

**The Fight Against the Present Darkness:
The Mennonite Reaction to the Vietnam War**
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At the close of the letter to the Ephesians, the quarreling Christian churches of Asia were encouraged with the following, concluding remarks,

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.²⁵¹

Like the recipients of this letter who faced internal divide within their community, the American Mennonites living in the mid-twentieth century were faced with an outbreak of religious schisms within the Anabaptist community due to the war being waged by the United States in Vietnam. However, like the early Christians of Asia, these Mennonites were called to “fight” against the “present darkness” of the Vietnam War through peaceful, Christ-like means. Historically speaking, the Mennonites had intentionally separated themselves from the “secular” world in order to maintain their religious purity. However, throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, war and social unrest forced American Mennonites to leave their quiet communities and become increasingly involved in promoting social justice in the secular sphere.

The central question facing the Mennonite community during the Vietnam War era is one that has perplexed Christian

²⁵¹ Eph. 6:10–13 [Revised Standard Version]

thinkers for centuries: what does the imitation of Christ look like? A good number of Mennonites realized that being a proper follower of Christ involved helping others through some form of missionary work. Nevertheless, this view of proper Christian conduct began to change during the conflict in Vietnam. Many Mennonites were content with simply serving in the alternative service programs set up by the government for conscientious objectors. However, some Mennonites felt that if they were to remain faithful to Christ's teachings, they would have to reject cooperation with the government entirely, and instead opt for a form of protest that could potentially cost them their freedom. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the Mennonite community was forced to reevaluate their non-violent, anti-political viewpoints.

Basic Anabaptist History and Theology

Mennonites can trace their origins back to the Anabaptists of the early-sixteenth century. Initially, the Anabaptists strongly resisted secular power and promoted non-violence in the name of Christ. After several years of persecution and terrible leadership within the community, Anabaptism began to fall apart.²⁵² However in 1536, a former Catholic priest from the Netherlands named Menno Simons revived Anabaptism by taking a leadership role within this greatly-weakened religious society. Under his guidance, the importance of non-violent resistance and separation from

²⁵² Specifically, the disaster in the German city of Münster from 1534–35. Under the corrupt leadership of Jan Matthys and Jan of Leiden, Münster was forcefully seized by the Anabaptists. After Lutheran and Catholic forces reclaimed the city, nearly all the Anabaptist men, women and children involved in the city's take-over were slaughtered.

secular society once again became the focal point for the Anabaptists. According to Menno Simons, Protestants and Catholics had created a false dichotomy between faith and good works. In contrast, Menno Simons believed that when one accepts the divinity of Christ and the salvation he brings to humankind, not only will his/her heart and mind be changed, but also his/her overt actions will bear witness to that inward change. Unlike his predecessors, however, Menno Simons stressed that in order to remain righteous before God a proper Christian community must spiritually cut itself off completely from the secular world, that is, to be in the world but not of it. Menno Simons's followers—the Mennonites—took this last point to heart and for the next four hundred years, Mennonites all over the globe became *Die Stillen im Lande* (German for “the quiet of the land”).²⁵³

In terms of Christology and theology, Mennonites and other Protestants can find common ground. However, Mennonites can be distinguished from other groups of Christians on two points: their position on violence and cooperation with political power. Although Mennonites have never had a cohesive, ecclesiastical canon, most believe that the Schleithem Articles, a small epistle drawn up by a former monk named Michael Sattler at a conference in 1527, provides some basic beliefs held by most Anabaptists.²⁵⁴ On the issues

²⁵³ De Lamar Jensen, *Reformation Europe: Age of Reform and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 117–18; Robert Lee and Nancy V. Lee, ed. *Making Sense of the Journey: The Geography of Our Faith—Mennonite Stories Integrating Faith and Life and the World of Thought* (Telford: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), 2.

²⁵⁴ Jensen, *Reformation*, 110.

of violence and the state, the Schleithem Articles plainly state that a follower of Christ should oppose these two things at all cost. In the sixth article, the violent measures issue is raised:

Now, many who do not recognize what Christ wills for us will ask whether a Christian may also use the sword against evil people for the sake of protecting the good or for the sake of love. Our unanimous answer is as follows: Christ teaches us to learn from him that we should be mild and of humble heart, and in this way we will find rest for our souls.²⁵⁵

The Mennonites and other Anabaptists maintain that although Jesus had opportunity and reason to use violence against those who threatened his life, he practiced the radical notion of loving one's neighbor and "turning the other cheek" even if it meant losing his own life. Finally, Sattler sums up the Christian community's relationship with the state and the entire secular world:

[I]t is not fitting for a Christian to be a magistrate for these reasons: the authorities' governance is according to the flesh, but the Christian's is according to the spirit. ...Their citizenship is of this world, but the Christian's is in heaven. Their weapons of conflict and war are carnal and only directed against the flesh, but the Christian's weapons are spiritual and directed against the fortifications of the devil. Worldly people are armed with spikes and iron, but Christians are armed

²⁵⁵ Michael Sattler, "The Schleithem Articles: The Brotherly Agreement of Some Children of God Concerning Seven Articles" in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. and trans. Michael G. Baylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 177.

with the armor of God—with truth, with justice, with peace, faith, and salvation, and with the word of God.²⁵⁶ Proper Christians, according to Anabaptists, should deliberately distance themselves from anything that is of this world, including all forms of worldly politics.

The contemporary historian Robert Friedmann refers to this deliberate dichotomy between followers of Christ and the rest of the world as “kingdom theology.” In Anabaptist thought, kingdom theology is “a promise not of a ‘yonder’ after death, but of a present possibility.”²⁵⁷ However, in order for kingdom theology to work, a “Christian [must withdraw] to his island, that is, to what he considers a partly realized kingdom of God, where there is no more hatred and violence but only brotherly sharing and peaceful togetherness.”²⁵⁸ For centuries, this culture of quiet separation from the rest of the world became the norm of life for Mennonite communities everywhere. Although the Mennonites (unlike the Amish) remained at least physically part of the secular world, their lives revolved around their religious community. For Mennonites living the United States, all of this changed with the advent of world wars in the twentieth century, and the forced conscription into the army that came along with these dangerous conflicts.

World War I and the End of Isolation

The American Mennonites’ quiet separation from the rest of society came to an abrupt end with the forced conscription of all able-bodied men during World War I. As the historian Gerlof D. Homan notes, many Mennonites did not

²⁵⁶ Sattler, *The Schleithem Articles*, 178.

²⁵⁷ Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998), 41.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

understand the implications of “modern, total war;” they did not foresee how quickly a world war would “[break] down their semi-isolation and semi-separation.”²⁵⁹ When Mennonite men resisted conscription on religious grounds, they were sent to camps for non-combatants for the duration of the war. However, these non-combatants endured a great deal of abuse from those who operated the camps; as a result, in desperation, some Mennonites did become combatants.²⁶⁰

Because of their experience during World War I, Mennonites after the war began to actively push for exemption from any further military combat. By the time the Vietnam War began, special arrangements had already been set up between the United States government and members of “historic peace churches” on the issue of military conscription. After passing the Selective Service Act of 1940, conscientious objectors (or COs) could either take a non-combatant role in the military (like chaplain or medic) or participate in civilian work for two years. More specifically, Mennonites could work as a volunteer through the church or participate in the I-W or I-W program, which refers to the classification given to members of historic peace churches. According to the Selective Service Act, participants in the I-W program were paid to contribute “to the maintenance of the national health, safety, or interest.” Participants often worked in hospitals, took care of the

²⁵⁹ Gerlof D. Homan, *American Mennonites and the Great War 1914-1918* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1994), 45.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 166-67; James C. Juhnke, “World War I,” *The Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, Vol. 5, A-Z, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1990), 938-40.

physically and mentally challenged, or took part in some sort of relief organization.²⁶¹

The Horrors of War and Christian Service

Mennonites became more engaged with a dangerous world outside of their religious community. After enduring decades of French imperialism, the Vietminh party led by Ho Chi Minh began to fight for the independence of Vietnam. Fearing the influence of these communist revolutionaries in the northern half of the country, the United States became enmeshed in a complex situation in Southeast Asia as part of the cold war, and was increasingly involved in what will be called the Vietnam War. As the historian John Prados points out, the war in Vietnam would prove to be disastrous: millions of people lost their lives and those who survived suffered physiological and psychological damage in the aftermath of the war. Additionally, the U.S. army eventually began to force the Vietnamese people out of their homes and whole villages were destroyed as a result.²⁶²

²⁶¹Homan, *American Mennonites*, 166; Melissa Miller and Phil M. Shenk, *The Path of Most Resistance: Stories of Mennonite Conscientious Objectors Who Did Not Cooperate With the Vietnam War Draft* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1982), 13; Jesse Glick, "Functions of the I-W Program," *Gospel Herald*, June 7, 1966; "Conscientious Objectors and the Draft," *Gospel Herald*, June 7, 1966.

²⁶² Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey—Volume II: Since 1865*, 12th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2007), 834–834, 841; John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), xii, 29.

The Mennonites were not unaware of the miserable conditions in Vietnam; as mentioned above, the Mennonites had become active members in the volatile, secular world they once avoided. In order to help fellow Anabaptists in the Ukraine After the First World War, American and Canadian Mennonites created the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). Since this time, the MCC became active in various forms of missionary and relief work all over the world. The MCC officially began their relief work in Vietnam on August 16, 1954, following the Geneva Conference. The MCC and Mennonites who focused primarily on missionary work sought to express not only the “word” but also the “deed” there. Although the MCC strongly opposed any affiliation with the U.S. or South Vietnamese government, both the United States and Ngo Dinh Diem approved of MCC’s involvement in the region.²⁶³

When MCC began its relief work in Vietnam, it focused on four major tasks: providing material aid, medical services, improved agricultural services, and student services. Like many organizations at the time, the MCC put more of their energy into immediate aid to Vietnamese refugees; they “distributed beef, clothes, Christmas bundles, soap and school supplies—

²⁶³ Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 29, 225; Larry Kehler, “What is MCC Doing?,” *Gospel Herald* 59, no. 4 (January 25, 1966): 76; Luke S. Martin, “An Evaluation of a Generation of Mennonite Mission, Service and Peacemaking in Vietnam 1954–1976,” July 1977, A Vietnam Study Project commissioned by the Mennonite Central Committee, MCC Peace Section and the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, Mennonite Library and Archives at Bethel College, North Newton, 3.

U.S. surplus rice, beans, butter, cheese, shortening and cooking oil.” Eventually, the MCC eventually felt that long-term aid would be more beneficial to the Vietnamese and to that end it put less emphasis upon emergency items. In terms of medical aid, the MCC set up various clinics across the region, and was instrumental in treating leprosy. Agricultural aid, however, was not fully implemented: the Vietnamese resisted setting up villages where Westerners could help them improve their agricultural techniques. Finally, the MCC was naturally driven to spread the Gospel. Christian schools were set up for Vietnamese children where they were taught English and Christian values. The schools were abandoned by the MCC in 1959 when the MCC realized the ineffectiveness of the program.²⁶⁴

As the years went by and aggression between the United States and the Vietcong intensified, missionary and relief work became increasingly difficult. As the violence escalated, so did the suffering of the Vietnamese people. While participating in relief work in Vietnam in 1966, Mennonite missionaries Atlee and Winifred Beechy noted the increasing despair in the region in their book *Vietnam: Who Cares?* “The tragedy of Vietnam hangs over the world like a persistent fever or a hacking cough which will not go away.”²⁶⁵ In fact, the Beechys’ small book *Vietnam: Who Cares?* often reads as a litany of horrors. Aside from often lacking the bare necessities, dislocated Vietnamese refugees suffered from tuberculosis, and most of them could simply not remain healthy due to a terrible diet. Another major problem facing the Vietnamese was the break-up of the family.

²⁶⁴ Martin, “An Evaluation of a Generation,” 9–13.

²⁶⁵ Beechy and Beechy, *Vietnam: Who Cares?* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1968), 9.

Because all able-bodied men were drafted into the army, women were left to fend for themselves and their children resulting in hunger and prostitution. Mothers often gave up their children to orphanages in the hope that these facilities could provide them with food and shelter. In addition to all of these problems, Vietnamese refugees lived in a constant state of fear. Without a stable support system, including the family, the Vietnamese lived wretched lives.²⁶⁶

Getting the Word Out—The Church's Initial Response

After information about the situation in Vietnam came back to Mennonites living in the United States, the Mennonite community could not remain silent; it had to respond. The nature of that response, however, continued to be a major problem for the Mennonites throughout the duration of the war. Most Mennonites could agree that their ultimate goal was “one of witness and reconciliation—witness to the love that is in Christ, calling all men to be reconciled to God and to their fellowman.”²⁶⁷ However, in order to achieve this goal, the Mennonite community as a whole needed to feel free to discuss the Vietnam conflict within their own congregations. In the article “What Can Be Done?,” E. Stanley and Paul Peachey argue that a Mennonite congregation should come to a consensus on how to witness to the state. The authors of this article suggest that the congregation write “letters to public officials, ads in the local paper, [offer] a speakers’ bureau service, panels, TV and radio phone-in programs...[basically] anything that sponsors free discussion.” While this might have been a vital

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 68–70, 99.

²⁶⁷ R.B., “Voice from Viet Nam,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, February 18, 1965.

step for the Mennonite community, it certainly did not address another serious issue – conscription.²⁶⁸

Alternative Service?

Most Mennonites had no problem complying with the Selective Service Act of 1940. In fact, quite a few saw alternative service as something worthy of pride and honor. According to historian Perry Bush, Mennonites considered the I-W program and other forms of alternative service to be a source of “positive service;” that is, the young Mennonite men who served in these programs helped correct social ills. In light of what soldiers had to endure, these young Mennonites could “easily afford two or three years of voluntary service without real economic hardship.” According to Dr. Richard Keeler, Mennonite men should be thankful for the grace that the U.S. government had shown the Mennonite church. In earlier wars, the U.S. government did not treat COs with kindness.²⁶⁹

A good number of Mennonites remained skeptical about the motivation behind a Mennonite’s desire to opt for alternative service. In an article entitled “‘Viet Nam’: Questions, Not Answers,” Mennonite commentator Vincent Harding asks, “Why should we be free from sacrifices when soldiers are sacrificing their lives for an essentially evil cause and civilians are being consumed daily in the conflagration?” Later in the

²⁶⁸ Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 173; Bohn and Peachy, “What Can Be Done?”, *Gospel Herald*, January 25, 1966.

²⁶⁹ Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 231; Richard F. Keeler, M.D., “Privilege and Responsibility: Why Choose Voluntary Service?” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, May 30, 1968.

article, Harding continues questioning alternative service by asking:

Is our I-W program a clear enough witness against the war? Is it adequate when it involves only our young men; is it enough when it simply sends them to jobs that are often easy, well-paying, and of such a nature as to free other men for armed service? Should any others of us give up two years of our regular activities—or for at least as long as the war lasts?²⁷⁰

In many ways, alternative service gave COs an “opt out;” many of them could serve the States by working as relief workers in unstable countries like Vietnam without risking their lives. Some Mennonites maintained that following Christ had to involve self-sacrifice and suffering. Furthermore, as admirable as it was to serve in an American hospital, such service did not improve the conditions of the Vietnamese people.

Rejecting the System Entirely—Draft Dodgers and Peace Protesters

On August 18, 1969, in Turner, Oregon, a conference was held to discuss the position of Mennonites who simply refused to be drafted into combat or alternative service. The delegates at this conference drafted the “Mennonite Church 1969 Statement on Draft Resistance;” in this statement, the members of the conference clearly outlined their views on cooperation with the government:

A small but growing number of Mennonite young people find the present arrangement with the United States government totally unacceptable. The Vietnam

²⁷⁰ Vincent Harding, “Is There No Other Way?—Viet Nam: Questions, Not Answers,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, September 30, 1965.

War and the continued military conscription have prompted us to examine our individual and church relationships with the Selective Service System. By cooperating with this agency we, in effect, are sanctioning its actions.²⁷¹

Many Mennonites of the younger generation felt that by choosing alternative services, one was compromising with the state and essentially acknowledging the authority of non-Christian, political power. "Positive service" was simply not enough; and a Christian in their eyes must openly protest the actions of the state that created the war in the first place.

As a result of their resistance against the draft, many young, Mennonite men became the target of the federal government. In their refusal to join the military or to participate in some acceptable form of alternative service, these young men broke the law. Intimidation from the government and the natural fear of being imprisoned became main concerns. In their book, *The Path of Most Resistance*, Melissa Miller and Phil M. Shank tell the story of Duane Shank, a man who sent a letter at the age of eighteen to the federal government stating his refusal to register. Not long after that letter was mailed, FBI agents were sent to Eastern Mennonite College, the school Shank was attending at the time, in order to pressure Shank to register with the Selective Service. Eventually, Shank was arrested and put through months of hearings and trials until he was sentenced to three years of community service in southern Virginia. Some Mennonite men were not as lucky as Shank; Dennis Koehn, who attended Bethel College at the time of his

²⁷¹ Found in Melissa Miller and Phil M. Shank, *The Path of Most Resistance*, 233.

arrest in 1970, was sentenced to “an indefinite length of time [in prison that would] not exceed six years.”²⁷²

These radical Mennonites received condemnation from an unlikely source: other Mennonites in their own community. As Miller and Shenk point out in their book, many older Mennonites firmly believed that young Mennonites had been led astray by the beatnik/hippie counterculture movement. In order to illustrate the older generation’s resistance to the younger generation’s more radical agenda, Miller and Shenk recall the story of Doug Baker who helped write the proposal in favor of accepting draft resistance for the Mennonite Church general conference in Turner, Oregon. Interestingly enough, the proposal put forth by the younger Mennonites was opposed by many members of the conference not because of the proposal itself but because of the people who supported it. According to Miller and Shenk:

It soon became clear to the resisters that the way they were dressed was becoming one of major topics of the Turner conference. People would repeatedly say they were concerned about the “hippie” style of dress because it might hinder the resisters’ Christian witness. But it was obvious that people just did not like “hippie” clothing, witness or no witness....[Additionally,] rumors were circulating about the resisters’ personal lifestyles.²⁷³

Older Mennonites were uncomfortable with the fact that these young resisters bore a physical resemblance to a subgroup of people who promoted drug use, “free love,” and the deconstruction of long-held moral norms. In addition to this

²⁷² Ibid., 21, 27–28, 39, 81.

²⁷³ Miller and Shenk, *The Path of Most Resistance*, 49.

concern, older Mennonites believed that the young draft-dodgers were posing a threat to the compromise between the Mennonite church and the government. If these draft-dodgers resisted participation in alternative service, the government could deny Mennonite men the chance to register in the I-W program. Older Mennonites were appalled by the draft dodgers' willingness to disturb the peaceful separation between the Mennonite community and the state.²⁷⁴

Closely related to the issue of draft-dodging was the controversy over peace protests. As in the case of dodging the draft, certain Mennonites criticized the younger generation for falling prey to the "spirit of the age." In a 1965 editorial in the *Mennonite Weekly Review*, the nameless author states:

[M]any a discerning observer would say they [the young people] are choosing the wrong spokesman. If they want a serious hearing, it would be greatly to their benefit if they had as their leaders respectable, balanced and persuasive young men or women rather than the beatnik-type characters who in so many cases have been making the most noise.²⁷⁵

Many Mennonites worried that the younger generation under the influence of non-religious peace protests going on across the country would become clueless rebels. Once again, the older generation of Mennonites feared the influence of the secular counterculture.

This conflict over peace protests came to a head in November, 1966. In light of the upcoming celebration of Veterans' Day, the Peace Club at the Bethel College in North

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 229.

²⁷⁵ "Our Concerned Students," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, July 8, 1965.

Newton, Kansas, planned a march through the town of Newton. The aim of the march was to peacefully protest the disastrous results of the war and the number people killed as a result of the conflict. Bethel College officially called off the protest because of the sudden public outcry against the march. Nevertheless, a small group of Bethel students led their own protest known as the “Repentance Walk” through North Newton. This smaller protest gained the attention of all the media outlets.²⁷⁶

One of the major complaints against Bethel’s Peace Club march focused on how to distinguish Mennonite war protests from “secular” war protests. A day before the Veterans’ Day peace protest was to be held, the *Mennonite Weekly Review* ran an editorial called “What Will Be the Effects On The College” written by a concerned member of the Mennonite community. The writer of the editorial expressed concern over the kind of message the protest would send to the entire community—Mennonite and non-Mennonite:

An editorial in the college student publication, *The Bethel Collegian* [has] raised two vital questions, “What good will the march do?” and “What will be the march’s effects on Bethel College?”...The method of communicating is important, but much more serious is what we communicate and whether one communicates or witnesses at all.²⁷⁷

²⁷⁶ “Yes or No?,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, November 24, 1966; “Bethel Peace Club Lists Positive Results of Repentance Walk,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, December 1, 1966.

²⁷⁷ “What Will Be The Effects On the College?,” *Mennonite Weekly Review*, November 10, 1966.

To the community, a Mennonite protest should not just express a discontent with the Vietnam War; it should also contribute to a solution. The writer of this editorial feared that a witness to the Peace Club's protest would not see the Christian inspiration behind the activists' disdain for the war.

After the small demonstration on November 11 in North Newton, the Steering Committee at Bethel College responded to the editorial mentioned above in a reader response in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* on December 1. As far as the committee was concerned, the peace protest successfully communicated the concerns of the Mennonite Peace Club:

Since November 11 we [the Bethel College Peace Club] have had opportunity (*sic*) to meet informally with some Newton non-Mennonite church members, including veterans, to discuss our concerns about the war.

These discussions have been rational and amicable; we are planning for more of the same. We believe the genuine confrontation of issues which takes place in such discussions would not have been possible without the Repentance Walk.²⁷⁸

By putting on a very public demonstration against the Vietnam War, the Mennonites at Bethel College grabbed the curiosity of non-Mennonites in the community. The Mennonites in the Repentance Walk welcomed debate about the war, and thus broadcasted to non-Mennonites the Christian worldview held by their religious denomination. According to the article, several young supporters of the war sought out the demonstrators eight days later in order to antagonize the Mennonites. However, the Mennonites at Bethel were able to sit

²⁷⁸ "Bethel Peace Club," *Mennonite Weekly Review*, December 1, 1966.

down and talk with fourteen of the young men, and eventually these men came to respect the views of the Mennonite demonstrators.²⁷⁹

Not every member of the older generation of Mennonites objected to public peace protests. Guy F. Hershberger, a highly-respected Mennonite of the older generation, argued in the article "Protest Against Evil" that shocking protests were not foreign to the holy men of the Bible. According to Hershberger, Jesus expressed his rage towards the moneylenders in the temple by turned over their tables. Nevertheless, Hershberger believed that Mennonites should not always go out of their way to be shocking. Being a peaceful people, Mennonites must protest in a way that would not contradict the loving, non-violent message of Jesus.²⁸⁰

Using the Opponent's Method to Fight the Opponent: Mennonites and Political Offices

Mennonites were a people who insist upon resisting the political powers—that-be. Many Mennonites believed that Satan, the embodiment of evil, had control over the political powers of the world. The only way to resist evil was to cut the entire Mennonite community off from political involvement. During the Vietnam War, this traditional Anabaptist practice came under scrutiny. In an article called "Our Almost Unused Political Power," James Juhnke describes the powerlessness of a Mennonite trying to witness against the Vietnam War:

Our leaders, including William Snyder executive secretary of the Mennonite Central Committee and William Keeney, chairman of the MCC Peace Section are

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Hershberger, "Protest Against Evil," *Gospel Herald*, January 3, 1968.

dissatisfied with United States policy in Vietnam and believe that steps to deescalate the war could and should be taken. Relief work is fine, say our workers in Vietnam, but the *war* is the real problem.²⁸¹

In Juhnke's view, volunteering in the relief effort in Vietnam or vocalizing the Mennonite criticism of the war was not enough; the war itself had to be stopped, but that could only occur if the government decided to terminate the military mission in Vietnam.

In another article, Hershberger states what purpose a Mennonite political office would serve:

1. To serve as a listening post...

3. To select with care public moral issues in which there is to be a prophetic Christian witness. These would need to be issues on which the church can speak unitedly (*sic*) in a corporate way, and with a sufficient amount of information to speak with a reasonable degree of competence.²⁸²

By having a political post in Washington, Mennonites could influence the policies that might lead to wars and international conflicts. Eventually, the MCC decided to create a political office in Washington on January 18, 1968.²⁸³ This reaction to the Vietnam War seemed to be the most radical in that officially broke away from traditional Anabaptism.

Epilogue—John Howard Yoder and the Political Message of Jesus

²⁸¹ Juhnke, "Our Almost Unused Political Power," *Gospel Herald*, January 9, 1968.

²⁸² Hershberger, "A Mennonite Office in Washington?," *Gospel Herald*, February 27, 1968.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

The Mennonite reaction to the Vietnam War was just as scattered as the national response to the war. From the beginning of the war in 1964 to the fall of Saigon in April of 1975, Mennonites debated over how to behave like Christ in a world governed by “fallen” political powers. One could argue that the very nature of Anabaptism would lead to this kind of response in light of a national crisis. The Anabaptists never had a strict ecclesiastical order and as a result, they never developed a strict dogma like Catholics or other Protestant denominations. Additionally, the Mennonites went against Menno Simons’s strict teaching of the separation of church and state. If the Mennonites had remained isolated from secular culture, perhaps they would have avoided the moral and religious confusion brought about by the war.

The Mennonites could not go back to the kinds of small, peaceful communities they had lived in the sixteenth century. The Mennonites integrated themselves into mainstream, American culture by becoming involved in the Vietnam War. The Mennonites had to find a way to interpret the Gospels in a mainstream context. John Howard Yoder, a prominent Mennonite theologian in the early 1970s, took on this task in his 1972 book *The Politics of Jesus*. The purpose of this book is to ask in reference to the Gospels: “Is there here a social ethic?”²⁸⁴ In his analysis of the Gospel of Luke, Yoder comes to the conclusion that Jesus does not promote apolitical beliefs. He clarifies this point by saying, “[Jesus] did not say...‘you can have your politics and I shall do something else more important;’ he said, ‘your definition of *polis*, of the social, of

²⁸⁴ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 11.

the wholeness of being human socially is perverted.”²⁸⁵ The expression of brotherly love to all human beings is Jesus’ alternative to the world’s political ideologies.

The claims made by Yoder in *The Politics of Jesus* are not new to the Mennonite community. However, after years of coming to terms with the social realities of the world, one could argue that the Mennonites needed to seriously review their religious beliefs. In the end, the Mennonites could not find a uniform plan of reaction against the social injustices caused by the Vietnam War. The war allowed the Mennonites to put their faith into action through missionary work and protests against the government and its policies. Although the Vietnam War divided the Mennonite community on proper Christian ethics, it also forced all them together by making them take their faith seriously.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.