

## A Critical Evaluation of Ourselves

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I have no objection whatever to a critical evaluation of ourselves. Some such inventory of our strengths and weaknesses from time to time is certainly desirable. However, I must admit that I ran into some trouble in trying to think my way through this topic. My difficulty has been principally two-fold.

In the first place, a critical evaluation of ourselves means that we as a Schweitzer group compare ourselves with some other group. More particularly, it means that we compare ourselves with some other group which in all other respects is most nearly like us. Obviously, it would not be very meaningful to compare ourselves with the Hottentots of central Africa. To get at that which is uniquely Schweitzer it would not do even to compare ourselves with the average American. The comparison must be with another Mennonite group living within the same general area and under the same general circumstances. This quite obviously limits our comparison to one between ourselves and our good friends and neighbors, the low Germans. And I, for one, see no reason for being hesitant in making this comparison, if it is done fairly and objectively. The indications are that the day is past when the Schweitzers on the Bethel College campus, living in the White House, and the Low Germans, living in Western Home, would get out on the porch roofs of their respective houses and shout across the street at each other, calling each other all the derogatory names they could think of. This, however, is not the difficulty.

The difficulty is, rather, that the topic, "A Critical Evaluation of Ourselves," seems to imply that there is some essential difference between the groups being compared, and I do not believe that any such essential difference, other than that of language, actually exists. As a matter of fact, I am inclined to say that the difference between Mennonites as a whole and the outside world is often grossly exaggerated. I have now spent some summers among the Mormons in Arizona.

The Mormons are not even a strictly Protestant group. Yet I find their young people confronted by much the same problems and demonstrating much the same strengths and weakness as our own. The most significant aspect of my experience in India I regard as the first-hand knowledge gained of the essential sameness of humanity--a sameness that cuts across color, creed and nationality. The outstanding conclusion to which any comparison of groups can lead us, I am convinced, is that the differences between groups are not nearly so great or important as the differences among individuals within any one group. "Under the ocean all islands are one; under colors of face, humanity is one; under the creeds, God is one." The difficulty with the topic at hand is, then, that it would readily lead us to attribute characteristics to ourselves as a group that have no basis in fact. It is an all-too-common human failing to notice some relatively superficial difference--such as that of language, skin color, or national origin--and thereupon immediately proceed to postulate other differences as well.

The second difficulty that I have with the topic is that of making the evaluations that it calls for. Even if certain characteristics of the Schweitzers could be established as unique, what of it? Are

they of any real significance? Are they necessarily good or bad? We are in an age today when it is wrong to call attention to differences unless one has a good reason for doing so. The emphasis needs to be placed on that which unites us. Our natural tendency, at any rate, is to regard as good those things uniquely characteristic of ourselves and as not so good, those things that characterize the other group. I suppose we have all at one time or another marveled at the exceedingly good fortune of having been born in the best nation in the world, the best state in the nation, the best community in the state, and the best family in the whole Schweitzer community.

The difficulty at this point is not that of having no standards of right and wrong, of good and bad, to go by. It is, rather, that of making a proper application of these standards to complex cultural factors. Take, for example, one of the most obvious of our Mennonite traits--that, namely, of a strong in-group feeling--the denominational loyalty and separateness that characterizes us. Even in speaking of this one is confronted by a choice of words that depicts the problem at hand. Is this trait to be referred to as solidarity or as clannishness? Is our separation from the world good or bad? Dr. Fretz has just spoken of cultural infiltration and the dangers associated with it. These dangers are real and not to be minimized. But then, on the other hand, what is our primary concern--group survival or the extension of God's kingdom? Are we first of all concerned with the preservation of Mennonitism or with the service that can be rendered to the outside world? Going out into the world and associating on a common basis with other people will almost inevitably bring about a degree of assimilation and a loss of Mennonite distinctiveness. Cultural assimilation is seldom a one-way process.

Yet, when Jesus talked of a grain of seed falling into the ground and dying and when he said, "he that seeketh to save his life shall lose it," was he not saying something as true for the group as for the individual? Are we not in danger of losing our life as Mennonites by making self-preservation our primary concern? You see, here we have a characteristic of the Mennonite community as clear as any that can be found, and yet, what are we to make of it? How are we to evaluate it? From our own point of view this separateness can be justified, both practically and Scripturally. From an outsiders point of view, it is sheer clannishness and a light, if it be a light at all, hid under a bushel.

I have now managed to use a good share of my time in being critical of my critical evaluation. In the remaining moments I must turn to what the program committee must have had in mind in assigning this topic, hoping, however, that you will keep in mind the qualifications that I have set forth.

To get directly at the point, I think what differences there are between the Schweitzers and the Low Germans can be traced largely to the fact that when the Schwietzers came to America they were both economically and educationally an inferior people.

Economically, our Schwietzers were among the second poorest of all immigrant groups. They arrived here with little other than their health, strength and a determination to succeed. Few had the financial resources of some of the Warkentins, Goerzs, Regiers, and Claassens.

Educationally and culturally, also, they were inferior. While the Low Germans came from well-established cultural settlements in Russia and Germany, our Schweitzers did much wandering and finally came by way of Volhynia, a section of Poland hardly known for its cultural

refinement. We were an uncouth and simple people. One hears of numerous instances indicative of the ignorance and superstition of our forbears even sometime after their arrival in this country. One of our grandfathers, seeing a telephone in the home of his host and hearing it ring, remarked seriously, "Du kumsht geviss net in der himmel mit dem ding and der vandt." Some were against photography and one of our grandfathers explained how, if one were in proper relation to the occult world, one could stop a person's heart by piercing his picture with a needle in the region of the heart. Even the innocent bicycle was suspected by some. They reasoned that only the forces of the evil one could keep this two-wheeled contraption upright. While availing themselves of the services of doctors and sometimes lawyers, they would have excommunicated anyone proposing to enter training.

It is therefore not surprising that when it came to advanced education and to the founding of an institution such as Bethel College, it was the Low Germans who took the initiative. Last week I looked through the first two Bethel College catalogues (1893 and 1894). Not a single one of our Schweitzers appears among either the faculty or the Board. There are some non-Low-Germans-- i.e. British and Pennsylvania Dutch (Haury, Lehman, Sprunger, Welty, Krehbiel) --but none of our own people. In talking with Dr. P. J. Wedel, our college historian, he made the statement, "With regard to the history of Bethel College, if the Low Germans had not dragged us along we would not be where we are." This "dragging us along" should not be interpreted as a purely benevolent gesture on the part of the Low Germans, for by this time the people in this Hoffnungsfeld community represented some economic power and then, as now, Bethel College always needed money! Nevertheless, the original impetus and leadership in higher education came from the Low Germans. But the point I set out to make is that, originally, our people were economically and culturally inferior, and what differences are discernable between the two groups today are traceable largely to this fact. They are traceable to this fact either directly or by way of that common psychological mechanism known as "compensation."

In a relative sort of way, there are perhaps four characteristic distinctions that can be made. First, I think it is true that the Low Germans are still ahead of us in cultural refinement. Schweitzers are still a bit more loud, uncouth and unpolished. I have noticed this on the Bethel campus. While there is ample room for improvement in all cases, it has been my impression that the Low Germans, by and large, keep their rooms more neatly than we do. They are also not quite as boisterous and loud-mouthed. You can't always tell what a Low German is thinking or how he feels. You can always tell what a Schweitzer thinks or feels, for he will tell you. This reticence on the part of the Low Germans is sometimes irritating to us Schweitzers as our bluntness must be to the Low Germans. It makes us feel a little uncomfortable. We don't quite know where we're at and we are inclined to look upon it as indecision and "riding the fence." We believe in being forthright, in telling the other person just what we think and then, perhaps., even listening to what he says he things. To the Low German, however, this reserve is a part of good breeding , and also of good diplomacy. A one-time Bethel professor, now retired, told me, "In early years the Low German students would address professors and outsiders impersonally, saying, 'What does so and so think about it?' or 'What does the professor believe to be the case?'" with us, of course, "Vas denksht du?" is sufficient.

A second observation is that the Schweitzers, possibly because they did not come with as much of a culture or tradition as the Low Germans, do not seem to be as firmly bound by it. They have,

I believe, proven somewhat more flexible and adaptive to the American way of life. Again, I say, I do not know how to evaluate these observations. I am simply making them here. While the point just observed may mean that the Schweitzer has more adaptability, ingenuity and originality and that he is more sophisticated--that is, more at home in the outside world--it may also be that he is more susceptible to the assimilation and has, consequently, a lower survival value as a Mennonite.

In the third place, our Schweitzer people still have something of a generalized inferiority feeling and have, I believe, a disproportionate number of individuals among them affected by inferiority feelings. In view of the psychology of the inferiority feeling, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this condition may be responsible for other eccentricities among our people which we cannot take time to enumerate here. There is one, however, which deserves special mention. This is the dynamic and energetic quality of our people, a quality that appears almost compensatory in nature. Schweitzers are strongly motivated, highly active and intensely persevering. Once a Schweitzer sets out to accomplish something, the likelihood is that he will get it accomplished. In the academic world, for example, I have observed that it is seldom that one of our people starts out for his Ph.D without eventually getting it, even if his I. Q. isn't much above 80!

Finally, we are "the newly rich" and the newly cultured, and we show the symptoms of it. We are no longer poor or uneducated. We have money, advanced degrees, and leisure. But it all came about so fast that we don't quite know what to make of it. Dr. Kliwer, former president of Bethel and himself a Low German, once said something to the effect that when the Low Germans came to America they were ahead financially and educationally, but the Swiss group by management and sheer determination, almost in his own generation, caught up and in some respects surpassed them. Yes, in some respects we have caught up and even surpassed the Low Germans. Our farms are just as big, if not bigger; our houses are just as fine; if not finer; and our cars are just as new, if not newer. For an interesting comparison, drive past the Alexanderwohl and the Eden churches some Sunday morning and notice the difference in the cars lined up at the two places.

But these are all surface matters, not to be confused with genuine deep-down cultural development and refinement. These are things that money can buy. Real cultural refinement can't be bought--and it does not come about in seventy-five years. It is the art of truly gracious living and this comes about only with time--generations and generations of time.

A well-developed society will have a degree of material prosperity and security. But along with this there will also be a composure and serenity which we still lack. We have money, but many of us can think of no better way to use it than to turn it back into more land for more money. We have, or could have, leisure, but our highest idea of a good time is to get into our fine cars and burn up the road--seeing two or three baseball games in an afternoon. We do little in the creative arts. We have produced no outstanding painter, writer, or composer. If we were as spiritually minded and as deeply concerned about things of the spirit as we purport to be, we should have engendered some creative genius. The point is, I think our development has been predominantly material. We have adopted the American standards of success, which are confined largely to that which can be seen and measured and which do not reach far below the surface.

Well, this has turned out to be a critical evaluation after all. Permit me to remind you again, in closing, that any differences between groups, however valid, are represented in far greater degree

within any one group. Also not to end upon a depreciative note, may I say that if we can get our sense of direction straight and in the next seventy-five years demonstrate the same dynamic and stick-to-it-iveness in the realm of spiritual and cultural values that we have in the past seventy-five years shown in the area of material values, then the Schweitzers will really be one of the best communities in the nation!

Zerger, p. 5; Descendants of Joshua Zerger and Freni Stucky Zerger, p. 4.