**Reaffirming Our Identity as a ‘Three Streams’ Church**

For decades the Brethren in Christ have told their story as that of a “three streams” theological community. Our theological heritage is a synthesis of three major traditions that inform our approaches to (amongst other things) Scripture, discipleship, the church, and missions. To speak of these traditions as “three streams” is to recall that they each arose in different historical circumstances and as a result focused on different parts of the Christian life. Within the Brethren in Christ, these three traditions have each played their part in shaping our community identity. As our faith community faces new challenges and new opportunities, we seek to “Reaffirm Our Identity as a Community of Christ-Followers” – and doing so involves looking back at where we have come from as a church.

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| “I would say that our original synthesis reduces itself to this: ***Anabaptism* supplied the form** and ***Pietism* the spirit** of the Brethren in Christ Church. The version of ***Wesleyanism*** that we encountered **revived and intensified the spirit** part of this equation.”  Luke Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams in Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” *Reflections on a Heritage,* page 44. |

The Brethren in Christ are not purely Anabaptist, Pietist, or Wesleyan in theological outlook. We are a synthesis of these three traditions. But studying these traditions and how they have historically influenced the Brethren in Christ can provide us with guidance for reinvigorating that identity in the present.

**ANABAPTISM**

Emerging in Central Europe in the 1500s, the Anabaptists rejected the “state-church” system popularized during the Protestant Reformation. The Anabaptists believed that the church was a community comprised of believers who were committed to obedient discipleship. They practiced believer’s baptism, a practice that earned them their name (*ana-baptism* being a Latin phrase meaning “to baptize again” that used in a mocking way by other church traditions of the period). Early Anabaptists faced resistance and persecution from local authorities in response to their unique practices. Some responded to this resistance by forming alternative communities, a few by responding with violence in turn, and others by fleeing the regions where they lived.

**Key Beliefs:**

* ***Christ-focused Interpretation of the Bible*:** The Bible is not a “flat” book out of which one can select any text for application in any context. Instead, it is a collection of texts whose meaning is most clearly revealed through the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.
* ***Community of Believers*:**Baptism and church membership are free-will responses to the teachings of Jesus. They are not to be compelled by the state. The church is a ‘visible community’ of believers rather than a collection of saved and unsaved.
* ***Discipleship of Obedience*:** Christian discipleship is not a matter of doctrinal correctness. It is an on-going posture of obedience to the commands of Jesus, lived out in (and with the support of) the faith community.
* ***Non-violence & Peace-making*:** The teachings of Jesus forbid the use of violence or force against one’s enemies or to spread the kingdom of God.

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| “***Christ loved His enemies and He calls us as His disciples to love our enemies.*** We follow our Lord in being a people of peace and reconciliation, called to suﬀer and not to ﬁght. While respecting those who hold other interpretations, we believe that preparation for or participation in war is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ. Similarly, we reject all other acts of violence which devalue human life. Rather, **we aﬃrm active peacemaking, sacriﬁcial service to others, as well as the pursuit of justice for the poor and the oppressed in the name of Christ.**”  Brethren in Christ U.S. *Manual of Doctrine & Government* (2022), page 13. |

**PIETISM**

Doctrinal and state-church divisions, coupled with power struggles between regional rulers, led to the Thirty Years War, an event that resulted in the deaths of millions of Europeans. Against this background reformers later known as Pietists emerged. The Pietists sought to redirect their churches towards a vibrant, socially-engaged devotional life as the center of Christian living. This movement prioritized Christian fellowship, prayer, and Bible study over doctrinal precision. Their social outlook prompted them to engage in early justice and missions work.

**Key Beliefs:**

* ***Vibrant, Personal Faith*:** Christianity is a lived faith rather than a demographic description, and begins with a new birth, or conversion.
* ***Love of Others*:** The vibrancy of one’s relationship with God is closely associated with how they love others, especially those within the community of faith. Mutual love often takes precedent over doctrinal precision.
* ***Prayer & Fellowship*:** Faith is nourished in community. The priesthood of all believers means that God is encountered through shared prayer, Bible study, and fellowship.
* ***Social Consciousness*:** Historical Pietists held a hopeful vision about Christian engagement and believed that sincere Christians ought to and in fact could improve society. They believed that the same Spirit who empowered the early church could transform their communities, and the devotional life cultivated by prayer and Bible study was pursued with such transformation in mind. This hopeful attitude led them to create orphanages, schools, and hospitals for communities ravaged by war. It also led them to engage worldwide in missions work.

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| “Far from being a form of Christianity that ignores the world while focusing on the interior life, historic Pietism offers us a role model for embracing a holistic biblical faith. Keenly aware of the destructive movements in their social contexts, the original **Pietists responded with hope and confidence in God’s ultimate goal: the *transformation of themselves and all Creation*.”**  J.E. McDermond, “Pietism: It’s Not What Your Grandparents Told You It Is (and That Guy with a Degree from an Ivy League Divinity School Isn’t Right Either),” *BICH&L* 42.1 (April 2019): page 111. |

**WESLEYANISM**

Influenced by the Pietist outlook, the Wesleyan and Holiness movements spread religious revival across England and North America while teaching about the importance of holy living. Their shared focus on sanctification involved a belief in the Holy Spirit’s empowerment to overcome sin and live an increasingly Christlike life. Holiness involved a supernaturally-aided growth in self-sacrificial love for others, manifested in commitment to the poor and to missions.

**Key Beliefs:**

* ***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.
* ***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.
* ***Sanctification*:** Spirit empowered holiness often occurred after conversion in what some called a “Second Work of Grace” or the idea of “Christian Perfection” or Wesley’s language of “Perfected Love.” Importantly, to be “perfected” in holiness meant not simply that one could avoid active sins, but more fully that their heart was wholly oriented towards God’s desires, including the self-sacrificial love of others.
* ***Spirit-Empowerment*:** It is through the Spirit that believers can experience sanctifying moments and attain true holiness and victory over sin. The Spirit also empowers individuals for ministry, distributing supernatural gifts for the benefit of the church*.*

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| “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,” *BICH&L* 42.1 (April 2019): page 86. |

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

These resources are good places to learn more about the “three streams” of the Brethren in Christ U.S. theological heritage and how they have informed us across our history.

**Brethren in Christ U.S. Publications:**

* Manual of Doctrine & Government:
  + Articles of Faith & Doctrine
  + Statements of Christian Life & Practice
* Accents & Issues:
  + Assurance of the Believer
  + Baptism
  + Christians & War
  + Holy Living
  + Renewal
  + Sanctification
  + Violence
* BIC U.S. website & blog

**Affiliated Resources/Publications:**

* Brethren in Christ Historical Society
* Brethren in Christ History & Life
* Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation
* “Deeper” Theological Resources at TheSeed.online

**General History & Values:**

* *Quest for Piety & Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Carlton O. Wittlinger)
* *Reflections on a Heritage* (E. Morris Sider, editor)

**Anabaptism:**

* Myron S. Augsburger, “The Contemporary Relevance of the Anabaptist Faith” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 23.2 (August 2000): pages 325-332.
* Dale W. Brown, “Love Theology: Pietism, Anabaptism, and the Brethren in Christ Tradition” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 19.2 (August 1996): pages 306-318.
* David L. Hall, “Finding Our Roots: Anabaptism and the Early Church” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 4.2 (December 1981): pages 126-141.
* Nancy R. Heisey, “Anabaptist Heritage and Faithful Diversity” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 26.2 (August 2003): pages 92-108.
* Matthew R. Peterson, “Three Streams: The Brethren in Christ Theological Heritage (Part 1)” Available at: https://www.theseed.online/deeper-theology
* E. Morris Sider, “The Anabaptist Vision and the Brethren in Christ Church” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 17.3 (December 1994): pages 283-296.
* 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.
* Various Authors, “Reaffirming Our Brethren in Christ Identity” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 43.4 (Fall 2023)

**Pietism:**

* Dale W. Brown, “Love Theology: Pietism, Anabaptism, and the Brethren in Christ Tradition” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 19.2 (August 1996): pages 306-318.
* Luke L. Keefer Jr., “Pietism, ‘Heartfelt Religion,’ and the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 28.3 (December 2005): pages 454-464.
* J.E. McDermond, “Pietism: It’s Not What Your Grandparents Told You It Is (and That Guy with a Degree from an Ivy League Divinity School Isn’t Right Either)” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 42.1 (April 2019): pages 89-112.
* Ronald R. Sider, “Pietism, Prayer, and People of Prayer” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 32.3 (December 2009): pages 463-490.
* Various Authors, “Reaffirming Our Brethren in Christ Identity” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 43.4 (Fall 2023).

**Wesleyanism / Holiness:**

* 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.
* 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.
* 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.
* Matthew R. Peterson, “Three Streams: The Brethren in Christ Theological Heritage (Part 3)” Available at: https://www.theseed.online/deeper-theology
* 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.
* Various Authors, “Reaffirming Our Brethren in Christ Identity” *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation* 43.4 (Fall 2023).