Reflection

Alter Call: An Anabaptist Critique of Evangelical Authority

Paul Cumin

> Now I have friendly relations with a majority of my confrères over there and respect them as they are in a more difficult situation than I. Consider my moral scruples: it is not easy to write a pamphlet against living human beings and how can one be severe without usurping for himself the place of a judge?
>
> —Czesław Miłosz, *Letter to Thomas Merton*, January 7, 1959

I recently attended a conference with several hundred Evangelical-Anabaptist church leaders at which the stated aim was to reinforce our theological unity. The appointed consensus-builder chose the image of a sandbox as a metaphor, with the sides of the box representing the theological boundaries within which the rest of us were to assemble. His efforts soon recalled the cliché about herding cats, and the results of the conference eventually resembled what most cats would do in a sandbox. I blame Anabaptism for the mess. Anyone familiar with Anabaptists will know the palpable bristle among them when theology gets too prescriptive. Evangelicals, on the other hand, tend to respect and even enjoy a good burst of authority.

"Evangelical-Anabaptist." It's one of the things we Mennonite Brethren call ourselves, and I'm a pastor as well. However, neither of these names nor this role fit me easily. For almost forty years I've served in four different countries and six different denominations, each with dozens of associated parachurch organizations and institutions. From this breadth of experience, I have concluded that Evangelical-hyphen-Anabaptist means that the question of theological authority is, well, fraught.

I came to faith in the standard storybook way, sitting around a campfire, hearing about hellfire, and soon grew into the standard storybook version of 20th-century North American Christianity: Evangelicalism. Now, decades later, I find myself leading and learning within a congregation for whom a

The Conrad Grebel Review 38, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 40-58.

once-beloved identity as Evangelical-Anabaptist represents a serious, even existential, dilemma. For me, the hyphen between the two names represents an immense field of possibilities, even if at the moment I'm tempted to swing across it, smoothly away from my now tarnished Evangelical past and naively forward into whatever resolution an Anabaptist alternative might offer.

In this Reflection I'll be talking about Evangelicalism and not particular evangelical individuals. Attentive readers could easily point to exceptions to the broad-stroke caricatured version of Evangelicalism that I'm presenting here. I ask them to evaluate my account in light of my overall aim, which is to identify and address a set of problems theologically, not historically or sociologically.[1]

Biblicism—Evangelicals Worship their Bibles

For most of church history, the inspiration and authority of Scripture were accepted as more or less obvious. Then, during the Reformation, the Bible acquired a new role within a polemic against a perceived over-emphasis on the role of tradition. For Protestants, the Bible became the principal source of theological authority. By the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, Scripture as a theological source acquired another unique, and uniquely Evangelical, function. Fundamentalists wanted into a conversation in which "fallibility" and "errancy" were the accepted terms of exclusion. To be heard by the masses meant that the possibility of basic errors or uncertain authority had to be eliminated from the outset.

On the one hand, epistemological objectivity was the gold standard for knowledge established by modern science: something was true if it could be dispassionately observed, empirically measured, and subsequently re-tested as both. On the other hand, faith as psychological delusion was a common theme from Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, to whose compelling case liberal theology eventually replied on a spectrum from outright acceptance to degrees of concession. Combined, modern science and liberal theology seemed to make a simple demand of early Evangelicals: either find a claim to truth—a theological authority—outside the knowing

[1] Although unable to comment at length on this shortened version of his original submission because of time demands during the COVID-19 pandemic, the author has kindly granted CGR permission to publish it here.

subject's psyche or find an exit from public discourse.

Of the four usual sources of theological authority—Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience—only the first, the Bible, could be sufficiently distanced from subjectivity to suit the demand. The Bible as an object could be plausibly considered immune to the kinds of subjectivity that would disqualify it as a respectable source of authority. It could be re-presented to the public not as a set of religious texts authored and transmitted through history by various and vastly different human subjects, but as something fundamentally stable and objective. With this *sola scriptura* standpoint Evangelical theology now had what it needed to enter the public arena.

However, something important had changed. What the Reformers meant by *sola scriptura* was that the Bible alone should have precedence over other valid and fallible sources of theological authority, but what the early Fundamentalists needed was infallibility pure and simple. So the Bible became not just the most important but the *only* source of theological authority.

This change in the theology of revelation was made in order to engage in a conversation that either excluded or denied the possibility of divine revelation in the first place. A choice about the nature of theological knowledge was made for the sake of an *a*theological epistemology. Early 20th-century Evangelicals, i.e., Fundamentalists,[2] wanted the kind of knowledge people respected. The solution was to solidify the Bible to fit the bill. Problems began to compound, however, because the logic here was so tight: the Bible is obviously not itself God, yet Evangelicals had made it the only source of theological knowledge. Put these two beliefs together, and early 20th-century Evangelicalism had introduced a subtle and fateful distinction between God and revelation of God. But this distinction soon solidified into difference, and with it came the possibility of losing the theological plot entirely. The problem is that a difference between God and divine revelation means theology is no longer really about contact with God.

The Bible thus became the quasi-divinized object of faith. This subtle shift, never made explicit but in the end idolatrous, is what I'm calling

[2] There were non-fundamentalist Evangelicals at the time, and the term can be rightly used of even earlier Evangelicals but, alas, that is the whole problem in view in this essay. See George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 235-36.

"biblicism." The shift was not sudden nor is it yet complete, but a trajectory was set, and a swing was begun toward a new course whose unspoken aim is no longer knowledge of God but some kind of textual or historical or religious defense. This is exactly what late modernity prefers.[3]

Authoritarianism—Evangelicals Worship Their Leaders

A second way Evangelicalism compensates for a relatively inchoate system of theological authority is by empowering authoritarian leaders. Such leaders are needed for two related reasons. First, as an inanimate thing the Bible alone cannot act; to do anything, to exercise its authority, it must be handled in some way. While the notional authority remains with the thing, in practice it passes freely to its handler. Second, and more fundamentally, Evangelicalism has accepted an epistemology in which knowledge should be non-subjective. "Truth" must be absolute and unchanging. The combined effect means Evangelical Bible-handlers are responsible not just for stewarding the source of authority but for preserving its propositional content. And since the propositions are by definition unchanging, preserving them means preventing change. This is where we get the common image of church leaders as doctrinal police, and partly explains why Evangelicals are so enamored with apologetics.

The Bible is indeed a book. As such it must be read, or at least consulted, or at very least referred to in some way, in order to exercise its authoritative function. In theory Evangelicalism believes in the perspicuity of Scripture (any Christian can read and understand it), and in the priesthood of all believers (any Christian can mediate God's presence to the church). In theory this disperses the Bible's authority to every reader and implies a flat, democratic structure of theological responsibility. In practice, however, its authority is condensed and deferred to the preacher-leaders. Functionally, they are now the Delegated Hermeneuts (DHs), and the once-flat structure of theological authority has become vertical and at least potentially

[3] "When *sola scriptura* is used to underwrite the distinction between text and interpretation, then … [it] is a heresy rather than a help in the Church. When this distinction persists, *sola scriptura* becomes the seedbed of fundamentalism, as well as biblical criticism. It assumes that the text of Scripture makes sense separate from a Church that gives it sense."—Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 27, 28.

authoritarian.

The DH is considered particularly "strong" in Evangelical churches and organizations when the complexities of the Bible make only brief appearances in sermons or decisions enroute to tidy, clear resolutions. This mode of theology, simplistic but effective, removes ambiguity where uncertainty is destabilizing and provides cohesion where agreement is the basis for unity. In this arrangement, a DH and a church share a tacit agreement about how the system functions: he facilitates cohesion and agreement by keeping the terms and boundaries clear; non-leaders comply by attending or exiting the group when they agree or disagree with him.[4] The result is a culture of manufactured consensus, in which people experience a real sense of unity and cohesion, but only because it's been carefully managed so that no one holds substantially different views. It's a mostly peaceful and efficient scenario, but there is nothing especially Christian or theological about it. It's just ideological stability, an example that any group can play nicely when everyone agrees. If serious questions are asked only by those on their way into the sandbox or out of it, we can thank the boundaries and their keepers for the peace.

All this is based not on a belief in the Bible's authority but on a decision about what the Bible is and how its authority should function. It doesn't just *mediate* divine revelation, it *is* divine revelation. It's become divinized, making the presence of any actually divine authority, i.e., God, unnecessary. For the pious mind this shift is not a displacement of God but rather a heightened respect for God's word. However, in practice it makes at least two persons of the Trinity redundant; DH handlers of the now divinized book are in the mediatorial position and *de facto* arbiters of truth.[5]

What changed during the late Fundamentalist stage of Evangelicalism was not the normative role of Scripture per se but the normative role of *a belief in* the normative role of Scripture. It wasn't so much a change in the function of the Bible as a new way of rallying diverse Christians into a cohesive group and, when necessary, excluding other Christians from it. Biblicism became a form of Evangelical gerrymandering. Biblicism and

[4] DH leaders are almost always men.

[5] Cf. Paul Cumin, "Sex after Church," *Direction* 45, no. 2 (2015): 157-79. The same point is made with a Christological analogy.

authoritarianism are symbiotic.

Biblicism and authoritarianism are perfectly compatible for another reason. When we begin with the Bible rather than with Jesus for a theology of revelation, we lose any way to distinguish Jesus categorically among all the other biblical characters. With respect to leadership style, he will have notional priority over the apostles and prophets, but he is nonetheless among them as one of several "biblical" models of leadership. The meek and gracious attitude of Jesus might be the ideal, but it is only relatively better than the brash, inflammatory style of some of the prophets. The selfless love of Jesus may be the preferable option whenever convenient, but there are other less peaceful options for when it is not. The result is not just how this kind of hermeneutical loop reinforces systemic patriarchy but how the patriarchs it produces gain immense breadth of "biblical" justification for abjectly unchristlike styles of leadership.

Colonialism—Evangelicals Worship Evangelicalism

Within Evangelicalism is a presiding sense that the only correct posture towards anyone not an Evangelical is proselytization. This push toward multiplication and expansion has a profound effect within Evangelicalism. There is a *culture* of mission: the shared goal of converting others provides immense cohesive strength to the movement itself. The ends are in the means: by aiming to make new Evangelicals, the current ones are incentivized to set aside squabbles and cooperate on a larger objective. At play here is a semantic overlap between a theological concept of mission and a business-savvy technique for corporate efficiency. Mission has become not just a straightforward response to the Great Commission but a unifying principle for making the commissioners great. Evangelicalism's relative lack of theological depth is made up for in width; the movement expands not because it is great, but becomes great because it expands.

This drive to proselytize tends to be a characteristic on all the many checklists for identifying Evangelicals, but it has not always followed the same approach. Whereas earlier forms of Evangelicalism followed a stereotypically Anabaptist impulse to come out from the world, after World War Two Evangelicalism adopted a more Reformed mood about the relation

between the church and culture.[6] Modern Evangelicalism now largely views society and the state as terrain to be captured and eventually dominated by the Lordship of Christ. Secular culture is now less like Egypt and more like Canaan; it's no longer a domain from which God rescues his people but one into which he calls them to multiply, subdue, and possess.

This shift of posture is not as drastic as might first appear: both align with a binary narrative. The former version marks the crucial boundary between church and world, the latter places it between an exceptionally Christian culture and all others. In both cases the Evangelical posture was and remains isolationist. The exit-and-cloister impulse is isolationist in a straightforward, even physical way, while the enter-and-conquer impulse is isolationist in a subversive, ideological way. Each is a version of the strategy that says the best offense is a strong defense. Whereas the original defensive instinct aligned with Anabaptist ideals about real distance between church and state, now we have a movement that can somehow be both isolationist-defensive and expansionist-triumphal. This can partly explain the otherwise baffling compatibility of contemporary Evangelicalism and populist nationalism.[7]

By accepting modern science's commitment to empiricism and rejecting liberal theology's embrace of subjectivity, early Evangelicals restructured theology around a doctrine of revelation that at first favored and then relied exclusively on non-subjective propositional truths. To achieve this, divine revelation had to be reducible to a message that could be lifted from its original historical, social, and political context. The culture in which the divine propositions were originally delivered was only as important as a husk is to a kernel.

This is a problem. When a contextless, de-cultured message is authoritative for a religious community with an impulse for expansion, the result is a culture of mission with all the markers and effects of colonialism. Since the first thing to be said about divine revelation is not that God has

[6] See Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), esp. 266 ff.

[7] Unlike me, many historians don't find this baffling. See, e.g., John Fea, "Intellectual Hospitality as Historical Method" in *The Activist Impulse: Essays on the Intersection of Evangelicalism and Anabaptism,* eds. Jared Burkholder and David Cramer (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press, 2012), 82 ff.

become encultured and contextualized but has revealed a message that somehow transcends all cultures and contexts, stewards of this transcendent message have a divine imperative also to transcend all cultures—with the glaring exception of their own. If hundreds of millions of people imagine this is exactly the God-given point of their lives, it's a catastrophe. Such is the exceptionalist rationale for Evangelicalism's colonialist missiology. The results range from a simple lack of self-awareness to an explicitly baptized version of "manifest destiny." Either way it's a recipe for an ideology wherein one culture perceives all others as deficient to the degree they differ from itself while believing the remedy is only total surrender or assimilation. The remedy for all others, in short, is to cease being other.

This negation of otherness is relevant to theological authority in Evangelicalism. Sameness can unfortunately feel similar to unity. For capitalist democracies in general and Evangelicalism in particular, the homogenizing effects of colonialism are now multilateral: differences are eliminated in the process of expansion from *both* the sending *and* the receiving cultures. This flattening of difference is crucial. Any trend toward social, racial, political, and economic sameness provides Evangelicalism with much-needed, albeit theologically artificial, cohesion.

Can Evangelicalism Be Saved?

The three trends identified above—biblicism, authoritarianism, colonialism—reinforce each other in a theological web. What is driving so many problems with the Bible are neither hermeneutical nor exegetical issues. The problem with how Evangelicals handle the Bible is a misconstrued theology of revelation (and, consequently, a misconstrued bibliology—what we think the Bible is and why). This in turn is not really an epistemological problem (defining it as such was the modernist bait). Theology about revelation is just theology: knowledge of God and how God relates to the world.[8]

And how does God relate to the world? Recall the classic tension between immanence and transcendence: God is both "near" through the incarnation and the presence of the Spirit, and "far," uncreated and

[8] See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 56; John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), viii.

qualitatively other. This tension can never be fully resolved in Christian theology, but various systems lean in one direction or the other. Reformed theology, for example, when done well achieves a respectable tension with many constructive results. When done less well, or done under pressure from atheological decisions like biblicism, the ship of theology heels over, takes on water, and eventually capsizes.

When the transcendence of God is over-weighted, a systematic precedent is set to favor the general over the particular. That is, starting with God-as-other rather than Immanuel establishes a pattern in which otherness dominates relation throughout the theological web. In epistemology it's a preference for propositional over personal knowledge; in ecclesiology it's a preference for monolithic authority over congregational contingency; in mission it's a preference for collective ideology over interpersonal love. At each point the same choice for distinction over connection repeats itself. In Christology this habit means favoring one of Christ's two natures; in theological anthropology, favoring the self over society; in eschatology and ethics, separation rather than reconciliation; in theology proper, unity over triunity; in the doctrine of creation, stability over change, and so on.

The common theme in all these choices is a leaning towards an antagonistic metaphysic or an ontology of separation. At this level we get to what Christians really think is happening between God and the world, and about their faith in Christ. Evangelical structures of authority have effectively displaced Christ from the center of Christian systematic theology and things have unravelled accordingly from there: *sola scriptura* became biblicism, which deflated *the priesthood of all believers* into authoritarianism, and led to a culture no longer contingent on transforming union with God—*sola gratia*—but depended instead on transforming others into itself, colonialism. All this rests on what or in whom *sola fide* is placed, and then on how this crucial choice establishes a structural precedent for the whole theological system.

Anametaphysics—Rebaptizing *Sola Fide*

Western metaphysics offers only two options with respect to the nature of reality: either things are ultimately stable and unchanging or they aren't.[9]

[9] See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ.

Monotheisms generally tend toward the stable/unchanging end of this spectrum. When we say "God" we usually mean an ontological singularity, the source of being alongside of whom there is nothing else, unless this God should bring something else into being. That we believe such a God exists usually brings with it the related idea that everything else now alongside him depends for its existence, moment by moment, on God.[10] We contingent creatures experience change, flux, decay, and the like now, but ultimately we will arrive in or so near to God that everything will finally be stable, complete, perfect.

We go to church, we pray and worship, and we sometimes do theology, and these are ways of participating in or anticipating that ultimate perfection, the presence of God. But on these terms theology is about grasping something static. We might be humble about our limited access or modest about the strength of our grip, but still the aim is to find, know, and express (and defend) something that does not change. Since this something is the Ultimate And Absolute One Important Thing, doing theology becomes functionally inseparable from exercising authority and power. This is the root of our problem. It is not the kind of problem that can be solved with conceptual tinkering. It shapes the very way we ask questions and limits the possible answers in advance. If we already believe that everything is, someday will be, or somehow should be absolutely stable and unchanging, then we are bound to conclude that we should do everything in our power to expedite stability and then prevent change. However, this sets us up for conflict in a world full of change, difference, and complexity. Enacting our conviction will inevitably require coercion or, failing that, violence. This is why metaphysics and theology are so unpopular today: they seem to lead inexorably to oppression and suffering.

Western intellectual history can offer only one exit from this dilemma, namely that there is no ultimate stability or transcendent meaning to anything. Historically, this has been a marginal view.[11] But today it's common,

---

Press, 1993).

[10] There is no good reason for using masculine pronouns for God, especially when the scope, as here, is above or beyond the particularities of a given religious tradition. But neither are there any sufficient alternatives.

[11] David Bentley Hart makes this repeatedly and excruciatingly clear in *The Experience of God* (Yale, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2014).

and usually accompanied by the false idea that it's just the near-culmination of humanity's progressive emergence from pre-scientific darkness. People today believe in naturalism or materialism or maybe a softened nihilism as if these ideas are new, but they are not. What is truly new is about two thousand years old. It is still new because we don't yet have the conceptual tools to grasp it. With only a few exceptions we keep returning to variations on the two given options. Christians repeatedly reject the latter (chaos) and choose the former (stability). But there is a problem: the gospel. Within our given metaphysical terms, the idea that the Creator might become a creature and then die as such—that God would somehow *change*—simply does not compute.

Anabaptists have long functioned with an "implicit" theology, and the same is true of our association with metaphysics. But consider: the first radical reformers prioritized an encounter with God so completely that every other authority or power was deemed less significant. They risked death for their faith. This was a metaphysical decision. The ground and structures of the world had not been established in a past tethered through an unbroken succession to the present. Nor was what shapes and orients life real only in some inaccessible future; nor does everything that matters boil down to abstract ideals available only to the mind. The ground and structures of the world could be realized through a transforming present encounter with a living, present God.

Some have suggested that Anabaptists exhibit "existential" leanings; that is, they prefer a lived, embodied, praxis-oriented faith over other more cognitive, intellectualized, or dogma-oriented versions. While this is a valid use of the term *existential*, there are more possibilities. The pressing concern of 20th-century existential thought was how we seem to have much freedom except with the single most basic choice: whether to exist in the first place and whether to continue existing.[12] We just do. Then we have to figure out who we are, why we're here, and what to do about it. And then we don't. The implacable order of those facts captures both the wonder and torment of the

[12] The apparent preoccupation with suicide among existential thinkers is not as morose as first appears. They're not expressing a simple death-wish but rather the terms and terrain of our existential dilemma. See Paul Cumin, "Looking for Personal Space in the Theology of John Zizioulas," *IJST* 8, no. 4 (2006): 356-70.

human condition—and the connection between existential metaphysics and Anabaptist instincts.

Existentialists had an implicit metaphysic despite themselves, and were dismissed as enthusiasts and disdained for their esoteric popularity. Their driving conundrum was summarized by Jean-Paul Sartre: "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards."[13] This is the flux-and-change option at full strength. Having ostensibly rejected metaphysics, humans are left to find their "essence," their identity and purpose, on their own. We simply surge into existence and then must "define ourselves afterwards." The famous impetus to all this was the widely reported death of God, and how it made Sisyphus a hero, meant Hell is other people, and named the human condition as angst and nausea until nothingness. It's a brazenly atheistic assessment not obviously compatible with something as pious as Anabaptism. But if God is alive, indeed incarnate and risen from death and therefore triune, then recognizing these existential conditions could be another way of affirming a tenet of Christian theism dear to Anabaptists: we are free to find our own new and true identity. In this respect, to be "defined afterward" is like being ana-baptized. To be baptized "again" is to insist on finding one's own defining freedom after the preceding conditions of one's birth or institutionalized identity.

Again, a metaphysical truth is implied here. To imagine one could become someone other than the product of their given conditions hinges entirely on a belief that the creator of the world also grants us freedom from and within those very conditions. That this feels like a contradiction between the divine will and our own is a legacy of the deism that so many Evangelicals are determined to resuscitate. But this god is indeed dead and should be left to remain so. Existentialism rightly left this god behind but wrongly thought it was God. God, however, is not dead. Since this is the case, the humaneness of existentialism can be hopeful. Now human freedom needn't be a Sisyphean curse but received and enjoyed as an already-given gift. To swap the dead god for the Living One means we must also swap our notions of freedom. The freedom given by God is not diminished or put at

[13] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946 lecture), https://www.marxists.org/reference/ archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm.

risk by other people; rather it is only receivable from and within communion with Others and others.

In short, relations are ontologically constitutive, defining us and making us our true, essential selves. Persons and things can still be stable, but this stability *follows* rather than precedes our connections with everything and everyone else. If it weren't for God, this would be the old minority view about instability and flux. But God exists, so it isn't that. Nor is it the standard alternative. If relation is the most fundamental dynamic, there are no static ontological bits to cling to—neither deep inside us, nor beneath things, nor even in a realm of ideas or divine life. This is true not just of creatures but also of the Creator. Most monotheisms call this kind of thinking *heresy*: if God receives his being-in-relation, it is a slight on divine immutability and most other ideas about God. But this concern derives mostly from how we tend to think of God as an impersonal monad rather than as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Deism is hard to shake because it speaks to our felt need for stability. Who's to say God won't change, or just stop, or fail to pull through for us? Such is the demand for security from anything besides the personal trustworthiness of God. But fear must not be normative for theology. We can still believe God is unchanging and the Son is incarnate, and in all the other holy ideas, we just cannot rest them on anything other than our place in the Father's love of the Son in the Spirit. The ordering of these ideas is crucial, as it sets the systematic ship on keel or off. God isn't faithful because he's unchanging; God appears unchanging because he's so faithful. There is no higher ontological law about stability or immutability to which God must conform. Rather we believe he is faithful because that's the kind of God the Father, Son, and Spirit have shown us.

Swapping abstract immutability for relational faithfulness is exactly the metaphysical shift needed to oppose established structures of authority so people can live radically with and for others, even at great personal risk. I'm not suggesting that the Anabaptists' revolution started in left-bank French cafés or that their prison hymns and underground preaching included veiled speculations about the Trinity. Nevertheless, with a glance backward from this side of the 20th century and a hopeful one forward, the congruencies are hard to overlook.

Guerilla Theology—Rebaptizing *Sola Scriptura*

Early Anabaptists were so disaffected with established church authorities that they developed a radically different notion of biblical revelation: God reveals himself in Scripture not top-down through the channels of a Church magisterium but bottom-up, in and through a freely gathered laity as their collective witness affirms or rejects the words of their teachers and preachers. This gives an extraordinary amount of social space for individual freedoms. There's a nascent democracy here and a respect for personal conscience centuries before most of Europe could imagine either. The democracy in view is about an individual's free choice either to be ("re-") baptized and participate in shaping an alternate *polis* or to remain within state-sanctioned structures of politico-religious authority.[14]

This embrace of human freedom hinged entirely on a belief in God's freedom. God was free to work outside of and in opposition to the religious establishment; he could communicate with, and bring new life directly to, his people. The terrain of imaginable reality had altered from a world where truth is static and functionally absent to one where it (indeed, *He*) is alive and present.[15] God's freedom to be immediately real and the vibrant newness this presence brought could not be quenched either by fear of capital punishment or by threats from other lethal powers, because the Anabaptists had discovered something more sublime than the security of the status quo. They might call it *nachfolge Christi* (following Christ), and although we often interpret "following" in a narrowly moral sense, we might also call it *existential freedom.* They had found a way to follow Christ in which the conditions of their existence—political isolation, suffering, proximity of death—had become less metaphysically normative than their essential being: love for God and others.

However, this freedom did not lead to a scenario in which people

[14] "[T]he great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period."— Harold Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13, no. 1 (March 1944): 4. I freely signal my revisionist slant here. The events and ethos within early Anabaptism were excruciatingly more complex.

[15] An example of an occasion in which the "whole known network of meaning has collapsed and a new, dangerous situation of faith has emerged."—Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 2001), 96.

were especially agreeable. Early Anabaptism was not so much a cohesive movement as a multi-genetic hodgepodge of older ideas that finally found their footing in various places and ways across Europe. Anabaptist theology was indigenous to where and who people were, rising impromptu from their lived experience of God and their new freedom to interpret Scripture.[16] This legacy continues; we Anabaptists still consider ourselves "people of the book." But we must also insist that where the Spirit of the Lord is, the Bible is not alone. There is freedom to include contributions from the past and to welcome and affirm new experiences of God in the present, because the Spirit responsible for our hermeneutical community is unrestricted by time as we know it. This same Spirit co-authored our Scriptures, enabled their co-mission to us now, and is available to co-interpret them among us ever anew. The result is "guerilla theology": unofficial, conceptually minimalist, perpetually reforming in sometimes radical ways the work of rogue churches operating outside the rules of political compromise.[17]

The Joy of Sects—Rebaptizing the Priesthood of All Believers

Were the grassroots, ad hoc nature of this theology and the local, de-centralized, easily replaceable kinds of authority in these communities weaknesses due to the movement's infancy? Or was this theological authority as it should be: only strong when it is weak, only true when it is free? Let me suggest an answer to both questions: How a church structures itself *is* its theology. The only way to affirm the priesthood of all believers is to keep theological authority on the ground, spread-out, vulnerable to change, and shared among and across a gathered laity.

But if this is theological authority as it should be, who's to keep local churches from sliding into error? The only possible answer: Nobody. Not

[16] See C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 17. For an indication that this is not just a past-tense, historical reality, see Bruce Yoder, "Mennonite Missionaries and African Independent Churches: The Development of an Anabaptist Missiology in West Africa: 1958-1967," Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 2016; and his "Mennonite Mission Theorists and Practitioners in Southeastern Nigeria: Changing Contexts and Strategy at the Dawn of the Postcolonial Era," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 37, no. 3 (2013): 140.

[17] It could be accurate and constructive to describe Anabaptism as "ecclesiological anarchism." See Noam Chomsky, *On Anarchism* (New York: New Press, 2013).

God, certainly. Even more certainly, not any of his creatures. Nothing keeps us from theological error, and even a modest glance around any one of our churches or a quick flip through Anabaptist histories will reveal they're all a case in point. Full and complete orthodoxy is only an eschatological possibility. Being wrong with our ideas about God is something to be avoided whenever possible, but the category of concern here is several grades lower than what so many church authorities would have us believe. That the church has always survived and at times thrived with incomplete, mixed-up, or contradictory beliefs should assure us that doing likewise is nothing to fear. Fear is too easily a tool of control.

Our real concern should be right action. Theological error is a fact to be borne, a burden to carry, while we feed the hungry, tend the sick and dying, and seek justice—in short, as we behave like Jesus. In doing these things we find our collective burden lighter, our corporate knowledge of God clearer. Orthopraxy will mitigate heterodoxy. This is a loop—a good shared life opening minds and hearts to good theology, and inspiring that life to yet better living, and so on around, outward and onward—and it is the route to freedom. The route is clear, not needing boundary patrollers or priestly guides.

True, this kind of thinking has led churches to fracture and will almost certainly lead to more of the same. And church fractures have produced pain and suffering; more of this, too, seems inevitable. But a broken church is not always a moral failure. It can be God working through our weaknesses to save us from distortions to the gospel and the Christian life arising when theological authority gets too centralized; it can be the cruciform grace of God transforming our suffering into salvation from idolatrous impulses. Pain and suffering are not in themselves a symptom of unfaithfulness; indeed, the example of Christ and the martyrs suggests an entirely opposite, counterintuitive meaning. This is true of both an individual's life and a church's corporate life: being small, seemingly insignificant, even dying, are perfectly compatible with being faithful. The felt need to be large and secure, institutionally significant, or ideologically compelling does not arise from a straightforward grasp of the gospel. In this respect Evangelicalism's lack of theological authority is not the problem, but the many destructive ways it attempts to compensate for this lack.

Centrifugal Church—Rebaptizing *Sola Gratia*

The issue is sharpest today in missiology. How do we "share" the gospel or "make" disciples without taking an authoritarian, even colonialist, posture over the unbelieving other? At root is the postmodern conundrum about the possibility of making any assertions or predications whatsoever. It's as if our capacity for language is our capacity for violence.[18] I contend that "language" covers the way everything we say is laden with how we see the world and how this world has already been shaped by what's conceivable within the rules or "grammar" of our language. It's another loop—this time headed in the opposite direction, away from freedom. It's not just that we see what we want to see, but also how we foist these wants onto others and diminish both their lives and ours.

The concern here is *hegemonic discourse:* those who control the discourse, the "hegemons," maintain their power and privilege by keeping the story straight and continuing to talk. If the narrative is large enough and the grammar clear enough, sheer momentum will provide the needed cohesion. Dissenting views are thus grammatically incorrect and incomprehensible. Any interruption to the presiding or "meta" narrative can only come from outside the linguistic group and is therefore unworthy of audience. This is filibuster theology with no conceivable adjournment. The theological authorities in these systems may be perfectly benign. While probably not consciously or deliberately manipulating others, they are being manipulated by their own grammar, the accepted norms of ways of speaking and thinking. This is the metaphysics-is-intrinsically-violent problem mentioned earlier, couched here in terms of language and grammar. The problems are pre-cognitive: we tend not to think *about* our language because we think *with* it. This is most common where privileges groom us from very young to expect others to listen to us.

The sentence above is a case in point. A white man (me) has just framed a problem about authority with himself ("us" / "others") at the center. When I wrote that sentence, I wasn't even trying to exhibit the problem I'm attempting trying to describe, yet in the process I've demonstrated

[18] See Maxwell Kennel, "Mennonite Metaphysics? Exploring the Philosophical Aspects of Mennonite Theology from Pacifist Epistemology to Ontological Peace," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 91, no. 3 (2017): 216.

how systemic privilege has prepared me to understand problems as if I am somehow central to their solutions, even if it's the problem of my own centrality I'm trying to address. In this respect the most well-intentioned advocates and ostensibly progressive speakers can displace others, even in an honest effort to bring them in.[19]

This isn't a complaint about who is in the center at any given moment, as if simply swapping one narrator for another would solve the problem. It's that there is a center at all. Is there any escape from this? If the act of communicating with others is at best hospitality, an invitation into the world I inhabit, or at worst a form of subliminal coercion to accept as your own the world I've made, then the question is the basic theological one: Who after all is the creator? Is it humanity, shaping our selves and worlds with the language and grammar we make up? Or is it God? "The reason we are not fully enslaved to the fellow humans from whom we learn to talk," says Robert Jenson, "is that finally it is not they but God who so talks as to enable talking. There can be no rebellious gains, or defense of, any given discourse if and only if there is a Word before all human conversations that is the latter's possibility and beginning." Jenson goes on to re-theologize contemporary philosophical language; he says that God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is a conversation, that the act of creation is God's address to others, and that being human means being invited into this conversation. God, then, is a "meta-hegemonic discourse."[20]

The only way a community can speak without excluding others is to have one at its center—the One—who is existentially both divine and human. Jesus has his being-in-relation-for-others: immanent by kenosis and transcendent in cruciform love. This self-emptying, self-giving incarnate Son can therefore be central without de-centering others. With such a one

[19] "The problem with an inclusionary approach…is that it simply widens the boundaries of the stable center that continues to be maintained. In an inclusion model, debates about inclusion/exclusion will go on the same way with minor changes in process…. [T]he center that makes it possible to include and exclude in the first place, continues to govern the whole."—Melanie Kampen, "Unsettling Mennonite Theological Methods," a paper delivered at the *Humanitas Anabaptist-Mennonite Theology* conference in Langley, BC, June 2017.

[20] Robert Jenson, "On Hegemonic Discourse (1994)" in Robert Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics. Essays on God and Creation*, ed. Stephen John Wright (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 18-22.

at the center, it is always open, not vacant but perpetually moving outward, away from itself in a love renewed every moment from God and as the self-existence of the God who is love. A Christocentric church will be a centrifugal church.

Followers of Jesus can neither solidify into an institution gathered round a static center nor huddle inside stable boundaries. We are a living, enSpirited body motivated perpetually outward by our head.[21] Since God has neither an exclusive center nor a limiting boundary, neither should our theology. "Theological authority," then, is an oxymoron. Ideas and beliefs about God cannot be prescribed for others without diminishing the purpose and function of theology. Unless it inspires rather than controls, frees rather than binds, and is continually dying and rising rather than clinging to its own wellbeing, theology will not find the God revealed in Jesus.

***

What I've written in this Reflection is perhaps not "Anabaptist" in any historically valid sense, but I trust it imbibes some of the radical and reforming spirit of what got our history moving. I feel more hopeful at the end of this essay than I did where it began. It may turn out that all this was less about an exasperated slide from one end to the other of my Evangelical-Anabaptist identity, and more about a renewed appreciation for the hyphen in the middle that could yet hold it all together.

Paul Cumin is former senior pastor of Lendrum Mennonite Church in Edmonton, Alberta.

[21] That so much Anabaptist life has huddled inside colonies reveals how the original spirit and bodily life of a movement can so easily drift away. Chris Huebner recoups this somewhat by suggesting a properly pacifist epistemology would be "nomadic" and "diasporic." See Chris Huebner, "Globalization, Theory, and Dialogical Vulnerability: John Howard Yoder and the Possibility of a Pacifist Epistemology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 76, no. 1 (2002): 49-62.