

J. ALLEN MILLER, 1866-1935

by Richard E. Allison

The spirit and genius of the Brethren, says Dr. J. Allen Miller, are to be found in the life of the community. To appreciate it one must enter it. The reference is not to narrow idiosyncrasies but those "magnificent traits of Christian conduct, the unfaltering devotion to convictions, the honesty and integrity of character and loyalty to the church and the Word of God."¹ This quiet and peaceful lifestyle flowed on as a deep stream of spiritual righteousness. The fraternal fellowship was simple and sincere. These are the traits that improve with the years. This calls for a heroic, self-sacrificing spirit able to live in distinction from the culture with the goal being Christ-like character.



J. Allen Miller

Thus it is that this man more than any other epitomized historic Brethren ideals in the years following the 1883 division.² He illustrated the tension Brethren have experienced between Spirit and Word, the internal and external, faith and obedience, personal faith and corporate responsibility, the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history.

As Dr. Miller began his term as president of Ashland College, he began by parting the weeds on the campus and kneeling in prayer. He wanted for himself and his students an intelligent and reasonable faith. His Lord was Christ and his book was the Bible and his faith was that of the Brethren.³ The first third of the century has been dominated by his Christocentric faith, scholarship and devotion.

His origins are simple. Born near Rossville, Indiana on August 20, 1866 to a teacher father and a "PK" mother. He followed in the footsteps of his father and began teaching school at seventeen. At eighteen he united with the Brethren Church at Edna Mills, Indiana. Within a few months following baptism he was called to ministry and began preaching.

In 1887 he entered Ashland College graduating four years later with an A.B. degree. While at Ashland he pastored the Glenford, Ohio Brethren Church (1890-92). Following graduation he moved to Elkhart, Indiana where he served the Brethren Church (1891-1894) and attended Hillsdale College. In 1894 he began forty-one years of ministry at Ashland College and Seminary. The church

had prevailed upon him to leave his pastorate and fill the term of the ailing president, S.S. Garst. This he did but resigned two years later to pursue additional studies at Hiram College earning the B.D. degree in 1898. While at Hiram, J. Allen Miller wrote a series of articles on "Divine Self-Revelation" that were published in the *Brethren Evangelist* as a series of six articles (1896).

In the fall of 1898, Dr. Miller opened Ashland College in what is reckoned as the beginning of the modern history of the school. It has been in continuous operation since that time. His philosophy of life was that "this is God's world and he had a plan for it and he will not permit it to fail. It is a plan in which good is intended for his people, and he will bring it to pass."⁴

This philosophy expressed the confidence and assurance of the man. He had an unquenchable optimism that would neither turn back nor retreat when he had set out on a path. Energetic, industrious, loyal, with resoluteness he forged ahead. When he resigned as president in 1906, the college was debt free, possessing an adequate endowment and with an enrollment that had greatly increased.

He was appointed dean of the theological department of Ashland College at this time. His duties included outlining courses, arranging for the teaching staff and director of student Christian work.⁵ In addition he served as Vice President of the College.

As a student, Dr. Miller had characteristics that students today would do well to emulate. He was thorough, painstaking, and efficient in his day-to-day work. He was nearly always a shade superior intellectually to his colleagues upon their own admission. He had a passion for accuracy, for correctness and detail. This laid the foundation for the solid and enduring scholarship which won him the respect of the Brethren.

Dr. Miller was a dominant figure in the denomination throughout his lifetime.⁶ He served with distinction from 1895 on the Committee of Ten on church polity (1895), the Committee of Three on General Conference rules (1901), the Committee of Twenty-five on church polity (1912) and the Committee of Twenty-five which formulated the "Message of the Brethren Ministry" (1920). He authored the preamble to the above work. In addition he served two terms as moderator of the General Conference (1907 and 1924) and on several occasions served as moderator of the Ohio District Conference.

The quality that suited him for this work was that when "... profound and controversial issues had reached a dead-lock, he was first to reach a certain unhesitating assurance of conviction which seldom failed to carry conviction and endorsement."⁷

Dr. Miller served as president of the Foreign Missionary society

from its inception (1903) until the time of his death. In addition he was elected as the first president of the board of directors of the Brethren's Home and served until his death. In addition he was elected to several terms on the Publication Board.

He was an active, constructive member of the Ashland community serving on the Civil Service Commission of the city and the committee that established the commission form of government. He was a member of Rotary and served as its president. He was widely known and respected in the community.

His students remember Dr. Miller as a man carrying an armload of books to class. He lectured from the text of numerous books rather than from copious notes.⁸ His home was filled with beloved volumes with which he had an intimate acquaintance. He knew his books and where to find anything he wanted. He knew the page to which to turn and where on the page the statement was to be found. He displayed exceptional ability in Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic. "His technical skill in Biblical languages and his unqualified commitment to the authority of God's revelation through Christ in the Word made Miller a highly respected exegete."⁹

His breadth and openness as a scholar is evident in the following:

We must hold a faith that is reasonable, intelligent and compelling. We ought never as ministers and teachers of the Word of God have to beg the question when asked for the grounds upon which our faith rests by replying evasively or charging our questioners with unbelief. . . . I plead for an informed and intelligent ministry. I covet a ministry for the Brethren church that knows the grounds upon which faith can be rested, —grounds that can not be shaken by any discovery of history, science or philosophy.¹⁰

As a preacher, he was an expositor rather than topical. His knowledge of scripture made this approach natural. He not only knew the Book better than most, but he also had a personal acquaintance with the land of the book having visited the Holy Land in 1926. In addition he knew people, their characteristics, and loved them. Physically he was rather frail but he excelled spiritually and intellectually.

He was a person who held positive convictions. At the same time he was not at all contentious in defending them. As Martin Shively has written:

In fact he was not at all inclined to argue in defense of any position, but it would have been something of an undertaking to have tried to change his opinions. He seems to have gone thoroughly into any question which came to him for solution, and when a conclusion was reached, that end had been achieved as a result of careful study and thought, and while he was always open minded, and inclined to yield to the inevitable, his convictions were rarely affected. He was distinctly a man of peace, not only for his own

sake, but especially for the sake of the church which he loved with devotion which was absolute. That beatitude which says, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God,' entitled him to such a distinction; for he not only loved peace, but made every possible effort to preserve it in every relation with which he was connected.¹¹

Dr. Miller exemplifies more than any other what it means to be Brethren. Many gain renown for intellectual abilities. Few attain a life of saintliness. Others excell in service. Dr. Miller excelled in all the above. There is a moral beauty to his Christian character. There is a profound depth to his Christian scholarship and there is a childlike simplicity to his faith.¹²

The thought life of Dr. Miller is to be discerned from the book *Christian Doctrine*, a work published posthumously by his students from his lecture notes; a short work prepared as Sunday school lesson outlines entitled *Doctrinal Statements* (1922); several pamphlets such as "A Brief Sketch of The Brethren" and over one hundred articles that appeared in the *Brethren Evangelist*. "Even though each of these treatments derives from a different decade of his life, his seminal thoughts remain quite consistent."¹³

Miller's thought is thoroughly christocentric. The eternal purposes of God are centered in Jesus Christ. It is Christ that has perfectly manifested the will of the Father. It is Christ who effected man's redemption by his atoning death. It is Christ who assists man to first see his infinite possibilities.

Scripture is the sole and sufficient authority illustrated in the following:

Jesus Christ came into our world as God's Son, incarnate in perfect man;

Jesus Christ spoke for God to men; he revealed the will of God to Men;

Jesus Christ commanded men to hear his message, believe it and obey it.

This Message which he revealed personally and through chosen men is the New Testament; as such record it is God's Revelation given through Inspiration.¹⁴

The scriptures are not to be worshipped, but the Christ of the scriptures. The scriptures point to him. The scriptures are a "perfect revelation", "a complete revelation" and "a final revelation". The Word is divinely inspired and helps us to know the will of God. The New Testament is to be viewed as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, therefore, biblical revelation is to be viewed progressively.

Dr. Miller believed in the inspiration of scripture. This is due to the God-inbreathed influence enabling chosen persons to communicate the revelation of God.¹⁵ He held that scripture exhibits both divine and human aspects. At points one finds the very words which God directed and at other points, the words are those of the writer.

Thus Miller steered a course between the fundamentalist and liberal controversies of his day.

Miller's approach to interpretation is seen in the following principles:

1. Every passage has but one true meaning.
2. There is, therefore, a unity of Biblical truth.
3. The meaning of each passage is capable of being investigated.¹⁶

Miller continues by giving a series of rules for interpreting the scriptures. He relied upon light from historical and literary criticism. He insisted that the interpretation be contextual.

Miller harbors none of the antipathy toward reason found among the early Brethren. Rather he is far more typical of his age in mirroring a fairly optimistic view of the powers of reason. He declared:

... the New Testament is and must remain our ultimate source of information and the final word of authority. One must of necessity hold some philosophic world-view. But there must be consistency in one's thinking and one's conclusions ought not contradict this philosophy and dare not be contrary to the Teachings of Christ and the New Testament Revelation.¹⁷

Miller's theological approach is biblical rather than systematic. This is characteristic of Brethren. Corroborating scriptures are important. Controversial topics are avoided. Technical theological terms are rare. He cites few scholars and does not interact with other theological positions. His thrust is to search the scriptures to discern the will of God. Sin is accepted as a fact. Its origin is not explored. This leads to the discussion of redemption provided by God in Christ. Miller rejects the idea that newly born children are guilty sinners before God. Guilt is not inherited or transmitted. A tendency to sin is what is inherited. We begin with a predisposition to sin.¹⁸ Quickly Miller closes the door on any possibility of self redemption. Redemption is provided by God and there is no redemption except in Christ.

Miller does not become embroiled in a theory of the atonement. Rather, he is content to review the biblical materials. He wrote:

In the voluntary offering of Jesus Christ as a ransom for the sins of the many we have an everlasting redemption brought in, and upon which offering as a ransom redemption is effected. Further we may add that faith upon man's part brings him into a relation of gracious acceptance with God and adoption into sonship.¹⁹

The conditions of salvation recognized by Miller coincide with those of the early Brethren namely enlightenment, faith, repentance, obedience.²⁰ Obedience implies confession, baptism and confirmation. These several acts are what is meant by conversion. He sees salvation as a process encompassing "deliverance from the

present evil world and its sin and the enjoyment of all the blessings of children of God.”²¹ Salvation is a process whose goal is the ideal exemplified by Christ. Regeneration follows and has both a divine and a human side.

The church for Miller is the gathering of faithful ones which was the clear intention of Jesus very early in his ministry. Thus the church is not a mixed multitude, but a body of believers in Christ who have been called out of the world, have been born again of the Holy Spirit, and are therefore alive in Christ, and who, under the authority of Christ, are accomplishing the will of God on earth and among men.²² This precludes Christians living apart from the church.

The strong, highly developed ecclesiology overshadows the space given to the ordinances of baptism by trine immersion and communion. Baptism is important as already noted in the order of salvation. The trine mode is determined by conflating the teachings of scripture, the practice of the Apostolic age, the meaning of the Greek word for baptism and supported by the opinions of leading scholars. The order for the threefold communion service is pedalavium, agape and eucharist.

The pedalavium is supported by John 13 and is a fitting symbol of service. The agape symbolizes brotherhood, fellowship and looks forward to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The eucharist is a symbolic remembrance of Jesus. Other ordinances include the laying on of hands, anointing for healing and the kiss of peace.

In a sermon on “The Quest of a Warless World”,²³ Dr. Miller says:

WE ARE CONSCIENTIOUS NON-RESISTANTS. This is the Historic position of the Church. We insist that MORAL and SPIRITUAL Issues can not be arbitrated by FORCE. War is basically a moral issue. An appeal to ARMS is an appeal to brute force. Force can never make a wrong and an injustice, right and just, whether as between man and man or Nation and Nation. We refuse to be partners to the settlement of a moral issue on the basis that might makes right. And we are conscientious in this matter. **WE ARE CHRISTIAN.** We take the Bible seriously as the very Word of God; therefore we observe to the letter many of its teachings which are commonly disregarded. . . . We hold literally to the teachings of Jesus. . . . For the same reason we are Non-resistants. It is our inmost conviction of reasoned thought and an overwhelming sense of divine compulsion that impels us to take our stand against WAR as un-Christian and therefore sinful.

Miller’s eschatology is determined by his emphasis on the didactic and narrative passages of the New Testament rather than the apocalyptic passages.²⁴ He holds that the separation of the wicked from the saints occurs at death. Christians receive a resurrection

body at death. The ultimate destiny of the wicked is a mystery which he is unable to resolve.

Interestingly, Miller questions the idea of a secret rapture and a great tribulation to follow. He taught:

Then there is the teaching concerning the great tribulation. We are told by some that the coming of the Lord divides itself into the unseen presence of the Lord in the air, and that the living saints and the dead saints will meet him up there all unknown to the rest of the world here; then, the Church being taken out, there will be a great tribulation. I can't find it in the Scriptures. I shall be glad to have anyone find it for me. Let me tell you what it is. It means the personal presence. In every passage I have found, every passage in the New Testament, the Parousia or presence everywhere and always means the personal presence; or one man in the presence of others. . . . As for the great tribulation as mentioned in the apocalyptic writings, this one tribulation, I think a fair exegesis will show, refers to the overthrow of Jerusalem and the persecution of the Jews.²⁵

Miller views the kingdom as the greatest theme of the New Testament. Everything there looks forward to its realization.²⁶ Christ's personal return will precipitate the final crisis which will usher in the age to come.

Dr. Miller died March 27, 1935 at Ashland, Ohio. He stands as the epitomy of what it means to be Brethren. Steeped in the Word as interpreted through the life of Christ, he sought light wherever he could find it. He held convictions firmly, but did not press them upon others. He stood with Protestantism where he could, and went beyond at other points, stressing commitment to the Gospel and calling for this to emerge through the body, which is the agency through which God is working out his plan in the present age. The kingdom is the goal.

FOOTNOTES

¹George W. Rensch, "In Memorium: As A Church Leader," *The Brethren Evangelist*, LVII, No. 17 (April 27, 1935), pp. 5-6.

²Dale R. Stoffer, "The Background and Development of Thought and Practice in The German Baptist Brethren and The Brethren Churches" (Ph. D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1980), p. 620.

³Clara Worst Miller and E. Glenn Mason, *A Short History of Ashland College to 1953* (Ashland, Ohio: Brethren Publishing Company, 1953).

⁴Martin Shively, "Some Brethren Church Leaders of Yesterday As I Knew Them: J. Allen Miller, H.M., D.D.," *The Brethren Evangelist*, LVII, No. 32 (August 17, 1935), p. 6.

⁵Miller and Mason, p. 51.

⁶Stoffer, p. 622.

⁷William D. Furry, "Introductory Note of Appreciation" in J. Allen Miller's *Christian Doctrine: Lectures and Sermons* (Ashland, Ohio: Brethren Publishing Company, 1946), p. xiv.

⁸From a class lecture by Delbert B. Flora, April 1982.

⁹Stoffer, p. 623.

¹⁰J. Allen Miller, "The Sure Foundation," *Brethren Evangelist*, L (December 29, 1928), p. 3.

¹¹Shively, p. 7.

¹²A. J. McClain, "The Faith of Doctor Miller," *Ashland College Bulletin*, VIII, No. 7 (May, 1935).

¹³Stoffer, p. 625.

¹⁴Miller, "Sure Foundation," p. 3.

¹⁵Miller, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 118.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 280.

¹⁸J. Allen Miller, "Sin And Human Need IV," *Brethren Evangelist*, XXXII, No. 32 (July 7, 1910), p. 7.

¹⁹Miller, *Christian Doctrine*, pp. 42-43.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 51-52.

²¹Ibid., p. 67.

²²Ibid., p. 249.

²³Ibid., pp. 334-35.

²⁴Stoffer, p. 672.

²⁵Miller, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 226.

²⁶Ibid., p. 228.