

CSCH President's Address 2008

**“From the Edge of Oblivion”:
Reflections on Evangelical Protestant
Denominational Historiography in Canada**

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Next to the banquet, my favorite part of the CSCH conferences has always been the presidential address. I've not only had opportunity to hear many of these presentations in person, but as one of the editors of the *Historical Papers*, I've also carefully read every one during the past fifteen years. They have invariably been thought-provoking, often entertaining, sometimes remarkably autobiographical and candid,¹ and several, even a little controversial.² These addresses reflect the diverse interests within our society, and the high level of civility and collegiality that has characterized interaction among members.

Like others who wove parts of their own story into their presentations, I too at times use personal experiences as a kind of “text,” and my professional working space as the con“text” from which to offer observations. In this address I offer a range of reflections on evangelical Protestant denominational historiography in Canada by commenting, first, on my experience of *working within* an evangelical Protestant denominational world, second, *teaching history*, including denominational history, within

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this same world, and third, *doing* evangelical Protestant denominational history in Canada.

Working in an Evangelical Protestant Denominational Setting

Like a number of other CSCH members, I am employed in a confessional institution that prepares people for professional Christian ministry. I teach in a seminary consortium called the Associated Canadian Theological Schools (ACTS), which was started in 1988, and is made up of six evangelical Protestant denominational seminaries. While consortiums are not unique in Canada, the features that make ACTS unique is that all six denominational partners are Canadian evangelical Protestant, more specifically “Believers Church,” denominations.³ At ACTS tuition revenues are pooled and a common curriculum has been designed for all students, but each faculty member remains an employee of one of the six partners. Adding more complexity to the multiplicity of institutional relationships within ACTS, is the way the consortium simultaneously functions as the Graduate School of Theological Studies of Trinity Western University.⁴

I was hired by Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (MBBS), when the seminary joined the ACTS consortium in 1999. MBBS was started in 1955 to serve the Mennonite Brethren churches in North America; its main campus is located in Fresno, CA. I came to this denominational seminary setting after having taught for almost ten years as a sessional lecturer in a variety of schools including several public universities – these years were, professionally, as a friend once put it, life on the “tenuous” track. I teach a variety of history courses that are a part of the common curriculum at ACTS, and one denominational course designed specifically for Mennonite Brethren students.

My employment within a denomination with a deep sense of history (more on this later) was from the outset accompanied by an expectation that a portion of my research time and energy would be used to serve denominational interests. I was immediately perceived as an “insider” within the denomination by virtue of my professorial appointment, despite the fact that I was a relative newcomer to the denomination at the time (I became part of a Mennonite Brethren congregation in 1993). My new identity as a Mennonite historian, and status as an expert in Mennonite history was somewhat ironic in that I had never taken a course in Menno-

nite history or theology, and had never even attended a Mennonite school. Nevertheless, nominations to an international Mennonite Brethren “Historical Commission,” invitations to speak at denominational gatherings, and to write for denominational publications were quickly forthcoming.

Having become accustomed to the luxury of complete autonomy in selecting research projects, and the identity I wished to assume as an historian, these new expectations created some ambivalence. My lack of familiarity with the denominational story at the outset was at times an advantage in that it allowed me to approach the historical sources with the eyes of an “outsider.” Involvement in Mennonite and denominationally-specific projects slowed my progress on other projects, but I tried to offset this by choosing projects that could be stretched in multiple directions. Although I still do not consider myself to be primarily a “denominational” or even a “Mennonite” historian, I now worry less about how others choose to identify me (the lack of anxiety might be partly related to having moved from the tenuous track to a tenure track position).

My willingness to use my expertise as an historian on behalf of the denomination was sharpened several years ago after coming across a provocative and memorable speech delivered by Richard W. Hamming, Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA in 1986, entitled “You and Your Research.”⁵ He posed three rather pointed questions for his audience: “What are the most important problems in your field? Are you working on one of them? And if not, why not?” These questions are worth pondering not only by individual scholars in any discipline, but also by our society as a whole.⁶

Without claiming that the projects on which I’m currently working are *the* most important issues in the field, Hamming’s challenge did prompt a greater degree of intentionality in selecting the issues I, as an historian, worked at within my particular institutional and denominational setting. During my participation in denominational events, I started to take particular note of questions that kept recurring from new incoming leaders. Many of these questions have been incorporated into my teaching, and some have been used as the focus of writing projects. For example, the perennial question, “Do I have to be a pacifist to be a Mennonite Brethren pastor?” prompted a review of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist, and the subsequent Mennonite, response to the use of “the sword,” which revealed a much more variegated story than many denominational leaders know, or

in some instances, care to admit. The influx of new immigrants into Mennonite Brethren congregations, and the long-standing association in parts of Canada between “Mennonite” and one of several ethnic composites sparked an exploration of Mennonite Brethren identity, ethnicities, ethnocentrism, Canadian multiculturalism, and ongoing dilemmas of negotiating the relationship between religious faith and culture. Questions about how to lead Christian communities in a pluralistic, media-saturated, technological, multi-cultural society prompted a socio-cultural historical critique of how people within the Mennonite Brethren denomination have moved from being members of a geographically isolated and an ethnically homogeneous Christian community to becoming a multi-cultural Christian community that is actively engaged in all areas of Canadian culture.

William J. Bouwsma (who Doug Shantz cited in his CSCH presidential address in 2003) talks about the “obligation” historians have to meet “public needs”; historians are “properly the servants of a public that needs historical perspective to understand itself and its values.”⁷ Even though my primary area of expertise is not Mennonite Brethren history, as an historian hired by this denomination I resonate with the sense of obligation described by Bouwsma for using history to help this religious group understand better its place and experience within Canadian society, to help shape the identity and self-understanding of this particular religious group, while at the same time helping the scholarly community understand better the experience of this religious community. Instead of being anxious that involvement in denominationally-specific studies will lead to a kind of myopia or provincialism, my experience has given me a better appreciation for the opportunities that are present within denominational settings, and the reciprocity that is essential for connecting particular stories and experiences with the larger patterns in the history of Christianity in Canada, and in Canadian history and culture more generally.

Teaching History in an Evangelical Protestant Denominational Seminary

During the discussion following Ellie Stebner’s president’s address last year, someone asked, “Does one write and/or teach history differently for the academy than for the church?” The question generated considerable discussion: many, but not all, said no. I’d like to offer a perspective on this question in light of my experience of teaching at several public universi-

ties, and now within a denominational consortium.

For many years my approach to teaching history of Christianity has been influenced by George Marsden's idea of "methodological secularization." In offering historical explanations, Marsden encouraged Christian historians to suspend, if only temporarily for limited ad hoc purposes, attempts to identify metaphysical influences, and to concentrate only on identifying the "observable cultural forces" accessible to everyone that are at work in historical circumstances. The task of identifying the work of the Holy Spirit within historical circumstances is best left to the theologians.⁸ This is not unlike, he argues, the task of a pilot when landing an airplane. "No matter how open the pilot may be to spiritual realities, we hope that he will rely on the radar and not just the Holy Spirit when trying to get safely to O'Hare." He differentiates between "methodological secularization" and "methodological atheism" in that the former does not require the Christian historian to deny that there are spiritual dimensions ordered by God in the affairs of humanity. Marsden writes,

The pilot who follows the radar and the instrument panel may even sense those tasks differently if she believes she is ultimately dependent on God and that she has spiritual responsibility to her passengers. In academic work, such openness may have real impact on our theories, particularly in eliminating those that claim the universally accessible natural phenomena are all there is.⁹

Marsden sees the academy as a place where multiple perspectives should not only be permitted, but welcomed. I resonate with his observation that faith-informed views are not necessarily antithetical to scholarship, and his plea that public, pluralistic institutions should be more open to explicit discussions of the relationship between religious faith and learning. And I believe he is right in pointing out, as he puts it, that the "first principles" of naturalism are no more neutral than those derived from supernaturalism; broadly speaking "faith in something or other informs all scholarship."¹⁰ But his methodological proposal for the bracketing of explicitly theological judgments from historical assessments perpetuates, implicitly at least, a dichotomy that distinguishes, on the one hand, between scholarship exhibiting a critical detachment associated with neutrality and therefore suitable for the academy, and, on the other hand, engaged faith-informed research that explicitly utilizes Christian "first principles" and is therefore

deemed unsuitable for the academy on the grounds that it promotes a particular ideology. For Marsden, “methodological secularization” is a necessary concession that makes it possible for people who differ about first principles to communicate and get along.¹¹

For many years I used Marsden’s strategy. In a public university setting it helped me, as a young sessional lecturer, avoid overt ideological conflict within the department in which I was teaching. In seminary settings it was helpful for holding in check attempts on the part of some ministry-bound students to short-circuit the hard work of historical research and analysis in favour of quick providentialist judgments and pronouncements (a reflexive tendency among some evangelical students). Even a temporary suspension of the gravitational pull towards theological explanations helps some students glimpse the contribution that socio-cultural historical analyses can offer to an understanding of historical events.

A response to the debate about the methodological differences between religious studies and theological studies by Ann Taves (Professor of Catholic Studies in the Department of Religious Studies, University of California in Santa Barbara) has been helpful in seeing the limitations of Marsden’s methodological proposal for Christian historians who teach history. Taves observes that scholars who teach in theological schools “occupy a complicated institutional middle ground between the academy and religious communities.” She writes:

In theological schools, we routinely ponder the theoretical and practical meaning of established distinctions between theological studies and religious studies, the classical disciplines and the arts of ministry, the study of spirituality and spiritual formation. We often try to make sense of these distinctions, when we are not trying to throw them over altogether, by pointing to dichotomies – such as insiders and outsiders, theory and practice, detachment and engagement – that ostensibly inform them. In applying these distinctions, however, we typically get lost in endless intellectual snarls as these simple dichotomies simply refuse to make adequate sense of the complicated realities we are negotiating.¹²

In order to move away from these static dichotomies, which tend to anchor a person to a particular approach or identity, she proposes the use of a more dynamic, motion-oriented performance metaphor. She argues

that scholars in *both* the academy and the theological seminary need to use multiple “roles” that require at times an outsider-like detachment (that is, an approach that attempts to analyze and observe a phenomena, and to incorporate a multiplicity of perspectives),¹³ and at times an insider-like kind of engagement (that is, the promotion of a particular ideal or view). The crucial distinction or boundary between the two different institutional settings is defined not by a particular method or ideological approach, she argues, but rather by the question of what sort of persons each institution is trying to form – “who are we forming for what end?” Those teaching in the humanities, in a public university, are participating in the formation of students in the liberal arts; those teaching in the seminary, are trying to form theologically informed and committed Christians, some of whom are preparing for professional ministry.

An historian in a public university assumes a detached “posture of non-alignment (outsiderness)” by giving serious, critical analytical attention to a phenomena, but then assumes an engaged posture when defining what Taves calls “constitutive terms,” that is “the terms without which a discipline or tradition would not exist.” Historians, whose key constituent term is, of course, history, have like all scholars a “role-specific obligation to define their constitutive terms.” And when they do, they are no longer detached outsiders, but rather engaged insiders promoting an ideal, taking a stand, making a case, prescribing a perspective.

Similarly, in theological seminaries, scholars who are themselves committed to a particular tradition sometimes assume a detached posture for the purpose of listening to other, even competing, viewpoints about an historical phenomena, about religion, about spirituality, etc. Scholars in theological schools also have an obligation to define their constitutive terms, and not only disciplinary specific terms such as history, but also what it means to be Christian (and in my case, what it means to be Mennonite Brethren), and the relationship between these constitutive terms.

Students in every educational setting are served best when professors have the capacity to use interchangeably the roles of both the detached and engaged scholar in order to achieve institutional outcomes.¹⁴ In a seminary it means teaching about the history of a particular denominational tradition by using all methods available to analyze and critique perspectives, transitions, decisions, practices in order to enhance an understanding of achievements as well as contradictions. It also means using the same

historical story to affirm beliefs, values and identities, and to assist in the theological and spiritual formation of those who are attempting to embody these ideals in the way they live and lead. So, in answer to the question raised last year, “does one write and/or teach history differently for the academy and for the church?” my response is a both no, and yes.

Doing Evangelical Protestant Denominational Historiography

Finally, a few observations about doing evangelical Protestant denominational history in Canada. There are well over 100 denominations in Canada today that are associated with evangelical Protestantism.¹⁵ Many of these denominations have now reached their centennial anniversary, or are getting close, yet few have been the subject of sophisticated historical study.

The recent dearth of denominational histories is perhaps no surprise given the rather poor reputation of denominationalism during the twentieth century. Denominations have often been associated with divisiveness and schism. Richard Niebuhr’s description of denominations during the apex of the ecumenical movement as “emblems of the victory of world over church, of the secularization of Christianity, of the church’s sanction of the divisiveness which the church’s gospel condemns” didn’t help. For Niebuhr, denominationalism represented “the moral failure of Christianity.”¹⁶ In a study of denominationalism completed during the 1970s, Russell Richey describes how, “slurs on the denomination and denominationalism recur throughout religious literature, made as though they were so self-evident as to require no elaboration.”¹⁷ Interest in denominationalism has diminished further as loyalty to institutions, including religious institutions, has waned. For many, denominational identity is at best a secondary consideration when finding a church: churchgoers routinely use their experience as consumers to “shop” for a church in reasonable geographic proximity that will meet their “needs.” It is no longer uncommon to have students in class who have been active in at least half a dozen (or more) denominations in their first 30 years of life.

For numerous reasons the writing of denominational history has not been popular among historians of religion. In the academy, the search for rubrics broad enough to include all expressions of spirituality, along with a preference for analytical approaches, and the trend towards studies of pan-denominational phenomena (for example, evangelicalism and gender),

weakened an interest in using denomination as a category of analysis. In his presidential address in 1995, Bob Burkinshaw identifies a variety of pan-denominational themes and directions in his survey of Canadian evangelical historiography. He makes the point “that much of the dynamic activity of twentieth-century evangelicalism will be missed if the focus remains exclusively on denominations.”¹⁸ His affirmation of the need for, and value of, broad thematic studies is well taken, but very few denominational studies have actually materialized in the decade since his address. The stories of denominations within scholarly studies of evangelical Protestantism in Canada are almost invisible, and as a result, so are some of the finer nuances within this multifarious religious phenomena.¹⁹

Scholars of religion have worked hard to demonstrate the relevance of religion for understanding human experience and events. Denominational studies sounds like a regressive attempt to move the study of Christianity back to its former isolation after having finally managed to escape, in the words of one of our past-presidents its “unacknowledged quarantine;”²⁰ or still worse, to return to an era when “church history” meant writing apologias for the defense and promotion of a particular tradition. Add to this the fact that many denominational histories are poorly written works of triumphalistic hagiography in which well-intentioned amateur historians have copiously compiled as much detail as possible concerning the people, places and events they wish to celebrate or commemorate. Such histories are an invaluable source of information to be sure, but they seldom offer answers to critical questions or situate a denominational story within a larger social-cultural, national or theological trends.²¹ All of these factors have left denominational historiography, in the words of Henry Bowden, on the edge of oblivion.²²

Evangelical Protestants themselves share some of the blame. For many the value of remembering forgotten historical figures and events pales in comparison to the priority given to evangelism, the bringing about of conversions. The intense pragmatism of many evangelical Protestants sees the study of history (and in some instances even the study of theology) as a curricular luxury within colleges and seminaries. The legacy of giving preference to piety over learning, to being satisfied with simplistic providentialist approaches to history rather than more substantive, nuanced, critically reflective analyses, takes generations to overcome. Many evangelical denominations have not, until very recently, had individuals with the necessary credentials to produce quality historical studies (and

some still do not). And producing good denominational histories requires money, not to mention attention to the preservation of sources.²³

My own interest in denominational historiography preceded my employment within MBBS-ACTS, and occurred as an accidental consequence of my dissertation research. My dissertation examined the historical development of the Bible school movement in western Canada and used it as a window into the development of evangelical Protestantism in the region.²⁴ For decades the movement had been associated with large transdenominational schools such as Prairie Bible Institute, which by the end of the 1940s managed to attract nearly 1,000 students annually to the little prairie town of Three Hills, AB. The school was brought to the attention of the entire nation in 1947 when it was the feature story in *Maclean's Magazine*.²⁵ Just as the study of evangelical Protestantism in Canada was beginning to make its debut in the early 1990s, this association was unintentionally reinforced by John Stackhouse's introduction to evangelicalism in Canada that was based on selected transdenominational evangelical institutions and organizations.²⁶ A closer look at the demographics of the Bible school movement revealed the involvement of more than thirty different evangelical Protestant denominations prior to 1960 in western Canada alone. The cumulative enrolment in denominational schools outnumbered the cumulative enrolment in transdenominational schools by a ratio of two to one. In fact, the cumulative enrolment of all Mennonite schools made up approximately one-third of the enrolment of all Bible schools. Further investigation revealed some deep tensions between denominational and transdenominational expressions of evangelical Protestantism, which then became a theme in the study. All this to say, that evangelical Protestantism in Canada has been, and continues to be, much more denominational in its orientation than transdenominational.²⁷ This is not to minimize the significance of transdenominational tendencies or institutions and organizations, or to overlook trends that have reduced the differences and increased the levels of collaboration among some evangelical Protestant denominations. It is to emphasize that "denomination" is an important, but seldom used, category for analyzing the development of evangelical Protestantism in Canada.

The need for more studies of evangelical Protestant denominations in Canada was illustrated for me again when I had opportunity to be a part of the recently published "Christianity and Ethnicity" project.²⁸ The project design illustrates well the lacuna in the denominational studies of evangeli-

cal Protestant groups in Canada. All the historic “mainline” Protestant denominations – Anglicans, Lutherans, United Church of Canada, and Presbyterians – were allocated a chapter. The Roman Catholics were given two. Evangelical Protestants, with more than 100 denominations, were squeezed into one chapter. Had we had a better sense of the numerical demographics of the evangelical Protestant denominations at the outset the structure of the project might have been different.²⁹ The denominational (and transdenominational) scope of evangelical Protestantism in Canada made this chapter exceedingly difficult to write.³⁰

What specifically could denominational studies offer to our understanding of evangelical Protestants in particular, and Christianity in Canada in general? The vast majority of evangelical Protestants practice their faith in congregations that are connected in some way to a larger denominational body. Without giving some attention to the organizational structures that contribute to a sense of identity, that define beliefs and convictions, and that help give expression to priorities and practices, it is not possible to understand fully the diversity among twentieth-century evangelical Protestants in Canada and around the world. Many independent mega-churches whose charismatic leaders once decried denominations are part of networks and associations that organize conventions, and even produce publications and media products (for example, Willow Creek Association). Many of these new networks and associations are at least quasi-denominational in function.³¹ Even though organizational structures may not be as tactile an artifact as prayerbooks or as visible as the architectural aesthetics of a building, they are every bit as much a part of the “material culture” of religion, and are a vital part of the complex interplay between religious convictions (beliefs) and the visible manifestation of religion.³²

There are a few bright spots for denominational studies in North America. Notable is the *Denominations in America* series edited by Henry Bowden and published by Greenwood Press. The series publishes manuscripts that place the experience of major religious denominations in America within the broad context of social and cultural history. Almost a dozen works have been published in the last two decades (the most recent, *The Episcopalians*, in 2003). The efforts of Greenwood have been augmented by the work of scholars such as Edith Blumhofer and Grant Wacker, whose work on American Pentecostals serve as examples of the best kind of denominational histories.³³ A conference organized by Russell

Richey (Duke University) on “Reimagining Denominationalism,” in the early 1990s produced a provocative collection of essays highlighting the need to recover denominational stories. In her essay in this collection, Nancy Ammerman comments that an interest in stories of particular groups “probably represents the broad-ranging retreat from universalism to particularity that is part of what we are coming to call ‘postmodernity.’”³⁴ To-date such broad-based discussions of denominationalism among scholars of religion have not appeared in Canada – perhaps it is yet another example of how trends and themes within Canadian religious historiography typically lag behind those in American religious historiography.

There are two denominational families within the evangelical Protestant world in Canada that have more established historiographies that could (and should) serve as models for other denominations, namely the Baptists and the Mennonites. Although a good number of my research projects have explored aspects of the Mennonite experience in Canada, it was my entry into the Mennonite Brethren denomination that enabled a more direct involvement in its denominational historiography, and within the organizational infrastructure that has supported this historiography. This infrastructure includes at least four archival centres in North America, the online journal *Direction*, which has been in existence since 1972, an international “Historical Commission” that has a mandate to foster historical understanding and appreciation within the denomination, dozens of graduate students who either have or are currently completing theses or dissertations on topics related to the life of the denomination, scores of articles, biographies, primary source collections, and a range of monographs many of which have been produced by Kindred Press, a denominational publishing house, or Herald Press.³⁵ Since their origins in Russia in 1860, Mennonite Brethren writers have produced more than a dozen denominational histories, and are in the process of producing several more to commemorate their 150th anniversary in 2010. The Mennonite Brethren are a significant exception in the desert of evangelical Protestant denominational historiography in Canada.

What accounts for such prolificacy by a denomination with an attendance of only 50,000 people, and for its willingness to maintain an infrastructure for the preservation and writing of its history that rivals that of historic denominations in Canada that are multiple times larger? And what sets them apart from so many other evangelical Protestant denominations that have virtually no infrastructure in place for the writing of

history? First, the group has historically manifested a deep appreciation for, and commitment to, higher education. It has for many years had trained personnel and institutions interested in, and capable of, producing historical work.³⁶ Second, its sense of identity as a Christian community has been formed as much by story as by a set of common beliefs. The orientation towards using narratives for navigating tensions and transitions is a natural habitat for historians: not surprisingly, the denomination has produced far more historians and Bible teachers than theologians.

But challenges remain even within a denomination as committed to preserving and telling its history as the Mennonite Brethren appear to be. First, the denomination was begun in Canada largely by immigrants, and has experienced tremendous change during the past one hundred years. It has moved from being a culturally isolated and ethnically homogeneous religious community to being an urbanized, occupationally diversified, multicultural faith community. The telling of the denominational story must constantly be adjusted to incorporate new experiences, while maintaining its ability to anchor the denomination's theological identity in the face of new challenges.³⁷ The expectation for a newly hired historian like myself to get this balance "right" was spelled out rather explicitly by an older leader who approached me just prior to a presentation at a national denominational event, to say: "I'm very interested in hearing you tell the story because I'll be listening for what you include, what you exclude, and the spin you put on that which you do include!" I have intentionally tried to tell the denominational story in an invitational way, inviting people to become participants in the ongoing story of a particular "family," rather than as an elitist, triumphalistic apologia demonstrating the group's superior piety and theology. This adjustment is in line with an observation made by Martin Marty, who wrote "Denominations are not disappearing but changing, they are coming to be more like extended families – operating with memory and sensibility, ethos and kinship – than like creedal or other conformity engendering units."³⁸

Second, the denomination has not been immune from the impact of living in a society dominated by technology, satiated with information, and shaped by visual media, which has resulted, in the words of one scholar, in the annihilation of history.³⁹ It is a challenge to convince some contemporary leaders that preserving the denominational story needs to remain an essential priority.

Third, the maintenance of an infrastructure that has facilitated a rich

denominational historiography also has a gravitational pull that can easily consume historians within the denomination who are willing to make a contribution, thereby creating a kind of parochialism that prevents one from being enriched by, and contributing to, the larger field of religious history. It is a constant challenge to convince denominational colleagues that spending time and energy on research projects that are part of the larger story of Christianity in Canada will also make the denominational projects on which I work more valuable. Keeping ones feet in both a denominational seminary world, and the larger academy requires balance and an eye for reciprocity. Insider status can be an advantageous position from which to access the rich literary and artifactual texture of the internal life of a denomination so that it can be used to inform the larger story of Christianity in Canada. And an understanding of the broad patterns and trends within Christianity in Canada can help situate a denominational experience and enhance denominational self-understanding.

Fourth, although many denominational leaders recognize the usefulness of an appeal to the past for reinforcing a sense of identity, and for addressing contemporary issues, few denominational leaders are aware of the deeper historiographical debates and their implications for the telling of the denominational story.⁴⁰ For example, leaders within renewal movements such as the Mennonite Brethren often manifest a “declensive tendency” as they shape their stories of the past. Changes in practice, modification of theological emphases, or the open acceptance of influences that cannot be directly traced to a group’s founders, are interpreted as a deviation from a gold standard established at some designated point in the history of the movement. This has been particularly evident in the way some Mennonite Brethren in North America have interpreted the influence of evangelical Protestantism.⁴¹

For decades the prevailing interpretation among North American Mennonites of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement was shaped by Harold S. Bender’s short address, “The Anabaptist Vision.”⁴² He identified three emphases as central and normative within “evangelical Anabaptism”: discipleship, the church as a voluntary and separated brotherhood, and love and nonresistance in all relationships. Underlying Bender’s interpretation of sixteenth-century Anabaptism was the assumption that the movement had started in its purest form in 1525 in Switzerland, spread to other parts of Europe where, in some instances, these offshoots deviated from the original expression. This succinct summary served as a kind of plumbline

for determining what could legitimately be considered Anabaptist. It was (and still is for many) the measuring stick used in Mennonite versus evangelical Protestant comparisons and assessments.

The work of James Stayer and others during the 1970s signaled a scholarly coup d'état that marked the end of the historiographical monopoly enjoyed by Bender's "monogenesis" model in North America, and inaugurated in its place a "polygenesis" model.⁴³ These works highlighted the complexity and diversity of Anabaptist origins, ideas and experiences. Greater awareness of the theological diversity among sixteenth-century Anabaptists drew attention to the "confessional partisanship" by which previous Mennonite church historians had selectively endorsed those aspects of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement that they considered to be normative, and suppressed information that might challenge their intended version of events. The seismic historiographical shift created by the polygenesis model not only raised questions about the meaning of Anabaptism and the source(s) of Mennonite identity, but also prompted a more fundamental question: is it even possible to formulate an Anabaptist identity, and if so, on what basis? In the words of Rodney Sawatsky, "What is the hermeneutical key to determine normative Mennonitism?"⁴⁴ Many proponents of the polygenesis model were social historians who were more interested in the social, economic, religious and political aspects of the movement than they were in theological questions. After wrestling with the additional questions concerning the methodological relationship between history and theology, several Mennonite historians have tried to use the polygenesis model to work out a response.⁴⁵ The point is that although polygenesis historiography has generated considerable discussion among professional historians, very few Mennonite Brethren leaders know about this debate or care about the way in which it might effect their own self-understanding as "Mennonites."

Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope it is clear that I'm not suggesting that writing denominational histories is the only way, or necessarily even the best way, to study the history of Christianity in Canada. I'm asserting that denominational studies are a seldom-used (or seldomly used well) approach that can and should be used creatively and constructively to help us understand more deeply the subject(s) that we as learners, teachers, practitioners, and

scholars are seeking to understand better.

Endnotes

1. Particularly notable for their courageous candor are several addresses offered by members who did not, at the time, have an academic post, but who have manifested considerable determination and even entrepreneurial creativity in order to remain active contributors to the society and discipline (Marilyn Whiteley [2002], Peter Bush [2005], and Paul Laverdure [2006]).
2. The majority have used the occasion to offer a wide and provocative range of methodological and historiographical reflections on the study of Christianity in Canada. See for example Marguerite Van Die's discussion of religious experience (1992), Randi Warne's exploration of the relationship between economics and the study of religion (1993), Robert Burkinshaw's overview of evangelical historiography (1995), Beth Profit's inquiry into meaning and methodology (1996), William Katerberg's investigation of historical identity (1997), Paul Friesen's critique of "scientism" within religious historiography (1998), Sandra Beardsall historical sketch of CSCH's "three-headed" identity (1999), Jim Opp's look at the material objects and cultural practices in religious history (2000), Catherine Gidney's encouragement to use socio-cultural approaches within religious history (2001), and Doug Shantz' reflection on using history to serve the common good (2003).
3. The origin of ACTS was part of a broader trend as approximately a dozen evangelical Protestant seminaries were established in the latter half of the twentieth century.
4. The school was started in 1961 by the Evangelical Free Church of Canada as a two-year Christian liberal arts college; it was granted membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges in 1984.
5. The speech was delivered at a Bell Communications Research Colloquium Seminar in Morristown, New Jersey in 1986. For a transcript see <http://www.cs.virginia.edu/~robins/YouAndYourResearch.pdf>
6. For various reasons, including the transitory nature of leadership within CSCH and limited financial resources, issues within the history of Christianity in Canada are being addressed more substantively through special-topic conferences or projects that often involve individuals who are members of our society rather than by the activities of the society itself.

7. William J. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past: Essays in European Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1.
8. Marsden briefly differentiates between the task of the historian and the task of the theologian: “since God’s work appears to us in historical circumstances where imperfect humans are major agents, the actions of the Holy Spirit in the church are always intertwined with culturally conditioned factors. The theologian’s task is to try to establish from Scripture criteria for determining what in the history of the church is truly the work of the Spirit. The Christian historian takes an opposite, although complementary, approach. While he must keep in mind certain theological criteria, he may refrain from explicit judgments on what is properly Christian while he concentrates on observable cultural forces . . . How one judges any religious phenomena will depend more on one’s theological stance than on one’s identification of the historical conditions in which it arose” (“Afterword,” in *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980], 229-230). His approach is explained more extensively in *Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
9. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, 91. The comparison between the task of the historian and the pilot are, however, categorically different: in landing a plane the pilot is performing a task that is skill-oriented, not unlike a mechanic fixing the brakes on a car, whereas the task of the historian is interpretation-oriented.
10. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, 10-11. He argues that a Christian framework offers significance to one’s work, as well as a motivation and a rationale for the selection of research issues/questions, but it does not determine the actual methods of historical investigation (91-92). He argues that the “technical dimensions” (61) of all scholarship needs to abide by the “usual standards” without elaborating on how those standards are determined (49).
11. Marsden anticipates criticism in a section entitled “Christian schizophrenia” (*The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, 55-57). His proposal has been widely debated: see for example, Christopher Shannon, “Between Outrage and Respectability: Taking Christian History Beyond the Logic of Modernization,” *Fides et Historia* 34, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2002): 3-12. A full analysis of Marsden’s proposal is beyond the scope of this presentation.
12. Ann Taves, “Negotiating the Boundaries in Theological and Religious Studies,” Unpublished manuscript, 2-3 (see <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/faculty/taves/GTU-FinalLecture.pdf>).

13. This posture should not be confused with “objectivity, as if the scholar had no commitments or social location” (Taves, “Negotiating the Boundaries,” 8).
14. Using the anthropological notion “multiplex subjectivity” (“Negotiating the Boundaries,” 4), Taves notes that the more experience one has in shifting between different occupational or cultural worlds, each of which might require different identities, rules and obligations, the more easily one incorporates a multiplicity of roles in the classroom.
15. By “denomination” I mean the organizational form commonly used by Christian groups in North America. Russell Richey and Robert Mullin note that the category has served as the fundamental unit of religion in North America because of the way it successfully accommodated traditional religious claims and affirmations to the voluntarism and free association of a free society (*Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretative Essays* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1994], 3).
16. *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Hamden, CT: The Shoe String Press, 1954), 25.
17. “Foreword, in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russell E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 3.
18. “Aspects of Canadian Evangelical Historiography,” *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1995): 188.
19. In her presidential address in 1992, Marguerite Van Die used an essay by Ann Firor Scott, who observed how patriarchy made the activities of women invisible. Van Die argued that the influence of patriarchy is analogous to the secularity that has kept historians from recognizing and acknowledging the transcendent, spiritual dimension of people’s spiritual experience (“Recovering Religious Experience: Some Reflections on Methodology,” *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* [1992]: 156). Similarly, the preference for pan-denominational themes within Canadian religious historiography has sometimes obscured the significance of denominational structures and identities.
20. Ruth Compton Brouwer, “Transcending the ‘unacknowledged quarantine’: Putting Religion into English-Canadian Women’s History,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 47-61.
21. Mullin and Richey differentiate between two types of denominational studies: internal materials, which focus “on things generated by the movement for its use and self-perpetuation,” and external efforts, which depict or describe the denomination for an outside audience. Such external accounts “reach for

intelligibility, accent points of distinction, [and] defend the denomination from its critics” (“Introduction,” in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 5).

22. “The Death and Rebirth of Denominational History,” in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 17.
23. Approximately thirty-five evangelical Protestant denominations in Canada have in recent decades made an effort to produce a history volume. While all contain useful information, they vary considerably in quality: some of the better examples include Lindsay Reynolds, *Footprints: The Beginnings of the Christian & Missionary Alliance in Canada* (Beaverlodge, AB: Buena Book Services, 1981); *Rebirth: The Redevelopment of the Christian & Missionary Alliance* (Beaverlodge, AB: Evangelistic Enterprises, 1992); and Thomas William Millar, *Canadian Pentecostals: A History of the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada* (Mississauga: Full Gospel Publishing House, 1994).
24. “Training for Service: The Bible School Movement in Western Canada, 1909-1960” (Ph.D. dissertation, McGill University, 2001).
25. James H. Gray, “Miracle at Three Hills,” *Macleans Magazine*, 15 December 1947: 16-56. The school’s story was popularized within the Christian press as well: see for example J.H. Hunter, “With God on the Prairies: The Story of Prairie Bible Institute,” *The Evangelical Christian* (August 1943): 337-340.
26. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to Its Character* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 71-88; 131-137.
27. Significant attention is given to various evangelical Protestant denominations in the work of Robert K. Burkinshaw (*Pilgrims in Lotus Land: Conservative Protestantism in British Columbia, 1917-1981* [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995]).
28. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak, eds., *Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).
29. For example, the attendance in the Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches is approximately equal to that of the cumulative total of all Presbyterian churches; in fact, the cumulative attendance in Baptist churches is more than double that of Presbyterian churches. The cumulative attendance in Pentecostal churches exceeds the attendance of the United Church of Canada and the Anglican Church by more than 25%, and is more than the triple that of Presbyterian churches; the attendance in Christian and Missionary Alliance churches exceeds the cumulative total of all Lutheran churches in Canada.

30. Others have also struggled with managing the diversity among evangelical Protestants. Lloyd Mackey, founding editor of *Christian Info News*, who is very familiar with the contours of the evangelical Protestant landscape in Canada, organized his journalistic overview with only one chapter devoted to a particular denominational group, the Baptists (*These Evangelical Churches of Ours* [Winfield, BC: Wood Lake Books, 1995]). The conference organized by George Rawlyk that culminated in the publication of *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997) was a better mixture of comparative viewpoints, broad themes, and studies of specific denominational families and transdenominational organizations.
31. Examples include the Association of Vineyard Churches with over 1,500 congregations around the world, and the Association of Faith Churches and Ministers. Less structured are networks such as the emerging and emergent church movements, Ekklesia project, the Gospel and our Culture Network (missional church), and New Monasticism.
32. See Colleen McDannell, who argues that “religious meaning is not merely inherited or simply accessed through the intellect” (*Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 272).
33. Edith Blumhofer, *Restoring the Faith: The Assemblies of God, Pentecostalism, and American Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Grant Wacker’s *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
34. “Denominations: Who and What are We Studying?” in *Reimagining Denominationalism*, 111.
35. Mennonite Brethren historiography is augmented further by an extensive infrastructure that undergirds the study of Mennonite history in North America more generally.
36. For more on the leadership role played by the Mennonite Brethren within evangelical higher education in Canada see Bruce Guenther, “Slithering Down the Plank of Intellectualism? The Canadian Conference of Christian Educators and the Impulse Towards Accreditation Among Canadian Bible Schools During the 1960s,” *Historical Studies in Education* 16, No. 2 (2004): 197-228.
37. For a helpful description and critique of Mennonite Brethren historiography see Paul Toews, “Differing Historical Imaginations and the Changing Identity of the Mennonite Brethren,” in *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabap-*

- tist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C.J. Dyck*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Winnipeg: Herald Press, 1992), 155-169.
38. Martin E. Marty, Review of *Reimagining Denominationalism: Interpretative Essays*, eds. Robert B. Mullin and Russell E. Richey, *Christian Century* (7 December 1994).
 39. D.H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 9-26. Williams echoes the observations of the French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul made decades earlier in *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964).
 40. For a more detailed discussion of the implications of three current historiographical debates see Bruce Guenther, "Rediscovering the Value of History and Tradition," in *Out of the Strange Silence: The Challenge of Being Christian in the 21st Century*, ed. Brad Thiessen (Winnipeg: Kindred Productions, 2005), 187-202.
 41. A fuller discussion of this issue within Mennonite historiography is included in Bruce L. Guenther, "Evangelicalism within Mennonite Historiography: The Decline of Anabaptism or a Path Towards Dynamic Ecumenism?" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 24 (2006): 35-53; and Paul Toews, "The American Mennonite Search for a Useable Past: From the Declensive to the Ironic Interpretation," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 73, No. 3 (July 1999): 470-502.
 42. "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13, No. 1 (1944): 3-24; and *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18, No. 2 (1944): 67-88.
 43. James Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972); and James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49, No. 2 (April 1975): 83-121. See also Werner O. Packull, "Some Reflections on the State of Anabaptist History: The Demise of a Normative Vision," *Studies in Religion* 8, No. 3 (1979): 313-323; James Stayer, "The Easy Demise of a Normative Vision of Anabaptism," in *Mennonite Identity*, 109-116; Werner O. Packull, "Between Paradigms: Anabaptist Studies at the Crossroads," *Conrad Grebel Review* 8 (Winter 1990): 1-22. For a short overview of the historiographical changes in Anabaptist studies see A. James Reimer, "From Denominational Apologetics to Social History and Systematic Theology: Recent Developments in Early Anabaptist Studies," *Religious Studies Review* 29, No. 3 (July 2003): 235-240.

44. Rodney J. Sawatsky, "The Quest for a Mennonite Hermeneutic," *Conrad Grebel Review* 11, No. 1 (Winter 1993): 3.
45. Arnold Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology," in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 1-34.