

Book Review

Chester C. Weaver Jr. *The Things Which Become Sound Doctrine: The Life of Aaron M. Shank*. Manchester, MI: Sermon on the Mount Publishing, 2020. Pp. 385.

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The Things Which Become Sound Doctrine: The Life of Aaron M. Shank is an unusually fitting title. Aaron Shank himself suggested it, and it nicely condenses the life and ministry of this conservative Mennonite leader as recounted by biographer Chester C. Weaver Jr. Weaver shows that correct doctrine—which Shank, in a characteristically Anabaptist way, identified with proper practice as well as proper belief—was Shank’s central concern in a ministerial career that stretched from the 1940s to the early 2000s.

In writing this biography, Weaver drew on interviews with family members, friends, and colleagues, as well as letters and church publications and records. Quotations from these documents are numerous and lengthy. It is also worth noting that Shank himself read an early draft of Weaver’s work. Weaver’s account appears to be well-grounded in these sources, but it is lightly footnoted: more robust citations would have been welcome.

Weaver does not neglect the basic facts of Shank’s life—his birth in Virginia in 1915, the influence of his Mennonite parents, his family’s move to Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, his two marriages, his work as a farmer, his relationships with his four children, and his death in 2003. But Weaver’s emphasis is squarely on Shank’s work as a church leader, which commanded much of his time and energy for nearly all of his adult life. He was ordained as a Lancaster Mennonite Conference minister in 1941, and ordination as a bishop followed in 1957. He travelled widely as a preacher and Bible teacher and served on several boards and committees. Shank became a leader of the conservative faction within Lancaster Conference, and was instrumental in the relatively cordial withdrawal from the conference that led to the formation of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (EPMC) in 1968. Shank viewed his conservatism as secondary to his biblicism, and eventually found himself among a group of ministers increasingly at odds with the more tradition-minded majority in the EPMC. In 1991, EPMC leaders decided that these ministers and their followers would leave the EPMC and form a new conference, which became known as the Pilgrim Mennonite Conference. Shank remained an influential leader in the Pilgrim Conference and preached his last sermon less than a year and a half before his death.



Weaver's account is largely episodic, cohering into a more structured narrative when dealing with the two church divisions that were the great crises of Shank's life. The division of 1968 is very well described; the concerns of Shank and his fellow conservatives over what they saw as the breakdown of biblical standards in matters such as dress and divorce are clearly articulated, and Weaver's analysis is supported by extensive quotations from documents of the period. The events leading to the division of 1991 are rendered with greater obscurity. While Weaver identifies several specific issues and discusses differences in general perspective at length, he seems to leave some things unsaid. Notably, he portrays the views of Shank's like-minded ministerial colleague Stephen Ebersole as a major point of contention while leaving this reviewer wondering precisely what Ebersole's controversial views were. Weaver makes reference to documents that appear to have the potential to bring more clarity to the situation but does not quote from these documents or explicitly describe their contents. The fault may not be entirely Weaver's, as Ebersole's supporters felt that his opponents were less than forthright in explaining themselves.

Although Weaver does not address the point in these terms, this reviewer was struck by the continuity of Shank's conservatism with the Mennonite progressivism of his parents' and grandparents' generations. Shank's father, John Shank, was a vigorous proponent of that earlier movement—an advocate of English preaching and Sunday evening church services, a friend of George R. Brunk I, a promoter of Eastern Mennonite School, and an opponent of tobacco and neckties. To a significant degree, Aaron Shank's conservatism was an attempt to maintain those values. He was a strong supporter of education, backing Christian schools and favorably viewing Numidia Bible School, which became an EPMC institution, as a counterpart to the Eastern Mennonite School of his youth. A most curious possible point of continuity is the remarkable frequency with which the documents that Weaver quotes use the word "administration" and its variants in reference to church leadership. Could the use of this word, with its connotations of institutional management, be an echo of earlier progressive changes in church organization?

Also remarkable is the degree to which Shank's life and viewpoint revolved solely around his church. His concerns were Mennonite concerns, as he often focused on issues such as women's head covering and modest, nonconformed dress. Weaver tells his story as if world events made virtually no impact on Shank's adult life; for example, in this biography of an American man who was 26 years old when Pearl Harbor was bombed, this reviewer noticed no mention whatsoever of World War II. Shank's connection of events in the state of Israel to his premillennial eschatology is the exception that proves the rule. In this way, Shank contrasted with his father, an attentive observer of the world.

Weaver clearly admires Shank and holds him up as a man of principle rather than a conservative ideologue. The Bible was Shank's lodestar. (An evaluation of Shank's life that compares his biblicism with a more explicitly Christocentric approach would be interesting.) While he valued Mennonite traditions and earned a reputation as a staunch defender of conservative standards in his Lancaster Conference days, Shank was not afraid to reject established practices when he considered alternatives to be more biblical. Neither did he support conservatism

for its own sake, questioning as insufficiently grounded in Scripture some restrictions advocated in the EPMC. He also appreciated the need for flexibility in applying biblical principles. It is easily inferred that Weaver hopes to see twenty-first-century Anabaptists follow Shank's example. Regardless of whether readers agree with Weaver on this point, they must acknowledge Shank's integrity as a man devoted to his vision of Christian faithfulness. The continued influence of this vision across much of conservative Anabaptism makes *The Things Which Become Sound Doctrine* a valuable resource for those interested in this movement.

Erratum

12/5/2022: Activated links in PDF file.