



The 21st Century Jews



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Thesis

Conservative Mennonites of the 21st century are very close in many ways to the Jews of the 1st century, and we have a wonderful opportunity to learn from their strengths and weaknesses because so much of the New Testament is directed to them.

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Introduction

Prefude

Brisk autumn breezes carry the cacophony of taxi horns and other sounds of New York City traffic through the cavernous halls of Grand Central Station. The chill in the air hurries the steps of the thousands of people scurrying to and fro on its great platform. An incredible array of people from Bangladesh to Bermuda to Berlin go about their business. Even in their strangeness and diversity, or rather because of it, everyone seems uniquely and quintessentially New York in character. Across the hall a large collection of children, ranging in age from about one to fourteen, catches your eye. You notice they are curiously dressed, but when you see that the patriarch presiding over his clan has dark pants, a dark suit coat, a long gray beard, and a black hat, you turn away, surprised at yourself for having been curious about this obviously Jewish family. After all, Jews are a dime a dozen in New York City. As you head toward the escalator, a nagging incongruity is tugging at the back of your mind leading you to suddenly pivot and stare back to where the presumed Jews had been standing. However, they have vanished.

Aboard the train, Jake turns to his wife and remarks with a huge grin, "Ounfashtandich Martha! This sure is more fast than ol' Johnny can make the buggy go." "Ja, sis," Martha replies quietly as she looks somewhat worriedly out the train windows.

Introduction to the Jews & Mennonites

On the one side of the comparison, I will be limiting myself to 1st century Jews. This includes primarily two sub-groups of Jews: the Pharisees and the Christian Jews. These are not necessarily distinct groups as many of the Christian Jews had been Pharisees

and carried many of their Pharisaical ideas over with them. The most prominent of the converted Pharisees was, of course, Paul. In any case, these uniquely Jewish characteristics ran throughout various strains of 1st century Jews.

On the other side of the comparison, I will be limiting myself to Conservative Mennonites, especially those groups in close doctrinal and practical proximity to my own church: Beachy Amish-Mennonites.

These clarifications are meant to limit the scope of the paper for the purposes of writing. This does not limit the scope of application. In fact, one of my best sources writes comparing modern fundamentalist evangelicals to the Pharisees.

Purpose

The term Pharisee has become such a pejorative that many are probably conjuring visions of a bitter Mennonite hurling ecclesiastical condemnations upon the conservative Mennonite church. This is the farthest thing from the truth. For one, the Pharisees were quite a lot better people than we give them credit for¹. But more telling, I remain an Amish-Mennonite and am glad to be called such. I see myself remaining a Beachy for the foreseeable future. I see quite a lot more good in conservative Mennonite circles than bad and think it is one of the best types of churches to attend.

But most importantly, the message of this paper is not one of condemning a section of the church. Beyond the fact that this would be an unpopular thing to do, it would be unfair and paint with an overly broad brush. (While these weaknesses and strengths are *tendencies* for us having grown up in a conservative Anabaptist setting, they are not *necessarily* belonging to every one.)

1 For one very small example, Jesus explicitly endorsed the Pharisee's theology and beliefs in Matthew 23:1-3. However, if you read Josephus' writings and the Mishnah, you will find that the Pharisees are quite a bit "better" than we give them credit for.

This message is one of encouragement because of our strengths and a call that these not be squandered. Furthermore, this message is one of *personal* conviction and personal revival. Through writing this paper, I have been convicted anew of some of these weaknesses in my own life.

Strengths

*What advantage then hath the Jew? Much every way
Romans 3:1-2 (KJV)*

Introduction

I believe there to be great strengths to being a Christian Jew in the 1st century² or being a conservative Mennonite in the 21st century³. From little up, Jews were taught the ways of God. True, there were some nasty distortions of God's character and some wrong emphases and imbalances, but it was far better than having grown up a pagan not knowing about God. They knew the Scriptures and what righteousness was—what God expected. They often did it with a wrong attitude, but it is far easier to correct only an attitude rather than both attitude and habit. In short, I believe the advantages of being a Jew far outweighed the advantages of being a Gentile believer.

I believe the same to be true today of Mennonites. We have been taught so much about God and understand so much of what He expects of us. There are distortions, imbalances, and wrong emphases, but once again, so much of the framework of the Christian life has been laid in a habitual manner. Thus the bulk of the task that remains in walking with God is humbly entreating Him for a soft heart, right attitudes about life, and wisdom in having balanced emphases.

Possibilist

One positive characteristic shared by Jews and Mennonites is that of being, what John Howard Yoder terms, possibilist. This is not a huge point, but it is a foundational one, and Yoder does a good job of describing it. So I shall let him speak:

2 For brevity's sake, from now on when I refer to a "Jew", I am meaning specifically a Christian Jew or a Pharisee of the 1st century.

3 For brevity's sake, from now on when I refer to a "Mennonite", I am meaning specifically a conservative Mennonite of the 21st century.

I classify Jews, Anabaptists, and Wesleyans as 'possibilist' in this sense: they affirm a possibility in principle – not an achievement in fact – of human behaviour that pleases God.

Now I must walk a very narrow path. On one hand, I must continue to offend the Augustinians, represented by Dr Miguez' Socratic question, by seeming 'Jewish', in the apparent pride of thinking it possible to do the will of God. On the other hand I have to offend my Jewish friends, by describing a possibility which could only become real if in Jesus and Pentecost the messianic age in fact began.

In the eyes of those I must offend, the offenses are symmetrical opposites. Each side must see me as standing in the opposite camp. The rabbi must see me making unacceptable claims for the uniqueness of Jesus, one more Christian imperialist. The Augustinian will see me as 'Judaizing' or 'Pelagian', negating the need for grace.

Yet from my perspective – and here the introduction concludes – this 'narrow path' is neither a difficult balancing act, nor a tension between two dangers, but a unity. Because the Messiah came and poured out God's Spirit, obedience is possible. The obedience which was a potentiality became a reality in him. Pelagius affirmed (if the biased sources we have can be trusted) that there is something good left in human nature; an affirmation about Man. The 'possibilists' on the other hand are making affirmation about God. The affirmation that obedience is possible is a statement not about me nor about human nature, but about the Spirit of God.

(Yoder, 122-123)

Lone Rangers

Religiously

It is part of the self-understanding of both Jews and radical reformers that they find no surprise, and even no embarrassment, in learning that their view is not generally acceptable.

(Yoder, 108)

Mennonites have stood firm despite the theological badgering of the mainstream Protestant movement which decries many Anabaptist distinctives as unnecessary. While mainstream Protestantism has allowed itself to be drawn into many modern philosophies that contradict the Bible and have not stood firm on Biblical principles in light of the sexual revolution (for only two examples), Mennonites have firmly stood their ground on the Bible.

Geopolitically

The Anabaptists and Mennonites have been like the Jews geographically... Every foreign land could be their home, yet every homeland remained to them foreign... Even when tolerated, they never fitted in completely. (Yoder, pg. 109-110)

The Jewish diaspora is a simple fact of Jewish existence.

The Mennonites have taken as their rallying cries what Jesus said in John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world", and Paul's note in Romans 11:13 that those of great faith were "strangers and pilgrims on the earth."

This has been a necessary and worthy focus.



Generally

In recent history, they have seen the rest of the world as something to be engaged with only as a necessary evil and only with great caution. This has unfortunately led to a monastic mentality (Stoltzfus) that is not properly in balance with Scriptures⁴.

⁴ "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one... "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.
John 17:15, 18 (NASB)

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.

1 Corinthians 5:9, 10 (NASB)

so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world,
Philippians 2:15 (NASB)

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.

However much it has been overdone with the Biblical principle⁵ being exchanged for a set of man-made rules, it has undeniably assisted the Mennonite church greatly in maintaining some of the moral precepts found in Scriptures. My assessment is that overall it has had a net positive effect on the Mennonite church.

Scriptures

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Matthew 7:13-14 (NASB)

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.”

John 15:18-19 (NASB)

“They will make you outcasts from the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.”

John 16:2 (NASB)

We see that this stance of being “lone rangers” vis á vis the world is quite Biblical and a strong point of both Jews and Mennonites.

Romans 13:1-6 (NASB)

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20 (NASB)

- 5 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NASB)

Zealous for the Scriptures

From the outset of their movement, the Pharisees were people of the Book. Josephus writes, they “are supposed to excel others in the accurate knowledge of the laws of their country.”⁶

(Hovestol, 28)

Interestingly, the Pharisees' attitudes toward the Scripture match those of conservative Christians today. We, as they did, hold a high view of Scripture and pride ourselves on our fidelity to the Word. On all levels of the church, from the cradle role to the senior citizens, we encourage and honor Bible study. So did they. We favor the broad dissemination of the Scriptures so that the common person can understand them. So did they. We, like the Pharisees, seek to apply the Bible to every facet of life. We, like the Pharisees of old, believe and teach that the Bible is to be trusted and obeyed.

(Hovestol, 29)

The 'free church'⁷ agrees with Jewry in deriving its ongoing social identity, including its capacity to change, from the presence in its midst of a book.

(Yoder, 109)

...and that from childhood you[, Timothy a Jew,] have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

2 Timothy 3:15 (NASB)



The very basis of the entire Reformation was the authority of Scripture. The mainstream reformers did not carry through on this theoretical premise and the foundational Anabaptist distinctive came to be taking the Bible as authoritative without regard to political correctness.

The Pharisees of the New Testament had the same

6 Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, Sec. 38, in *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whitson (Lynn, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1982), 100.

7 The “free church” is, according to Yoder, synonymous with the “peace church”, the “radical reformation”, the “restoration” movement, the “believers' church”. This, of course, includes conservative Mennonites.

premise. They were a movement that arose against the liberalism of the Sadducees, Herodians, and Hellenists and they promoted a back-to-the-Scriptures approach, with the Scriptures being the final authority.

Conscientious in Obedience to God's Commands

The free churches were like the Jews in their seriousness about a distinctive moral commitment.

(Yoder, 109)

[Paul was] circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; **as to the Law, a Pharisee**; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; **as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.**

(Philippians 3:5-6 NASB)

[Pharisees] revered, studied, memorized, and sought to interpret the Scripture accurately. They made it their life pursuit to apply the teaching of the Scripture to every detail of life. The Pharisees had a very high view of God's Word and sought to obey its every command...

With the best of motives, they endeavored to bring every sphere of life under the authority of God's Word and His moral will... They wanted their fellow Jews to walk with God, not just talk about Him. Their goal was to bring every facet of life into subjection to God's truth. And they desired to bring this zeal for obedience to the masses, not just to an elite few.

(Hovestol, 28-29)

Mennonites are renowned for their conscientious obedience to the commands of God. Many mainstream evangelicals despair of every living a life that follows the moral precepts of the Bible as closely as the lives of Mennonites. The reason for this goes back to the foundation of Jews and Mennonites being possibilist versus the total depravity of TULIP Calvinism.

The Pharisees were the same way. Many Jews despaired of living a life that was as righteous and good as that of the Pharisees. The things that Jesus saw in the hearts of the Pharisees and the ways He condemned them was a surprise to those around Him. After all, the Pharisees were the ones that were most conscientious about following God and centering their whole lives around Him. They also put a lot of energy into teaching others about God, establishing the synagogue and Jewish religious education system. They were the ones that were fighting against liberalism and worldliness that was



encroaching from the surrounding Roman (Hollywood!) culture. (Hovestol)

If the Pharisees and Mennonites would have lived during the same time period, they would be best friends. And rightfully so. Both took very seriously the commands of God and looked with scorn upon those who did not feel doing so was important. They were entirely correct in this viewpoint.

Dedicated to Living Untainted by the World's Evil

The Pharisees sought to live *pure lives*. According to Josephus, they tried, “to do all things whereby (they) might please God.”⁸ The Pharisees' top priority was to promote Biblical purity in Israel.

(Hovestol, 29)

⁸ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, in *The Works of Josephus*, 281.

They saw themselves as standing firm for the old ways against the encroachments of new, more secular lifestyles.

(Hovestol, 31)

The very name Pharisee means “separated one” (Strong; Brown). Jesus gave an indication of how righteous the lives of the Pharisees were when He told people that unless their “righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees” they couldn't enter the Kingdom of Heaven.⁹ Those that heard would have felt a helplessness to achieve that standard because the Pharisees were the epitome of righteousness, as measured then and now. (Hovestol, 29).

One of Mennonites' biggest indictments, both against the mainstream Reformation and against modern mainstream Evangelicals, is their lack of a pure lifestyle. Their concept of unconditional election (grace) makes a pure lifestyle only a bonus rather than something that must flow out of true faith.

Thus Mennonites strive and make it a high priority to live untainted by the world's evil. The Jews in general and the Pharisees in particular made this a high priority as well.

Valued Fellowship

One only needs to visit a Mennonite church and compare the time that is spent fellowshiping after the service with that of mainstream Protestant churches to see quite starkly that Mennonites put a high value on fellowship. Inviting people over for meals is a very frequent occurrence. Community is a huge emphasis in Mennonitism.

Pharisees are affectionate to each other and cultivate harmonious relations with the community.

(Josephus/Mason, 170)

⁹ Matthew 5:20. A parallel construction (which adds weight to the righteousness of the Pharisees) of Jesus' words is found later in the chapter when He said, “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matthew 5:48, NASB)

Gary Tobin, head of the Institute for Jewish and Community Research, said of traditional Jewish culture, "...After all, what is life really about? **Food, relationships, enrichment ... So is Jewish life.**"

(Wikipedia)

Jews often invited each other to their house for meals (Hovestol, 30). They had a very strong sense of community that continues to this day.

Valued Family

The Pharisees were respectful toward the elderly and insisted on the integrity of the family.

(Hovestol, 31)

[Paul was] circumcised the eighth day, **of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews**; as to the Law, a Pharisee;

Philippians 3:5 (NASB)

One might paraphrase and reapply Paul's words as, "of the nation of Anabaptism, of the tribes of Mast, Miller, Yoder, and Beachy, a Mennonite of Mennonites." That would describe me. As Mennonites, we are very concerned about genealogy and *franschoff*. Recitations of ancestors can be given by most Mennonites. *The Mennonite Game* has even been birthed in which genealogies are explored and relationships are discovered.

Given its frequency of quotation and the ardency with which it is believed, one could say that one of the theme verses of Mennonites is Psalm 16:6, "Yea, I have goodly heritage." (KJV) Family is a big emphasis among Mennonites and larger than average families are the norm. Grandparents are well-cared for and decisions are often made in the context of families. Family reunions happen often and reconnect far-flung family members.

Weaknesses

Introduction

The strengths of Mennonites and Jews naturally beget some weaknesses. In our imperfect world, there are few strengths that do not have attendant tendencies to weaknesses. It is a significant note that every one of these weaknesses shared by Mennonites and Jews listed here is directly linked to a strength. Self-righteousness is pride in *right* actions. Knowledge without love is linked to *good* Biblical knowledge. Hypocritical show is a result of wanting to appear *righteous*. Traditionalism comes about through traditions that are often based upon the *Bible and righteousness*. An overemphasis on fences is an overemphasis on something that is designed to fulfill *righteousness*. Finally a misunderstanding of worldiness and non-conformity comes only because of a strong desire to *not conform to the evils of the world*.

Finally, most of the seven woes also come out of strengths. “Gatekeepers on the wrong side of the door” comes out of a desire to avoid the false easy-believism of modern evangelicalism. “Gospel-peddlers who increase the population of hell” come out of an overzealousness to make sure the truth is imparted and a confidence that we are following God the right way. “Oath-takers who loathe the truth” is the first weakness that doesn't arise out of righteous desires. “Gnat-pickers who swallow camels” by definition are those that are so zealous for the law that they are straining out gnats—their fault lies in not noticing the camels. “Clean hands and dirty hearts” in my experience arises out a desire to achieve quantifiable righteousness and quantifiable results, something that is not possible with issues of the heart. “The disguise of ministry” in my experience arises from a genuine desire to serve God, but involves a misappraisal of what is important to God. Finally, “those who murder the righteous” are

often as sincere as the apostle Paul persecuting the Christians—sincerely believing they are doing the work of the Lord, not realizing what true righteousness looks like.

The analysis and identifying of these weaknesses on the Mennonite side come primarily out of an analysis of my own weaknesses. While I have seen these weaknesses in my fellow Mennonites and believe there is a tendency present in most conservative Mennonites for these weaknesses, it is not necessarily a spiritual profile of all conservative Mennonites. While I have done a bit of interviewing of other Mennonites for this, it is primarily a reflection of my own experiences.

I would make it clear that while I say that this has arisen out of my personal experiences and an examination of myself, there has been an incredible range of severity of these weaknesses that I have observed. Please don't look to my home church as being stereotypically weak in these aspects. In fact, I have been incredibly blessed to grow up in a church that recognized many of these weaknesses and worked to combat them.

In this section, I will be doing extensive quoting and mirroring of Hovestol's points. This is for a number of reasons. The first is that he says them better than I could and has put more study into it than I have. The second is that I'm still Mennonite enough that I can't bring myself to be as blunt as he often is.

Self-Righteousness

Self-righteousness is, by definition, in the domain of those that strive to live righteously. Thus, it was and is those with the most pristine lives of morality that are most susceptible to self-righteousness.

For myself I have found that self-righteousness comes primarily after periods of spiritual growth. This spiritual growth is not fake—it's the real thing. However, I become pleased with myself for attaining “righteousness” and forget that there is

nothing that I can do to satisfy the righteous standard of God. I establish external standards for myself and when I attain them, I become proud that I am now a righteous man of God who has everything figured out. I forget that God's standard of righteousness is a measure of the heart. I totally lose proper perspective and the picture I see of myself is utterly distorted.

Hovestol has done excellent work on this subject and I will simply state his points in my own words. First, a list of how we are deceived by self-righteousness:

1. **Blinded by society** – We are so righteous externally compared to society, that we begin to think that we are righteous on an absolute scale, rather than punily righteous on a relative one.
2. **Blinded by morality** – When morality is reduced to external standards, it is easy to convince oneself of one's own righteousness.
3. **Blinded by religion** – We tend to think that when we do religious things—good Mennonite things—that we are righteous.
4. **Blinded by knowledge** – When we know a lot about the Scriptures, people are impressed and think we must be walking closely with God. Unfortunately, there is not a direct relationship between Biblical knowledge and a relationship with God. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures better than anyone, yet they didn't recognize the Son of God in their midst. (Hovestol, 48-49)

Next he gives a list of self-righteousness “warning lights”:

1. **A contemptuous view of others**
2. **A shallow sense of forgiveness** – So often I forget how much I have been forgiven. I think that since I have been “good” so much of my life, God must have

had to forgive me far less than a lot of people. When I forget the depth what Jesus did for me, it's a good sign that I'm getting self-righteous.

3. **A wrong sense of grace and fairness** – When I find myself crying, “Not fair!” and forgetting how unfair God forgiving me was, it's a good sign that I'm self-righteous. When I am not willing to extend the same grace to others that God extended to me, it's a good indicator that I don't see myself and my righteousness clearly.
4. **An unhealthy view of failure** – When sin or failure is revealed in my life, do I repent or do I attack the prophet? Is my appearance of righteousness or my relationship with God more important? (Hovestol, 50-54)

What self-righteousness comes down to is when we think the opposite of what the apostle Paul said, “Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect.” (Philippians 3:12, NASB) When we think we have obtained, that we have become as perfect as is humanly possible, that is when we are self-righteous.

Knowledge Without Love

*Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.
I Corinthians 8:1b (NASB)*

In my life, knowledge has always been a high priority. I enjoy getting knowledge and having knowledge. Frequently in my life this knowledge has caused me to, as the above verse says, become arrogant. Knowledge will always cause arrogance when not balanced with sufficient love. This is not a solved problem in my life—it is still something I battle, often on a daily basis.

There is a series of folk sayings and adages that illustrates this point well. “Knowledge is power.” “Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The more powerful

the knowledge, the more love is needed to balance out the arrogance that naturally comes with that knowledge. There is no knowledge more powerful than the knowledge found in the Scriptures.

The Pharisees knew the Bible backwards and forwards—literally. They had such things memorized as how many letters were in each book. They knew the doctrines of the Bible and Jesus affirmed their right belief and doctrine when he told the people, “The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe.” (Matthew 23:2-3a, NASB) From a young age, Mennonites are taught the Bible through Sunday School and sermons and thus we have a very powerful knowledge of the Bible, much like the Pharisees. However, Jesus goes on to tell us where they went wrong:

“but do not do according to their deeds; for they say *things* and do not do *them*. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with *so much as* a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels *of their garments*. They love the place of honor at banquets and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called Rabbi by men.”

Matthew 23:3b-7 (NASB)

Jesus pointed out that these excellent Bible scholars knew and even applied much of Scripture, but they had a dreadful imbalance in their interpretation of Scripture; they obeyed all the letters of the law—the quantifiable and measurable parts—but they forgot the heart matters of the law such as justice, mercy, and faithfulness. (Matthew 23:23)

They selectively applied the Scriptures, thus getting their priorities mixed up. They put a greater emphasis on laws like the Sabbath—laws meant to help our relationship with God (Mark 2:27) rather than being an end in itself—than on love, mercy, and a

relationship with God. (Matthew 12:1-14; 23:23)

Through their careful study of the Scriptures, they had carefully constructed comprehensive theologies that dealt with all sorts of issues. Some of these theologies were extra-Biblical, extrapolated from the Bible, and were quite simply wrong. Their extra-Biblical theologies caused them to reject Jesus because He didn't agree with their systematic theologies.

Finally, even when they did the right things externally, they were often doing it on their own strength for selfish reasons. When I do things on my own strength for selfish reasons, it is worthless from God's perspective (Isaiah 64:6). (Mast, *Eritheia*)

The Pharisees, much like myself today, had lots of knowledge and lots of arrogance (they had quite an unteachable spirit). They taught the right things, but often didn't practice what they preached. They put an emphasis on externals and nearly ignored matters of the heart and matters of attitude. They had comprehensive theologies that had some wrong bits and which filtered out the truth. They did the right things for the wrong reasons, rendering it a pointless exercise.

They had knowledge about God, but they had no love relationship with God. Their lack of relationship and knowing the heart of God caused them to miss the presence of God-incarnate in their midst.

Hypocritical Show

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness."

Matthew 23:27 (NASB)

The Greek word for hypocrisy means to be an actor on a stage putting on a performance (Mast, *Hupokrisis*). That is at its root what hypocrisy is—it's putting on a show of piety

for man rather than being pious out of love for God.

We all know that the Pharisees were hypocritical showoffs, but how about myself? I know that I have been many times throughout my life an absurd hypocritical showoff—working hard to appear to be very righteous and Godly. I will summarize Hovestol's points about true piety (in contrast to hypocritical piety) and let you and the spirit of God decide whether you fit into this camp of hypocrisy with the Pharisees and me.

1. True piety is difficult, not natural – I don't need to practice hypocritical piety, it comes quite naturally.
2. True piety is practical, not mystical – Making sure that I am not hypocritical can not be done by following a list of do's and don'ts. Indeed, if we try to do so, we will often hinder true piety. Not praying in public, not keeping record of tithing, never telling *anyone* when I fast, etc will not make so that I am free from hypocrisy. In fact, Jesus didn't call us to these do's and don'ts. What He does call us to is that we do these things with the right motives and when people see them, that they give glory to God, not give glory to us.
3. True piety is often unnoticed, not publicized – Hypocritical piety brings lots of positive attention from humans around us. Thus, it is very attractive. However, true piety often goes unrecognized.
4. True piety is vertical, not horizontal – The heart of true piety is motivation; true piety is done out of a heart for God, not out of a desire for human recognition.
5. True piety is simple and secret, not showy – If we are unsure of our motives regarding an act of piety, a simple way to check them is to do the act in secret and see if it holds the same appeal. It also helps to think a bit about the results of the acts—what is the benefit of doing this? Is it a funny, smart, wise-looking

thing to do? Or is it genuinely helping people? (Hovestol, 97-99)

Traditionalism

[Jesus said to the Pharisees,] “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN.’ Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.”

Mark 7:6-8 (NASB)

In the Christian church, almost *everything* we do is based on humanly devised traditions. The days, times, and places we meet for worship... the meetings we hold and ministries we offer.... the way we dress, the structure of our service, our styles of music... are dictated largely by tradition. We have theological traditions, denominational traditions, psychological traditions, sociological traditions, ethnic traditions, national traditions, even geographical traditions. Tevye [a Jew] in *Fiddler on the Roof* was correct when he said, “Without our traditions our lives would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.”

Traditions are everywhere and influence almost everything we do. They have their benefits, but they must not be confused with God-given commands. Tradition should never have the same authority as Scripture. Yet often we fail to recognize our traditions as comfortable patterns, not God-ordained instructions. We elevate them to unshakable truths, just as the Pharisees did.

(Hovestol, 101)

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Colossians 2:8 (NASB)

Tradition is not necessarily a bad thing—often it codifies into common practice things that are good to do. When tradition becomes bad is when it either goes against (or hinders) the truth and commands of Scripture or when it is viewed on the same level of authority as Scripture.

Tradition May Foster False Religion

If you invited me to your house for a meal and we sat down to eat and you would simply say, "Dig in!" without first praying, I would wonder whether you have Alzheimer's or whether you are an apostate Christian. In fact, what I am judging you by is simply tradition, not a Biblical command. Nowhere in the Bible is praying before a meal commanded. Your relationship with God or obedience to His commands is in no way linked to whether you pray before a meal. Yet, I would tend to judge you.

Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?"

Matthew 15:1-3 (NASB)

The Pharisees did the same thing with hand-washing—it was not a Biblical command, but they ostracized and looked down on people for not following it.

With both the modern Christian "tradition of the elders" of praying before meals and the Pharisees' "tradition of the elders" of washing hands before eating, we see that these traditions were fostering a false idea of what righteousness and following God looks like.

Tradition May Supplant Scripture

The Pharisees had a tradition called a Corban vow—a pledge of a future offering to God. When the person that had made the vow died, whatever was dedicated would be given to God. However, in the meantime, the person could use those goods for themselves. But they couldn't give the goods to anyone. What happened was that aged parents would be in need and the Pharisees would prevent—through their Corban tradition—the use of those goods for their benefit, breaking the command to honor father and mother. Jesus told them very clearly in Mark 7:9-13 (NASB), "You are experts at setting aside the

commandment of God in order to keep your tradition.” So we see traditions have the potential to contravene Scriptural commands.

Tradition May Twist Theological Truth

The Pharisees had another tradition, this one about defilement. They had long lists of rules about what (external things) would defile a person. Jesus told them very clearly that it is not physical things like food that defile a person, but internal things of evil thoughts. He said, “Are you so lacking in understanding also? Do you not understand that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? [...] That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.” (Mark 7:18b-23, NASB) So we see traditions have the potential to twist our views of theology and cause us to misdiagnose unrighteousness and be impotent to address such issues.

Tradition May Contribute to Spiritual Blindness

Matthew reports that the statements about defilement aroused the ire of the Pharisees (Matthew 15:12-14). This confirms how traditions engage, and enrage, the emotions. [...]

Jesus made it clear that Pharisaical traditions posed a much more serious problem than the disciples imagine. It was perilous to their spiritual health to hang around with those who equated tradition and truth. These were tough words from a trouble Master. It is more dangerous than we know to follow Pharisees, ancient or modern, Traditions, which are often a large part of the package of legalism, must be strongly confronted.

One of the surest tests of what we truly believe is revealed by how we emotionally react to various situations. Emotional reactions expose the inner workings of our souls. Which of our traditions enrage us? Do any of our traditions have a blinding effect? [...]

How do we avoid falling prey to the emotional offense and spiritual blindness that traditions can produce? First, when our emotions rise over religious issues that we know are not Biblical commands, it is time to take a time-out. We ought to listen to the other side. Then we should ask ourselves if our offense is justified or if God is trying to nudge us. Next, we must be sure that our lives are guided by God's Word, not human traditions. For to lead people into traditions as if they were the essence of Christianity is no different than a blind man leading a tour through the Grand Canyon.

At the same time, we must be prepared to cause offense if we seek to truly follow Jesus. I do not believe that we should try to be offensive; instead, we should seek to be as gracious and patient as possible. And surely we should never confront traditions with a haughty spirit. Few things are as offensive as arrogant youth seeking to replace crusty traditions with contemporary traditions. This is major-league hypocrisy (and very common today).

(Hovestol, 113-115)

Conclusion on Tradition

I purposely did not include any examples of Mennonite traditions in this section. The reason is that because of the emotional ire they raise, it makes so there are no easy answers. The laws of love for brothers are very important.

What I desire to do is to take us to the teachings of Jesus, see what He said, and then have each of us personally evaluate the traditions that we hold to, and ask how Jesus would respond to our traditions. Each one of us must humbly entreat Jesus for wisdom and insight into how He would have us to live and how He views our traditions.

I would like to conclude this section on tradition by giving a very insightful quote from Hovestol that contrasts tradition with God's truth:

Traditions are easier to obey than God's truth. Traditions often focus on actions while God focuses on attitudes that motivate actions. Traditions can be accomplished by gut-power while God's truth requires Spirit-power. Living God's truth requires a relationship with Him. When traditions become automatic, it is easy for the intimacy to be lost.

(Hovestol, 107)

Fencing the Law

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence.
Colossians 2:20-23 (NASB)

There's something comfortable about reducing Christianity to a list of do's and don'ts, whether your list comes from mindless fundamentalism or mindless liberalism: you always know where you stand, and this helps reduce anxiety. Do's-and-don'tism has the advantage that you don't need wisdom. You don't have to think subtly or make hard choices. You don't have to relate personally to a demanding and loving Lord.

(Roberts)

The Jews and Pharisees were the ultimate fence builders. *The Mishnah* (the written down oral law/traditions) gave their mission as a three-fold one: "Be deliberate in judgment; raise up many disciples; and make a fence around the law." (Lipman)

Fences are extra-Biblical protections around what God commanded. The first fence was built by Eve when she told the serpent that God commanded them not to eat *or touch* the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It probably was indeed helpful for her to not touch the fruit, but it was not the command of God. Hovestol gives a whole list of fences that could have been made: "Do not smell it; do not see it; do not go near it; rope off that part of the garden; build a wall around the forbidden tree." (120) He concludes by saying that someone would probably eventually decide that the safest thing to do would be to cut the tree down and burn it.

Fences May be Inconsistent with God's Word

“For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”

Hosea 6:6 (KJV)

The Jews built many fences around the Sabbath to make sure that people didn't break it. However, in the process, they created situations in which to follow the fences contradicted direct Biblical commands. This is an inherent problem with any hard and fast practical rule and is probably one of the reasons that God moved in the New Covenant to a heart-based system rather than an external rule-based system.¹⁰ God said, “For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:6, KJV) Jesus confronted the Pharisees because obeying their Sabbath fences entailed breaking the some of the primary commandments of God, namely mercy. The Jews' sabbath fences made so that it was “lawful” to get an ox out of the ditch on the Sabbath, but “unlawful” to heal a child of Abraham on the Sabbath. (Luke 13:13-17; Mark 3:1-6; Mark 2:27; Matthew 12:1-14)

Unfortunately, many times our fences do the same.

Fences have a good purpose in making it easier for *immature* Christians to do what is right. We do the same with our children, giving them external commands and restrictions—erecting fences at the tops of stairways, telling them not to go on the road, etc—until they become mature enough to understand the principle that stairs are all right to traverse if you don't fall down them and roads are all right to walk on if there are no cars coming.

An example of one of our fences that are far more explicit than the Bible's more

¹⁰ For example, Jesus said, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28, KJV). Jesus said time and again, “It hath been said... but I say unto...” and each time He moved the command from being an external action-based command to an internal heart-based one. If people did not hate, there would be no problem with murder. Hate is the root sin of murder just as lust is the root sin of adultery.

nuanced stance is abstinence from alcohol. The Bible gives dangers of alcohol (*Isaiah 28:1-8; Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 6:10; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:6-8; 1 Timothy 3:3, 8; 1 Peter 4:3*) and benefits of alcohol (*Numbers 28:7; Deuteronomy 14:22-27; Psalm 104:14-15; Ecclesiastes 9:7; Matthew 26:27-29; John 2:1-10; 1 Timothy 5:23*). Certainly nowhere does it outright condemn the consumption of alcohol.

Hovestol eloquently cites two more fences which go farther than, indeed against, Scripture:

Various fences involving worship also are on precarious ground if we consider the whole counsel of God's Word. Dancing for example, was a prohibited activity in my background. The temptations of sexual arousal motivated the construction of these fences, and I have grown to appreciate the protection they provided. Some dancing in Scripture is associated with evil (see Exodus 32:19; Matthew 14:6). However, an across-the-board ban on dancing is not supported by Scripture [**Exodus 15:20**; Judges 21:21; 1 Samuel 18:6; **2 Samuel 6:14-16, 20-23**; Psalm 30:11; **Psalm 149:3; Psalm 150:4; Ecclesiastes 3:4**; Jeremiah 31:4, 13; Lamentations 5:15; Luke 15:25]. God must believe that the body can be rightly used in celebration and worship. Moreover, we cite texts on reverence in worship but are silent about those that speak of noisy celebration with "clashing cymbals," no less (1 Chronicles 13:8; Psalm 150:5). Rigid fence-building can turn us into judgmental thinkers rather than Scripture-submitting, Spirit-led people. Jesus would likely get out His wire cutters and hack away at some of our fences just as He did two thousand years ago with the Pharisees.

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Also, God's hymnbook, the Psalms, gives a list of instruments (in command form) that He prefers in worship:

- Trumpet
- Harp
- Lyre
- Timbrel
- Dancing
- Stringed instruments
- Pipe
- Loud cymbals
- Resounding cymbals

For obscure, extrapolated, man-made reasons (read: fences) we forbid some of these very instruments which God specifically commands.

Fences May Ignore Special Ministries and Exceptions

*"Or have you not read in the Law, that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple break the Sabbath and are innocent?"
Matthew 12:5 (NASB)*

Some laws, especially external fences (as opposed to spirit of the law, heart laws), are made to be broken by the appropriate people. That is an understood part of those laws. A modern example is traffic laws that are broken by emergency personnel. The example Jesus gave was priests who "broke" the Sabbath performing their duties (Matthew 12:5). Making fences tends to create a proliferation of exceptions to keep with the spirit of the law. However, when principle is taught, countless exceptions (and a resultant complex web of rules) are not needed.

Fences May Cause Us to Forget Who is in Control

*"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."
(Matthew 12:8 NASB)*

The Pharisees forgot that God gave laws for a purpose and that He has the responsibility to define what He means by it, not us. We are to do our best to figure out what God intended and ask for His direction as we seek to follow Him. It is not our place to tell God what His commands mean. The Pharisees tried to tell God-incarnate what God meant by the Sabbath commands. Unfortunately, I find myself approaching God with the same attitude sometimes.

Separatism & Worldliness

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

Romans 12:2-3 (NASB)

[Jesus prayed to His father,] "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world... I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."

John 17:11a, 15, 18 (NASB)

I'm not going to say a whole lot about this subject because it is really quite simple. The Bible is clear that we are to not be worldly in our way of thinking, but it does not say that we are supposed to separate ourselves from the world. In fact, it says the opposite. This is probably one of the biggest misconceptions among both Jews and Mennonites—many of both groups have the idea that a weird look and strange beliefs makes them righteous. However, the idea that the Bible teaches is not that a different look or radical actions vis à vis the world makes us righteous, but rather that a different heart and a different way of thinking will sanctify us. This new way of thinking will conform us to an absolute Godly standard—a look that may look like the world in places and may look different in places. The contrast, while it will come out in appearance and action, is of the way of thinking. Any other contrast is worthless from a righteousness perspective.

We must commune with God and allow Him to transform our minds, and then our appearance and actions will follow. To try to “transform” our actions or appearance is going to make us do many weird things that God doesn't care about. It's the wrong target to aim for.

Seven Woes (Matthew 23:13-31)

After seeing so many similarities between myself and the conservative Jews of Jesus'

day, I sat up and took notice when I read Matthew 23:13-31. It is a series of seven¹¹ woes directed toward the Pharisees. I found myself guilty of most of these woes and found them to be more shared characteristics between Mennonites and Jews.

Gatekeepers on the Wrong Side of the Door (Matthew 23:13)

“But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.”

Matthew 23:13 (NASB)

So often I find myself, in my Mennonite righteousness, judging those liberals who are not following Christ's commands as well as I am. I forget that if I were to compare my righteous acts to their righteous acts on God's scale of righteousness, there would be little difference. Furthermore, God has made it crystal clear throughout the New Testament that it is quite simply not our job to judge or condemn (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37; Romans 2:1; 14:3-4, 10-13; 1 Corinthians 4:5; James 4:11).

Gospel-peddlers Who Increase the Population of Hell (Matthew 23:15)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.”

Matthew 23:15 (NASB)

Here Jesus is condemning the Pharisees for proselytism instead of evangelism. They were converting people to Pharisaism rather than converting people to being followers of God. My parents raised me to know that there are many non-Mennonite true Christians. I have always been taught that we are responsible for what God convicts us of and that God hasn't convicted all believers of all the same things He has

¹¹ Matthew 23:14 is not part of the inspired word of God as it was added by a later scribe. It is not found in reliable manuscripts.

convicted me of. So I can't honestly say that I have perceived this to be a weakness in my own life. However, I have seen this problem of proselytism instead of evangelism in the Mennonite church. Far too often I hear laments that converted people are willing to become followers of Christ, but they aren't willing to become Mennonites. We seem to forget that our mission in life is not to proselytize people to Mennonitism, but rather to evangelize people to Christianity. We forget God's promise that "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6, NASB)

Oath-takers Who Loath the Truth (Matthew 23:16-22)

"Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, that is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple is obligated.' You fools and blind men! Which is more important, the gold or the temple that sanctified the gold? And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, that is nothing, but whoever swears by the offering on it, he is obligated.' You blind men, which is more important, the offering, or the altar that sanctifies the offering? Therefore, whoever swears by the altar, swears both by the altar and by everything on it. And whoever swears by the temple, swears both by the temple and by Him who dwells within it. And whoever swears by heaven, swears both by the throne of God and by Him who sits upon it."

Matthew 23:16-22 (NASB)

Here the Pharisees were following the letter of the law so minutely (in an effort to find loopholes) that absurdity results. Their problem was that their hearts were not following the spirit of the law.

Need I mention more than DVDs and "video cassettes"?¹²

¹² For those not up to date with the conservative Mennonite church, for many years "video cassette players" were forbidden in many churches. With the advent of DVDs, however, many conservative Mennonites became avid movie watchers because they were following the narrowest possible definition of the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the law.

Gnat-pickers Who Swallow Camels (Matthew 23:23-24)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. You blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”

Matthew 23:23-24 (NASB)

The law did not require for people to tithe their spices (“mint and dill and cummin”) but the Pharisees did anyway. This was obviously a very minor part of the law, but it was done to demonstrate their righteousness. However, many of the heart laws that God had given in the Law were being neglected: “justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” They were taking incredible amounts of energy to strain out the little things that were not harmful, but were ignoring the elephant in the room—the camels sliding down their throats, choking their spiritual life.

So often I find myself doing the same. I want to make sure that I have every theological duck in a row, every action right, every attitude right, etc, but I neglect to comfort a brother who is hurting; I fail to share the gospel when I have the opportunity; I neglect to speak encouraging words to my brothers; I don't go out of my way to do an unseen deed of service; I am scared to speak to a brother who is failing in an area with which I can help him. The list goes on and on.

The most weighty matters of the law are positive commandments—love, mercy, brotherhood, relationship with God—rather than negative commandments. The negative commands are easy to check off. However, the positive—the most weighty commands—are the most easy to ignore.

Clean Hands and Dirty Hearts (Matthew 23:25-26)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”

Matthew 23:25-26 (NASB)

I was such a good little boy growing up. I voluntarily wore a straight cut suit at a young age and was heavily complimented for being so mature for rejecting the sloppy status quo of my peers. I was voluntarily (without any pressure from my parents or peers) baptized at a very young age; the rest of my baptism class was far older than me. I had devotions in church at a very young age. I was elected usher at age 13. I was elected youth leader by the church at 15, but the pastor stepped in and said that while he thought I was a quite mature young man, he thought it would be better if I were a bit older first. Appearing righteous had its very real benefits and I became skillful at this game of righteous appearance. I quickly came to learn little tricks to increase my righteousness in the eyes of those around me. However, this all hid an incredibly dirty heart. Lying, cheating, lusting, dis-respectfulness to parents, rebellion, temper, etc, etc were (and still remain) incredible struggles. I was the epitome of a man with clean hands, but a dirty heart.

I see many others around me in the Mennonite church with the same condition. When one gets to know them well, the inside life is far different than the outside picture.

Perhaps because this is such a widespread and common problem, this is the only woe in which Jesus offers the solution alongside the woe. The solution is very simple and really gets to the heart of this entire thesis: **“Clean the inside of the cup and of the dish, so that the outside of it may become clean also.”**

The Disguise of Ministry (Matthew 23:27-28)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

Matthew 23:27-28 (NASB)

From a young age until now, I have been very aware of the things that I can do to pad my spiritual resumé and to add to my appearance of righteousness. It is a constant battle that I must fight to ensure that righteous acts that I am doing are done for the sake of God rather than for the prestige and acclaim of men. So often I find myself structuring my actions so that I will receive maximum benefits of prestige and acclaim from men. (Mast, *Eritheia*)

Those Who Murder the Righteous (Matthew 23:29-31)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, and say, 'If we had been living in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”

Matthew 23:29-31 (NASB)

Finally, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for looking at sins of past generations—specifically that of murdering those that preached repentance—and saying, “We would never do that!” How many times have I read through the New Testament and prayed and thought, “God, I thank thee that I am not as other men... or even as this ~~publican~~ Pharisee.”¹³

Jesus was addressing two problems here. The first was that they didn't think they were like previous generations. The second was that they were rejecting those prophets from God that made them feel guilty.

¹³ Obviously modified version of Luke 18:11 (KJV).

Solution

Any way you cut it, religion does not work with God. Attach any name to it that you wish—Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, even Christianity—human efforts to make one's way to God are futile. No amount of self-effort can reform the heart. No pursuit of piety or understanding of philosophy can connect one to God. No traditions have the power to produce true spirituality, and no fences can protect from transgression. No degree of separatism can shield one from sin. For that matter, no amount of moral uprightness can produce righteousness.

(Hovestol, 180)

Introduction

There are many ways in which the solution could be discussed. I am going to take three approaches. The first is a list by John Fischer of extremely practical, daily things that can be done. The second is an exegesis of Philippians 3 by Tom Hovestol that gives a series of strategic spiritual steps to take. The third is a series of four points of focus that should underlie and be the foundation of everything we do. Finally, I'll give you what I see as the simple bottom line of (all these manifestations of) the solution.

12 Steps

John Fischer in his book, *12 Steps for the Recovering Pharisee (like me)*, gives the following steps:

- Step 1** – We must admit that our single most unmitigated pleasure is to judge other people.
- Step 2** – Have come to believe that our means of obtaining greatness is to make everyone lower than ourselves in our own mind.
- Step 3** – Realize that we detest mercy being given to those who, unlike us, haven't worked for it and don't deserve it.
- Step 4** – Have decided that we don't want to get what we deserve after all, and we don't want anyone else to either.
- Step 5** – Will cease all attempts to apply teaching and rebuke to anyone but ourselves.
- Step 6** – Are ready to have God remove all these defects of attitude and character.
- Step 7** – Embrace the belief that we are, and always will be, experts at sinning.

- Step 8** – Are looking closely at the lives of famous men and women of the Bible who turned out to be ordinary sinners like us.
- Step 9** – Are seeking through prayer and meditation to make a conscious effort to consider others better than ourselves.
- Step 10** – Embrace the state of astonishment as a permanent and glorious reality.
- Step 11** – Choose to rid ourselves of any attitude that is not bathed in gratitude.
- Step 12** – Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we will try to carry this message to others who think that Christians are better than everyone else.

Philippians 3

I am simply going to quote Hovestol's overview of the solution exegeted from Philippians 3:

Paul offers six keys to unlock us from the dungeon of Phariseism. They are all found in Philippians 3. The keys were offered to the believers at Philippi to escape the false, legal teachings of the so-called Judaizers. They apply to all Christians who wish to escape from the prison of Pharisaic service to God and enter into a fuller relationship with Christ. The six are:

1. *Beware of false religion.* God's spokesmen—the prophets, the apostles, and Christ Himself—have always opposed those who added to the gospel or externalized religion (v. 2).
2. *Forsake any confidence in the flesh.* Religious acts will not get us to God before or after our spiritual salvation (vv. 3-6).
3. *Recognize your spiritual wealth.* In Christ we have our only eternal asset. We must guard and cherish our relationship with Him (vv. 7-9).
4. *Develop your love relationship with Jesus.* We know Him better by spending time with Him and experiencing life as He did (vv. 9-11).
5. *Pursue Christ passionately to know Him deeply.* Like an athlete in a race, we are to be active in seeking to deepen our relationship with Jesus (vv. 12-16).
6. *Avoid the pull of the world to libertinism.* We must be careful not to overreact to legalism by embracing license, as the world does (vv. 17-21).

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Focus

An incredibly important thing in solving some of these problems is one of focus. We must have the right focus. Many of these things look like righteousness on the outside; indeed, Pharisaical righteousness is often very difficult to distinguish from true righteousness. Often it is humanly impossible. Many times the only difference between

true righteousness and Pharisaical righteousness is one of motivations. Thus our motives and focus become incredibly important.

Spirit

One of the first and foremost things we should focus upon is to do the will of God. We must ask ourselves, “What Did Jesus Do?” in this situation? We must realize that our every intention stands utterly naked before God and that while we can fool those around us with pious sounding statements, God knows our hearts. **We must plead with God to show us our hearts in juxtaposition with His heart.**

Thus says the Lord, “The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”

Jeremiah 17:5a, 9 (NASB)

Scriptures

Remind them of these things, and solemnly charge them in the presence of God **not to wrangle about words**, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers. **Be diligent** to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, **accurately handling the word of truth.**

2 Timothy 2:14-15 (NASB)

Second we must examine the Scriptures diligently for ourselves. We should not go through and extract a list of do's and don'ts—that's not the Spirit of the New Testament. Rather, we should learn the principles taught in the Bible. A life built upon principles will be far “stricter”¹⁴ than one built upon easily loopholed laws.

14 Isn't it funny how strictness has become equated with righteousness?

Saints

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. **The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him.** Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. **Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died.** Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; **for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.** For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. **So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense.** It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.
(Romans 14:1-23 NASB)

Third, the bane of everyone who seeks to do the will of God without compromise, the pesky little commands about our fellow saints. We must be sure in our zealous pursuit of what is truly true and actually righteous that we do not trample upon the consciences of those brothers who do not yet understand the freedom we have in Christ. We must love our fellow saints with our whole hearts and weigh our actions' impact upon them.

We also must follow the command of Philippians 2:4 and look out for others' interests before our own.

~~Self~~

The final question to ask—the one which so often cuts me to the heart—is what are my motives in doing this action? Is my focus and motivation to increase my own prestige, power, or comfort? Or is my focus and motivation to serve others, follow the Scripture, and please the Spirit of God? Here too we need to plead with God to make our intentions and motives clear.

Bottom Line: Relationship with Jesus

So they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also."
John 8:19 (NASB)

Jesus told the Pharisees again and again that they did not know God the Father. That was their root problem. They wouldn't have got mixed up between hypocritical righteousness and true righteousness if they would have known God—had a relationship with God.

Thus it is for us as well. The bottom line of this entire discussion is that we must have a relationship with God. We must know Him. We must feel His heart. We must not go around with an external religious form and have no relationship with God. If we do, we are in the same boat as the Pharisees.

Being a disciple of Jesus is our goal. Being a disciple means having a relationship with our master. Jesus gave a very sobering indicator, in light of the many church splits among conservative Mennonites¹⁵, of who are His disciples and who are not:

¹⁵ Unfortunately, many of these splits are caused by a wrong view of fences, traditions, separatism/worldiness.

"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
John 13:35 (NASB)

The humility¹⁶ that comes from knowing Christ is an incredible antidote to church splits and not loving one another.

The Scriptures show us that our love of our brothers is really the ultimate external measurement of our love for God:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

1 John 4:20-21 (NASB)

So ultimately, the bottom line for all these weaknesses mentioned is a real relationship with Christ.

¹⁶ Fulfilling Philippians 2:1-11 has become one of my important life goals, and is an essential part of the solution to some of these problems.

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:1-11 (NASB)

Conclusion

Summary of Strengths

What advantage hath the Mennonite? Much every way. Like the Jews, we are possibilist and believe that it is possible (through the power of God) to live a life pleasing to God. We have stood for the truth even when that has made us lone rangers religiously and geopolitically. We have been zealous for the Scriptures and sought to apply it to our lives. We have been conscientious in our obedience to God's commands and dedicated to living untainted by the world's evil. We value fellowship and family. In short, we have a lot to be grateful for—we need to ensure that we do not irresponsibly waste this wonderful heritage given to us.

Summary of Weaknesses

Summary

Unfortunately, those strengths are so often accompanied by those weaknesses which are a natural flip side of the strengths. We struggle with self-righteousness—thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think and thinking that we can attain righteousness through self. We tend to have a relatively good knowledge of the Scriptures, but often that knowledge does us no good because it is unaccompanied by love. Probably our most prevalent weakness, however, is that of traditionalism. Our cultural traditions and religious traditions are tied together so closely and are unfortunately often equated. We often elevate these traditions to a greater level of authority and importance than we should. Finally, we fence the law with huge barbed wire fences. We think we must make sure that no one inadvertently goes to hell because of some small sin they committed, not realizing that that's not how it works—that it's

the heart that matters. (If the former was how it worked, we'd all be hell-bound.)

Jesus pronounced seven woes upon the Pharisees, some of which are applicable to us today: Gatekeepers on the wrong side of the door, Gospel peddlers who increase the population of hell, Oath takers who loath the truth, Gnat pickers who swallow camels, Clean hands and dirty hearts, The disguise of ministry, and Those who murder the righteous.

Purpose

I would like to end by once more reminding you that this is not a paper of ecclesiastical condemnation, but rather a personal call to repentance—a call to repentance so personal, that the foremost person called to repentance is myself. Though I have seen many of these things as tendencies among conservative Mennonites , this call to repentance may or may not apply to you. Humbly seek God and ask Him to show you whether He is calling you to repentance.

Summary of Solution

There are many passages of Scripture I could refer you to (Philippians 2 & 3), there are many points I could make from them, but what the solution really comes down to this: We must have a true father relationship with God and a brother relationship with Jesus. We must truly know Christ, have a relationship with Him, commune with Him, feel His heart, and strive to emulate His heart.

Appendix

Further Suggestions for Study

The foremost book that I would recommend that you read is *Extreme Righteousness: Seeing Ourselves in the Pharisees* by Tom Hovestol (<http://tinyurl.com/ytjshy>). It is an **incredible** book that should be required reading for every conservative Mennonite. Much of the structure of this paper came from that book.

An excellent book from which I gleaned the “12 Steps” of the “Solution” section is *12 Steps for the Recovering Pharisee (like me)* by John Fischer (<http://tinyurl.com/2ekc69>).

For further reading on “The Disguise of Ministry (Matthew 23:27-28)”, one of the seven woes, and “Focus: Self”, I wrote in more depth on the subject in a paper entitled “Word Study of Eritheia” (<http://tinyurl.com/2n8xeg>).

For further reading on “Hypocritical Show”, I wrote on the subject in a paper entitled “Word Study of Hupokrisis” (<http://tinyurl.com/2n8xeg>).

For further information comparing Anabaptists and Jews, read *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited* by John Howard Yoder (<http://tinyurl.com/2hg6z4>).

For a starting point of further study of Philippians 2 and humility, I collected a few of my SMI assignments into “An Exegetical Collection on Philippians 2:1-11” (<http://tinyurl.com/224z8t>).

Additional books that I perused, and would have been delighted to be able to study in depth if I would have had the time, were:

Jewish Believers in Jesus edited by Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik
(<http://tinyurl.com/ywcyhx>)

In the Shadow of the Temple by Oskar Skarsaune (<http://tinyurl.com/yo4any>)

Meet the Rabbis by Brad Young (<http://tinyurl.com/ypmcob>)

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