



Pastoral Assistance from GLC  
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# A Fourth Stream?: Evangelicalism and the Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage (Three Streams - Part 4)

For questions or concerns about this resource, to discuss this topic in more detail, recommend books, or to share wisdom from your own pastoral context, please contact Bishop Lynn Thrush (lthrush@bicus.org) or Matthew Peterson at: Matthew R. Peterson, *Theologian in Residence (Great Lakes BIC)* mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com (631) 871-8339

## I. EVANGELICALISM - THE FOURTH OF THREE STREAMS?

For decades the Brethren in Christ have told their story as that of a “three streams” theological community. It is common in our denominational literature to speak of our denominational heritage as a synthesis of Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism. Although these traditions emerged from different historical circumstances, they were each gradually incorporated into the BIC ethos due to overlapping commitments to obedient, Spirit-empowered discipleship. Yet our denominational story is not complete if we conclude with the “three streams” concept. In fact, in many of the articles and books that proposed the “three streams” hypothesis, there can also be found the influence of a fourth stream – Evangelicalism.

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*Evangelicalism’s role in the recent history of the BIC U.S. is complex and increasingly the subject of debate.* Some in our faith tradition view the BIC’s embrace of evangelicalism as an important step towards fuller cultural engagement with a rapidly changing world. Others locate in evangelicalism the loss of a distinct denominational identity and the diminishing of key historical values.

Such debates have existed (in my understanding) since the earliest interactions between the Brethren in Christ and evangelicalism around the time of the Second World War. But in the present day these discussions have been shaped by social, theological, and political developments across the broader American evangelical community. *That the Brethren in Christ have been influenced by evangelicalism is a historical fact. Whether this influence is positive, negative, or a mixture of the two, is a matter of debate.* And how our denomination might best navigate current challenges in the wider evangelical community is an area for on-going discernment.

This resource is designed as an introduction to BIC U.S. involvement with evangelicalism, along with various debates concerning evangelicalism. It is my hope that it will prove helpful as we explore ways to **“Reaffirm Our Identity as a Community of Christ-Followers”**<sup>1</sup> in the coming years.

<sup>1</sup> “Reaffirming Our Identity as a Community of Christ-Followers” is one of the aims of the *Project 250* initiative, pursued by the BIC U.S. in advance of our two hundred and fiftieth anniversary in 2028. For more on this project, see: <https://bicus.org/project-250>

## II. HISTORY OF THE BIC & EVANGELICALISM

In the lead up to the Second World War, the “three streams” synthesis of the Brethren in Christ was largely complete. Anabaptism and Pietism, which had both influenced the BIC since before our earliest denominational writings, retained their strong influences through theological commitments to believer’s baptism, non-violence, and simplicity, and a robust belief in the new birth that accompanied conversion. These commitments were reinforced through traditional Brethren in Christ practices, such as the use of plain dress and prayer veils, the holy kiss, and love feasts. To these core streams were added, after much debate, the Wesleyan concepts of holiness and sanctification.<sup>2</sup> While it would be wrong to suggest that the BIC U.S. of the early twentieth century had a single consistent worldview among all its members, it is still possible to point to a series of doctrinal views and cultural practices that could be recognized as distinctly Brethren in Christ for that era. As *Luke L. Keefer Jr.* once put it, *the community identity of the Brethren in Christ during the first half of the twentieth century was Anabaptist in form and Pietist/Wesleyan in spirit.*<sup>3</sup>

The rapid technological and cultural shifts of the twentieth century brought with them significant challenges to the structures on which that distinct Brethren in Christ self-identity rested. Among these shifts were exposure to and fellowship with other Christian traditions, struggles over how to carry out non-violent commitments during the World Wars, and questions about the simple lifestyle in a world increasingly shaped by the daily use of technology. These significant changes brought with them concerns about whether the Brethren in Christ identity would endure for younger generations growing up in this strange, highly interconnected new world.<sup>4</sup>

Modern American evangelicalism, which emerged from several denominational traditions during this same time, appeared as a potential solution that could guide the Brethren in Christ through the twentieth century. Here, in brief, is an outline of our history with evangelicalism:

- **Prior to the 20th Century:** The roots of American Evangelicalism are formed during the religious revivals of the Great Awakenings, the spread of Wesleyan and Holiness theologies, and other factors. The Brethren in Christ adopted some elements of these movements into its existing Anabaptist/Pietist worldview.
- **Early 20th Century:** Significant cultural and technological shifts prompt re-evaluation of key BIC U.S. views and practices. Especially concerning was the loss of BIC youth to other traditions and to the wider society, as well as a decline in acceptance of key values among said youth.
- **1930s-1940s:** Modern American Evangelicalism emerges following splits within the fundamentalist, holiness, and other church movements.
- **1949:** General Conference voted to formally affiliate with the *National Association of Evangelicals*, a movement of various evangelically inclined denominations in North America. In following years, we affiliated with other evangelical groups. The Brethren in Christ are still members of the NAE today.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this historical process, see the earlier entries in the “Three Streams” series of resources.

<sup>3</sup> Luke Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams in Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” *Reflections on a Heritage*, page 44.

<sup>4</sup> Charlie B. Byers, “The Brethren in Christ Church in My Lifetime,” *BIC History & Life vol. 2.1*, pages 24-25.

- **1950s-1960s:** Favorable interactions with other evangelical groups prompt a gradual modification of Brethren in Christ denominational structure and church practices with a focus on evangelical outreach.
- **1970s-Present:** American evangelicalism “goes political” through the rise of the *Moral Majority* voting movement (Jerry Falwell) and alignment with conservative politicians. Questions emerge in the pages of Brethren in Christ History & Life and other denominational settings as to whether this politicized evangelicalism risks damage to traditional Brethren in Christ values.

### III. DEFINING EVANGELICALISM

Defining evangelicalism is itself a challenging task in today’s culture, in large part because of how the term “evangelical” is used in media. For some, the term evangelicalism is synonymous with a form of fundamentalist Christianity centered around a particular literalistic, inerrantist reading of the Scriptures. For others, it is effectively a political demographic comprised of individuals who identify as Christian and whose voting patterns are largely shaped by abortion and gay marriage. In theological circles, it has been common to trace evangelicalism through shared beliefs about the Christian life. Drawing on the work of historian *David Bebbington*, the National Association of Evangelicals defines evangelicalism as a Christian movement centered around the values of *Conversionism, Biblicism, Activism, and Crucicentrism*.<sup>5</sup>

- **Conversionism:** the belief that lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a life long process of following Jesus.
- **Biblicism:** a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority.
- **Activism:** the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts.
- **Crucicentrism:** a stress on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as making redemption possible.

At least in this summary fashion, the Brethren in Christ can both historically and in the present time be described as “evangelical”. Our Anabaptist heritage gifted us with a healthy Biblicism and our Pietism ensured that Conversionism has been a long-held view. From our Wesleyan influences we inherited our Activism. And our overarching theology has been grounded in Crucicentrism from the beginning. Both our current *Articles of Faith & Doctrine* and our congregational practices also fall within this bird’s eye view of evangelicalism.

Nevertheless, an enduring question among the Brethren in Christ has been whether the evangelical self-identification along theological lines is appropriate given how the term is understood in the wider society. In other words, is the term “evangelical” a helpful descriptor for the Brethren in Christ to someone whose mental image of an evangelical is determined by the culture wars and political rallies?

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<sup>5</sup> “What is an Evangelical?” *National Association of Evangelicals*. Available at <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>

#### IV. EVANGELICALISM'S COMPLEX IMPACT

In some ways Brethren in Christ engagement with evangelicalism hastened shifts in denominational culture that were already in process at the start of the twentieth century. Traditional values such as non-retaliation and simplicity, as well as traditional practices for attire and church service structure (amongst other areas) had already faced headwinds from world events, technological developments, and rapid changes in the surrounding culture. Positive interactions with other evangelical churches who did not hold many historical Brethren in Christ values prompted additional reflection on the role of those values in the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Among the significant developments of the Brethren in Christ's evangelical period were the formalizing of a professional pastorate, the centralization of denominational structure into regional conferences, permission of musical instruments in worship, shifts in church architecture to accommodate additional programming, the acceptance of believer's baptisms conducted outside of the Brethren in Christ, and modifications to dress code requirements.<sup>7</sup> The latter half of the twentieth century also saw the Brethren in Christ affirm women in ministry leadership, begin debates over the traditional limited posture of non-resistance in the wake of the Civil Rights movement, and aim to articulate its doctrine in new ways in the restatement of the *Articles of Faith & Doctrine*, positions statements on current issues, and the Core Values. Although such developments cannot be wholly attributed to the influence of evangelicalism, Brethren in Christ openness to newer forms of cultural engagement associated with it certainly played a role.

But along with these changes came dilemmas, prompted in large part by the politicization of evangelicalism in America starting with the Moral Majority movement of the 1970s-1980s. Brethren in Christ Bishop *Perry Engle* summarized the dilemma as follows: *"We didn't know that the promising breezes of this movement would eventually merge with the gales of nationalism, tribalism, militarism, and political partisanship. We couldn't foresee—or maybe we refused to see—that the evangelical movement would eventually push hard against some of our most heartfelt convictions like belonging to the community of faith, pursuing peace, living simply, and following Jesus."*<sup>8</sup>

The major adjustments to our church life and challenges to our denominational identity brought about by our involvement in evangelicalism have produced some complex responses from within the BIC family. Luke Keefer, writing on the "three stream" heritage of the BIC, held the view that **American evangelicalism had "substantially blunted our Wesleyan voice on sanctification" and "muted much of our Anabaptist heritage"** because of its influence from Calvinism.<sup>9</sup> He also located in evangelicalism a shift in our church planting and evangelism efforts away from the poor and marginalized towards middle class suburbia.<sup>10</sup>

Keefer's work has been quite influential to this on-going discussion, with many contemporary and more recent articles calling for a re-emphasis of the "three streams" traditions over the emerging evangelical identity.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience*, pages 476-479.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this, see Wittlinger, 475-544 and Henry A. Ginder, "Decades of Transition," *BIC History & Life vol 2.1*, pages 31-33.

<sup>8</sup> Perry Engle, "Charting a Course to Rediscover the 'Evangel' at the Heart of Evangelicalism," *BIC History & Life vol 42.1*, page 118.

<sup>9</sup> Keefer, "Three Streams," pages 42-43.

<sup>10</sup> Keefer, "Three Streams," page 53.

<sup>11</sup> For a list of additional reflections similar to Keefer's, see the Bibliography at the end of this document.

Although a consensus has not fully been arrived at, it appears that the refocusing on the traditional streams without undoing the cultural engagement we have gleaned from our evangelical peers is one way forward. As an early article on this debate once put it, we have a need *“to identify rather clearly the content of our message, and at the same time to remain evangelical in the fervor with which we carry this message to the world.”*<sup>12</sup>

## **V. THE ROAD FORWARD**

A post on the BIC U.S. website in advance of the 2024 General Assembly meeting summarized evangelicalism’s impact on our denomination as follows: *“The evangelical movement of the mid-twentieth century shifted the BIC’s focus from what separated us from culture – such as dress and lifestyle – to how we could better engage culture with the transformative message of Jesus.”*<sup>13</sup>

These words speak to the complexity of evangelicalism’s influence on our denomination. On the one hand, it is fair to suggest that many present-day members, including a fair number of pastors and denominational leaders, would not be a part of the Brethren in Christ were it not for the denomination’s embrace of evangelicalism. The decision to adopt an ecumenical posture towards other evangelical groups, and to accommodate church practices to the wider culture has brought with it the opportunity for many to join our denominational family who might not have otherwise done so.

On the other hand, this same accommodation towards the surrounding American evangelical culture may have muted some of our long-held beliefs and practices to the detriment of our views on discipleship. Our historical peace witness is on the decline in some portions of the family, and some traditional practices are now more commonly encountered in journal articles and books instead of the lived experience of the church.

As American evangelicalism faces a reckoning of its own identity, it is worth asking ourselves what it means for the Brethren in Christ to be evangelical. This task will involve both a revisiting of the historical Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan streams of our faith and reviewing both the positive and negative influences of Evangelicalism as a fourth stream. While we engage in this important work of reflection, we might conclude that our denominational story is that of a four streams tradition, one that is Evangelical in its outreach, Anabaptist in its ethics, Pietist in its worship, and Wesleyan in its soul.

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth B. Hoover, “The Brethren in Christ: One Body?,” *BIC History & Life* vol 2.1, page 39.

<sup>13</sup> “Walter Kim to be Keynote Speaker at General Assembly 2024” *BIC U.S.* Available at: <https://bicus.org/2024/03/walter-kim-keynote-general-assembly-2024/>

## VI. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### General Summaries & History

- Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (pages 475-544 especially)

### Evangelicalism & the Brethren in Christ; Brethren in Christ Heritage

- Charlie B. Byers, “The Brethren in Christ Church in My Lifetime” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 2.1 (June 1979): 21-27.
- Bruxy Cavey, “Evangelicalism and the Brethren in Christ: Opportunity for Revitalization or Trojan Horse?” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 42.2 (August 2019): pages 171-181.
- Scott Elkins, “Sipping from the Fire Hydrant of Evangelicalism: A Response to Luke L. Keefer Jr.” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 35.2 (August 2012): pages 375-383.
- Perry Engle, “Charting a Course to Rediscover the ‘Evangel’ at the Heart of Evangelicalism” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 42.1 (April 2019): pages 113-124.
- Henry A. Ginder, “Decades of Transition” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 2.1 (June 1979): 28-36.
- Paul Henry, “Reflections on Evangelical Christianity and Political Action” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 12.3 (December 1989): pages 266-281.
- Kenneth B. Hoover, “The Brethren in Christ: One Body?” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 2.1 (June 1979): 37-41.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams in our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” pages 31-60 in *Reflections on a Heritage* (E. Morris Sider, editor).
- Arlene B. Miller, “The Brethren in Christ and Evangelical Culture” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 21.1 (April 1998): pages 189-201.
- Don Shafer, “Response to ‘Evangelical Culture’ and ‘Culture and the Church,’” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 21.1 (April 1998): pages 216-223.
- Ron Sider, “History Shows Us Why Being Evangelical Matters” *Christianity Today* (November 21, 2016). Available at: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november-web-only/history-shows-us-why-being-evangelical-matters.html>
- Elizabeth Claassen Thrush, “Fellow Pilgrims: A Response to Luke L. Keefer, Jr.” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 35.2 (August 2012): pages 368-374.

## MINISTRY DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Ministry Training opportunities are periodically made available through the Brethren in Christ U.S. to equip BIC ministers for effective ministry in their mission fields. Below is a list of upcoming opportunities through the BIC U.S. that may meet some of your credentialing requirements. For more information on these opportunities please visit <https://bicus.org/training>

### Core Courses

- ***Leadership & Structure***

October 17-20, 2024 Zoom (*Spanish*)

- ***Theology of Salvation***

August 12-14, 2024 Mechanicsburg BIC  
(Mechanicsburg, PA)

For more information please visit: <https://bicus.org/training/core-courses>

### Directed Study Programs

Fall 2024 Directed Study Program courses will run August 26 - November 29, 2024 with the following courses to be offered:

- ***B103r (Biblical Interpretation)***
- ***B202r (Synoptic Gospels)***
- ***M100r (A Study of Brethren in Christ Core Values)***
- ***M102r (Evangelism)***
- ***M106r (The World Christian Movement)***
- ***M202r (Pastoral Care & Counseling)***
- ***T101r (Basic Christian Doctrines)***
- ***B203 (Paul and His Letters)***
- ***H302 (Life and Thought of John Wesley)***
- ***M105 (Discerning God's Call, My Identity)***
- ***T102 (Life in the Holy Spirit)***

(Courses with the letter "r" at the end of their course number are required DSP courses)

The Spring 2025 Directed Study Program term will run January 13 - April 11, 2025 with the following courses to be offered:

- ***B101r (Bible Survey)***
- ***B103r (Biblical Interpretation)***
- ***B201r (Pentateuch)***
- ***H101r (History of Christianity)***
- ***M100r (A Study of Brethren in Christ Core Values)***
- ***M103r (Intentional Discipleship)***
- ***M106r (The World Christian Movement)***
- ***M202r (Pastoral Care & Counseling)***
- ***T101r (Basic Christian Doctrines)***
- ***M105 (Discerning God's Call, My Identity)***
- ***M306 (Spiritual Formation)***

(Courses with the letter "r" at the end of their course number are required DSP courses)

Registration is *now open*. For more information please visit: <https://bicus.org/training/directed-study-program>