“The Road Between Ephrata and Elizabethtown”
By Pamela Reist and Paul Brubaker
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PART 1

Paul will say:

I was born and raised on a dairy farm near the village of Schoeneck…in northern Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Now, it’s said that in Schoeneck even the dogs bark in Pennsylvania Dutch – and the babies cry in Dutch too!

At any rate, how well I remember February of 1955. I was eleven, going on twelve. After coming home from school one evening, my dad told me the number of hay bales I was supposed to put down the hay hole for the cows. So I climbed to the peak of the barn and pulled on the first bale of hay. But wouldn’t you know it, the twine around the bale tore. I lost my balance and fell down backwards to the barn floor. When I landed, I took several somersaults backwards and also fell down the hay hole to the feeding entry beneath. I got up, and even though I was a bit stunned, I walked away from what could have been serious injury or even death. Definitely, God had been gracious!

Several weeks later, the late Bro. Hartman Rice was conducting evangelistic services in our congregation. Now, for some time God had been calling me to give my heart to the Lord, but my stubborn will had said no! Well, you can imagine that it didn’t take me very long to make up my mind what I ought to do. On Monday evening, March 7, 1955 – during the singing of “Just As I Am” – I stepped out into the aisle and went forward to receive Christ as my Savior. Later that month I was baptized in the Middle Creek, just upstream a bit from our church.

As I came up out of the water, I remember so well that wonderful feeling of being washed – of being forgiven. I had been transformed, and I remember thinking at the time, I’m never going to sin ...AGAIN! Well, guess what? Almost immediately, Satan began doing his devious work! And he’s never stopped attacking me. But I must say that in more than fifty-eight years of living the transformed life, Jesus has become more precious to me – and the authority of the Scriptures have had an increasingly-profound effect…on how I attempt to live out the transformed life.

In this evening’s text from Ephesians 4, Paul says that God is grieved…when we as Christians continue in our old way of living by refusing to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us. Paul puts it this way in verse 30:

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed…for the day of redemption.”

It’s important to know that Paul’s letter to the Ephesians was written to a community of believers – it was written to the Church! Certainly there is personal application for us in this
passage, but when you and I think about this verse in terms of the community of believers, then I think it takes on a whole new meaning.

In verse 31 of Ephesians 4, Paul goes on to list...some of those things that cause the Holy Spirit to grieve – to be in heaviness – regarding life among us...as believers. He’s talking about life within the community of faith! This is how the Apostle puts it (and by the way, in the original Greek this is written in the imperative). He says this:

“Get RID...[Get RID]...of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”

Notice here that Paul lists six things...that grieve the Spirit as we live and interact with each OTHER – and as we deal with various ISSUES in our day. Look with me at these things that grieve the Holy Spirit.

- Bitterness has to do with a smoldering resentment and an unwillingness to forgive.
- Rage has to do with bad temper.
- Anger is more internal...and speaks of deep hostility.
- Brawling has to do with quarreling and a contentious spirit.
- Slander speaks of insulting and abusive language.
- And malice...has to do with spite and ill-will.

Think of these characteristics in terms of how we deal with each other as issues arise – both in the local CHURCH and DENOMINATIONALLY. Somewhere along the way, I learned these lines:

To live above with those we love,
Oh, that will sure be glory!
But to live below with those we know,
Well, that’s another story!

When the Apostle wrote to the believers at Corinth, he mentioned a catalog of sins – but then ended that passage by writing this in I Corinthians 6:11. Regarding those sins, Paul says:

“And that is what some of you were. BUT (he writes)...you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and...by the Spirit of our God.”

The bottom line, brothers and sisters, is that when you and I have been transformed by the Holy Spirit, our lives will be DIFFERENT! Our lives will no longer be characterized by what verse 31 of this evening’s text outlines. Our lives will no longer be marked by bitterness, by rage, by anger, by brawling, by slander and by malice. You see, transformation brings CHANGE! (PAUSE)

Sister Pam, I know that St. Paul, in verse 32 of this evening’s text, goes on to show us a contrast of how we ought to be living – both on the LOCAL church level as well as DENOMINATIONALLY. I’d like to hear your take on verse 32. And in the process, can you tell us why good Christian PEOPLE – on both sides of the issues that the Church grapples with today – why good Christian PEOPLE...DEAL with each other...in ways that are less than CHRIST-LIKE. I’m anxious to hear what you have to say!
PART 2

Pam will say:

Unlike you, Brother Paul, I was not born on a dairy farm in Lancaster County, PA. I am a Buckeye by birth, although I moved to Lancaster County 38 years ago when I married an 8th-generation native of the county. So that means...I’m almost an insider. I must tell you however...I have been well-taught...I can pronounce Schoeneck...like a native. When our children were little, sometimes they were nix-nutzes. For me, too, Paul, Lancaster County is home and I love it there.

I don’t remember February of ’55, but I have been moved by your sharing your memories—of that life-changing fall through the hay hole and your description of the clear call from God that you experienced. Although my spiritual journey has been different from yours, I resonate with your faith-filled response to that call, and your commitment to Christ and the church through baptism. These past months it has been a privilege and a delight for me to sit with you and have conversations in preparation for this shared sermon. I have come to know and appreciate you as a brother in Christ, as a mature and sincere follower of Jesus, and as a friend. You first graciously volunteered to make the trip from Ephrata to Elizabethtown for us to begin our conversations. And I was able to reciprocate as we continued our work.

You’ve laid out well these beautiful yet challenging verses in Ephesians. You’re right, Brother Paul, in emphasizing that this letter was written to the community of believers. The apostle continually reminds the community that it has been grafted into the body of Christ. The result, then, is a life rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, as we read only a few verses later in Ephesians 5. The ultimate call is for the community to imitate both God and Christ, whose love is central to the message of Ephesians.

You ask, Brother Paul, why good Christians deal with each other in ways that are less than loving and less than Christ-like. Whenever we live in community, whether it is our families, our congregations or our denomination, there are bound to be differences and life gets messy. Just like the church in Ephesus, we have a tendency to slip into behaviors that undermine the community and grieve the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes I wonder if we in the church, the Body of Christ, have adopted the same *modus operandi* as the rest of society: say whatever it takes to get what you want without having to give up anything to anybody. It grieves our creator when we act in ways that destroy the fabric of humanity that the Spirit weaves among us. Now to be sure, we each have a truth to share and we are called to speak the truth in love. And it’s that “in love” qualifier that is addressed in verse 32.

You ask for my take on verse 32 and here it is: In this passage, Paul is not so much telling us what to do; Paul is telling us how to do it. Our behavior and speech should reflect the grace of God in Christ, and should benefit the community as a whole, even when life is messy. And I think this is the transformational piece: love is the framework. The ultimate call is to imitate both God and Christ, whose love has been central to the message of Ephesians and is meant to characterize the life of faith. We have responsibility toward one another as members of the same body, the body of Christ, and also as members of the Church of the Brethren. We are to relate to one another in ways that promote peace and justice and love.
We are to be kind to one another. Kind is good and loving and merciful, easy to bear. Compassionate – tenderhearted and gentle. And forgiving…to deal generously with and full of grace. And not just once or twice – the language the apostle used here indicates that it is ongoing – over and over again. These actions strengthen the fabric of humanity that the Spirit weaves among us. These are the “how to” in relating to one another.

I recently read something in “Wonder and Word,” published by Bethany Theological Seminary, where you serve on the board, and where I did some of my coursework. The question was raised: “Can we be a place where the community of conversation brings us to places of common commitments that transcend points of difference?” And I think therein lies the key, for us, as Brethren. As long as we are trying to convince one another that we are right on whatever the controversial issue happens to be at that time, there is danger that we fall into patterns of speaking and relating that can grieve the Holy Spirit. If however, our places of common commitments to peace and justice and faithfulness to Jesus' way can transcend our differences, then we will be able to speak and relate and grow together as the body of Christ. Then love will be the framework for our relating and the Spirit will be able to move among us and weave the fabric of a new humanity that brings hope and healing to the world.

I think in a way, Brother Paul, you and I have been able to do this a bit on a personal level. We acknowledged the first day that we met together in E'town, that we don't agree on everything and that we are different in many ways. But we have been able to focus on the things that we have in common - love of and complete devotion to God, careful study of scriptures, desire to be faithful disciples and peacemakers, love for the church. These have transcended the issues upon which we do not see eye-to-eye.

Here are my questions for you as we continue our conversation. Can this same thing be done at the denominational level? Can we allow our commonalities to transcend our differences? Can we embrace, or at least tolerate, our differences without speaking to one another in unhealthy ways? If not, would it be healthier for us to part ways? Can we transcend our differences in the Church of the Brethren, or will they define and divide us? These are the questions that have weighed heavily on me, on us, and that I think need to be asked. You are intelligent and insightful, Brother Paul, and I value you and trust you. What do you think?

PART 3

Paul will say:

Thanks for your thoughts, Sister Pam. You’re right, in that, as long as we’re trying to convince each other that we’re absolutely right on whatever the issue happens to be, it's then… that we’re prone to fall into unhealthy patterns that certainly grieve the Holy Spirit.

I’ve appreciated the good working relationship we’ve had over these past months as we’ve traveled to and from Ephrata and Elizabethtown. We’ve shared our journeys with each other as we’ve put together this evening’s sermon. But the fact is, Sister Pam, you and I serve very different congregations in the Church of the Brethren, even though geographically, we’re only about thirty miles apart. My sense is that our two congregations – the Middle Creek Congregation just outside of Ephrata, and the Elizabethtown Congregation – my sense is that our two congregations…characterize
in some way two very different camps…in today’s Church of the Brethren. Sister Pam, let me speak about my own congregation.

Our church at Middle Creek is a growing, evangelical, Anabaptist congregation that stands solidly on the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. That belief…defines who we are and how we carry out the demands of the Gospel. I so much wish I had time this evening to expand on what all that means, but I need to address your question, Sister Pam. You asked it this way:

As we look at this passage from Ephesians 4 about being kind and compassionate and forgiving, can we continue living together as a denomination without parting ways?

My response to you, Sister Pam, is coming from me personally. I’m not speaking on behalf of my congregation! I’m not speaking on behalf of a group! I’m speaking on behalf of Paul Brubaker! So let me cut to the chase. As a denomination, clearly we’ve drifted! Biblical erosion, beginning decades ago, has taken its toll! As more and more of our leadership over these decades began embracing liberalism and pluralism and humanism and any number of other isms, many Brethren have simply voted with their feet and their dollars.

In terms of numbers, the Church of the Brethren peaked at about 200,000 members in 1960. Since that time there’s been a steady decline, so that today, we have about 118,000 members. In other words, we’ve lost about 41% of our total members over the past fifty-plus years. Just as a sidebar: During that same period, the Middle Creek Congregation has had a 68% increase in membership. In 1960 we had about 300 members – and today we have 504 members, with an average worship attendance of about 460.

So let me get back to your question, Sister Pam. With the disparity in theology and the polarization in belief and practice among us, will Paul Brubaker…be able to continue holding membership in the Church of the Brethren? And here’s my answer: I’m very aware of the scriptures that speak of being “unequally yoked” and of “coming out from among them,” etc. But I’m also cognizant of my Lord, who didn’t separate Himself from the synagogue – or of an Apostle Paul who didn’t give up when things weren’t going well in Corinth. There’s also the example of the Old Testament prophets who, despite apostasy among God’s people, never withdrew and formed another group. I’m also reminded of the Christian armor that Paul speaks about in Ephesians 6, and the fact that there’s no protection in that armor for the back – which says to me that we’re not called to retreat, but we’re called to press on in faith and with perseverance.

So in answer to your question, Sister Pam, I personally intend to remain in this denomination for the long-haul…unless God directs me otherwise. Now, I realize that in these various Brethren camps, others may take a different view, and I respect those views even though I may not agree with them.

I’m in my forty-third year as an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren, and one of the things I so much appreciate about this denomination…is the latitude that we as congregations have. One of the basic tenets of Brethren belief is that of “no force in religion.” During more than four decades of church leadership, NEVER has anyone from Elgin or anywhere else mandated certain beliefs or practices on me or on the Middle Creek Congregation. Each congregation has had the freedom to map out its own program and set up its own membership guidelines. And that, to me, is a real blessing!
So Sister Pam, I’ve bared my soul to you, so now I’m interested in hearing your answer to the question about whether we as Brethren can continue living together as a denomination without parting ways?

PART 4

Pam will say:

You have bared your soul, Brother Paul. Your willingness not only to engage in conversation, but to do so with complete honesty and vulnerability has helped me, not only to know you, but to trust you. I hope that you have felt the same willingness to engage from me. Maybe that word - trust - is part of that transformational piece that we’ve been missing denominationally. When we don’t trust, when we don’t feel safe, we slip into those attitudes and behaviors which are destructive. But when we trust one another, when we feel a safety in the other’s presence, being kind, compassionate and forgiving is natural, even if we don’t always agree.

As you know, a delegation from the Church of the Brethren and the American Baptist Church participated in a faith expedition to the Holy Lands this past December. I was privileged to be one of the pilgrims on that trip. It has impacted my life and my faith in deep ways. While there, we experienced Shabbat with a Jewish family in Jerusalem. Before dinner, our host guided us to the Wailing Wall at the temple at sundown, where he shared this story:

Long, long before the temple was built, two brothers are said to have lived on Mount Moriah. One was a single man, the other had a wife and family. These two exemplified brotherly love. They shared the same house without dissension. Every morning, they rose early and shared the tedious work of farming the hill.

Soon, the time came for harvest. The sheaves were gathered and carefully divided into two identical piles. Each brother would garner an equal share in the fruit of their labors. When finished, the two brothers returned home to get a good night’s rest in preparation for the difficult day of threshing ahead.

But sleep did not come easily. The unmarried brother tossed and turned. Finally, in the dark of night, he slipped out of the house and returned to the threshing floor and carefully redistributed the harvest. He thought to himself, “it is not right or fair for me to keep an equal portion of God’s bounty. My brother is a good man, caring for his family. It is better that he receive the bigger portion.” So he reduced his portion of the sheaves to make his brother’s pile larger. Then he quietly returned to bed.

The married brother, too, had difficulty sleeping. In the wee hours of the night, he woke his wife and whispered, “It is unfair that my brother has an equal share of the harvest. I already received a greater share of happiness because of the love that I share with you and our children. My brother has neither.” So, together, the man and his wife quietly went to the threshing floor, and together they transferred a portion of their sheaves to the pile of the single brother. Then they quietly returned to bed.

When daylight came, the two brothers went to thresh the sheaves. As they reached the threshing floor, both were amazed. Each pile was again equal! Perplexed, they quietly finished their day’s work and went home, exhausted.

That night, each brother tossed and turned and determined to return to the threshing floor to bless the other. And so they slipped into the quiet of the night, and this time, the two brothers arrived at the
threshing floor simultaneously. In an instant, they both understood the other’s heart. And they fell on each other, embracing and weeping as they realized their great love for one another.

And it is thought that that very threshing floor is the site which God chose for the Temple in Jerusalem to be built, that God built the Temple upon that deep, deep love.

And I think that when Alexander Mack and the others gathered at the banks of the Eder River, that love served as the foundation, as they committed to living God’s love as expressed in the life and teachings of Jesus - together. And I think that when John Kline risked it all, even his very life, that love served as the foundation.

And we are called to live that same love of God. That is our foundation. As you say, Brother Paul, we do come from two different congregations. And although the road between Ephrata and Elizabethtown is not long, considering the geographic breadth of our denomination, there are differences in our congregations. And each of our congregations has had the freedom to live that love as we have been called and led by God’s spirit. You and I, Brother Paul, identified at our first meeting that we have different views on scripture and its interpretation and application. But I also say with great confidence and conviction, that I respect you and consider you to be a brother in Christ, who faithfully is seeking to love God and neighbor. And I sense that you would affirm me as a sister in Christ, who also is faithfully seeking to love God and neighbor.

And therein, for me, lies the hope that we can continue together as the Church of the Brethren. We don’t all think or believe alike. But, as you say, there is to be “no force in religion.” We all try, however imperfectly, to follow in Jesus’ footsteps, on the journey to which we are called. And we rally around those things upon which we agree - things that are near and dear to the heart of the Brethren - service, peace, community, simple living.....

At our Annual Conference in 2008, the delegate body gathered in Richmond, VA to celebrate our 300th Anniversary. It seems so very fitting that at that celebration, we adopted the Resolution Urging Forbearance. The statement in part says, that “for more than a hundred years we have recognized that being open to the Holy Spirit sometimes requires us to accept differences in the body of Christ and to practice forbearance.” It continues, “Before we are conservative, liberal, evangelical, progressive or any one of the many labels we put on one another, we are children of God and brothers and sisters in the church. We are people who love and follow Jesus.”

Just as on Mount Moriah, with God’s transforming love as our foundation, we can find a better way to be the Body of Christ, even, and maybe especially, with our differences. And that, I think, can be a gift. In a day and age when a variety of issues are pulling the Christian church and our world apart, we can offer a different way of being and living. If we, the Church of the Brethren, in our diversity, can love one another, and speak with one another kindly, compassionately and with forgiveness, what a gift that would be to the world. Maybe…just maybe…that is our calling as followers of Jesus and peacemakers in this world. I hope so.

After the symbolic anointing of our preachers by “John Kline” and Moderator Bob Krouse, all are invited, as led by the Spirit, to move toward the designated persons (deacons and ministers) offering anointing and prayer before departing the worship service. Let us go in love and peace.