

FORBEARANCE:
A VISION FOR
DIVISIVE
TIMES

ENTEN VERNARD ELLER

Forbearance: A Vision for Divisive Times

Ephesians 4:1-3; Colossians 3:12-14

With this message, continuing our series about what it means to be Brethren, I want to reflect on one of the core values of what it means to be Brethren. I would argue that, in light of the denomination compelling vision process, as well as what is going on in several districts, including here in Atlantic Northeast District, we would do well to remind ourselves, to ground ourselves, in these beliefs that helped form the core of what it means to be Brethren.

By way of introducing this core value, I want to note that we Brethren are a product of our history, as are most all people and groups. While there are pros and cons to that, being a product of your history is not necessarily a bad thing... it allows you to learn from experiences and mistakes, and to make correctives. Now, being a product of your own history can spin the wrong way if taken too far... for instance, whenever we allow our history to limit us, or over-determine who we would like to be or how we want to respond in any certain situation. An example this is often be found with people who are traumatized, who have learned to fear. Far too often, even after fearful people come to a safe place where acceptance is present instead of trauma, they have difficulty moving beyond the history of fear to receive love and trust others. It's the story of us humans, and the hurt we so often do to each other.

In the case of the Brethren movement, however, I celebrate the ways that the church learned from history, leading the church from the start to stand against the society around them in a number of different ways. We could include such values as adult baptism, witnessing to the peace position, and being willing to sacrifice wealth and life for following Jesus. Today, I'm going to focus on one of these core beliefs, especially since while it undergirds many of our other beliefs, it isn't talked about often and doesn't get much publicity: that belief is "no force in religion."

Our strong affirmation of no force in religion is clearly a product of our history. Prior to the Brethren movement, which started in

Germany in the early 1700's, was the Thirty Years War. This war, which was a back-and-forth battle that raged across much of central Europe from 1618-1648, resulted in an estimated eight million fatalities from the military engagements, plus the violence, famine, and plagues brought on by the military efforts.

The Thirty Years War was initially a war between various Protestant and Catholic states in the fragmented Holy Roman Empire, although it gradually developed into a more general conflict involving most of the European great powers. These states employed relatively large mercenary armies. The war was precipitated by the election of a new Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, who imposed religious uniformity on his domains, forcing Roman Catholicism on the peoples. The northern Protestant states, angered by the violation of their rights to choose—which had been granted in the Peace of Augsburg—banded together to form the Protestant Union. So as armies swept across Europe, whoever seized the land at the time would tell all the people living in those lands what religion they were to believe, and how they had to worship. One week you were Lutheran; the next Catholic, depending on which army went through. Ordinary people had no say... you were forced to be what they told you to be.

While that war had concluded 60 years prior to the Brethren beginning, the Brethren vowed that they would never contribute to such violence and devastation by affirming “no force in religion,” upholding freedom of conscience—in essence, affirming that each and every person had the right to choose for themselves and believe what they felt called to believe.

Of course, Brethren were not the only ones to feel this way, nor even the first. We are taught about William Penn's great experiment (or Holy Experiment), where those of his Pennsylvania colony were granted freedom to worship, that started around the same time. Also, many centuries prior, in the Qur'an, verse 256 of Al-Baqara includes the phrase “there is no compulsion in religion” and one of the predominant interpretations is “Do not force anyone to become Muslim, for Islam is plain and clear, and its proofs and evidence are plain and clear.” Other groups have claimed this belief as well.

Regardless, Brethren have been one of the few groups that both named this position, and have tried to stay true to it. In fact, one Brethren historian, Martin G. Brumbaugh--who later served as the governor of Pennsylvania--described no exercise of force in religion as "the fundamental first principle in Brethren doctrine."

For Brethren, no force in religion continues to mean such things as:

- opposition to compelling church membership and the related infant baptism--an infant cannot choose; to baptize is to force;
- opposition to compelling an individual to take an oath--the oath itself is contrary to the teaching of Jesus;
- opposition to war--as war is violent interference of the rights of others;
- opposition to state religions--rather, affirming one's freedom of conscience, and allegiance to God above allegiance to rulers;
- freedom of conviction--thus disavowing all religious persecution.

This principle has been lived out in Brethren life in external ways--like opposition to war, and respect for the beliefs of others--and in internal ways, such as when Brethren could not agree at Annual Conference. Historically, when we Brethren could not reach agreement, we would refuse to make a decision, not only because we steadfastly believed that the Spirit of Christ would continue to lead us into a better understanding, yet also because we wanted to avoid forcing one decision or another onto other brothers and sisters who might believe differently. We understood that voting by close margins does violence to those holding minority opinions... and, in humility, knew that throughout history, minority opinions have often borne out to be right, as in the case of the beginnings of our own church.

A great resource on this belief of No Force in Religion is the 1989 Annual Conference paper of the same title. The introduction to the paper includes these words:

"The history of the Church of the Brethren has been one that has continually reaffirmed the religious liberty of "no exercise of force in religion," but has also experienced tension with the state in living its own convictions. In its origin, the church was born in

an act of civil disobedience. The baptism of the eight at Schwarzenau in 1708 violated the law. Persecution followed. The sufferings of the early Brethren led them to migrate to the United States, drawn to the colony of William Penn by promise of religious freedom.”

That 1989 paper was focused on the external freedom of conscience. When freedom of conscience is exercised within the body of Christ, however, one word that captures the concept remarkably well is “forbearance” - meaning, to put up with another, to allow freedom of conscience and belief, even if different from what we may believe.

Forbearance is a Biblical concept, finding its NT basis in both:

- Ephesians 4, and
- Colossians 3:12-14 (which, incidentally, was the National Youth Conference theme of 2018).

As you can guess, forbearance is not a popular concept with many churches these days, especially those who want to prescribe a rigid sets of beliefs that one must adhere to in order to be accepted as part of the group... whether you call that a creed, a catechism, or fundamentalist principles. You know that Brethren have from the beginning avoided all such things, even to the point of being called a non-creedal church, for we affirm that we have no creed except the New Testament. We have no written set of beliefs that members must follow in order to be members... instead, we follow Jesus. And that is one of the unique parts of being Brethren.

Honestly, such lack of formal regulation makes living and sharing our faith harder... for there is no simple formula. We have to think and interpret and follow to get it right. It takes a lot more work, and is frustrating to any who want clear and simple answers, yet we value this because of its root in no force in religion, in forbearance. Our faith isn't easy... but it is worth the struggle and the investment. Those who founded the Brethren movement, with their sensitivity to no force in religion, highly prized forbearance. Alexander Mack Jr., the son of the founder of the Church of the Brethren and a church leader on his own right, was recorded as saying that he would much rather accept a brother with beliefs different than his own, than to force his beliefs onto them and break their relationship.

This is not just an historical position... we still lift up forbearance as an important part of our life together. A 2008 Annual Conference paper, "Urging Forbearance," written on the 300th anniversary of the Church of the Brethren, begins: "We find ourselves in a world where people are driven apart by deep differences. These divisions seep into the church, pitting us against one another in action and language. Yet God has entrusted us with a ministry of reconciliation." It continues:

"For more than a hundred years we have recognized that being open to the Holy Spirit sometimes requires us to accept differences in the body of Christ and to practice forbearance with one another. For example, to an 1883 query regarding footwashing, Annual Conference answered, "We desire very much to see a uniform practice in the church. But we see no way of accomplishing that object at the present time." As early as 1888, just a few years after the major Brethren split, a controversial item came to Conference and the delegates could not reach unanimity. So their final action was to take no action but to "strongly urge forbearance with each other" (Minutes, 1888, article 12).

"Forbearance does not jeopardize or denigrate individual conviction, but it does place boundaries on the quality and character of individual responses. Forbearance does not require one to accept what another believes, but it does require one to listen and try to understand what another believes without demeaning, personal attacks, or acting to disenfranchise the other person."

Simply put... forbearance is really good stuff... and something that our divided country, and divided world, needs to hear about.

Our 2017 Annual Conference, mindful of the divisions within the church, accepted a paper entitled, "Patient Hope in Matters of Conscience" reminding us once again "of our calling to, and history of, practicing forbearance with one another in the church when in faithful conscience we disagree."

Yet now the denomination is at crossroads, where many in the church are considering violating one of the most fundamental values of being Brethren. In the disagreements about whether gay and lesbian people are welcome in the church or not, those who are more conservative are trying to punish and/or push out those who would be open and affirming. The motion from the Atlantic Northeast District board coming to the District Conference on October 6 advocates stripping the ordination from those ministers who would officiate at a same-sex marriage. This proposal would take away a minister's status and legal standing, threaten their calling, and likely affect their livelihood... while also removing them from any district position, so that even their voices would be silenced.

What is proposed is an act of violence, of punitive force. As such, it is contrary to the Biblical mandate and our core belief of forbearance, our history of seeking the mind of Christ together, and the Annual Conference statements that I just mentioned. It is seeking to disenfranchise some in the church in direct violation of the 2008 Annual Conference paper. Truly, as the paper said, the ways of the world are seeping into the church.

Such a proposed action is also contrary to the spirit and intent of the denomination's new Compelling Vision process that was so central to this past Annual Conference, and for which extra time is being allotted during next year's Annual Conference. Delegates have voted to set aside all new business in 2019 in order to take extra time to helping shape this Compelling Vision, which it is hoped will be able to unite the church in a way that will move us forward into ministry and mission, together.

Honestly, as I reflect upon this attempt to forge a "Compelling Vision," I fear that we are too human, too stuck in our own views, too influenced by the world, too divided to find a middle ground of a compelling vision. And we're not wrestling with just two sides of belief, like a linear continuum, but with many sides and a multiplicity of concerns, more like a starfish with many arms. I fear that we'll never agree on everything, unless what we agree upon is such a low common denominator that it has no ability to generate energy and interest at all, much less to be compelling.

I pray that I am wrong about that. Yet one thing seems clear to me: if we have any chance at all to forge a compelling vision, one key ingredient that has to be present for us to hold together would be forbearance... being willing to allow others to hold differing beliefs than we do. Indeed, a vision of a church that practices forbearance is a compelling vision for me! And that is one of the reasons I am committed to the Church of the Brethren and its ideals.

After all, forbearance is what holds all our human relationships together: we don't always agree with our loved ones or colleagues, yet we allow them to like the foods they like, the hobbies they pursue, the movies they prefer, or any number of other beliefs and preferences, loving them all the same—indeed, sometimes loving them for it!

Forbearance is not just anything goes; there is still right and wrong. For instance, violence is wrong. True forbearance refers to taking into account earnestly held beliefs and values, even if different from my own. In our denominational context, if one can show from the New Testament—our rule for faith and practice—a cogent argument supporting one's conclusions, what forbearance sets aside is not the message of the Gospel, nor my convictions or your convictions. Rather, forbearance merely sets aside the insistence that my way is the only right way to interpret the Gospel message.

True forbearance is based out of a humility that recognizes that no matter how strongly I may believe, I may not be completely right, and may have room to grow. The lack of forbearance asserts that I have the whole truth, and not even God can show me where I am wrong... for if we had even a bit of humility, then we would have to recognize that the Spirit might chose to move in such a way as that others might be following the Spirit ahead of us.

That leads me to the question, "Can we make forbearance itself so compelling that it will unite us?" My answer is... I fear not. The influence of the world, this seeping in of worldly values, has twisted the church to such a degree that we no longer value the forbearance to which the Gospel calls us. In this day and age, in our society, what many are dead-set against is forbearance itself, the concept

of live and let live, of mutual respect. Our national discourse has all but eliminated mutual respect from what we value as a nation, and those who show respect for or try to cooperate with “the other side”—or across the aisle—are viewed as traitors. It is sad that this sin has infected the church as well.

Nevertheless, it is this concept of forbearance that I believe is one of the most powerful witnesses for us today, and a hope for the church and the world; whether in our church, in our nation, on our highways, or with our families and friends. If we cannot regain that sense of mutual respect, of humility to allow another point of view, of forbearing with one another with our foibles and in our differences (deep as they may be), then we cannot show the love of God to a hurting world. They won’t know that we are Christians by our love... they will see a church divided, that has lost its witness to the world.

After all, God sacrificed for us while we were yet sinners... God was willing to show forbearance to us, to love us, even when we were not on the straight and narrow. And I don’t know about you, but I know that even though I believe some things pretty strongly (that is obvious, no?), I also know that I still have things to learn as well, and that God’s ways are far higher than mine... so I’d better be pretty slow to judge others, because God is talking to them, too.

So treasure forbearance. Practice it. Set aside judgments, like Jesus asked, and walk with people wherever they are. Show everyone respect. Allow people to have differing opinions. Bear with them in love. As we do, our light will shine more brightly, our welcome will be more open, and our affirmations will become completely authentic. We’ll be more Brethren. And we just might find a compelling vision for our life together.

Amen.

Enten Vernard Eller was born and raised in La Verne, CA, graduated from Bridgewater College, served several years of community service for refusing to register for the draft, then earned a Master of Divinity degree from Bethany Theological Seminary. He has served in various capacities in ten or more districts of the Church of the Brethren, in addition to being the Director of Educational Technology at Bethany Theological Seminary for over eight years, before returning to pastoral ministry in 2013. Enten is known for his tri-vocational callings of ministry, technology, and peacemaking. He has a strong commitment to the Church of the Brethren and its teachings about taking faith seriously and following Jesus peacefully, simply, together.

This sermon, "The Fundamental First Principle in Brethren Doctrine," was written by Enten to share with the two congregations he currently serves as pastor; the Ambler Church of the Brethren (Ambler, PA, Atlantic Northeast District), and the Living Stream Church of the Brethren (the denomination's only online congregation, Pacific Northwest District). He preached this sermon during the worship service of each congregation on September 16, 2018.

You may watch the streamed recording of this sermon at <https://livestream.com/livingstreamcob/>.



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