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Review of: Weaver, Chester C., Jr. 2020. *The Things Which Become Sound Doctrine: The Life of Aaron M. Shank.*

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Fairmount

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BOOK REVIEWS

Review of: **Weaver, Chester C., Jr. 2020. *The Things Which Become Sound Doctrine: The Life of Aaron M. Shank. Sermon on the Mount* Publishing: Manchester, MI. 388pp. \$27.95.**

By Kent Richard
Fairmount

The Things Which Become Sound Doctrine: The Life of Aaron M. Shank offers a window into the rise and development of several conservative Mennonite groups in southeastern Pennsylvania in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Deeply influenced by the book's subject, the author offers a historical account of Aaron M. Shank (1915-2003), whose role was instrumental in shaping the origin and growth of the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church (EPMC), which came from Lancaster Mennonite Conference (LMC) in 1968, and the Pilgrim Mennonite Conference (PMC), which came from EPMC in 1992.

The completion of this historical account was intriguing, taking several decades to bring to fruition. Commissioned by the Pilgrim Mennonite Conference in the 1990s, author Chester Weaver interviewed key figures in Shank's life who were living at that time. Shank himself reviewed Weaver's manuscript for accuracy and chose the book title but directed that the history was not to be published until after his death. Weaver discontinued his work on the book in 1996. After Shank's death, another interested party worked on it but eventually left the unfinished work with Shank's family. In 2019, Weaver returned to the project and finished what he had started earlier.

The biography commences with a brief summary of the conservative movement in the Swiss Mennonite branch of the Mennonite landscape. It assumes the reader's understanding of both the development of the Mennonite Church in general and the background of the Swiss Mennonites in eastern Pennsylvania in particular. Beginning with Shank's grandparents, the author carefully weaves the fabric of the story to reveal that Shank's conservative roots were well established for several generations and contributed to his ideology. It might have been helpful if the author had offered some insight into the divisions within the

Mennonite church caused by both the conservative and the progressive groups in the latter part of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. A summary of the Old Order Mennonite division from the (Old) Mennonite Church would have been especially beneficial, since the author refers several times to the influence of former Old Order members on the groups that Shank was instrumental in starting.

The author details Shank's ordination as a minister (1941) and bishop (1957) in the Lebanon District of the Lancaster Mennonite Conference, as well as his extensive activity in the Church: Bible School teacher, Lancaster Mennonite School board member and eventually vice-chairman, Mennonite Publication board member, as well as speaker at revival meetings from Oregon to Florida. Weaver then proceeds to focus on Shank's mid-century attempt to rein in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference in an effort to stop the drift toward assimilation with the broader American (worldly) culture.

When Shank was unsuccessful at stopping the flight of LMC from its conservative roots, he, along with several other like-minded bishops, was instrumental in the separation of the EPMC from its parent body. Weaver credits Shank for his diplomatic role in crafting the division which the author offers as "amiable." Numerous contemporary stories I have heard from LMC members whose families were split in this church division would more likely have used the word "painful" instead. In the newly formed EPMC, Shank continued to be a bishop in the Lebanon District, serving as first editor of "The Eastern Mennonite Testimony," the Eastern Church periodical, and chairing the Church Bishop Board.

Weaver credits Shank's roots in the Virginia Mennonite tradition for Shank's focus on Scripture and Biblical consistency, as opposed to the long-rooted Lancaster Mennonite satisfaction with tradition. This focus eventually led to discord in the EMPC, with the majority of the Lebanon District at odds with the rest of the Church. The author holds that this was the underlying cause of an eventual division. Externally visible issues included, among others, maternity wear and hat-wearing for men, in addition to other differences

such as the ownership of organs and pianos. Shank was one of three founding bishops in the 1992 offshoot of PMC. He continued to play an active role in this conference until his death in 2003.

There were points where I felt the author could have been clearer in explaining historical events, such as the division that Earl Horst and Edwin Gehman led, splitting from the EPMC in the early 1980s. The author doesn't name this new group when explaining this division, but later in the book, assumes the reader knows this was the Hope Mennonite Fellowship when listing the conferences Shank influenced in his conservative Mennonite endeavors. Also, some of the facts concerning the Eastern/Pilgrim split were confusing, such as when and why Bishop Stephen Ebersole was made inactive in the EPMC a second time. By and large, however, the author's explanation of the divisions and the events surrounding them were clearly delineated. Weaver offers details of Shank's first and second marriages, but never includes the date of the second wife's death.

At times, the author's extensive use of detail was detracting from the book. Was it really necessary to include a history of Shank's first wife's grandfather (page 37)? Why include over five pages of comments by students regarding his first wife as a teacher (pp. 191-97)? Also, a more thorough editing of the book would have been advantageous. A picture caption (p. 6) has a typographical error: "J. L. STauffer" [*sic*]. One of the last paragraphs on p. 140 is repeated in its entirety as the first paragraph on p. 141. In addition there are some inconsistencies in capitalization and a few abbreviations offered without explanation. However, for the most part, the book was well written.

Due to my interest in Anabaptist history, my leadership in a Lancaster County Old Order Mennonite-affiliated institution, as well as friendships and extended family relationships with people who lived and experienced the events described in this tumultuous time of change and resistance to "church drift," I found this book to be a fascinating read. The generous sprinkling of photos and documents throughout the text added life to this book and were helpful in clearly illustrating changes the church was experiencing. Anecdotes generously scattered through his history revealed Shank's tenacity and, yet, sensitivity while staunchly holding the conservative line.

The author's inclusion of Shank's quotes, record of meetings, service on various committees, and selections of writings were helpful in illuminating Shank's passions and convictions.

Weaver is open in expressing his admiration and appreciation for Shank and Shank's huge influence in his life. While it is obvious that Weaver is biased toward the conservative viewpoint, in fairness, he does acknowledge (even offering some quotes) that others did not always appreciate Shank's vocal support of the conservative movement in the Church. Weaver even points out the fact that some of Shank's own descendants did not espouse his conservative beliefs, much to Shank's regret.

This history is written in a simple, clear style. It is obvious Weaver's intended audience is not a scholarly one. He writes to a conservative Mennonite audience who will appreciate his viewpoint, and it is clear that he hopes this helps them gain a deeper understanding of the Biblical rationale for their beliefs.

For students of Anabaptist history and those who seek to understand the multiple divisions in the "plain" Mennonite churches, particularly those with roots in southeastern Pennsylvania, this book is a must read. Weaver labored long and hard in compiling this valuable source book on the evolution of conservative Mennonite life in the last half of the twentieth century and it will be greatly appreciated for many years to come.

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