

Reflection on Bethlehem 83 and George Brunk II

(from Ross T. Bender online seminar, 2004, moderated by Ross L. Bender)

The incident that Ross Bender describes well involved me in a personal way. At some point in the proceeding, which involved Ross' presenting the General Board's statement of concern regarding George's criticism of several teachers in Mennonite institutions in his *Crisis in Mennonite Education* booklet, George called on me to come forward. I was in a balcony section, as I recall, so it took me a little while to get to the platform. I did not know what was coming, so I went to the platform with some trepidation. When I came onto the platform George greeted me with a big bear hug, and said into the microphone, "I want all of you to know that I regard Willard as a good brother in the church."

Just what this meant was not entirely clear. I don't recall that I spoke at all publicly. I was one of the teachers mentioned in the *Crisis* booklet, so it was evident that his statement indicated some degree of desiring reconciliation. During my year of leave from EMU, teaching at Conrad Grebel College, 1975-76, George and I had considerable letter exchange, seeking to understand each other's points of view. I had been under "watch" for several years prior to the leave because of alleged "heretical" Bible teaching in the College. George was then dean of the Seminary. Faculty minutes registered concern and alarm at the College Bible department, of which I was chair. This is the context in broad strokes that made the bear hug quite significant.

After the session I made it a point to meet George to further understand his reconciliatory gesture. By 1983 I had been teaching at AMBS for five years, so was no longer at EMU and no longer a threat in that setting. Most all the teachers criticized in *Crisis* taught either at Goshen College or AMBS. But except for me, George had no personal relations with any of them, and some had never met, I learned in talking to him. So I said that if he is serious about making peace with those he criticized, he should come to Goshen/Elkhart to meet with them. He did not close off that possibility, so I invited him to come to my home for several days so the meetings and discussion could take place.

This did occur, over Labor Day weekend in 1983. For an evening meeting George met with Leonard Gross, Don Blosser, and Theron Schlabach in the basement of the Swartley home. The meeting was productive, and cleared up some misunderstandings that George had of their respective positions and intentions. Of course, the theological positions were not of one mind, but the "intent to or outcome of destroy(ing) faith," which was George's underlying concern proved erroneous. Next morning George met with Millard Lind, and this breakfast discussion in our dining room was most satisfying. George told me afterward, he really came to like Millard, with his rather serious and unpretentious manner and chuckle at his own points of view (giving the effect that not everything should be taken so seriously). Meeting these people was an important step in healing relationships.

Another unplanned meeting occurred also, between my 68 Ford Galaxie and George's 70s something Mercedes Benz. When George arrived at our home 40 minutes before dinner time, I still had one more errand I wanted to run that day. So since he traveled long that day I suggested he might want to rest in his room upstairs, while I ran the errand. So it was to be, but upon my backing out of my drive and looking back to see no cars coming, I swung my front end too quickly and my bumper caught his rear tail-light, pulling it off and splitting it into many pieces. Rather foolishly I did not stop, but went on to do my errand. When I came back, my wife Mary was upset and wondered why I was in such a hurry and did not stop to see the damage. She said George certainly heard the bang and came down shortly thereafter, viewed the damage, and went walking down the street.

I went out and started to pick up the many, many pieces of the tail-light, and began arranging them on the picnic table, with the intent to get the puzzle together, and then glue them, so he would have a temporary working tail-light when driving back to Va. George soon came back from his walk, and we stood staring at the catastrophe. I apologized and said I would pay for the damage (just send me the bill). He didn't speak for what seemed to be ages, and then he spoke with a faint smile, "Willard, I promise I will never write about this in *Sword and Trumpet* or otherwise." I embraced him, and our peace was sealed in a different and unexpected way.

I did get the puzzle together after some time, and the next day taped the glued tail-light to the car with some good transparent sticky tape (brought home from Germany a year earlier). When George left for his trip home, I said I hope it holds for him all the way. He said, "It might if it doesn't rain." Well it did rain that day, but alas when I visited him the following December in Harrisonburg at the Seminary, the tape and all was just as I left it. There was also a scratch and faint dent in the paint. He informed me that his insurance company had agreed to fix it all and no charge to me.

At some point in our conversation at Elkhart after the "collision" and my glued together tail-light, I said, "maybe this is parabolic of our relationship now. We did collide on some points and some breaking occurred. But we are together now, glued for good, I hope." Yes, our relationships thereafter were always amicable, even at the two Laurelville Conferences on Biblical Authority in 1984 and 1986. God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.

--Willard Swartley