

*Amos B. Hoover*

## **A Letter Defining Old Order Mennonite Worship in the Nineteenth Century**

Old Order Mennonite faith has sought to live a quite nonconspicuous life, holding forth the New Testament and Christian discipleship, but at the same time holding the unity of the brotherhood very high. To be in Old Order therefore is a job of seven days a week.

An Old Order public worship service is comprised of hymn singing in unison at the beginning and close of the service. The opening singing is followed by an opening sermon, followed by a silent prayer, a reading of the text by the deacon, then the main sermon followed by testimonies from the other ministry while they are seated. Then an audible prayer and benediction with more singing and announcements and dismissal. The Groffdale Conference and Old Order Amish still follow this pattern, but the Stauffer Mennonites moved their benediction to the very end of the service about 1895, while our Weaverland Conference moved it to the very end about 1946.

Isaac Clarence Kulp (1938–2008) once pointed out that celebrating communion or Eucharist was central throughout the old Catholic worship; but the Reformation, for the Protestants, changed the centrality to the sermon and the preacher. This called for university trained ministers and decorated pulpits high from the floor. With Anabaptists, the sermon was important, but the accent shifted to unity of brotherhood, hence no special training is desirable and all are to be at one and each person present shows his support by their very presence. In fact in all Old Order worship the minister always invites the others to kneel with him for the audible prayer, if they are in unity with him.

Centuries ago in Holland, there were discussions whether the prayers should be silent or audible. It was concluded that silent is the most desirable, but audible is necessary for children to learn to pray. Ever since there is one silent and one audible prayer in Old Order Mennonite worship.

Any Old Order worship would abhor instrumental accompaniment and even four part harmony was considered worldly. Singing the slower tunes in unison was the preferred Old Order singing for worship. Old Order worship is never interspersed with singing, but rather is at the beginning and end of the service. In the old sense, singing was not considered an important part of the service, but was thought of singing 'before' and 'after' the service (which we likely inherited from our Reformed background.) Another family tradition says that we sing before and after the church service so that Paul's admonition is not abused for the sisters to keep silence in the churches.

Swiss Anabaptist worship was very similar the world over, but in the latter part of the twentieth century with the advent of the so called *Great Awakening* or quickening in the Mennonite churches the older forms of worship were greatly threatened. This threat seemed to surface first in Indiana and Old Order-minded church fathers sounded an alarm to the other conservative settlements. The most descriptive document denouncing the new forms of worship was written by John B. Weaver in 1878. He supported Jacob Wisler in an effort to keep the old traditions alive.

The biggest struggle the traditional minded brethren had was Sunday Schools. These schools were modeled after the union Sunday School which had the ecumenicity of bringing all groups together. This tended to introduce a new language (English) and a host of new ideas. While Old Orders held that the marriage blessing be performed by bishops and not ordinary ministers, the modern group began to conduct weddings even if the bride or groom were not baptized members. This was a very divisive subject. Other practices also appeared such as short devotions replacing the half hour introductory sermon; silent prayer was disposed of; the ministry would arise to give testimony. In the dismissal benediction the minister began to spread their hands over the congregation to bless the people. The dead were brought into the church houses. Also evening meetings were a struggle for traditional minded brethren to understand. All these subtle new changes began in the 1870s, especially after the Old Order Mennonites and Jacob Wisler were expelled on 6 January 1872.

John B. Weaver (1821–1907) was an Old Order supporter with strong Pennsylvania background. He moved to Indiana and discovered that the frontier Mennonites were not as sheltered and were subjected to many new ideas.

An eloquent Gothic writer, Preacher John Weaver (or Johannes Weber) did not change his name as is often said. In his writing it is clear that it is a matter of language. Johannes Weber was German, used on letters; while John Weaver was used on the envelopes for the English postmaster.

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John was born in Lancaster County, the son of David and Christiana (Buckwalter) Weaver. He married Mary Zimmerman (1824–1879), daughter of Christian and Mary (Martin) Zimmerman. They had twelve children. John moved with his family to Elkhart County, Indiana, in the year 1868. After retiring from farming he did not sit down and waste away, but did carpenter work. He once made a wooden mosaic chest consisting of 11,800 pieces.

He had been ordained to the office of the ministry at Weaverland by Bishop George Weber in 1856. He was an active defender of the Old Order faith and he with Jacob Wisler could be called the fathers of the Old Order Mennonite faith in Indiana. His influence was also felt in Pennsylvania and Ontario.

Later in life, he tried very hard to avert the 1907 telephone division when he wrote to Bishop John Martin: "We believe that the discord in the church is much more grievous in the sight of the Lord than the phone."

John Weaver wrote many important letters about matters of the church to his cousin Samuel Weber of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Perhaps the following is the most explicit description extant today, in explaining the radical changes having taken place during the intervening six years. The conservatives were called Old Orders or Wisler Mennonites, while the progressives were often called Funk Mennonites.

Wakarusa, Ind February 9, 1878

Werter Cosend, Bruder, und mitarbeiter in des Herrn Weinberg, und die deinigen, wie auch alle recht glaubige brüder und schwester in Christo Jesu Gnade und friede von Gott dem Vater, die liebe in Christo Jesu und die Kraft des heiliger und guten geistes derselbig wolle uns alle sammt geleiden und führen durch dieser jammerthal bis zu einem Seeligen ende in Christo Jesum, Amen.

Was uns angeth, haben wir keine ursach zu glagen, und können Gott lob und dank sagen, vier die gesundheit die wier geniesen. Die freund und bekannten sind auch gesund so viel wir wissen, ausgenommen die Elisabeth Huber war eine Zeitlang nicht gesund. der dockter sagt sie hat das neven fieber. die nachberschaft is üeberhaupt gesund. Wir haben deinen brief vom 12ten December in rechter zeit erhalten und sind auch dankbar vier dessen inhalt und wohlwunschen an uns. Du hast etliche fragen an mich gerichtet, Es wunterd dich was vier verscheidenen ordnung und regel sie haben von unsern. Du weist es is gebreichlich, nach dem singen wird eine anred gethan und dan zum gebet angewiesen und also ein stilles gebet getan. Sie aber nach dem singen wird ein Cabittel verlesen, und wird fast gar keine anred gethan, und weisen an zum gebet, und einer von den diener thut das gebet laud dan

wird der text verlesen und verhandeld, und dan wan sie Zeigniss geben steth einer nach dem andern auf um sein zeigness zu geben und im gansen wird ihre versammlung auf eine Parrerartige weise geführet.

Und es ist dem diacon erlaubt wen nur ein diener gegenwärtig ist eine anred zu thun, und am schlüss der versammlung stehen die zuhörer auf und der betreffende diener reckt die hände lieber das volk aus, u spricht den Segen. Das sind jetzt solche sachen die früher nicht gebreichlich waren u[nd] noch nicht beÿ uns gebreichlich sind, und fals wir wieder eine gemeinde sein solten so misten wir nothwendigerweis unter einen sinn kommen, dan der Apostel sagt, Habt einerlei sin unter einander. Es sind auch noch andre sachen, die früher nicht waren nöhmlich die Todens ins versamlungs haus zu tragen, und nach der red, ein Welt gebreichlichen marsch beÿ dem Toden verbeÿ zu machen, und so dient auch die Sontags Schuhl mehr zum verderben, als zum wohl der kinder, und sonderlich so wie sie sie halten, gans nach der Welt mode. Alle andere stehen mit ihnen in Einklang und sie thun nicht nur um tie kinder deutsch zu lernen, sondern es ist Klar zu sehen das es mehr is em der Ehre der Welt halben, Es wird nicht aus dem blatz sein einen vorfall zu bemerken, unsren Diacon David Neukemer und sein weib gingen letzten herbst, zu ihren freund auf besuch und da sie komen waren sie bereid um an die Sontag Schul Consert zu gehen an einen union haus, da gingen Neukumers auch mit hin weil es ganz nahe am versammlung platz war. Da hat es sich heraus gestellld das auch ziemlich vom Funk seinen gemeinde glieder und ihren kinder auch mit theil nahmen. Es ging alles nach der welt mode her, mit spiel werk, und was sonst nach welt gebreichlich ist.

So war es auch niemals gebreichlich noch notwendig erachtet in der Menoniten gemeinde so weid mir bekannt is das zweÿ tag erforderlich währen um zusammenkunft zu halten, als wie hier in Indiana. Das ist auch etwas nies und diennt mehr zu einem distpodat, als wie zum vortrag der krundsatzten und ordnung, oder auch zur liebe und frieden der gemeinde. So habe ich auch noch nie gehöret von irgend einer zusammenkunft wo die nachtversammlung verwilliget worden sein. hier werden sie aber gehalten, dass kan ein in der fremde sehr [vor] wan er in unsre versamlung hauser kommt und siehet die öl lichter aufgehängt. Sie haben schon mehr mols zur zeit der zusammenkunft Donnerstag Abends, Freitag abends, Samstag abends und Sontag abends im yellow krick versammlungs haus, versammlung gehalten. Wir sind auch berichtet von glaubwirdigen quelle dass ein gemeiner diener kobelieren thut inner oder auser der gemeinde.

Du wunterst auch, wer is J. J. Weaver und Jacob H. Wisler. J. J. Weaver ist ein diener und wohnt in Lagrange Counti Indiana. das ist alles was ich von ihm weis. Jacob H. Wisler ist armen Pfleger, ist ein bruders Sohn von Jacob Wisler, und wohnt hier in Elkhart Counti, Er is erst etliche Jahr am dienst

Du begehrst auch bericht von Jacob Hoffert. So viel ich weiss, ist er nach so gesonnen wie er War, er ist aber zurick gestelld von seiner gemeinde, wegen berichten ueber ihn die ich jetzt nicht schreiben will. Jacob Wisler und Christian Bär waren letztes frühjahr hin gefoderd und haben eine untersuchung gethan, so weit sie es untersuchen konten, haben aber die sach so liegen lassen müssen

Ich habe kürzlich einen brief hören lessen von Lancaster Counti, Pa. der ein kurzen bericht gibt von einem schreiben, worinnen der alte grund und ortnung der gemeinde vor geschrieben ist, und wer damit einig ist der soll mit sein. Wer aber nicht der soll ab sein, die Bischöff dord habens all unterschrieben und wollens nach Bocks und Montgamare Counti schicken, und wan die Bischöff da auch unterschreiben so soll es nach Canada gesand werden, Ich fürchte wann dieses schreiben uns angeth so bringt es in grose versuchung wan nicht pinktlich die neuen sachen (wo ich in diesem brief beschrieben habe abgeschnieten sein, wo nicht, so thun sie sich all darunter begeben und wier sind gezwungen uns unter ihre ortnung zu geben oder angesehen sein als solche die nicht mit dem alten grund einig sind. wan sie aber komen und geben sich unter die ortnung, so sind sie unsre brüder

Nun habe ich so ein wenig geschrieben was noch zwischen uns und unser gegnern liegt (newig dem schlusch von den 6 Bischoffen gemacht) Wan ich aber zu weit gegangen bin, oder zu Viel von ihnen fodere, so wollest du dirs gefallen lassen und mirs schreiben, ich wills in liebe annehmen. Dieses ist auch in liebe geschrieben, und hoff es wird auch in liebe angenommen werden, Mit diesem will ich schliesen, sonst könted ihr veleicht verdrisslich werden, meinen mannichfaltigen brief zu lesssen. Noch einen herzlichen liebes Gruss an euch und an alle die dieses lesssen oder hören lesen Seid unser Eingedenkt in eurem gebet. Seid Gott und dem Wort seiner gnade anbefohlen So viel von eurem geringen doch in liebe verbundenen friend u. Wohlwünscher

Johannes u. Maria Weber

an Samuel u. Anna Weber

schreib wieder

Weil der Johannes noch weis papier gelasen hat, so will ich auch noch ein wenich schreiben. Vor das erste winsche ich euch ein liebes gruss und Weiter noch ein wenich vom Wetter. Wier hatten eine gelinten Winter. Wier nicht viel schnee, aber viel dreck, den letzten Freitag hat es angefanen zu schneen un der schnee is jetzt angefehr 8 bis 10 zoll tief. Ich denk in Canada hat es guten schlitten Weg das Amos sons sein jetzt in Canada und werden fleisch Am Schlitten faren sein. Dass Johannes Wislers haben eine jünge tochter, sie ist Vier wochen alt. ich will mein krizlen schliesen so viel von Maria Weber an Anna Weber

<p>Sie sind wieder das Volk aus in Bonnez ohne Regen, ráid puer auf. Tolka jasne sia prüfer nüff gneine stich Wärme, und wie nicht trug wir's gut schrifft' iher, war folc' Kür. Kinder sind Grünminn' puer, othen se weifte Kür, noß am minn' wa nos ünter armen / im Hausem, vonn' van Hoptal jagt, old manning' für sech nimm' enet, Es sind redt, vry warden Jaghen, ein prüfer wird / si dauer, wem ließ den Pader, und Widy dörkung' füllt grü stigam, vry wendt und O, van Dult gneineischem' erwart und dann földun ywring' sic reygen, und so Si. Venant und S. in Pontros. Dicht mehr Sicke ywring' alz däne Koff und Rauwe und ywring' fo Kün' jen, Pia jaltun, gaud' woy und platt mon</p>	<p>Makarose Trest Makarose Copno, Borevot, wenn misforhous in die Stuere Kinder sind Grünminn' puer, othen dien' k'leid' alz allen wort' gneine se weifte Kür, noß am minn' wa nos ünter armen / im Hausem, vonn' van Hoptal jagt, old manning' für sech nimm' enet, Es sind redt, vry warden Jaghen, ein prüfer wird / si dauer, wem ließ den Pader, und Widy dörkung' füllt grü stigam, vry wendt und O, van Dult gneineischem' erwart und dann földun ywring' sic reygen, und so Si. Venant und S. in Pontros. Dicht mehr Sicke ywring' alz däne Koff und Rauwe und ywring' fo Kün' jen, Pia jaltun, gaud' woy und platt mon</p>
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John Weaver's letter of 1878, pages one (right side) and four.

John Weaver's letter of 1878, pages two and three.

*Festschrift for Earl C. Haag*

Wakarusa, Ind. Feb 9, 1878

Dear Cousin, Brother and fellow laborer in the Lord's vineyard and your loved ones, as well as all true believing brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus be grace and peace from God the Father, the love in Christ Jesus and the power of the holy and good Spirit, the same to lead and guide us all through the vale of sorrows unto a happy end in Christ Jesus, Amen.

As far as we are concerned, we have no reason to complain and we can praise and thank God for the health we enjoy. Friends and acquaintances are also well, as far as we know, with the exception of Elisabeth Huber was not well for a time. The doctor says she has nervous fever, the neighborhood in general is well.

We received your letter of December 12 in good time and we are thankful for its content and greetings toward us. You directed several questions to me. You inquire about differences they [the Funk people] have in conducting [meetings] versus ours. You know it is customary that following the singing a sermon is given followed by prayer, which is a silent prayer. But they following singing read a chapter, and practically have no sermon, and then call to prayer, and one of the ministers lead in an audible prayer. Then the text is read and expounded, and then they give testimony one after another by arising [to their feet] so that their whole church service is conducted in a seminary trained fashion.

With them it is permitted that the deacon may preach if only one minister is present, and at the closing of the meeting, the audience arises and the main minister spreads his hands over the people and offers the benediction. Now these are such things that were not earlier customary, nor are they customary with us today, and in the event we should again be united into one church, we would have to be of one mind, for the Apostle says, "Be ye of one mind, one toward another."

There are also other items that were not earlier. That is to carry the dead into the meeting house and after the sermon, perform a march past the coffin in world fashion. And also Sunday School is more destructive than helpful to the children, especially the way they perform it entirely after the world fashion.

All the others [Funk church] stand in harmony, and they do not do it to teach children German, because they learn more English than German, but on the contrary, it is clear that it is more for the sake of the world's glory. It is not out of order to note the following incident; Our deacon, David Neukumer and his wife last fall went to their (non-member) friend on a visit, and when they got there, they were ready to visit the Sunday School Concert held at a union house, where several Sunday Schools come together, and the

Neukumers also went along since it was very near where they gathered. It became apparent that also many members of Funk's church also took part. All went by high social fashion with musical instruments and all else that is according to world customs.

Never before was it customary nor considered necessary in the Mennonite churches, as far as I know, that two days were required to hold [minister's] conference, other than here in Indiana. This too is something new, and serves more for a disputation, than for a setting forth of basic rules and ordnung, and love and peace of the church.

Nor have I ever heard of any conference anywhere where the evening meetings were allowed. But here they are held. This seems very strange when visitors come into our meetinghouses and see the oil lamps hanging up. They have held meeting various times at the time of the conference, on Thursday evening, Friday evening, Saturday evening, and Sunday evening in the Yellow Creek meetinghouse. We have been informed from reliable sources that ordinary ministers have been conducting marriages both for members and non-members.

You inquired also, who J. J. Weaver and Jacob H Wisler are. J. J. Weaver is a minister and lives in Lagrange County, Indiana, that is all I know about him. Jacob H. Wisler is a deacon and he lives here in Elkhart County. He is serving for several years now.

You desire also to have a report on Jacob Hoffert. As far as I know he is still minded as he was, but he was expelled from his church about reports against him that I do not want to write about. Jacob Wisler and Christian Bär were called there and investigated it as far as they could, but they had to leave the matter unchanged.

I recently heard a letter read from Lancaster County which gave a brief account of a writing setting forth the old fundamentals and ordnung of the church and whoever is in agreement with the writing shall be with [the church], but anyone opposed to it shall be off of [the church]. The Bishops there have signed it and it shall be sent to Bucks and Montgomery Counties and if the bishops there also sign it, it shall be sent to Canada.

When it becomes our turn, I fear this writing will bring a great trial for us, if these new things (I wrote about in this letter) are not punctually forbidden. If not, they will all agree and we are forced to give in to their ordnung, or we will be considered as such who are not on the old order. But if they come and agree to the ordnung, then they are our brethren.

Now I have written a little what is between us and our opponents, in addition to the resolution drafted by those six bishops.<sup>1</sup> But if I have gone too far, or require too much of them, then would you please write it to me and I will accept it in love. This has also been written in love and I hope it will be

*Festschrift for Earl C. Haag*

accepted in love. I want to close at this point or you may become discouraged in reading my extended letter. Yet another heartfelt greeting of love. Remember us in your prayers. We commend you to God and the Word of his grace.

This all from your unimportant friend, though bound in love

Johannes and Maria Weber

To Samuel and Anna Weber

Write again

Since Johannes has left some paper empty, I will also try to write a bit. To begin, I wish you a loving greeting and farther a bit about the weather. We had a mild winter, not much snow, but lots of mud. Then last Friday, it began to snow and the snow is now about 6 to 8 inches deep, and I suppose in Canada there is good sleigh riding roads. Amos (our) son is now in Canada and likely are busy riding sleigh. Johannes Wislers have a young daughter. She is four weeks old. I need to close my scribbling. This being from one, Maria Weber to Anna Weber

*Muddy Creek Farm Library*

Ephrata, Pennsylvania

**Note**

<sup>1</sup>This refers to a six man arbitrary committee which took Bishop Jacob Wisler's right to function as a bishop. It is signed by the bishops and dated 17 October 1871. This document is published in its full text in J. C. Wenger, "Jacob Wisler and the Old Order Mennonite Schism of 1872 in Elkhart County, Indiana," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 33 (April 1959): 108-31; (July 1959): 215-40.