Anabaptist Thoughts on Teaching the New Testament as an Anabaptist in a Non-Anabaptist Setting: Enough Already

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In 2008, I was asked by the Mennonite Scholars and Friends (MS&F) group to be part of a panel on "Teaching Bible: Setting, Method, Agenda" at the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) annual meeting. I was ambivalent about saying "yes," for while I always attend the MS&F reception on Friday evening at the SBL meetings, I almost never go to the panels. My reason for avoiding them is directly related to my practice of teaching, both where and how I teach. So in the following paragraphs, I want to outline a major flaw I see in current Anabaptist scholarship, and to describe how it hurts our teaching and our impact on the world as scholars and as a church.

Let me begin by laying out my status. I am a Mennonite. My father was a Mennonite pastor, and my mother loved being a Mennonite pastor's wife. I have attended three Mennonite schools (and numerous non-Mennonite ones), and have enjoyed all of them. I am also a Mennonite pastor, although I am currently not serving in a church. I attend and am actively involved in a Mennonite church, and have in my past been an active member in numerous Mennonite churches in the US and Canada. So that makes me pretty solidly Mennonite.

In my teaching life, I teach at Wichita State University as part of the Religion program. Mainly I teach New Testament, although most of my publications are in Old Testament. My students are aware that I am a Mennonite pastor, although many of them have no idea what a Mennonite is. (I usually send them to the Third Way Café online if they want to know.)

In this way I straddle two worlds: the world of Mennonite church and the world of secular scholarship. I really enjoy both of these worlds, and I would feel a loss if one was missing. Of course, there is much overlap between these worlds. I teach New Testament, so I have no way of avoiding questions of faith and practice that come up regularly in the classroom. I teach as a Mennonite, and this affects how I teach, the questions I ask,

and the way I relate to students. For example, when talking about being a Christian, I think primarily in terms of "following Jesus" rather than the more usual Bible Belt assumption that Christianity is about what you believe. Some of my students find this odd, but most at least agree that there is some component of action involved in the Christian life, and the most obvious example is Jesus.

The frustration I feel as I work between these worlds is that most religion scholars who work as Mennonites seem to think that the purpose of the exercise is largely one of sectarian apologetics or an advanced form of navel-gazing. Too often the whole apparatus of Mennonite theological education appears (from the outside, at least) to be training for life inside a cloister. Mennonites write as if they assume that their audience and their frame of reference is somehow "Mennonite," and that it is sufficient to address oneself to this microcosm.

The most obvious manifestation of this is the continual use of the word "Anabaptist" in publications, presentations, conference names, and any other place where scholars are asked to work as scholars.[1] I could cite hundreds of examples. To randomly choose one, a forthcoming book from Cascadia Press is titled *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective*. I'm sure that this is a fine book, although I haven't read it. I also proudly claim my status as an Anabaptist, having actually re-baptized someone. As someone with reasonable Anabaptist scholarly connections, I also know many of the people who have written chapters for the book. As I read the title, however, it appears to have as its subtext the assumption that this book is of interest only to those who either already claim some Anabaptist connection or have some curiosity regarding this tiny cult. The assumption seems to be that this book would be of little interest to a Lutheran or Episcopalian, except as an object of curiosity or voyeurism.

Now, both of these assertions may in fact be true. I don't work in the sub-disciplines of theology or ethics, so I don't know how things work in those fields. It may be that Catholic theologians read only other Catholics and Pentecostal ethicists read only fellow Pentecostals. All I can speak to is my experience as a biblical scholar.

In biblical studies, denominational/religious distinctions are of only minor concern. For example, as I work in Leviticus, there currently appears

to be a small schism developing within the very small group of scholars interested in Leviticus and ritual. There does not appear to be any significant denomination angle to this schism. One group has a Jew, an Adventist and a Pentecostal, among others. The other group has a Mennonite, an Episcopalian, and a Presbyterian, among others.

When I write a paper about Leviticus, I write about Leviticus. I remain a Mennonite during the process, and my heritage in some ways informs my thoughts and ideas. But I would never consider thinking about my work as "An Anabaptist Perspective on Leviticus." I really don't think there is any such thing. My studies with professors of Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic and other backgrounds, as well as years of reading the works of others whose religious affiliation I often don't know, make it impossible to know what parts of my writing come from which parts of myself.

So my Leviticus friends know that I'm Mennonite, and they claim they can see this in my work. I'm fine with that. It does not mean, however, that my perspective is any more or less sectarian than any other. My acknowledgement of my Mennonite heritage is informative to them, but that neither validates nor invalidates the content of my work. So when Jews read a Mennonite's paper on Leviticus, they read from a Jewish perspective (whatever that might mean), but judge on the basis of their ability to make sense of and agree with the assertions made.

Part of the reality of my work, of course, is the impossibility of doing things any other way. If I talked about Leviticus and ritual only to other Anabaptists, I would be very lonely. I'm already alone in the field of Leviticus and pop culture, but get to tag along with other Leviticus scholars because working in Leviticus is lonely enough without splitting hairs too finely.

On the surface, Mennonite theologians seem to have things quite differently. There are lots of them about (at least in comparison to Mennonite Leviticus scholars), and they can keep busy reading each others' works and writing for in-house publications and conferences. On the other hand, I really don't think there is any such thing as Mennonite theology (unless we are speaking historically), and there hopefully can be no such thing as Mennonite ethics (sorry, Harry).[2] Either we are either speaking meaningfully and intelligibly about God and the world or we are not. Yes, we speak from

somewhere, but that does not allow us to speak nonsense. Neither does it validate our ideas to have them make sense only within a small sectarian community. Mennonite actions are human actions, and writing about them should conform to the same rules of language as writings from any other perspective.

The most obvious and quoted example of this issue is the work of John Howard Yoder. I am not a Yoder scholar, so I hesitate to make assertions about his work that others can easily contradict, but I do notice a lack of the word "Anabaptist" in the titles of most of his better-known books. *The Politics of Jesus* stands or falls on its own. Its ideas are not "Anabaptist." Yoder is writing to Christians, not to the cloistered community of Mennonites. It is Yoder who often draws people into the Mennonite church, yet he also draws people into new ways of being Lutheran or Catholic. You can be a Yoderian Baptist (a ridiculous title in itself; why not "follower of Jesus"?) without needing to become Mennonite. Yes, Yoder does articulate a particular way to follow Jesus, but all ways to follow Jesus are particular. The trick is to be something without needing to say that your way of understanding requires denominational commitments.

Another manifestation of our cloistered perspective is the practice of needing to cite every Anabaptist who has ever published on a subject in any paper or presentation. In other words, mostly we seem to be talking to each other about our own little world. This practice continues the appearance that the Anabaptist world is a self-contained entity that only occasionally needs to speak about (but never to) the "world."

I realize that in an issue of *The Conrad Grebel Review* devoted to teaching theory and practice, what I have said so far may appear to be off the topic. Yet it significantly affects teaching both inside and outside the Mennonite world. I teach in a secular university; I teach as a Mennonite pastor and biblical scholar. Yet my assumption in teaching New Testament is that we in the class can look at a passage and come to some basic understandings of what is or is not being said. My message is not "this is how Mennonites understand Jesus." My message is "this is how Mark understands Jesus, as best as I can understand Mark." The impact of subjectivity remains but does not itself become the object of study. Otherwise, the class would quickly become "Sectarian Approaches to the New Testament," a study of little interest to me or my students.

The same would be true, I think, if I taught in a Mennonite institution. In fact, it is truer in those contexts. Do students learn a specifically sectarian approach to the New Testament? If so, they learn that the content of the course is somehow relevant only to those who are Mennonite. This is especially problematic because we live in a world in which the term "Mennonite" has no significant meaning. In this world, "Mennonite" is roughly equivalent to "Irrelevant." Adding the adjunct "theology" or "ethics" or "biblical studies" to the modifier "Mennonite" does not alter this fact.[3]

This suggests that Irrelevant colleges offer numerous courses on Irrelevant theology and ethics (at least irrelevant to life outside the cloister). If biblical studies courses claim a specifically Mennonite orientation, the same would be true for them.[4] This may qualify as a good job if you can get it, but is not likely to be the life goal of most professors. The alternative, as I see it, is to teach theology, ethics, and biblical studies in ways that make sense in the world in which we live. Some of our conversation partners along the way are likely to be Mennonite, but there is nothing that privileges their positions. If the ideas cannot stand on their own merits, then attaching the modifier "Mennonite" only denigrates the word "Mennonite."

Another way of looking at this question is to imagine a course called "Mennonite Biochemistry" or "Mennonite English Composition." Professors of Mennonite background or those teaching in Mennonite colleges do not become less Mennonite by teaching regular biochemistry or composition. Perhaps a more helpful parallel is to imagine a course called "Mennonite American History." What exactly is the Mennonite position on American history? There are certainly aspects of American history that would be taught differently in a Mennonite college than in a secular one or a Southern Baptist one, such as wars and the duties of a citizen. What does this mean for how the class is taught? And more to my point, what does it mean for how often the term "Anabaptist" appears in course titles, descriptions, and readings?

Thus, if class considers the US Civil War, does a critique of the war arise from our being Mennonite or from a study of the evidence and a logical, thoughtful construction of alternatives? Only the latter has meaning outside the cloister. In my New Testament classes, we look at what Jesus says about violence. Sociologically, I recognize that I do this because I am Mennonite. But my students are asked to look at the evidence and reach a logical and

defensible conclusion. Many of them feel the need to invoke theology as a means to avoid what Jesus is saying. As their professor, I point this out to them but do not challenge the point. In this instance, the study of the Bible becomes a way of moving beyond sectarian theology rather than a way of instilling it.

If I taught peacemaking as a "Mennonite" thing, my students would automatically and logically believe that this idea had no relevance to them. If I teach it as a Jesus thing, they are forced to deal with this as a Christian issue. When they choose to argue with me about peacemaking being impractical or unrealistic, I tell them to argue with Jesus. In this way, we are not debating the superiority of one denominational position over another. We are trying to make sense of the words of Jesus as they apply to the world around us. There is always context to these discussions, but context does not allow us to speak drivel and pretend it is wisdom. There is no more nutrition in Mennonite cake than there is in Catholic cake.

On numerous occasions I have heard speakers say there is a generation of young people out there ready to hear the message of the gospel as articulated by the Mennonite churches. They are eager to hear about peacemaking and simplicity and following Jesus. The problem, as I see it, is that our message is not getting out to them. Rather, we are busy talking to one another in our own code. What does "Anabaptist" mean to most youth today? Nothing at all. Even if someone were to penetrate the code and realize there is good news hidden in these writings, the message too often is "come join our cloisters." We know what happens when idealistic youth show up at most Mennonite churches. Sure, we can all think of exceptions, but the rule is that they go away discouraged, never to return.

As teachers, then, we need to find a way to articulate the gospel beyond the Mennonite cloister code. This is not a call to "dumb it down." Most of us don't need any help in that area. Our guide, rather, should be the writer of the gospel of John, who managed to say the most profound things using the simplest vocabulary in the New Testament. His "code" was words like "life" and "bread," transformed into ideas of profound spiritual and social significance. If we can teach this way, then we can give students a vision and a message that does not come pre-coded as specifically "Mennonite." This, ideally, would provide them with the vocabulary and example of a gospel

for the world rather than a gospel for the cloister.

I realize that this paper has wandered into the category of the sermonic. It is more usual in academic journals to be descriptive, not prescriptive. My ending is a deliberate choice not to play the game. I have crossed the line that separates religious-study-as-science from religion-as-life-transformation. In most journals, crossing that line makes a paper unpublishable. In books, it means that an editor will move it from the academic section to the trade paper section. In teaching, it starts to sound like preaching.

So we face a dilemma in our writing and teaching. We can write for Mennonite journals and publishers, and publish material that will be read by a few fellow academics and occasional students in Mennonite colleges, or we can write for a broader audience and risk not being published at all. In the meantime, we can teach in such a way as to prepare our students to engage the world and challenge the church, or we can stay inside the cloister and invite students into the closed world of Mennonite language and thought. As I teach at Wichita State University, I regularly encounter students who are hungry for the challenge of the gospel. After thirteen years, I have yet to encounter a student who is hungry for Mennoniteness. There would be no point in attempting to create a desire for the latter, when it is so much easier to work with a desire that is already present.

Notes

[1] I will mostly use "Mennonite" in this paper rather than "Anabaptist," because I have little experience with Anabaptism outside the Mennonite church.

[2] An insider Mennonite reference. Insiders will know or guess that I am speaking to Harry Huebner of Winnipeg, who has long taught ethics at Canadian Mennonite University, and who happens to be married to my cousin.

[3] I realize that, in significant parts of this world, "Christian" is also roughly equivalent to "irrelevant." Our use of the modifier "Mennonite" only increases the irrelevance of our discussion. Using "Christian" as our frame of reference at least increases the number of fellow travelers on our journey.

[4] This is a significant issue in my life right now, as my son is a senior in high school. Do I really want to spend thousands of dollars to send him to an Irrelevant college?

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