

RESEARCH NOTES

Letters Pertaining to the Sam Yoder Division

-by Edward Kline

In the summer of 2006, a collection of letters was given to Ohio Amish Library which had belonged to Wilhelm (William) Yoder, who was bishop in Nappanee (Marshall Co.) Indiana in the early 1900s.

Numerous letters in this collection make reference to, or pertain to, the issues related to Sam Yoder and the resulting division. Perhaps one of the most interesting points that can be gleaned from these letters is the attitude of various individuals and the overall sentiment concerning the issues.

Several letters allude to the fact that Wilhelm had come to Holmes Co. several times prior to the 1922 meeting to work with the problems, although they do not give dates. Wilhelm was frequently asked to help mediate in church matters in Amish communities across the country. The letters relate at least 8 such calls to various congregations.

The following excerpts from letters written to Wilhelm Yoder shed further light on several aspects of the Sam Yoder (Swartzentruber Church) division. The other four bishops who

presided at the 1922 meeting (as mentioned in the preceeding article) are frequently mentioned: Daniel Beachy, Johannes Schmucker, Christian Kaufman, and Benjamin F. Beiler. It appear these bishops continued to work together after the 1922 meeting to make decisions.

The first excerpt is from a letter from Jonas Swartzentruber, who was a member of the "Klein Dagit" congregation in the beginning of the controversies, but later joined Sam Yoder.

August 7, 1913

...The weather is warm and dry, very dusty, although the corn looks pretty good, or better than what I think it does in the spiritual fields, namely in the church. I feel it doesn't look good, as it looks like it would divide in 3 parts...

The next letter was written by Jacob Lapp, a minister from Ronks, Pa. He attended the 1922 meeting, but this was written in 1916.

October 21, 1916

...Beloved brother, I would like to have your advice on a very serious matter. The circumstances in Holmes Co. are well known to you. Recently I received two letters from Jonas Swartzentruber and it is very thought provoking how things are going there. Sam Yoder had communion in his two congregations, Mose Mast and Abe Yoder held theirs together, Joni Troyer had his alone, Noah Beachy didn't know how far he would come. The "Klein Dagit" church, because they do not have a bishop and not being agreed, probably cannot go on for this time. Oh how sad, I don't think it would have come to this if they would have followed the advice which you helped give to the two churches. The serious matter for us here is that it appears that Abe Yoder wants to visit the East, maybe come to us. I believe both sides made mistakes, still I believe Sam wants to keep himself by the Word, but I can't say this for Abe....The question is, what shall we do with him when he comes to us? Should we fellowship with him and grieve those who want to do right and weaken their position or on the other hand, grieve Abe and help create a division by not fellowshiping with him? I would be glad for your opinion soon.

In another letter a little over two months later Jacob Lapp relates:

Jan. 3, 1917

....Well, Abe Yoder didn't come. I don't know why. He was in Somerset and I heard he preached in the church house. He was also at Lewis Beachys in Maryland. I think he was received in

peace. I just don't know what will happen in Holmes Co. I recently received four letters from there and it appears that they all went with Abe Yoder except Sam Yoder and his ministers and those in the "Klein Dagit" church. But Joni Troyer does not feel good about it. He is burdened and troubled. He thinks till everything is finished, he will end up with Sam Yoder.

The following two excerpts are from letters written by Daniel Beachy, one of the five bishops, after the 1922 meeting:

Feb. 13, 1923

John Schmucker...writes that he heard that Sam Yoder is threatening to send the bann after those members who leave his church and go to the Abe Yoder or Wengerd churches. I also received a letter from Abe Yoder saying the same. Both want advice. So what do we say-maybe it would be best to wait till Sam actually does this then we will have a witness for it. I suggest to send two of their ministers to Sam, telling him they want to go with him to see his fellow ministers and talk about the members that are in the bann. They should ask what they did, and if he says they were disobedient, then ask in what way. Then ask Sam if he would lift the bann if they are received with the same words that he uses. If Sam and his ministers do not say anything or give no reason, then I think they could be received out of the bann and received as full members, if Sam has no scripture grounds. This should not harm the members nor the church if Sam wants to practice avoidance against them.

Some think Sam should be disciplined in some manner, but I would not like to help discipline him or his church. He has a big church and I would be afraid it would cause much unrest and maybe another division. I think the matter will be exposed with time. I heard that Lawrence Co. thinks a lot of Sam.

You can write and spell well, so write your opinion and if you see something in my letter that you think is upbuilding, you can use it. If we five can be agreed and sign a letter to send to Abe Yoder or Noah Beachy, then we can see if the bishops are all agreed...

March 2, 1923

....I am agreed with what you wrote and thank you for it. I want to send it on to J. Schmucker this morning. Your letter took long to get here. My wife wants to go to town, so I must hurry. I heard D.J. Plank say, If he had any part in the Sam Yoder affair then he would have asked to

silence Sam Yoder or take his ministry away. I asked him if we didn't tell him the matter is very grievous to us, and we want all of them to help us...He said, I want to be patient. My wife is ready. Farewell.

The following is the main part of a letter written by Wilhelm Yoder to Daniel Beachy, in response to Daniel's request. The letter was later signed by Daniel Beachy and Johannes Schmucker. A note on the back also says, *...Ben Beiler and the Geauga ministers wrote letters back with this copy saying they think it right and good counsel. The Holmes Co. bishops also met and were agreed with it.* The letter was apparently returned to Wilhelm after the others approved it.

Feb. 25, 1923

First, for me I would not like to do anything with Sam Yoder or his church. I don't think he would accept it as we do not fellowship together. Now we gave the counsel at the ministers' meeting that the members which Sam Yoder put in the bann should make peace in Sam's church, and if they afterwards want to go to the other churches to do so as peacefully as they can. I have thought already that it would be good and would also free the ministers and churches in Holmes Co. if D.M.Wengerd, Abe Yoder and some other ministers would go to Sam Yoder and his ministers and ask them if they are going to put those members in the bann who leave his church and go to one of the other churches. If they say that they will, then ask them to give a scriptural reason for this. If they cannot give a sound or scriptural reason, then tell them we are not going to heed such a bann. If then some of Sam's members want to become members elsewhere then those ministers should go to Sam right away to see if they are at peace and if there was anything against them outside of their leaving. If not, then I would say to receive them in peace as members. If Sam and his people put them in the bann and shun them, I don't think that it will hurt them or the church. I believe if Sam wants to work in this manner then he will have so much trouble in his church and much more than he wants, for I can't see that that will work out. But I want to wish him the best. However I want to make it clear that if members are out of order or lead an evil life or go to a higher church with whom we do not fellowship, then I would be agreed with Sam to hold the shunning on such people. These are my thoughts and counsel as far as I understand it at this time.

The following excerpt was written to Wilhelm by Daniel Wengerd from Fredericksburg, Ohio. The letter was written several years after the above letter, and shows that it had not entirely solved the problem.

April 25, 1926

...I sent back the letter which you had written. We did everything that was asked of us therein with great care and effort. That letter was confirmed by a ministers' meeting in Geauga Co. and another in Holmes Co. Sam Yoder's people are saying all kinds of things about us, how we receive people here. The Geauga ministers have checked these things out twice already and found them empty. Because these people come over to our churches, they hold them in disobedience.

Saul was in disobedience because he did not use the bann in the way God had told him to. This is what we and the whole ministers' meeting held against Sam Yoder, [his use of the bann]... Is one brought into disobedience for being obedient to the united decision of the ministers' meeting? They asked Sam to come and give his reasons for his actions, instead he put the meidung on those members who united with the ministers' meeting decision- one weak minister against 21. Those members who come over to us from Sam's church are as faithful as any of our or Sam's members. ...Samuel did not say to Saul, because you were disobedient to me (as Sam Yoder says), but he said, because you were disobedient to the voice of the Lord...If I have to keep the meidung against a faithful people who keep their covenant diligently, in order to appease a people who are disobedient to the Word of God. then I would be agreed with those who do not let the Word of God judge. The Word is the truth and who is out of the truth hears his voice.

The last excerpt, from Abe J. Miller of Applecreek, Ohio relates Dan Wengerd's sickness and his wife's death. Dan died Dec. 13, 1935.

January 24, 1933

...Preacher Dan M. Wengerd's wife was buried last Friday and Dan is sick in bed but better now.