

# **Anabaptist or Mennonite? Interpreting the Bible**

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## **Introduction**

Generic use of the term “anabaptist” to designate the essence of Mennonite faith is well established today, especially in Mennonite World Conference circles. In the 1950s and 60s, however, some Mennonite leaders challenged the appeal to Anabaptism as a definitive paradigm for Mennonites, claiming that such authority belonged only to the Bible. Today, there are still groups of Mennonite origin who reject both the name Mennonite and Anabaptist, choosing to identify with Evangelicalism. What is the significance of the designation, how and why has it come into use, and how is it related to the question of biblical authority?

Are Mennonites Anabaptists by virtue of being Mennonite? If not, what is the difference? Are only Mennonites Anabaptists? What about other believers who belong to “Free” or “Believers” churches? For example, should the Baptist denominations in America be included as “Anabaptists”? If not, what differences would exclude them? The late James McClendon, who grew up in the Baptist tradition, used the lower case “b” to include all those who shared a theology of voluntary church and discipleship. This seems to suggest that “anabaptism” and “believers church” are synonymous. Is there a generic anabaptism – “anabaptist” with a lower case “a” – and if so, what does it mean?

This essay suggests that the original Anabaptists were neither biblical literalists nor sectarians, and that generic anabaptism should not be understood as a new orthodoxy, but rather as an authentic perspective on reading Scripture.

## **The Problem of Pluralistic Interpretations**

Virtually every denomination or theological grouping has its own set of biblical commentaries – Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian (Reformed), Lutheran,

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Ecumenical, Evangelical, Catholic, “Believers Church (Mennonite/Church of the Brethren)”, Liberal, Conservative, Fundamentalist. How much of this is due to ecclesiastical conviction and concern, or to publishing companies’ entrepreneurial enterprise may be debatable! However, this raises a set of related questions. What is implied when we speak of perspectives in biblical interpretation? The Bible is read and interpreted from many “perspectives,” both Jewish and Christian. Is only one of these perspectives correct? Is there only one orthodox interpretation of each biblical text? Missionaries of previous centuries assumed that there was.

Biblical scholars of different religious traditions can pretty well agree on the historical contexts – language, culture, situational background – of the texts, and on the contemporary meaning of the words, at least on their ambiguity. The *Anchor Bible* commentaries written by Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars were planned to interpret the Scriptures from this historical perspective. But the more difficult question is their significance for present-day multicultural contexts.

Should we be content with pluralistic interpretations of Scripture? Should we expect the Bible to have many different meanings and interpretations for different people? Is its message primarily for personal inspiration, instruction, and encouragement? Are its texts, read more or less at random, intended serendipitously to meet the need of the moment? Or do they primarily speak to larger theological and social issues that define the unity of the ecumenical church? If so, how do we go about understanding their correct meaning and application? What is the significance of an *anabaptist* perspective?

Other questions arise: Whose responsibility is it to unpack and apply the biblical message? Is it that of scholars, priests, preachers, or officially appointed church study committees? Each congregation and its leadership? Everyone for him or herself? If we talk about an *anabaptist* perspective, are we suggesting that this is the only correct perspective? Or are we proposing it as a conversational position to be considered in the larger, ecumenical discussion of the Bible? All these issues are implied in our recognition of *anabaptist perspectives*.

### **Current Meaning of “Anabaptist” in Mennonite Circles**

At the turn of the twentieth century there was a generally recognized North American “Mennonite perspective” on the meaning and application of

Scripture. Common ethnic mores that were thought consistent with biblical ethics characterized Mennonite communities. Social and economic patterns inherited from Europe were adapted to meet the conditions of the American frontier and handed down in a tradition of biblical interpretation. These patterns were preached from the pulpit in a recognized style of exposition. Then this German Mennonite tradition collided with the emerging Fundamentalist movement, one of predominantly English origin and closely linked to the King James Version, that was making exclusive claims to correct (orthodox) biblical interpretation. In its battle with “Liberalism” and higher criticism of the Bible, Fundamentalism insisted on literalistic precision in interpretation of Scripture as God’s very words of instruction to humankind.

The impact of this fundamentalistic literalism upon Mennonites who, until then, had assumed that they were literally following the biblical teachings led to a sea change in Mennonite biblical interpretation, application, and preaching style. Mennonite pulpits began to apply fundamentalist literalism to New Testament teachings on dress, adornment with gold, use of alcohol and tobacco, sexual mores, the “spiritual” life, evangelistic outreach and missions, and on what were dubbed “restrictions” demanded by the nonconformed life. For example, John S. Coffman introduced a literalistic interpretation of 1 Cor. 11:1-17 that eventually made the wearing of a prayer covering a biblical requirement for sisters.<sup>1</sup>

Expository preaching, i.e., explaining a particular scriptural passage, became the model for sermons. The preacher did not simply choose a text of a verse or two to launch his own inspirational comments. Rather, guided by the church community tradition, he chose significant passages that could be expounded to support and encourage uniformity of belief and practice. At the climax of this style in the 1960s and 70s, John R. Mumaw tried to give it some guidance with a book on expository preaching, but it came at the end of a long tradition and the beginning of a new hermeneutical approach.<sup>2</sup>

To understand the significance of an “*anabaptist* perspective” in contrast to a more general “free church” perspective on biblical interpretation, one needs to see its relation to this sectarian *Mennonite* perspective. What led North American Mennonites to renew their interest in their Anabaptist origins? Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they had continued to show interest in the *Martyrs Mirror* and in the works of Menno Simons.

But around the turn of the twentieth century, at the same time some of their leaders began to be acquainted with Dwight L. Moody and the fundamentalist revival movement, there was renewed interest in Anabaptism. The revivalist movement sparked new life and emphases into the old Mennonite patterns that raised questions about the source and validity of the contemporary North American Mennonite tradition. This in turn raised the question of their Mennonite origins in the Anabaptist movement.

As Mennonite leaders came into contact with the dynamic revival movement, they became more self-consciously aware of themselves as a potentially competitive evangelical group. This in turn led them to explore their Anabaptist origins for precedents that could define their own distinctive character over against English expressions of piety and mission. Men like Bishop John F. Funk, John S. Coffman, Menno Steiner, and other self-aware leaders who introduced a more dynamic and evangelistic strain of piety into the Mennonite communities looked to the sixteenth century for a model that could be followed in nineteenth-century America.

The first instinct was to identify Anabaptism and the essence of Mennonitism by contrasting it to Protestantism. In his *Mennonite History*, first written and published in 1927, Daniel Kauffman wrote, “When we say ‘Mennonitism’ we mean the same as Anabaptism, for the Mennonites (though not known by that name until later) were the pioneer Anabaptists.”<sup>3</sup> He distinguished them from the Reformers as “nonresistant in life, and scripturally orthodox in fundamentalism” [sic]. The issue that divided them, he said, was twofold, namely “(1) State-Churchism vs. individual conscience and choice; (2) the sword, and what is behind it.” And he added, “While times have changed, circumstances now are different from what they were then, and issues have shifted somewhat, yet the fundamental difference between these two schools of thought and classes of people remains substantially the same.”<sup>4</sup>

In mid-century C. Henry Smith published his *Story of the Mennonites* (c. 1941), in which he portrayed Anabaptists as “the extreme Left of that day” and the origin of the conviction that religion is a matter of individual conscience.<sup>5</sup> The next year (1942) John Horsch, who had been researching and writing on Mennonite history, published his *Mennonites in Europe*. In it he portrayed Anabaptists as strict biblicists of high moral character and evangelistic zeal.<sup>6</sup> (In a series of articles in *The Gospel Herald* earlier in the

century he maintained that they were essentially a fundamentalistic movement of the Reformation.)

In his *Conrad Grebel 1498-1526, Founder of the Swiss Brethren* (written earlier but published in 1950) Horsch's son-in-law, Harold Bender, portrayed "evangelical" Anabaptism as a biblically based New Testament movement with emphasis on "full Christian discipleship in its transformation of life after the pattern of Christ."<sup>7</sup> In his now famous presidential address to the American Church History Society in 1943, "The Anabaptist Vision," he spelled out the implications of this discipleship. It included a voluntary community of committed members, dedicated to the Scripture as the Word of God and the sole standard for the church, and committed to a life of nonresistant love. This Anabaptist perspective was identified and promoted as the ideal for the twentieth-century Mennonite denomination.

In the 1950s and early 60s church leaders in Pennsylvania and Virginia challenged this appeal to Anabaptist beliefs as an authoritative perspective for Mennonites today. They insisted that the first-century "Bible," not the sixteenth-century Anabaptist interpretations, was the only authority.<sup>8</sup> By "Bible," however, they were defending certain doctrines such as premillennialism, inerrancy of the Bible, the "two-kingdom" theory of church and state, the necessity of a personal experience of salvation – all current fundamentalist doctrines. They were afraid of an incipient "liberalism" and social emphasis on the gospel. They accepted John Horsch's fundamentalistic interpretation of Anabaptism, and they were suspicious of H. S. Bender and Guy F. Hershberger, who were propounding the new vision.

At the same time there was growing dissatisfaction with the fundamentalist view of the biblical text. A more literary and experiential interpretation of the text was being introduced into Mennonite circles through the "inductive approach."<sup>9</sup> This new conservative but non-fundamentalistic perspective is clearly reflected in the 1963 *Mennonite Confession of Faith*. Under the guiding hand of John C. Wenger, the language of the confession took on a more biblical character. It signals a distinct cultural shift away from a literalistic and sectarian understanding and application of Scripture. This is epitomized in the self-conscious replacement of the phrase, "inerrant in its original writings," with "infallible Guide to lead men [sic] to faith in Christ" (Article 2).<sup>10</sup>

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), drawn up by the two Mennonite groups, General Conference Mennonites and (Old) Mennonites, that now form the Mennonite Church USA, continues this conservative but not fundamentalist approach to Scripture. It emphasizes the central hermeneutical importance of Christ for understanding the whole Bible, the authority of Scripture for the guidance of ethical behavior and the relation of the church to society, and the centrality of the congregation in discerning and testing biblical interpretation (Article IV, p. 24). These emphases clearly reflect what was then understood as distinctive “anabaptist” characteristics.

### **Impact of Trans-cultural Missions**

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw a realignment of Mennonite loyalties. Significant groups, some in the name of “evangelical Anabaptism,” and some reacting against an identification of anabaptist Mennonitism with peace and social service emphases, broke clear of the major Mennonite denominations. Cooperative projects, such as publishing Sunday school materials, and a new hymnal-worship book, were undertaken by two major Mennonite groups and the Church of the Brethren. There was increasing cooperation between the various Mennonite related groups on the mission field. All of these collaborative projects ignored twentieth-century differences in theology and practice and implied a common faith without clearly formulating its content. The 1995 Confession of Faith, mentioned above, explicitly attempted to formulate a statement for the two largest Mennonite groups, who were in the process of merging, that “follows some traditional patterns, but also introduces new elements in line with their Anabaptist heritage.”<sup>11</sup>

Beginning in the late 1970s Herald Press began planning for a *Believers Church Bible Commentary Series*, and the first volume came out in 1986. Mennonites, Brethren in Christ, Church of the Brethren, and the Mennonite Brethren sponsored the ongoing project. Use of the term “Believers Church” and the inclusion of a number of related groups indicate that they were seeking for a more ecumenical perspective than the older name “Mennonite” implied, but the denominations included in the project all represent an *anabaptist* orientation. The Herald Press catalog does not explicitly advertise the series as Anabaptist, but it does emphasize that it is organized and written for “lay leaders” as well as teachers and pastors – clearly an

anabaptist perspective. This shift in nomenclature indicates that the progressive groups were moving toward a more inclusive position as the attrition of conservative groups, who still felt more comfortable with the old Mennonite label, continued.

During this same post-World War II period the Mennonite label began to feel restrictive on the mission field. But what was the alternative? Some Mennonite missionaries in Asia allied themselves with fundamentalist Evangelicalism, which emphasized personal conversion and church planting. Others were still convinced that the Mennonite tradition had something to offer to the evangelical Protestant world, even though they were abandoning the older literalistic traditions. Yet others began to stress an “incarnational” approach to witness and the contextualization of the gospel in the name of Anabaptism.

Were we – I was one of these missionaries – merely another of the crusading, church-planting evangelical missions preaching an individualistic, born again, personal experience with Christ apart from which individuals were heading for hell? In order to distinguish ourselves from this truncated view and establish our evangelical identity in the original sixteenth-century meaning of that word, we began to use the more inclusive word “Anabaptist.” We began to take critical contextualization of the gospel seriously. For those dissatisfied with the fundamentalistic gospel of individual salvation, the “Anabaptist Vision” as outlined by Harold Bender provided the perspective for an approach on the mission fields throughout the century’s second half.

The first Mennonite missionaries to Hokkaido (Mennonite Board of Missions) in the early 1950s, who went directly from Goshen Biblical Seminary, introduced an egalitarian concept of Christian community, strict biblicism, and nonresistance as the distinctive Anabaptist principles. Well into the 1970s Japanese congregational leaders in Hokkaido were self-supporting, holding jobs that allowed them to give time to the church, and on principle refused to be “ordained.” At the same time, several of the first generation leaders in the Osaka and Kyushu area with the General Conference Mennonite mission were pressing these same non-institutional features as the marks of Anabaptism. In the 1980s one of the major leaders in the Brethren in Christ Mission also began pressing the question of what it means for Japanese churches to be Anabaptist.<sup>12</sup>

In the context of this cultural ferment, in 1986 I wrote a paper (unpublished) entitled “The Relevance of Anabaptism to Twentieth-Century Japanese Christianity.” I asked whether a sixteenth-century European movement born in Christendom could be applied meaningfully in the Japanese culture, where the state religion was Shintoism and the dominant popular religion was Buddhism; and if so, what elements might authentically represent the gospel. Similar questions were being raised in other Asian countries such as Indonesia and Australia.

Then in May 1986 the Asian Mennonite Conference was held in Taipei, Taiwan. It demonstrated the new mood among the Asian church bodies and marked the beginning of Asian leadership. This raised in a new way the question of common identity. Commonality was not marked by a shared “Asian” identity. Indeed, the primary language the delegates had in common was English! Representatives came from vastly different cultural settings. “Mennonites” around the world were a multilingual, multicultural multitude of varied socio-economic status, moral values, social practices, interpretations of Scripture, worship patterns, and understanding of discipleship.

It was at this conference that leadership shifted from mission boards’ responsibility and financing to Asian church responsibility, from missionaries to the younger leaders of the Asian Mennonite churches. In a report to the Mennonite Board of Missions secretary for Asia I wrote, “The atmosphere of the conference was quite different from the one in Osaka in 1980. The old guard [dominated by missionary structures, financing, and goals] is out! There seems to be a new air of cautious realism and responsibility as the leadership shifts to younger Asian leaders.” This signaled a redoubling of the search for a common self-identity as Mennonite churches. The banner word for this identity became “anabaptism.” Just how these various cultural expressions of church related to sixteenth-century Anabaptism was not clear, but there was a sense that a generic anabaptism and “discipleship” could provide a unifying slogan. This has become a developing reality in the Mennonite World Conference movement in the decades since.

### **What is Generic Anabaptism?**

In the meantime in the United States and Europe the interpretation of anabaptistic Mennonitism as an evangelical pacifistic, nonhierarchical (lay),

socially concerned church group with emphasis on a Jesus-centered view of the Bible began to gain a hearing, especially in academic religious centers. Through the centuries Anabaptists had been considered *Schwaermer* (fanatics), and their interpretations of scripture were dismissed as “sectarian.” Now scholars from other church traditions and perspectives on biblical interpretation began to take Anabaptist contributions to the discussion seriously.<sup>13</sup> What precisely is generic anabaptism?

Anabaptism with a lower case “a” is a twentieth-century phenomenon – an attempt to adapt and adopt the insights and values of sixteenth-century Anabaptism as a guide to the interpretation and use of Scripture in twenty-first century North American culture. When written with a capital “A,” it refers to the historical movement in sixteenth-century Europe that developed as part of the Protestant Reformation. While contemporary generic anabaptism tries to preserve an authentic continuation of that movement, it is not, and cannot be, a replica of pristine Anabaptism. Rather, it represents a post-denominational perspective that seeks to dialogue across denominational lines.

Much has changed over the past five centuries. We live in vastly different political cultures than did the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Historical studies have changed our way of understanding and interpreting the Scriptures. The concept of “Orthodoxy” with which the sixteenth century began no longer furnishes the paradigm for ecclesiastical relations. Both Protestant and Roman Catholic institutions have recognized the legitimacy of theological pluralism and the right of voluntary religious commitment. Scientific research and technological developments have altered our very way of life. Subtly these changes altered the cultural, political, and religious climate so that the conservative patterns of Amish and Mennonite communities less and less resemble the dynamic innovative responses of the original Anabaptists. This has introduced an ambiguity into claims on the “Anabaptist” label.

Within worldwide Mennonitism there are two contemporary versions of Anabaptism, each claiming to be authentic representations of sixteenth-century Anabaptism. This complicates defining the terms. While they have much common ground, at the same time they differ concerning the nature of the Bible and its interpretation. The conservative groups assume a pre-critical view of Scripture and method of interpretation. Some of these groups take a fundamentalist, charismatic perspective and some take a more traditional

American Mennonite (“old orders”) perspective. However, the divide that separates these more traditional (pre-critical) Mennonite positions from present-day “generic anabaptism” is their view of the Bible. The fault line lies along the historical distinction between the “critical” and “pre-critical” assumptions and methodologies brought to biblical interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

Not all who take an anabaptist perspective in biblical interpretation are Mennonites, but *anabaptistic* Mennonitism as a participant in interdenominational dialogue is, as noted earlier, an evangelical pacifistic, nonhierarchical (lay), socially concerned church group (denomination) emphasizing a Jesus-centered view of the Bible. This ecumenically oriented anabaptism is intellectually comfortable in the left wing of Evangelical scholarship, and does not draw sharp lines of distinction between its conservative and liberal interlocutors. It has a conservative but “critical” perspective on biblical interpretation, attempting to preserve and promote an authentic modern contextualization of the pre-critical hermeneutic of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. It assumes that the Bible is the historical witness to and record of God’s revelation through Israel that climaxed in Jesus who came as the Christ, the Son of God.

Various stages of this transition from a pre-critical to a critical approach to Scripture exist simultaneously among groups of contemporary Mennonites who themselves are at different stages of sociological accommodation to North American culture. Historical groups of Hutterites, Amish, and Old Order Mennonites still claim to represent the true Anabaptist perspective. Conservative Mennonite groups like the Evangelical Anabaptist Network, the Fellowship of (Biblically) Concerned Mennonites, and other independent groups who have withdrawn from the main body over issues of biblical interpretation continue to regard the Bible as the infallible and literal Word of God. What these groups have in common is a hermeneutic that continues to view the meaning of Scripture through the lens of Protestant orthodoxy.

By way of comparison, the goal of generic anabaptism is not a fixed, uniform position. Its goal is not *orthodoxy* but *authenticity* – authentic interpretation of the Scripture through the lens of its own Anabaptist tradition. This necessitates a dialogue in two directions: (1) between sixteenth-century Anabaptism and twenty-first century Mennonitism; and (2) between twenty-first century Mennonitism and other denominational traditions. At least implicitly

it recognizes that an authentic expression of Christ-centered faith as portrayed in the NT requires an inclusive conversational dialogue among all those seriously seeking to follow the way of Christ.

Generic anabaptism's dialogical character has resulted from the "denominational" rather than "sectarian" stance that Mennonite bodies adopted in the twentieth century, and from their missionary activity crossing many different cultures. It became increasingly clear almost from the first that western Mennonite interpretations and applications of the Bible did not always fit the diversity of cultural practices where missionaries were planting churches. Neither could they give an effective inter-denominational witness by pontificating a position. Effective witness needed to take a conversational, dialogical approach.

### **A Generic Anabaptist Hermeneutical Perspective**

What perspective does generic anabaptism bring to the interpretation of the Bible? Again we must note that it is not an exclusively Mennonite perspective. Biblical students of one tradition and another share many of its understandings, but Anabaptism brings its own historical tradition to the dialogue.

Anabaptism does not establish a new orthodox creed for the universal church to follow, or a standardized theological and ethical formula to achieve uniformity among the diversity of the world's cultures. Rather, it is a perspective, a way of reading and contextualizing Scripture under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit that adapts to multicultural dialogue. It makes Jesus the lens through which all Scripture is read, concentrating attention on the pattern of Jesus' life as the authentic example of God's will for human society. It offers a way to deal with the multicultural expressions of Christian faith in Jesus.

To further elucidate, perhaps we should begin with the conviction that *the Bible is the book of the church*.<sup>15</sup> This is a perspective that the Anabaptists inherited from and share with the Catholic tradition. The Bible is the inspired witness to and record of God's self-revelation to be interpreted and used as authority in the church. The books of Scripture issued out of the life and experience of Israel and the church, and the church created the Christian canon, i.e., the list of recognized authoritative books. To speak with theological precision, the church does not give the canon its authority but recognizes its divine authority for the life of the church. The warrant for this

authority is found not so much in the text of the Bible as in the Spirit of God that initially inspired the text and is given to the church to guide it in its understanding and use of the text. Today, we refer to this as “contextualization” of the text, i.e., the interpretation and application of it in different and changing cultural contexts.

Both the Catholic and Anabaptist traditions recognize that this responsibility has been given to the church as the “body of Christ,” which continues the salvific work of the historical Jesus Christ. The Bible has not been given to individuals as a private revelation to provide serendipitous authority and guidance. But here the Anabaptist and Catholic traditions have different perspectives. For Anabaptists the church is made up of voluntarily committed members who are full participants in the life of the church. This includes participation in discerning the spiritual meaning, relevance, and practical application of the text to specific situations.

To say that interpretation, which includes contextual theology and application, is basically the responsibility of Christian congregations living in the cultural situation does not mean the congregation is a law unto itself. The congregation is dependent upon the ecclesial and scholarly resources at its disposal. The process of hermeneutical contextualization begins with the study of original languages, historical and anthropological studies of the biblical cultures, biblical translation, and theological evaluations, all of which require technical scholarly effort and insight. But at the end of the process it is the local congregation of Christian believers in the Spirit/spirit of Christ that is responsible to act in the name of Christ. This is a fundamental aspect of the historical Anabaptist perspective that generic anabaptism attempts to re-establish.

A second distinguishing perspective, one that marked the Anabaptists off from other Protestants, was their insistence that *because the New Testament is the record of God’s revelation in Jesus, the Christ, it has authority over what preceded it*. This was not merely a legalistic shift from the text of the Old to the text of the New. Rather, their new authority was Jesus, the Messiah, and not Moses, the Lawgiver.<sup>16</sup> Christians’ mandate is to follow Jesus, and because the NT scriptures are the trustworthy written witness to him, they are of supreme importance. The Anabaptists valued the Old as a preparatory document, the historical witness and record of God’s covenant with Israel preparing the way for Christ and a new covenant to be written on

the hearts of God's people, in the words of Jeremiah 31. The NT, they held, is the culmination of, fulfills, and serves as the interpretive key to the Old.

Protestant leaders, as Stuart Murray has pointed out,<sup>17</sup> continued the medieval pattern of appealing to the OT law to establish a socio-political structure within which the church functioned. In effect they continued the social pattern in which the church (spiritual) and the state (secular) joined to establish a sacral community in which the civil structures for the total community were found in the OT. The hermeneutical debate between Lutherans and Reformed merely continued the medieval argument as to whether the spiritual trumped the secular in authority, or vice versa, but both fully agreed that the Testaments – Old and New – shared an equal authority in the institutional church. Thus in Calvin's Geneva the church could render a judgment of heresy with the intention and full expectation of the death penalty to be carried out by the "Christian" government.

Anabaptists understood the NT to be a new covenant between God and humans creating a "new people of God" – a new social order. It was not merely a spiritual directive for individuals in their religious life, but a social directive to guide the ethical life of the human community. The Hebrew covenant is explicitly a religio-cultural covenant providing a socio-political structure for a "people of God" among the pagan nations of the earth. The NT gives little or no political instructions. Christians are simply to be "salt and light" for the world – a rather non-specific ethical directive. They are to follow the Spirit of agape according to the new ethical alternative taught for followers of "the Way." How is the new Christian covenant to be interpreted?

Protestant reformers held that the new covenant assumes and accepts the political context of the old, and merely provides for a mid-course correction and personalization of the relationship. Anabaptism, on the other hand, asserted that the new covenant establishes a new spiritual and cultural pattern based on the example of Jesus as "the true and living Way" (John 14:6). The church as the people of God under this new covenant is to be a voluntary alternative society taking its precedent from the New Testament. Where the New differs from the Old, Jesus' words, "It has been said by them of old . . . but I say unto you" are the authority for action. Christians are to be guided by a new ethical pattern. *Nachfolge Christi* was not equated with patriotism in a Christian nation governed in the spirit and form of the Hebrew scriptures.

The consequences of this hermeneutical revision of the Hebrew covenant had inevitable sociological implications. The government that Paul says “does not bear the sword in vain” was de-sacralized and understood as part of the fallen natural order. The secularization of the political order placed it outside the church, and in effect gave it the status of the pagan nations surrounding Israel. For the Anabaptists this created a tension between the true church and Christendom.

Although the first generation of Anabaptism did not function as a sectarian movement, it became so in the centuries following. This is generally attributed to the social and political pressures that forced Anabaptists to separate their societies from the continuing Christendom patterns of church and state. Yet the old covenant is explicitly a socio-cultural covenant creating a settled, national “people of God” among the pagan nations. The new covenant, on the other hand, assumes the dispersion of Israel as its metaphorical pattern. This ambiguity in the Anabaptist interpretation of the relevance of the OT has left contemporary generic anabaptism with a similar dilemma.

The Mennonite perspective on NT ethical interpretation led eighteenth and nineteenth-century Mennonites to withdraw from political society, which it called “the world.” Where the example and teaching of Christ – understood as including the ethical admonition of the Apostles – did not provide a practical political guide for action, there was nothing to do but withdraw. Now that the Mennonite world has assimilated much of the professional, institutional, political, and economic (“world”) culture, the relevance and role of the OT is being re-examined. Generic anabaptism, however, maintains that Jesus as “pioneer and perfecter of the faith” is the ethical and spiritual gestalt and exemplar for Christian action.

That leads us to the third hermeneutical perspective of contemporary anabaptist biblical interpretation, namely, that *Jesus as the climax of revelation – the Word made flesh (John), and “image of the invisible God” (Paul) – is both the personal-spiritual and social-ethical pattern for Christians.* Evangelical Protestantism has interpreted Jesus as a spiritual redeemer and ideal for personal life, but not as an example to be followed in social ethics. Beginning with the original Protestant, Martin Luther, Jesus was understood to have had the unique “vocation” of Savior, a vocation or calling that his followers do not and cannot share. Although the spirit of Christ motivates lay Christians, the law of justice guides their secular functions in the world.

One can find beautiful passages in Luther's works extolling the nonresistant love of Jesus as an example for Christians to follow in their personal attitude, but alongside such passages are the exhortations to these same Christians to apply for the public job of hangman, because as individuals of faith and love they bring the right spirit to the ghastly job. Jesus' call to "take up your cross and follow [my example]" does not apply to the Christian calling in the public arena. Discipleship is a matter of private faith and love.<sup>18</sup>

This perspective on Jesus' divine person and work led Protestants to a focus on justification by "faith-belief," not by "works-righteousness." Christ's role as God's penal substitutionary sacrifice became the almost exclusive center of interest, and our relation to him was interpreted as one of dependence and trust (*fiducia*) – a favorite word of Luther. He remained focused on the cross and blood of Christ, made effective for lay Christians in the sacrament, rather than on the ministry and lifestyle of Jesus that resulted in his execution as a religious and political threat. From this perspective the resurrection of Christ became the vindication of his divine self-sacrificial atoning death, not of his incarnational identification with us as the "true and living Way."<sup>19</sup>

The recognition of Jesus' sacrificial identification with us as God's "pioneer" (Hebrews 12:2), and "servant" in whose likeness we are to be formed (Phil. 2:6-8) is virtually ignored. His role as peacemaker is interpreted as a theological adjustment to satisfy the justice of God, and the ethical and social dimensions of peacemaking are muted. Salvation as reconciliation and transformation of human life and society through faithful commitment and enablement to follow his pattern – what one might call the "hermeneutics of reconciliation" – is dismissed as "works righteousness." The classic tradition of *imitatio Christi* (imitation of Christ) is rejected as a theological error of atonement theory and is suspect as "works righteousness."

By contrast, the Anabaptist tradition has from the beginning insisted that salvation is by faith alone, but that "faith without works is dead." Faith is understood as faithfulness in following "the Way" marked out by Christ. It is not simply belief and trust in the merits of his substitutionary example. Following Christ, who is the culmination of God's revelation, is the essential core of Christian faith.

Finally, related closely to the above understanding of Jesus' pioneer role, is *the concept of discipleship as Nachfolge Christi – the imitation of*

*Christ*. Anabaptists understood discipleship as apprenticeship. A *disciple* is one who learns by following the example of the master, not merely by calling him lord but by imitating his lifestyle. A. M. Hunter caught the import of this perspective when he entitled his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, *A Pattern for Life* (Westminster Press, 1953). Jesus is the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” who set the pattern to be followed (Hebrews 12:3ff). His endurance of society’s hostility and, in the end, his execution as a political criminal is understood as a personal-social path to be followed as a kind of discipline. To keep the faith means to persevere in this pattern modeled by Jesus.

The goal of biblical study, therefore, is not theoretical knowledge but practical behavior, namely “justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (the spirit of Christ), as Paul wrote in Romans 14:17. Generic anabaptist hermeneutics is the “hermeneutics of obedience.”<sup>20</sup> Its theology is a theology of apprenticeship. To be a Christian disciple means to participate in and live under the mandate of Jesus Christ, the Master, who not only leads but also enables and transforms us in and through the discipline of following.

In their literature Anabaptists referred to this alternative way of living in society as “taking up the cross and following Christ.” They characterized the Christian life as the way of the cross, exemplified in the nonviolent lifestyle of Jesus. In the same manner, the anabaptist perspective interprets this call as a summons to the nonviolent pattern of life that led Jesus to the cross. It does not regard “cross bearing” (nonviolence) and “crucifixion of self” (self-denial) in the typical Protestant evangelical manner, that is, of simply equating it with self-denial. Certainly the nonviolent lifestyle of a peacemaker will often require self-denial, but not every act of self-denial can be identified as “taking up the cross and following Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Matt. 28:19, from the Anabaptist perspective, the apostolic commission is to make followers of all the nations. Discipleship is not just for those of the Jewish nation but for all humankind. The gentile nations are to be “apprenticed,” i.e., formed according to the archetypical pattern through following Jesus’ lifestyle. They are to be inducted into the holy nation being formed under the new covenant (baptism), and instructed in the commandments and example of Jesus (“teaching them”). This discipleship is not just the vocation of a special class – religious orders, pastors, or preachers. It is the pattern of the transformed life to which Christ calls everyone.

Such an anabaptist hermeneutical perspective calls for authentic contextualization of the message and example of Jesus in the tradition of the Apostle Paul and first-century writers of Scripture. Indeed, the NT epistles themselves provide a model of such discernment and translation of the meaning of the life of Christ for the diverse cultures of the world. Given the inevitable diversity of world cultures where Christian Mennonite witness has taken root, the call to authentic discipleship as a hermeneutical principle becomes fundamental. We must again emphasize the guiding motto of Menno Simons: “Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11), and move forward under the aegis of the Holy Spirit of Christ.

“Bearing the heavy cross of Christ” was a favorite phrase of Menno to describe the martyr vocation of Christians. For him it clearly meant following the nonviolent pattern of Christ’s life and patiently bearing the consequences. That he considered this the calling of every Christian with no exceptions is illustrated by his approach to whether a Christian could hold office as a magistrate, which he admitted is a “dangerous office.” He did not give a direct answer with scriptural proofs. He simply insisted that whether a person is ordained of God to be king, magistrate, or judge, as a Christian he is first called to follow the word and example of Christ in that office. There are no exceptions. Indeed, I will end by quoting from Menno’s *Reply to False Accusations* [that Anabaptists will not obey the magistrate]:

Henceforth, beloved rulers, see to it, you who call yourselves Christian, that you may be that also in deed and in word. Water, bread, wine, and the name do not make a Christian, but those are Christian who are born of God, are of a divine spirit and nature, are of the same mind as Christ Jesus . . . love their neighbors as themselves; lead an unblamable, regenerate, pious life, and willingly walk in the footsteps of Christ . . . . These the Word of God calls Christians.<sup>22</sup>

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In her unpublished dissertation, *The Articulation of Mennonite Beliefs about Sexuality 1890-1930* (Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, VA, May 2003, p. 93) Brenda Martin Hurst traces the explicit teaching of the covering as a biblical ordinance to John S. Coffman. She writes, “The cap became a ‘prayer head covering’ symbolizing a woman’s submission to God’s order of authority: God, Christ, Man, Woman.”

<sup>2</sup> John Mumaw, *Preach the Word: Expository Preaching from the Book of Ephesians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987) attempted both by homiletical instruction and example to advocate expository preaching in Mennonite pulpits.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Kauffman, *Mennonite History, Including a Brief Sketch of the Church from the Time of Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1927), 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>5</sup> C. Henry Smith, *The Story of the Mennonites* 3rd ed. (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1950), 4.

<sup>6</sup> See “Character of the Evangelical Anabaptists,” 293-98.

<sup>7</sup> *Conrad Grebel c. 1498-1526: The Founder of the Swiss Brethren Sometimes Called Anabaptists* (Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1950), 209-10.

<sup>8</sup> The proper interpretation of nonresistance and its biblical basis became a focal issue in this debate. Guy F. Hershberger’s argument that both testaments teach nonresistance was strongly refuted by John L. Stauffer, president of Eastern Mennonite School, and an ardent premillennialist. (See his “The Error of Old Testament Nonresistance,” in *The Sword and Trumpet*, Vol. 28, no. 2, 6-16. Later published posthumously as a pamphlet entitled *The Message of Scripture on Nonresistance* in 1971.) John R. Mumaw published a pamphlet, *Nonresistance and Pacifism* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1952), arguing against a more vague presentiment that an activist “anabaptist” nonviolence was leading to liberal pacifism. The *Sword and Trumpet* kept up a steady barrage of articles presenting a traditional literalistic Mennonite interpretation, implicitly if not always explicitly critical of the emphasis on Anabaptism.

<sup>9</sup> See my “American Mennonites and the Bible, 1750-1950,” first published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1967, and reprinted in Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 131-50 for more detail on this period.

<sup>10</sup> That this is indeed the intention of the *Confession’s* authors is illustrated by other significant changes. For example, in contrast to the Garden City confession (1921), which declared the seven day creation account to be “an historic fact and literally true,” it speaks of God as the infinite Creator, source and end of all things, and of creatures as limited and dependent upon God. It speaks of revelation as “supremely and finally [given] in His incarnate Son,” and it bases Scripture’s authority on its witness to Christ, who is the “key to [its] proper understanding.” The command to nonresistance is based on “Christ’s redeeming love and sovereignty over all men,” and nonconformity to the world is described in terms of spiritual allegiance to Christ’s kingdom, not hortatory texts from Scripture.

<sup>11</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Published by arrangement with the General Board of the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church General

Board (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 8.

<sup>12</sup> At the time the Brethren in Christ missionaries had chosen not to emphasize the connection of Japanese congregations with an American denomination. This led some of the Japanese leaders to search for their identity among the many Christian groups. Unsatisfied with the Fundamentalism of the Japan Evangelical Association, and aware of their Mennonite relations, they were exploring the Anabaptist alternative that was being tendered.

<sup>13</sup> People like Stanley Hauerwas, who calls himself a “camp follower,” and Richard Hays at Duke University, Christopher Rowland and Stuart Murray of England, James McClendon, Jr., Glen Stassen, Nancey Murphy, and the like from Evangelical backgrounds began to accept anabaptism as a dialogical partner. See the October 2000 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly*.

<sup>14</sup> In his chapter, “Evangelical Reconstruction of the Anabaptist Vision,” Levi Miller writes, “A reconstructed understanding of evangelical Anabaptism would be completely at home within the basic theological categories of Protestant orthodoxy. . . . An evangelical Anabaptism for the next century will embrace an orthodox Christianity, holy living and intimacy with God, along with an ethic of nonresistance, peace and justice.” (John D. Roth, ed., *Refocusing A Vision: Shaping Anabaptist Character in the 21st Century*, Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 1995, 31, 34.) Miller takes his stand with the “pre-critical” hermeneutic of orthodox Protestantism and interprets any revision of it as a watering down of “transcendent and revealed biblical Christianity.” Scholars who deny or reject such “revealed biblical Christianity,” he continues, can still be accepted as anabaptist “if the author – especially if the author has Mennonite parents – still believes in pacifism, ecological wholeness or perhaps liberation and justice.” (*Ibid.* 29) These comments illustrate well the character of the divergence that separates the two versions of generic anabaptism.

<sup>15</sup> In Article 4 on Scripture, the 1995 Confession states that the Bible is “the essential book of the church” after affirming its inspiration and trustworthiness as the “Word of God written.” An earlier edition sent to the constituencies for testing made the statement the lead sentence for the article, but in both editions the point is clear. The Bible is an instrument of the Holy Spirit to nurture “the obedience of faith to Jesus Christ and guide the church in shaping its teaching, witnessing, and worship” (22).

<sup>16</sup> Menno Simons has a particularly clear reference to this in his discussion of the swearing of oaths: “The Scripture teaches that we should hear Christ . . . [and] Christ Jesus does not in the New Testament point His disciples to the Law in regard to the matter of swearing . . . but He points us now from the Law to yea and nay, as to the dispensation of perfectness [sic]. . . .” *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496-1561*, John C. Wenger, ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 518.

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2000), 223. See also his chapter on “The Two Testaments.”

<sup>18</sup> Carl F. H. Henry’s two volumes on Christian ethics are a modern example of this kind of emphasis. In 1957 Henry published his 690-page *Christian Personal Ethics* with the promise that a volume on social ethics would follow. Finally, seven years later in 1974 he published a 190-page volume entitled *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (both published by Eerdmans).

<sup>19</sup> One might refer to this as the “hermeneutics of justification.” The concept of “justification by faith alone” (*sola fide*) dominated Protestant interpretation of passages where righteousness/

justice, peace and reconciliation were the subject.

<sup>20</sup> Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 225.

<sup>21</sup> For example, in a recent seminar in Northern Ireland my appeal to “the way of the cross” as the call to nonviolence prompted an objection from one participant. He pointed out that his friend had felt called to volunteer for military duty in the Iraq war as a matter of cross bearing. He considered his willingness to deny himself personal security in order to help violently overthrow Saddam’s regime an example of bearing his cross. While respecting the sincerity of his sacrifice, one cannot but remember Jesus’ word to Peter when he reached for his sword in the Garden. The defense of Jesus with the sword at the risk of his own life did not qualify as “taking up his cross,” as 1 Peter 2:21-25 so eloquently states.

<sup>22</sup> *Complete Writings*, 553.