

# MENNONITE EDUCATION: THE DISTINCTIVE EMPHASIS

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Every school has its emphases. Classical schools emphasize Latin and logic, Catholic schools strong discipline, Baptist schools child evangelism, Fundamentalist schools patriotism and nationalism.

What do Mennonite Schools emphasize? It is easy for Mennonites to give negative reasons for having our own schools rather than sending our children to public schools or other Christian schools. We don't want the exposure to drugs or a sexually-charged atmosphere that is so prevalent in public education and neither do we want the focus on child evangelism or Christian patriotism that is found in many Christian schools.

But are there any positive emphases of Mennonite Education that can excite us, that allow us to say with energy and conviction: "That's worth having our own schools," that define what we are about rather than merely what we are against, or that give churches and parents and board members and principals and teachers compelling reasons to have Mennonite Schools?

There are! I suggest three Christ-centered emphases of Mennonite Education that we can and should continue to cultivate in our schools. But before launching into these three emphases, we will consider something of a context for this discussion.

Some may ask whether the emphases suggested here are descriptive or prescriptive. That is, are these things we *should be* emphasizing or are they things that we *are* emphasizing? The answer is they are both. Not all of these emphases are present in every Mennonite school. Not all are present in appropriate degrees. Some of these emphases are almost lost as we follow patterns of education prescribed by worldviews that differ from our own. However,

we will quickly recognize these emphases as consistent with our history and that they are often present in our schools in many ways. By identifying these emphases we can increase their presence and impact in our communities.

Again, someone may ask, Why all this attention to Mennonite emphases? Shouldn't we be concerned about being Christian – and having Christian emphases? Of course! However, we are not the only ones to be concerned about being truly Christian. It is preferable to acknowledge the general perspective that we bring to the pursuit of truth and that perspective is probably best described with the words Mennonite or Anabaptist. To claim to be merely Christian without an acknowledgement of our overarching vantage point runs the risk of arrogance.

God has been gracious to us as a people. Because of our heritage, we are uniquely shaped to understand and live with clarity some of what it means to follow Christ. For this we must be grateful and faithful. We must also acknowledge that we do not understand everything with clarity and that some of what we think we understand is probably not as certain as we think. This calls for a deep-seated humility about the contributions we make to education and about our need to learn from others who can help us see our blind spots. Being grateful for and faithful to the grace of God as experienced in the Mennonite tradition calls us to speak confidently of the distinctive emphases of Mennonite Education while humility calls us to listen well to other traditions.

## ARE THERE ANY POSITIVE EMPHASIS OF MENNONITE EDUCATION?

Finally, a word about the approach we plan to take. For each of the three emphases we will first, state the emphasis; second, define, illustrate and give biblical justification for the emphasis; then describe two ways which this emphasis is observed in Mennonite schools; and finally, suggest some dangers to which the emphasis is susceptible.

First, Mennonite Education emphasizes living over thinking.

It was my first test during my first year of college. The class was Old Testament Survey. The teacher, Hap Struthers, was an old, godly man. The Hap stood for Happy. The day arrived when the tests were handed back. After letting us see our grades, Dr Struthers said, “Some of you made A’s and some of you made F’s. I have those grades recorded in my grade book. But there is another gradebook – God’s. And in His gradebook some of you who have an A in mine got an F in his and some of you who got an F in mine has an A in his. His gradebook is a whole lot more important than mine.” Dr. Struthers illustrates so well what we mean when we say Mennonite education emphasizes living over thinking.

Schools are given the responsibility to teach the 3 R’s, Reading, Writing and Arithmetic, all of which having more to do with thinking than living. For this reason, it is easy for schools to make the mind and thinking the focus of education. Additionally we live in a time when the dominant cultural mold believes that the problems of society can be solved through the education of the mind. Poverty, crime, abuse, and disease will cease when we learn to think properly. Mennonites disagree. In the words of Paul Zehr, “The Anabaptists discovered the total life is to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ. Instead of educating the mind or training the body, the Anabaptists *educated the will* so that the total person began to live in obedience to Christ.” Richard Hughes quotes a Mennonite as indicating that “Protestants learn to live by thinking; Mennonites learn to think by living.” Mennonite education emphasizes living over thinking.

The Apostle James asks the question, “Who is wise and understanding among you?” Then he answers, “Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (James 3:13). A wise person, a truly educated person can be recognized by two qualities: his acts of service and his humility. Mennonites agree that you can tell if a person has been properly educated, not by how much he knows but by how humble he is and how much good he does. If our students graduate with attitudes of disdain for people who know fewer facts than they do (in some cases maybe even their parents), we have failed as Christian educators. If we merely graduate students who live self-centered, materialistic lives we have failed. Our goal is not to make smarter people but to make better people. Making them smarter may help, but it is only a means, never the goal. Thus, Mennonite education emphasizes living well over thinking.

How, then, does this emphasis bear fruit in our schools? One way is the importance given to godly character as the primary qualification for teachers. Godly character, much more than great learning, is the basis for choosing who teaches in our classrooms.

I suspect there is universal agreement that the best known Mennonite educator of all time is Christopher Dock. Whenever his name is mentioned, I think of two images. The first is the title often used to describe him, “pious schoolmaster of the Skippack.” The second vivid image is the picture of him kneeling in prayer as he died. Piety. Prayer. Is Christopher Dock remembered for his intellect? No – for his godliness. Mennonites value godly teachers because they represent the vision of a whole life rather than a disproportionately large brain.

Over the years, I have looked at a number of teacher applications from Mennonite schools. Some of them have asked absolutely nothing about the applicant’s qualifications as a teacher. Instead they have only asked about the applicant’s relationship with the church, relationship with God and the conduct of his life. This approach would be absolutely incomprehensible to many schools outside of the Mennonite Church. It does illustrate very effectively the value we place on godly character. Inquiring about and making aptitude to teach a part of the teacher evaluating process can be done in ways that do not violate the emphasis on living over thinking. In fact, it is imperative that we find not only good “livers” to teach in our schools but also capable and called “teachers.”

Mennonites value godly teachers because that is how students’ lives are shaped. It may be possible to shape the mind with other methods. There is no other way to shape godly lives.

Another way that the emphasis on living over thinking influences the classroom is in our approach to grading. We tend to reward life qualities like diligence, effort, cooperation, and attention to instructions with good grades as much as we do superior intellect. We make it possible for the student with these characteristics to do well in school even if their natural intelligence is not outstanding.

With every emphasis comes the real possibility of overemphasis. And the Mennonite emphasis on living over thinking sometimes results in neglecting and devaluing the mind. We sometimes view mind development as a necessary evil. From this viewpoint, we should only develop the mind enough to read the bible and make a living, more than that will take us away from God. We have struggled as a people to see the mind as a necessary, even essential part of what

it means to live well. The presence of this tendency should not deter us however from making a life focus the basis for developing the mind.

Secondly, Mennonite Education emphasizes the community over the individual.

We live in a society that has elevated the status of the individual. This emphasis has greatly affected Christianity. James Sire comments on this by saying, “Whether Catholic, evangelical, mainline, liberal or conservative, Christians see themselves as individuals first and communities second.” He observes that “Our faith tends to be a Lone Ranger Christianity. We sing, ‘I Come to the Garden Alone,’ or ‘Just a Closer Walk with Thee,’ or ‘On the Jericho Road.’ He concludes by saying, “It is the community side of the equation that we in our Western mode have missed. (Sire. *Discipleship of the Mind*. Pp. 63-64) For Mennonites, a primary purpose of education is to prepare students for living well in community.

Jesus stressed the overarching significance of the community in His prayer prior to the crucifixion. He asked the Father on behalf of those who would believe in Him over the centuries that “they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21). Paul continues the theme in Philippians 2 where he instructs us as individuals to “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” He goes on to say that this kind of community focus describes precisely the mind of Jesus Christ (2:3-5). We are designed by God to find our normal existence not as disconnected individuals but in committed and unified community. Mennonite education emphasizes the community over the individual.

If we played word association and I said Baptist or Evangelical, someone likely would say Billy Graham. If I said Catholic, someone would probably say Pope John Paul. If I said Mennonite – at least to a non-Mennonite audience the response would not be specific people (who outside of our circles know Conrad Grebel or Felix Manz or Menno Simons) but things like close, unique communities and large families. When people think of Mennonites, they don’t think of individuals but groups. A friend of mine was in New York City on business recently and struck up a conversation with one of the locals. During the course of the discussion my friend indicated that he was a Mennonite. “Oh,” the other person responded, “I didn’t know there was community of you people in this area.” Perhaps it is no accident that we have not produced Billy Grahams because Mennonite education emphasizes community over the individual.

Mennonites understand a primary purpose of education as preparing children to live well in community. Education that prepares one to live in community must happen in community. This is another reason godly teachers are so important. We want a person in the classroom who is living well in community. There are many and perhaps better ways to accumulate facts (e.g., computerized learning) but we are preparing people to live well with each other. When I wanted to go to college, my father suggested that I go to a school where I could spend weekends at home. He understood instinctively that if education is to result in a greater commitment to the community it must happen in the context of community. Each weekend I would go home and discuss what I was learning. The discussions were sometimes animated and we didn’t always agree, but insisting that I continue to engage my community while learning was a major factor in bringing me toward rather than away from the community.

How then does this emphasis on community over the individual impact the Mennonite school? One obvious way is in the subjects that are often highly valued in our schools. Our valuing history and music flows from our community orientation. How so? Family history, local history, Mennonite history, church history, American history, world history are important to people who value the community, including the community as it extends from the past into the present. We have tended to be suspicious of the arts but singing has found broad acceptance among us perhaps in large part because it is a community experience rather than individual artistic expression. If we were to again play word association with the phrase “Books and Lutherans” we would immediately think the “95 Theses.” For the phrase “Books and Reformed Tradition,” Calvin’s Institutes would quickly come to mind. For the phrase “Books and Mennonites” many would suggest that our two outstanding works are *Martyrs’ Mirror* and the *Ausbund*. A history book and a music book. Both illustrate our commitment to community.

There is another way that a community emphasis is practiced in our schools and classrooms. Our schools serve all students from our community, not only the intellectually advanced. Two summers ago, I was teaching a course on the Foundations of Education. During the course we spent some time reading an article about a classical school in Texas. I was getting excited because I find some of the classical methods and ideas very compelling. One student wasn’t excited however, and when I gave the chance for the class to respond she said “I don’t like it. It strikes me as elitist. It seems that only a certain kind of person would do well in that school.” She was right. Mennonite education, on the other hand, values a school where all individuals can be included in the community.

This emphasis has the capacity to veer into dangerous territory. I will mention two possibilities. An emphasis on the community over the individual can easily become a deadening form of traditionalism. Jaroslav Pelikan stated the problem so succinctly: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living." A community focus can degenerate into a culture of empty activity designed to sustain the group but without a life worth sustaining. Also, a community emphasis has sometimes resulted in the rejection of people who didn't quite fit the community mold but could have brought a legitimate and necessary diversity. When community is highly valued we are not always sure what to do with the exceptional people among us who challenge our communities. So, many of them leave. A student of mine once remarked that he didn't think there was any room in the Mennonite church for a career mathematician. An emphasis on community can inappropriately exclude.

### Third, Mennonite Education emphasizes a world vision over a national vision.

We are living at a time of intense national feeling. America is engaged in a number of struggles that pit it against other countries or at least elements within those countries. The American president has pictured these situations in terms of fighting the evils of terrorism and bondage. This vision of fighting evil has two components.

1. The nation, in this case America, holds our primary allegiance and is a geographic entity.
2. We fight evil in the world through exercise of our nation's power.

Conservative American Christians have largely endorsed this vision. They say it is the responsibility of American Christians to support this nation in its fight against evil. But Mennonites have a different vision.

1. The Kingdom of Christ holds our primary allegiance, and it has members in every country of the world, including Iraq.
2. We fight evil in the world through the skillful use of our weapon, love.

This vision is one of a kingdom of followers of Christ that transcends national borders. We belong to a kingdom that has members in every country of the world. And Mennonites believe that our first responsibility is to those brothers and sisters. Paul calls us to this vision when he states, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). But our commitment is not only to those who belong to the Kingdom of God. We are

called to love everyone, including our enemies. Our call is to not only love the neighbor next door but to act in love to everyone in every nation. Mennonite education stresses that we are Christians first and Americans second. According to Richard Hughes, "Mennonites routinely counsel one another to abandon self in the interest of others and to abandon narrow nationalism in the interest of world citizenship." This is not loyalty to the United Nations but a vision of the world where our brothers and sisters span the globe and where we attack the evil in the hearts of all men by bombarding them with love. Our goal is not to kill our enemies but to love them into the Kingdom of God.

Mennonite Schools live out this emphasis in two basic ways: by telling different stories, stories of good over evil, and by honoring different heroes, heroes who loved well.

Years ago, a number of teachers from our school took a teacher field trip to Augusta, Georgia. We took a guided bus tour around the major historical sites in the city. Particularly memorable was the boyhood home of Woodrow Wilson. The guide showed us the church where Wilson's father, a minister, preached. He told the story how one Sunday morning during the Civil War an opening hymn was lead and the pastor, Mr. Wilson, stood up and announced, "We will continue our worship down at the foundry molding bullets for our soldiers." From a different time in this nation's history, Ken Gire tells about a tombstone he saw. It reads: "Sacred to the Memory of Lynn S. Love who, during his life time, killed 98 Indians that had been delivered into his hands by the Lord. He had hoped to make it 100 before the year ended when he fell asleep in the arms of Jesus in his home, In N.Y. state." These are the stories that are often told in the broader culture, stories of power, of violence, of death.

Mennonite Schools tell stories of how we can and should overcome evil with good. For example Myron Augsburger tells about Aaron Rempel in his book *the Robe of God*.

"In the early decades of the 20th century, Aaron Rempel, a wealthy Mennonite farmer and estate owner, lived in southern Russia, in a town called Gnadenfeldt. He was so prominent and wealthy, and his estate so well known, that the Czar of Russia would often visit and hunt on his estate. When the Revolutions of 1917 broke out, the White Army was initially successful in defeating the Red Army in the region near Rempel's estate. The officers of the White Army ordered their soldiers to put Red Army prisoners into boxcars and ship them off to Siberia. One evening, as Rempel was walking home from the city with groceries he had purchased for his family, he came upon a railroad siding where there was a boxcar full of men. One of these



captured soldiers called out to Rempel, "Sir, we're so hungry, we've been in here all day with nothing to eat. Can you help us?" Acting on his Christian beliefs, Rempel walked over to the boxcar and began shoving his bread, cheeses and sausages through the cracks. The man inside took them and passed them around. He said, "Thank you," and Aaron replied, "God bless you." Some months later, the tide of the struggle changed. The Red Army totally defeated the White Army, put their prisoners into boxcars and shipped them to Siberia. Within a few months, as the Marxists took over the country under Lenin's leadership, the Red Army rounded up all of the Mennonite farmers in the area, put them into boxcars, and shipped them to Siberia as well. Deported to Siberia, Rempel went from a life of wealth to a life of poverty, from a position of strength to one of weakness. And yet, he remained the entrepreneur he had always been. Recognizing the need for a warm drink in the Siberian cold, Rempel began shipping in tea from Mongolia and soon had a good business going. His neighbors, however, were envious of his success and - calling Rempel's business the crime of capitalism - had him arrested by the Marxist authorities. As the trial progressed, it became evident that he was, indeed, "guilty of capitalism." Finally, the Commissar told him to step forward to be sentenced. Aaron Rempel stepped forward, fully expecting the sentence to mean his execution. But the Commissar said, "I think we have met before." "No, your Honor," Aaron replied, "We have never met." "Yes, I think we have. Were you ever in Gnadenfeldt?" Aaron said, "Why yes, I lived there." "Do you remember an evening when a man called to you from a boxcar, and said 'We are so hungry, we have been in here all day with nothing to eat?'" "Yes," Aaron said, "I remember that." "And what did you do?" "Why, I went over to the boxcar and shoved my bread and cheeses and sausages through the slats." "And what did you say?" Aaron paused for a moment and then replied: "I think I said, 'God bless you.'" The Commissar said, "Yes, we've met before. I was that man. I'm not going to sentence you. If you would like, I'll sign those papers for your family to emigrate." Aaron said, "Oh sir, thank you, and would you sign those papers for all of the Rempels, for I have brothers here." All of the Rempels immigrated to Burbank, California."

Mennonites tell different stories and they honor different heroes. Recently I received a catalog for Christian families. It was promoting resources for raising godly sons. There were two kinds of heroes the catalog suggested parents should encourage their children to emulate: the missionary and the soldier. Tony Campolo tells a moving story about an American and German soldier. He says that a friend of his told him about being at dinner with a veteran of World War II. The man related a story of what it was like during Battle of the Bulge. One foggy, rainy morning his commanding

officer commanded his unit to go out and shoot any of the enemy that were lying about wounded. This did not fit in with the Geneva Convention, but given the chaos and disarray of a battle in which there were no clearly drawn lines, the officer believed that it had to be done. The rules had been abandoned, and prisoners were not to be taken. This soldier told how he came upon a German soldier sitting on the ground with his back against a tree. He wasn't wounded. He was just too tired to go on. He was totally dissipated. There was nothing left in the way of will power. He was too listless and tired to resist anything or anyone. "As I aimed my gun at him, he asked me to wait a moment. Speaking in English, he told me he wanted a chance to pray before he died. I immediately sat down with him as I realized that he was a Christian brother. We talked about our families. I showed him pictures of my children. He showed me photographs of his family, We read some Scripture together. It was wonderful." Campolo's friend asked, "Well? What did you do?" When the man didn't answer, the friend kept pressing. "What did you do? What did you do?" The man said, "I stood up, aimed the gun at him, and said, 'You're a Christian and I'm a Christian. I'll see you in heaven.' And I shot him!"

In contrast, Mennonite education promotes heroes who have learned to love the unlovely, help the helpless and to do good even to their enemies. We grew up hearing time and again the story of Dirk Willems and how he gave himself up to rescue the very man who was attempting to capture him. Or the story of Pastor Peter and the thatched roof. These were heroes who loved well. A number of years ago at SMBI, I heard my father-in-law tell the story of Annie Funk. She was born into a Mennonite home in 1874. As a teenager she spent some time in voluntary service among the black people in Tennessee and then later among needy women in New Jersey. When she was 32, the church asked her to go to Janjgar, India as a Mennonite missionary where she founded a girls school. Six years later she received a telegram saying her mother was sick and that she should come home. Annie booked passage home to take care of her. She sailed to England where she was booked on the SS Haverford for the voyage to America. A coal strike delayed that ship and so she went aboard another, the Titanic. You know that story. By some accounts Annie had found a place in lifeboat but when she saw a mother with children, she gave up her place for them and perished in the waves. And so very possibly Annie died the way she lived, in loving, sacrificial work among the poor and needy. She was fighting evil by doing good. These are heroes that our children need to know about. Otherwise they will grow up following more the example of George Washington, Paul Revere and Daniel Boone than Dirk Willems, Aaron Rempel and Annie Funk.

What are the dangers associated with a Kingdom mentality? One very real possibility is a retreat into passivity rather than the active engagement of evil. It is very easy to refuse to fight an enemy overseas but never sacrificially love the neighbor next door. It is easy to give lip service to a world vision and not give of myself in my local community. It is easy to turn nonresistance into “If you leave us alone we won’t be any bother.” When our world vision becomes this rotting carcass, it is understandable that our young people are not compelled. It is understandable if they say, “Well at least the US is doing something about the evil of terrorism.” A sacrificial call to engage actively the evil in the world through loving service will, on the other hand, light a fire in many of our students that can make an eternal difference in the world.

Mennonite education emphasizes a world vision over a national vision.

### **Conclusion**

If Mennonite schools are to have a continuing reason to exist, it is not merely because we live differently but also because we think differently. The classroom is a primary tool for shaping the thinking of the next generation, but only if we intentionally set out to do that.

We have considered three ways that Mennonites think differently about the world.

1. Mennonite education emphasizes living over thinking. It has a Life Focus.
2. Mennonite education emphasizes the community over the individual. It has a Community Commitment.
3. Mennonite education emphasizes a world vision rather than a national vision. It has a Kingdom Mentality.

As we live our beliefs and think carefully about what those beliefs mean for education, a vision for our schools can continue to develop, a vision that is energizing, a vision that is compelling, and a vision that defines our schools not merely by what we want to avoid but a vision for what we want to accomplish May God help us.