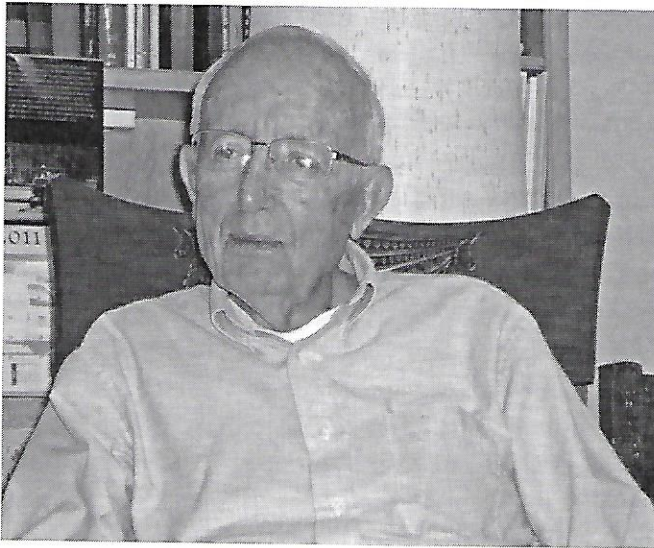


## ARNOLD WEDEL DISCUSSES EDUCATION AND DOCTRINE

*Arnold Wedel, of North Newton, taught mathematics at Bethel College. He was interviewed by Jason Holcomb on June 24, 2011. Heather Holcomb also was present.*

AW: Our people started going east from south Germany or Alsace-Lorraine ... We were sort of lost, we in fact joined the Hutterites for awhile. Some of the people joined the Hutterites. ... Anyway, there were four communities, essentially these Swiss people, but like I said the one distinction we had ... we're Amish background. All the other Amish came directly to this country, we were the only Amish that went east.



JH: OK, so you're saying the Swiss Mennonites ... your ancestors began as Amish ...

AW: Yeah, we were the only Amish that went east, all the other Amish came directly to this country from south Germany and Alsace-Lorraine or wherever, Switzerland. ... It wasn't the whole congregation that went, it was just individuals, that started going. Just like joining the Hutterites, it wasn't the whole group, it was just four or five families would do that ... for land to have, and that sort of thing.

JH: So your people began as Amish and then moved east, and when and where and how was the change to Mennonite?

AW: Well, actually when they came here in 1874, the leaders did ... attend some Amish congregations or had some Amish connection, but we were corrupted, even before we got to this country, by other Mennonite groups. ...

JH: Do you know what the differences were? Differences meaning in beliefs, in religious doctrine, in theology? ...

AW: I think it was pretty much the same, Anabaptist. The three things on the Anabaptist is the separation of church and state, pacifism, and adult baptism. I don't know that any of the groups, even today, all of the so called Mennonite groups would have pretty much that. ...

JH: Traditionally, historically, the Mennonites were very well known and admired for their farming.

AW: Oh, yeah.

JH: Did you find, as you grew up, there was still a strong connection of your community to farming?

AW: Yeah, I suppose.

JH: And was there any pressure put on people of the community to remain, to continue farming?

AW: Oh, certainly, but ... my grandfather's brother, E. J. Wedel, graduated from KU (University of Kansas) in 1895 and he was the first Amishman, sort of, to graduate from college and his son ... Waldo Wedel is one of the famous people in Kansas archeology. ... He was at the Smithsonian, so as a famous Kansan, Waldo Wedel would be the only Mennonite in that ... although Bernhard Warkentin [credited with introduction of Turkey Red wheat to Kansas], might have been listed. Anyway, my grandfather's brother graduated from KU in 1895, my dad went to college then, and he graduated from Bethel, but then he became a high school teacher. I was actually born in Lawrence. He had taught here and the then-academy was closed, so I grew up in Oklahoma. So we lived with my grandparents during the summer in general. I grew up in a famous town in Oklahoma, a town called Holdenville. Have you ever heard of Holdenville? Have you ever heard of Boone Pickens?

JH: Yes, T. Boone Pickens?

AW: He was a grade behind me, that's why Holdenville is famous.

JH: The oil man?

AW: Yeah, I know him very well. I mean, we grew up together, he lived a block from me and so on



and so forth. So I did not grow up like the rest. In 1941, we moved here. My mother had built a house here in 1923, so I would know people were farmers, and that's it. And some were well to do and some were not particularly well to do.

HH: It seems like we've heard a lot of people talk about Mennonites in a way that has made it clear that they have supported education, or have been friendly toward higher education for some time, and I'm just wondering about, say the Amish or German Baptists, or other groups that stop at an eighth grade education, do you know why there is a difference?

AW: Yeah, German Baptists wouldn't be of Mennonite background, but basically Amish still today, the Old Order Amish, quit at eighth grade or whatever it is, the Holdemans maybe a little bit more. But yeah, education wasn't a priority in our Amish community, it's never been, but then there are people that leave the Amish. ... When the high school was started at Halstead, there [were] three of our people that came to Halstead for high school, just three. One was my grandfather on my mother's side, Peter H. Wedel ... So no, education wasn't a high priority in our group, but it became that way because of where we lived and influences from the outside. ...

HH: Do you think there was controversy, like say in your grandfather's day, about going on to high school or college.

AW: Yes, even in my high school ... you're absolutely right. Even in the '40s there were some people from Eden that didn't finish high school. It wasn't a big thing, but there was just people who didn't think that was important, but now that's all past. I don't think there's anybody of this group that would say it isn't important to go to college and that sort of thing. In other words, the Amish background we've completely forgotten in that respect.

[When I taught at Bethel,] I got Pete Seeger to come here to do a concert and one thing he demanded when he came was to go to Amish homes, so we had a very close friend who now has passed away that we always had contact with, Alvin Beachy. I've always had contact with Older Order Amish.

JH: I have to ask you why you got Pete Seeger to come here for a concert? ... Is it because he's famous or because of his beliefs?

AW: Yeah, both ... I think. ... Pete Seeger is an idol and clearly what Pete Seeger says is instead of "The Star Spangled Banner," we ought to sing "This Land is Your Land." ... I did a lecture series here in the late '70s, and I got Pete Seeger to come as one of the concerts. ... Yeah, I got ... what's his name? The Pentagon Papers [Daniel Ellsberg] ... I got him here ... [and] Maurine Corrigan came, I got her — she won the Nobel Prize.

JH: I'm not familiar with her.

AW: The Peace Price, Maurine Corrigan, from Ireland. I've always belonged to the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

JH: What's that?

AW: The Fellowship of Reconciliation, that's a peace organization that started in the '30s. A. J. Muste and others started it. It is sort of Dorothy Day-type stuff — Dorothy Day, Catholic worker — that's peace.

JH: I've heard ... that there is still some emphasis on the pacifism, on peace at your church.

AW: Oh sure ...

JH: From what I've heard, it seems that in the larger Mennonite community that is a bit unusual. ... Is that true?

AW: Yeah, that's essentially correct. I would just say in the bulk of the Mennonite Church, in the Second World War, fifty-fifty. Half went to military service and half went to conscientious objector. Now, we're not talking just Schweitzers, we're talking in general. In general, I think peace emphasis is very, very strong. Now with Mennonite Brethren it is very weak. There's certain Mennonite groups that have *abgefallen*, fallen away.

JH: What about ... comparing your church to other churches in Kansas or across the country that you know of? Would you say that your church at Eden has more emphasis on pacifism than ...

AW: Oh, sure. But in the '40s, for example, if you went to the Army you got kicked out of church, but that wouldn't happen today.



JH: There is still quite a bit of discussion in your church at Eden about peace?

AW: Oh, yeah, peace has never been second fiddle at all. It's always been A+.

JH: But I have gathered, in talking to other people, that [in some other Mennonite churches] it's not an issue anymore, if at all.

AW: I think you're probably right, but Conference-wise and everything, that issue of peace has never been minimized ... in terms of the leadership in the Mennonite Church USA, in the leadership there has been no hint of any ... the issue might be, should you accept military people to join church and that sort of thing. Basically, I think in the leadership there is no de-emphasis.

JH: At the national level there hasn't been any de-emphasis?

AW: I've sure never heard any ...

JH: Well, it could be that they still ... hold that belief, that part of the religious doctrine, but they just don't talk about it.

AW: That's right. Well, to make matters worse ... what did I tell you ... I told you one of the doctrines is the separation of church and state, everybody has forgotten about that — every Mennonite has forgotten about that. And I think it's terrible, because that's the most important issue in this country, separation of church and state. And we've forgotten about that completely as a Mennonite group. ...

JH: Well, two questions — why do you say ... what evidence do you have that the Mennonite Church has forgotten about separation of church and state?

AW: You never hear a sermon about it. ...

JH: What you were saying [is] so completely different from what you would hear from evangelical Christians.

AW: Yeah, I know, I know.

JH: Do you have any insight as to how that sharp division came about?

AW: Well, you know, it's ... oh, I wish I wasn't being recorded.

JH: Would you like me to pause it?

AW: No, it doesn't matter, I don't care. This whole issue is something I can't figure out. Everybody knows John Calvin was opposed to homosexuality and abortion. I got that in writing. Now, everybody knows, in 1500, Erasmus was a homosexual.

JH: Who was?

AW: Erasmus, the most famous theologian of his time, was a homosexual. Everybody knows that, and everybody knows that John Calvin was opposed to homosexuality and abortion. Now, Menno Simons never said a word, as far as I know. And why would anybody ... Menno Simons never said a word about homosexuality. I can't find out why that's ever been an issue. ... Homosexuality, it just never came up, and I've been working on this, I've been trying to figure out how it got involved. Alcohol never got involved [either] ... the temperance movement never got involved in the Mennonite church. You have never heard a sermon in a Mennonite church against the use of alcohol, except some lone minister might be opposed to it. But it's never been an Anabaptist doctrine. The Anabaptist doctrines were those three things. ...

JH: What you are talking about, not having a church doctrine, no particular beliefs or regular commentary about homosexuality or alcohol, that's very different from most people's perception.

AW: Yeah ... the issue of homosexuality got into the Mennonite church, just like it did every other church. But what I'm saying is, what was the basis? Menno Simons never said a word about it ... I took Mennonite history in 1947, not a word was said about homosexuality, but I did know some people were gay or lesbian in the church and no one said anything about it. See, my complaint is, why did it creep in? Alcohol didn't ever creep in — what in the world, there is no justification. And I finally found somebody who said, when he was at seminary, one of the seminary professors started talking about homosexuality. Well to me, talking about homosexuality, that is the biggest loser you could think of, what in the world? Why would anybody discuss it, it makes no sense. Who cares in the first place, and in the second place, it is the most ridiculous thing you could think of to get worried about homosexuality.

JH: I know where other people come from, they point to particular scriptures about ... you probably know what I'm talking about.

AW: Well, yeah ... but it doesn't make any sense.

JH: That God taught not to practice homosexuality, that's where they get that ...

AW: I know what you're saying, but I'm just claiming there was real justification for adult baptism, the separation of church and state, and the war issue. There is real justification, it makes sense. But why anybody would think that worrying about homosexuality, or bisexuality, or whatever this is, how in the world can you have a doctrine on that ... it doesn't make any sense whatsoever. ... Historically we've been influenced — the story goes at Pretty Prairie, for example, that Mennonites celebrated the harvest and got out the beer and that sort of thing, and the Methodists came along and said, "You shouldn't be doing that." We've been pretty gullible on outside influences. Even with this homosexuality ... that's part of my problem with this stuff, we've been a gullible people.