

# Old German Baptist Brethren: Plain but Different, Part 1

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**Abstract:** This article utilizes a narrative methodological research paradigm to explore perceived distinctions between the Old German Baptist Brethren (the main Old Order expression of the Schwarzenau Brethren) and other Plain groups. The authors explore three areas of specific distinction: (a) The group's weave of Pietist as well as Anabaptist historical and theological influences, (b) a strong emphasis on the ritualized enactment of a discrete array of ordinances, (c) an emphasis on orthopraxis rather than doctrinal uniformity as a marker of church unity. All these, together with four other areas addressed in the second part of the article, combine to create a distinctive and unusual expression of Plain spirituality and life practice.

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**Note:** This is part 1 of an article examining what makes the Old German Baptist Brethren distinctive among Plain groups. The second part of this study will appear in the next issue of the *Journal of Plain Anabaptist Communities*.

## Introduction

*During our stay in Indiana a few years ago, friends who were members of the Old German Baptist Brethren<sup>1</sup> took us to Shippshewana, an area of the state with a large Amish presence, but*

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, we use the terms Old German Baptist Brethren, OGBB, Old German Baptists, Brethren, the Brotherhood, and the Fraternity interchangeably as descriptors. In each instance, unless the context



*with few German Baptists. Here, enriched by the commentary of our Old Order companions, we had a taste of the realities of Plain life. Passing through the richly cultivated countryside, we saw team after team of horses pulling old-fashioned plows as Amish farmers readied the fields for spring sowing. This adventure brought us down narrow dirt roads, our car<sup>2</sup> following in the wake of black buggies drawn by beautifully tended horses. We visited tiny stores, dimly lit by gas, or sometimes simply oil, lamps. The shops were crammed to overflowing with an unimaginable, if rather specific, variety of goods: sober hard-wearing clothing, serviceable glassware and china, lamps, and canned foods. Each store had its own bewildering array of natural remedies; every possible physical ailment had its cure. Vast racks of garden seeds teetered in corners. The smell of paraffin pervaded many stores as, fascinated, we maneuvered our way between bales of material, tottering piles of aluminum buckets and haphazard stacks of garden implements. The contents of each store was a commentary on the priorities of Plain life.*

*Mesmerized by an existence so at odds with the pace of Western life in general, we were conscious of many Amish shoppers, distinctive in their somber dress, exchanging nods of greeting with our friends. They would then eye us curiously in our obviously “English” clothing—we seemed to constitute something of an unexpected appendage and perhaps a novelty in such contexts. Often the shopkeeper would greet our companions, in their Plain uniform, in Pennsylvania Dutch. There would then be a conversational exchange—often developing into quite a complex discussion—explaining that while, yes, our friends were Plain, no, they were not members of one of the multitudes of slightly differing Amish groups in the area. And, no, they spoke only English—despite their Old German Baptist name—and not the German dialect known as Pennsylvania Dutch. Some of the shopkeepers became quite animated, keen to know the exact nature of Old German Baptist belief and practice. And to understand what exactly made them different from other Plain groups. Ultimately each exchange concluded with a recognition of commonality but simultaneously of an awareness of clear distinction; the Old German Baptists were certainly Plain, but differently so, it seemed, to other Plain folk.*

Meeting members of the Old German Baptist Brethren for the first time, most Americans assume that they are members of the Amish—the largest and best known of the Old Order groups. The Brethren’s simple, uniform dress, the long untrimmed beards of the men and the women’s head coverings make such a mistake an easy one to make. Even members of other Old Order churches (such as Conservative Mennonites or Plain Quakers) can themselves make this slipup on first encounters. But of course, the Old German Baptist Brethren are very definitely committed to the nonresistance and nonconformity of an Old Order way of life; they are definitely Plain people, deeply committed to a Plain lifestyle as they seek to follow their

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specifically indicates otherwise, we are utilizing the terms to refer to the largest Old Order expression of the Schwarzenau Brethren.

<sup>2</sup> The Old German Baptists use automobile transport, but often, particularly in some areas of the country, prefer to drive older models and dark-colored vehicles, lest flashy or expensive cars become the focus of pride or expressions of individualism. Both expressions are seen as conforming to the assumptions of majority Western society and to be avoided.

understanding of the teachings of Christ in the twenty-first century. However, they are “differently” Plain.

In their 2001 book, *On the Backroad to Heaven*, Kraybill and Bowman take pains to elucidate the essentially varied nature of the Old Order world. In that seminal work, they explore four very different expressions of Plain belief and practice as they reconnoiter four contrasting expressions—Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren. They explore the somewhat differing origins of each group, their different structures, and their contrasting assumptive worlds expressed in significantly contrasting ways of being in the world. In doing so, the authors contest the tendency (even in some academic circles) to view all Old Order groups as “cut from the same cloth.” In spite of certain shared understandings, Plain groups differ substantially and the “further we probe the more striking the differences and the more foolish the depictions that fail to penetrate the simplistic veneer of ‘they all.’”<sup>3</sup>

In this article, our approach departs from that of Kraybill and Bowman. We utilize a postpositivist framework, which constitutes a more tentative approach and includes the textured and often varied comments of OGGB participants on a variety of topics, reflecting the nuanced and multilayered process of human meaning-making. We also concentrate on exploring the Old German Baptist Brethren alone, as just one particular and distinctive expression of Plain life and conviction. In general, then, we underline a significant aspect of Kraybill and Bowman’s motivations, seeking to invite attention to a multilayered rather than a homogenized perspective on the world of Old Order belief and practice. In doing so, we emphasize the need to broaden and deepen academic understandings of a Plain world.

In this article and in the research inquiry on which it is based, we attempt to explore this terrain of difference. In the process of our exploration, we were sometimes surprised to find that Old German Baptist members themselves were not always aware of the degree of difference that distinguishes them from other Plain groups. Some of this may have to do with the very human experience of “taking for granted” or of being consciously unaware of what is most familiar. It may also have to do with the fact that what is noteworthy to external viewers is less obvious to those involved. It could also be related to an innate modesty that characterizes many Plain groups including members of the Old German Baptist Brethren; they would not wish to claim a distinction of which they were not immediately aware. In this article, we explore seven areas of difference that seemed to emerge as strongly distinctive traits as we read and talked among ourselves and then as we discussed our impressions with members of the Old German Baptist Brethren as well as with others from Plain backgrounds. These areas of distinction include:

- The Brethren’s Anabaptist and Pietist origins
- An emphasis on a particular range of ordinances and their detailed enactment
- Orthopraxis, and an emphasis on conformity to specific practices rather than to the niceties of doctrinal convention
- An array of “flat” and unusually participative organizational church structures

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<sup>3</sup> Kraybill and Bowman, *On the Backroad to Heaven*, 213–214.

- A particular understanding of hospitality and its exercise
- A distinctive emphasis on the inner life and reflective practice
- An overriding emphasis on unity and submission as essential marks of membership

These impressions of difference in the eyes of the writers of this article constitute clear distinctions. They are, however, *our* impressions. And they are, of course, biased by our own histories, culture, and other influences, which create our positionality and form the lenses through which we see and make sense. Nonetheless, we offer them as tentative understandings and as a catalyst toward further reflection and discussion, both within the Brotherhood and among those with a scholarly interest in the area.

### Methodology

Finding a method of social inquiry that is respectful and simultaneously capable of conveying something of the rich complexity of a group's life and thinking is always challenging. In this article, we draw on the conceptual framework of postpositivist research, particularly privileging the disciplines of narrative inquiry and autoethnography.<sup>4</sup> These insist on the recognition of the complex nature of any social phenomenon and consequently emphasize tentativeness rather than presumptions of complete understanding or notions of "objectivity." In social inquiry informed by such postpositivist approaches, the inquirer takes up a learning—rather than a definitive—stance, and one that is focused on *exploring with* and *learning with and from* those with whom we interact. Postpositivist inquiry also acknowledges that *what* is researched and *what* is concluded is always contingent—materially influenced by the subjectivity of such inquirers.

Narrative inquiry foregrounds the importance of story (in its wide variety of forms) for human life and particularly in the complex process of human meaning-making. Narrative theorists argue that story-making and storytelling are both primary and active modes through which human beings make sense of their world, through which they structure their experiences and through which they communicate the nuances of their reality. In consequence, we have included a selection of quite literal stories and comments from those with whom we have engaged; these seem to us to convey something of a richness of experience and understanding through which people make sense of their lives and involvements.

In autoethnography, researchers (and participants) present something of their own experience of a group or social phenomenon. Rather than being concerned with notions of objective reality, the autoethnographic writer strives to convey a sense of "how things seemed to be" in a particular world. Writing about their experiences, their aim is to touch a world beyond the self of

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<sup>4</sup> For readers interested in pursuing a more detailed understanding of these research frameworks, the following may provide a useful resource: Tony Walsh and Anne Ryan, eds., *Writing Your Thesis: A Guide for Postgraduate Students* (Maynooth, Ireland: Maynooth Adult and Community Education Press, 2016).

the researcher. Ambiguity of meaning and, at times, apparent contradiction are part of the complex business of living and meaning-making.

Both narrative and autoethnography aim, through the use of concepts, description, quotation, narrative, experience, and view, to convey the texture of what it is like to be part of a particular world—in this instance, the world of the Old German Baptist Brethren. The presentation of such material in an evocative way that moves both head and heart is a significant part of the genre. Unlike traditional scientific modes of research, narrative inquiry resists claims of objectivity. It contends that acts of observing and of analysis are processes vulnerable to a multiplicity of influences (including the life experiences and professional backgrounds of the writers); this creates biased and partial conclusions.

In this research project, we have drawn on the richness of the conceptual frameworks of postpositivist research, narrative, and autoethnography. Our initial research process was largely discursive, drawing on our own experiences and readings relating to the Plain world. Having written an original draft based on our own discussions, this was then circulated to a number of members or friends of the Old German Baptist Brethren. We sought and were provided with a rich variety of corrections, insights, comments, narratives, and views. Some of these we have woven into the text; others we have included as stand-alone comments or narratives. Both are central elements of the article. Our hope is that the piece will be seen not in any sense as “the last word” on the topic but rather as a catalyst for further discussion, contribution, and reflection for members of the Plain community, for interested academics, and indeed for ourselves as authors as we seek to more faithfully follow the one we term our Master.

### **Brethren Origins**

While the Brethren trace their origins to post-Reformation Europe, their development is somewhat later than that of other Plain churches. They first emerged in 1708 in the village of Schwarzenau, in the county of Wittgenstein in today’s Germany. Their appearance was very much a reaction to the interconnected conflicts born in political and religious conditions in German territories after the Thirty Years’ War concluded in 1648. The settlement authorizing rulers to determine the religious identities of their territories and citizens led to some stability. However, the conditions allowed the three legitimized traditions—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed—to compete for dominance through polemics, church structures, and shifting political influence. The chaotic history of violence, war, famine, disease, and displacement exerted continued pressure on social and religious conditions, affecting especially the poor and those without social influence.

In this environment and in reaction against the power of the ruling churches and the occasional immorality of their clergy, some Christians sought a deeper religious awareness cultivated in studying the Bible and prayer in small circles of fellow seekers. One such group formed among the approximately three hundred religious separatists living in the tiny village of Schwarzenau, where Count Henrich Albrecht offered toleration to dissenters. Ultimately, eight people united in their need for baptism upon confession of faith and for a church of mutual

accountability. One August morning in 1708, these eight went to the Eder River where their leader, Alexander Mack Sr., was baptized by a man chosen by lot. Mack then baptized the other seven, immersing each one in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Although committing an illegal act, these eight people believed that Christ had called them to obey the New Testament. Their actions constituted the founding of the Brethren movement with its distinctive expressions of Christian belief and practice. Their insistence on voluntary membership challenged the legal power of the established churches. In the next section, we will introduce some of the distinctive features that have come to characterize the movement.

### ***1. History: Balancing Anabaptist and Pietist Influences***

Most participants in the early Brethren group were officially members of the Reformed Church in their native territory of the Electoral Palatinate. Although the Reformed Church constituted the numerical majority in the Palatinate, Prince Elector Johann Wilhelm (ruled 1690–1716) restored the dominance of Catholicism in religious and political matters. Religious conflicts coupled with the devastation of the Palatinate in the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–1697) and the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714) reduced and exhausted the population. Social and religious conditions fueled apocalyptic questionings for some citizens and promoted despair over the church system for others. In this context, the Pietist movement, with its emphasis on spiritual renewal, and some of the radical separatists associated with it attracted the attention of people weary of church politics, war, and hunger. At the same time, the small Mennonite population, descendants of the Swiss Anabaptist movement, offered an alternative religious perspective with their sincere, simple lifestyles and scriptural practices. The Mennonites' understanding of the church, discipleship, and Christian living encompassing every facet of life contributed to early Brethren concepts of the church, discipline, and discipleship.

Anabaptists had been present in the Palatinate since 1526. A harsh edict against Anabaptism in 1528 attempted to eradicate the movement. Milder policies were instituted by Prince Elector Friedrich III (ruled 1559–1576), the latter having introduced the Reformed faith to the Palatinate. Anabaptists were an entrenched minority there by the time of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). In the wake of destruction and depopulation from that war, Prince Elector Karl I Ludwig (ruled 1648–1680) created policies to repopulate the territory and offered a more lenient posture, leading limited tolerance for Anabaptists in 1665. These conditions attracted new waves of Mennonites fleeing Switzerland during renewed persecution there.

The roots of Anabaptism in the Palatinate extend to the first site of the emergence of Anabaptism, namely in Zürich, Switzerland, at the beginning of the Swiss Reformation between 1522 and 1525. Erstwhile associates of Ulrich Zwingli, the lead reformer, sought a different path to reform that was based on an adult confession of faith and baptism. The first adult baptisms took place in Zürich in 1525.

Mennonite scholar C. Arnold Snyder characterized the Anabaptism concept of church membership as grounded on the baptism of adults (and not infants) upon the confession of a

“mature faith.”<sup>5</sup> Membership was based on spiritual conversion and on an explicit commitment to holy living, a life of discipleship touching the totality of lived experience, and an ethic of nonresistance and love.<sup>6</sup> As Snyder noted, Anabaptists believed that saving grace transforms believers, spiritually regenerating them for lives of active discipleship.<sup>7</sup> Such understandings contrasted dramatically with the views of Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, the architects of magisterial Protestantism in Europe.

**Anabaptist Principles.** The legacy of Anabaptism came to the people who became Brethren through personal acquaintance with some Mennonites in the Palatinate and in the Basel area of Switzerland, as well as through Mennonite writings that the Brethren read. Some key principles of the Mennonites in the early eighteenth century impressed the Brethren:

- Salvation as an inner work of God’s grace manifested in conversion but also expressed through stringently ethical behavior based on the New Testament and example of Jesus. Only believers who confess faith in Christ and commit themselves to discipleship may receive baptism.
- The church primarily as the local gathering of converted, spiritually committed, and subsequently baptized adult believers with both the internal authority and a *responsibility* to discern and enforce standards of behavior, belief, and practice for members. The church was understood as the visible expression of God’s kingdom on earth, gathered out from a sinful and degenerate society, the kingdom of the world. According to this view, the church presents a clear alternative order, rather than a vehicle by which the wider society could be transformed.
- The clear separation between church and government structures and between believers and the world. Believers in the church expressed this separation through a radical nonconformity to the standards, behaviors, and assumptions of the surrounding society.
- The rejection of violence in any context and the principles of love and nonresistance to be exercised not only within the church fellowship but also outwardly toward others not in the church.

One elder comments:

In Anabaptist thinking, “the church is God’s called-out people.”

As the Brethren looked into the Scriptures seeking a return to New Testament principles, the teachings and practices of Mennonites reinforced their quest. While admiring the latter’s beliefs,

<sup>5</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Bender, “The Anabaptist Vision,” 78–87.

<sup>7</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 86–89.

practices, and integrity, the Brethren felt that the Mennonites had cooled in their efforts to evangelize others and to share their faith.<sup>8</sup> The Brethren also disagreed markedly with the ways the Mennonites carried out certain New Testament practices. A quotation taken from the work of Mack regarding the Mennonites clearly underlines this distinction:

It is true we consider our congregation (*Gemeinde*) superior to those now-deteriorated Baptists [Mennonites] with whom we are acquainted [*kennen*] and whom we know [*wisen*]...they have deteriorated in doctrine and life and have strayed far from the doctrine and life of the old Baptists [Anabaptists].<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the fledgling fellowship at Schwarzenau chose not to join them, instead embarking on a journey that was to result in the formation of a separate and distinctive church structure.

**Pietism.** Unlike the Anabaptist movement that emerged in the Reformation era in the 1520s and 1530s, the Pietist movement developed within Protestantism approximately one hundred and fifty years later. Its focus was the spiritual renewal of the established Protestant churches whose ardor and commitment had cooled since the Reformation.

Despite attempts by numerous scholars and church members to delineate Pietism and Anabaptism as neatly separate theological influences or even in polar opposition to each other, the distinctions are neither neatly distinct nor clearly opposed. Robert Friedmann proposed this view of Anabaptism and Pietism as opposites in his book *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries*.<sup>10</sup> His exaggerated account of the characteristics of the two movements skews the understanding of either one. While Friedmann contributed to the understanding of Mennonite writings, careful reconsiderations of Anabaptism and Pietism have created new spaces to assess differences and similarities between the two movements. Marcus Meier has demonstrated points of shared emphases between Pietists (particularly Radical Pietists) and Anabaptists at the turn of the eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> We will explore these below, following a brief introduction to Pietism.

While Philipp Jakob Spener, a Lutheran pastor in Frankfurt, Germany, is often credited as being the godfather of Pietism for introducing small group meetings (*collegia pietatis*) for edification in his congregation in 1670, scholars such as Klaus Deppermann and Martin Brecht point to the deeper roots of Pietism in English Puritan writings. Lewis Bayly's *Practice of Piety (Praxis Pietatis, 1612)* voiced concerns for godly living.<sup>12</sup> These Puritan impulses influenced some ministers and professors in the Netherlands, such as Willem Teelinck. He promoted more rigorous ethical and devout living in a movement called "the further reformation" (*de nadere reformatie*).

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<sup>8</sup> Meier, *Origin of the Schwarzenau Brethren*, 59–60.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Mack, quoted in Willoughby, *Beliefs of the Early Brethren*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety through the Centuries*, 9–13.

<sup>11</sup> Meier, *Origin of the Schwarzenau Brethren*, 56–59.

<sup>12</sup> Deppermann, "Der Englische Puritanismus," 44–45.



Reformed theology students from Germany who studied in the Netherlands, such as Theodor Undereyck, brought these priorities to their German congregations. Undereyck also proposed forming small house groups for Bible study and prayer in 1670.

As a youth, Spener read Bayly's *Practice of Piety* and Johann Arndt's *Six Books of True Christianity*,<sup>13</sup> a trailblazing book promoting inward spirituality for Lutherans and other readers. Spener arrived in Frankfurt in 1666 after a pastorate in Strasbourg.

In addition to his proposal for small groups in his church in 1670, Spener wrote a treatise in 1675, proposing church reform. It was titled *Pia Desideria (Pious Desires)*. From Spener's treatise, the following characteristics of Pietism can be identified:

- The centrality of the Bible for preaching, worship, and personal spiritual growth. Rather than the doctrinal wrangling that stymied Protestantism, Pietism emphasized the Bible.
- Greater emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, embodied in conventicle gatherings for prayer, fellowship, Bible study, and the sharing of spiritual experience. These groups promoted the nurture and development of faith. Initially, meetings were held at churches or in parsonages, but lay members began to hold them in their homes, to the objection of many church officials.
- A sense of unity among spiritual sisters and brothers with a shared experience of faith that grew out of the close fellowship of the small groups. In some locations, this trait fostered a sense of Christian identity that transcended traditional denominational boundaries; this commonality suggested a sense of separation from the world.<sup>14</sup> The strong emphasis on shared spiritual experience at times created a receptivity to more mystical elements of Christian spirituality, and many Pietists reinforced this tendency through turning to writers such as Jakob Boehme, Thomas á Kempis, the Scottish Puritan Samuel Rutherford, and even Catholic Quietists such as Miguel Molinos and Madame Guyon.
- A strong emphasis on living one's faith outwardly in moral behavior and upon improving the lives of those in need. Spener's protégé, August Hermann Francke, excelled at institutionalizing these efforts at the university in Halle, to which he was appointed in 1693. Inspired by Spener, Francke created a multitude of charitable institutions aimed at social improvement, including an orphanage, educational institutions (including schooling for girls), a pharmaceutical enterprise, and a publishing house. Halle saw the outworking of Spener's directive to demonstrate faith outwardly.
- Although Spener did not list his views on future times as a separate point in *Pious Desires*, a hope for "better coming times for the Church" was one of his

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<sup>13</sup> Shantz, *Introduction to German Pietism*, 76–78.

<sup>14</sup> Shantz, *Introduction to German Pietism*, 5, 13.

concerns. Renewed eschatological hope characterized Pietism and gave an impetus to evangelize. This outreach fueled the beginnings of foreign missions emerging from Halle. In some Pietist quarters, the hope for better coming times nurtured a much more radical expectation of Christ's imminent return, bringing with it a harsh judgment of corruption in the churches of Europe. These expectations were especially prominent in war-torn areas such as the Electoral Palatinate and in areas where church authorities exercised substantial oppression.

- While Spener never mentioned a personal experience of spiritual rebirth, Francke made the “struggle for repentance” (*Busskampf*) and resulting spiritual rebirth a hallmark of his preaching. Repentance and spiritual rebirth have become a resultant significant characteristic of the Pietist movement. Where such spiritual “new birth” was emphasized, it tended to soften the significance of denominational or doctrinal difference and of formal church structures.<sup>15</sup>

When Spener introduced small groups in Frankfurt in 1670, a wealthy lawyer in the congregation, Johann Jakob Schütz, helped to implement the plan. Initially, Schütz was interested in spiritual and mystical writings. He had a more urgent sense of Christ's imminent return in judgment accompanied by a greater pessimism that the Lutheran church could be renewed. Schütz withdrew from the congregation, forming his own small group, the Saalhof Circle, named for the place where they met. This group formed the nucleus for what many scholars call Radical Pietism, a branch within the movement characterized by readiness to separate from the institutional church and with greater apocalyptic expectations.<sup>16</sup> Radical Pietists were more open to women's leadership and to diverse religious experiences, ranging from the inwardly mystical to the boisterously ecstatic. The Radical Pietists envisioned a church without structure or form, created from relationships with like-minded believers and transcending denominational boundaries.

Radical Pietism exerted significant influence on the Brethren at Schwarzenau through two particular individuals. The first was the Lutheran scholar and pastor Gottfried Arnold. His book about the first Christians, *True Portrait of the First Christians* (1693), presented believers of the first two centuries as the most faithful Christians and a model for reforming the Lutheran church in Arnold's time.<sup>17</sup> Arnold's most influential work was his three-volume *Church and Heretic History* (1699–1700). In this work, Arnold claimed that people often persecuted as heretics were more faithful Christians than those who controlled the church systems. Around the turn of the eighteenth century, Arnold identified more closely with Radical Pietism, returning a few years later to conformity to the Lutheran church. During his radical phase, Arnold communicated

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<sup>15</sup> Shantz, *Introduction to German Pietism*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 7–8.

<sup>17</sup> Stoffer, *Background and Development*, 19–38.

extensively with members of the Philadelphian Society, founded in England by the English spiritualist Jane Leade and devoted to Jacob Boehme's writings. Members considered Leade to be a prophet and shared her view of an invisible church with strong brotherly and sisterly bonds. They upheld her teaching of universal restoration. According to her concept of restoration, at some point in the future all sinners, as well as Satan and demons, would be forgiven and restored to God. The Philadelphian network of influence extended to Germany, the Netherlands, the British colonies, and beyond.

The second Radical Pietist who most influenced the Brethren was Ernst Christoph Hochmann von Hochenau, an erstwhile legal student who experienced conversion in Halle. After his spiritual rebirth, he set out as a self-appointed itinerant preacher.<sup>18</sup> He called people to repentance and rebirth, warning them of Christ's impending return in judgment, which Hochmann predicted for Easter of 1700. Hochmann called people to leave the corrupt established churches and create a fellowship of loving Christians with no structured church.

**Pietism, Anabaptism, and the Formation of the Brethren in Schwarzenau.** Radical Pietist preachers' and writers' influence on the early Brethren motivated their questioning and their separation from the established churches. Those who became Brethren absorbed Anabaptist influences from books such as *Martyrs Mirror* (1660, 1685) and *Golden Apples in Silver Bowls* (1702) as well as through personal contacts with Mennonites and perhaps Amish people. From Anabaptism, the Brethren developed greater clarity about forming a visible church that would practice adult baptism, church discipline, and peace. Marcus Meier has written the definitive treatment of the interplay of these two movements on the formation of the Brethren. In reviewing Meier's work, one might notice that at times the influences overlap, reinforcing each other. It would also, however, be true to say that at times the characteristics of each movement pull in different directions.

From the dynamic interplay of Radical Pietism and Anabaptism some emphases emerged that led to the decision of the first Brethren in Schwarzenau to practice believers baptism and church discipline. From Hochmann and some other radicals, such as Georg Rosenbach, came the questioning of the validity of infant baptism. However, denying infant baptism was not the same as deciding to adopt the baptism of adult believers, as the Mennonites insisted. In Gottfried Arnold's writings, the Brethren found support for baptism by immersion, rather than by pouring water, as the Mennonites practiced. The insistence on baptism as entry into visible church membership separated the Brethren from their Radical Pietist friends. The adoption of threefold immersion baptism divided the Brethren from their Mennonite friends.

From Hochmann and Arnold the Brethren absorbed the value of strong mutual love among fellow believers, even addressing one another as "brother" and "sister" and practicing the holy kiss. While the latter practice was not common among Mennonites, they did emphasize the importance of strong bonds of fellowship, serving to encourage this emphasis among the Brethren. The "flat" emphasis in the Old German Baptists' ecclesiastical structures, which we will explore in detail later in the article, has its roots in the emphasis on mutual love.

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<sup>18</sup> Meier, *Origin of the Schwarzenau Brethren*, 14–16, 90–91.

When we discussed with a group of senior OGBB leaders which underlying emphases distinguish them from other groups, one elder noted:

Mutual love is a central foundation of Brethren thinking; it emerges in our practices, in our giving and receiving of hospitality as well as in our non-hierarchical structures.... Love together is what makes us the Body of Christ; love among the Brethren is a prominent theme throughout the Brotherhood.

The Brethren observed in Mennonite practice and writings the willingness to carry out church discipline. As Marcus Meier has noted, some Reformed ministers with Pietist sympathies, such as Undereyck and Heinrich Horch, attempted to practice discipline in their congregations. Both Anabaptism and Radical Pietism mutually reinforced the Brethren commitment to this practice, contrasting unfavorably with the norms of the territorial churches.

The early Brethren absorbed the zeal of Radical Pietist lay preachers to prepare for the imminent end times through repentance, spiritual rebirth, and sharing of their faith. The Mennonites had long since tempered these concerns. Ultimately, the Brethren, too, focused on a lively, inward spiritual life and on the apostolic practices of the first Christians to replace the failed timetables of Christ's return so notable among the Radicals. Consequently, the Brethren expanded their ritual practice based on the New Testament and Arnold's accounts of the first Christians. The Brethren adopted the love feast, incorporating the central components of a self-examination service, feetwashing, a fellowship meal, and the sharing of the bread and cup of communion. The members at Schwarzenau adopted anointing for healing and the holy kiss. These emphases created a clear distinction between the group and their Anabaptist friends as well as between the Brethren and the rest of Protestantism.

It is tempting in these comparisons to create a clear and overly simplistic dialectic where the Schwarzenau Brethren embedded themselves in a myopic Pietism that stood in polar opposition to Anabaptism, as one might conclude from Friedmann's account. Neither, however, did they form a synthesis between two opposite movements, as maintained by some Brethren scholars of the twentieth century, such as Vernard Eller and Dale Brown. Instead, our ponderings invite readers to consider a layered and much more complex mingling of influences, sometimes overlapping and sometimes diverging, sometimes complementary, sometimes contradictory. These tensions continue to be at the heart of OGBB culture and spirituality today.

**Pietism, Anabaptism, and the Old German Baptist Brethren.** The Old German Baptists have not remained untouched by the tensions within American society and American religious culture. They have experienced strains, too, within their own boundaries as well as within the broader Brethren family, including the divisions that led to their formation in 1881. They have also experienced tensions and divisions within their own branch of the Brethren family. The pull and push of these varying influences would suggest that present-day Old German Baptists are not necessarily identical in all points to the Schwarzenau group.

Impacts from the mingling of Anabaptism and Pietism, especially Radical Pietism, still provide stimuli that are potent in shaping the Old German Baptist Brethren as they negotiate their distinctness from American culture and from other Plain groups and as they chart the future course for the Brotherhood.

A member who joined from outside the Plain world reflects:

I feel that the Old German Baptist attitude...and I joined the Fraternity from outside...is much less judgmental than some other [denominations]. The concern is certainly not with who is “saved” or not as in some evangelical circles. We have our definite convictions, but we try to leave judgment to God...where it belongs.

I also feel that there is a less rigid attitude than in some Anabaptist groups where if there’s a disagreement about a doctrine or a practice, there’s immediately a pull-off into a split. My brothers and sisters know I have come a different journey and don’t expect me to disown all the influences from that. I can watch a ball game with my brother in his home (he’s a Presbyterian) and talk about our interest in country music, without it bothering the Brethren unduly. I sometimes wonder if that’s the Pietist influence, which is more concerned with the heart than with outward conformity.

The Old German Baptists still practice the multiple apostolic practices that they find in the New Testament, which Gottfried Arnold championed in his writings. These include threefold immersion baptism in running water<sup>19</sup> upon confession of faith, greeting with the holy kiss, and the use of the terms “brother” and “sister.”<sup>20</sup> The love feast with all of its components, anointing of the sick, and the laying on of hands for conferring the Holy Spirit at baptism and for setting apart church leaders are also part of this panoply. The group still emphasizes Bible reading and biblical literacy for all members. They practice church discipline, mingling emphases from Anabaptists and some Reformed Pietists. The strong emphasis on mutual love among the Brotherhood reinforces a more pietistic flattening of leadership structures that prevents a centralized denominational body and prevents the authority of elders from becoming elevated over and above the membership.

At the same time, some emphases have changed. The Old German Baptist Brethren do not engage in intentional evangelizing as a group, as might have been more characteristic of the first Brethren.

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<sup>19</sup> In certain areas, such as parts of Kansas where running water is difficult to find, reportedly the rite takes place in ponds, rather than in moving water; this variation is seen as acceptable due to geographical necessity.

<sup>20</sup> Among the OGBB, women members are universally denoted as “sisters” and male members as “brothers.”

One OGGB reader of this manuscript asks:

Is this really the way the early Brethren engaged in group evangelism or is it a revisionist historian's speculation? Could it be that society has changed and that communication, interaction have changed dramatically in the interim?

In their reluctance to aggressively proselytize, the Old German Baptists may have followed a pattern that the seventeenth-century Mennonites experienced. In the case of the Old German Baptists, it is more likely akin to the accommodation of the Dutch Mennonites in a culture of affluence in the seventeenth century rather than to the quietude of the Swiss Mennonites due to continued repression.

While the end times retains its interest among members, a rigidity of expectations concerning the Second Coming have softened considerably. Some speculation on eschatology now comes from American evangelical culture, while in some Old German Baptist circles, the concept of universal restoration retains an appeal.<sup>21</sup>

The distillation of these varying influences also results in a particular view of religious identity. Members of the Old German Baptist Brethren see themselves *primarily* as members of an overall brotherhood rather than as individual believers or members of distinct congregations. Local congregations, known as districts, are seen as significant, but constituent parts of the overall; their membership is composed of members living within a particular geographical boundary (defined by the Annual Meeting) rather than by personal preference.

The push and pull of influences from Anabaptism and Pietism, and the interactions with American culture, still provide a number of distinct identity markers influential in constituting the Old German Baptist Brethren as a distinctive body of believers. These will be described in the remainder of the article.

## ***2. Ordinances: A Detailed Array of Symbolically Rich Markers***

A unique hallmark of Old German Baptist Brethren identity is a set of practices—and the related beliefs—defined as “ordinances.” These include believers baptism by trine immersion, the “salutation” or holy kiss exchanged exclusively with members, the love feast (including self-examination, mutual feetwashing, a common meal, holy kiss, and communion), anointing, and the women’s prayer covering. All are seen as essential for the definition and nurture of the Christian life. Such ordinances are viewed as deeply grounded in the New Testament and in the practices of the early church. The OGGB are distinguished not only by this particular range of rites, which they recognize as scriptural ordinances, but also by the detail of ritual and the

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<sup>21</sup> It is very difficult to assess the prevalence of Final Restoration thinking among OGGB members. While preaching on the topic is officially disallowed, the authors have heard the doctrine referred to sympathetically in a significant number of informal conversations. Final Restoration also continues to be officially taught by some of the smaller “breakaway” Old Order groups, such as the Old Brethren German Baptists, known colloquially as the “Deer Creekers.”

universal uniformity with which each one is observed. The solemnity and richness of symbolic detail involved in the practice of each is quite arresting.

**Baptism.** The ordinance of believers baptism is central for the Old German Baptists. It demarcates identity as the rite by which individuals publicly commit themselves to Christ and his way, freely confess sin seeking forgiveness in Christ, and the sole gateway through which they gain admittance to membership of the church. Their practice is based firmly in the conviction that Christian beliefs and practice must be based in New Testament teaching, most particularly in the life, example, and teaching of Christ, and exemplified in the practice of the early church.<sup>22</sup>

The small group of Radical Pietists, meeting for prayer and Bible study in the village of Schwarzenau during the early 1700s, began to question the scriptural validity of their original christenings in the Reformed or Lutheran traditions of their birth. There was a growing sense that believers baptism by immersion was the sole model with a New Testament warranty and the one exemplified by Jesus' example. In 1708, as a statement of obedience to this example, eight adults received baptism by trine immersion in the river Eder. On that day, a distinct church—and simultaneously the Brethren movement—was born.

Their baptism constituted a dangerous and risky action in Continental Europe at the time. Adult baptism was still illegal, perceived as an act of defiance to the intertwined hegemony of church and state; it was punishable by imprisonment, banishment, or death. Added to this critical danger, their actions did not sit well with their Anabaptist and Pietist associates. Previously, there had been warm relations, and the emerging Brethren had learned much from both groups. Much of the Brethren's understanding of the church and its nature had been strongly influenced by their contact with Anabaptists. For the latter, the external world and its assumptions and priorities were seen as contrary to Christ's teaching. As a result, the believer must "withdraw from the worldly system and create a Christian social order within the fellowship of the church."<sup>23</sup> Believers baptism was viewed as the sole entry to such a church, which then becomes a completely alternative society based in the values, practices, and assumptions expressed in the life and teaching of Christ. The Anabaptists, however, although practicing believers baptism, administered the rite by pouring a little water on the candidates' heads. This expression of the ordinance was vociferously condemned as both unscriptural and invalid by the Brethren, to whom total trine immersion was the only method with biblical warrant. This step of baptism caused a significant rupture with their former Anabaptist associates.

The Radical Pietists, on the other hand, saw the Brethren's new insistence upon a particular form of baptism as promoting an unwelcome sectarianism, creating a dangerous precedent, and elevating a legalistic obedience above the spiritual, almost mystical union that joined all those who had experienced true conversion in a common Christian fellowship. In their actions, the Brethren were viewed as promoting the notion of a visible organizational model of church over the traditional invisible union of all true believers so dear to the heart of Radical Pietism.

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<sup>22</sup> Stoffer, *Background and Development*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," 88.

By insisting upon a very specific practice of adult baptism, the Schwarzenau group had managed to place themselves in a highly vulnerable position in relation to the State. They had also created a significant division between themselves and their erstwhile associates. For the Brethren, the ensuing conflicts, the threat of state prosecution, and the loss of friends were viewed as a consequence of faithful discipleship. Even today, such associations of profound cost are close to the consciousness of those undergoing the ordinance. In adopting a “two kingdoms” approach to life, baptism indicates a severing of all links with the kingdom of the world and a commitment to the kingdom of God with all that entails in terms of implications for behavior, lifestyle, and submission to the church.

**The Rite.** Baptism, entrée to the church—and the kingdom, as God’s kingdom is seen as synonymous with the church—is applied for on the initiative of the individual after much soul-searching and prayer. Two elders then visit privately with the person requesting baptism and ask if the individual will accept nonconformity to the world and nonresistance and refuse to join secret societies. On being satisfied with the testimony of such candidates, the ministers set a date for the baptism and announce a gathering of the congregation in the meetinghouse for that date. At that meeting, the ministers confirm that the candidates have been asked the preliminary questions and that they have answered in the affirmative. Then the candidates and their families withdraw from the meeting room and the lead elder asks the congregation to voice their acceptance of the candidates. The outcome is always a unanimous “yes.” The applicants and their families then come back into the room. The lead minister reads Matthew 18:10–20 and asks the candidates if they accept this teaching and will follow its steps. After they agree verbally, there is an exposition of the passage, and in due course all who are present go to the local baptismal site, usually in a stream near the meetinghouse. If the stream is not sufficiently deep for full immersion, a section of the stream will have been partially dammed to create a pool. However, the barrier will be created in such a way as to allow for some water to continue flowing so that the baptism occurs in moving water, emulating the example of Jesus’ baptism in the flowing waters of the Jordan.

At the baptismal site, a brief service is held, including an address or short sermon. The candidates stand in front of the crowd, garbed, perhaps for the first time, in the standard uniform of the OGBB. The service includes prayer, for which the congregation kneels. After all rise upon the conclusion of the prayer, a black-suited minister wades into the water up to his thighs to find a place where the water is sufficiently deep. A deacon or another minister then assists the applicant into the water. The presiding minister offers a hand to the applicant to help them to the spot where she or he will kneel in the water. The minister standing in the water asks the applicant questions relating to the three vows of baptism. Does the candidate believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who brought from heaven a saving gospel? Will the candidate renounce Satan and all his worldly pomps? Does the candidate promise to be faithful unto death? After the applicant answers affirmatively to the vows, the presiding minister places a hand on the back of the person’s head and immerses him or her three times, “in the name of the Father...and in the name of the Son...and in the name of the Holy Ghost.” The kneeling posture, the bowed head



and the forward immersion all speak of baptism not just as an initiation but as a profound act of worship, and of submission. The minister, laying his hands upon the head of the new member, now prays again, seeking that the individual's name will be written in the Lamb's Book of Life, that an assurance of sins forgiven will be granted, and that there will be an infilling of the Holy Spirit. Both the prayer and laying on of hands speak of an anointing of the candidate; they are now set apart for God's work, among his people. The baptizing complete, the dripping candidate is helped back onto the riverbank and the procedure is repeated for any other applicants. Some congregations start to sing a hymn after the last newly baptized person emerges from the water.

The integral ritual of greeting their still damp but usually radiant fellow members now begins, as all members of the district welcome the new members into the Fraternity. Relatives who are not members also greet the newly baptized. Members of the new members' biological family are the first to greet them: parents, siblings, grandparents, and then family members of married siblings. Those among the relatives who are members of the church will greet with a holy kiss, with men kissing men, women kissing women, and the "right hand of fellowship" offered between the genders. Relatives who are not members of the church will greet with a handshake only. After the relatives have greeted the newly baptized members, male members of the congregation will greet the new brothers with the holy kiss and offer the new sisters a handshake. The female members of the congregation will greet the new sisters with a kiss and offer the right hand of fellowship to the new brothers. Women members greeting a new female member often add a warm and emotion-filled embrace as they welcome them into the "ark of safety" constituted by the church. As one elder tellingly puts it: "Here we greet our new brother or sister, for the first time on the road to Heaven"; such is the potency of the rite of baptism for the OGBB. Members now disperse homewards—and often the "Youngfolks" to an evening of fellowship, usually in a member's local barn or workshop.

One elder comments on the OGBB perception of the ordinance:

To me, baptism is linked in our thinking to obedience; a converted heart will always seek to be an obedient heart. It's like "Belief, repentance, obedience." It's the obedience, not the water that's significant in baptism.... There's a spiritual work in obedience.

**Understanding.** As in much OGBB thinking, there is a significant emphasis on *form* in baptism and on the specific features of its administration; even apparently minor details attain a symbolic import and a significance in the perceived validity of the rite.

Despite a certain apparent nebulousness concerning the doctrinal underpinnings of baptism, a number of salient points are clearly articulated:

- The emphasis in baptism is almost as much on its being an entrance to the church community, moving from the kingdom of the world to that of God, as it is about personal conversion.

- The presence, not just of family and friends, but of the whole church to welcome the newly baptized into the “ark of safety” is symbolic of an enfolding into a new way of life. In reality, this is the stage when the uniform is donned and the full panoply of Plain practices is embraced. Baptism is a clear marker of the definition of personal self-denial and a new walk of life.
- Baptism is that first public step in a life of faith expressed in obedience. The prayer after the baptism is significant in that it points in a sense to the “ordination” of each candidate as a minister with their own particular gifts to be used in the kingdom. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is referenced in an underlying way.
- While the doctrinal view is at one level close to “baptismal regeneration,” there is in actuality a fine distinction here. Baptism is seen as an essential step in the process of salvation, but this stems from the view that it is seen as a scriptural requirement and *obedience* is understood as being an essential expression of real faith. Baptism is commanded by Jesus (and follows his example). It is not the water, but the faith working through obedience that is understood as an essential in the process of regeneration.
- The involvement of the local church members is (as with preparations for the love feast) very significant. Many sisters (women members) will be involved in making a whole set of new dresses, bonnets, and coverings for women candidates, and suits for men or boys. These are completed at district sewing days.

The following—perhaps fictional—story has been recounted. Apocryphal or not, it does seem to illustrate some of the elements relating to baptism that are emphasized among Brotherhood members:

I remember my daddy telling me of a baptizin’ years back; it was mid-winter and it was pretty cold. The elder who was administering the ordinance was elderly and there were some fears for his health. So havin’ broken the ice, some of the younger brethren brewed up a big, big cauldron of hot water borrowed from a farm and then tipped it in upstream just before the actual baptizin’. They figured it would just about hit the place and warm things up a little as the minister and candidates got in the water.... It was done in kindness, but I remember my Daddy sayin’ the elder involved was not impressed when he heard. He said they should have just trusted the Lord.... When you get converted and follow the Lord in baptism, there’ll be suffering involved, ridicule maybe, but you jus’ gotta’ trust Him for whatever’s to come...Baptizin’ in freezin’ water is as good a place to start as any, I reckon.

For the OGBB, the rite of baptism is a mark of obedience and the gateway to a living relationship with God, but also to a life of sacrifice and perhaps suffering; as Stoffer notes of

Brethren thought, “A necessary mark of the Christian life, suffering is a natural outgrowth of the Christian’s denial of self and of worldly practices.”<sup>24</sup> It is an entrée, too, to that mysteriously profound—almost mystical—bond that is central to Old German Baptist internal relationships. The individual is now willingly subsumed—in one sense almost lost—in collectivity; the emphasis is now squarely on community rather than on individual identity.

The emphasis on a particular understanding and practice of baptism is balanced in the following statement, expressed by a senior and much respected elder:

This is our view...our practice of baptism. We believe it’s vitally important and that we must preach it and practice it. But other people differ from us...the Mennonites do things differently...and we remember they’re God’s people too.

**The Holy Kiss or Salutation.** In keeping with and underlining baptism as an entrée to a shared identity and a world of common meaning, the holy kiss is a noteworthy ritual that flows from this understanding. It is qualitatively different from the communal rites associated with baptism and love feast (although it forms an important incorporation into both). The salutation is exchanged whenever members meet at church, in homes, or in other (usually) private settings. Exchanged between men and men, women and women, and solely between members, the light kiss on the lips is accompanied by the exchange of a handshake—the “right hand of fellowship.”

To a query about the exclusionary practice of the salutation, one sister remarks:

I have felt that if we share the holy kiss with others outside of our fellowship whom we believe to be Christians, as some would wish to do, we are actually taking individual responsibility for an undue judgment. We are actually saying that “because, in my view, I believe you to be a true Christian, I will pass you the salutation,” or alternatively, “I don’t feel you are a true believer and therefore will not pass you the holy kiss.” When we leave the passing of the kiss as “confined” to our own members, we are leaving the judgment to the church, or indeed to God, where it rightly belongs.

The exchange constitutes the ritualizing of a clear boundary between those who are part of a shared world and those who are outside that boundary. Even those “just outside”—for instance, those who belong to or have joined an Old German Baptist group of a slightly different order—are stringently excluded from the exchange; instead of the kiss of fellowship, they traditionally receive the “straight arm” handshake that symbolizes distancing. It is a reminder of a clear distinction that symbolically points to the shared love of God that unites the hearts of true

<sup>24</sup> Stoffer, *Background and Development*, 17.

believers. It is experienced as pointing to that relationship with God and fellow members, and it consequently enacts, reiterates, and seals the expression of holy love and unity.

**Love Feast.** At least once a year, each congregation (“district”) will hold the love feast. What is frequently referred to as “the love feast occasion” is exactly that—a full weekend of services culminating on the Saturday evening with the love feast itself.<sup>25</sup> The whole weekend emphasizes worship, recommitment of lives to God, fellowship, and a reconnection with other members in that mystical sense of spiritual linkage that binds them together as a fraternity. All baptized members of the hosting district are expected to attend the weekend of special services. Each occasion involves intense—practical and spiritual—preparation, which includes the visit to each member by local church officials to ensure their continued commitment to the Fraternity. The conversations involved also act as a litmus test for overall unity within the district. If this is found to be lacking, it is not unknown for the occasion to be postponed until matters have been resolved. Members not felt to be in communion can also be “set back” from participation. On a more practical level, preparations also involve the readying of the meetinghouse, preparation for house guests, and preparation of communal meals to serve several hundred attendees. The baking of the communion bread and the making of the wine are significant events involving an emphasis on both fellowship and spiritual engagement.

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<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the love feast, see Walsh, “Profound Encounters.”



*The informal fellowship and conversation between services and communal meals are a vital part of love feast occasions, seen as promoting connection between members of a geographically disparate group. (Photo courtesy of Tony Walsh)*

Typically, OGBB members from neighboring congregations and many from out of state will also attend. Ultimately, a member of the OGBB may attend several love feasts in the fall and in the spring of the year (these tend to be the times when the occasions are held), even though their own congregation may hold a love feast only once a year. Congregations in a given region will coordinate the dates of the love feasts so that no two adjoining congregations have the event on the same weekend. In that manner, members can attend as many love feasts in their region as possible, an activity that is strongly encouraged. The love feast is also observed at the Fraternity's annual meeting, held around Pentecost, which all members are encouraged to attend.

The love feast is a composite experience that the Schwarzenau Brethren formed from their beginning. Each of its several components is based on biblical passages that refer to the ancient Christian practice of communion, and particularly to the Gospels' account of Jesus' last evening with his disciples in an "upper room" in Jerusalem.

Visitors start to arrive for the weekend on Friday and typically stay in the homes of local members. Often the hosts are relatives of the visitors. On Saturday morning, the weekend opens with a preaching service of around two hours in length, with sermons emphasizing the centrality of Christ's sacrifice, repentance, and preparation for participation in the later communion. This is followed by a communal lunch prepared by local district members, always consisting of the same fare of boiled beef, broth, bread, pickles, and apple butter, and concluding with pies or fresh fruit. The communal meals, a central feature of the weekend, underline the importance of fellowship as an integral part of the overall experience. A slightly shorter afternoon service follows and, after a break, the actual love feast begins, usually around five o'clock; it frequently lasts for over four hours. In congregations with large meetinghouses and many visitors, two services may take place simultaneously: the main service in the packed upstairs meetinghouse and one for the "overflow" in the basement. Both areas will have been prepared with white-clothed tables surrounded by benches at which all participants are seated. The combination of local and visiting ministers supplies enough leaders to conduct two simultaneous services.

The central focus of the weekend, held on the Saturday evening, opens with a service of self-examination, based on instructions in I Corinthians 11 that each person should examine himself to discern rightly their preparedness to participate. This is followed by communal footwashing, accompanied by a sermon based on the account in John 13 of Jesus washing the disciples' feet and instructing them to wash one another's feet. Enacting this command embodies both humility and trust as members kneel before one another and yield their feet, in an act of profound vulnerability, to the care of fellow members.

A simple meal of bread, water, boiled beef, and broth is then served, based on Jesus eating a last supper with the disciples and the description of a meal taken at the time of communion in I Corinthians 11. The OGBB typically call this meal "the Lord's Supper" because that term is used in this chapter of I Corinthians to refer to the meal that the Christians ate when they also shared the bread and cup of communion. It is accompanied by preaching that reminds participants of their fellowship together and looking forward to the "Wedding Banquet of the Lamb" (Revelation 19), providing a forward-looking, hope-filled dimension in addition to the strong emphasis on obedience.

The final part of the love feast—for many, the high point—and one that includes the ritualized exchange of the holy kiss in two unbroken chains between sisters and brothers, precedes the sharing of strips of unleavened bread and the passing of a common cup of wine as symbols of Christ's body and blood. Participants "commune" each other, signifying the importance of the role of the members rather than that of a priestly officiant in conducting the transactions of communion. Commemorating the redemptive value of Christ's death, the forgiveness of sins, and participation in the unfathomable love of God in Christ are at the core of this communion service.

All the disparate yet closely connected elements of the weekend's central service are woven together with hymns, a variety of sermons, and times of extempore prayer. Throughout the love feast, a minister reads a pertinent passage from the Bible prior to each component of the service.

Then one or more of the ministers preach about the meaning and significance of these actions. Thus, the love feast combines the public reading and proclamation of Scripture and an enactment of the practices outlined. The highly tactile aspects of participation—the gentle and reciprocal washing of feet, the exchange of the holy kiss, the breaking of bread to one another in a process of mutual communing, and the constant invitation within the sermons and hymns to visualize and to imaginatively reconnect with the central events of the biblical accounts—all intensify the deepening of participants' experience. These combine to produce an extraordinarily intense level of engagement and to reiterate the sense of a close, often mystical and deeply personal bond with Christ as well as with other participants. There is an almost tangible connection with other members unable to be present for geographical or other reasons and, indeed, with those who have gone before, a clear reference to what other denominations might refer to as the “communion of saints.”

The service concludes generally late in the evening with closing comments often referring to the consistently unchanging nature of this service. There is a hymn, a prayer, and dismissal as members go out quietly into the night, as did a small group in Jerusalem so many centuries ago. As members return to one another's homes, the fellowship and sharing continue often far into the night.

Sunday morning dawns early (usually, but not invariably), opening with a short 7:00 a.m. service followed by a communal breakfast. The weekend then concludes with a preaching service of about two hours duration in which the various ministers preach about the significance of what has happened, underscoring the renewal of harmony, unity, and love among the members, and its necessity for the church to function in proper order. This spiritual quality among the members (local and visiting) characterizes the desired state for the church and is seen as God's gift and blessing to the members upon their willingness to practice the acts taught by Jesus. The service is followed by another communal meal and often by organized activities for the “Youngfolks” in the afternoon.

The love feast constitutes an intense experience that renews the members in their baptismal faith and their bonds of love and fellowship with one another. It is the yearly high point in each congregation. Members enjoy similar renewal by attending the love feasts of other congregations. The various elements of the occasion all illustrate how spiritual renewal and deep and harmonious connection among the members and within the church are vital to the lives of the members and congregations within a highly defined faith community.

**Anointing.** Among the Old German Baptist Brethren, anointing is seen as a significant ordinance, performed at the request of a member who is ill, facing an operation, approaching death, or confronting some other form of life crisis.

A member who had requested anointing prior to a serious operation shared this experience:  
 During the service, I felt the leading of the Spirit. After everyone left, I felt resolved about God's will and in the following days felt more peace.

Following the precedent of James, chapter 5, at least two district elders are called upon and the ritual normally takes place in the candidate's home. Usually, depending on the circumstances and the reason for the anointing, a group of friends and family members are invited to join the occasion. The Minute of 1860 reiterated in 2002<sup>26</sup> outlines a three-fold purpose for anointing: "the strengthening of thy faith...the comforting of thy conscience...a full assurance of the remission of thy sins." Healing, while often an aspiration, is not explicitly mentioned. At the beginning of the service, the candidate is asked three questions that make overt the prerequisites for engagement: "Is it your desire to be anointed?" "Are you, as far as you know, in peace and union with the church?" "Are you resigned to the will of the Lord?"

The following is an account of a recent anointing:

*Somehow the light seemed a little dim in the living room that late winter evening. Each time the door opened, admitting some of the invited brethren, it ushered in a draft of frosty air. Winter coats and shawls were shed in the small entry, and tonight everyone came directly into the living room, rather than the usual Sunday practice of sisters repairing to the kitchen and men to the living room. There was the usual exchange of the holy kiss with fellow members. The atmosphere was quiet; a sense of solemnity filled the very air and the visiting that took place felt restrained, quieter than usual. Daniel, who had requested the ordinance, sat in his recliner, exchanging greetings. He looked pale, perhaps a little apprehensive.*

*Then, as one of the two elders stepped forward, positioning himself beside and a little in front of Daniel, everyone hastily took their seats in a large circle. He started by asking three questions: "Is it your desire to be anointed?" "Are you, as far as you know, in peace and union with the church?" "Are you resigned to the will of the Lord?"*

*The answer to each was a quiet "Yes."*

*The elder then gave a short address bearing on the nature of healing.*

*He then lined a hymn and we all sang. The sound of the loud, slow harmonies in the low-ceilinged room was almost overwhelming. It was also strangely moving. The words of the hymn, as we sang in this context of home and illness, achieved a fresh depth of meaning:*

*Oh let this affliction be blest,  
 And answer Thy gracious design,  
 Then grant that my soul may find rest  
 In comforts so healing as Thine.*

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<sup>26</sup> Minutes of the Annual Meeting, 998, 1069.



*Daniel had chosen it as one that resonated with particular meaning for him. As we sang, there seemed to be a deep unity of spirit with him.... I remembered his words when he told me that he had requested anointing: "I want to be anointed to help me trust more in God's will about the outcome of the next operation," he had said.*

*There is a pause after the hymn concludes and the other elder now steps forward; he reads from the fifth chapter of the Epistle of James, the scripture portion that outlines the rationale for the ordinance of anointing: "Is any sick among you? Let him call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." The resonant words of the Authorized Version ring clearly through the quiet room; heads bowed, the company follows the chapter in their own Bibles. Now there is prayer and the Lord's Prayer. Then the two elders turn toward Daniel in his recliner; one pours a little oil into the hand of the other and he anoints Daniel's bowed head. This process is repeated three times: the first "for the strengthening of faith"; the second, "for the comforting of conscience"; and lastly, "for the remission of sins." Occasionally, I have been told, the candidate will speak at this stage, sharing perhaps a concern, or a sin, hidden long within the heart. Such confidences are not shared beyond the room; to do so would be seen as the betrayal of a sacred confidentiality.*

*Now comes "the laying on of hands," and the two elders lay alternate, interlaced hands upon the bowed head while one of them offers prayer and then the other leads in the Lord's Prayer again. There is a brief reflective silence in the room, and then the elders greet Daniel individually with the holy kiss and share a few words of encouragement with him. There is another short pause, and then the others in the room do likewise, one at a time. The anointing is complete; sometimes, as tonight, the company joins in singing hymns before sharing food.*

A sister reflects:

Is physical healing a result of the anointing? Maybe. If it doesn't seem to be, does that mean it didn't work? I don't think anyone would say that. From what I have seen, peace of mind has always been accomplished. I guess that means enough. As humans, it is appointed for us all to die; the timing of this is in God's hands; the anointing represents the conscious placing of all...of life and death, sickness and health, prosperity or need...where these belong, in God's hands.

**The Prayer Covering.** Most, if not all Plain groups are distinguished by their insistence on female members wearing a head, or prayer, covering.<sup>27</sup> The practice is based on the Apostle Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:3–12; however, there is wide variety among groups in the form and style of head coverings. Some are quite elaborate, carefully crafted from linen or net, while for other groups a simple handkerchief, "doily," or cap-like covering suffices. The type

<sup>27</sup> Kraybill, *Concise Encyclopedia*, 103.

and style in actuality form a useful way of identifying which group the wearers belong to. Generally speaking, the more assimilated the group, the simpler and less obtrusive the covering.



*The prayer covering worn by sisters among the Old German Baptist Brethren; for sleeping, it is replaced by a softer cotton version. (Photo courtesy of Sam Funkhouser)*

Many members, both women and men, are distinguished from other Plain groups in that they view the covering and its wearing not just as a scripturally defined regulation, but as a sacred ordinance as significant as the holy kiss or as any of those already described in this piece. Others, however, hold a somewhat different perspective, viewing the covering as an essential part of the “uniform” and thus an expression of their faith and of their lifestyle. However, they would not see it as an ordinance. Many OGBB women see the prayer covering as a holy object. When one wears out, they consider it best to burn it; few would throw a worn-out prayer covering into the trash. For all, it encapsulates and emphasizes the principle of submission, not just for women but as a core principle of Christian life.

One female member comments:

I believe the covering shows a respect for God’s ordained order. It demonstrates submission to that order. Wearing the covering is about submission to God; it stands for the whole principle of submission.

The OGBB style of covering is quite an intricate—and quite uncomfortable looking—affair of rigid, pleated net that is worn at all times, both in homes and at church-related affairs. When out and about, the white covering is normally shielded by a black felt bonnet (or in the summer, a woven-straw bonnet). It is replaced for sleep with a softer cotton version of similar design. The style probably has its origins in the head coverings worn by German peasant women in the 1800s to protect their hair from soot, dust, and insects.

Gender roles are heavily regimented within German Baptist society. The universal wearing of the covering is often interpreted by outsiders, and indeed by some academics, as simply an expression of oppression, of the silencing of women, and of a crass disregard of women's ways of knowing or of their particular gendered understandings of the world, within the group. The reality, however, is far more layered and nuanced. While the wearing of the covering is a central aspect of the group's sense of self-identity, few German Baptist sisters see themselves as in any way oppressed or marginalized. (This of course may in part be due to the reality that those who were particularly uncomfortable have left for New Conference membership or for other more assimilated denominations.)

The head covering is experienced as a very clear marker of role and identity, distinguishing members from “nominal” Christianity. While the wearing of the covering without question betokens the submission so central to OGBB thinking, a more gross or rigid expression of male dominance is leavened by a number of significant factors:

- The relationship of men to women (and wives to husbands) outlined in Ephesians 5; 21 is read in the light of the opening verse of the section, where the all-around principle of submission is expressed: “Submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God”; that is, the principle of “general submission.”
- The direction “Husbands love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25) and “So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies” (Ephesians 5:32) are seen as dominant principles in the relationship between men and women. These emphases tend toward the avoidance of an oppressively domineering mindset by men that would lead to or reinforce women's oppression and is strongly countered within the group.
- There is often a very strong accompanying emphasis laid on other verses in Ephesians 5 and other relevant passages of Scripture (e.g., Romans 12) that emphasize the reciprocal nature of relationship and responsibility.
- While women are not ordained as elders, ministers, or deacons, the role of the wife and her support is seen as essential in these positions. This is reflected in such wives having their own positions, and in sitting together at the front of the meetinghouse. It is also emphasized in ordination services, where the role of wives in fulfilling the duties of such appointment are very specifically recognized.

- While women members do not participate in the discussion and “voting” at Annual Meeting, their active participation is a core part of district council meetings, including in the forming of resolutions, or “queries,” sent to the main annual gathering.
- Women frequently wield significant influence behind the scenes.

A sister, when questioned regarding the covering, comments:

Why not put on the covering just when praying? Well what about “pray without ceasing”? Are we not to be of a prayerful mind always? How about when a song comes suddenly from the heart? I would readily admit that I may not be of a prayerful mind as often as I would like...but still. Even in the middle of the night when one wakes up are there not times of prayerful meditation? And, of course, all life should be prayer.

### ***3. Orthopraxis: An Emphasis on Conformity to Specific Practices Rather Than on Detailed Doctrinal Convention***

A noteworthy feature of Old German Baptist culture is the surprising degree of diversity that the group tolerates with regard to differences of opinion—including toward beliefs that would be considered nonnegotiable to many other Christian groups. Indeed, the Brethren place a much greater emphasis on orthopraxis—*uniformity of practice*, particularly noticeable in relation to their conduct of the ordinances—than they do on *rigid doctrinal conformity*.

One of the authors reflects:

One of the first occasions I spent in the OGGB ritual of after-dinner Sunday afternoon fellowship and discussion was particularly memorable. Philosophy and politics as well as theology and doctrine were the subjects of a detailed and wide-ranging conversation. It was particularly noticeable at one stage, when doctrine was the focus of the discussion, that an obviously well-regarded member held views that were quite strongly Calvinistic; another was definitely Arminian in his approach to Christian doctrine. One or two members of the group expressed views that appeared closer to Greek or Russian Orthodoxy. All drew on both Scripture and a wide range of respected sources in support of their thinking. As the discussion progressed, the degree of divergence was so marked that in other circles it would have led to argument or even to a break in fellowship. In this OGGB context, however, the discussion was held in a spirit of interest, calmness, and a tolerance for diversity. Later, when the discussion had moved on to baptism, several varying views on the exact doctrinal nature of the ordinance were expressed and there was little concern; what was strongly emphasized, however, was conformity to the norm. One elder summarized the view of the whole room: “Of course, whatever you believe, to be valid, baptism must be administered out of doors, in moving water, and with trine forward immersion—and in the names of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.” The emphasis was on conformity of practice.

Because of their Anabaptist-Pietist roots, the Brethren read the New Testament more as a guide for living than as a source for abstract, speculative doctrine, and they understand faith in Christ to be more about loving obedience to one’s Lord than mere intellectual assent. The OGGB expect their brothers and sisters, as followers of Christ, to seek to obey his commandments and to follow his example, and to submit to the will of the Holy Spirit as it works through the counsels of the church. But as long as a member does not deviate from these principles and practices, many of which we have described in this article—baptism, the love feast, the holy kiss, and other ordinances; nonresistance, nonconformity (particularly in dress), and non-swearing; active participation in and service for the church, etc.—a large degree of tolerance is shown toward individual members’ “private opinions” on various subjects, including theological ones that other churches might consider substantial.

Perhaps the clearest example of diversity of thinking among the OGGB can be seen in the differing eschatological views that exist among the membership. The range of views on this topic in particular is attributable in part to the persistence of the doctrine of “universal restoration” among some. This teaching can be traced to the influence of Pietism in the earliest days of the Brethren and was the predominant eschatological position of the church through much of the eighteenth century. This restorationist doctrine was not the same as universalism; instead, restorationists held that there is a hell, and that unbelievers are condemned to it for punishment. However, restorationists believed that punishment in hell (though terrible beyond imagination)

would not be eternal, and that eventually all people would be restored to God through the overcoming grace of Christ. To them, this is the logical outcome of a belief in an all-powerful God who will ultimately bring all things into submission.

Belief in the universal restoration fell out of favor among the Brethren membership during the nineteenth century, largely due to an influx of revivalist thinking from the broader American church culture. Eventually, the OGBB came to see the doctrine as an opinion that could be privately held, but one that was to be neither promoted nor preached. In more recent years, the OGBB have been influenced by other theological movements as well, including dispensationalism, leading to a broad diversity of viewpoints on the end times.

One member, with an interest in church history and who had joined the OGBB from another Plain group, shared this reflection:

I first heard about the doctrine of Final Restoration during some classes on church history run by the Church of the Brethren. It was only when I got to know something of the Old Orders that I heard it again. I'd like to believe in it, but I can't quite square it with so many scriptural quotations.... I do wonder if its popularity in some Brethren circles speaks of their much more loving and merciful attitude to the frailties of humanity.

For most Christians, it would be difficult to imagine a church in which universal restorationists and premillennial dispensationalists could peacefully coexist, but both of those viewpoints are well represented among the Old German Baptists!

Diversity of thinking among the OGBB is not, however, limited to things eschatological. For example, a handful of members believe in a flat earth, but remain in full fellowship within the church. Likewise, some members farm organically, seeing this as a response to scriptural principle, and implement environmentally sustainable practices, commitments that would be viewed as "liberal" or "progressive" in some fundamentalist contexts.

One OGBB farmer comments:

It has always seemed strange to me to note that organic and environmentally sustainable practices are considered "liberal" or "progressive." To me, these practices are traditional, getting back to original ways, caring for the earth...and that surely is at the center of a scriptural response.

There appear to be two clear limits to the church's openness to differing viewpoints: a member must not attempt to force their views on others and a member's views must not affect her or his adherence to the order of the church. As long as one stays committed to orthopraxis, as the church has defined it, one may hold a variety of opinions if it is done with respect and tolerance toward the views of others.

In the second part of this article (to appear in the next issue of the *Journal of Plain Anabaptist Communities*), we will consider additional areas that distinguish the Old German Baptist Brethren from other Plain groups, including organizational structure, hospitality, an emphasis on the inner life and reflective practice, and a peculiarly stringent view of unity and submission to the overall collective.

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