

**Yielded to Christ or conformed to this world?
Postwar Mennonite responses to labour activism**

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20th-century Canadian and American Mennonites altered their image as a rule people as they move to the cities and established and found work in businesses, a process that accelerated after the second world war. Whereas in 1941, 87% of Canadian Mennonites worked, by 1971 that figure had dropped to 56% (Regehr 1996, appendix F). This rural to urban transformation necessitated a re-examination of Mennonite religious beliefs. While there is no explicit and uniquely Mennonite theology of work, Mennonite attitudes toward labor have been shaped by religious understandings of *Gelassenheit*, nonviolence, and agape. Shifts and emphasis among these three concepts reveal that in the last 50 years, Mennonites have confronted issues of social responsibility and questions of power in their theology, with accompanying shifts in their attitudes toward trade unions. The increased militancy of the labor movement of the 1970s brought these issues into sharp relief for Manitoba Mennonites in particular.

An overview of Mennonite writing on theology during the postwar period allows for some cautious generalizations. The shifts in emphasis among three theological themes—*Gelassenheit*, nonresistance, and agape love—will be examined, with the caveat that what follows is, of necessity, not a comprehensive analysis of Anabaptist–Mennonite theology. These three are only a few of the themes that exist within Mennonite theology, and they are chosen in part because they are particularly problematic for labor issues.

Gelassenheit often is translated from the German simply as yieldedness, though it stands for a much more elaborate philosophy of thought, involving not merely the submission to God of individuals as is commonly preached by evangelical Christians, but also submission of the individual to the faith community (Weaver 1993, 116). Agape is a form of love that emphasizes one's relationship with and obligation to one's neighbors. Nonviolence at first was defined as pacifism, but later came to be equated with nonviolent resistance. All three of these themes are connected closely to each other, and are interpreted in different ways by five central figures in 20th-century Mennonite theological understanding: Harold S. Bender, Guy F. Hershberger, J. Lawrence Burkholder, Gordon Kaufman, and John Howard Yoder.

The Second World War prompted a re-evaluation of the Mennonite stance on nonresistance. Disturbed by American Mennonites' limited engagement with pacifism in both world wars and their drift toward fundamentalist evangelicalism, Harold S. Bender, editor of *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and professor of history at Goshen College (Indiana), embarked on a modern-day 'recovery' of the essence of Anabaptism. Almost half of American Mennonite men drafted did not choose conscientious objector status: numbers in Canada were similar.¹ At the 1943 annual convention of the American Society of Church History, of which he was then president, Bender gave a speech titled 'The Anabaptist Vision.' In this address, he sought to remold the identity of North American Mennonites, emphasizing Anabaptists' contribution to broader values of modern society and thus the respectability of Mennonites (Biesecker-Mast 1995, 64).

Bender's speech was distributed widely by North American Mennonite church publishers in 1944. In addition, the content of the 'Vision' was promoted through the Herald Press Uniform Series, Sunday school materials used in many North American Mennonite churches, as many of the authors were former students of Harold Bender (Keim 1994, 253).

[It was] a discourse that would reshape the Mennonite historical imagination. For Mennonite scholarship and self-understanding, it was a Kairos moment, a moment of breakthrough. No other single event or piece of historical writing has filtered so deeply into Mennonite thinking. The phrase 'the Anabaptist Vision' became the identifying incantation of North American Mennonites like no other set of words. (Toews 1996, 84)

Bender attempted to infuse North American Mennonites with pride in their religious heritage, and identified the key features of Anabaptism as discipleship (patterning one's life after that of Christ), voluntarism (the independent adult decision for baptism and church membership, as well as nonconformity), and nonresistance (separation from the world).²

Bender's interpretation was a clear departure from the traditional Marxist understanding of the role of the 16th century Anabaptist movement in the resistance to the development of proto-capitalism. Friedrich Engels had declared that, during the German Peasants War, Anabaptists such as Thomas Müntzer were forerunners of a radicalized proletariat (Engels 1978 [1892], 684-5). Had Bender incorporated aspects of the Marxist interpretation and thus created a Mennonite mythic identity that emphasized the radical nature of early Anabaptism, the history of Mennonite engagement with 2nd century industrial capitalism may have been very different, particularly with respect to attitudes to unionization and workers' rights.

Instead, Bender's 'Anabaptist Vision' became normative not only for American Mennonites for two or three decades after the Second World War, but for Canadian as well. The involvement of many North American Mennonites in postwar relief and service activities in Europe was one means of proliferating Bender's interpretation in the Mennonite community. Almost 3000 North American Mennonites volunteered with Mennonite Central Committee from 1945 to 1960. On their return after their term of service, these volunteers were held in high esteem and their new understanding of what it meant to be a Mennonite would have spread in these communities.

By the 1980s, commitment to Anabaptism as defined by Bender was declining among Mennonites in Canada and the United States. Such were the findings of two surveys conducted in 1972 and 1989 of the beliefs and practices of members of the five major North American Mennonite denominations. Though the decline was more rapid in Canada, Canadian Mennonites remained more strongly committed to the Vision than were their American counterparts (Dueck 1995, 83). Historian Al Keim provides the context for this gradual decline in support for the 'Anabaptist Vision.'

He credits increased enrolment by Mennonites in post-secondary institutions, their shift from agricultural to industrial employment, and their urbanization and suburbanization (Keim 1994, 254). The exposure to a larger and more diverse world challenged some of the more simplistic assumptions that commitment to Bender's interpretation necessitated. An awareness that it was no longer possible to maintain geographic isolation meant that Mennonites had to confront the question of how and when compromise of religious beliefs was required by the increased complexity of their world.

Guy F. Hershberger, a Mennonite peace theologian and professor of history at Goshen College (Indiana), was the first to address seriously the question of Mennonite involvement in the industrial workforce. Writing in the 1940s and 1950s, he promoted a concept of nonviolence that strongly emphasized its connection to agape and *Gelassenheit*. Described as the 'chief interpreter' of nonresistance at mid-century, Hershberger defined nonresistance as the rejection of the use of force in any form (John R Burkholder 1990). Participation in war, involvement in Gandhian protests, membership in labour unions and exploitative business practices were all, he declared, violation of the 'greater ethic of love and nonresistance found in the Bible' (Harder 2001, 84). He asserted that there was "no difference in principle between so-called nonviolent coercion and actual violence" (Hershberger 1939, 147). The economic world, Hershberger claimed, was where justice and love came into "sharper focus in their mutual relationship." It was in that world that Christians were in greatest danger of "losing the way of the cross," which he defined as "seeking to do justice and standing ready to suffer injustice rather than to violate the higher law of love" (Hershberger 1958, 213, 215). He believed that "Mennonite businessmen should create islands where ideal relations could exist between boss and worker without struggles for power." While he conceded that in the modern world, workers "would never get justice without some use of power and coercion," he insisted that nonviolence necessitated submission to injustice if the alternative was involvement in conflict (Schlabach 1976, 30). For Hershberger, *Gelassenheit* entailed yielding one's right to justice, refusing to force compliance with one's demands, because to do so would violate agape love for the neighbor. Hershberger's passive, rural, isolationist views became increasingly impractical in the postwar urban world in which North American Mennonites found themselves.

In the late 1950s, Goshen College theology professor (and later Goshen president) J. Lawrence Burkholder challenged what he viewed as the subordination of agape to the principle of nonviolence in the Hershberger tradition. "Love itself demands responsible participation in a society for it is in the social realm that the Christian meets the neighbor," he declared (1989, 25). Burkholder argued that Christians were called to a life of nonviolent confrontation with power rather than a meek submission to it (1976, 134).

The danger of making nonresistance into an absolute is that it leads logically to a lifestyle that is so withdrawn from the conflicts of the world that the real cross is seldom encountered.... The cross of Christ is one that is imposed by the world upon those who confront the world and try to change it. (1976, 136)

Such confrontation and efforts at transformation necessitated compromise between agape and nonviolence – two principles which Burkholder viewed as oppositional. Decisions regarding the nature of this compromise were to be made by the faith community as a whole.

[O]nly through compromise can love be objectified socially, however imperfectly.... To place compromise on a continuum of ambiguity as the subject matter for ethics is a function of the ‘discerning community.’ Where to draw the line is the issue. Different times, different circumstances, different identities obviously will bring different answers. (1993, 48-9)

Burkholder had been strongly influenced by his experiences as a service worker of the complexities of suffering and injustice faced by refugees in postwar Europe. His views were dismissed by the Mennonite academic and religious communities at the time, fearing, as they did, that the emphasis on compromise would “reduc[e] the high cost of discipleship as the believer too easily concedes to the ethics of empire” (Holland 1993, iii). Consequently, his 1958 Princeton Theological Seminary doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church*, was not published until 31 years later.

In his dissertation, Burkholder argued that Mennonites historically had equated nonresistance, Gelassenheit, and agape. The essence of Anabaptism had been obedience to “the commands of Christ and the ‘law of love’” (1989, 41). The commands of Christ included acceptance of “the loss of all things for Christ including one’s own historical existence, if need be.... This is a kind of complete submission to God and the neighbor which the Anabaptists called Gelassenheit” (1989, 60). Love came to be “almost synonymous” with nonresistance for Anabaptists and Mennonites (1989, 61). In fact, Burkholder asserted, nonresistance was “applied agape.” The commitment to nonresistance was not merely the result of obedience to the commands of Christ but stemmed from “the life of faith and gratitude.” Nonresistance was “freedom to love, having been loved by Christ” (1989, 64).

The equation of nonresistance, Gelassenheit, and agape resulted in the exclusion of questions of justice and power from Mennonite understandings, Burkholder declared. Love for the neighbor was an inadequate principle for life in the modern world, as it did not address what to do in the face of competing claims of neighbors. Thus compromise on the part of Christians was necessary as they were beset by “multiple demands [which] required one to choose between equally valid but contradictory obligations” (1989, iv). Compromise would become possible when Mennonites came to terms with their complicity in worldly power struggles.

“Traditionally the Mennonite position has assumed that Christians can live without the exercise of power – that is, power in the form of compulsion and force.... But certainly business organizations, educational institutions, and even highly organized mutual aid societies cannot operate by the pure principles of the ‘love feast’” (1989, 223).

Mennonites must seek their traditional goals of brotherhood, peace and mutuality under the conditions of compromise. Mennonites must realize that they are a part of the world system and that they share the guilt and responsibility for corporate evil and that their attempts to be obedient to Christ and ‘be’ the true church must take into consideration the ‘ambiguities’ of their actual situation. This realistic approach will prevent perfectionistic illusions and despair. (1989, 223).

Burkholder advocated the replacement of normative nonresistance by “nonviolent resistance as an approximation of the absolute idea.” Nonviolent resistance would grant Mennonites the theological freedom to work for justice in the world.

The argument of Burkholder’s doctoral dissertation was paralleled in the 1950s and 1960s by *Concern*, a small group of American Mennonite graduate students, missionaries, and relief workers who met in Amsterdam in 1952 to discuss issues facing the Mennonite church in Europe. Like Burkholder, the members of *Concern* were shaped by their contacts with European war refugees. Over the next 20 years, the group held retreats and published pamphlets at irregular intervals on the relationship of faith, church, and society. Gordon Kaufman was a *Concern* member whose writing, while not as extensive as that of Burkholder, shared Burkholder’s perspective.

In the sixth *Concern* pamphlet, published in 1958, Kaufman contributed an essay titled “Nonresistance and Responsibility.” He argued that social responsibility is the necessary outcome of Christian (agape) love. “Love means accepting the neighbor where he is ‘in hope that the neighbor may be transformed and the situation may be redeemed’” (1990). Despite initial resistance to their perspective, scholars like Burkholder and Kaufman raised the question of Christian social responsibility as a direct challenge to the traditional two-kingdom worldview of Mennonites. In part, their perspective was shaped by the supposed disconnect they perceived between the proponents of the ‘Anabaptist Vision’ and the content of the ‘Vision’ itself. Bender, Hershberger and their supporters;

claimed that, despite obvious shortcomings, American Mennonitism maintained continuity with the original vision while *Concern* saw discontinuity, compromise, social accommodation, materialism, institutional rigidities, apathy, and excessive and manipulative power by a few well-known leaders. The second generation said in effect to the first generation, You led us to the trough (‘Anabaptist Vision’), but you won’t let us drink. (J. Lawrence Burkholder 1990)

Kaufman revisited the question of social responsibility almost 25 years later with his opposition to what he terms the ‘authoritarian orientation’ of Mennonites.

“Mennonites have believed that there is an absolute authority which can and does provide sufficient guidance for every situation and condition into which a human might fall” (Kaufman 1982, 166). These authorities were tradition and the Bible. The difficulty was that such authorities no longer remained “unquestioned and obviously relevant” (Kaufman 1982, 168). Kaufman’s proposed solution was to jettison authoritarianism. Mennonite “notions of love and self-sacrifice, reconciliation and community, devotion and service to God” should be held not simply because they were Biblical but because they were true.

[T]rue, that is, to what human nature actually is, true to the human condition, a true understanding of human problems.... When we recognize that our decisions will have to be based on our own insight and understanding, that we cannot depend for final answers on authorities who simply give them to us, but must take responsibility for ourselves and our judgments and our decisions, we will move to a new level of maturity. (Kaufman 1982, 170)

Christian social responsibility required an abandonment of the isolationism that required simplistic belief. Grappling with broader social questions from a Christian perspective necessitated not an appeal to authority but the discernment of a community of faith (Kaufman 1982, 174).

Critics of this perspective were concerned that it was not the community of faith but the secular world that was in fact the locus of discernment. Burkholder was critiqued for his assumption that the abandonment of passivity necessitated by agape concern for the neighbor required “some level of involvement and compromise with the institutions and structures of modern society” (Weaver 1993, 78). Historian J. Denny Weaver declared that Burkholder’s was a “neo-Constantinian outlook” in that it subjugated religious beliefs to the demands of government and economy, even as the emperor Constantine had turned religion into a tool of the state. Such a view was anathema to a faith community that came into existence in part because of a belief that 16th century Protestantism had not separated church and state clearly enough. The problem, Weaver explained, was that Burkholder’s position assumed that

Christian social responsibility happens primarily through societal and governmental structures as agents. It assumes that greatest effectiveness occurs through the eventual use of the government’s means, namely violence and war, with the criteria for success and relevancy also supplied and defined by those structures. (1993, 78)

Weaver’s critique of Burkholder was shaped by the perspective of John Howard Yoder, professor of theology at Goshen College (Indiana) and later at Notre Dame. Yoder’s writing had become highly influential among Canadian and American Mennonites in the interim between the writing and publication of Burkholder’s dissertation. Though also a member of *Concern*, Yoder’s position differed from those of Burkholder and Kaufman. While these latter believed that it was the responsibility of Christians to work within the system for its transformation, Yoder

“focuse[d] on helping Christians understand external structures and institutions so they [would] not be seduced by them” (Harder 2001, 86). Yoder dismissed the classic argument that the Bible addressed personal ethics rather than the power of social structures. He argued that the Christian was called, like Christ, to reject the assumption that it was a moral duty to exercise social responsibility through these structures and institutions (Yoder 1972, 100). Thus he rejected the belief of evangelical Christians that the way to change society was through individual conversion, “changing the heart” of those in power or electing Christians to office. Yoder argued instead that “the primary social structure through which the gospel works to change other structures is that of the Christian community” (1972, 157).³

Yoder viewed the opposition of agape and nonresistance established by theologians like Burkholder as artificial. The call to nonresistance of Matthew 5 and the call to obey authority of Romans 13 were not contradictory. The incorrect assumption that they were, he declared, led people “to say that the pacifist is one who gives precedence to the personal realm over social obligation, preferring Jesus or Paul or eschatology to responsibility” (1972, 213). Rather, both passages taught Christians to be nonviolent “in all their relationships, including the social.” Christians were called to “respect and be subject to the historical process in which the sword continues to be wielded and to bring about a kind of order under fire, but not to perceive in the wielding of the sword their own reconciling ministry” (1972, 214). Those who wished to downplay nonviolence for the sake of social responsibility were deceived in their egoism. Christians were those who, like Christ, renounced the claim to govern history (1972, 241). They were to “represent in an unwilling world the Order to come” (1972, 97). Despite his argument that it was not the job of the Christian to redeem the world, Yoder was not calling simply for a return to the separatist ethic of Hersherberger. Historian Paul Toews concludes that Yoder “offered Mennonites a middle ground” between social marginality and co-option by “the approved, established order” (Toews 1996, 335-6).

By the end of the 20th century, therefore, Mennonite theologians were still debating the competing claims of nonviolence and agape love. Nonetheless, a shift in Mennonite theological thinking is discernible in the postwar period. From a position that emphasized *Gelassenheit*, submission to the faith community and the rejection of all forms of force, Mennonites moved to one that stressed agape as social responsibility and made an effort to distinguish between violence and power. Reflecting this shift, ‘nonviolence’ began to replace the term ‘nonresistance.’ Mennonites’ reconsideration of their religious beliefs was prompted in part by the perceived crisis of their postwar entry into the urban industrial world, as well as by the war itself. The transformation of North American Mennonites’ social reality and the shift in their theology were reflected in changes in their church conferences’ position with respect to union involvement.

The Mennonite Church passed a resolution against union membership as early as 1937 (Peachey 1980, 105). Several Bible passages were cited in support. Isaiah 9:6 and Matthew 26:6-63 suggested that the highest authority for Christians was God – not the union oath of membership. Matthew 5:38-45 and John 18:36 declared that Christians should not press demands for justice or seek to establish the kingdom of God on earth. Biblical references to nonresistance (Rom. 12:17-21, 2 Cor. 10:4, Eph 4:31-2, James 5:6) were used to argue that the coercive nature of strikes and the adversarialism of collective bargaining were incompatible with Christian values.

The resolution made reference as well the most often cited Bible passage used by Mennonites to defend their position against organized labor. Christians should not join unions because of the apostle Paul's admonition not to be "unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (in the phraseology of the King James Version).

Do not be mismatched with unbelievers, for what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (2 Cor. 6:14-6, NRSV)

This same passage was used by the bishops of the Mennonite Church Lancaster Conference in September 1941 as the rationale for their opposition to union membership (Peachey 1980, 107). The 1937 Mennonite Church resolution concluded that church members could not join a union. In an effort to be balanced, church members who were also employers were informed that they "should by fairness and liberality seek to forestall labor dissatisfaction among their employees." Somewhat unrealistically, it was noted that the church itself should, "in anything that savors of class strife," maintain impartiality, "not favoring the unscriptural practices of either capital or labor."

The Brethren in Christ Church and the Mennonite Church approved a statement regarding industrial relations in June 1941 (Peachey 1980, 102-3, 105-6). Class conflict was condemned as a power struggle emanating from "an absence of the Christian principle of love." The statement echoed Guy Hershberger's advocacy of passive meekness declaring that "Biblical nonresistance enjoins submission even to injustice rather than to engage in conflict." As a consequence, Christian employees could not be involved in unions because of the threat of force implied in "the monopolistic closed shop, the boycott, the picket line and the strike." At the same time, Christian employers were not to join manufacturers associations if they existed to counteract the labour movement through use of "the lockout, the blacklist, detective agencies, espionage, strike-breakers and munitions." Mennonite employees were to be assisted in negotiating their exemption from union membership through the creation of a Committee on Industrial Relations.⁴

Ten years later, a study conference of the Mennonite Church acknowledged that members were not adhering consistently to the 1941 statement (Peachey 1980, 106-7). Mennonites needed to produce educational literature that would instruct them on the types of employment contracts that were compatible with their religious beliefs. It was reiterated that Christians could not be union members. The inconsistency with which the 1941 statement was being followed was “weakening the position of the church on the entire question of nonresistance and the recognition we seek to obtain for that position....” Shortly thereafter, the Mennonite Church accepted this reality and softened its position. The Committee on Economic and Social Relations (formerly the Committee on Industrial Relations) acknowledged in 1954 that unions “serve a useful purpose for the maintenance of justice and a balance of power in a sub-Christian society.” Mennonites were free to “cooperate with the union (as... with the state) in so far as doing so does not conflict with... Christian testimony” (Redekop 1989).

Other Mennonite groups followed suit. The Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, opposed union membership in September 1953 (Peachy 1980, 104). In August 1967, the denomination left union membership to the individual as “a matter of conscience.” Employment in union shops was permitted if the equivalent in dues could be paid to charity and if Mennonite employees refrained from voting on certain union issues (presumably strike votes). Similarly, the Mennonite Brethren Church decided in August 1969 not to forbid union membership (Peachey 1980, 104-5). Mennonites were warned, however, that they should not engage in union-related violence or intimidation. The prejudice against unions had not completely disappeared: the original motion had included the phrase “nor should we judge or condemn those who are members of unions.” This wording was removed when the motion was amended.

The various church conference statements reveal that Mennonites were moving slowly from a position on labour unions influenced by their commitment to nonviolence and *Gelassenheit* to a position shaped by their understandings of *agape*. Historian Ted Regehr argues that within Canadian Mennonite workplaces in the immediate postwar period, a clear pattern of deference to authority existed. He asserts that Mennonite employers were:

the bosses, rewarding employees according to what they believed was fair and equitable, much as the head of a farm family expected every member to contribute to the success of the farm and then to be rewarded as the head of the household saw fit. Employees were expected to think first and foremost of the business and, beyond that, to trust the goodwill and generosity of their employer. (1996, 158)

The willingness of Mennonites to accept managerial authority, even as they accepted the authority of their fathers, husbands, and church leaders, made them model employees from an employer’s perspective (Vogt 1997, 13). This deference resulted from the Mennonite stance of *Gelassenheit*;

humility, meekness and conformity to the community translated into submission in the workplace. Coupled with the belief that Christians should not make use of the courts or other legal institutions to settle dispute, it is not surprising that Mennonite workers were hesitant to assert themselves.

Gelassenheit had implications for Mennonite business owners as well as their workers. Owners attempted to compensate for their powerful status by avoiding conspicuous consumption and choosing to live in ethnic residential neighborhoods. For example, according to Art DeFehr, president of Palliser Furniture, the DeFehr family made a “deliberate choice” to remain within the Mennonite community and “subject themselves to its judgment.”⁵ They chose to live and shop within North Kildonan, a Winnipeg suburb with a large concentration of Mennonites, rather than “fleeing to Tuxedo,” a wealthier Winnipeg suburb (Art DeFehr, personal communication Winnipeg MB, 2 September 1997). DeFehr’s sister, Irene Loewen, explained that their parents exercised personal financial restraint in order not to offend the Mennonite community to which they belonged.

My father, when they had the means, loved to give luxuries to mother. But she didn’t want them, she didn’t feel comfortable with them. In the States when she was living there, she had learned to use make-up, she went to movies, even tried dancing. When she moved to North Kildonan she dropped all of it except her intellectual interests in order to fit in with the rest of the women. When dad wanted to buy her a fur stole she refused, feeling she would stand apart from the other women of the church. When she finally did get a fur coat it wasn’t the luxury type that dad wanted to buy her. (Enns 1982, 148-9)

Such personal decisions on the part of Mennonite business owners probably helped stem critique of their corporate behavior.⁶

The political and economic situation in Canada in the 1970s brought the tensions between Gelassenheit and agape, meek acquiescence versus active commitment to social justice, to a head. Inflation, unemployment and wage controls were met by a growing militancy on the part of Canadian workers. Strikes reached a record high in 1975 and 1976. In Manitoba, the New Democratic Party, under the leadership of Edward Schreyer, was elected to govern for the first time in 1969. The Manitoba Labour Relations Act was revised in 1972, granting more favourable terms to workers regarding compulsory union dues check-off, unfair labour practices, and union certification (McAllister 1984, 108; Manitoba Labour Relations Act 2004; Sprague 1990, 311). Among Manitoba Mennonites, the strengthened labour movement of the 1970s was a concern.

A number of Mennonites during this period sought exemption from union membership at their workplace. Their situation prompted the intervention of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Manitoba. MCC Manitoba chair Peter Peters and Peace and Social Concerns Committee members Diedrich Gerbrandt and Harold Jantz met with Russell Paulley, Minister of

Labour, on December 17, 1974. They asked him to “guarantee the rights of persons who are conscientiously opposed to membership in labour unions.” Section 68(3) of the Manitoba Labour Relations Act provided employees working under collective agreements to remit their dues to a charity rather than the union, provided that they had religiously based conscientious objections to joining and paying dues to a union.⁷ MCC asserted that the Manitoba Labour Board had been “turning down all applications for exemption [under this section]. Among the eight or so cases heard by the board during the past months have been three Mennonites.”⁸ Paulley followed up with a letter in January 1975, observing that the delegation’s concern was with the Labour Board’s interpretation of Section 68(3) and not with the legislation itself. He advised them to address their concerns directly to the Labour Board itself.⁹

One of the Mennonite workers who sought exemption under Section 68(3) was Henry Funk, a baker. He was fired from his job at McGavin Toastmaster in Winnipeg for his refusal to join the union as per the collective agreement. He applied to the Manitoba Labour Board in 1975, requesting exemption. As a Mennonite Brethren, Funk declared he objected to “the violent tactics of unions” and to taking an oath of membership. His application was dismissed as the relevant section was not applicable to his circumstances. Funk had been hired in violation of the collective agreement, which had a clause requiring new employees only be hired after signing an application to join the union.

Even in the absence of this clause, the chair of the Manitoba Labour Board, Murdoch MacKay, observed that Funk’s application would not have been successful. The Mennonite Brethren Church had no official stance against unions at that time and so Funk’s opposition to joining one was founded upon personal rather than religious beliefs.

[Mr. Funk] did not testify that his Church ever directly forbade him to join a union. He felt that the tone of the sermons were against unions but there was never any direct reference to them.... [His minister’s] testimony was that the Church did not have a rule against joining a Union nor was it treated as a sin. [The minister] thought most minister of his Church would suggest that unionism was contrary to their beliefs but would not specifically preach against unions....¹⁰

McKay concluded that

The Mennonite Church has some rules, [tenets] or sanctions, the breach of which are clearly contrary to church law. Joining a union falls short of a breach of their churches’ laws and is only detrimental if the conscience of the adherent feels that way.

Though objecting to the coercion of unions, Funk was not opposed to the coercion of the courts, as he took his case to the Manitoba Court of Appeals, which rules in his favour in 1976.¹¹

Henry Funk described his experience at a meeting of the Mennonite Health Assembly (CMHA) on April 23-25, 1975. The group met in Winnipeg to discuss the role of labour unions in Mennonite-operated hospitals and personal care homes.¹² The assembly raised \$700 to fund Funk's appeal, believing his court case "could well set a precedent in our position to organized labor." Two Mennonite nurses discussed their experience with the Manitoba Nurses Association and a representative of a Mennonite nursing home outlined "his board's position in the event that a union organized his staff."¹³ John Redekop, professor of political science at the University of Waterloo, delivered a lecture on labour-management relations from a biblical perspective. "The session concluded with the recommendation that MCC and CMHA should work together to make our constituency more aware of the labor laws of the areas in which we live, and how we could best respond to them."¹⁴

MCC Manitoba held its annual meeting in Winnipeg on November 22, 1975. The meeting was attended by 327 church delegates and 250 guests. Peace and Social Concerns committee member Harold Jantz requested that Mennonite church examine the question of whether church members should join unions and suggested that churches offer assistance to conscientious objectors to unions.¹⁵ His presentation "sparked a discussion which indicated that Mennonites have differences of opinion on the degree to which they should become involved in secular structures, such as unions, courts, and political parties." Jantz advocated the use of the courts and proposed writing to government as methods whereby Mennonites could seek exemption from union membership. Jake Neufeld, Altona postmaster and president of his union local, stated that he had "refused to call the 17 members to a strike." June Buhr, a Mennonite employed at the Winkler hospital, explained why Mennonite nurses objected to unions.¹⁶ Strikes left patients without care. A Mennonite's allegiance was to God and Christ, not the union. Further, the Bible taught people "to be content with their wages, and not to 'render evil for evil or to exercise vengeance'." Not everyone at the meeting agreed with the wholesale criticism of unions, however. "Comments from the floor also cautioned employers not to take advantage of employees and a suggestion was made that the churches should speak to the matter of underpaying employees also." The assembly passed a resolution that MCC Peace and Social Concerns be given a mandate to "be a resource and to represent individuals and groups who request assistance" on the issue of labour relations.

MCC Manitoba responded by organizing three seminars on labour-management relations in Steinbach, Winkler and Winnipeg on January 27, 28, 29 1976. More than 200 people attended, including representatives from Loewen Windows and Triple E (a Mennonite-owned manufacturer of recreational vehicles in Winkler MB) and the Mennonite owner of Kitchen Gallery (a cabinet manufacturer in Winnipeg MB).¹⁷ The pastor of Steinbach's Grace Mennonite Church explained to the local newspaper that the motivation for the seminar in part was

“the unhappiness of the postal strike” of 1975. The question of Mennonite participation in organized labour had been caused by their postwar movement to the cities. “While we didn’t want to become part of the labor unions because there’s something about the power strategy that we didn’t like, urbanization has simply demanded involvement.”¹⁸ The seminars were advertised in church bulletins throughout Manitoba:

With the present unhappy spirit in relations of labor and management toward one another, many Christians are increasingly asking themselves what their response ought to be. These seminars will attempt to give some answers, from a biblical understanding, of the kind of relationships which acknowledge the Lordship of Christ and bring about reconciliation.¹⁹

The perspective to be presented was clearly anti-union. MCC’s Harold Jantz declared that “there is no reason why we have to buy the adversary concept.”²⁰ The intention of the organizers was to invite as speakers individuals working in “a business or industry where they do not have a union but rather some alternative means of relating to management.”²¹ Instead, the speakers were political science professor John Redekop and Gerald Vandezande of the Christian Labour Association of Canada.²²

Redekop described Canadian labour-management relations in the 1970s as being “in a very sorry state” (Redekop 1976). The responsibility for this situation lay with workers consumed with materialist desire for whom “quitting time [is] the only highlight of the working day.” Professionals, whom Redekop placed in a separate (and superior) category, also suffered from this “lack of purpose.” Workers of all sorts were preoccupied with the false notion that “society owes me a constantly improving living standard.” The labour movement was criticized for its militancy and disrespect of signed contracts and the law.

While the average taxpayer who strays from the straight and narrow path of the law quickly finds himself subjected to law enforcement, governments at all levels nowadays wait for days and weeks while strikers who are blatantly flouting explicit back-to-work directives deliberate at their own good pace whether or not they will obey the law. Almost invariably governments stand idly by, waiting patiently. This seed of dereliction can bear only bitter fruit.²³

After proffering this negative assessment of labour, Redekop continued with a critique of both Christian employers and employees. Among Christians, “[c]lass antagonism, selfish individualism, unchristian capitalism, sloth, insensitivity, economic blackmail, exploitation, and the propensity to see employees as commodities rather than people are much too common.” He declared that Mennonites did wrong to ignore the Biblical command not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-16) – a verse often cited as justification in Mennonite church conference statements against union membership. Nonetheless some of his other comments suggested that Mennonites should try to transform unions from the inside.

As employees have we tried to influence union policy? Do we attend meetings? Do we speak up and spell out our principles? Do we stand for elective office? Or do we merely draw back and complain?

At the same time, workers were encouraged to see things from “management’s point of view.” Employers were also challenged.

Do we honestly try to see issues from the other side of the table? As employers do we indulge in hatred and innuendo provided these are directed against unions? Do we ever seriously look for positive dimensions of unionism?

Redekop concluded with an outline of a Biblical view of labour. Work was part of the order of creation, part of a meaningful life, and service to God. Again his comments were somewhat contradictory. He repeated his reference to 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, observing that a Christian “weights very carefully the entire matter of being yoked together with materialistic pagans.” And yet he declared that since love rather than nonresistance was a Biblical imperative, then both management and labour

as a last resort, have the right to use power, short of physical violence or psychological destruction, to press their claim for justice as they see it. Management can go so far as to dissolve the enterprise and let some other firm fill the void and under certain circumstances school boards, hospital boards, city councils, and private bosses have the right to lock out slothful employees. Labour can go so far as to strike but employees have no right to prevent others from accepting the employment conditions which they have rejected. In this manner both sides can exercise freedom of choice for themselves but they have no right to force their decisions on others.

On balance, for all his qualifications and evasions, Redekop’s presentation was anti-union.

Gerald Vandezande was even more direct in his condemnation of unions. He distributed a list of objections to unions by the Christian Labour Association of Canada. These objections included their “acceptance of coercion and force,” the practice of closed shops, membership oaths, and adversarial relations with management.²⁴ A further objection was to the Manitoba Labour Board’s rulings regarding Section 68(3):

The demand for a formal church rule against union membership, as the Labour Board has demanded, fails to recognize the nature of the church as a voluntary association... [and] fails to recognize as well that the exercise of conscience is precisely the practice of taking a general teaching of the church and applying it to a particular situation.

The document concluded that Christians should not have to become “economic martyrs” by quitting jobs that required them to join a union, though they should be willing to do so. John Redekop expressed similar sentiments, asserting that “some might have to change vocations or deny faith and ethics.”²⁵ Both Redekop and Vandezande promoted the CLAC, arguing that

too many unions “demand allegiance above God” and that the CLAC advocated “reconciliation” rather than adversarialism.

In addition to the CLAC handout, a number of other documents were made available to the audience at the seminars. These included copies of Section 68(3) of the Manitoba Labour Relations Act and the similar Section 39(1) of the Ontario Labour Relations Act, as well as the 1969 Mennonite Brethren Church statement on labour unions and the “Reasons for Decision” in the case of Henry Funk’s application under Section 68(3) to the Manitoba Labour Board. The membership oaths for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canadian Union of Postal Workers and the Bakery and Confectionery Workers’ International Union of America were distributed. A copy of a letter from Egon Frech, special assistant to Manitoba Premier Edward Schreyer, in reply to Gerald Vandezande’s questions on Section 68(3) was also presented. The letter read, in part:

It was the original intent of the Manitoba Government to exempt no one from such payments [of union dues], on the strength of the arguments advanced in favour of the Rand Formula. In other words, it was felt that anyone who benefits financially from the activities of a union should also be compelled to contribute financially to that organization. However, during a review of the proposed legislation by a Legislative Committee, it was brought to the attention of the Legislature that members of a particular religious sect, the Plymouth Brethren, believed that a certain master-servant relationship exists between employers and employees, and that members of this sect who held these specific beliefs would in fact sooner quit their jobs than to pay dues to a union, because by paying such dues they felt they were sinning against the Commandments of God. The Legislature had no wish to deprive anyone of employment because of his or her religious beliefs, and thus included the amendment exempting such persons from the requirement to contribute financially to trade unions. As you can appreciate from the above explanation, the amendment was designed to make allowances for specific religious – i.e., ecclesiastical – beliefs, and not to exempt everyone who is morally opposed to unions.²⁶

Two decades later and a province away, the debate about unions was revisited. The actions of teachers against the Ontario government in the 1990s prompted publication of a series of articles on Mennonites, unions, and strikes in the Winter 1998 issue of the *Conrad Grebel Review*. John R. Sutherland and Susan Van Weelden, professors of management and business, outlined four criteria to determine if a strike was morally justified. Striking was legitimate only if the matter in dispute was gravely unjust, if all other means of dispute resolution were exhausted, if “innocent bystanders” would not be hurt, and if the “legitimate moral rights of others [would not] be violated” (Sutherland and Van Weelden 1998, 19). Ontario Mennonite and school trustee Ted Martin responded that such criteria required unjustly condemning as “morally wrong” the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike and the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. By ignoring lockouts by employers, transfers of production to other facilities, employer strike-provocation, and

strike-breaking, the author revealed their anti-union bias, he declared. Furthermore, collaboration, mediation and other alternative dispute resolution methods “often increase the power of the strong to take advantage of the weak.” In the face of an inequitable economic system, unions needed the right to strike (Martin 1998, 24, 29-30).

Further debate was conducted in the pages of the journal of Mennonite Economic Development Associates. Editor Wally Kroeker acknowledged that organized labour continued to be a contentious issue for Mennonites.

If you want to bring a furrow to a Mennonite businessperson’s brow, say the word ‘union’.... Most businesspeople contacted by this magazine became emotional when discussing unions. Some became agitated. Criticism ranged from the coercive (even violent) tactics employed by some unions to complaints of alleged union featherbedding and other means employed to obstruct ‘progress.’ One successful entrepreneur who sees employment creation as part of his social contribution as a Christian in business says his view of “expanding employment” would change if he were required to work in the antagonistic environment that often comes with unionization. Only a scant few businesspeople had favorable things to say about unions. (Kroeker 2000)

Articles in the issue included a paean to the CLAC, the personal story of a Mennonite member of the Teamsters Union and an account of a successful organizing drive at a Mennonite-owned business. The story of a Mennonite-owned business where an organizing drive had failed was not included, even though one had been solicited. An individual who had consented to be interviewed requested the information not be used for fear of its use in a possible future attempt to organize.

Thus while Mennonites continue to question the wisdom of union membership, outright rejection of unions no longer goes unchallenged. Union membership was rejected in part because the threat of strike action was considered an exercise of force on the part of labour. Management use of force, through the control of labour conditions and terms of employment and the ability to terminate employees, rarely has been critiqued in the same manner (Vogt 1983, 65; Regehr 1996, 158). As postwar Mennonites were exposed to the challenges of service work overseas and urban life at home in North America, the Burkholdian understanding of social responsibility took hold among Mennonites and their opposition to union membership began to wane, particularly among more educated urban Mennonites of higher socio-economic status. Surveys conducted in the late 1980s found 54 percent of Canadian and American Mennonites favoured joining unions (Driedger 2000, 45). Nonetheless, the percentage of Mennonites who are members of labour unions had not changed significantly – 5 percent in 1972, 6 percent in 1989 (Kauffman and Driedger 1991, 92, 207-8; Kauffman and Harder 1975, 146).²⁷

An understanding of the changing interpretations of *Gelassenheit*, *agape*, and nonviolence can provide insight into the Mennonite workplace. *Gelassenheit* promoted worker deference while at the same time curbing excesses on the part of employers. The decreased emphasis on *Gelassenheit* among Mennonites, together with new understandings of *agape* and nonviolence in light of Burkholder's critique, may or may not have been translated into class consciousness on the part of Mennonite workers. Investigation of these issues over time in a variety of Mennonite workplaces is required and a number of questions must be asked. How have Mennonites reconciled their religious beliefs with the capitalist system in which they are immersed? In what ways and at what times have Mennonite employers and employees used their common Mennonite ethos to shape workplace conflict? Have class distinctions transformed the unity of Mennonite communities over time? How have Mennonites (re)created their identity in the face of the competing claims of class, ethnicity and religion? While some of these questions have been touched on by sociologist Calvin Redekop's studies of North American Mennonite employers, questions of class, particularly from the perspective of employees, have been ignored. What is needed are micro-histories of Mennonite-owned businesses and Mennonite workforces that acknowledge the dialectic between Mennonite religious belief and the Mennonite labour experience.²⁸ It is only recently that Mennonites in Canada and the United States have shown a willingness to confront problems of power and authority in their theology. Now is the time to make use of these writing to examine these same issues in Mennonite labour history.

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¹ Canadian statistics are difficult to obtain, in part because federal records regarding alternative service have been destroyed. The 1941 Canada census records 16,913 Mennonite men between the ages of 15 and 35. Historian Frank Epp searched records of Canadian military personnel and discovered 4,453 Mennonite names. The Mennonite Heritage Centre archives in Winnipeg records that, of the 10,851 Canadian conscientious objectors in the Second World War, 7,543 were Mennonites. See the website "Alternative service in the Second World War: Farm service" at <http://www.alternativeservice.ca/service/farm>.

² See the 1975 challenge to the Bender view presented by James M. Stayer, Werner Packull, "From monogenesis to polygenesis: The historical discussion of Anabaptist origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49: 83-121.

³ Yoder's views find a new incarnation today in the writing of Duke University ethics professor Stanley Hauerwas. See for example *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

⁴ The Committee on Industrial Relations was known after 1951 as the Committee on Economic and Social Relations. In 1965, it was merged with the Peace Problems Committee to become the Committee on Peace and Social Concerns of the Mennonite Church. Mennonite Central Committee formed its own Peace and Social Concerns Committee in 1964. *Canadian Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, "The Way of Christian Love in Race Relations (Mennonite Church, 1955): a CMEQ source document," 1999, <http://www.mhsc.ca/encyclopedia/contents/W39.html> (July 20, 2004).

⁵ Palliser Furniture was founded by Russian Mennonite immigrant A.A. DeFehr in 1944. Until the privatization of Manitoba Telecom Systems in 1997, Palliser was the largest private employer in Manitoba. It is currently the second largest employer in the province, with over 3,000 workers.

⁶ For further examples of the influence of *Gelassenheit* on the behaviour of Mennonite employers at two other Manitoba Mennonite-owned companies, see Janis Thiessen, "Friesens Corporation: Printers in Mennonite Manitoba, 1951-1995," MA thesis, Universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba, 1997, and Rachel Mills, "Gender, ethnicity, and religion in the context of entrepreneurship: The Loewen lumber businessmen of Steinbach, Manitoba, 1877-1985," MA thesis, Universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba, 2003.

⁷ This section has been replaced by section 76(3), which specifies that the employee must be “a member of a religious group which has as one of its articles of faith the belief that members of the group are precluded from being members of, and financially supporting, any union or professional association” and that the employee “has a personal belief in those articles of faith” (Manitoba Labour and Immigration 2004).

⁸ MCC Canada press release, January 10, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1975-80),” Vol. 3650, Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg MB (hereafter MHC).

⁹ Letter from A.R. Paulley, Minister of Labour, to Peter Peters, MCC Manitoba, January 27, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1975-80),” Vol. 3650, MHC.

¹⁰ “Reasons for Decision” re the application by Henry Funk to the Manitoba Labour Board under Section 68(3) of the Labour Relations Act, with McGavin Toastmaster Ltd. as employer-respondent and Bakery and Confectionery Workers’ International Union Local 389 as bargaining agent and agreement holder, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1974-80),” Folder 6, Vol. 3636, MHC>

¹¹ Manitoba Court of Appeals, Henry Funk v. Manitoba Labour Board, January 5, 1976, “MCC Manitoba (1975-80),” Vol. 3650, MHC; “Labor board decision overturned,” Steinbach *Carillon* (January 7, 1976): 1:1.

¹² Letter from H. Klassen, Donwood Manor, to Mennonite Churches of Manitoba, March 19, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1975-80),” Vol. 3650, MHC. The Canadian Mennonite Health Assembly was formed as the Canadian Association of Mennonite Hospitals and Homes in 1966. It changed names in 1973. Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, “Canadian Mennonite Health Assembly,” August 16, 2003, <http://www.mbconf.ca/mbstudies/holdings/other/cmha.en.html> (July 20, 2004).

¹³ While the proceedings do not detail either the nurses’ experience or the board’s position, it is clear that they were not pro-union.

¹⁴ Proceedings from the 1975 Conference of the Canadian Mennonite Health Assembly held at Donwood Manor, Winnipeg MB, April 23-25, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1975-80),” Volume 3650, MHC.

¹⁵ “Mennonites struggle with union membership issue,” Steinbach *Carillon* (November 26, 1975): 2:1.

¹⁶ Nine Mennonite nurses at this hospital had refused to join the union and requested assistance from MCC. Memo from Arthur Driedger, executive director of Peace and Social Concerns Committee, MCC Manitoba, to committee members, June 13, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1975-80),” Vol. 3650, MHC.

¹⁷ “MCC Manitoba (1974-80),” Folder 6, Vol. 3636, MHC..

¹⁸ “Labor, management, meeting at Steinbach,” Steinbach *Carillon* (January 21, 1976): 1:1.

¹⁹ Labour-Management Relations seminar advertisement, “MCC Manitoba (1974-80),” Folder 6, Volume 3636, MHC.

²⁰ “Labor, management, meeting at Steinbach,” Steinbach *Carillon* (January 21, 1976): 1:1.

²¹ Letter from Arthur Driedger, executive director of Peace and Social Concerns Committee, Mennonite Central Committee Manitoba, to Gerald Vandezande, former head of the Christian Labour Association of Canada, December 22, 1975, “MCC Manitoba (1974-80),” Folder 6, Vol. 3636, MHC.

²² The Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC) was formed in 1952 as an alternative to traditional labour unions. The CLAC objects to the “adversarial nature” of traditional unions and is opposed to the closed shop. The CLAC is not affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress.

Christian Labour Association of Canada, "CLAC Tour," 2004, http://www.clac.ca/Flash_Tour.asp (July 20, 2004).

²³ Redekop noted, "There are, of course, also some positive trends but since they are not controversial we will omit listing them. IT is the negative ones that cause the problems."

²⁴ "Item 7: What are our concerns?," MCC Manitoba (1974-80)," Vol. 3636, MHC.

²⁵ "Labor-seminar speaker: 'Christians may have to pay high price'," Steinbach *Carillon* (February 4, 1976): 1:1; Redekop 1976.

²⁶ Letter from Egon Frech, special assistant to Premier Edward Schreyer, to Gerald Vendezande, executive director, CJL Foundation, September 16, 1974, "MCC Manitoba (1974-80)," Volume 3636, MHC.

²⁷ One possible explanation for the consistently low union membership of Mennonites may be their increased employment in non-unionized professions. In 1972, 21 percent of Mennonites employed in North America worked as professional, managers, or business owners; by 1989, this number had risen to 37 percent (Kauffman and Driedger 1991, 38). The 1989 survey data published by Kauffman and Driedger provide the most recent statistics that are available.

²⁸ My doctoral dissertation is a comparative study of the Mennonite workforce at three such businesses. See Janis Thiessen, "Faith and factory: Russian Mennonite workers in Twenty-century Manitoba," PhD diss., University of New Brunswick, 2006.