THE MEANING OF ANABAPTISM FOR THE Mennonite Brethren Church

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In the last three years Mennonites in general and Mennonite Brethren in particular have recalled three formative events in the life of the Mennonite Church. Mennonites in the midwest three years ago celebrated the centennial of the coming of the Russian Mennonites to Kansas on August 16, 1974. In 1975 we commemorated the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Anabaptist movement on January 21, 1525. And last year all Mennonites in America recalled the Bicentennial of the United States. What do these anniversary events say about our view of the past and our vision for the future?

The 1874 event which many of us celebrated in a year-long cultural and religious festival was an event of ethnic Mennonite history. It recalled the migration of a group of Russian Mennonites to North America who came for both noble and ignoble reasons, although, as can so easily happen, our romanticized remembrance of that history tended to stress the good and overlook the not-so-good. We planned and shaped our centennial observance as a massive and continuous cultural-religious extravaganza because we, together with other ethnic Mennonites, are hungry for our roots. We want to know where we have come from. We are losing our ethnic shame and beginning to feel good about being Mennonite. "Mennonite is beautiful." After centuries of inferiority feelings we have experienced a moment of liberation (thanks in part to similar movements among other minority peoples) that says "ethnic peculiarity is beautiful."

So we celebrated: we read, talked, ate, toured, looked and laughed. We affirmed ourselves as we are. We are the descendants of a great and good people. Therefore, it follows, we are good. And because we are good our ways are good. We celebrated, but we did not feel the need to re-
pent and change. We felt we did not have to repent and change because the event we were recalling in ethnic history did not call for such a radical response.

But it is different with January 21, 1525. That date marks a major event in Christian history and in western religious-political history. On that day a new understanding of faith and church was born which shook western Europe and which changed the shape of modern civilization. But we hardly acknowledged that major event 450 years later in 1975. We alluded to it, but we did not celebrate it. Why? Perhaps it was because January 21, 1525, calls us to repentance and new vision rather than celebration.

The 450th anniversary of the founding of Anabaptism judges all forms of Christian ethnicity and calls for rebirth of a radical faith and church that is true to Jesus and the New Testament. We celebrated our ethnicity in 1974, but we tended to deny a hearing to our own history’s call for radical Christian commitment in 1975.

What was this Anabaptist movement all about?

First of all, it was a Jesus movement. Anabaptism meant a profound commitment to take Jesus seriously in everyday life. Christianity was defined as discipleship, following Jesus in His life, death and resurrection.

This definition of Christian faith ran counter to two contemporary understandings of the meaning of Jesus. The first asserted that the demands of Jesus were too difficult for ordinary people to carry out. Therefore, only specially elect—the clergy—were expected to take Jesus’ life and teachings seriously while the masses were free of that obligation. The second delimited Jesus’ significance to providing heavenly salvation, but regarded His earthly life as irrelevant for Christians. Jesus did something for people that could be described theologically as “justification” but that “justification” made no demands on the way one lived in the world.

The Anabaptists rejected these understandings of Chris-
tian faith. They refused to distinguish between Christian faith and morality. For them there was no faith and no church without following Christ in everyday life. The life and teachings of Jesus were the clue to the shape of the Christian life and church. Jesus was the model.

Another way of saying this is that the Anabaptist movement was rooted in the Synoptic Gospels, not the Old Testament or Paul. It was supremely a movement for the recovery of Jesus and His kingdom as the center of faith and church. Out of this fundamental conviction emerged a Christian ethic characterized by love and nonresistance, the simple life, economic sharing, personal and churchly discipline, etc.

The Anabaptist commitment to Jesus as the center of faith also resulted in a new understanding of the Bible. For the reformers the total Bible was taken as one flat book. Every text had the same kind of authority regardless of its place and purpose in the biblical tradition. Thus the state church and war could be justified out of the Old Testament without reference to what Jesus and the early Christians said about kingship and lordship, violence and war.

The Anabaptists in contrast made a clear distinction between the Old Testament and the New. They read the Bible as the story of God's movement for and among His people which reached its high point in the life and work of Jesus, and which sees His continuing work in the life of His disciple community. Jesus was the "canon" through which they read the rest of the Bible. There is an old and a new covenant. They read the old in terms of its goal, Christ. They read the new as the fulfillment of the promise.

This understanding of the Bible had enormous consequences for life and faith. It was the foundation stone for the Anabaptist understanding of nonresistance, rejection of oaths, believers baptism, separation of church and state, and many others.

Secondly, the Anabaptist movement was a believers
church movement. That means, very simply in outline form, that the Anabaptists understood the church in terms of the following five characteristics:

1. The Church is composed of voluntary adult believers. Anabaptism meant human choice is taken very seriously. In a context where people were assumed to be Christian by birth and environment, the Anabaptists articulated and practiced a high view of voluntary personal responsibility. Discipleship was a matter of free, personal adult decision. No one could make that decision for anyone else, and no coercion could be used in forcing a faith decision.

2. The church is a discerning brotherhood. Anabaptism meant the church is the covenant community of discerning brothers, not simply the place where the word is properly preached and the sacraments properly observed (Luther’s definition). The faith decision did not simply rescue one from evil for heaven, but incorporated one into the community of disciples. The real and symbolic expression of this living fellowship was the frequent practice of the Lord’s Supper. The prerequisite to the observance of the Lord’s Supper was the practice of spiritual discipline based on Matthew 18. The church celebrates its oneness with her Lord because she had discerned that she was one in faith and life. The church experienced such oneness because she had discerningly dealt with sin in her midst, supportively strengthened the weak, and encouraged the strong.

For all wings of the Anabaptist movement this understanding of church included the economic dimension of life. Anabaptism meant the community of goods in one of two forms: the common purse in the practice of full economic community or the willing and joyful sharing of personal property with the brotherhood in case of personal or corporate need.

3. The church is a visible counterculture. Anabaptism meant the church was a visible community distinct from the larger society and the state. The church had one Lord and one loyalty. That singular loyalty to Jesus as Lord
called for a critical stance of the church over against all social and political powers that make claims of loyalty on men. Christ and Caesar, church and state, stand in opposition to each other because each make fundamentally contradictory claims for loyalty.

This understanding of the church’s relation to society and the state was so liberating in the 16th century, and subsequent centuries, that the churches of the Anabaptist movement were labeled as “Free Churches.” The connotations of this label are very significant. The church understood itself as free from state control and support, as a culturally free church which stood above political and economic identities, and as an ideologically free church. The citizenship of disciples was in heaven, not in a political/economic system which shaped the loyalty and life style of the church in the world.

4. The church is missionary. Anabaptism meant a missionary church because the church was the body of voluntarily committed believers living together in tension with the prevailing society. If infants are baptized and if all citizens of the state are viewed as Christian there is no need for evangelism. On these assumptions the church perpetuates itself. But if the church is limited to those who have freely confessed the lordship of Christ, then the survival of the church depends on evangelism in every generation. It is precisely because the Anabaptists rejected both infant baptism and the marriage of church and state that they defined the church as missionary and considered all of Europe their mission field. The great commission was the responsibility of every Christian because no one was automatically assumed to be Christian.

The missionary nature of the church was rooted in an understanding of the church as a minority movement in society. The church can be missionary only if it is a prophetic minority. When the church no longer sees itself as a missionary minority it has become identified with the citizens and powers of the state. Precisely that identifica-
tion represents the fall of the church, which the Anabaptists believed occurred under Constantine in the 4th century, and from which they sought to restore the New Testament understanding of the church.

5. The church is the New Testament church. Anabaptists meant to be New Testament Christians. The intention of the Anabaptist movement was to restore the life of the church according to the New Testament patterns. This restoration movement was not naive. It was concerned that the New Testament be taken as authoritative in whatever is clearly taught by precept or example. The Anabaptists did not insist that everything in the life of the church must be done exactly as it was done in the New Testament. But they did object to notions which said that things must be done differently from the early church.

In summary, Anabaptism meant Christian radicalism; that is, it called for a return to the root. That root was defined as Jesus’ life and teachings, and a believers church that was composed of those who have voluntarily covenanted with Christ and each other to live as discerning and missionary brothers in tension with the world but in harmony with the New Testament.

What does Anabaptism mean for the 20th century Mennonite Brethren church?

Anabaptism is not a rigid model for us to follow. To treat it that way would deny its intention. But it is a powerful and radical witness to the incarnation of the Word of God in one epoch of history which calls all Christians (especially those who claim to be its descendants) to a similar fleshing out of New Testament faith and life in our times.

Except for the problem of ethnicity the issues facing us are not different from those which confronted the 16th century Anabaptists. Then as now the great temptation is Christianized conformity to a pagan or secular society. Then as now the great obstacle to real renewal is the confusion of church and society. Then as now the internal
test for renewal in the church is whether there can be, as John Howard Yoder says, “a redemptive yet binding personal discipline, and whether it can include the economic realm.” Then as now the external test of the church’s faithfulness is “her moral independence of the state and her rejection of war, and whether she has a missionary method and motivation.”

To be Anabaptist-New Testament we must be willing to become a Jesus movement once again. Jesus must become more than savior from sin and ticket to heaven. He must become the moral norm of our personal, social, and churchly life.

To be Anabaptist-New Testament we must be willing to become a believers church movement once again. Our definition of church will have to move from sanctuary preaching and worship to covenanting brotherhood. Our preoccupation with conformity to the prevailing American middle-class culture will need to be transformed into a nonconformist stance. Our model of being the church will have to change from what other Protestant and evangelical churches are doing to what the New Testament church did. That’s a long journey, but all renewal movements involve travel of great distances.

Finally, to be Anabaptist we will have to let January 21, 1525 stand in judgment over both August 16, 1874 and July 4, 1776. Present Mennonite ethnicity, including Mennonite Brethren ethnicity, must not be identified with Anabaptism, or viewed as the faithful expression of it in the 20th century. To be Anabaptist necessitates the rejection of ethnicity as in any way determining Christian faith and faithfulness. Our 16th century forefathers recognized the basic contradiction between the emphasis on ethnicity and the missionary nature of the church.

It is unfortunate that the emphasis on ethnicity which the 16th century Anabaptists rejected has become a special hallmark of their descendants. For a non-ethnic to become a member of a Mennonite Brethren church and a leader in
the conference implies the contradiction of accepting a totally different ethnic identity as well. It is little wonder that many non-ethnic seekers felt alienated by the 1974 centennial celebrations.

Similarly, present Mennonite identification with contemporary American or Canadian nationalism and civil religion, whether symbolized by the American Bicentennial or the Montreal Games in Canada, must be critiqued by those who wish to be Anabaptist in the last quarter of the 20th century. Our forebearers sacrificed their lives because they rejected the nation state and its self chosen symbols of legitimacy as representing the primary means of doing God's will in the world. To be Anabaptist necessitates rejecting nationalism, which is nothing more than another form of ethnicity, as in any way determining Christian faith and faithfulness. Positively, it calls for the recovery of a clear understanding and incarnation of God's peoplehood in the world.

Anabaptism is not identical with contemporary Mennonite Brethrenism. In many ways it is in serious conflict with it. Therefore, for us to flesh out the New Testament heritage means we must make a choice. We can face the difference between the New Testament vision and present Mennonite Brethren reality and conclude that out of faithlessness to the vision we are no longer Anabaptist-New Testament Christians. Or we can repent and be renewed. That will mean recommitting ourselves to the New Testament vision of faith and church, being judged by it and thereby being justified by it.

We must choose this day which vision will guide our lives.
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