. If so, Martin would have been something like a great-grandson of Jacob. However, definite proof of this relationship seems to be lacking.

Distressed

No, Martin was not at peace. As he rested his horse at the end of each fresh furrow, he knelt down and prayed. Getting back up, he would make a fresh furrow, only to stop and pray at the other end.

Back and forth. Back and forth. But despite the serenity that surrounded him, all that seemed to ring through his mind was one word: “Verloren, verloren!” (Lost, lost!)

Finally, he could stand it no longer! He did not wait until the end of the furrow; he stopped the horse in the middle of the field and fell to his knees. He tells the story in his own words, beginning with his ordination to the ministry some months before:

When nominated, I had no desire that the lot might fall on me, and I earnestly besought my brethren to nominate someone in my place, better than myself. This, however, was not done, and the moment came when each nominee was to step forth and take a book. I stepped out, saying inwardly, “Lord, not me. I am too poor.” The books were opened, and the lot or token was mine! Believing, as I did, that this lot falls by divine appointment, I did not feel myself at

liberty to refuse obedience to its decision, but felt constrained by my conscience to take upon myself the office of the ministry, and discharge it as best I could.

According to our usage it was not expected from me to preach immediately thereafter, because our elder preacher was still able to preach; but it was my duty to assist him in preaching and exhortation as God would give me ability. I had been reading the Scriptures much, but now read them still more, and with care, in order to impress their reading on my memory, so that I might have something wherewith to preach or exhort.

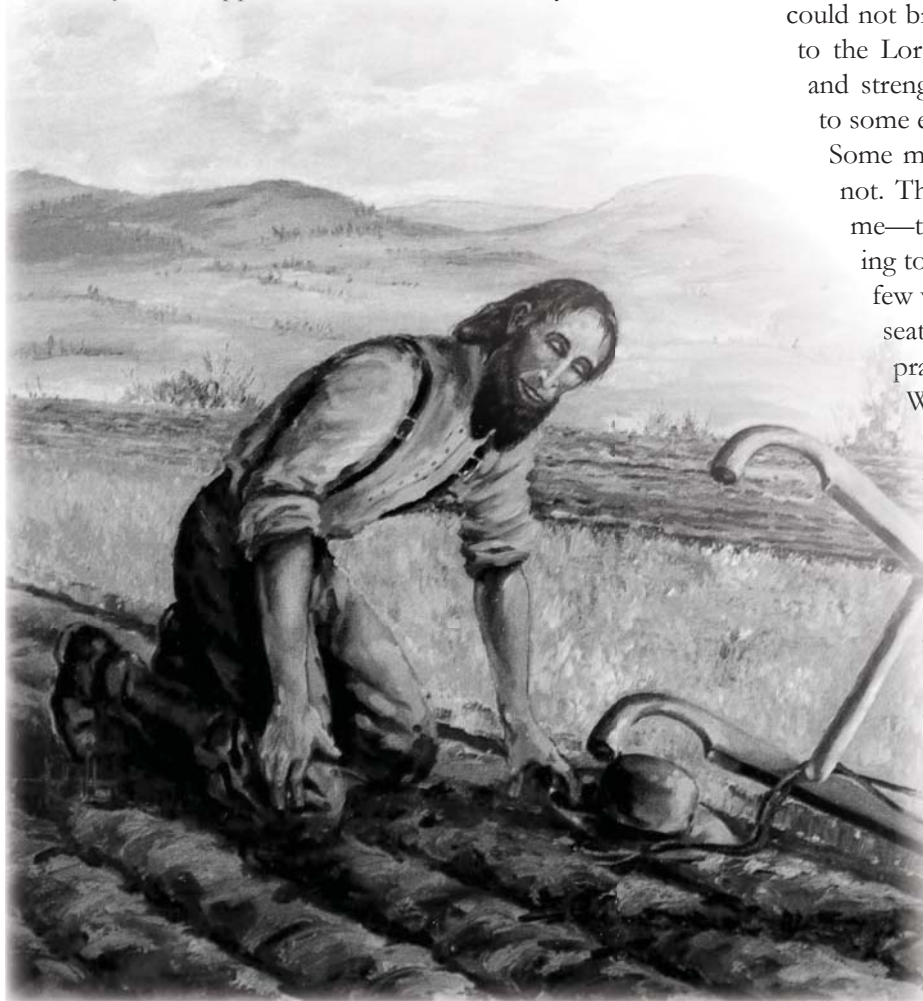
Sunday came and the elder brother preached. In attempting to follow him by a word of exhortation, I failed, although for some two years past, I had been giving testimony at the close of the sermons, and frequently concluded the meetings.

I continued reading. The next Sabbath I was requested to take part, and rose up, but could say little or nothing. I had charged my mind and memory with some Scripture passages, but when I wanted them, could not bring them to my recollection. I prayed to the Lord to assist me in retaining his word, and strengthen me in my great weakness, that, to some extent at least, I might answer his call.

Some months passed in this way, but it came not. This condition began deeply to distress me—to be a preacher, and yet have nothing to preach, nor to say, but stammer out a few words, and then be obliged to take my seat in shame and remorse! I had faith in prayer, and prayed more fervently.

While thus engaged in praying earnestly for aid to preach, the thought rose in my mind, or as though one spoke to me, saying, “You pray for grace to teach others the way of salvation, and you have not prayed for your own salvation.”

This thought or word did not leave me. “My salvation” followed me wherever went. I felt constrained to pray for myself; and, while praying for myself, my mind became alarmed. I felt and saw myself a poor sinner. I was lost! My agony became great. I was plowing in the field, and knelt down at each end of the furrow, to pray. The word “Lost, lost” went every round with me.



Midway in the field I could go no further, but sank behind the plow, crying, "Lord save, I am lost!"

The thought or voice said, "I am come to seek and to save that which is lost."

In a moment, a stream of joy was poured over me. I praised the Lord and left the field, and told my companion what joy I felt.

Martin continues his story, explaining the change that occurred in his outlook toward preaching:

As before this I wished the Sabbath far off, now I wished it was tomorrow. Sunday came: the elder brother preached. I rose to tell my experience, since my call to the ministry. When speaking of my lost estate, and agony of mind, some in the congregation began to weep. This gave me encouragement to speak of our fall and lost condition, and of repentance. The Sabbath following it was the same, and much more. Before I was done, I found myself in the midst of the congregation, where some were weeping aloud!

This caused considerable commotion in our church, as well as among the people generally. It was all new; none of us had heard or seen it before. A new creation appeared to rise up before me, and around me. Now Scripture, before mysterious, and like a dead letter to me, was plain of interpretation; was all spirit, all life.

Like a dream, old things had passed away, and it seemed as if I had awakened to new life, new thoughts, new faith, new love. I rejoiced and praised God with my whole heart. This joy, this faith, this love, I wished to communicate to those around me. But when speaking about it, in public or in private, it made different impressions on different persons. Some gave a mournful look, some sighed and wept and would say, "Oh! Martin, are we indeed lost?"



"We are brothers!" exclaimed Reformed minister William Otterbein to Mennonist bishop Martin Boehm (man with beard).

Yes, mankind is lost! Christ will never find us, till we know that we are lost. My wife was the next lost sinner that felt the same joy, the same love.

Although the story, as it is told above, says that such an experience was a new sort of thing for that congregation, no one really had a big problem with it. In fact, in just five years Martin was chosen as bishop, again by lot. But to get in the lot, he had to have been nominated, a sign that his Mennonist people had confidence in him.

Martin's zeal for preaching soon caused him to step beyond the normal meeting schedule, and he began to preach midweek in various places. The custom of his day was a church gathering every two weeks. When this custom began is not certain, but it is assumed by some to have begun even before the Swiss Brethren immigrated to America.

Frontier life was generally hard on spiritual life. Families were scattered through the woods with practically no good roads. Travel in such conditions was often hard, especially

on large families with lots of little children, the aged, and expectant mothers. Many people have assumed that this hard lifestyle only contributed more to the practice of a church meeting once every two weeks. In fact, in some frontier communities church meetings were held only once every month.

But it was not so in the beginning of the Swiss Brethren movement! The earliest Swiss Brethren Congregational Order reads like this:

Since the almighty, eternal, and merciful God has made his wonderful light break forth in the world in this most dangerous time, we recognize the mystery of his will. His will is for his Word to be made known to us so we may find our way into community with him. For this reason, and in obedience to Jesus' and the apostles' teaching, we are to observe a new com-



The Isaac Long house and barn still stands, 245 years after an estimated 1000 people gathered there to hear gospel preaching. While Martin Boehm preached inside the barn, other Mennonist ministers preached to the overflow crowd in the orchard. (Photo taken Dec. 28, 2012)

mandment—the commandment to love one another so we may live in brotherly unity and peace. To keep that peace, all of us brothers and sisters have agreed as follows:

1. To meet at least three or four times a week, to exercise ourselves in the teaching of Christ and his apostles, to admonish and encourage one another from the heart to remain faithful to Jesus as we have promised ...

Six more points are listed in that congregational order, which, by the way, was found on Michael Sattler right along with the Schleithem Confession, written by the same hand. But did you notice that they agreed to meet “three or four times a week”? Somewhere along the line that vision was lost. But not only the quantity of the meetings was lost, something happened to the quality.

Very sleepy ...

In about 1750, a German Pietist living near the Swiss Brethren immigrants in Lancaster County wrote of his experience with them and with the newer German Baptist group. The German Baptists were expressive in their public worship, but of the Mennonists he wrote:

These people [are] modest ... and upright in their conduct. They wear plain clothing; proud colors may not be worn by them. Most of the men wear beards. When they are grown up they are baptized and a little water is poured over their heads. Their meetings are very sleepy affairs.

Of course we recognize that what one person may call a “very sleepy” meeting, the next person will not. However, the above writer was not alone in his assessment of the meetings of that era.

So along comes a man with a fresh enthusiasm, a fresh testimony of conversion ... and the sleepy are shaken. And shake them Martin did.

He began, along with others, to hold meetings, sometimes by candle light, in the evenings. “Great meetings” were called, probably given that name because they usually lasted for three days—“great” or “big” on length.

Crowds came; Mennonists, German Baptists, Reformed, and, well, about everybody in the community. The other Swiss Brethren ministers had no problem with the meetings. Some of them even helped.

The great barn meeting

Five years after Martin’s ordination as a bishop, a “Great Meeting” was called for May 10, 1767, with the location being the barn of Mennonist Isaac Long, just north of the town of Lancaster. It is reported that over 1000 people showed up. While some listened to Martin preach inside the 13-year-old barn, those who could not fit inside listened to some other Mennonist preachers in the orchard.

While this meeting was typical of the “Great Meetings” in many ways, it ended up being a life-changing meeting for Martin. William Otterbein, a Reformed Church minister, listened to Martin tell of his experience. He had experienced something very similar to what Martin had—at about the exact same time Martin had, ten years earlier.

When Martin finished speaking, William rushed to the long-bearded Mennonist preacher and gave him a hug, exclaiming, “Wir sind brüder!” (We are brothers!) These words would be the foundation of their later church name—*The United Brethren in Christ*.

Those looking on were moved to “praise God aloud, but most of the congregation gave place to their feelings—weeping for joy.” It was an emotional *experience*.

Brotherhood based on experience

There are lots of other details about the story that we do not have space to detail here. About 20 years after that meeting in the barn, Martin Boehm and William Otterbein were elected as the first bishops of a new church

movement, *The United Brethren in Christ*.³ What we want to look at is the basis of their initial fellowship.

That basis was a common *experience*. From all appearances, neither one knew the other before meeting in the barn that evening. After listening to Boehm's *experience*, Otterbein *felt* him to be a brother in Christ. He did not know how much Boehm *obeyed* Jesus' teaching; he only knew of Boehm's experience.

Brotherhood based on obedience

In contrast, Martin Boehm's Swiss Brethren (Mennonists) were basing their brotherhood on a common obedience to the teachings of Jesus. To join the congregation, one had to commit to obeying what Jesus had taught on the Sermon on the Mount, and of course, His other teachings as well.

This difference in the basis of brotherhood proved to be problematic for Martin Boehm. He had a decision to make ...

Too close to disobedience

Martin continued being a bishop among the Swiss Brethren immigrants for about a decade after his meeting Otterbein in that barn. However, some of the Mennonists began to grow leery of his direction. While Martin held firm to following the teachings of Jesus in his own life, he began to associate with others who did not practice Jesus' teaching about war and swearing oaths.

After several meetings with him, Martin's fellow Mennonist elders felt they had to excommunicate him. Disobedience to Christ's teachings was too fundamental of an error for their brotherhood to permit.

The timing was the Revolutionary War. As said, Martin himself never participated in the war, and refused to swear the allegiance oaths that the newly formed states required after the war. Francis Asbury, the famed bishop of the new Methodist movement, likewise refused to participate in both the war and the oath swearing. He and Martin had become good friends. Asbury would end up preaching Martin's funeral sermon.

However, in the Methodist churches, while *most* of the early ministers and members held to nonresistance and nonswearing of oaths, these two points were not a *requirement* to enter the brotherhood.

Before his death in 1812, Martin Boehm had become a member of the local Methodist Class. He preached, baptized (which included baptizing babies, but it is not clear if Martin himself did this), and held communion with them.

By the time the American Civil War rolled around 50 years later, the Methodists were aiming their sights and pulling the triggers of their guns on other Methodists, on both sides of the front.

The Mennonists were correct in their foresight: evil communications do corrupt good manners!

³ Incidentally, this was the first denomination born on US soil.

The foundation of your fellowship is ...

... what?

Think about it, if you haven't. Just what is the basis upon which you and/or your congregation form a fellowship, a brotherhood of believers?

In the story we are looking at, we see a "battle" between fellowship based upon *experience* and fellowship based upon *obedience*. There are many other possibilities: fellowship based upon *theology*, fellowship based around a *person/personality*, fellowship based upon a *common goal* (ex. *foreign missions*), fellowship based upon a *common reaction* (ex. *anti-Catholicism*).

Perhaps you are thinking, "My fellowship is based upon a person, the man Christ Jesus!" While that sounds good and looks good on paper, the bottom line is that people use that phrase all the time to mean *one aspect of Christ or Christianity*. It would do us all well to ponder just what our expectations are when we think of fellowship. Do we demand obedience? Do we expect a common theology? Are we united around a common zeal we may have? Are we gathered around a good preacher?

If a testimony of conversion is required to be a part of your congregation, what is expected in that testimony? If *assurance of salvation* is testified to, what is the basis of that assurance? An assurance based upon *feeling received from an experience*? (As in American revivalism.) Or an assurance based upon Christ living within, producing *victory over sin*? (As in early Anabaptism, and Psalm 41:11.)

The purpose of the above article is to stir us to consider the foundation of our brotherhoods. Foundations make or break congregations!

Too close to formality

On the other hand, Martin Boehm felt he had no choice but to leave the Mennonist churches. They demanded of him that he stop fellowshiping with churches that disobeyed Jesus' teachings, and that he repent of having said such things like "the [Mennonist] bishops lead their people to hell by preaching the ordinances." Or, saying "the Bible could be burned without harming the church."

To be sure, the Mennonists should have sat up and paid attention to what Martin was saying, even though his way of wording it probably only irritated them. When people were struggling with their conscience about their sins, they were sometimes counseled by Mennonist elders to "get baptized and take communion." So they did. Meanwhile, their old carnal heart had never been turned from loving this world to loving Jesus. So instead of repentance and faith in Christ, the seekers were told to "join church and keep the ordinances."

Robots can keep ordinances. And so can carnal, unregenerate people.

So, the churches contained people who did what the Bible said concerning baptism and communion, but who had not a lick of fervency toward Christ. When church meeting was going on, it was a "very sleepy affair." But as soon as meeting was over, and the talk outside the chapel doors turned to the price of cattle in the Philadelphia markets, conversations and hearts began to warm!

When it came to spreading the gospel, the neighboring Conestoga Indians never had a sermon preached to them by Mennonists,⁴ let alone the ones in the next county over. The Mennonists, it seemed, even had a hard time to send preachers to their own church members who lived very far from home.

Martin felt he could not choose such lifelessness and carnality.

What does God think of cold obedience?

The Bible is clear about formality: it is a stench to the nostrils of God. The words "so then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth" were *not* directed towards outright rebels, but to people who at least outwardly obeyed some of God's commands.

"Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting" reveals God's attitude toward people who

⁴ At least none are known of. That said, the Mennonists were friendly to the Conestogas and did give them food and shelter at times.

are indeed doing the correct ceremonies, but without a heartfelt obedience.

When it comes to *experience*, God expects and desires that humanity *experience Him*. Paul wrote that his desire toward God was "that I might know Him, and the power of his resurrection." Paul wanted to *experience Christ*.

Does God want cold obedience? Heartless worship? Sleepy assemblies? Why did He tell us, "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment"?

If God did not want an *experiential relationship* with man, why on earth did He allow the Song of Solomon to be included in the Holy Scriptures?

Scriptural references could be multiplied, but there is no need. It is quite clear that God wants man to *experience Him in a personal way*.

What does God think of disobedient experiences?

One verse suffices to answer the question: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

Disobedience, no matter how great the *experiences*, is not an option in the kingdom of God. Jesus then continues, making it clearer yet:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

If there were ever a people who could claim great experiences, the people referred to in these verses would have it. Yet, they will hear those fateful words on the final judgment day: "Depart from me."

Why? The reason is clear: "work iniquity."

Disobedience is absolutely incompatible with the kingdom of God.

Period.



**Remember,
robots can keep
ordinances.
This fellow
could probably
be programmed
to wash feet or
take communion!**

Christian Newcomer

At this point in our story we will introduce another contemporary of Martin Boehm: Christian Newcomer. Christian was a fellow descendant of the Swiss Brethren immigrants. He, too, had an *experience* similar to Martin's. Among other things, his terror of death was made real when a peach stone became lodged in his throat while plowing one day. Feeling himself to be dying, he suddenly got the idea (from God, he felt later) that he should throw himself against a tree about 30 yards away. Using the last of his fading energy, he ran to it and "bounced his shoulders" against it—and out came the stone! He immediately determined to "seek the salvation" of his soul.

He describes the events that followed with these words:

Sometime thereafter, a very heavy tempest arose one evening in the western horizon; presently the whole canopy of Heaven was a black darkness. Tremendous thunder following, clap after clap, and the forked lightning illuminated the objects around me, making darkness visible. This, said I to myself, is perhaps the day of Judgment, of which I have lately dreamed. O! what anguish, fear, and terror took possession of my heart. I walked from room to room, tried to read and to pray, all to no purpose. Fear of hell had seized on me, the cords of death had wound about me. I felt as if wholly forsaken, nor did I know which way to turn. All my prayers committed to memory would not avail.

"O! Eternity! Eternity," I exclaimed, "which way shall I fly?"

The passage of the door of the house stood open wide. I saw the rain pouring down, the lightning blaze, and heard the thunders roar. I ran, or rather reeled out of the house into the yard a few paces, to the garden fence, and sunk on my knees, determined to give myself wholly and without reserve to Jesus the Savior and Redeemer of mankind, submitting to His will and His will alone.

Having in this manner humbled myself before my Lord and Master, unable to utter a word, a vivid flash of lightning darted across my eyes—at the same instant a clap of thunder. O! what a clap! As it ceased, the whole anguish of soul was removed. I did not know what had happened unto me. My heart felt glad, my soul was happy, my mouth filled with praises and thanksgiving to God for what He had done for me, a poor unworthy creature. I thought if ever a being in this world had cause to praise the Lord, I was

that creature. For several nights, tears of gratitude and joy moistened my pillow, and I had many happy hours.

Christian continues his story, explaining that while he felt happy for a while, "gradually I lost this pleasing sensation" and "fear returned." When he asked the Mennonist elder what to do, the reply was to be baptized and join the church and take communion. He wrote:

I took his friendly advice and did as he had counseled me to do; but all this did not restore to me the joyful sensation or inward comfort which I had lost. True, I was not accused, nor did any person even insinuate anything derogatory to my religion, but I knew and felt a deficiency of something within.

Feeling saved

As we read Christian's story, we see him seeking a definite *feeling* of salvation, an *experience*. And, he got just that ... only to *feel* it slip away again.

Life went on for the seeking teenager. His father's death left him in charge of his mother and the family farm. Soon after turning 21, he "entered with" Miss Elizabeth Baer "into a state of matrimony." That same year, during the winter, he contracted measles, which made his throat swell dangerously shut. He wrote:

O! what unhappiness did I again experience, what a dreadful conviction did I again find myself in; the conviction of sin was more powerful and severe than ever—the burden thereof too heavy almost to be borne. ... Heaven appeared to be as brass, wretchedness and distress had fallen heavily upon me ... but I still continued to sue and cry for mercy.

When I had been for two days and three nights in this misery, I was reading to the best of my recollection about midnight, in Revelation 12:10-12. At the end of the latter clause of the 11th verse I made a pause, reflecting, "and they loved not their lives unto death." Then reading again, "therefore rejoice ye heavens and ye that dwell in them."

The same instant a something (call it conviction or give it what appellation you please) whispered to me, "This is to say all those who are in such a situation as yourself shall rejoice." [parenthesis original]

In a moment the peace of God and pardon of my sins was manifested in my soul, and the spirit of God bore witness with my spirit, that God for Jesus' sake had taken away the burden of my sins and shed abroad his love in my poor unworthy heart. O! thou glorious Being; how did my soul *feel* at the time? Only those who have *felt* and *experienced* the same grace will be able to understand or comprehend what

I am about to say. Yes, gentle reader! If at that time I could have called a 1000 lives my own, I would have pledged them all, every one of them, to testify to the certainty of my acceptance with God: my joy or rather ecstasy was so great, that I was in some measure as one beside himself ... I ran into the yard to give utterance to my feelings ... [Underscores mine.]

This experience was not his last. He again lost his good feelings for a while, blaming it later upon the fact that he was ashamed to testify publicly about what had happened. Christian then moved to Maryland, where he had another restoration of his former feelings, so much so that he had to leave his house so he could exclaim aloud—in the middle of the night—his joy.

Then he returned to Pennsylvania for a visit. Here he finally found the courage to tell of his *experiences* when the service was opened at the end for testimony. Recounting his *experiences*, he touched the Mennonist congregation. He wrote:

... every person present was sensibly touched—all shed tears as well as myself. And I have no doubt many were convinced that a form of religion, whose habitation is only in the head, and is not felt in the heart, is insufficient unto salvation.

Experiences that lead to ... where?

Did you catch Christian's concern? "Only in the head ..." He, like most people, want to *experience* God. Just knowing about Him in the head and obeying His ordinances like a robot is simply nauseating to God ... and to man, if man would but admit it.

But ...

Where did Christian Newcomer's and Martin Boehm's experiences lead them? The Mennonists of their time did not have a problem with people *experiencing* God. What they *did* have a problem with was when these same men began to base their fellowship on a common experience, rather than a common obedience.

Martin and Christian were some of the leading men in the *United Brethren in Christ Church*. That denomination made, in its early years, the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' other practical teachings a test of membership. But ... they also freely mingled with other churches, like the Methodists, who did NOT make obedience to Jesus' teachings mandatory.

It was too much for the Mennonists. They felt obligated to break fellowship with people who would not make obedience (as a test of fellowship) mandatory. The mindset of the Swiss Brethren was more that a born-again experience was necessary to *change a person's heart and actions*, whereas the mindset of American revivalism was

more that a "new birth" *gave a person a feeling of assurance*.

There is quite a difference in those outlooks. Ponder them well.

The fallout

The *United Brethren in Christ* and the *Methodist Episcopal Church* worked toward a union for several years. Documents still exist with Martin Boehm's and Christian Newcomer's signatures that show both men as actively engaged in the union effort. Things were coming together ... old bishop Asbury was encouraging the effort to unite from the Methodist side. He, too, was nonresistant and opposed to oath swearing, just as were both Boehm and Newcomer in their personal views. However, the proposed union made no mention of making obedience to the Sermon on the Mount a requirement for fellowship in the merger.

When Asbury died, the negotiations between the two denominations came to a screeching halt; one of the Methodist bishops after Asbury decided that the only option for a union was for all the United Brethren to officially become Methodists. The United Brethren could not accept that, for whatever reason, even though up until that time they were sharing pulpits and communion freely (as well as ordinations—Methodist William Ryland helped ordain Newcomer). So the two movements parted ways until 1968 rolled around, when they officially joined together to form what is now *The United Methodist Church*.

Martin Boehm suffered the tragic loss of a big part of his family to an outbreak of disease. But his son Henry "made up for the loss" by living to be 100 years old, a fervent Methodist all the way. He had been chosen as a traveling assistant with Bishop Asbury for several years, then served in the ministry of the Methodist church until his death in 1875. But even though the Methodists lost virtually all their nonresistance in the Civil War, Henry stayed right with them. Somehow *experience* had forgotten to obey Jesus' command to love our enemies.

What a sad place for a Swiss Brethren descendant to end up at: allowing his "brothers" to shoot each other.

The third option

Thankfully, there is another way. We do not have to choose between cold obedience and exciting disobedience. In Newcomer's and Boehm's day, there was a very viable third option. Why they did not choose it, no one knows.

The people of the third option probably attended Martin Boehm's first "Great Meetings." They may have even helped him preach at some of them. They sympathized with Martin's desire for a fellowship that would not tol-

erate cold formality and preach ordinances as a balm to people who did not love the Lord with all their heart.

But they also sympathized with the Mennonists who would not tolerate preachers that took communion with people who swore oaths and participated in war.

They called the people of this third option “the River Brethren.”

Marrying experience and obedience

Experience with God was never meant to be divorced from *obedience*. But it happened in 18th-century Lancaster County. It actually was happening before then and ever since then.

The problem with (some of) the experiences of people that Martin Boehm fellowshiped with was that they were false experiences, false conversions. True new-birth experiences *always*—let me repeat *always*—lead people to a deeper obedience to Christ.

The problem with (some of) the Mennonist obedience was that it was a dead obedience, a mere formality. And it stank in God’s nostrils, probably about as bad as plain old disobedience. True obedience always draws the human heart closer to God, into a relationship with Him.

Never, I repeat, never, never, never divorce obedience from experience in Christianity! When they are divorced, you end up with people who claim obedience, but have hardly a word to say when it comes to sharing Christ with others. Or, you end up with bubbly, excited “believers” who will next pick up a gun and shoot the other bubbly, excited “believers” on the other side of the war front, who may well be a member of the same denomination.

Two examples

I think of two examples that I have seen in my day that illustrate the error of divorcing obedience from experience.

Example 1: A young couple grew up in an Old Order Amish church. To be sure, many people in those churches represent a cold obedience: doing many right things, but not knowing, or even caring, why. This young couple then claimed to have a “born-again” *experience* and wanted out of the Old Order Amish. They wanted to be somewhere where people *experienced* God.

So out they came. But within weeks, literally, they had ditched their Plain clothes. She came to church wearing a bright yellow dress, bright enough to make a canary jealous as one might say. He came in his T-shirt and blue jeans.

My heart sank. “Born again and conforming so rapidly to the ways of the world?” I asked myself. A year or so later I saw a picture of these two. I didn’t know them. “You remember that couple that left the Amish a while back?” someone prodded my memory. “Oh, yeah ...” The girl had no covering, and the young man was dressed in the fashion of the day.

Experiences that lead to disobedience are false experiences. Period.

Example 2: A lady joined a church that expected obedience to the clear teachings of Jesus and the New Testament. She came from an Evangelical background where such obedience is optional, or even called “legalism.” So here she came: long hair and covered head, modest dress, baptism upon confession of faith, communion, feetwashing, etc. She was obeying the teachings of Jesus in those areas.

But what else came with her? An attitude. “We all knew she was mouthy from the day she came,” her minister said of her later.

Unfortunately, her obedience was a farce. An unconverted heart lay underneath those formal obediences. What does a covered head mean on a “mouthy” lady? A submissive, meek and quiet spirit?

Her heart condition eventually revealed itself later on, and she reverted to her former ways. The last I saw her she had her long hair cut off and was wearing pants and jewelry ... and her mouth still functioned. But for a time she had lived in obedience to many of the teachings of Jesus, without a true regeneration of her spirit. However, not everyone who has a formal, cold obedience reverts to open carnality. Some people can live their whole life in a moral, dry formality. Remember: robots can keep ordinances.

Back to the River Brethren

The so-called “River Brethren” were given that name due to the close proximity of the original members to the Susquehanna River. A good part of the early membership came from Swiss Brethren immigrants. But instead of ditching the Mennonist requirement for obedience, they simply recognized that obedience without experience was sick at heart. And, they recognized, true experiences with God would lead to obedience. One of them wrote:

Those who are born into the kingdom of grace, and have been washed and cleansed by the blood of Christ, are born of God; and they will do the will of God. ... The whole man will become changed within and without and become a new creature in Christ Je-

Disobedience,
no matter
how great the
experiences, is not
an option in the
kingdom of God.

sus. ... The people of God are a peculiar and separate people. They will come out from the world.

Notice the emphasis of the *experience*: a new character. Another River Brethren lady who had an *experience* tells what happened to her:

I felt as though I was in another world ... old things had passed away and all things became new.

So far, it is all *feeling* ... but let us continue reading her account ...

I was now willing to be led by the Spirit. I was dressy before, now I wanted to be plain. When I began to change my dress, my friends turned against me.

Here we see the *experience* is leading her toward *obedience*,⁵ not a mere *feeling of assurance of salvation*. This was what original Swiss Anabaptism would have promoted. She continues later, saying:

I looked around me and wondered whether there was no other way to get to heaven than this narrow path; but there was no other way for me.

The River Brethren did not promote *experiences* that were mere cheap-shod, hooly-hooping, emotional shindigs. Many of them spent long periods of time making restitution in areas where they had wronged fellow humans. One of them explained it this way:

It is impossible to exercise that faith that will draw the blessings of God upon us if we are at enmity with our fellowmen or hold what we dishonestly took from them, or live in any way in violation of God's moral law. People have prayed and seemingly cried mightily unto the Lord for days, trying to substitute prayer for confession and faith for honesty. Confession and restoration were first in order, without which no further progress could be made. "Obe-

⁵ This is, of course, only one area of obedience. There are many, many other areas. But unadorned dress is a big one for many ladies.

dience is better than sacrifice." No amount of praying, no amount of tears, can take the place of these "works meet for repentance."

In recognition that a person can have a cold, legal obedience, another River Brethren person wrote:

... the Lord wants a clean and perfect heart. I fear that I have only the form which the Church upholds, or in other words, my heart does not accord with my outward appearance. I often wish that when I speak for the cause of Christ, I might speak such words that originate in the heart; for when the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, oh! what joy and happiness we can realize, ...

A microcosm of Christ's kingdom

The details are sparse, but it seems that these "River Brethren" knew of and attended some of Martin Boehm's early "Great Meetings." They generally approved of the revival that was happening in those early days. But when comparing what their experiences were, and what the later Methodist experiences were, one gets a hint of different expectations.

Another big difference between Martin Boehm's Methodism and the River Brethren was about *what constituted the church*. Author Carlton Wittlinger, writing about two centuries later, sums it up with these beautiful words:

The early [River] Brethren perceived the church to be the visible people of God, the community of born-again, obedient, disciplined, interdependent Christians in face-to-face fellowship. It was not a man-made institution created to produce either personal piety or the salvation of "souls," nor was it the total invisible community of those who had been born again. Salvation, they believed, was not only person-

Did you know ...



Milton Wright was a bishop in the United Brethren Church.

that Milton Wright (1828-1917), father of Wilbur and Orville Wright, was a bishop in the United Brethren Church founded by Martin Boehm and William Otterbein?

In their younger years, Wilbur and Orville helped their father publish a Christian paper. But as they grew older, their obsession with flight seems to have trumped their religious desires. They strove hard to sell their flying machines to the military. Later, when they became rich and famous they built a huge mansion at Dayton, Ohio. Also, they filed many bitter lawsuits against those whom they felt were infringing upon their copyrights. These lawsuits were so bitter that even friends of the Wright brothers were ashamed of them.

Was the fame of being the first to fly worth all that? ~

al, but corporate; the church as a visible community was to demonstrate the redemption of relationships; it should seek to be nothing less than an earthly microcosm of Christ's Kingdom. (Wittlinger, 44)

In short, the church was not (as is too often thought) a place where people gather to encourage one another in their *feelings of assurance* and then go home for the week. The church was to be an earthly microcosm—a miniature model—of Christ's kingdom working on earth! It was to be a place that revealed the “redemption of relationships”; a place where people actually live out brotherly love in a visible, tangible community of holy people. Well said, Carlton!

Now it's our turn

Have we divorced *experience* from *obedience*? It is certainly tempting to do so ... to participate in the great debates that happen between those who have experiences, but disobey, and those who keep the ordinances, but are ice-hearted and formal. Those debates can be endless and are often fruitless.

Don't get caught in that useless debate! True Christian experiences will lead one into a greater obedience, and true obedience will bring a closer, personal walk with the God of heaven.

If our obedience is not drawing us into loving Jesus like the “dove ... the undefiled one ... the only one of her mother” was admiring—and being admired of—her Lover in the Song of Songs, we had better ditch that obedience and find an obedience that is fiery, heartfelt, and meaningful!

And if our experience is causing us to move away from the simple teachings of the New Testament (nonresistance, separation from the world, holiness, plain dress, etc.), we had better ditch that experience and seek one that moves us to a stronger obedience.

Whatever you do, do not divorce—or try to balance—obedience and experience. They do not balance each other: they walk hand in hand! The more you get of one, the more you automatically get of the other! ~

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About that cover photo ...

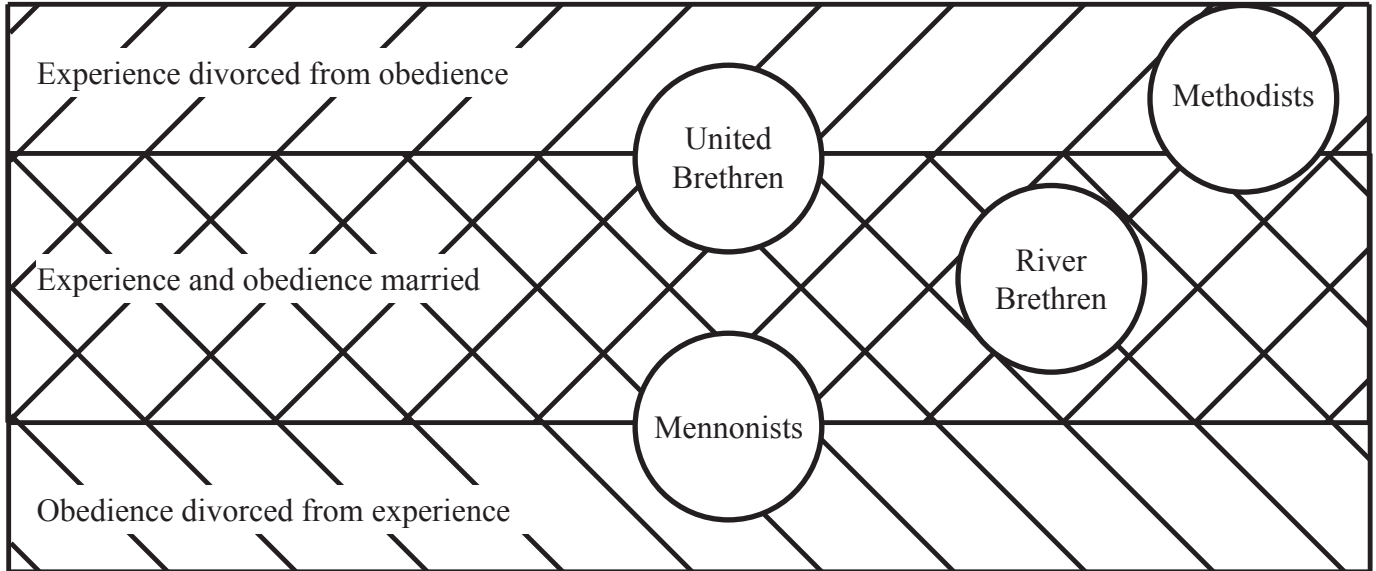


The problem with that photo is that **obedience** and **experience** are shown as balancing or opposing each other. True obedience and true experience are never opposed; they always work and walk together. The photo on the right is a better illustration. Wherever true experience goes, obedience is right there with it!



Graphing it out ...

Sometimes it helps to see things graphically. The following graphic was made to help us “see” the main points of the previous article. The positions of the mentioned churches are a snapshot as they were in the late 1700s and early 1800s (positions have changed since then). Later history shows that each group had its saints, and each had its share of rotten apples. This graph (and the previous article) is not given to “save” or “unsave” any person or denomination, but to help us grasp what was the basis of their fellowship.



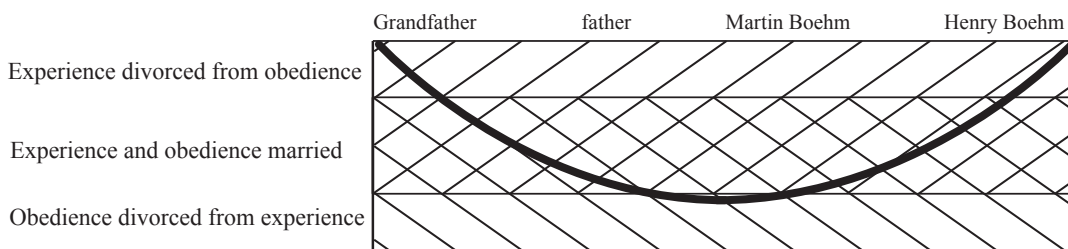
United Brethren: Official teaching stated that members must practice nonresistance and other kingdom characteristics. But ... they openly fellowshiped with others who did not follow these teachings, thus essentially making obedience unofficially optional.

Mennonists: While the church wanted members to experience God in a personal way, some of the membership appears to have had only a formal obedience to the ordinances. Thus personal experience became unofficially optional.

River Brethren: Strove for obedience to the kingdom mandates by personally experiencing Christ. No fellowship allowed with anyone who went to war.

Methodists: While Francis Asbury and most of the leadership of the early American Methodism refused to take arms or swear oaths (and personally desired that all Methodists follow their example), members were not disciplined by the church if they did take arms or swear, nor did official church doctrine demand nonresistance and nonswearing of oaths. Thus obedience to the Sermon on the Mount was officially optional.

As another exercise in pondering where we are and where we are headed, let’s look at a graph of four generations of the Boehm family (note that time and position of the changes are generalized, not exact):



All this has been written and graphed out to get each one of us to THINK about where we are, and where we are headed. Where are you and your family/congregation? Where will you and your family/congregation be 25 years from now?