No Other Foundation: Anabaptism, Past and Present

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**Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:5-17**

Have you ever had to explain what it means to be a Mennonite to someone who has never heard of us? This probably isn’t as common of an experience here, in the prairies, where Mennonites are a prominent group. But it happened to me when we lived in Toronto more often than one might expect. I would usually have to think for a while before blurting out something about adult baptism and our peace stance. There often wasn’t time to go into the specifics of our uniquely egalitarian understanding of the church or our emphasis on discipleship or following Jesus in daily life. And there certainly wasn’t time to go into the origins of the tradition during the radical early Anabaptist movement in sixteenth-century Europe. And yet when Mennonites themselves think about their identity, that’s usually where we start: with the early radical reformers and their ideas about God, faith, and the church.

As you may know, this year is the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses (essentially, disagreements with the church) to the door of the churches in Wittenberg, Germany. Our adult education class will be exploring the context that gave rise to early Anabaptism later this Fall, so the worship committee decided to do a parallel worship series on past and present Anabaptism. This worship series will introduce us to or remind us of some of the beliefs and practices that distinguished the early Anabaptist movement from other Reformers of the time, and that continue to shape the Mennonite church in one way or another today – things like the history of martyrdom, our communal understanding of the church, our emphasis on music and hymns, our understanding of Jesus as someone to be followed, our peace tradition.

The thing is, it’s really difficult to know where to start with the Anabaptist tradition! Even in the beginning, it was a pretty diverse group, as non-hierarchical groups tend to be. Without one, central leader dictating a uniform set of beliefs, it was difficult then – as now – to pin down a single theology. But that’s not to say that it was incoherently diverse. There was unity and diversity, as people figured out together what it meant to live out this new way of being the church.

And it was an incredibly inspiring new way of being the church. This was a context which saw the church and the state as inseparable and both as supposedly God-ordained hierarchies of power – and, on top of it all, hierarchies that had become quite corrupt. So “common,” ordinary people were hungry for a different vision of what it meant to be Christian. People like Martin Luther and John Calvin began the reform by questioning some of the practices and assumptions of the Catholic church of their time, emphasizing instead the priesthood of all believers, the importance of the Bible, and the centrality of God’s grace and human faith (not sacraments or “works” or money) for salvation – in other words, salvation could not be earned or bought! But in a way, the Anabaptists took things one step further, departing even more from what church looked like in their time, which is why they’re called “radical reformers.” In reading the Bible for themselves, they went beyond the other reformers in calling for adult baptism, a rejection of violence, a more active understanding of faith as following in Jesus’ footsteps as disciples, and an understanding of the church as the communal, egalitarian Body of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit to read and interpret the Bible together.

These differences were enough for both Catholics and Protestants to find Anabaptists a threat to their political and religious authority, and both brutally persecuted them, which somehow didn’t stop the movement, but fed its popularity. The reason we know so much about the early Anabaptists is partly because some of them were former priests and monks, who left behind theological writings. But according to historian C. Arnold Snyder, part of what we know comes from court records from when Anabaptists were on trial, which reveal the impressive biblical knowledge of Anabaptist men and women, especially considering most were illiterate. Among early Anabaptists, “all church members were urged to become biblically literate” through memorizing large portions of Scripture.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He writes, “It was shocking enough [for people of the time] to see so many women (many of whom were not literate) claim the Anabaptist faith for themselves. Not only had they decided to join this dissenting group of their own volition, they also knew exactly in what their faith consisted, as the prison records document. Anabaptist women ably debated learned clerics and court officials, defending their faith with numerous biblical texts, with ready wit and intelligence.”[[2]](#footnote-2) So as the crowds watched these ordinary people who knew the Bible so well go confidently to prison or to their deaths, they didn’t end up being intimidated, as the authorities hoped, but inspired. The martyrs thus led many to join the Anabaptist movement.

Menno Simons, as we heard during the children’s time, is an interesting example of early Anabaptism, because he came to be a prominent leader in the fledgling movement. Perhaps this was partly out of a sheer ability to survive the persecution of the time – which sometimes involved some quick thinking, as per the wagon incident! As a former Catholic priest, Menno was one of the leaders who left behind a body of writings that we can read today. And he helped with the development of a more Christ-centred way of interpreting the Bible. You see, when ordinary people encountered the Bible for what was really the first time, they found some pretty spicy stuff in there, which they then tried to apply to their own lives. They started taking things like the end times literally, and tried to reinstate polygamy. The most famous example is the violent takeover of the city of Muenster in Germany by a group of Anabaptists convinced that it should be the “new Jerusalem” or God’s kingdom on earth, complete with a new “King David” who had many wives and kicked anyone who refused to become an Anabaptist (to be rebaptized) out of the city. Needless to say, this saga ended with most of the group being imprisoned or put to death.[[3]](#footnote-3) Unbridled biblical interpretation can be a dangerous undertaking.

Snyder writes, “after some of the Anabaptists had been led to disaster by so-called prophets,” many of the Anabaptists tried to clarify how the Bible was to be interpreted. “Menno Simons especially emphasized that all spiritual claims must be measured by the life and the words of Christ.” So for Anabaptists, the Bible was to be interpreted in community, led by the spirit, and measured by the example of Christ.[[4]](#footnote-4) It was for this reason that Menno Simons included a verse from our Scripture today on the front page of every book and pamphlet that he wrote:[[5]](#footnote-5) “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11, NRSV).

In our Scripture passage for this morning, we see that while Menno’s favourite verse is fairly straightforward, the context of it in 1 Corinthians 3 is not so clear. So let’s go back to Paul’s first-century context, where he is addressing some of the concerns of the early church in Corinth. The specific concern here is that they are claiming allegiance to different church leaders, and it’s causing division among them. Right before our passage, Paul says that some are claiming, “I belong to Paul” and others, “I belong to Apollos,” who was another apostle who worked with Paul, preaching and teaching about Jesus. In an effort to promote unity, Paul writes, “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5-7. In other words, Paul is saying, it doesn’t matter which leader the Corinthians prefer, whether himself or Apollos – what matters is God’s work among them. He continues, “we are like God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field” (3:9). Here is the church community as a growing, organic, living thing, like a field full of green crops. But this does not mean that there is nothing for the church community to do, because according to Paul, they are also the ones who tend and water the crops – they are the field, and also the farmers and field labourers.

And then, within the same sentence, Paul switches metaphors, saying the church is “God’s building” – an image which appears elsewhere in the New Testament as well (1 Peter). So Paul says, through God’s grace, he himself, Paul, laid the foundation of the building, which is Jesus Christ (there’s Menno’s favourite verse!). But it is up to others – i.e., all the Christians – to build their faith on that foundation. Paul says, “Each builder must choose with care how to build on it” (the foundation, Jesus Christ). “Now, if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – the work of each builder will become visible” (v. 10-13). And then he goes into the imagery of fire which “will test what sort of work each has done” on “the Day,” which is a reference to the “Day of the Lord,” or the day of judgment. So Paul speaks about God’s judgment of what the people of faith have built – i.e., how they live out their faith, which has Christ as its foundation. But like with the field metaphor, where the church community was both field and farmers, they are also both builders and the building, which is a temple. Paul writes, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple” (v. 16-17).

Now this kind of judgment language might seem pretty distant from our context and worldview today, but we have to remember what was happening to the church at the time Paul was writing. The church was at this time a small minority within the Roman empire, and there was brutal persecution from the Romans and some of the Jewish leaders alike; the field or temple or church was very much at risk of being destroyed. In those times, above all, it was important for there to be unity among the members of the church community in the face of destruction, for them to keep doing the sacred work of building faith instead of resentment and fear. And in that uncertain and frightening time, Paul comforts the people of the church in Corinth by assuring them that God will judge those who harm and do violence to them.

As hard as it might be for us comfortable, safe, 21st-century Christians in North America to relate to this kind of a situation, you know who didn’t find it that hard to relate at all? Menno Simons and other early Anabaptists! They easily found parallels between the situation of the early church in the New Testament and the situation of the early Anabaptist movement in Europe, which was also a persecuted minority movement trying to live out a new interpretation of Scripture and faith. And really, once you start looking for them, the connections between early Anabaptist theology and Paul’s theology jumped out.

Sick of seeing the church hierarchy sink to power struggles and corruption, the early Anabaptists, like Paul, wanted to shift away from an emphasis on church leaders and allegiances to God’s work in the church, to the church as a community God has caused to grow and be life-giving. And the ordinary people, not just the leaders, are invited to actively participate in the work of the church, not just be passive “laypeople.” In Paul’s terms, they are both field and farmers, temple and builders – in Anabaptist terms, it is a priesthood of all believers, in which the community reads and interprets and lives out the Bible together. As a community built on Christ as a solid foundation, it’s not the literal building or the rituals or the leaders which make the church holy, but the gathered community of disciples, following Jesus together. And when they face difficulties like persecution and martyrdom, there is no call to arms or vengeance, but the reassurance that God will judge those who threaten to destroy them, and that God will not leave them – the foundations of peace theology. In these ways we see just how biblical early Anabaptist theology was, and the ways in which Christ was the foundation of their inspiring and risky innovation on what it means to be Christian.

But what about us, today? As I mentioned, the parallels between the New Testament and our situation today don’t jump out as clearly as they did for the early Anabaptists. Times have changed, and neither Christians nor Anabaptists are a persecuted minority. So how do we try to be faithful to the roots of our faith tradition? Historian Walter Klaassen warns us not to idealize the past or try to replicate it. He writes, “There is … among Mennonites the common human practice of appealing to a past event as a model for the present. . . . Therefore…I raise this little monument o my ancestors as a reminder to all who pass by that they are both great and mediocre, strong and weak, progressive and regressive, much as their descendants [today]. It is designed to serve as a warning signal not to use our past uncritically and as an admonition to be honest with our ancestors.”[[6]](#footnote-6) We have to remember that the early Anabaptists didn’t have things all figured out either, as evident in their anti-semitism, their self-righteous declarations that they were the only true Christians, their vicious schisms with one another.

But we can still remember them and try to live out what it means to be an Anabaptists today, here, in our context. What does it mean to have Christ as our foundation today? How can we be the church in a context where it’s once again becoming a minority? How can we live out our faith together, in community? It is my hope that the answers to these questions will become clearer in the coming months as we explore the life and faith of our spiritual forbears. May the best of our tradition continue to inspire us, like Menno Simons’ insistent reminder that “no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

AMEN

1. C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: Exploring the Historical Center of Anabaptist Teachings and Practices* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007), 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 177-178. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Muenster Anabaptists,” in *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=M%C3%BCnster\_Anabaptists [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Snyder, *Anabaptist Seed*, 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Menno\_Simons\_(1496-1561) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Walter Klaassen, “Anabaptism: Both Positive and Negative,” Word and World Pamphlet Series (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1975), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)