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Menno Simons and Dirk Philips Speak

The New Birth

By WILLIAN E. KEENEY

LUTHER'S great insight regarding justification by faith was a recovery of an essential point in the Christian faith, and it played a central part in the Reformation. On this point the Anabaptists usually acknowledged their indebtedness to him. Their regret was that after he made this great discovery, he never seemed to explore its fullest implications and apply them radically both to personal living and the life of the Church. Indeed, it seemed to Menno Simons that Luther in later days regressed and inhibited further development by his own attitude toward others who went beyond him.¹

In the early days of his labors, Menno placed great stress upon the importance of the doctrine of justification by faith. In two of his earliest works, Menno dealt with the transformation that occurs through justification by faith, although he preferred what he probably considered to be the more Biblical concept of the new birth. This preference may also have reflected the needs for popular preaching as opposed to theological discussion. In 1536-37 Menno wrote a tract on "The Spiritual Resurrection" (Van de Geestelijke Verrijzenisse, ende nieuwe of Hemelsche Geboorte).² In this tract he identified spiritual birth and sanctification with the spiritual resurrection.³ Shortly thereafter he wrote another on "The New Birth" (Van de nieuwe Geboorte), which he revised and enlarged in 1550.⁴ Nevertheless, it remained for Dirk Philips to give a fuller and more systematic treatment of the topic. He included in his Enchiridion a tract with the title, "Regeneration and the New Creature" (Van der wedergeboorte ende nieuwe Creature).⁵ There was a separate edition of this tract earlier than 1564, but the date of its composition and first publication remains uncertain.⁶ He had also dealt with this concept in a confession of faith which was published in 1557 but which was probably a revision of a briefer confession which first appeared about 1544-45.⁷ This confession was included as the first part of the Enchiridion and places the new birth in the context of the major points of theology but in a much briefer form than in the tract.⁸

It appears that the new creatures in Christ, and the doctrines associated with it, were the real beginning points for both Menno Simons and Dirk Philips. This doctrine seems to be the predominant theme in Menno’s first writings. Although it cannot be established as clearly from the order in which Dirk’s writings appeared, the order in which he places his materials in the En-

chiridion would tend to confirm that this was true for him also. Thus it seems that their movement of thought and experience was from the individual experience of rebirth as the source of their theology toward its corporate expression in the church, which more and more came to be the organizing principle for their theology and practices. The implications of the salvation experience with regard to the corporate expression evolved out of personal experience and conflict, so that Dirk’s tract on the church, which appears to be late (1559-1564), is the only full-scale, systematic and separate treatment of the topic by either Menno or Dirk.⁹

Creation and Fall of Man

In order to understand fully the concept of the new creature, it is necessary to review Menno and Dirk’s concept of the creation and fall of man even though their treatment was largely traditional. Man was created by God with a dual nature. He was of the earth since he was made from dust. He was also endowed with a divine nature; that is, he was created in God’s "own image and likeness, as the holy Scripture testifies in many places, namely, that in the beginning God had created man unto eternal life, in the image and likeness of His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. . . ."¹⁰ Soon after this creation, however, man fell. The central issue was disobedience of man to God’s commandments. Although man received the knowledge of good and evil by the act of disobedience, man also lost his original purity and immortality. Menno and Dirk’s conception of original purity seems to resemble closely the loss of the theological virtues but is never so defined in explicit terms or limited to just the traditional three—faith, hope and love.¹¹

The fall resulted in the loss of the divine nature, although God made provision or promise for its restoration.¹² Menno and Dirk interpreted original sin to have a slightly different connotation from the traditional understanding, although they seemed at times to be somewhat inconsistent in their views. Dirk apparently recognized this inasmuch as he once referred to "original sin" and added in a parenthetical remark "as some call it." Indeed, S. Hoekstra and Karel Vos have claimed that Dirk denied original sin, apparently because Dirk spoke incautiously with respect to the consequences of original sin in children.¹³ If original sin implies a necessary guilt in all men from birth and a consequent condemnation by God until they are forgiven after

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repentance, Dirk did deny original sin. If, however, it implies a nature that is weak or corrupted so that it inevitably sins, Dirk would have accepted this definition. Unfortunately, Dirk did not have the careful distinction between the "inevitable" but not "necessary" act of sin on the part of natural man which Reinhold Niebuhr makes.14

Both Menno and Dirk assumed that there was some physical corruption in human nature as a result of the fall. They seem to assume that Eve was bitten by the serpent and this became the source of the pollution.15 Man's seed is henceforth impure, and the consequences of the fall are transmitted by heredity to all subsequent generations.16 This original sin is not counted as guilt in children, however. Both Menno and Dirk insisted that condemnation does not occur until one reaches the age of understanding and can make responsible moral and ethical decisions. After reaching the age of understanding, disobedience entails guilt and condemnation as it did for Adam and Eve. Menno apparently used scholastic terminology in trying to distinguish between "potential" and "actual" sin, the latter resulting in guilt when it is done with understanding.17 Dirk merely asserted that children were not held responsible until they had reached the age of understanding.18

There seems to be some inconsistency here inasmuch as Menno and Dirk make the sin a result of physical transmission, whereas sin is a spiritual reality. They seem to have some awareness of the problem when they strive to make the consequence of sin dependent upon action arising from understanding. Perhaps this is a result of using traditional scholastic theology to explain the moral and ethical demands which were closer to the position of the mystics such as the Brethren of the Common Life.

As man grows in understanding, he is able to distinguish good and evil, and eventually he sins because of his tendency to evil, and becomes personally responsible for his wrong actions. Thus, in addition to the universal fall of the prototypes, Adam and Eve, there is the particular fall of each individual.19 Because of his knowledge of good and evil, man is able to perceive the righteousness of God. Through the revelation in the Scriptures, he may also know that he is destined to another end. The promise of God since Adam, through Abraham and David, has been that man will have his original nature restored. However, because of the inheritance of a corrupt nature from Adam and Eve, man is unable to restore himself. In such a state, man needs redemption.

Redemption through Atonement

At this point one must turn to Jesus Christ, for He is central in the fulfillment of the promise of redemption and the restoration of the divine nature to man. While the problem of the incarnation is related, it is not of primary concern here. Of primary concern at this point is the atonement, since this has the greatest bearing upon the new birth.

Again, there seem to be two aspects to the atonement. The first is the problem of guilt which needs to be forgiven and which is symbolized by a debt which man owes to God. Out of this need came the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, which was central for the Reformation as a whole. Menno and Dirk also acknowledged that Jesus' death was a sacrifice and a ransom, and that remission of sins is through the blood of Christ. From man's point of view, such an atonement was necessary in order to appease the wrath of God and to conquer the power of Satan.20

It seems, however, that in the minds of Menno and Dirk the real dynamic for salvation was found in vicarious atonement. They stress the love of God which caused Jesus voluntarily to accept the unmerited death of the cross, and by His example to stir men to repentance and obedience to God.21 This emphasis upon the need to respond with obedience to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, instead of just teaching the acceptance of the grace offered in the atonement, brought the Anabaptists into conflict with the Lutherans especially and the Calvinists to a lesser degree.

The Conversion Process

1. Free Will

The preaching of the Word is the means for bringing the revelation of God's grace to bear upon man's need. As indicated, it has a double function: to stir man to repentance because of the wrath of God and to give man hope of forgiveness because of the love of God. The Dutch Anabaptists made a serious attempt to balance the proper action on the part of man and the necessary action of God. The Roman Catholic Church seemed to offer a magical sacramentalism in which nothing was required of the individual in the way of response. Furthermore, since the church was the dispenser of grace, man controlled the means of salvation. Through the sacrament of penance, this led to a popular form of "works righteousness" by which one could earn his salvation. Luther rediscovered the necessity of justification by faith and the corollary of the priesthood of believers. With this discovery he also accepted Augustinian predestination and shifted the entire process into God's hands. Calvin also accepted predestination. It is significant that he placed faith before repentance in the conversion process and seemed to divorce it from any voluntary moral response on the part of man.22 Yet his definition of repentance is very similar to what Menno or Dirk might propose. He defines it as follows:

Wherefore I conceive it may be justly defined to be "a true conversion of our life to God, proceeding from a sincere and serious fear of God, and consisting in the mortification of our flesh and of
the old man, and in the verification of the Spirit."  
Menno says,

But if you wish to be saved, by all means and first of all, your earthly, carnal, ungodly life must be reformed. For it is naught but true repentance that Scriptures teach and enjoin upon us. . . . We must be born from above, must be changed and renewed in our hearts and must be transplanted from the unrighteous and evil nature of Adam into the true and good nature of Christ, or we can never in all eternity be saved by any means, be they human or divine. 

While J. H. Wessel does acknowledge that Menno and Dirk have a deeper concept of sin than a doctrine of free will normally implies, he has pointed out the somewhat contradictory position which they adopted in attempting to deal with free will. Menno explicitly rejected Zwinglian predestination because he believed that it made God rather than man responsible for sin and evil. In other instances Menno implied freedom. He speaks of "all those who accept this proffered means of divine grace . . ."; or ". . . until of my own choice I declared war upon the world, the flesh and the devil . . ."; or "Remember the covenant of the Most High which you voluntarily desired and accepted being taught by the Word of God and led by the Holy Spirit." Dirk is less obvious in his assumption of free will, but it is there nevertheless.

It should perhaps be pointed out that Johannes Anastasius Veluanus, an important Dutch Reformer who was identified in most respects with the Zwinglian position, insisted that there is a little bit of free will left by which man can assist or hinder his salvation. God created this little free will in man and preserved it after the fall. Despite sin, it remains by the grace of God.

It may be that predestination was not as much of a problem for Menno and Dirk because they used a Dutch translation of Romans 8:20 where the term was found that circumvented the problem of time. Instead of saying that salvation was "predestined" or "fore-ordained," they merely said that it was "ordained" (geordeineert) of God. Menno did use a transliteration of the Latin, "Predestinatie." This was used in citing the position of those with whom he disagreed, however. It should also be noted that Melchior Hoffman came to accept a doctrine of free will in opposition to the Lutherans. One of his major works was an "Explanatio of the Captive and Free Will" (Verklaring van den genagene ende vrije wil). He based his position primarily on practical moral and ethical considerations rather than on rational, theological arguments. One may also find among the Swiss and South German Anabaptists attempts to express some measure of free will in opposition to what they considered to be Lutheran and Zwinglian deterministic predestination. Balthasar Hubmaier attempted to explain some degree of free will within the structure of Scholastic psychology. On the other hand, Hans Denk explained it in terms of neo-Platonic, mystical theology.

Menno and Dirk were somewhat contradictory when they attempted to recognize the paradox of a fully sovereign God and man created with sufficient freedom to remain morally and ethically responsible for his behavior and, therefore, of his destiny. They recognized some election but very clearly asserted that it was conditional and not "irresistible," to use a term that came into common use at a later period in Dutch history. The proffered grace is conditional, because it depends upon the belief and obedience of the individual.

Thus the Word may be used by the Holy Spirit to stir up a person to repentance. Upon repentance the believer is granted faith, which is "a powerful work of God and a gift of the Holy Spirit." Justification is by faith alone. This is repeated by Menno and Dirk with emphasis. They deny that any merits, whether of works, words, ceremonies, sacraments or signs are of any value for justification. However, faith is not just an intellectual process or belief in certain historical facts. Dirk and Luther have strikingly similar statements in which they point out that knowledge of the historical Jesus is not sufficient for salvation. Luther says, ". . . it is not enough nor is it Christian, to preach the works, life and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life. . . ." Dirk says, "But this confession is not an historical knowledge regarding Christ, as many think, but a quickening and powerful work of God in man, whereby he becomes transformed." The positive definition of faith which Dirk gives is close to Calvin's, except that it does not incorporate as neatly the symbolism of the Trinity. Dirk defines faith as ". . . a living hope, a sure confidence in God's grace, and it directs one toward the things that are not seen, that are eternal and heavenly." Calvin says, ". . . that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the Divine benevolence toward us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit." Thus, faith is dynamically conceived so that one who receives it must bear fruits.

2. The Ontological Effects of Justification

The experience of justification results in a new birth, in which the individual is now born out of the divine nature. This results in a metaphysical but real change that will affect the total personality. The spirit is born of the spirit as the flesh was born of the flesh. As man was born once of Adam and had a human nature that was carnal and sinful, earthly and corruptible, so now he receives another nature which was Adam's originally, but is now given through the second Adam, Jesus Christ. This is spiritual and divine, it is incorruptible.
and heavenly. The old was outward; the new is inward.46

Through no work of his own, man becomes a partaker of the divine nature. He is transplanted into God through the Holy Spirit.47 This does not mean that man is like God and Christ in true being and person. The creature cannot become the Creator. Man still retains the human nature with its weaknesses as long as he is of flesh and blood. But the divine nature which restores the divine virtues and grants eternal life is added. Menno and Dirk normally expressed this distinction very carefully so as to preclude any possibility of confusion with pantheism where man is absorbed into God. Man is born out of (uit) and from (van) God, so that man's divine nature can only be created or conferred. On the other hand, Christ and the Holy Spirit are begotten from (van) God so that their divinity is uncreated. Jesus Christ, who is from (van) God but born out of (uit) man, partook of human nature with its weaknesses and mortality, yet without sin. Man, on the other hand, is born anew out of (van) God and now partakes of the divine nature and becomes like Christ in holiness, purity, and eternal life.48

The new creature results from a metaphysical change in the nature of man. This is not merely a change in status before God, a forensic change. The transformation is a dynamic change that affects man's activities, that has results both in the spiritual nature of man and also produces fruits that are manifested physically in his moral and ethical behavior. If the transformation cannot be identified by other men, it is now ontological and is therefore meaningless. This new reality which results from a process of deification is called the new creature in Christ.

List of Abbreviations

BRN—Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica.
CWMS—The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561. (Scottsdale, 1956).
HB—Eucliridion Ofi Handboeckken ... by Dirk Philips.
Instit.—Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin.
Opera—Opera Omnia Theologiae by Menno Simons.

FOOTNOTES

1Note the shift in the reference to Luther in the Foundation Book, 1539. In the later edition Menno refers to Luther "through whose writings at the outset the Lord effected no little good ..." (CWMS, p. 126; Opera, p. 15A. Underlining mine.) Earlier he had referred to those who "had worked so mightily in the beginning ..." (Foundation Book, 1539, fol. 25 ro.) Compare also the criticism that Luther and others wrote correctly in the beginning, but do not follow their own advice, Opera, pp. 499; 468A; CWMS, pp. 550, 514.

2Opera, pp. 177A-184B; CWMS, pp. 51-62.
3Opera, p. 179B; CMWS, p. 54.
4Opera, pp. 121-133; CWMS, pp. 87-102.
6BRN X, p. 19, n. 2.
7BRN X, pp. 15 and 25 ff.
8BRN X, pp. 60-68; HB, pp. 9-18.

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Containing a comprehensive index of the past five years, this issue is a very useful guide to materials published in Mennonite Life from 1956 to 1960. This issue and the issue of January, 1956, constitute a complete index of Mennonite Life. For more copies of the January, 1956, or this issue, send 75 cents each to

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