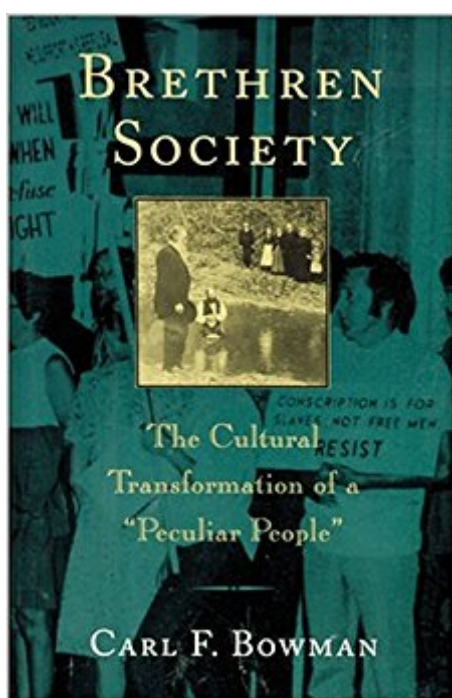


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# Brethren Society: The Cultural Transformation Of A "Peculiar People" (Center Books In Anabaptist Studies)



## Synopsis

In the first book ever written on the subject, Carl Bowman examines how and why members of the Church of the Brethren—historically known as "Dunkers" after their method of baptism—were assimilated faster and earlier than their Amish, Mennonite, or even Hutterite cousins.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This model study of a small denomination's history, sociology and anthropology will inspire scholars who study larger, less definable religious groups... Bowman provides a good chronology of events and shows the walls of rural protection, sectarian ethos and geographical distance breaking down." (Christian Century)"A welcome addition to an expanding collection of scholarly books about 'plain people,' including Amish Society and Hutterite Society, both by John Hostetler, and Mennonite Society, by Calvin Redekop, all published by The Johns Hopkins University Press." (Contemporary Sociology)" Brethren Society is unique, creative, and well written. There are virtually no other books to compare with it." (Donald B. Kraybill, author of The Riddle of Amish Culture)"Thoroughly and richly researched, clearly organized and cogently written. Bowman's account will be the standard reference on the subject for years to come." (James Davison Hunter, University of Virginia)"This brilliant analysis will shape the interpretation of Brethren history for many decades." (Donald F. Durnbaugh, Elizabethtown College)

Carl Desportes Bowman is associate professor and chairman of the Department of Sociology at Bridgewater College.

The Brethren, known as the "Peculiar People," according to Bowman, were also once called the "plain people." Emerging at the River Eider in Schwartzenu, Germany in 1708, due to the beliefs of Alexander Mack and a small number of religious separatists, the Tunkers/Dunkards attempted to engender the qualities of the early Christian Church (pp. 26-27) without the creeds imposed by more organized state religious institutions. The triune baptism by dunking in water, communion, feet washing, anointing and the "holy kiss" were to be practiced as instructed by Jesus. The New Testament, and later annual meeting minutes, were the loose creed of the faith- childlike faith, unity, obedience, and separation from the world. Initially, the Brethren were a people of nonresistance who would not bear arms to defend country or family (p. 38.) In fact, they were marched, singing hymns, off to prison by those who did not approve of their beliefs. For a time the Brethren maintained a strict fashion code (p. 79.), but they got over it. During the mid to late 19th century, German no longer was the language of choice, and members began publishing periodicals and even founding colleges, entering nonagricultural vocations. Members of the church spread from Pennsylvania to California and slowly began to resemble other protestant churches. This included introduction of musical instruments, paid preachers, and offering collections, stained glass, etc. And by the late 1800's more traditional factions peeled away leaving the more progressive Brethren Church standing aloof from their fundamentalist brethren. (pp. 126-127.) And, by 1917 Brethrens were less separatists and even voted...for the more moral candidate, of course. By 1908 the term Church of the Brethren came into favor (p. 225). And, by the 1920s, the Brethren became a part of the common community. And, by the 40s most Brethren did not want to be different anymore. Gone were the prayer coverings, the elders, and the church's demand for pacifism. Although peace was still endorsed, it was not mandatory and military service was considered an honorary option. (pp. 331-334.) Toleration rated higher than division. The very "peculiar" attributes of the initial faith distracted from growth/missions and were pared back. In 1979, the Annual Conference encompassed both diversity and unity. (p. 363.) But, still in 1985, most Brethren had some previous family connection to their Church. (p. 382.) Today, the Church of the Brethren remains a Church without a creed (other than the New Testament). This book is a general narrative. Each church within the Church has its own history and beliefs which may vary dramatically. Persons interested in this denomination may find the book "History of the Tunkers and the Brethren Church" by Henry R. Holsinger to also be informative.

I am Brethren and my family has a long history of being Brethren so this book helps me to know about some of my family history. Excellent book.

This book is really helping me understand my ancestors better. They were Dunkers and now I am learning about their trials, their faith and courage, as well as their history. I am loving it.

It was helpful with my understanding of their Non War stance during the Revolution. Also it gave me other good reference books.

I liked this book. It was very informative.

Carl Desportes Bowman tells it like it was in his account of the decline and acculturation of the Church of the Brethren, the formerly conservative wing of the Brethren Movement. It's readable, enjoyable, but on the whole a very sad story.

I came to this book because I wanted to understand the faith of my forebears, and the mysterious and confusing transformation of that faith during the first half of the 20th century. Bowman's account of that transformation is very detailed, thorough, and convincing, yet remains highly readable throughout. As the story unfolds, one is left with a sense of the inevitability of the process of transformation. Step by step, the plain and peculiar Dunkers were turned into the mainstream and culturally indistinct modern Church of the Brethren. This is the story of how that happened, but some readers might wonder, as I did, was it really inevitable? To address that question, and to open another absolutely fascinating, related field of inquiry, readers should turn to a book authored by Bowman's colleague, Donald Kraybill, called *The Riddle of Amish Culture*. It seems that in the 1880's, just when the Dunkers were about to begin their "decline" into acculturation, the Amish were dealing with many of the same challenges and questions. Yet, in perhaps every case, the Amish came up with a different answer. The result is that the Amish are a thriving spiritual community today. They are a cultural microcosm in modern America that is, in many ways, far more successful than the society that surrounds it. They paid the price to remain peculiar, and showed greater vision than the Brethren intellectuals and progressives that led their church into the American mainstream. Whether you agree with that statement or not, reading both books will provide the interested reader with a fascinating comparison.

Carl Bowman's book follows his other valuable work to provide a must read for all those interested in the development of The Church of the Brethren. One of the three historic peace churches, and a people who never seem to be able to find peace among themselves for very long.

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