
Becoming Anabaptist- Mennonite: The Contemporary Relevance of Sixteenth- Century Anabaptism

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Revisions in the telling of the history of a tradition eventually result in revised understandings of what it means to stand in that tradition. The last two decades of scholarship on sixteenth-century Anabaptism have produced several revisionist interpretations whose contemporary implications have as yet received little discussion. This essay poses itself as one attempt to interpret what it means to stand in the Anabaptist tradition as described by the recent historiography.

Historical ties still link Mennonites to the sixteenth century. Without bonds to Anabaptism and to Menno Simons, there would not be people today carrying Menno's name. Whether or not the bearers of the name allow Menno or other parts of the early tradition to make an impact on their lives and beliefs, continuing to accept the name at least implies such links and influence. To accept that the Anabaptist reformation from four and a half centuries ago should help define a people — Mennonites — today is a statement of faith, a decision and a commitment to allow a particular historical tradition to have an impact on those who live within it. On the basis of that faith stance, this essay is an attempt to articulate an Anabaptist direction for the late twentieth century.

Some who could claim a link to the Anabaptist past have attempted to cut it, as shown by dropping the designation Mennonite, or by accepting other origins and influences as more significant and formative. If individuals, a congregation, or an entire conference or denomination decide to reject their Anabaptist roots and to adopt another set of roots as more significant or important, that step is also an act of faith and a confession of faith. Such a change is not a rejection of tradition but an

exercise in choosing and committing oneself to a particular historical tradition from which one will accept guidance. In this essay, therefore, I am attempting to articulate one particular faith stance which could be posed over against other particular faith positions.

Earlier scholarship on Anabaptism, frequently associated with the name of Harold S. Bender, posed a normative Anabaptism, as an alternative to both Fundamentalism and Liberalism. With a normative form, which originated in Zurich through the leadership of Conrad Grebel, discussion of contemporary relevancy revolved around such images as "recovery" of the early "Anabaptist vision."

Revisionist scholarship has pointed to multiple origins for Anabaptism, as well as establishing clear links between figures and events which the normative view had sought to disassociate from "true" Anabaptism. Such interpretations mean that historical scholarship cannot identify an early normative movement, while a strong sense of historical particularity renders impossible the idea of "recovering" an earlier particular vision. Elements to take seriously from the new scholarship when discussing its contemporary relevance include the observations concerning its multiple origins and the recognition of Anabaptism as a diverse and pluralistic movement.

A tempting approach — in the light of contemporary Mennonite pluralism — might be to affirm as a blessing the pluralism of early Anabaptist and Mennonite history. In this way, each contemporary Mennonite group could find some element from the sixteenth-century movement with which to identify and thus feel a kinship with the tradition. I would argue, however, that while pluralism is a fact of contemporary Mennonite life — as well as of the sixteenth-century Anabaptism — pluralism, or the acceptance of it, in and of itself is no virtue. Acceptance of pluralism is not an attitude which provides guidance for the Christian life. In fact, the other side of pluralism as an operative principle is the assumption that none of the options has any ultimate significance, which leaves an individual to be shaped and influenced by the vicissitudes of the larger culture in which one lives.

Earlier, inter-related attempts to define a normative "Anabaptist vision" foreshadowed the recent emphasis on diversity and multiple origins in telling the story of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement. Well known is Harold S. Bender's synthesis, "The Anabaptist Vision," which he originally presented as the presidential address to the American Society of Church History in December 1943. Many of its salient points are found in previously published works of his friend and colleague Robert Friedmann.¹ Further differentiation in the description of that Anabaptism came from Mennonite scholars such as Friedmann or Cornelius Krahn or challenges from without like that of Hans Hillerbrand.² The "vision" came in at least four versions, each of which

intended to describe Anabaptism and apply it to the present.³ There was the interpretation favored by John Horsch, who saw true Anabaptism as a kind of proto-fundamentalism. He emphasized the inspiration and authority of scripture, personal commitment to Christ, correct belief, separation of church and state, and high personal and corporate morality.⁴ This view retains currency in the periodical *Sword and Trumpet*. There was Harold Bender's normative Anabaptism, characterized by discipleship, the church as a voluntary community, and nonresistance. This view interpreted Anabaptists as the most consistent Protestants, those who completed the reformation begun by Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli.⁵ Writings of John C. Wenger and much denominational literature, such as the recent *Foundation Series* of Sunday school materials, carry on this perspective. C. Henry Smith posed a third version as a kind of counterweight to the first two. Smith characterized Anabaptists as quite individualistic progenitors of such modern ideas as separation of church and state, freedom of conscience, and tolerance and openness in matters of religion.⁶ A number of General Conference Mennonite writers have continued this interpretation. Finally, a fourth view envisioned Anabaptism as a countercultural community posing itself as a prophetic alternative to the existing social order. This view shows a great willingness to generalize from Anabaptist principles to other issues, as in arguing, for example, that opposition to violence demands a reform of the American penal and judicial system. The "Concern Movement" which produced the pamphlet series of the same name, and *The Politics of Jesus* and other writings of John H. Yoder have given visibility to this perspective. Of course, these four versions overlap and are not mutually exclusive. As distinguishable outlooks, however, they contribute to our perceptions of the pluralistic character of the Anabaptist movement, and show how the recent moves to describe plural origins and absence of a normative Anabaptism need not appear as a big step.⁷

Should one accept the Anabaptist tradition or another one? What does it mean to accept a tradition for one's own? How does an individual go about living within or giving expression to a tradition? These are multi-faceted questions. The following outlines an approach to this complex discussion, and suggests some answers and avenues for further discussion on the question of the contemporary relevance of Anabaptism. The first section deals with the issue of finding commonality in the midst of plurality.

Vision, Visions, or What?

As recent scholarship has underlined, several distinct Anabaptist groups originated in the sixteenth-century. Even if one could perform the impossible and transplant a recovered movement in a new age, the diversity of the early movement would complicate the problem of decid-

ing what is relevant and appropriate for the present. Historical study does not identify one group as normative, and in fact they never fused completely. Although the surviving Anabaptist groups across western Europe did come to constitute a related set of traditions with various kinds of interaction and mutual aid, not until the 1980's did Swiss congregations, which descended directly from sixteenth-century Swiss Brethren and without any causal links to Dutch Anabaptism, begin to call themselves Mennonites. Descendants of both Dutch and Swiss Anabaptists developed a greater cohesion in colonial North America than in Europe, around the writings of Menno Simons and the *Martyrs Mirror* but with Swiss-South German cultural dominance. These Mennonites thus constituted a different tradition than the Dutch Anabaptist heirs, who began arriving in North America in 1874, via extended sojourns first in Prussia and then in Russia. The Mennonites from Russia brought several diverse outlooks themselves.

Nonetheless, the various members of these two major streams — Swiss-German and Dutch-Russian — in North America, do share a historical legacy and relationship which we can follow to the present. And in North America — and even on a worldwide scale, if the atmosphere at World Conference in Strasbourg was any indication — the heirs to sixteenth-century Anabaptism have attained perhaps the highest levels of cooperation and agreement in outlook ever reached by diverse Anabaptist groups. In the midst of the diverse origins and development of early Anabaptism, the movement's heirs do inherit a legacy which can inform their attempts to be "God's people" in the late twentieth century.

Several themes evolved as common to the various groups. Together these themes describe a way to be the church. While descriptions of this way vary, they almost always include some form of the following. The church is characterized as a brotherhood or community, which gives it a position as an alternative society both to the dominant society with its government which usurped authority in religious affairs, and to the established church which depended on the government and pretended to encompass all of that society. Crucial is the idea of discipleship or following Jesus, or a christocentrism which makes both the life and teaching of Jesus normative for the community of the church. Rejection of a resort to violence, and nonresistance to evil follow as a specific manifestation of discipleship. Derived from these principles or closely related to them as means for preserving and protecting the church are such specific things as separation, church discipline, missions, individual freedom of conscience, sharing, mutual aid and community of goods, refusal of oaths, and refusal to hold public offices. Baptism of adults follows from the church as a voluntary society. Absence of a hierarchy in the church reflected the emphasis on community and brotherhood. All Anabaptists rejected the Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed ideas on the bodily presence of Jesus in

the communion bread and wine, and adopted symbolic views of the Lord's Supper similar to and derived from the so-called sacramentarians, Karlstadt and Zwingli.

All Anabaptists appealed to the Bible as the source of these beliefs and saw themselves as working to restore New Testament Christianity. Since the entire Reformation asserted the authority of the Bible as a counterweight to the Roman Church's assertions of the authority of pope and tradition, taking the Bible seriously or emphasizing the authority of the Bible in themselves cannot be singled out as characteristics unique to Anabaptists. They did however develop a distinctive way to take the Bible seriously which reflected their unique outlook. While the Protestant reformers tended to retain the right of interpretation for the authoritative teachers, Anabaptists put the Bible in the hands of lay people and involved every member in interpretation by making the believing community of voluntary members the locus of interpretation. Further, the assumption of the normative value of the teaching and example of Jesus and also of the early church gave a priority to the New Testament, and particularly to the narratives about Jesus. Anabaptists thus developed a kind of canon within the canon,⁸ and they read the Bible not as a flat series of propositions and timeless allegories, but with a sense of direction and development from the Old Testament to the New Testament.

The radicals who became Anabaptists did not set out with separatism as a forming principle, but it became a part of their identity. They had originally intended to challenge and reform the prevailing structures. It was by a kind of "trial and error" that the radicals arrived at the fact and the idea of a separated church which stood as an alternative to existing structures. Whether it concerned Karlstadt in Wittenberg and Orlamünde or the radicals in Zürich or Waldshut or in South Germany or Melchior Hoffman in Livonia and the Low Countries, their reform efforts began with roles in the existing established churches. While the intent to follow Jesus and their biblicism may have supplied those impulses which differed from the magisterial Protestants, it was opposition and persecution which forced the radicals outside the established church and helped to instill a sense of separation. Such things as opposition to the tithe demonstrate a clear social component to their reform goals. When they failed to remake the established church along the lines of their vision of a more just society, that social component received expression through the structure of an alternative society, outside of or separated from both established ecclesiological and political structures. This process moved at varying rates of speed for the several groups. Reaching the idea of a separated church came much more rapidly for the Swiss Brethren at Schleithem than for the Melchiorite tradition, which was eventually reshaped by Menno Simons.

The central themes from the description of the Anabaptist-Men-

nonite tradition do not belong to Anabaptists and Mennonites alone. In recent times, the way of being Christian which begins with the church as the voluntary, disciplined community of adult believers which follows the example of Jesus has come to be called the believers' church tradition. It depicts an outlook running through the entire history of Christianity, sometimes as a motif within the dominant church, sometimes gaining expression through a structural alternative to the established church. It is probably the case that one can locate all these principles somewhere within the monastic tradition. The Czech Brethren, the Quakers, the Church of the Brethren, the Disciples of Christ, and the Churches of God are other particular traditions which attempted to structure an alternative church of voluntary believers modeled on Jesus. The believers' church motif is receiving striking visibility in certain elements of the modern Catholic Church. While most of these movements are not causally related, they all reflect a way of being the church identifiable throughout Christian history.⁹ While the believers' church tradition did not begin with sixteenth-century Anabaptism, the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition is one of the clearly identifiable, particular historical manifestations of that way of being Christian.

It is possible to identify some priorities within the list of characteristics of the believers' church, the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition. That is, some themes are derivative of or dependent upon other themes. These first level principles have stood as assumptions within the believers' church tradition from the origins of Christianity. These universal ideas include at least the following: i) The assumption that Jesus is the norm of truth, the belief that the will of God is revealed in the particular humanity of Jesus and that Jesus' life and teaching thus form the baseline against which Christians evaluate their own activity. This idea has frequently found expression via the term *discipleship*; ii) The communal or social nature of the church which follows Jesus. That is, to follow Jesus involves a new way of life which expresses itself in redeemed attitudes and relationships toward people both inside and outside the church. This communal or social orientation does not deny individuality or the personal nature of one's faith, but says rather that the individual's faith attains its meaning in terms of the *believing community*; iii) Peace, *rejection of violence*, and nonresistance as a particular manifestation of following the example of Jesus. Jesus' specific rejection of the violent option of the Zealots through his nonresistant confrontation of evil belongs in a central way to the nature of the kingdom of God revealed by Jesus' life and teaching.

These assumptions with regard to Jesus as norm, the social or communal nature of the church, and the inherently peaceful nature of the community of Jesus' followers are more than a list of propositions — or creed — to be accepted or rejected on an individual basis. At the same

time, they are not a precise model for copying. Rather, they function together to depict a stance, an outlook, an attitude, which assumes that the church is a foretaste or visible witness to or representation of the kingdom of God made visible by Jesus. This way of living in the world begins by accepting Jesus as Lord and the New Testament as the repository of writings on the life and teaching of Jesus, and then expresses that acceptance in a complete lifestyle. These assumptions describe an outlook which collapses if any part of it is removed. The ideas function as regulative principles,¹⁰ a set of interdependent beliefs which structure a way of life, an alternative society. They deal with the relationships between people, so that the church is truly a new society, and its lifestyle authenticates what it believes.

While the principles establish an orientation or direction, they do not enable us to absolutize any particular manifestation of them. For example, while all sixteenth-century Anabaptist groups had expressions of brotherhood or community resulting from renewal as Jesus' followers, relatively few extended community to mean common ownership of property, and only the Hutterites developed community of goods into a lifestyle on a long-term basis. Further, the broad Anabaptist tradition itself is only one of a number of believers' church manifestations. None should be canonized as an absolute or normative form. On the other hand, each has significance as a particular manifestation of the believers' church.

The Anabaptist groups developed in differing contexts. The believers' church idea was not present as a unified vision or set of regulative principles at the outset for any of the radical groups. However, parts of the core of themes were present in various combinations. Eventually the originally diverse Anabaptist movement came to embody them in its several continuing groups. Thus through historical processes and coincidences or through divine providence, depending upon one's expressions, there thus emerged from the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement another set of groups which came to reflect the believers church motif, present since the origin of Christianity and which has appeared in other forms as well since the sixteenth century. From the pluralistic Anabaptist origins has emerged a set of traditions, all of which to some extent are regulated by the believers' church principles given particularly by sixteenth-century Anabaptism. I suggest that it is the operation of these regulative principles which can and should continue to define Mennonites as a religious movement. Adherence to the believers' church outlook which is rooted in the nature of the Christian faith shows how the particular Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is a base from which to address all aspects of Christian faith and practice. It also shows how a measure of commonality — a core outlook — came to be discerned within the plurality of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.

Reform, Recovery, Restitution, or What?

In this section I discuss the application of the believers' church idea to the present. Various images and terms have been used to describe the relationship between past and present, including reform, recovery, restoration and restitution. How do we understand the contemporary relevancy of the Anabaptist tradition? What image is compatible with the complex Anabaptist origins and with the Believers' Church outlook?

The idea of regulative principles encompasses an approach which both maintains continuity with the original roots while also enabling their adaptation to new contexts or a changed environment. That is, it conserves an outlook which can be expressed in a variety of new or changing forms. In much of Anabaptist and believers church history since the Reformation, the discussion of continuity and change and of contemporary relevancy has revolved around terms such as *restoration* or *restitution* or *recovery*. John H. Yoder has developed this issue in such a way as to distinguish a believers' church idea of restitution from other kinds of appeals to church history or to the historical tradition.¹¹

The idea of restitution depends upon a thought pattern which divides all of church history into three epochs. First, the church existed in an early normative state. Then came a fall or departure or deviation from the earlier norm, a degeneration great enough to rupture historical continuity. Finally there was a radical renewal attempt to restore the essence of the earlier normative state. This world view, broadly described, fits the self-perception of many historically-oriented religious groups. It also applies to other historical movements or epochs, such as the Renaissance, some of whose figures thought of themselves as giving rebirth to ancient Greek and Roman civilization in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. When stated generally, this tripartite outlook applied not only to Anabaptists but "was common to all reform tendencies" of the sixteenth century.¹² Used generally, therefore, a restitution motif was not unique to Anabaptism, and does not distinguish Anabaptists from other protagonists of the Reformation.

Using believers' church motifs, Yoder suggested a redefinition of the term *restitution*, which would enable the user to distinguish Anabaptists from the established Protestants of the sixteenth century. This redefinition, according to Yoder,

must a) include an alternative to the social shape of the fallen Christendom it rejects, not only to doctrinal formulations or churchly practices. It must further b) identify *within* Scripture its base line, especially with regard to the relationship of the Testaments; and it must c) locate the authority to read Scripture somewhere (the prophet, the congregation, everyman) outside the establishment.¹³

Another important aspect of Yoder's redefinition is the ongoing

nature of restitution. It is not a one-time, once-for-all event, but a continuing process of renewal — a process continually calling the church to examine itself in the light of Jesus and its earlier history. The notion of an ongoing or continuing critique of the church changes the view of history from a static entity composed of three neat epochs into an ongoing movement — perhaps analogous to a river rather than a series of ponds — with a direction determined in part by human choices¹⁴. Every epoch features particular historical manifestations of apostasy as identified by the criteria from within history, in comparison with Jesus and the New Testament. Recognition of this apostasy then stimulates corresponding attempts to restore a redefined faithfulness.¹⁵ Yoder described this outlook as “a continuing series of new beginnings, similar in shape and spirit, as the objective historicity of Jesus and the apostles, mediated through the objectivity of scripture, encounters both the constants and the variables of every age to call forth ‘restitutions’ at once original and true-to-type, at once unpredictable and recognizable.”¹⁶

The ongoing nature of restitution means that the church is never complete. Followers of Jesus witness to the kingdom of God and make it visible on earth, but the kingdom as represented by the church is never fully or finally or definitively established by human activity. That culmination awaits and depends upon God. This is not a defeatist statement about the inefficacy or unimportance of human activity but a simple awareness and acceptance of human finitude and limitation. In traditional orthodox language, one might call it awareness of the reality of original sin.

The idea of ongoing restitution allows the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition to adapt to its inevitably changing environment, to make use of new forms and modern technology and newly developed scholarly tools in the process of continuing renewal. Since the recovery or restitution is never completed, one cannot freeze the formulations and practices of one particular epoch as the definitive ones for recovery or preservation, as though all following novel developments were of necessity misguided or to be rejected. In effect, an attempt to freeze formulations and practices creates a post-biblical canon. While new technology or novel ways of looking at theology or the church can and have led the church astray, the new is not inherently wrong just because it is new. Using the criteria of Jesus, the New Testament and the earlier tradition, the novel is to be evaluated, adopted, adapted or rejected as a part of the process of restitution. The continuing nature of restitution even allows the church to change its mind about innovations and technology without abandoning the criteria from within history and the New Testament. For example, Mennonites initially rejected the revivalist form as a threat to the brotherhood principle of the church. At the end of the last century, John S. Coffman helped Mennonites in the Swiss-German tradition to adopt

revivalism in a form adapted to a congregational format and it became the means by which several generations of Mennonites were brought to commitment to the church.¹⁷ More recently, Marlin Jeschke has shown again how a nurture model is "the more excellent way" to bring to salvation the children who grow up within the loving fellowship of the church.¹⁸ After initial great concern and many years of caution about movies and the radio and television media, many Mennonites have come to accept all these in some degree as tools for proclaiming a Mennonite message.

If change is not inherently wrong, neither is the new — progress — inherently good. Clearly a change can result in abandonment or selling out of the foundational ideas or orientation. Change can take unfaithful as well as faithful directions. For example, if reaction against one generation's restrictive rules results in an openness to or toleration of behaviors which contradict the example of Jesus — such as accepting acts or institutions which kill people — that change is an unfaithful change. At stake is not the notion of whether there can be change, but whether we recognize that change can result in an unfaithful as well as a faithful attempt to restate the tradition.¹⁹

Many junctures in Mennonite history have seen renewal efforts or attempts to reformulate traditional Mennonite understandings and practices. It is the presence and continued influence of the regulative principles which identifies the renewal movements and the reformulations as faithful or unfaithful to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

The story of sixteenth-century origins described how Swiss, Dutch, south German and Moravian Anabaptist groups took quite different routes to arrive at the idea of the church as a separated brotherhood or community, which claimed to follow the example of Jesus and eventually made nonresistance a normative stance. Other scholarship has described a number of transformations within this Anabaptist tradition, stimulated by changing circumstances in the several centuries since the Reformation. For example, after colonial American Mennonites acquired security and wealth in the New World and no longer endured persecution for their faith, suffering ceased to make sense as the expression of nonconformity or separation from the world. Richard MacMaster describes how "humility" then came to replace suffering as the operative motif for the expression of nonconformity or separation.²⁰ Theron Schlabach earlier described the transformation of the humility outlook into the more aggressive revivalist and fundamentalist idiom, with the result that the distinct Mennonite emphasis such as nonresistance moved out of the heart of the gospel and ended up in a category called "restrictions."²¹ From a theological standpoint, this restatement weakened peace theology by making it less central to the gospel. Nonetheless, present in some form throughout all these changes was the intent to continue to be a

peaceful community which followed the example of Jesus. What differed was the form this outlook received.

The Mennonite experience in Russia might supply another example of transformation. Stimulated by a variety of European contacts, the Mennonite Brethren emerged as a structured renewal movement in the 1860's. Hard feelings existed and persisted on both sides, with each accusing the other of having abandoned the Mennonite tradition. The Brethren thought that the Old Church or *Kirchliche* had substituted formalism and physical birth for conversion and living faith, thus lacking the ability to separate the faithful from the uncommitted. The *Kirchliche* charged the Brethren with emotionalism, ethical weaknesses, individualism, exclusivism and fracturing of the Mennonite peoplehood. However, by the eve of World War I, there had evolved two versions of the believers church. One emphasized the *Gemeinschaft* (fellowship) practiced in the local *Gemeinde* (church), while the Old Church attempted to include the entire diffuse Mennonite community within the *Gemeinschaft* of the church. According to John B. Toews, neither of these was inherently more true to the tradition than the other.²²

The possibility of unfaithful change is present with each renewal effort. As renewal has come to Mennonites, it has always involved an element or a stimulus not currently a part of the tradition. An inevitable struggle for dominance then occurs between the traditional and the new. In the course of the renewal, do the traditional regulative principles regulate the new forms as well, so that it is truly a new form of what already existed? Or, does the new form become, in effect, a new set of regulative principles, with the former core now peripheral? Examples of both kinds abound in Mennonite history, with the shifts often involving the regulative principle of nonresistance. Using this model, one would then say, for example, that for the Daniel Brenneman schism, which was first the Mennonite Brethren in Christ and eventually the United Missionary Church, revivalist impulses became more important than the Mennonite core of regulative principles. Such has also frequently proved to be the case with attempts to fuse Mennonite principles and Fundamentalism. The Harder-Kauffman study shows the Anabaptist-Mennonite regulative principles to be weakest where the Fundamentalist outlook was strongest.²³ In effect, the Fundamentalist agenda, rather than the Anabaptist-Mennonite core, had become the actual regulator. At another part of the spectrum, those Mennonites who have most stressed notions of tolerance and freedom of conscience have also experienced difficulty in expressing what it meant to be Mennonite.²⁴ That is, the more a group accepts and tolerates diversity and individualism, the less the regulative principles actually regulate the conduct of the group. To what extent is a group truly standing within the tradition — truly regulated by the tradition — if nonresistance, for example, is left to the individual conscience

and nearly all the individual consciences opt for military service? This scenario in fact happened with a number of Mennonite congregations during the second World War.

Some Contemporary Implications

To develop all the implications of looking at all of Christian faith and practice from the perspective of a believers' church, Anabaptist-Mennonite core of regulative principles would far exceed the size and scope of this essay. The following only suggests a few avenues for ongoing discussion and renewal in the context of the current orientation of North American society.

On community. That the linkage between the members of the church is not incidental but belongs to the essence of the church is a vitally important message for the late 20th century. The meaning of the church as a community is not limited simply to the free association of consenting adults after they recognize their parallel but individual experience of salvation. The reconciled and redeemed relationship between individuals, made visible by their linkage in the church, is the result of grace. Religion is not simply the story of "my personal salvation and my religious history." Reconciliation between individuals belongs as much to the essence of salvation as does reconciliation to God, and the two dimensions exist together inseparably. The sense of community has many dimensions and applications, both for American society as well as for the churches.

In contrast to the communal nature of the believers' church, modern western society is characterized by a rampant individualism. A few, obvious examples make the point. This individualism is exemplified by a comment I hear frequently from students in my ethics class: "What is right for me may not be right for you, but the important thing is that each of us makes up his mind for himself." While students seem comfortable with the fact that this outlook makes each individual a supreme authority unto himself or herself, they fail to see that this individualism is actually a social stance with problematic implications. Only when I start asking whether the right of the individual to decide right and wrong applies to Adolf Hitler or to the Boston Strangler do they start to realize that some kind of standard exists apart from the individual. The rampant individualism — call it selfishness — is quite obvious in commercials. A nationally known candy bar used to brag that it was big enough to be shared with a friend, and TV commercials showed friends happily sharing the treat in communal good will. The recent commercial for that candy bar had the consumer hiding in a closet so that he could eat the whole thing by himself without having to share. A tool commercial pictures a man working with great care to build his own sailboat, for which he obviously will need the best tools. Accompanying the picture, a voice

sings, "You're doing it right, 'cause it means more when you're doing it for yourself." Such a message only works within the assumption that the individual takes supremacy over the common good and over anything one does for others. This appeal to individualism and to selfishness appeared front and center in recent political campaigns. One need merely note a slogan such as "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" or the fact that in the 1984 United States presidential campaign, civil rights or ecological concerns — issues which envision minority cultural groups or the common good — very much took a back seat to economic issues touching middle class American pocketbooks.

When envisioning society as a whole, the communal component of the Anabaptist tradition provides an alternative to this individualism. Jesus' followers are not on their own, guided only by the sincerity of their motives. They take their cues from the Bible and the tradition as mediated and interpreted by the community of believers. The believing community should remind the broader society as a whole of the humanity of all individuals, and should testify that the justice of a society is measured by how it treats the powerless rather than the powerful. The communal-oriented church calls attention to the common good, and to the solidarity of the human race.

Anabaptism originated in a time of social upheaval. Local control of the believing community and enfranchisement of lay people appealed to peasants who felt alienated from the established church and exploited by the nobility and ruling classes. In the twentieth century, poor people in Latin America, Africa, the Philippines and other third-world countries also find themselves exploited by a wealthy minority ruling class which frequently receives the support of an established church. The poor are not synonymous with the church nor does poverty of itself make them harbingers of the kingdom of God or the locus of God's activity in the world. The poor, however, do belong to the church, and increasingly they are coming to question the unequal status in which they find themselves within it. The church faces the challenge of being the alternative society in a way which liberates the poor and oppressed instead of comforting the oppressors. How to accomplish that goal in a peaceful way, modeled on Jesus, is a difficult and multifaceted endeavor. However, that we must work at that task, if we are to be the church, remains abundantly clear.

The community component of the Anabaptist tradition speaks to the neglect of the doctrine of the church in much of western theology. Particularly Protestant theology — whether in Evangelical or liberal versions — perceives salvation in individual terms, involving the relationship between an individual and his or her God. Personal salvation is thus perceived as complete without discussion of the church or of reconciliation among persons. For too much of American Protestantism, the

existence of the church is not integral to salvation, but is a group of persons *already saved*, who in recognition of their salvation gather for mutual encouragement and inspiration. The concern to underscore the individual nature of salvation has resulted in neglect of the fact that structures and relationships between people also need redemption and are integral to the process of salvation.

The Anabaptist tradition has the potential to remind western thought of the social component of biblical religion. In the Old Testament, Yahweh worked to create a people, "a priestly nation," (Exodus 19:6; Deut. 7:6; I Peter 2:9). Individuals experienced reconciliation to Yahweh by becoming part of Yahweh's people. The church, a new Israel, continues historical Israel with a different way of becoming part of God's people. Since Jesus, acceptance of Christ inaugurates one into God's people, and experience of Christ means to experience the reconciliation among persons which Christ brings. This relational or social component should regulate theology done from a Mennonite perspective. It should be visible in the discussion of classic theological questions such as hermeneutics, atonement, or christology,²⁵

The Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has never fully agreed on the meaning of community. For the Hutterites it has meant a virtually complete common ownership of all material things, with individual members possessing only minimal personal items. Earlier for Amish and Mennonites it had meant the eschewing of insurance, with the church community sharing in and replacing the losses of its members. More recently, Mennonites have redefined that particular form through Mennonite-owned insurance companies, run for Mennonites. The idea of community has meant refusing to record minutes at conference so that the gathered brotherhood could reach decisions together under the guidance of the Spirit of God; and it has meant recording minutes to insure that all persons had an equal participation in the decision-making of the community. Throughout these disagreements and many more, there is nonetheless the regulative idea that the church in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition was indeed a community, and that the communal principle should find expression in the way the community conducted its life.

On discipleship. The term "discipleship" makes a statement about what it means to be Christian. Discipleship means that the essence of Christianity is following Jesus, that is, obeying his teaching and following his example. The German word *Nachfolge* (following after), often translated by discipleship, expresses clearly the idea of following. Discipleship means that Jesus is not only the focus of worship and is more than one who died in place of humankind. He is also the lord — the ruler — of the kingdom of God. As the lord of this kingdom, he is to be obeyed and followed. Obedience and following mean that Jesus' teaching and exam-

ple become the standards for those who would be part of the kingdom of God.

The idea of discipleship — making Jesus' life and teaching the norm of Christian behaviour — identifies a reference point for ethics which is outside of the individual and beyond the immediate context. It is also a reference point to some extent accessible to everyone. Few knowledgeable people, scholars or otherwise, doubt that an individual called Jesus of Nazareth actually lived at one time on earth. A general historical consensus exists as to the major events in the outline of Jesus' life — at least there is a consensus on what the New Testament identifies as the major events. While interpretations of the meaning of the story may vary, the story itself does not.

Characteristic of Jesus' life is the attention he paid to widows, orphans, outcasts and strangers — those without representation in the patriarchal society of first-century Palestine. These acts show that the kingdom of God identifies with the powerless — those without advocates in a given society. Some contemporary parallels might be work with the sanctuary movement in the United States, the Witness for Peace movement in Nicaragua, or efforts on behalf of black people in South Africa or refugees in the Middle East.

As important as *who* Jesus identifies with is *how* he identified with them. Those who would follow Jesus must adopt his way of being on the side of the victims. Jesus rejected violence as a way to help the powerless and alleviate their suffering.

Most Christians acknowledge — at least implicitly — that love and nonviolence characterized Jesus' life and his way of confronting evil, and that nonviolence belonged to the heart of his message about the kingdom of God. This acknowledgment is so strong, that as John H. Yoder stated in the first chapter of the *Politics of Jesus*, most of the efforts of what has passed for Christian ethics have been to rationalize why Christians should not or could not accept Jesus as the norm or model for their behavior.²⁶ The just war theory provides one example. Contrary to popular misconception, the so-called "Just War Theory", does not explain how to reconcile Christianity and war. Rather, in its historical form, it accepts nonviolence as the norm for Christians, with a few deviations from the norm justifiable in exceptional circumstances. If applied seriously, rather than validating recent wars, the "just war" criteria would have condemned all modern wars and it certainly eliminates any thought of nuclear war as justifiable.²⁷

Claiming Jesus as the standard for behavior does not solve all problems. The Anabaptist-Mennonite claim to make Jesus normative for belief and practice indicates an orientation and a commitment, but it does not provide specific answers to all new questions in a changing world. Mentioning only obvious examples, Mennonites have struggled with

issues such as keeping conference minutes or using musical instruments. More recently Mennonites have disagreed on the appropriateness of civil disobedience for the sake of civil rights for black people or in protest of the building of nuclear weapons. They have disagreed on the ordination of women and on accepting divorced and remarried people into the church. For all these issues and more, one can find literature by Mennonites on each side of the issue, with each side claiming Jesus as normative for its position. In spite of the disagreements, however, acceptance of the idea of Jesus as normative remains a significant part of the Anabaptist-Mennonite orientation.

On peace. Nonviolence and nonresistance could be considered a more specific application of the idea of Jesus as the norm of Christian behavior. The 1980's cry out for peace. We live in a world which bases its military posture on illogical presuppositions. There is the assumption that the world will become more peaceful and less war-prone if we build *more* weapons. Further, our society somehow seems to assume that if the United States build *more weapons*, such acts will demonstrate a *peaceful* intent to the Soviets who then somehow will be persuaded to dismantle their own systems of weapons. Even a cursory survey of history, however, reveals that in spite of all the peaceful intentions proclaimed with the development of new weapons systems, *all* such new weapons eventually have been used. Thus those who make the assumption that peace comes through more weapons are almost certain to be dead wrong (pun intended), based on the historical certainty that military people will eventually find an opportunity to use any weapons developed.

The assumptions about the peacefulness of American weapons have some equally illogical corollaries. It is assumed that the Soviet Union and the east bloc countries constitute an "evil empire" which cannot be trusted, and whose weapons demonstrate their evil and aggressive intent (while the existence of American weapons obviously demonstrates a peaceful intent). Although it is not stated in quite this way, the assumption is that those who oppose the Soviet system must prepare to be more evil than the assumptions made about the Soviets. That is, if the supposed enemy has the capacity to destroy the world ten times over with nuclear weapons, then "our side" must have that capacity and more. It is assumed that one demonstrates the evil intent of the enemy by producing even more of the same kind of evil. The vivid analogy likens this insane scenario to two men standing armpit-deep in a vat of gasoline and arguing about which one has the biggest fistful of matches.

From an Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective, perhaps the single most important contribution to the modern world is the emphasis on peace as integral to the Christian message. Peace is not a nice ideal to be abandoned in the name of a "higher" good like national pride or the survival of capitalism or the institution of democracy. For Jesus' fol-

lowers, peace is a way of life which cannot be abandoned without abandoning Jesus as well. The message of Jesus Christ says plainly that to have peace one must live peacefully. Meeting evil with evil merely continues the chain. It is returning good for evil which breaks the evil pattern and demonstrates a different, better way. It is confronting evil with good — rather than with more evil — which reveals evil for what it is.

A commitment to nonviolence and to Jesus as the norm of Christian behavior does not solve in a final way the questions about the shape of peace in a specific context. Each society and government and each war have posed the problem in a different way for Mennonites. In North America, from the French and Indian War until the present, Mennonites have engaged in conversations on the shape that nonresistance should take. They have paid war taxes and hired substitutes, and have provided horses and wagons and foodstuffs, and have served in alternative service approved by the Selective Service system. Other Mennonites have simultaneously rejected all these acts on the grounds that they involved too much cooperation with or participation in the military system. Most recently, the discussions have centered on whether Jesus' followers should register for the military draft, when the federal government defined registration itself as a military signal directed at the Soviet Union; and on whether Christians ought to pay the considerable share of their taxes which goes directly for military purposes. Such discussions and disagreements would not arise, however, if peace did not function as a regulative principle for Mennonites. Throughout these discussions there remains the idea that Jesus' followers accept his teaching and example as normative, and that that norm necessitates nonviolent rather than violent solutions to conflicts. After all, disagreement on whether or not payment of war taxes or registration for the draft makes an individual guilty of the military killing which both peace-oriented parties recognize as wrong is a quite different disagreement from that about whether Jesus' people may kill under military auspices.

On separation. A sense that the Christian belongs to a higher order than his or her national society, a belief that the kingdom of God is not of this world is particularly important to this juncture of North American history. In Anabaptist and Mennonite history, the idea that the kingdom of God had different standards and required from the follower of Jesus an allegiance higher than the society of the world, has been expressed in varying degrees through such terms as *separation* or *nonconformity* or *being different*. One could use neutral language and state it positively as "having a unique identity."

In the mid-1980's we are seeing a re-awakening of attempts to identify nationalist goals with the Christian religion. In effect, Christianity is becoming the tribal religion of North America, with Christianity subordinated to the national interest. To make clear my objection to this

identification of Christianity with national interests, I am willing to use the sometimes discredited image of being "separate from the world." Of course, the intent is a separation in attitude rather than a physical or geographic withdrawal.

The current attempt to put prayer officially into United States school rooms illustrates this unfortunate identity clearly. Anyone can pray at any time. Thought control does not exist. The prayer proponents, however, are not satisfied with this form of voluntary prayer. They want prayer instituted officially. The legislative drive targets only public classrooms, and ignores, for example, airport terminals or restaurants or supermarkets. Schools perform the function of socializing the nation's young into the national mythology of American purity and righteousness. The desire to legislate prayer into the classrooms recognizes the public schools as a national institution and reflects the identity of American nationalism and religion which the existence of prayer in the classroom would symbolize.

It is therefore very important that the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition reflect a theology and an orientation which makes clear that Christian faith transcends national interests and is not the tribal religion of one nation or of the west European and North American military alliance. This sense that Christian faith is an alternative to — rather than the supporter of — the existing society was included in John H. Yoder's definition of restitution, when he calls it an ongoing alternative to the established churches.²⁸ It is a necessary stance if the Christian faith is to judge society rather than be controlled by it.²⁹

One can argue that this sense of separateness in itself contributes to peace in the modern world. A crusade mentality has characterized all of America's wars. The crusade mentality results in part from a sense of unified national purpose, which comes easily to a United States whose national religion has a messianic quality, making the nation a world savior. A unified and supportive national religious feeling is integral to such a crusade.³⁰ It is more difficult to mount a crusade when there are competing claimants to the universal reality in whose name the crusade should be pursued. The existence of a Christian faith which poses itself as a universal alternative to the national mythology thus contributes in two ways directly to this necessary pluralism. Such a theology both challenges the claim of the nation to ultimacy and at the same time poses itself as another competing, ultimate or universal perspective. With the competing claims to ultimacy, one can argue that it is more difficult to rally the nation in a crusade.³¹ Thus, an Anabaptist-Mennonite presence as a separate religious tradition can contribute to peace, even apart from its specific teaching on peace as the way of Jesus and the kingdom of God. In short, a separatist theology, an alternative to the established church, a

religious tradition which is sociologically sectarian, has a vital role to play in the late 20th century.

Canadian national identity lacks the messianic quality of American national religion. It may, however, pose an equally dangerous, if more subtle, challenge to Mennonite attempts to be the alternative society. The easy access which Mennonites have to Canadian politics and business make it easy to lose the distinction between church and world. If some sense of Mennonite uniqueness — separation — is not reinforced, some observers have noted that in another generation it may be meaningless to talk about Mennonites in Canada as an alternative community.

Mennonites have never agreed fully on the meaning and expression of separation. For Old Order Mennonites and Amish, it has meant a rather pronounced physical separation. For others, it has meant distinctions in language and culture and clothing styles, or the refusal to participate in the political processes. Some have extended the latter even to refusing to vote. Many modern Mennonites have abandoned a distinctive cultural separation, and then define their uniqueness — separation — in terms of attitudes toward wealth, service, and the use of force. A number of articles in the *Conrad Grebel Review* stem from a concern to define a systematic theology which reflects assumptions and regulative principles of the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition rather than those of establishment Protestantism. While a great deal of diversity exists in the expression of separation, it continues to exist nonetheless as a regulative principle in the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition.

Conclusion

Preceding paragraphs have made references to Mennonite disagreements on varying issues. Recognition of differing versions of what it means to be Mennonite is not a disparaging word about a tendency to division in Mennonite history. It is a simple historical observation. Within or in spite of the diversity, historians can still recognize and trace the heirs to sixteenth-century Anabaptism. I have suggested that community, discipleship, nonresistance, and separation serve as some of the most important regulative principles for this tradition. Differences within this comprehensive Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition should be interpreted as variations in the application of these regulative principles rather than as errant departures from a normative Anabaptist tradition. Anabaptism of the sixteenth century never achieved a state of homogeneity. Neither have its heirs. In common with all earlier generations, however, all its inheritors have the task of becoming Anabaptist, the task of understanding what it means to stand in the Anabaptist–Mennonite tradition, and of understanding how to be the peaceful, alternative community which follows the example of Jesus. As have all previous generations of persons who have claimed this tradition as their own, Mennonites too are striving

to form their open future on the basis of a serious conversation with their past. Common to all — past and present — is the task of becoming Anabaptist-Mennonite.

Notes

¹See Leonard Gross, "Recasting the Anabaptist Vision: The Longer View," ms. to be published in *MQR* in 1986.

²Hans J. Hillerbrand, "Anabaptism and the Reformation: Another Look," *Church History* 29 (1960): 404–23; "The Origin of Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism: Another Look," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 53 (1962): 152–80.

³Theron F. Schlabbach described four versions in "The end of Mennonite history," *Christian Living*, October 1981, pp. 22–24.

⁴See various writings by Horsch, including the tract "The Background and Heritage of the Mennonite Church" (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1940), reprinted in *Sword and Trumpet* 19.1 (1951), pp. 29–36; *The Mennonite Church and Modernism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1924); *Is the Mennonite Church of America Free of Modernism?* (Scottsdale, Pa.: By the Author, 1926); "The Faith of the Swiss Brethren, I–III," *MQR* 4.4–5.2 (October 1930–April 1931).

⁵"The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* 13.1 (March 1944): 3–24 and *MQR* 18.2 (April 1944): 67–88; "The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," *MQR* 24.1 (January 1950): 25–32.

⁶*The Mennonites: A Brief History of Their Origin and Later Development in Both Europe and America* (Berne, Ind.: Mennonite Book Concern, 1920), passim, esp. pp. 320.

⁷For a summary of recent scholarship, see James M. Stayer, Werner O. Packull and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *MQR* 49.2 (April 1975): 83–121; and James M. Stayer and Werner O. Packull, trans. and ed., *The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer* (Dubuque, Iowa and Toronto, Ontario: Kendall/Hunt, 1980). The latter work provides selected writings representing the various older and newer perspectives in interpretation.

⁸The idea of a 'canon within the canon' should not pose a problem in itself. For example, carrying a New Testament in place of a whole Bible expresses a judgment about the priority of the New Testament. Martin Luther considered the writings of Paul, particularly Romans, and Psalms as among the best sources for learning the meaning of "Christ."

⁹See Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, for a comprehensive synthesis of the believers' church motif and historical sketches of a number of believers' church traditions. A brief sketch of contemporary manifestations of the believers' church motif is in John H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1984), pp. 5–6.

¹⁰The term 'regulative principle' is borrowed from George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). Lindbeck described doctrine not as statements with a univocal relationship to ultimate truth, nor as mere symbolic expressions of a prior and more important inner experience, but as the regulative principles which determine how the adherent of a religion actually lives. Doctrine thus exists external to an individual believer, and forms an individual's religious experience as well as expressing it. While Lindbeck dealt with religion and doctrine in general, I have here adapted his term to describe the way in which the believers' church assumptions define and influence that way of being Christian.

¹¹Much of the following discussion is based on John H. Yoder, "Anabaptist and History. 'Restitution' and the Possibility of Renewal," in Hans-Jürgen Goertz, ed., *Umstrittenes Taufertum 1525–1975: Neue Forschungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1975), pp. 244–58; reprinted in *The Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 123–34. Citations to this work refer to *Priestly Kingdom*.

¹²"Anabaptism and History," pp. 124–27.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁴The statement that history's direction is determined "in part" by human choices is

deliberate. I am simply recognizing the factor of human choice in history without development of the fundamentally necessary doctrine of God's providential lordship of history.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 132.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁷Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 21 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980), p. 33.

¹⁸Marlin Jeschke, *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, with a Foreword by J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa. and Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1983).

¹⁹Yoder provides additional discussion of the idea of perpetual reform, and the use of scripture as a base line, with acceptance of the just war theory as an example of unfaithful change, in "The Authority of Tradition," in *The Priestly Kingdom*, pp. 63-79.

²⁰Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, and Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America 1683-1790*, The Mennonite Experience in America, vol. 1 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), pp. 175-82.

²¹Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel*, p. 51. These observations about the development of the 'humility' concept apply to the Swiss-German Mennonites who arrived in colonial Pennsylvania beginning in the seventeenth century. They do not describe the experience or outlook of the Dutch-Russian Mennonites who began to arrive in 1874.

²²John B. Toews, "Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 2 (1984): 42-59.

²³J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1975), pp. 131-36, 341.

²⁴See the two-part series by Cornelius J. Dyck, in *The Mennonite* 94 (23, 30 January 1979): 49-51, 65-67.

²⁵This kind of question motivated the seventh Believers' Church Conference on christology, which met at Bluffton College, October 1980. For a discussion of that conference, see J. Denny Weaver, "A Believers' Church Christology," *MQR* 57.2 (April 1983): 112-131. For one attempt to show how a communal perspective might impact on biblical authority, christology and atonement, see J. Denny Weaver, "Perspectives on a Mennonite Theology," *Conrad Grebel Review* 2.3 (Fall 1984): 189-210.

²⁶John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 15-19. For discussions involving Jesus as norm in sixteenth-century Anabaptist contexts, see J. Denny Weaver, "Discipleship Redefined: Four Sixteenth Century Anabaptists," *MQR* 54.4 (October 1980): 255-79; and "The Work of Christ: on the Difficulty of Identifying an Anabaptist Perspective," *MQR* 59.2 (April 1985): 107-29.

²⁷John H. Yoder, *When War is Unjust: Being Honest in Just-War Thinking* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

²⁸"Anabaptism and History," pp. 132-34.

²⁹Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, p. 78.

³⁰See the important interpretative study by William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

³¹This idea comes from Herbert Richardson, "Civil Religion in Theological Perspective," in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 161-84.