

The Spiritual Heritage of James T. Bartsch

God has blessed me with a rich spiritual heritage, one largely of Mennonite origins. My most distant Bartsch ancestor, so I believe, was Johann Bartsch (1757?-1820?), who belonged to the Free Mennonite Church in Danzig-Neugarten, West Prussia. He and Jacob Hoepfner traveled in 1787 to seek terms of settlement in Russia from Empress Katherine the Great. Presumably the agreement would have included the Mennonites' industrious farming of the Russian area, providing much needed wheat, in exchange for an exemption from service in the Russian military for the men of the new colony. Johann Bartsch settled in Rosenthal / Chortitza in the year 1790. Of his presumed son, Johannes Bartsch, Sr (1812-1857), nothing is known.

To Johannes, Sr. was born Johannes Bartsch, Jr. (1848-1905), my great-grandfather, who had a colorful history. Born in Heiligenbeil, West Prussia, he was apparently an unbeliever in his early years, and, being musical, sang in the opera. At some point in his life he was converted to Christ. Eventually he traveled to Russia to be with his mother, and became a colporteur for the British and Foreign Bible Society, for which he worked there with good success. In the late 1870's or early 1880's he came under the spell of Claas Epp, who persuaded 400 German speaking Mennonite families to travel from what is now Ukraine into Central Asia, there, as the "Bride Community," to await the coming of Christ. Johannes accompanied Epp, as did his brother Franz Bartsch, also J. K. Penner, my father's maternal grandfather, as did likewise Jacob "Elder" Toews, my mother's paternal great-grandfather.

One by one these Godly men came to see that Claas Epp was a fraud, a false teacher, and they sadly parted ways. My great grandfather Bartsch, Johannes, Jr., resumed his selling of Bibles from Tashkent, Turkestan, according to my parents, on camel back. "Because of his earlier work with the Kirghiz while but a teenager, he was invited by the English Bible Society to start a Bible center in Tashkent. The main objective of this body was to put the Holy Scriptures of Christianity into all the languages of the Turkestan area and actively seek to win the natives to the Christian religion. Bartsch gained the permission of the government to evangelize among all the native peoples. Franz Bartsch, his younger brother, was hired to sell books and Bibles to the natives and discuss the meaning of Scripture with them. Becoming quite involved in teaching the natives, he gained for himself a profound understanding of many aspects of theology."¹ Eventually Johannes and his wife Anna emigrated to Newton Kansas, along with his three surviving children, including my grandfather, Paul W. Bartsch.

Paul William Bartsch, Sr. (1891-1967) established his home in Newton, having married Gertrude Penner (1891-1930), daughter of Bible teacher / musician J. K. Penner. Gertrude acquired her father's love for music, and could play the piano beautifully, by ear. This same trait she handed down to my brother John, her grandson, himself an excellent organist and pianist who can play by ear. This same musical trait bypassed me, but it reached my son Jeff, who also can play piano extremely well by ear. While not as gifted a musician, my father, John Bartsch, Sr. (1923-2000), played piano in the Newton High School Band and sang in choirs and quartets throughout his life. John, my father, was born in Newton, Kansas, and lived there for many years. Though I'm convinced his father, my grandfather, Paul Bartsch, Sr., was a believer in Christ, he seemed not to communicate that faith sufficiently to his children. My own father,

therefore, while growing up and attending high school as a likeable, well-mannered, and friendly young man, yet was apparently not a believer in Christ, even though he attended the First Mennonite Church in Newton.

J. K. Penner (1850-1924), my father's mother's father, was also a godly man. Johannes K. Penner was born in 1850 in Elbing, West Prussia. He thoroughly enjoyed the study of theology and was also a musician in his own right. As time went on, he advanced in his studies to the point where he was chosen to be school teacher of the Mennonite children and youth, a task that not only required him to be their educator, but their spiritual mentor as well. With his studious nature and heart for God, he came to exercise a great deal of influence as a teacher in the church, while at the same time leading the church choir and the church itself in congregational singing. Unfortunately Johannes, or J. K., as he was better known, came also under the spell of the false teacher, Claas Epp. He early on questioned Epp's theology, but apparently possessing a loyal quality, was slower to dismiss himself from Epp's clutches than were Johannes and Franz Bartsch. J. K. Penner also emigrated to the United States, settling in Beatrice, Nebraska with his wife Helene and their fourteen children, including Gertrude, my father's mother.

Jacob "Elder" Toews (1838-1922), my mother's grandfather, was also a man of unique spiritual character. "He was born at Wotzlaf, West Prussia, June 26, 1838. He attended school at Weisshof and was baptized in 1854. In 1858 he visited his relatives in Russia. On March 15, 1860, he married [Maria Wiebe] and in 1864 he was ordained minister by Johann Wiebe. In 1869 he migrated to Russia and took part in the establishment of the Trakt Mennonite settlement (q.v.) in Saratov. In 1880 he joined the group which moved to Central Asia (q.v.) to escape government service and to be prepared to meet the Lord. On Oct. 10, 1884, they arrived in Newton, Kansas. In 1886 he was elected elder of the First Mennonite Church and installed by Leonhard Sudermann, which office he held for 31 years. In 1916 he resigned and moved to Aberdeen, Idaho, where he died Jan. 2, 1923."²

Johannes "John" Toews (1865-1934), son of Jacob "Elder" Toews, also lived in Aberdeen, Idaho, and pastored the Homestead Church there. As was so often the case in those days, he also was the school teacher for the children. My mother, Florence Bartsch, his granddaughter, remembers being taught by her pastor-grandfather. He would permit them to speak no English. Nevertheless, his love for the Lord he transmitted to his son, Herman J. Toews (1892-1924), my grandfather, who married Suzie Neuman, my grandmother. Herman and Suzie had only 6½ brief years together in their marriage. He died when my mother, Florence, was less than a year old.

Grandma Suzie Toews (1900-1991) was a dear Christian. She and her daughter Florence moved to Newton, Kansas to join two other daughters, Elda and Dorothy. Later on, Grandma Suzie would become my Sunday School teacher in the early days of Newton Bible Church, the church in which I grew up.

My mother Florence Toews (1923-), newly arrived in Newton, Kansas, met my father, John Bartsch, Sr., while they both attended the youth group of the First Mennonite Church in

Newton. My mother was a devout believer in Jesus as her Savior, but sensed a certain shallowness spiritually in John. They worked together as leaders of the youth group. She made it her goal to lead him to genuine faith in Christ. He became romantically interested in her, calling for numerous committee meetings. Finally he saw the light and placed his trust in Jesus Christ as his Savior in a personal way. Considering her job complete, Florence broke off relations with John. Understandably crushed, he nevertheless pursued Florence, and she eventually responded. They were married in Newton, Kansas on Oct. 15, 1943, during World War II. My father served in England during the war years, and eventually returned to Newton, where he and Florence made their home, now with two children, my older brother John, Jr. and me.

By the time I, James T. Bartsch, came into the world in 1947, I had two parents who were thoroughly committed to Christ. When I was a child of four, my mother hosted a Child Evangelism Bible Club for elementary children in our home on 613 SE Second St. in Newton. Another woman taught the lesson discussing the joys of heaven and the terrors of hell. I was deeply stirred, knowing I certainly did not want to spend an eternity in hell! When she gave an invitation for all those who wanted to make sure they were going to heaven, I raised my hand. She evidently referred her pre-school counselee to his mother, who took me aside into the master bedroom and explained God's plan of salvation. I do not remember her words, but I imagine she would have pointed out to me my own sinfulness, the death of Jesus Christ for my sin, and my need to ask Jesus into my heart. Whatever the theological perception of a four-year-old might be, I date my salvation to that event.

My own father and mother set a tremendous example for me in my Christian life. My dad was always doing something to serve God in his local church and in the Church-at-large. Dad was church treasurer, deacon, choir member, quartet member, piano player, and Sunday School teacher for many years. He helped organize the annual Newton Bible Conference for many years and was active in Youth for Christ as a young adult. In later years he served on the board of directors of Berean Academy in Elbing, Kansas, and on the board of directors of Grace University for 25 years. An accountant all his life, he spent the last ten years before his retirement serving as accountant for Back to the Bible Broadcast in Lincoln, Nebraska. I have memories of my father coming home from work and reading his Bible in his easy chair before falling asleep just before supper.

I remember my mother and her well-marked Bible. As a high school student I would sometimes get up early in the morning to complete homework. I would sometimes find my mother kneeling in prayer and Bible study before the start of a busy day with six children. These indelible memories have a way of impacting a son over the years.

As I grew older, during my childhood, obviously the content of my faith matured. A couple of times my faith struggled. I can remember feeling uncertain about my salvation during my childhood. I reaffirmed my faith in Christ. As a high school student attending Berean Academy in Elbing, Kansas, I struggled once with the existence of God – I couldn't prove it. Our Superintendent, Dr. Richard Hughes, assured me that, just as in geometry one makes certain

assumptions without being able to prove them (a straight line is the shortest distance between two points), so in theology, we can begin with the starting assumption, “The God Who Has Revealed Himself in the Scriptures.” Starting from that vantage point, all of existence makes sense. Providentially, this was just what I needed, and my perplexity vanished. The last time I struggled with an assurance of my salvation from sin was when I was a freshman attending Grace Bible Institute (now Grace University) in Omaha, Nebraska. There one Saturday in the library I bowed my head and reaffirmed my faith in Jesus, who died and rose that I might have eternal life (Rom. 3:23; 6:23; John 1:11-12; 3:16-18; 5:24; 11:25-27; Rom. 5:8; 8:1; 1 John 5:11-13).

Early in my Christian life I was challenged to dedicate my all to serving Jesus. As a child of eleven or twelve, I did so. I have renewed that commitment on many an occasion. Although I realize that I am a sinner saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9), I was placed on this earth as a redeemed sinner to serve the King (Eph. 2:10; Col. 3:17; 1 Cor. 10:31). I have married a wife, Esther Louise, herself a pastor’s daughter, whose desire it is to serve Jesus. We have endeavored to lead each of our children, Brian, David, Jeffrey, and Erica to a faith in Jesus Christ. By God’s grace they have each trusted in Jesus and have made their faith in Christ their own. Brian has married a Christian wife, Christa, and Dave has also, Jenifer. It is our continual prayer that our children and our grandchildren will serve Jesus with all their hearts and make a solid contribution for the coming kingdom of Christ.

In some ways, my service for Jesus has mirrored that of my ancestors, teaching God’s Word in different places on the globe. I have pastored in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. I have served as a Youth Pastor in Australia. I have taught the Bible everywhere I have lived. I have taught the Bible to Bible College students in Adelaide, South Australia and near Sydney, New South Wales, in Kharkov, Ukraine, and near Mukachavo, Ukraine. I have taught public school teachers a course in Christian Ethics and Morality with the International School Project in Vinnitsa and Zhitomir, Ukraine. I taught Bible classes to Junior and Senior High School students in Huron, South Dakota. I praise God for the opportunities He has given me to serve Him.

At this stage in my life I see Jesus as my King as well as my Savior. I am presently pursuing an exhaustive study of Christ’s coming kingdom in the Bible. As Jesus’ parable in Luke 19:11-27 reveals, how we live our lives as Christians in the present age determines our degree of usefulness and service during Christ’s coming Kingdom. I am taking great pains to be as faithful for Jesus as I can in this life, in accordance with the gifts and talents He has given me, so that I might serve Him in an exponentially greater capacity during His kingdom.

Endnotes

1. Richard Belk, *The Great Trek of Russian Mennonites*, p. 146. Copyright 1976 by Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania 15683 and Kitchener, Ont. N2G4M5. Book now apparently out of print. Present writer has a photocopy.
2. *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, pp. 735-736.

