

War and Peace in the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition

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Based in a German-American revival movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the predecessor bodies of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) have left a record of involvement in issues of war and peace within the context of their North American environment and in their global missionary outreach.

These bodies include the Evangelical Association (die Evangelische Gemeinschaft; 1816-1922), the United Evangelical Church (1894-1922), the Evangelical Church (1922-1946), and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ (1800-1946). The first two denominations united to form the third in 1922, following a division in 1891-1894, and the last two united to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church (EUB) in 1946. Then in 1968, the EUB united with The Methodist Church to form the current United Methodist Church. Total EUB membership peaked at 763,000 in the early 1960s in almost 5,000 congregations. The global constituency, including persons in indigenous church bodies that were related to the denomination, reached a peak that approached one million adherents.

United Brethren Origin

Earlier United Brethren (UB) historians identified their denomination as the first American-born denomination since roots were traced to the encounter between Philip William Otterbein (1726-1813) and Martin Boehm (1725-1812) at a barn revival meeting in 1767 (the Long's barn meeting, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania). Here, the German Reformed missionary pastor from Baltimore (Otterbein) embraced the "awakened" Mennonite preacher (Boehm) with the salutary "wir sind Brüder" ("we are brethren"). Their constituency represented a body of immigrants from Germany and their descendants, many of whom had fled the scourge of warfare in Europe. Meetings of "awakened" German preachers began in the 1770s that developed into the UB by 1800, when these men were elected general "elders" (later called bishops).

A significant percentage of early UB members and preachers had Mennonite background, which blended with the Pietistic emphasis upon the new birth as the central Christian experience. Anabaptists, the ancestors of the Mennonites, were early proponents of a "believers' church", built on adult baptism and avoidance of the marks of the "fallen" society, including oath-taking, public office holding, and participation in military conflict. The Christian life was modeled on "nachfolge Christi", or a literal following after the way of Jesus. Pacifist sentiment was also introduced by converts from the Dunkers (Church of the Brethren).

Early UB and Evangelicals sometimes held dual allegiance to these peace church traditions and to the newly formed revival denominations, which included participating in

the “love feasts” of the Dunkers and the foot-washing practice of the Mennonites. The latter is reflected in the first Confession of Faith of the United Brethren, adopted in 1815, where “the washing of feet” is “recommended”, along with baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Civil War

In 1849, in the wake of the American acquisition of Texas in the Mexican War, United Brethren voted in General Conference, by a vote of twenty-one to one, with several abstentions, the declaration that “Resolved, we believe that the spirit that leads men to engage voluntarily in national warfare is unholy and unchristian and ought not to be tolerated by us.”¹ This resolution was modified during the Civil War, reflecting the position that morally justified the military defense of duly constituted government, particularly when threatened by forces that had instituted the enslavement of humanity. A resolution from the 1865 UB General Conference asserted that “We believe it to be entirely consistent with the spirit of Christianity to bear arms when called upon to do so by the properly constituted authorities of our government for its preservation and defense.”²

From that time, the denomination sought to balance its abhorrence of war with a realistic assessment of the obligation to bear arms for causes deemed just.³ Support for the Union position in the Civil War was also congruent with longstanding UB policy of forbidding slaveholders or slave traders from membership in the church.⁴ The change from the 1849 to the 1865 position reflects as well the transition of the UB from a sectarian body to a rapidly growing regional denomination that was increasingly identifying the coming Kingdom of God with the Christianizing of the American social order.

United Brethren placed a high priority upon being an “unpartisan” fellowship, and they did not allow even the division of the nation during the Civil War to disrupt that unity. A case in point is Bishop John J. Glossbrenner, who served the Virginia Conference. Its northern half embraced the state of Maryland, while its southern half was in pro-slavery Virginia. Glossbrenner was granted safe passage by both warring sides to pass through the lines for the purpose of holding conference in the two divided segments of that conference.

Influence of German Pietism

To understand these developments, it may be observed that the United Brethren were chiefly influenced by radical German Pietism in their ethos and theological idiom. Inherent within this ethos is the centrality given to the theme of Pentecost and the baptism in the Holy Spirit, which anticipates a new millennial age of peace and justice, which Otterbein called “a more glorious state of the church on earth than ever has been.”⁵ The barn meeting of Otterbein and Boehm that launched their movement occurred on Pentecost, 1767. This motif suggests that they were not called to replicate a sectarian (Anabaptist) stance of ecclesial separation from the world. Instead, their movement was

seen as the vanguard for the universal transformation of history into the Kingdom of God, that was commencing with the great awakening in the New World.

Otterbein wrote that “these great events are at the door,” and “the prophecies will be fulfilled, and they are being fulfilled from day to day, and you may live to see great things.”⁶ Their hope was for a Kingdom of peace, devoid of warfare, which the 1849 resolution reflected. Otterbein had also noted that this new order cannot break into history until “the seven vials of the wrath of God will be poured out” (an allusion to Revelation 14:19-15:1). The tribulation that precedes the full manifestation of the Kingdom involved the purging of the ungodly, since only those washed and reborn in the Lamb will inherit citizenship in that new historical order. The 1865 resolution suggests that the people of God had been enduring their tribulation in the era of the Civil War. In its wake, they were seeking to remain faithful in retaining their “unpartisan” (“unparteiisch”) unity in Christ, which was also their solidarity in the emerging, final “victory of Jesus Christ over the devil and death”.⁷

That unity was dramatically highlighted by the passage of Bishop Glossbrenner back and forth across the warring lines of North and South—protected from harm as a man of God’s peace, as he faithfully maintained the unity of the United Brethren in Virginia in the midst of the hatred and division of war. There were voices among the UB on both sides of this divide that called for division of the church, even as the Methodists and Baptists had divided in the heat of this conflict. However, unity prevailed within the Virginia Conference, despite the fact that some UB men were serving in the Union army out of their commitment to preserving the federal union of free men and women who rejected slavery. Likewise, most of those on the Southern side of this divide sought to remain faithful to their church’s opposition to slavery,⁸ even as they weathered tribulation, with congregational life disrupted, at the hands of the Confederate authorities.

In the twentieth century, United Brethren further modified its stance on war by officially recognizing the right of conscientious objection.

War is contrary to the spirit and message of Christ. The church should never prepare for or make war. The Church of the United Brethren in Christ recognizes the many Christians who, because of conscience find it inconsistent with their principles to participate or sanction war. A judgment of a citizen’s loyalty to his country should not be based on his willingness to bear arms.⁹

Evangelical Association

The history of the Evangelical Association/Church reveals a similar influence from the themes of radical German Pietism, including the central motif of Pentecost and Spirit baptism. As with the UB, their concern was to bring vital, experiential Christianity to the “unawakened” and self-absorbed German-Americans, including their nominal “church Dutch” (Lutherans and Reformed) and “plain Dutch” (Mennonite, Dunker) neighbors. In fact, their early gatherings in the revival among the Germans led by the lay preacher Jacob Albright (1759-1808) are referenced as “Pentecostal meetings”.¹⁰ Their celebrated

missionary bishop, John Seybert (1791-1860), wrote in his Journal that converts were baptized by all three modes, but that what was essential was that they “the baptism of the Holy Ghost came down upon all.”¹¹ By comparison with the UB, Albright’s followers readily adopted a Methodist form of church order, reflected in the “Doctrines and Discipline” of 1809, published after the death of their founder, Jacob Albright. Their Articles of Faith were an adaptation in German translation of the Methodist Articles of Religion.¹²

Before his encounter with the new birth in Christ, Albright had served as a soldier in the colonial army during the Revolutionary War, with particular responsibility being the guarding of German-speaking Hessian soldiers. However, reflecting radical Pietist influence probably more than that of the peace church traditions of the Mennonites and Dunkers, the statement was added to Article XVII of the Articles of Faith in 1839 that declared, “we believe that wars and bloodshed are not agreeable to the Gospel and Spirit of Christ.”¹³ Although this position remained officially in place, the General Conference of 1863, meeting during the Civil War, declared as part of its war resolution that “it is the imperative duty of our Government, to use the sword entrusted to it by God,...and it is the holiest duty of every citizen, faithfully to support the Government in the important duties devolving upon the same.”¹⁴

As with the UB, Evangelical support for the Union cause was influenced by their ardent opposition to slavery, as reflected in their 1839 General Conference resolution that no member “shall be allowed under any pretence or condition whatsoever the holding of slaves or the trafficking in the same.”¹⁵ For Evangelicals, antislavery was rather explicitly linked to their emphasis on the living out the doctrine of entire sanctification, and that government which defended human liberty was deemed worthy of support.

World War I & II

In the twentieth century, Evangelicals were particularly saddened by American entry into the First World War, given their strong connections with the German branch of their church. It was the result of missionary activity by Evangelicals from America that began in 1845. By the twentieth century, that mission had grown under state persecution to thrive as a free church with seminary, hospitals, benevolent homes, and a strong deaconess society. As Evangelical youth were drafted into the armed services of both opposing armies, there was anguish that Evangelical boys from America would be made to face in battle their counterparts from Germany. As the War progressed, support for the American government grew strong within the American “mother” church, and a significant number of Evangelical as well as United Brethren ministers volunteered for duty in the military chaplaincy.

A similar pattern of participation was observed in the Second World War. However, Evangelicals, United Brethren, and EUB allowed members the conscientious choice whether to support military service or opt for alternative service. As the official commentary on the EUB Confession of Faith (1962) declared, war “is a compounding of offenses against the ‘gospel and Spirit of Christ.’...Bloody struggle confronts us often in

this floundering world, but it simply has no place at all in the eventual divine plan.” In addition,

Our Statement of Faith concerning war rests on the principle that it is contrary to Christian idealism. The individual Christian must make the agonizing choice as to where duty and justice point him in a specific engagement and how much blood shall stain his hand or soul in the common defense. How close to the spirit and kingdom of Christ dare he aspire to come in this mortal life?¹⁶

Present and Future Kingdom

The issue for EUB was, to what extent can we live now by the norms of the future Kingdom, whose standards are our ultimate guide and yet cannot be prematurely interposed within a fallen world where evil still reigns? The peace church tradition would opt for a present, uncompromised identity with Jesus’ beatitudes, with a sharp delineation between the way of violence and the way of peace. The EUB and their predecessors would agree that the goal of the church’s witness was a community of grace and peace in the Resurrected Lord. But their present course, en route to that future goal, was set in the midst of a fallen world, which obliged them to support the righteous actions of duly-constituted civil government in promoting the conditions of freedom and justice.

When those actions enable the onslaught of human oppression and genocide to be replaced by conditions enabling freedom of assembly and the protection of life, including the free exercise of divine worship, the governments which facilitate that goal, even by coercive force, when necessary, may be deemed congruent with God’s ultimate redemptive concerns for human society. It is for this reason that many present-day heirs of Otterbein and Albright would prayerfully support the actions of democratic societies that rightly seek to replace regimes and movements which terrorize and dehumanize humanity with those committed to norms of peace and justice.

On related issues, EUB declared themselves opposed to nuclear testing, and the General Conference of 1962 fell only one vote short of opposing capital punishment.¹⁷

The EUB legacy and stance on war and peace was to live out their witness to Christ on the crucible of the two kingdoms, to which they gave allegiance: the one which was coming, and which was the source of their eternal hope, and the other which was strategically directed by God to be the theater of God’s testing and sifting of humanity, in preparation for the inexorable Day of the Lord.

¹ UB General Conference Minutes (1849), 127.

² Religious Telescope (May 31, 1865), 158.

³ “We most positively record our disapproval of engaging in voluntary, national, aggressive warfare; yet, we recognize the rightful authority of the civil government, and hold it responsible for the preservation and defense of our national compact, against treason, or invasion by any belligerent force, and we believe it to be entirely consistent with the spirit of Christianity to bear arms when called upon to do so by the properly-constituted authorities of our government, for its preservation and defense.”—UB Discipline, 1865, 87.

⁴ Resolution of the 1821 General Conference (UB), cited in J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (Nashville: Abingdon: 1979), 124.

⁵ Philip William Otterbein, "Letter Concerning the Millennium." In Arthur Core, ed., Philip William Otterbein: Pastor, Ecumenist (Dayton: EUB Board of Publication, 1968), 102f.

⁶ Otterbein, "Letter", 103.

⁷ See "The Protocol of the United Brethren in Christ" (1800-1812), in Core, 121, and Otterbein, "The Salvation Bringing and Glorious Incarnation of Jesus Christ over the Devil and Death," in Core, 77.

⁸ There had been a minority of UB in Virginia who strongly opposed abolitionism and their leader, W.M.K. Cain, had started the "Virginia Telescope" to counter the denominational paper, "The Religious Telescope" in 1840; in the interests of peace, the discussion of slavery was forbidden in that paper in 1841.—Paul Eller, These Evangelical United Brethren (Dayton: Otterbein Press, 1957), 72.

⁹ UB Discipline, 1937, 89.

¹⁰ The first of these was held at the home of Peter Walter in Quakertown, Pennsylvania, in 1799.—Behney and Eller, 73

¹¹ The Journal of Bishop John Seybert, cited in Spreng, Life of Bishop John Seybert (Cleveland, 1888), 162.

See also the author's Bishop John Seybert and the Evangelical Heritage (Topeka, KS, 1986).

¹² The Discipline and Articles of Faith (1809) were prepared by George Miller, a convert under Albright's ministry, and included an article on the Last Judgment from the Augsburg Confession (Albright had been catechized a Lutheran) and an extended essay on entire sanctification, appended to the articles. The translation from English had been completed by a physician, Dr. Ignatius Roemer. For a full discussion of these events, see Raymond Albright, History of the Evangelical Church (Harrisburg, PA, 1956), 83-125.

¹³ Discipline of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (Harrisburg and Dayton: Board of Publication, 1959), par. 31; see also Behney and Eller, 147.

¹⁴ Evangelical General Conference Minutes (1863), 59, 60.

¹⁵ Evangelical General Conference resolution (1839) cited in Behney and Eller, 146.

¹⁶ Dale M. Phillippi, "Civil Government," in This We Believe: A Commentary on the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church (Dayton, 1964), 98.

¹⁷ "Therefore, we urge the abolition of nuclear testing by all nations including our own and commend efforts being made to secure international agreements banning nuclear tests."—EUB General Conference Minutes (n.d.), cited in Arthur Core, "The Evangelical United Brethren Church Reader", (unpub., 1963), L-6; and "The Grand Rapids Journal Herald," (November 1, 1962), n.p., cited by Core, "The Evangelical United Brethren Church Reader," L-7.

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