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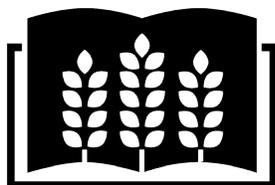
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# Social-Religious Change in the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite: An Analysis of Shifting Emphases in the “Holdeman Church” Based on the Periodical *Messenger of Truth*

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**Abstract:** This study examines cultural change within the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (“Holdemans”). In this analysis, I contrast the religious culture of the Holdeman people with that of rural, middle America in order to understand the changes and the degree to which the Holdeman people have been assimilated into the prevailing rural culture. The Holdeman people live a form of Biblical Christianity in which decisions about both practical and spiritual matters are made by consulting the Scriptures. Yet, higher levels of income, more education, advanced technologies, and the transition from farming occupations to small businesses are all affecting both doctrine and practice. In this study, I use the conversations in 80 years of the biweekly Holdeman newsletter periodical *Messenger of Truth* and the Church General Conference reports to detect change, decline, and emerging dissent in the policies and practices that both ministers and members have held inviolable for over a century. To provide historical context, these conversations are supported by reference to John Holdeman’s two major books —*Ein Spiegel der Wahrheit* (Mirror of Truth) and *Eine Geschichte der Gemeinde Gottes* (A History of the Church of God). [Abstract by author.]

**Keywords:** Cultural change; Christian holy kiss; Beards; Excommunication; Divorce; Voting; Social class; Insurance; Information communications technology; Secondary education



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## INTRODUCTION

While making compromises to religious beliefs and practices in order to function within broader society, many Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (CGCM or “Holdeman”) people have also expressed concerns about holding on to their religious traditions. Many members have expressed that their people are experiencing “drift,” that is, the unguided process of taking on the culture of broader society with a concomitant whittling away of in-group social and religious identity. For over 300 years, conservative Mennonites have combined religious belief and ethnic identity into a “peoplehood”—an awareness of an underlying unity within the group (Anderson 2013). A largely agrarian lifestyle and endogamous marriage practices have for many years strengthened this sense of peoplehood. A theology of nonconformity and living apart is made more difficult by the loss of bonds formed from a Dutch-Prussian ethnic heritage and common immigrant experiences. With increased mission work and members living in suburban and urban communities (Anderson and Donnermeyer 2013, 13), the CGCM has found it difficult to strike a balance between their semi-isolationist doctrines and living in the societally complex world of post-World War II America (Hiebert 1973, 332–33).

Today, social forces emanate from the surrounding rural culture while church policies persist that attempt to limit the pleasures and benefits of this society; these conditions create an environment in which members are contesting church strictures. Ministers, deacons, and fellow laity admonish and cajole their members in order to hold fast to their religious traditions and norms. Minister Isaac aptly characterizes the challenge.<sup>1</sup> He cautions against the carnal lifestyle that includes fancy homes, stylish clothes, and exotic hairdos, concluding: “We are in mortal, hand-to-hand spiritual combat with this Amalek. It is a battle to the death” (Isaac 1998, para. 12).<sup>2</sup> Even with advice and counseling from the church leaders, consensus is difficult to achieve and each

individual must come to grips with his or her own view of ultimate reality.

Given the frequency of concern about “drift” among the Holdemans, I raise the following research question: to what extent is this small group of dedicated believers maintaining and sustaining their unique religious culture? This study’s thesis follows their understanding of reality: that due to the personal appeal of integration with the cultures surrounding their churches, the Holdeman people are moving closer to full integration, and that the Holdeman Church system is at risk of being overwhelmed to the point where most of their traditional cultural patterns will be replaced. However, change is not necessarily linear and ideas not necessarily logically consistent.

For example, although the draw of a life without rules supporting nonconformity and separation can reduce church influence on individuals, members also hold competing commitments to belief, church, and family. These traditional forces tend to keep the Holdeman people within the group. Consequently, I explore this research question and thesis using theoretical frameworks that view change as multi-dimensional and complex. To explore change, I select several practices that Holdemans use to self-define and then analyze changes in these practices from two sources covering approximately 100 years: Holdeman General Conference reports and articles from their periodical *Messenger of Truth*.

This present analysis closely follows two related studies about the Holdeman people. In my first work, *Living in the World*,<sup>3</sup> I traced Anabaptism and the Mennonites through Europe and into the Great Plains of America, demonstrating how one of the most conservative Mennonite groups, the Holdeman people, adhered to the Anabaptist principles first expressed in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In a subsequent *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (JMS)<sup>4</sup> article, I focused on the lived religion of the Holdemans using a framework to examine the culture, behavior, authority, and structural aspects of the group. In the study presented here, I address

<sup>1</sup> Minister Joe Isaac was a church leader and prolific contributor to the *Messenger of Truth* during the 1980s and 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> The Amalekites were the archetypal enemy of the Jews, representing atheism and the rejection of God.

<sup>3</sup> Jantz, Ronald C. 2020. *Living in the World: How Conservative Mennonites Preserved the Anabaptism of the Sixteenth Century*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Jantz, Ronald C. 2020. “Lived Religion: The Modern World and the Existential Threat to the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite.” *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 38, 221–42.

the question of how the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite is dealing with change and pressures emanating from surrounding cultures. My role as a researcher is as both an insider and outsider. My parents, grandparents, and great-grand parents were all members of the Holdeman Church. Our family reunions were an odd mixture of cousins, aunts, and uncles who were both inside and outside of various Holdeman congregations in Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. These experiences in my early years have provided both an intimacy and a degree of distance in writing about Mennonite life.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HOLDEMAN PEOPLE AND THEIR CHURCH

The culture of the CGCM was developing well before the appearance of John Holdeman. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a small group of Russian Mennonites formed a distinct ethnic group through social and geographical isolation in the Russian and Polish territories. The culture of this group originated some several hundred years ago in the Groningen Old Flemish of eighteenth century Prussia and the Russian settlements of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The homesteaders in the Polish territories became known as the Ostrogers, maintaining their cohesion and identity throughout the nineteenth century and during the emigration to the Great Plains in the 1870s (Francis 1948, 101; Jantz 2020a, 55–68). On arriving in America, many of the impoverished emigrants found John Holdeman’s church to be most compatible with their lifestyle and religious beliefs.

Having perceived the decay and errors of the (Old) Mennonite Church, John Holdeman established a separate institution in 1859 that came to be known as the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Hiebert 1955, 598). In examining the Mennonite Church of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Holdeman concluded that, “the Church has slackened in its labor to maintain the whole truth. An apostasy has set in on account of the laxity and drowsiness of the ministry, caused by the love of

this world” (Holdeman 1956, 12). John Holdeman wrote extensively about the restoration of the “true church,” believing that there was a well-defined apostolic succession that did not include the Roman Catholic Church (Hiebert 1955, 600; Holdeman 2004, 25). In his *History*, Holdeman traces the lineage and propagation of the true church from the first century apostles to the Waldenses<sup>6</sup> whom he claimed were the forerunners of the Anabaptists and the Swiss Brethren of the sixteenth century (Holdeman 2004, 29). This lineage is continued through to the Dutch Anabaptists, Menno Simons, and the Mennonites. Using this continuous lineage of a faithful remnant, Holdeman claimed that his church, the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite, is the present-day “true church.”

In living a primitive Christianity, the Holdemans rely on the New Testament to resolve issues of doctrine, practice, and daily life.<sup>7</sup> The Church has created a distinctive set of beliefs, norms, and patterns of morality that enable leaders to maintain social control over members. Boundaries and inner cohesion are reinforced by the use of language, for example referring to members as “brother” or “sister.” Excommunication, the ban, and social avoidance are the most important doctrines for the Church, where the primary purpose is “to keep the congregation pure from willful, heinous, sinners” (Holdeman, 1956, 476). The ban also serves to chastise the “wicked flesh of the offenders” in order to put them to shame, hoping that they may become obedient again (Holdeman 1956, 476). In the modern church, these practices are frequently met with resistance and authority is required to provide guidance, create the necessary roles, and manage conflict.

The Holdeman people have managed to preserve a unique identity and thrive in today’s economy while also remaining largely invisible to the great majority of the American public. They adhere to the Anabaptist principles of separation from the world and nonresistance, living a life of humility, moderation, and simplicity while

<sup>5</sup> In the early seventeenth century, conservative Mennonites established the Groningen Old Flemish Society in the north-east Netherlands with several congregations spreading later to the Polish province of Prussia along the Vistula River.

<sup>6</sup> The Waldenses originated in the late twelfth century and were considered a dangerous heretical group by the Catholic Church. The Waldenses lived piously, believed in the Christian creeds, but they also attacked the Roman Church, its clergy, and rituals. See Cameron, *Waldenses*, 1-5. This group survived until the early 1600s.

<sup>7</sup> The Holdeman people use the term “primitive” to define their faith. See Holdeman, *Mirror*, 7.

also following Apostle Paul's teaching that their citizenship is in heaven (e.g., Philippians 3:20). Fundamental to their belief system is the view that they are merely sojourners in this world, passing through while yearning for heaven and a release from sin and suffering.<sup>8</sup>

The CGCM has situated their congregations in the rural areas of the Great Plains in the United States and Canada. In 2020, the CGCM population included 23,340 members and 34,000 adherents (not rounded) in North America, plus many others worldwide. North America had 233 congregations and congregation-like missions; outside North America, congregations numbered well over 200 (Source: U.S. Religion Census 2020). About twenty percent of the membership is in the 20 congregations established in Kansas. The annual General Conference meetings reinforce the traditional doctrines and establish new practices as required. The congregational structure is maintained through these General Conferences. Ministers and deacons provide leadership, predominantly through their ministry, writings, and advice in the biweekly *Messenger of Truth*.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this study, I define culture as a concrete and bounded world of beliefs and practices that are assumed to belong to a readily identifiable group. I conceptualize Holdeman culture in particular as learned behavior consisting of a whole body of practices, beliefs, institutions, customs, habits, and myths that have been built up by Holdeman members and forebears and passed on from generation to generation (Sewell 1999, 39-42). In this analysis, I position Holdeman culture against their non-Mennonite neighbors in rural farming communities of middle-class America, a culture that is largely white and Christian. The rural America of the Great Plains, where the greatest concentration of Holdeman congregations exist, encompasses a set of particular values including: hard work—the productive farmer, rising early and earning an honest living through work; family—the nuclear

family offering a secure role for every generation; community—the small town gathering places where social relationships are face to face and personal and where everyone knows your name; nature—the self-sufficient farm, where no scrap is wasted; and safety—of children wandering freely, of unlocked doors, of encounters with people whom you know as friends and neighbors (Logan 1996, 20). As population density is lower in rural areas, people are more likely to know each other, thus increasing influence in social networks (Slama 2004, 10-11).

In his classic book about the Holdeman people, Hiebert (1973) provided an in-depth examination of three overarching religious-cultural dimensions of the Holdemans: beliefs, religious life, and relationships to people and things. For this study, these three broad areas have been adapted and reconceptualized into five more specific areas of topical inquiry: (1) religious doctrine and practice, (2) politics and citizenship, (3) lifestyle, (4) business and information communications, and (5) education. Although the Holdeman people—and Hiebert—may conceptualize change as a gradual movement of a coherent cultural entity toward assimilation with surrounding rural cultures, this model is narrowly conceived and not a strong basis for social theorizing in itself (Anderson, et al. 2019). This concept will be reconceived along the lines of two theoretical frameworks of culture.

The first follows Sewell, who argues that cultures and social life comprise distinct worlds of meaning that are not necessarily coherent and logically consistent wholes. Rather, cultures can be *contradictory and loosely integrated*, subject to different spheres of activity that result in centrifugal forces. As such, Holdeman life is not a single sphere but consists of multiple spheres, including religious life, agrarian life, small business, family, kin, and education. Within these bundled spheres, cultures can be *contested*. The very members of the group who are generally thought to agree on church policies and practices can contest the culture and social life they are living, to varying degrees (Sewell 1999, 52-55). Consensus at any point is difficult to achieve and involves leadership, gender roles, and the opinions of the youth. Innovative behavior permitted by a minister might cause conflict but will likely be necessary to adapt to a turbulent external environment (Fritz and Ibrahim 2010). Cultures are also *weakly bounded* and involve continuous communication with the

<sup>8</sup> The Mennonites originated in the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation. See Snyder's *Anabaptist History and Jantz's Living in the World* for a more complete account of Anabaptist origins and the impact on modern Holdeman life.

“other” and a constant flow of technology, religious thought, and political ideas. We cannot conceive of the purest Holdeman Church as a totally isolated body and that “outside” interaction is necessarily harmful; interactions with non-members and interchanges of influence have always existed (Anderson, et al. 2019). Among the Holdemans, this reveals itself through multiple social spheres and processes, not least of which is mission work, which has brought the group in contact with radically different cultures and a two-way flow of ideas and beliefs. Lastly, cultures are subject to *constant change*. Old and new sub-cultures can exist within a group without conflict and the old is not necessarily replaced by the new. Traditional skills and structures can be used to innovate and produce new processes and practices.

The second framework I will employ follows Gusfield (1967) and Lambert (1999) and focuses on cultural *change*. Gusfield (1967, 351-57) has demonstrated that the classic modernization theory understanding of societal change as linear—societies moving from traditional to modernized—is an incomplete model of social change. Although a level of linear movement is undoubtedly discernible among the Holdemans, other directions of change are possible. For example, a quick glimpse at international mission work and the subsequent influx of other nationalities suggests that the Holdeman people are a culturally heterogeneous group, no longer purely of Dutch-Prussian-German ancestry. As another example, while the Holdeman people are certainly responsive to the idea of preserving tradition, this process need not necessarily be in conflict with acclimation to a surrounding culture, such as the dominant rural culture of the Great Plains.

Helping to expand the purely linear, unidirectional model of social change of modernization theory, Lambert (1999, 311) offers a model that identifies four directions or characteristics of social changes. His model of change is particularly useful for analyzing religious groups, for it was developed in part through a comparative analysis of religions of salvation:

*Decline or stasis*: becoming more secular; recognition of a problem but unwilling or unable to address the problem.

*Adaptation and reinterpretation*: a gradual or incremental breaking away from religious authority or established doctrines; church policies may be relaxed or members might choose to ignore traditional practices.

*Conservative reaction*: a reinforcement of religiosity, doctrines, and religious authority.

*Innovation*: creation of new practices and new organizations; introduction of a major change in an existing policy or doctrine.

“Decline” and “adaptation” suggest that doctrines and religious practices are contested from within the group, the former suggesting an inactive, irresponsive drift, the latter suggesting proactive reinterpretation existing at the organizational level. “Conservative reaction” represents re-entrenchment of existing norms and practices, and the structures that support them. “Innovation” represents the most pro-active, assertive change and can spark considerable controversy and opposition due to its forthrightness.<sup>9</sup> None of these changes necessarily require a religious group to end up totally assimilated or totally isolated and “pure,” and—consistent with Sewell’s characterization of culture—none suggest that it is the *one* all-encompassing process at any given time. All four represent merely phases of change in some but not all areas of thought and practice.

For this study, if some form of change is detected, I want to understand how it is rationalized; Sewell’s framework would suggest that, while rationalizations may not necessarily be consistent, they can nevertheless be effective in bringing about changes in belief and practice. For example, will we find that church doctrines and practices are updated to clarify changes already occurring among the membership (*adaptation*) or is there an overarching informal acceptance of change without doctrinal updates (*decline or stasis*), as is the sentiment of the “drift” view? Dawson’s four types of rationalizations are used in this study to interpret statements about religious beliefs and practices (Dawson 1999, 63-67; see also Sarno et al. 2015, 200-01). They include:

<sup>9</sup> In the larger Mennonite communities of the early twentieth century, Sunday school and revival meetings were innovations that were hotly contested (Kniss 1997, 22–26).

*Spiritualization*: the doctrine or practice is correct but perhaps not well understood by members.

*Test of faith*: God is using the doctrine or practice to determine which members remain faithful.

*Human error*: Members have misrepresented or misunderstood the doctrine or practice or are guilty of some moral inadequacy. Leaders censuring their followers for misconduct often invoke rationalizations of human error.

*Blaming others*: Others outside of the Church have hindered the members from adhering to the doctrine or practice. This effect can take on a more subtle reaction in which members blame others for introducing modern conveniences and therefore forcing them to make decisions regarding usage.

There are several critical resources in this study that are synthesized to answer the research question. First, Hiebert's (1973) classic text about the Holdemans provides an historical perspective regarding change in Holdeman culture and doctrines over time. Sewell assures us that culture remains a valid concept for study and provides the definition of culture used in this study, highlighting important issues such as consensus and contestation. Gusfield further stresses an issue which some may consider counter-intuitive, i.e. traditions can provide support for, as well as work against, cultural change. Lambert and Dawson provide the analytical structure for this study. Lambert's model helps us understand characteristics of change in Holdeman life while Dawson's rationalizations are used to clarify why these changes are occurring, emphasizing the perspective of people within the group. The reader should note that Lambert's effects and Dawson's rationalizations have been italicized in the analysis.

## METHODS

Data about the five topics of focus—religious doctrine and practice, politics and citizenship, lifestyle, business and information communications, and education—were derived from two

sources: the biweekly Holdeman publication, the *Messenger of Truth*, and General Conference meeting minutes. In the *Messenger of Truth*, ministers, deacons, and editors cajole and admonish members, supporting their views with advice, persuasion, and argument. Members and youth respond with their own opinions and perspectives. The relationship between writer and reader relies on shared experiences, ethnic bonds, and even kinship—a cultural context that demonstrates both integration and contradiction. The public discussions and debate allow the ministers to sense the mood of the people, providing important context for decision-making. Church theology considers ministers as divinely inspired; consequently, members are taught to not oppose what is offered in sermons and the official decisions of the Church. Typically, these major decisions are made by delegations—composed almost exclusively of ministers and deacons—and rendered as final in the General Conferences of the Church (Hiebert 1973, 393; Hiebert, P.G. 1955, 600). General Conference meeting minutes are available in a single print volume. Meetings have been held at unstandardized yet somewhat routine intervals—every few years as need arises—since 1896.<sup>10</sup>

The *Messenger of Truth* and General Conference minutes provide over 100 years of primary data from the 160 years total that the CGCM has been in existence. The *Messenger of Truth* publications are publicly available in a CD produced by Gospel Publishers.<sup>11</sup> The CD permits full text searching across all 80+ years of the periodical's existence. The General Conference meeting minutes are available in a single, compact print volume. For the sake of focus, I hone in on two periods: the 1940s-1950s and the 1990s-2000s. The 1940s and 1950s will be referred to as the "early period" while the 1990s and 2000s are referenced as the "later period."<sup>12</sup> Because of the timeline of this research—stretching through the 2010s—I

<sup>10</sup> Seven conferences were held prior to 1896 and are not documented in the General Conference minutes. Minutes for these conferences are covered in Gable (2010, 77-93).

<sup>11</sup> The CD *Messenger of Truth 3.0*, distributed by Gospel Publishers (Moundridge, KS: 2018) provides full text searching of the newsletters for the years 1941 through 2020. The CD is supplemented with scanned issues from 2019 and 2020 and from print issues prior to 1941.

<sup>12</sup> I occasionally cite sources from the 2010s and consider this decade part of the later period.

eventually included excerpts from this decade for the “later period” as well, when applicable, though did not systematically analyze the period

I used a textual analysis method to identify passages of interest in the *Messenger of Truth* and General Conference minutes, keyword searching the texts. I examined the frequency of selected terms to detect change that has occurred in the intervals under study and qualitatively analyze the passages that keyword analyses return. For each topic, I analyzed the texts for evidence of Lambert’s four types of social change (decline, adapt, conservative reaction, or innovation) and, following Dawson, identify rhetorical evidence for how church authorities and members rationalize these changes. In the discussion section, I return to the Holdeman’s own view of drift and Sewell’s concepts of cultural change to portray how the Holdeman culture has experienced change between the 1940s-1950s and 1990s-2000s.

## RESULTS

### 1. Religious Doctrine and Practice

The Holdeman people view the Bible, and especially the New Testament, as the source and guidance for how they should live. John Holdeman believed in a continuous lineage of his church and that his people must practice the primitive faith as represented in the first centuries of the Early Christian Church (Hiebert 1955, 600), with a particular emphasis on discipleship and the transformation of life. Yet, literally interpreting and applying Scripture presents a continuous challenge of practice destabilization as culture changes. Key subtopics follow.

#### *THE HOLY KISS*

In 58 CE, the Apostle Paul dictated a letter to be delivered to the Roman churches. Therein, he asks Christians to “*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*” (Rom. 16:16).<sup>13</sup> The holy kiss or Christian salutation is mentioned five times in the New Testament, four times by Paul (Rom. 16:16; I Cor. 16:20; II Cor. 13:12; I Thess. 5:26) and once by

Peter (I Peter 5:14). It has been practiced among the Holdemans since the years of the early church.

In a 1946 issue of *Messenger of Truth* (Editorial, “Question and Answer,” 1946, para. 40), the author raises a concern about members not practicing the holy kiss. “Since it is not a direct command [the holy kiss] is considered impractical [by some]. Since it is not a direct command it is also doubtful what the penalties will be if it is not practiced.” The author further states, “Some are too proud to practice it, and some others are so pharisaical that they consider certain brothers or sisters not worthy and consequently withdraw. God will deal with the underlying reason for ceasing this practice.” Using a metaphor of a penknife and cutting away at the Scriptures, another writer suggests that members have used the penknife to make incisions in the letters that reference the holy kiss. “These Scriptures have been so much abused that the multitudes would not know what ‘Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss’ would mean.” (Bontrager 1953, para. 25)

Some 50 years later, the General Conference sought to encourage and strengthen the practice. By vote of the members, “we pledged to teach and practice this doctrine” (“Holy Kiss” 1993, 121). However, members found it difficult to practice it. One youth member writes, “Why do we not practice it more?” (Unruh 2017, para. 55). Minister Bob Klassen (2016, para. 1) sounds an ominous warning: “If this is not corrected and repented of, eternal loss will be the punishment of the disobedient.”

This common refrain continues through the 127 references to the holy kiss in the later period where members exhort each other to hold to the traditions and cease the questioning of Church doctrine. Writing to her sisters of faith, one member asks why we find the practice so hard to carry out and aptly summarizes her experience:

“I don’t know why but it is a subject that I find myself resisting. It is a doctrine of the Bible that seems to me is not being practiced like it should be, especially among us sisters . . . Do we think it is because, by nature, we are not demonstrative when it comes to showing affection (why then is it easy to just give a hug)? Is it because we worry what others will think of us? Is it our pride? Or is it a lack of true, Christian, heart-felt love? I know that for myself, so often I have made it optional,

<sup>13</sup> Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

and soon I get in confusion about it, wondering when it is proper” (Goossen 2014, para. 46).

This member emphasizes the confusion and guilt resulting from making individual choices counter to the authority of the Church and General Conference guidelines. Some are even suggesting that punishment for the disobedient is likely to occur. Many of the letters of the later period speculate on the causes. One youth comments that it is peer pressure and no one else of her age practices the holy kiss (Toews 1991, para. 38). Minister Elliott (1990, para. 13) suggests the practice’s neglect might be due to “carnality.” Both regular members and ministers admonish and cajole in order to get the Holdeman people to embrace this practice.

The holy kiss appears to be a practice in *decline*. How do people rationalize this change? Members do understand the commandment as a New Testament reference (*spiritualization*). Instead, the change is primarily rationalized as *human error*, “carnality” as one minister suggests, in which members submit to pride, natural bodily pleasures, and appetites. Elements of *blaming others* also exist (as when one member worried about what non-Mennonite “others” may think) as does *test of faith* (as when members who do not practice the holy kiss are construed as lacking in true Christian faith).

### **MEN’S BEARDS**

The CGCM requires the beard of all male members beginning at baptism. Three reasons are typically cited for the beard: 1) God created man with a beard to mark a sex distinction, 2) the Old Testament Law commanded it, and 3) Christ provided an example (Hiebert 1973, 437).

The 1896 General Conference noted that the Gospels do not provide any specific regulations regarding wearing or cutting the beard (“Manner” 1896, 13). As a result, the Church looks back to the Old Testament Mosaic Law to sanction beard cutting (Lev. 19:27 - *You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard.*) In addition, numerous references to other Old Testament passages indicate the beard was an accepted practice, e.g. Psalms 133:2 - *It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard;* Ezekiel. 5:1 - *And you, O mortal, take a*

*sharp sword; use it as a barber’s razor and run it over your head and your beard.*

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Minister A. R. Peters (1946, para. 31) clarifies the beard policy. “God has created man with a beard, and if nature runs its course, as God has intended, man will grow a beard.” He further states a concern: And in my opinion any man that is not willing to help carry out God’s plan in wearing a beard in a Christian-like manner is not gathering with Christ, but scattering, he is tearing down the work of God and His Church, instead of building it up.

Supporting this view, Bontrager (1956, para. 18) writes:

Since the subject of wearing a beard for men has largely been placed on the shelf and by many almost forgotten, so much so that it has become very unpopular, and does not appeal to the average mind anymore, this giant uncircumcised Philistine (the Devil) is certainly defying the armies of the Church of God, in trying to destroy the laws of nature, yea, God’s order and distinction of sex.

Bontrager responds to his own musings: “The beard was ordered by the Lord God, hence it is a Moral Law, and since many ceremonial laws were changed, the moral law was never changed; never.”

In the later period, 200 references to “beard” exist in the *Messenger of Truth*, indicating that this practice still garners much attention. Melvin Jantz (1994, para. 51) cites many Old Testament references, arguing that the beard is a long-accepted practice. One passage indicates that men shaved the beard only in times of deep trouble and mourning (Jer. 41:5 . . . *eighty men arrived . . . with their beards shaved and their clothes torn, and their bodies gashed.*) Numerous comments exist about the beard’s length, noting that some have only two weeks of stubble (Johnson 2017, para. 67). By the wearing of a “shadow of a beard,” the carnal man will follow the trend of the world instead of the orderly, well-kept beard that would identify the Christian (Classen 1996, para. 12). The 2003 General Conference issued a statement that members should avoid worldly trends such as closely trimmed or fashionable beards (“Devotional” 2003, 133).

The casual observer in a rural community will note that all Holdeman men are wearing beards; however, many men closely crop their beards. Given the many references in the *Messenger of Truth* in the later period, the Church appears to maintain a strong defense of this practice and any member who completely shaves the beard is subject to excommunication (as also argued earlier in Hiebert 1973, 438). Reacceptance is contingent on re-growing the beard. Still, the practice is being re-interpreted to allow for a style-conscious, trimmed beard, a trend suggesting members want to adapt to a popular culture look.

For the beard, the change is *conservative reaction*, in which the Holdeman people strongly reinforce the beard in itself as a deeply rooted doctrinal practice. Yet, they have given room for the beard itself to change form. This change in form is rationalized as *blaming others*, as surrounding cultures have set the standard for the nicely trimmed, sporty beards of many Holdeman men.

#### EXCOMMUNICATION AND THE BAN

Excommunication, avoidance, and re-acceptance are the procedures used by the Holdeman Church to discipline wayward members. The ban as an instrument of church discipline is derived from Matt: 18:17: *if the member refuses to listen to you, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*<sup>14</sup> In the mid-sixteenth century, Menno Simons most eloquently expressed the need for the ban:

Even as a city without wall and gates, or field without enclosure or fence, or a house without walls and doors, so is also a church without the true apostolic exclusion or ban. For it would be open to all deceiving spirits, all godless scorners and haughty despisers, all idolatrous and insolent transgressors, yes to all lewd debauchers and adulterers, as is the case with all the great sects of the world which style themselves, although improperly, churches of Christ. (Simons, trans. Bender 2004, 86)

John Holdeman (1956, 476) goes to great lengths to define and explain the practice of ex-

communication and the ban. Among the more important justifications is “to chastise the wicked flesh of the offenders, that they may be reprovved, and put to shame, in order that they might become obedient again and be restored as fruitful members.” Excommunication is among the more important Gospel doctrines to ensure Church purity (Holdeman 1956, 476–96). Shunning or the practice of the ban begins once the congregation has decided to expel an erring member. At this point, members begin a period of spiritual and social ostracism in which they are forbidden to shake hands or eat at the same table with the expelled person (*But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one;* 1 Corinthians 5:11). Members committing grave sins, such as fornication, covetousness, idolatry, drunkenness, premeditated lying, and defrauding, are to be expelled without previous admonitions (“Excommunication 1896, 11). One editorialist states, “a willful premeditated lie requires excommunication” (“Confess Your Faults,” 1941, para. 4) and cites a passage from *Der Spiegel der Wahrheit (Mirror of Truth)*. Fully aware of the resulting emotional trauma, the Church urges members to exercise “conscientious carefulness” in practicing avoidance (“Avoidance” 1959, 83).

In the early period, 30 references to “excommunication” exist in the *Messenger of Truth*. From the later period, 140 references exist, suggesting an increased awareness of and effort to sustain this doctrine. In the early period, considerable discussion about church discipline exists, especially how excommunication cannot be separated from avoidance. Abundant citations of the New Testament are provided (e.g. in Romans 16:17: “*I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them.*”) (Leatherman 1941, para. 6; “Christian Discipline,” 1948, para. 1). Acknowledging that the practice can cause pain, members are counseled that avoidance must be done with “true sympathy and love.” In the later period, several letters urge caution and care in practicing avoidance (Koehn 2016, para. 15): “Care must be taken to not abuse this doctrine and authority.” However, the erring member is warned about the need to repent:

<sup>14</sup> The reference to a Gentile suggests treating the member as an outsider.

His excommunication, then, is the most urgent warning and judgment possible to alarm him of his condition and hopefully move him to repentance. Thereupon, the shunning is a continuing grace to again and again hold before him the truth that he himself is avoiding – his hope of salvation. (Editorial, “Avoiding the Apostates,” 1993, para. 1)

The ministers, editorialists, and members explain and fully support the doctrine of excommunication. One member indicates that the doctrine is very dear to him while another expresses concerns about an apostate who never returns and joins another so-called true church. One member worries, “Why is there a breakdown in the keeping of the avoidance?” (Koehn 1996, para. 18). Although the doctrine is not questioned, avoidance is frequently not practiced, especially in social gatherings, weddings, and funerals.

The practice of excommunication itself is a *conservative reaction*, notably in the increase in letters and editorials from the former to later period. Most rationalization focuses on the ban, which appears less a matter of *human error* in understanding the doctrine and more a matter of a difficult *test of faith* for members.

### **MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE**

Jesus’ teachings about divorce are frequently cited in the passages of the Gospel of Matthew 19:6— *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*” Apostle Paul has spelled out the directions concerning marriage and divorce with specific guidelines regarding divorce (namely, 1 Corinthians 7:10-11: “*To the married I give this command . . . that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.*”)

In the early period, 54 references to “divorce” exist in the *Messenger of Truth*, while in the later period, 83 references to “divorce” exist. The increase suggests the parallel increase of divorce in larger society by the 1990s and 2000s, a cause of concern for the Church. In the 1940s and 1950s, much discussion focuses on the evils of divorce – broken families, children born out of wedlock, and immorality. However, the *Messenger of Truth* letters cite fornication as the only reason a member

is allowed to get a divorce. Even when this situation occurs, no New Testament command exists to remarry, and one member suggests that it is better to “wait with patience, hoping the fallen companion might repent” rather than quickly remarry (Editorial, “During Moses’ time,” 1942, para. 1). In the later period, Minister Reuben Koehn writes about the evil of divorce and the sanctity of marriage:

Holy matrimony is, therefore, a union between two sanctified persons, embracing one faith, one baptism, one Lord, and sharing the blessings of one church. This is the only marriage the Church is authorized to perform.

Koehn (1990, para. 1) reports that there is no known case of a brother or sister seeking divorce while in the Church, and he suggests that if this were to occur, the member should be dealt with by excommunication.

Among the members, considerable discussion arises on the state of a person who divorces and remarries. Authors agree that if the husband or wife passes away, the surviving spouse can remarry without becoming an adulterer. Members write about the evils of listening to the radio or consuming alcohol that can cause divorce. Another letter to the “Youth” section cautions against meeting with divorced people who are looking for gratification and are very clever in offering good times, fun, and excitement – a form of entrapment (Moroney 1996, para. 85).

Although many warnings about the evils of divorce in the later period exist—with references to recent society-wide moral issues such as abortion and homosexuality—the tenor of the discussion in this period is similar to the letters of the 1940s and 1950s. In its first meeting, the General Conference stated the Church policy: Remarriage is permissible only in the case of adultery or death of a spouse (“Marriage” 1896, 9–11). This position has been repeatedly supported by many of the subsequent General Conference meetings. The effect falls into the category of *conservative reaction*, with the objective of reinforcing the prohibition against divorce. The doctrine seems clearly understood, and rationalizations focus mainly on *blaming others* given the many temptations from surrounding cultures.

## 2. Politics and Citizenship

The Holdeman people adhere to the two-kingdom doctrine, being in, but not of, the world (Romans 12:2).<sup>15</sup> As such, they view themselves as withdrawn from worldly systems, asking God to deal with the evil in the world. In an editorial about citizenship in the *Messenger of Truth*, Edwin Hughes (1996, para. 34) states that, “We must totally and completely renounce our allegiance to this world and its prince, Satan.”

### *POLITICS AND VOTING*

During the 1896 General Conference (“Nonresistance” 1896, 11), the Church clarified its policy on voting: “It is inconsistent for a non-resistant man to cast his vote for a worldly officer who is required to use the authority of the law.” In suggesting that the Apostle Paul did not participate in politics (Ephesians 6:20: “*for which I am an ambassador in chains*”), Bontrager spells out the negative effects of voting (1956, para. 27); for a Christian to vote is to serve two masters, a practice that brings closer ties between church and state. He concludes that Holdeman people should not meddle in politics by voting. However, in the early period, concerns about a lessening resolve are evident. “What was labeled ‘world’ a century ago has been questioned by many in succeeding generations, and the questioning has come to be accepted in the last decade.” The areas of threat and compromise included: politics (including voting); union shops; life insurance; expensive, modern homes; high-priced, flashy vehicles; and copying after the fashions and fads of the world in dress.

In the later period, members continued the stance against voting. Classen’s (1996, para. 12) comments about the tensions between living in the world and the responsibilities of citizenship are representative of comments on this subject. The issues of voting for political offices, taking part in jury duty, protesting, marching, campaigning, and voting on moral issues bring tension. In these situations it would be so easy for the weak

human flesh to join with other religious people, with the trend of the world, and take part in the affairs of the community. After all, who wants to be looked upon as one who does not contribute to the needs of the community? One does not want to be thought of as a useless citizen, not even caring to take part when the issues of permitting liquor or gambling come up for a vote.

One member (Peachey 2016, para. 51) explains how he deals with the reluctance to vote:

It is much better to be spiritually minded and somewhat ignorant of the state of politics in the country we live in. It would certainly not be a good idea to be a total recluse; it is helpful to have some knowledge of our nation. When asked by a nonmember what I think of this or that candidate, I have always been glad when I could answer that I really am ignorant of the situation and that I do not vote.

Lawrence Penner (1987, “Nonconformity,” para. 85) sums up the view of the Church quite succinctly: “May our vision be clear that we are not to be affiliated in any way with voting for world offices.”

### *CITIZENSHIP*

When a doctrinally two-kingdom people exist in a democratic society, the expected responsibilities of citizenship pose a dilemma for that people. Although Holdeman people honor and obey “the king” (Romans 12), their citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20: *But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ*). However, the Apostle Paul used Roman citizenship in his own defense and to advance the cause of the emerging Christian church (Acts 22:28: *The tribune answered, “It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.” Paul said, “But I was born a citizen.”*)

Minister Harry Wenger was a strong leader of the Church during and following the World War II years (Hiebert 1973, 308). Surely realizing that Mennonites will be chastised for their pacifist views, Minister Wenger offers a vision of citizenship for members, suggesting that their light be made visible to neighbors and the nation (Wenger 1942, “Progress,” para. 45). His statements reveal a poignant and unusual appreciation for social responsibility, given that his Church has a well-

<sup>15</sup> Perry Bush provides an excellent description of the two-kingdom ethic and theology. “Although sovereign over both, God endowed two orders, two kingdoms, for the ruling of human society.” See Bush, *Two Kingdoms*, 6.

established doctrine to separate from the evil of the world.

We now have opportunities upon this comparatively open avenue of the present, almost as never before, to let a beacon light shine out into the gross darkness of this sad, quarreling, hateful, warring world. As our thoughts dwell upon these things several questions for us to ponder might well be: Am I a living light to my neighbors and the nation, whose eyes are upon me as never before? Can they see in me that I am fulfilling the peace-loving program provided for us, in my personal life, at home, in the community, in the councils of my brotherhood, and so forth? Do I have something to offer this sick needy world in the way of peace, of a righteous forbearing unity, of kindness, of charity, of a cheerful Christian spirit, of doing constructive things to the upbuilding of God's kingdom and the welfare of humanity?

Minister Wenger's thoughtful words suggest that members do have a responsibility to humanity. However, an editorialist in the *Messenger of Truth* offers a different view, providing a candid assessment and rationale to explain the citizenship responsibilities of members (Editorial, "Alien Citizens," 2016):

Our spiritual loyalties are to our heavenly homeland whose obligations we hold superior to all others. From our heavenly country, we expect our dividends and eternal reward. Our earthly citizenship is but a pilgrimage. If the secular government provides us with benefits, we will gratefully and unworthily accept, yet knowing that we are not fully entitled to them. It is not in our place to demand our rights.

In a recent guest editorial, Minister Gladwin Koehn (2020, "Citizenship," 1–2) uses the metaphor of a traveler and a passport to explain and strengthen the concept of heavenly citizenship. He cautions members about how much worldliness they can take on without jeopardizing their citizenship in heaven. In referring to how some countries allow dual citizenship, Koehn notes: "Heaven has no such arrangement with the kingdom of this world."

The *conservative reaction* of the Church suggests the duties of citizenship such as voting and

other forms of government participation will remain out of bounds for members. Although there is much awareness and concern, the Holdeman people interpret their citizenship responsibilities as being a light to the world, offering kindness and charity while acknowledging that they probably do not deserve some of the government benefits that they routinely accept. The Holdemans' non-participation in government serves as a *test of faith* for members of the Church, who demonstrate their loyalty to God's kingdom by non-participation in the earthly kingdom.

### 3. Lifestyle: Poverty vs. Wealth

Holdeman doctrine holds that life should be simple and uncluttered, as described by a General Conference statement ("Modesty" 1959, 82): ". . . we teach and practice modesty, simplicity, and economy in everything—in clothes, in homes, in farms, in machinery, in automobiles, and in all we possess or handle." To understand the differences between Holdeman life and the surrounding rural culture, I examine the conversations about poverty and wealth. As noted earlier, the Holdeman forebears were a deeply impoverished group when they arrived in America in the 1870s. However, as the people of the CGCM survived the Great Depression of the 1930s and the deprivations of World War II, they emerged as a middle-class group who had benefitted materially from their hard work and thrift. This transformation can be seen in how they viewed poverty and wealth in the early versus later periods.

#### *POVERTY*

The topic of poverty has received considerable attention in the *Messenger of Truth* with 79 references in the early period and 176 references in the later period. As one might expect in the war years of the early period, poverty concerns dealt frequently with individuals and families who were unable to make ends meet. There are frequent references to the Scriptures where members can take solace in the belief that God will provide (such as Psalm 31:15: "*My times are in Thy hands*").

The tenor of the messages in the later period is much more varied, with recognition that God has granted significant material blessings to the Holdeman people and these benefits can be used

to help one another (Eck 1993, “Sharing,” para. 45). Members reminisce about how their elders survived the Dust Bowl and Great Depression but prospered spiritually. Many references cite the issues of “spiritual drowsiness” in which poverty of both spirit and knowledge has set in. A large number of the references to poverty have an inward focus in which there is admiration for their own people who have maintained a relationship with God during difficult times of hardship and poverty.

However, in the later period, individuals are voicing concerns about poverty in the world. One member states: “I wonder sometimes how accountable God is going to hold us for the plush-living we have, while there are many in other countries of the world who live in dire poverty and hunger” (Davis 2018, “Stones or Bricks,” para. 75). One member seems unsure about his responsibility, citing Deuteronomy 15:7—“*Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your neighbor*”—and comments: “We cannot eradicate poverty in the world because it is God’s providence that it should be so” (Anison 1995, “Gains and Riches,” para. 35).

#### WEALTH

There are 213 references to “wealth” in the early period and 539 in the later period. This sizeable increase suggests a concern about plentiful times. Many warnings discuss the pitfalls of becoming wealthy, whereas giving to the poor will result in a “spiritual blessing which far exceeds any earthly wealth” (Burns 1990, “Insurance,” para. 60). One member asks, “Did I ask God for direction before buying the item of comfort or convenience, before signing that dotted line for that new car, tractor, or quarter of land?” and suggests that the answer might be “no” (Yost 1990, “Progress,” para. 45). Minister Koehn (2017, “Old Time Gospel,” para. 55) clarifies the Scriptures: “The old-time Gospel teaches that we should eschew wealth and riches so that we might gain Godliness.” He warns about larger homes and more elaborate vehicles, noting that the old-time gospel says that the world is an enemy of God and must be avoided at all costs (James 4:4: “... *do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?*”). Another member laments the pressure on people to attain a standard, a certain lifestyle in vehicles, homes, décor, and clothes

(Friesen 2017, “Perfection,” para. 30). These cultural pressures “necessitate discernment on how to apply Biblical principles.” (Editorial, “The Word,” 2017, para. 1).

The increase in the references to wealth in the later period indicates, first, that many members have become relatively wealthy and, secondly, there is an increasing need to warn about the pitfalls of wealth. The cautions and admonitions suggest that there is much concern about slipping into the world of the wealthy. The pressure the group feels is emanating from a culture in which non-Holdeman people are aggressively pursuing wealth. The change is of *decline*, of becoming more secular economically. Rationales range widely, from *blaming others* among their neighbors who have a wealthy lifestyle and bring pressures, to *test of faith*, as members act on Bible-sourced commands about what to do with their wealth, and finally to *spiritualization*, a sense that people do not understand their poverty-wealth doctrine.

#### 4. Business and Information Communications

##### INSURANCE

As one measure of business practice, I analyzed changes in insurance. Founding leader John Holdeman wrote (2004, 169), “Insurance, whether of the life or property, is not allowed by us; for it is a violation of love to the brethren and, no doubt, in many cases founded on covetousness.” Notwithstanding this decisive admonition, the CGCM insurance policy changed much across the twentieth century. In 1909, the General Conference (“Insurance” 1909, 17) stated that “We believe to insure our possessions in the insurance companies of the world against fire, storm, and hail, etc. is averse to the holy patriarch’s and the apostles’ examples.” However, one writer of the early period described the behavior that was becoming more popular:

The heads of households crowd their income to pay premiums on life insurance policies as a security for their loved ones in case the breadwinner is disabled or dies. Almost every car owner has been persuaded by experience or salesman to protect himself against unjust law suits by having liability, and along with this many have security for their person and property. Many

farmers whose crops are subject to many devastating forces are resorting to crop insurance as a security for their investment. More and more individuals and families are resorting to hospital and medical benefits as a security against accident or illness. (Editorial, "Man's Quest," 1956, para. 1)

As recently as 1999, church leaders were still arguing against insurance. In his editorial entitled "Where is Your Security," Deacon Larry Loewen (1999, "Where is Your Security," para. 25) states: "Insurance agents are convincing many people that life insurance is a must. The argument is that it costs so little per month and, should something happen to the insured, his family would not have the immediate financial burden to worry about." In carrying out their responsibility for each other and as a substitute for insurance, the Church created a mutual aid society to provide assistance for disasters and also to advise farmers in making investments (Hiebert 1973, 329–30).

In the 2015 General Conference, Church leaders acknowledged materialistic pressures, stating that it is important to distinguish between necessary levels of insurance, such as crop insurance, and "an insurance that seeks advantage for gain" ("Insurance" 2015, 144). Dale Koehn (2015) elaborated on the Church's position: "Farming increasingly requires crop insurance, and farmers felt pulled in two directions — either follow their church or follow their livelihood." Koehn added that the focus is to keep relying on God but allow space for agricultural producers to operate in today's economy. This approach is also gaining traction with government insurance programs. The General Conference of 1956 was noncommittal regarding Social Security. However, a few years later ("Social Security" 1959, 86), the Church decided that its "institutions be given the right to make these benefits available to their personnel."<sup>16</sup>

Although it appears that many Holdeman people have reluctantly yielded to the benefits of insurance, many of the letters in the *Messenger of Truth* continue to suggest that the only security is from God and every quest for security without God will end in failure. For insurance, the process of change is to *adapt and reinterpret* as the stric-

tures against insurance are relaxed. The rationale falls on *blaming others*, especially the broader economy for making insurance so necessary, as well as clever insurance salesmen who claim you cannot do without these benefits.

#### INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS

The General Conference of 1993 acknowledged the possible dangers from radio, television, computers, and electronics, suggesting that caution must be exercised in the purchase and use of computers in order to avoid promoting a "computer spirit" ("Computers" 1993, 125). This statement continues in the spirit of their earlier prohibitions on radio and television.

While no reference to the internet and computers exists in the early period, in the later period, a rapid transition occurs in a few short years, from rejecting the internet to cautiously accepting it. In 1996, as consumer-level internet was spreading, Friesen ("Computers," para. 58.) reinforced the spirit of the 1993 statement, stating that "With regard to the Internet or other networks, our direction should be without question. Namely, that we do not even consider a connection to them." However, the General Conference of 2003 (Koehn 2003, "Technology Issues," 135) soon acknowledged the importance of the internet and granted permission for members to use the internet if appropriate filters are in place. In another fifteen years, a member discusses internet use as a question not of "if" but "how": "When we spend so much time with messaging, following our friends on social media, and searching for this or that on the Internet, we begin to focus on ourselves" (Miller 2018, "Fulfilled Life," para. 25). Today, among the Holdeman people, the internet and cell phones are part of daily life. It is not unusual to see members discretely taking photos with internet-enabled phones, albeit more of scenes than of individuals.

Assuming some continuity between the reservations against radio, television, and computers, for the internet and cell phones, the social change was to *adapt*, a process that will likely continue as the CGCM finds information communications technology useful in both agricultural and small business applications. The rationale that justifies this change is less clear. The church leaders acknowledge this ambiguity in their hope that

<sup>16</sup>It is possible for religious groups to opt out of paying and receiving Social Security benefits, assuming these groups have existed continuously since 1950.

“further light” will be forthcoming (“Technology Issues” 2003, 135).

## 5. Education

The benefits of secondary and higher education are many. In addition to an expected increase in income, Vila (2000, 24-26) found that significant non-monetary benefits also exist, such as improved health and better home management. Yet, as an external system aimed at assimilating students into the mainstream culture and economy, secondary and higher education strikes at the very core of the Holdeman Church’s doctrine of separation and represents a threat to the traditional values of the church, broadening mental horizons of individuals and preparing members for new occupations. As Hiebert reports (1973, 450), many of the Holdeman people who have been liberalized by higher education chose not to follow the faith of their fathers. The General Conference of 1909 was clear about the Church position on higher education: “In regard to high school and colleges – we believe that they are no means to the promotion of Christianity. Therefore we are opposed to their attendance, insofar when they are conducted with pride and high-mindedness so that impure and false doctrine is taught and practiced” (“High Schools” 1909, 16).

Yet, the General Conference of 1962 recognized the need for education in some cases: “We recommend that members who are sincere, and have a conviction and burden for the cause of Christ, make the proper preparation for the work for which they feel they are called” (“Clarification” 1962, 94). This unofficial support for higher education represents one of the most extensive changes between the early and later periods, acknowledging the reality that many Holdeman people were receiving a high school education.

In the early period, there were 39 references to “high school”. In 1942, the *Messenger of Truth* editor inserted a comment supporting the traditional view of education: “We are very much pleased and united with the above article from Brother Koehn, warning of the danger in high schooling.” Koehn cites the translation by Brother A. R. Toews of John Holdeman’s writings regarding the dangers of high schooling. The translation from the *Mirror of Truth* states: “We cannot believe that a church remains the church of God when it

has high schools . . .” (Toews, “Higher Schools,” 1942, para. 30). Even though many obituaries indicate that members were attending high school in the 1940s, the editorials and writings by ministers refer repeatedly to Holdeman’s writings in the *Mirror of Truth*: “The church of God during the apostles’ time and since, never had high schools to educate their preachers, and we follow their example to propagate His Church likewise.” A report from 1949 (Rushoi, “Betrayal,” 1949, para. 60) indicates that more than 25 percent of high school students in America are infected with one of the diseases of immorality (i.e. dancing, motion picture shows, etc.) “The whole tendency of modern dance is to release moral inhibitions.”

In the later period, there are 64 references to “high school” in the *Messenger of Truth*. What is interesting is that a majority of the references are to obituaries that indicate the deceased received a high school diploma. One letter to “Youth” encourages learning and preparing for the future, a statement that appears to contradict the traditional view on education (Decker 2015, “Dear Youth,” para. 65):

God never asks us to let go of something without giving us a better alternative. Do you have direction for your future? Has someone kindly encouraged you to do something you are good at? When I was in high school, my teachers did this, and I knew what I wanted to study after high school. I put my whole heart into my studies and learned a lot in my chosen career.

In the *Messenger of Truth* issues from the later period, church leaders continue to speak out against higher education. In the section “Your Minister Speaks,” Wenger (2003, “Wise and Prudent,” para. 20) suggests that higher education is not a good thing and cautions members: “Where a spirit desiring high schools (or higher education) arises in a church that was formerly opposed to this, there a deep fall has occurred, because she is beginning to seek for higher things.”

In the 70 years from the early 1940s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, the CGCM has moved dramatically from a position of condemning the moral depravity found in high schools to an acknowledgement that high school is important for members to earn a living in worldly society. This change is clearly evident in the many members writing in the later period who have routinely

received high school diplomas. Education beyond high school is also receiving attention. References in the later period to “college” fall into two areas: (1) members are warning about professors teaching evolution and homosexuality; and (2) other members discuss their attendance at a “Bible College” or other college that trains students for specific skills. There are many positive statements about the benefits of college where members have become nurses, medical technologists, and some have attended Bethel College in Newton, Kansas.

At the same time that more Holdeman people were seeking a high school education, the Church began to allow congregations to establish their own primary schools (“Discussions” 1967, 100). In 1970, three primary schools were established in Georgia, Kansas, and Ohio (Hiebert 1973, 455). This policy can be considered a conservative reaction in removing children from public schools. For example, Errol Wedel (1975, “Discipline,” para. 40) raises concerns about disciplinary issues, stating: “The underlying principles involved in progressive education are not compatible with Christianity.” However, establishing primary schools can also be considered an innovation where the CGCM has created their own institutions of learning and the training of Holdeman instructors. Tensions continue to fester between the liberal and conservative positions. In some extreme cases, parents have been excommunicated for allowing their children to remain in public school (Hiebert 1973, 454). Given the concern for being contaminated with worldly ideas, it is unlikely that the official policy will be changed to approve the need for higher education. In 2003, the General Conference (“Attitude” 2003, 134) reinforced this position with the following statement: “We maintain our position as being opposed to high schools and colleges with their attending evils.”

The changes in education are twofold. Regarding the expansion of secondary and higher education, the change is characteristic of *adapt and reinterpret*. The Church does not reject John Holdeman’s views on education, but there is clearly a departure from traditional religious authority. Inversely, the withdrawal from public schools into church-sponsored schools is *innovation*, for this was a pioneering creation of new organizations in response to their doctrinal concerns. The rationale for greater tolerance of high school and college

education is *blaming others*, for the pressures from the surrounding culture and the concern that more education is required to earn a livelihood in occupations other than farming. The rationalization for starting church-sponsored schools is *spiritualization*, for the doctrine may not be well understood by members, so an alternative institution is established to reduce pressure on them to forsake the doctrine.

## DISCUSSION

Using Lambert’s model of social change and Dawson’s rationalizations, this study has shown *how* CGCM doctrines, practices, and policies are changing and *what* rationalizations exist for the changes. Using these findings, I will now assess changes in Holdeman culture from the perspective of Sewell’s (1990) world of meanings: contested, loosely integrated, weakly bounded, contradictory, and constantly changing. The Holdeman culture, as with any culture, is not wholly distinct, coherent, and bounded. Changes occur within this community and they are not moving irrevocably from a separated, isolated system to total assimilation, as modernization theory and the “drift” doctrine might suggest.

### Contested

People in a social order will have different views and understandings of what might otherwise appear to non-members as group consensus. These different views result in resisting and contesting the institutionalized doctrines and practices of the CGCM. In the Holdeman community, these differences have surfaced with respect to several policies, suggesting that not all important beliefs are consensual. For example, the formal policy regarding higher education is contested. Members are quietly deciding to make their own decisions about higher education. This trend will likely continue as the demand for specialized workers increases across almost all occupations. Similarly, many members are uncomfortable with practicing the holy kiss; they increasingly ignore it while also experiencing guilt. The quandary for the Church is how to deal with resistance to a policy that is explicitly derived from the Scriptures. To accommodate reality and the resistance of members, church authorities may resort to a more sym-

bolic rather than literal interpretation of Apostle Paul's references to the holy kiss. Although there is considerable correspondence in the *Messenger of Truth* about the reluctance to observe the holy kiss, members rarely speak out about excommunication and the ban. However, members' actions reveal considerable discomfort and resistance to the doctrine that was adamantly defended by both Menno Simons and John Holdeman. This resistance is readily observed in group gatherings such as family reunions, weddings, and funerals, where there is frequently a mix of faithful Holdeman people and "apostates." Yet, in these gatherings, the men will shake hands and the faithful will join in a communal meal with the apostates. This resistance even surfaces in the educational realm where some members have allowed themselves to be excommunicated, freeing them to pursue their education. Upon completion of their education, they then seek re-acceptance in the Church (Hiebert 1973, 455). That members contest institutional rules does not mean that the institution will be overthrown; rather, it is a common process characteristic of the changes any society experiences.

### **Weakly Bounded**

It is unusual for any social group or culture to be strictly bounded and, hence, isolated from influences in the surrounding environment. Perhaps the most obvious example of the Holdeman Church being weakly bounded is in their use of information communications technology. Cell phones are commonly accepted, with filters in place and photos banned. Personal computers are used to manage transactions and inventory in small businesses. It is likely that Holdeman people will continue to take advantage of computer technology and the internet for both business purposes and personal entertainment. Another example is mission work. The CGCM has exposed Holdeman people to a wide variety of lifestyles, which raise questions about their own culture (Hiebert 1973, 281-82). Perhaps the most visible impact on the church is the change in ethnic composition, as mission work is blurring the boundaries of the Holdeman Dutch-Prussian ancestry and culture. In recent issues of the *Messenger of Truth*, one can view surnames such as Mendoza and Ortiz alongside those of those of Koehn, Schmidt, and Wedel. The experience in Nigeria is illustrative of

the mission challenges confronting the Church. Although the native Nigerians expressed a wish to be baptized and wear a head covering like their "white sisters," it was clear to the missionaries that these people did not always understand the symbolic meaning of Holdeman practices. Among North American members, these experiences are prompting much introspection, even questioning of the accepted norms in North America. Although assimilation of other cultures will not likely cause the CGCM to disappear through assimilation, changes are likely to result as church members respond to their perceptions of different cultures and ethnicities (Hiebert 1973, 359).

### **Loosely Integrated**

Social life is composed of many different spheres of activity including agriculture, business, and education. Each of these spheres has its own unique culture and rules, generating centrifugal forces that can relax some of the strictures of institutional policy in the church. For example, modernized agriculture and business have created a system of crop insurance to protect farmers. Similarly, Holdeman farmers have recognized that crop failures due to weather and disease can jeopardize their livelihood. The links between Holdeman agriculture and the broader agricultural economy loosens any monopoly linkage the Church institution may have on that sphere. However, the CGCM is still linked to their members' business sphere. Over the past several decades, many church members have moved from agricultural occupations to managing small businesses in rural communities. While some integration exists with the larger economy, many Holdeman business people still do not fully embrace the rough and tumble of competition in today's capitalist economy. The Holdeman approach to business profit and gain is influenced by their church's non-resistance doctrine. This approach has created a rare and unusual business ethic, where Holdeman people are recognized and trusted for their fairness in business deals. CGCM members interact in different spheres that have multiple linkages to non-Holdeman institutions. Such multidimensional integration does not necessarily mean that the CGCM as a religious institution will decline.

## Contradictory

Cultures contain contradictions, especially with ideas (doctrines) and symbols. For example, the two-kingdom doctrine holds some contradictions in idea versus practice. Holdeman people hold that they must completely renounce their allegiance to this world, claiming that their citizenship is in heaven. Yet, they receive many material benefits from the government and their own labors in a capitalist market system. Members follow the news and have a general knowledge of current events. On the other hand, they do not act on this information by voting. As another example, the Holdeman standard represents another contradiction. The General Conference minutes 2015 (“Materialism” 2015, 145–46) are clear in stating the Church doctrine: “Jesus taught very clearly about the pursuit of wealth, and the New Testament gives no license for the pursuit of riches.” Yet, the Church acknowledges contradictions in doctrine against members’ lifestyles: “... we are not clearly identifying and dealing with the spirit of pride and its fruits of worldliness in our personal lives, our homes, and congregations” (“Nonconformity” 2015, 144). Even though cultures contain contradictions, those contradictions are not necessarily the undoing of a culture. Every culture contains contradictions; what ideas exist and how institutions manage them helps define change across time.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown how the Holdemans have experienced social and religious changes through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Sewell’s worlds of meaning provided an improved theoretical understanding of culture while Lambert’s framework of types of changes and Dawson’s types of rationalizations provided a method for understanding how Holdemans experience and justify change.

The Holdeman people of the late nineteenth century would hardly recognize their institution and the practicing members of the twenty-first century. The English language in church services, few speaking Plattdeutsch; an extensive missionary program; and the emergence of business entrepreneurs with a raised standard of living represent significant change in the Holdeman way of

life. Although claiming continuity with first century Christianity, the Church deals with constant change. In the Church’s dedication to living a life of simplicity and separation from the world, authorities have found it difficult to formally endorse changes in policy that are evident in the subtle resistance of its members. From what we have seen in this study, the tension between church authority and members rarely results in a formal revision of policies. In lieu of formal policies, the emerging Holdeman culture appears to be one in which ministers and deacons condemn member’s actions for making accommodations to live in the world while also tacitly approving these same accommodations. In this reluctance to embrace change, one might also see a synthesis emerging in which the Holdeman church is developing a unique way of living in the world and managing change. In striving to preserve their traditions and doctrines, decisions will be forthcoming but only after many years of thoughtful discussion and deliberation.

What does all this portend for the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite? The Holdeman people will continue to look to the Scriptures and specifically the New Testament and the letters of the Apostle Paul for guidance on doctrine and daily life. They will continue to be appreciated for their way of life in the rural communities of the Great Plains. They will always blend to some degree into their respective communities, carrying out their work and personal lives in much the same way as their neighbors. However, living in this world while also maintaining separation will always require the Holdeman people to preserve a certain distance from their neighbors, always carrying a sense of identity as a special people, yet always moving toward the surrounding environment but never fully embracing it.

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