Book Review

Elvin S. Eberly. *The Original Joe Wenger: The Life Story of Bishop Joseph O. Wenger, 1868–1956*. Trenton, KY: Elvin S. Eberly, 2024. 102 pp.

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The primary focus of Elvin Eberly's biography of Joseph O. Wenger, the Old Order Mennonite bishop who founded the Groffdale Mennonite Conference, is how leaders master the art of compromise. Dictionaries generally define compromise as an outcome in which each side gives up something, and *Webster's New World Dictionary* offers a secondary meaning of "an adjustment of opposing principles." Eberly provides a narrative of Joe Wenger's expertise in leading through compromise. Without providing much historical context, Eberly outlines the causes for the divisions within the Lancaster (Pa.) Mennonite Conference in 1893 that resulted in the formation of the Old Order Mennonites and the 1927 separation of that group into the Weaverland and Groffdale Conferences.

As a child, Joseph O. Wenger was educated in a private Mennonite one-room school, the Lincoln Independent School, and only completed the fifth grade. He was a farmer in the Groffdale community of West Earl Township in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and was ordained as a minister in 1896 by Bishop Jonas Martin, three years after Martin had led the formation of the Old Order Mennonite Church.

Eberly discusses the formation of the Old Orders and the issues and compromises along the way. According to Eberly's timeline, the first divisive issue, in the nineteenth century, was the introduction of Sunday schools among Lancaster Mennonites. Eberly attributes Old Order opposition to Sunday schools to two reasons: Sunday school was "taught by non-ordained men" and Sunday school was "taught in English" (21). Eberly argues the Old Orders believed the curriculum taught in Sunday school "was best done at home by the parents as well as the ministry during church services" (22). Sunday schools and the English language were related to another issue, namely, the expansion of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference in the nineteenth century, which involved building new meetinghouses. Some were fashioned like contemporary Protestant churches with a pulpit rather than a floor-level preaching table. Old Orders opposed these physical changes to worship spaces, which elevated the clergy, and related innovations, such as singing schools and singing in English, that seemed to highlight performance.

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As for adopting the use of English, the compromise on using English in worship among Lancaster Conference Mennonites was settled by allowing an English song to be selected by the *foresingers* once a month. Eventually, concessions were made for singing schools because, according to Eberly, "four-part harmony and singing English songs was better than unwholesome activities that the youth could be involved with" (56). At weddings, Eberly says, Bishop Joe Wenger preached in German and the singing was in German. However, in the afternoon of the wedding, after Bishop Wenger had departed, everyone sang English songs; they waited to do so out of "respect towards [Wenger's] opposition to English used in singing" (63). Another divisive issue centered around young people postponing their application to join the church, living a worldly life, and, for some, never joining the church. The Old Orders opposed allowing ministers to marry couples who were not members of the church. A related issue involved Plain dress. The compromise on Plain clothing involved requiring men to wear a Plain suit only after they were married. Even Joe Wenger had not worn a Plain suit until he was ordained.

Next, Eberly discusses the issue of the telephone. An occasional phone call made by using a neighbor's phone was not a problem for the Old Orders but owning a telephone and purchasing stock in local phone companies was. As Eberly puts it, making so many phone calls that it justified owning a phone was "seen as a form of idleness" (45). On a related note, there was debate about installing electricity in the home. Eberly explains how the Old Order bishop engaged in the art of compromise. Members of the Old Order could have telephones and electricity, but when a man was called to the ministry, he was expected to stop using electricity in his home and give up his telephone.

According to Eberly, Old Order bishops never imagined their members would desire to own automobiles. He quotes Bishop Jonas Martin, the early leader of the Old Order Church, as saying, "The autos are for doctors and lawyers, and not for us farmers" (51). By 1927, however, automobile ownership had produced a schism within the Pennsylvania Old Orders, with the resulting Weaverland Conference allowing cars and the Groffdale Conference, also known as the Joe Wengers (because it was led by Bishop Joseph Wenger), continuing to drive horse-and-buggy "teams" (another nickname for the group is Team Mennonites). This schism also involved compromises. The first was treating members who owned autos as "half expelled" rather than fully excommunicated. Eberly writes that members who owned autos were not "allowed communion since they were not at peace with the church, but neither did they suffer the stigma of expulsion" (55–56). The second compromise on the issue of automobile ownership provided a two-year grace period for members to continue owning a car without making a confession or risking excommunication as they discerned with which conference they would align. Ten years later, the issue was about rubber tires on tractors. In this compromise, such tires were prohibited, but the ban on rubber tires on buggy wheels was lifted.

Eberly does not provide philosophical, ideological, or theological reasons for the Old Orders' resistance to these innovations except for his discussion of the Old Order Mennonites' refusal to participate in Civilian Public Service (CPS), the program that provided an alternative to military service during the Second World War. However, rather than explaining the church's ideal of

nonresistance, Eberly says the Old Orders chose prison instead of CPS because if they had worked in a CPS camp they would have been exposed to "the negative influence the progressive Mennonite boys [in CPS] had over them" (75). According to Eberly, Old Orders chose prison over CPS not because of a conscientious objection to war but rather to avoid being influenced by non-Old Order Mennonites.

Perhaps because he is writing as an insider, as a member of the Old Order Mennonite Church himself, Eberly does not put the Joe Wenger narrative into a broader historical context. The Old Order movement paralleled the national and global debate between modernists and conservatives and the rise of ecumenicalism. The questions of cultural assimilation through using English in education and worship was an important issue for many groups in the United States and not exclusive to Old Orders, especially during the world wars. There is no written record of the content of Joe Wenger's preaching or beliefs. It is unclear if he was aware that the issues facing his church and denomination were not exclusive to the Old Orders.

Eberly's biography demonstrates no clear definition of Wenger's position on divisive issues, just his desire to find compromises between conservatives and progressives within the Old Orders and thus reduce the possibility of further schisms. As an example, Eberly explains how Bishop Wenger's will divided his estate in half, distributed equally among his nephews and nieces in the Old Order and those outside the Old Order.

Eberly's biography is an interesting story about the politics of church leadership. Conservative members of the Groffdale Conference pressured Bishop Wenger to remove a bay window he had installed in his home. Then he was criticized for displaying his favorite pink Fleisig Lizzie flowers on a windowsill facing the road: "Someone rebuked him for taking pride in his flowers" (66). Parents scolded Wenger when he disciplined children in the church, arguing that he overstepped his authority since he and his wife, Susanna, had no children and thus he was in no position to understand how to discipline children.

Eberly asserts that he wrote this biography "to increase an appreciation toward our church fathers and inspire us to continue upholding their sacred principles" (6). Readers who are not Old Order will not learn a great deal about the "sacred principles" of the Old Order church fathers—that is mostly assumed by Eberly. But readers will gain an appreciation for Bishop Wenger's leadership, through compromise and concession, navigating an adjustment of opposing principles to maintain the peace.