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THREE STREAMS: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage (Part Three - Wesleyanism)

For questions or concerns about this resource, to discuss this topic in more detail, recommend books, or to share wisdom from your own pastoral context, please contact Bishop Lynn Thrush (lthrush@bicus.org) or Matthew Peterson at: Matthew R. Peterson, *Theologian in Residence (Great Lakes BIC)* mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com (631) 871-8339

I. THREE STREAMS: THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

Several years ago I saw a television commercial for a DNA testing kit. The commercial focused on a man who thought that he was descended from Germans but after taking the test found out that his ancestors actually came from Scotland. The commercial pitched the idea that with these DNA kits you could more fully understand *who you are* by gaining knowledge of *where you come from*.

As members of the Brethren in Christ, we have inherited a distinct “theological DNA” from our ancestors in the faith. Such is the case whether we have grown up in the denomination or have more recently been grafted into this faith family. Our theological DNA comes in the form of stories, ideas, and values that inform our denominational posture as Brethren in Christ.

Lisa Weaver-Swartz and Zach Spidel (both members of the Great Lakes Conference) recently drew attention to some large gaps in our theological DNA in the pages of *Brethren in Christ History & Life*. Their conclusions are that the Brethren in Christ “*is in deep need of identity work*” (Weaver-Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values,” 294) and that “*there is not now one consistent ethos that is identifiably Brethren in Christ*” (Spidel, “From Practice to Methods,” 353). In other words, today’s Brethren in Christ need to reflect on *who we are* as a church, which can only be achieved by exploring *where we come from* as a theological tradition.

This resource is the third part of a series titled *THREE STREAMS: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage*. The series is designed as an introduction to the three major theological traditions (Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism) that inform BIC U.S. statements of doctrine and practice. It is part of a wider effort to recapture “collective memory” (Weaver-Swartz, 293-295) for the church. In this edition, we will review the Wesleyan and Holiness movements and how they have shaped Brethren in Christ theology.

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II. WESLEYANISM & HOLINESS

The Wesleyan and Holiness movements both share a common early history, emerging out of the Pietistic revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pietism “*sought not to erect a new, distinctive church entity but to revive individual Christian life and practice. Its common denominator was a vital experience and relationship with God*” (Keefer, “Three Streams,” 33). The Wesleyan and Holiness movements likewise first sought to revive sincere Christian commitment within the church structures of their day, and later formed denominations following constraints and rejections by those church structures. Like the Pietists, the Wesleyan and Holiness movements emphasized the need for spiritual renewal and social engagement in response to the issues of their day. One of the hallmarks of these movements is their shared understanding of spiritual renewal as located in God’s call *to* and supernatural empowerment *for* holy living.

History

- **1720s–1730s:** Charles and John Wesley started discipleship bands at Oxford University that focused on prayer, mutual accountability, and Scripture reading (Pietist themes). While traveling across the Atlantic, John encountered Moravian believers and was struck by their confident faith in the face of disaster. On May 24, 1738, John felt his heart “strangely warmed” with assured faith while reading Martin Luther’s writings and recommitted himself to the Lord and to holy living.
- **1730s–1740s:** George Whitefield, John Wesley, and others began open air preaching to coal miners, the poor, travelers, and those imprisoned across England. “Methodism” (so-called because of their methodical approach to discipleship) emerged as a recognized movement within the existing Church of England.
- **1770s–1840:** Early spread of Methodism across North America through the work of Francis Asbury, Thomas Coke, and other ministers. The “Second Great Awakening,” a period of intense religious revival in North America, included Methodist circuit preachers spreading the ideas of holiness and entire sanctification across the United States and in frontier territories.
- **1850s–1870s:** Spread of Holiness “Camp Meetings” in the years surrounding the American Civil War. The camp meetings helped further the idea of scriptural holiness among the general population and across denominations. This period also saw the beginnings of distinct holiness denominations.
- **1890s–1900s:** Interactions between Brethren in Christ churches in Kansas and nearby Holiness groups (Hepzibah Faith Missionary Association, Iowa Fire-Baptized Holiness Association) saw Holiness teachings on sanctification emerge within the denomination. Personal testimonies from Brethren in Christ members about experiences of second-work holiness began to frequently appear in the pages of the *Evangelical Visitor*.
- **1935–1937:** A committee appointed by the BIC U.S. General Conference developed a statement that read, “*Sanctification has its beginning in justification ... is an experience to be attained instantaneously and subsequent to the new birth ... is a process by which the believer is daily cleansed from the defilement of a sinful world ... is a state of absolute perfection to be realized only through glorification*” (Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety*, 329–330). This language was debated by members who fell on different sides of the Wesleyan/Holiness debate, culminating in a doctrinal revision that included the “essence” of second-work holiness.

Theological Views & Practices

Although there is much more to the Wesleyan/Holiness movements than just one position, it is their unique emphasis on sanctification that has proved most influential on the Brethren in Christ and other Christian traditions. Here are some major beliefs found in these movements:

Assurance: The believer's experience of salvation and subsequent experiences of the Spirit brought with them a faith marked by internal assurance of God's forgiveness. The internal witness of the Spirit and a heart "strangely warmed" helped the believer to live the obedient life with confidence in God's love.

Holiness: God called his people to be set apart through conformity to his own image as the Holy One. The Christian life involved both the call to and the realization of holy living, including victory over sin. Holiness was also grounded in the experience of God. *"As Wesleyans we understand that God's presence makes a qualitative difference in our lives and in our world. We are not the same, having encountered the living God. There is something of God's holiness that must, in fact, change us as we draw near to him in Christ"* (Luke Embree, "Wesleyan Holiness in a Post-Church Age," 86).

Sanctification: The key to a Wesleyan/Holiness understanding of holiness was an assumption that holiness was in fact attainable through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. These movements believed that Spirit empowered holiness often occurred subsequent to conversion in what some folks called a "Second Work of Grace" or the idea of "Christian Perfection" or Wesley's language of "Perfect Love." Importantly, to be "perfected" in holiness meant not simply that one could avoid active sins, but more fully that they had a heart wholly oriented towards God's desires, including the self-sacrificial love of others in the faith community.

Centrality of the Spirit: Other theological movements that informed the BIC worldview believed that the Holy Spirit was deeply involved in the lives of God's people, but the Wesleyan and Holiness movements emphasized the Spirit's role to a unique degree. It was through the Spirit that believers could experience sanctifying moments and attain true holiness and victory over sin. The Spirit also empowered individuals for ministry, distributing supernatural gifts for the benefit of the church. It was from these Wesleyan/Holiness beliefs about Spirit empowerment that some of the charismatic revivals of the twentieth century emerged (although the relationship between these movements is quite complex).

What is "Holiness"?

*"But just as he who called you is holy,
so be holy in all you do; for it is written:
'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet. 1:15–16).*

1 Peter chapter 1 is an important passage about sanctification. The chapter links sanctification with God's foreknowledge and our obedience to Jesus Christ (1:2), calls us to holiness through obedience to God and the avoidance of sin (1:13-16), and to a purification of the heart that leads to deep love for the people of God (1:22).

Similar concepts appear in our doctrinal statements: *"As the Spirit works in the life of the believer, he or she is led forward in sanctification to a full surrender and commitment of the motives and will to Christ. This results in freedom from the control of sin and in empowerment to live the holy life."*

Manual of Doctrine & Government (2022), pg. 10

III. WESLEYANISM , HOLINESS & THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST

Unlike with Anabaptism and Pietism, which influenced the Brethren in Christ prior to our earliest theological statements, we can observe the process by which the Wesleyan and Holiness movements came to inform Brethren in Christ theology by consulting our denominational literature.

The optimistic view of the potential for *experiential righteousness* held by the Wesleyan and Holiness movements resonated with some nineteenth century members of the Brethren in Christ family. Carlton Wittlinger observed that “*many Brethren found through the experience of second-work holiness a sense of spiritual fulfillment and dynamic which seemingly had eluded them within the context of the historic Brethren theology of sanctification*” (*Quest for Piety & Obedience*, 247). Wesleyan teaching on Spirit’s empowerment for holiness provided for some Brethren in Christ the means by which the Anabaptist vision of discipleship and the Pietist vision of a fully committed life might be realized.

Wesleyan and Holiness teachings first grew to prominence within Brethren in Christ churches in Kansas and in the denomination’s emerging city and world missions efforts of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Personal testimonies in the pages of the *Evangelical Visitor* suggest that holiness theology was adopted quite rapidly by members of the denomination across geographical distances. At the same time, it was met with skepticism by other members of our denominational family well into the twentieth century. Notes from various *General Conference* meetings witness to extended debates around the issues of “perfectionism” and “second work of grace” understandings of sanctification. Holiness theology was also perceived by some members as promoting hyper-emotionalism and disorder in worship gatherings.

On this struggle for clarity, Luke Keefer wrote: “***The intrusion of Methodist holiness into the denomination presented little challenge to the Pietist part of the synthesis. Even though it meant a new theology of sanctification, it was a challenge that could be negotiated. Pietism emphasized heart-felt, life-changing salvation. Holiness was both of these, intensifying regeneration through a dramatic second experience. ... It was the Anabaptist half of the synthesis that was most challenged by Wesleyan sanctification and most resistant to it. Numerous issues caused concern. Did the emotionalism of personal experience and the spontaneity of corporate worship violate worship that was decent and orderly? Did the new optimism of grace overlook the subtleness of sin and the necessity of suffering in the Christian life? Would the emphasis upon the freedom of the individual conscience subvert the importance of group guidance and judgment? ... [Wesleyanism] found acceptance in the denomination by coming to terms with our Anabaptist heritage. And it modified the Pietist stand with which it already had widespread commonality***” (“Three Streams,” 37–38).

Since the more formal adoption of Wesleyan/Holiness theology in Brethren in Christ doctrinal statements, these movements have retained their shared status as the “third stream” of our theological heritage. Wesleyan/Holiness concepts can be found throughout our denominational literature, including these highlights:

Life in the Spirit

“We believe that God’s grace provides for more than forgiveness of sin. As the Spirit works in the life of the believer, he or she is led forward in sanctification to a full surrender and commitment of the motives and will to Christ. This results in freedom from the control of sin and in empowerment to live the holy

life. The Holy Spirit fills persons yielded to God and equips them for effective witness and service.”
(*Manual of Doctrine & Government [2022]*, page 10)

“Sanctification is also an ongoing journey of yielding to God and growing in grace. The quality of the surrendered life corresponds to the believer’s responsiveness to the Holy Spirit and obedience to the Word of God. The Spirit-filled life results in a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, inner strength in times of temptation, godly living and wholehearted service to the Lord. The Holy Spirit produces virtuous character—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These virtues characterize the believer’s walk in the Spirit.”

(*Manual of Doctrine & Government [2022]*, page 10)

Accents & Issues: God’s Call to Holy Living

“In short, we are urged to seek holiness (Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15) and live worthy of our calling (Eph. 4:1). The holy life is characterized by a strong aversion to sin, and an equally strong desire to portray the “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control” that evidence the Spirit’s presence (Gal. 5:22).”

Accents & Issues: Sanctification

“The Christian follows the light provided by the Spirit to progressively mature in holiness. Yet, there are times when the Holy Spirit allows the believer to experience a heavenly moment, which empowers a new level of holiness beyond normal maturity. Sanctification comes through natural spiritual growth and supernatural infilling by the Holy Spirit.”

A Blending of Traditions

As we saw in the first two *Three Streams* resources, the Brethren in Christ emerged from a mixture of Anabaptist and Pietist traditions. This distinct denominational culture was observed in the earliest doctrinal statements produced by the Brethren, which spoke with the values inherited from those earlier movements. The blend of Anabaptist and Pietist traditions of the earliest Brethren in Christ produced a community ethos centered around obedience to the teachings of Jesus and the lived experience of a vibrant faith.

That ethos was challenged by significant events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as a hunger for spiritual renewal among our members. During that time some of our members found satisfaction for their spiritual hunger in the teachings of the Wesleyan and Holiness movements. The values proposed by those movements both affirmed and challenged the Brethren’s existing theological structure. Through the influence of these movements the Brethren in Christ developed new views about the possibility for holy living and empowerment for ministry and world missions. The acceptance of Wesleyan/Holiness theology would also place the Brethren in Christ in closer theological proximity to other traditions that were a part of the emerging Evangelical movement, which some have recognized as a “fourth stream” of influence for our denomination.

IV. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

General Summaries & History

- Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (pages 227-257 and 321-341 especially)
- Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language* Third Edition (pages 331-350 especially)

Wesleyanism / Holiness & the Brethren in Christ; Brethren in Christ Heritage

- Robert Douglass, “Understanding the Work of the Holy Spirit” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): pages 355-362.
- Luke Embree, “Wesleyan Holiness in a Post-Church Age” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 42.1 (April 2019): pages 85-87.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams in Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” Pages 31-60 in *Reflections on a Heritage* (E. Morris Sider, editor).
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “The Wesleyan-Holiness Tradition and Christian Pacifism: Assessing Problems and Possibilities” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 29.1 (April 2006): pages 35-63.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “How Useful is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to the Brethren in Christ?” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 33.1 (April 2010): pages 117-133.
- William C. Kostlevy, “Perfecting Mennonites: The Holiness Movement’s Impact on American Mennonites with Special Reference to Kansas” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 34.2 (August 2011): pages 213-236.
- Zach Spidel, “From Practice to Methods: Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology and the Mid-Century Transformation of the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): pages 325-354.
- Lisa Weaver-Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values: Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.2 (August 2022): pages 260-298)
- John R. Yeatts, David Flowers, Harriet Sider Bicksler, Elvie Telfer, Luke Embree, “Follow Peace and Holiness: The Value of Anabaptism and Wesleyanism for a Post-Church Age” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 42.1 (April 2019): pages 71-88.
- John R. Yeatts, “Why Our History is Important” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 33.1 (Winter 2013): pages 2-3.
- Various Authors, “Reaffirming Our Brethren in Christ Identity” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 43.4 (Fall 2023)

V. CREDENTIALING UPDATE

While it is my hope that this *Deeper* resource might be of benefit to anyone who reads it, it is particularly relevant for folks preparing for their **Doctrinal Questionnaire (DQ)**. The DQ asks questions directly related to God's work of salvation and the Christian life that touch on Wesleyan/Holiness values, and so some familiarity with that part of our heritage would be helpful. These questions are included below for your reflection:

Part One (Doctrine). Section IV (Salvation). Question B:

The Brethren in Christ have viewed sanctification from a Wesleyan perspective.

1. *What is your perception of the Brethren in Christ understanding of sanctification?*
2. *Indicate your view of sanctification and how it pertains to:*
 - A. *The biblical call to holiness and holy living.*
 - B. *Commitment or surrender to the will of God.*
 - C. *Freedom from sin: What is the relationship between the call to holiness and God's provision for a holy life?*
 - D. *The work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Include your understanding regarding the Spirit-filled life as it pertains to: the gifts of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit and empowerment for service.*