

Anabaptist origins of Mennonite commitment to peace

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“We have been united as follows concerning the sword. The sword is an ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ. . . . Christ teaches and commands us to learn from him, for he is meek and lowly of heart. . . . Christ did not wish to decide or pass judgment between brother and brother. . . . So should we also do. . . . Christ was to be made king, but he fled and did not discern the ordinance of his Father. Thus we should also do as he did and follow after him. . . . The rule of government is according to the flesh, that of the Christians according to the Spirit. . . . In sum: as Christ our Head is minded, so also must be minded the members of his body.”¹

“The point at which the Sermon on the Mount focused most clearly the intensification of the law . . . is that . . . we are not to answer evil with evil but to love our enemies. . . . Honest readers have had to admit that that is what Jesus meant, even when they do not intend to follow it. Loving the enemy is one good candidate for the status of a moral imperative specific to Christianity, or to Jesus.”²

It is foolhardy to attempt to compare sixteenth century “original principles” to the expressions of those principles almost five centuries later. We look only at the bookends—and that in cursory fashion—and pay no attention to the volumes that have shaped the story in between: the coming of religious toleration, the scientific revolution, secularization, industrialization, citizenship in nation states, migrations, and catastrophic wars. Although taking a deliberately long view can sometimes help to focus continuities and differences, I apologize in advance for this brief and inadequate treatment of an exceedingly complex subject.

Even the simplified story of bookends cannot be told without entering caveats. There were nonpacifist and pacifist Anabaptists at the beginning—as the polygenesis historians taught us—but a longer historical view marks the eventual predominance of the pacifist position. The Schleithem Confession’s article VI, on the sword (cited above) is an early and powerful expression of the nonresistant conviction, and by the middle of the sixteenth century, the baptizers had arrived at consensus and endorsed positions of Christocentric nonresistance that sound much like Schleithem. This “peace position” was subsequently bequeathed as an essential confessional element to the Anabaptist faith descendants, that is, to the Mennonites, the Amish, the Hutterites, and the Church of the Brethren.

The story of the appropriation of the Anabaptist peace position by those standing in the tradition also needs to be qualified at numerous places. In the development of the Mennonite tradition, for example, there have been times when the peace position has not been maintained or has not been lived out with consistency. During the Second World War, to pick one difficult time, no pacifist Mennonite witness survived in Europe, and around half of the Mennonite men in North America who were eligible for military service chose to serve in the Allied armed forces.

Nevertheless, Mennonites in North America have remained committed to a nonviolent, pacifist position as a central faith commitment. The decades following the Second World War have seen a strengthening and reaffirmation of the Mennonite commitment to peace, particularly in Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. Peace, or more broadly, *shalom*—which includes justice—today is supported by these Mennonites as a biblical, theological, and moral imperative for them, or even for all Christians. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995), for example, devotes article 22 to explaining Mennonite convictions on “Peace, Justice, and Nonresistance.” In an appended commentary, the Confession of Faith clarifies: “Peace and justice are not optional teachings, counsel that Christians can take or leave. They belong to the heart of gospel message.”³ Or, as John H. Yoder emphasized in the citation above, loving enemies is what Jesus intended for his followers to do: as close to a moral imperative as there is for Christians.

Growing parallel to these expressed convictions, often independently of the biblical or theological discussion, has been an explosion in “peace and justice” social practice, promoted and supported by Mennonites. Among the practical expressions of the Mennonite commitment to peace we can list victim/offender reconciliation programs (VORP), nonviolent resistance to injustice (Christian Peacemaker Teams, for example), and mediation and conflict resolution training and degree programs in Mennonite colleges. Increasingly, to be Mennonite in Mennonite Church Canada or Mennonite Church USA is to be identified as someone who is part of a peace-and-justice church tradition.

Again, there are exceptions to this generalization, and some Mennonites worry that the Mennonite peace witness is eroding.⁴ Perhaps there is some fraying around the edges, but in my experience, peace—in its biblical, theological, ethical, and practical

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It was otherwise in the sixteenth century. Of course, it was another time and another world; the issues faced by the Anabaptists were vastly different. Granting all this, the fact remains that when we read widely in Anabaptist sources—even reading only the Anabaptists committed to peace—we fail to find *peace* there as the central and guiding principle to understanding the gospel and the Christian life. “Living without weapons”

(*Wehrlosigkeit*) is certainly present, but it is generally located in a long list of virtues that will be visibly manifest in the lives of Christians. Living a weaponless life is one visible fruit (along with many others) of a spiritually committed life, but it is not sap. The early Anabaptists in particular were interested in both sap and fruit; more importantly, they knew the difference between them.

I am quite certain that the sixteenth-century Anabaptists would have rejected a historical metaphor that suggested that they, the Anabaptists, could be the vine responsible for the fruit of peace witness borne by Mennonites four centuries later. At best they would have accepted being one of the historical branches

connected to the true vine and witnessing to a new life in Christ as part of the vine. The metaphor that spoke to them was found in the Gospel of John, where the vine is clearly the living Christ. The parable of the vine and the branches was a favorite Anabaptist text. The reflection of Andreas Gut, below, submitted to the Zurich authorities in 1588, is typical of what can be found in many Anabaptist writings.

Christ declared that nothing other than beautiful fruit will grow from the true vine, and will be visible on its branches. . . . If you abide in me, he says, you will bring forth much fruit. So the Christian life should be obvious to all Christians: all of his teaching is the Christian's teaching, his love our love, his mercy our mercy, his patience our patience, his peace our peace. . . . [But] unless one is born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God, for it is through the new birth which comes down from heaven that one is grafted into the vine, planted and blessed. . . . Therefore whoever has become a participant in the divine nature, and is of the divine nature, as Paul says in Acts chapter 17, such a one truly has the Son of God in him, and also life in him, and brings forth good fruit as noted above.⁵

The Christian life will be a Christ-like life. Thus far the sixteenth-century reflection does resonate with the conclusion that loving enemies is close to a moral imperative specific to Jesus. But

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the moral imperatives of a Christian life are nowhere near the central point for Andreas Gut. His point is, rather, that the fruit of Christ's peace in the life of a Christian is the **result** of a spiritual grafting of that person into the living Christ. This grafting happens through a spiritual birth, and this second birth results in a "divine nature" coming to reside in the believer. It is Christ's nature, implanted

and continually nourishing the believer from within, that brings forth Christ-like fruit. The "demand" of Jesus to love even enemies can be nothing but an unattainable legal requirement to

those who are not reborn and nourished by the living Christ within.

The Anabaptist peace position was based on key theological assumptions. In the first place, the Anabaptists were not liberal or optimistic in their understanding of human nature—even though they considered infants innocent and free from condemnable sin. The Anabaptists expected all descendants of Adam and Eve to embrace lives of sin as soon as they were capable of choice, and they expected a majority to reject the narrow way of salvation. Second, the Anabaptists were convinced that the living God was near to them, ready, willing, and able to provide the grace and power for repentance, conversion, faith in Jesus Christ, rebirth by the Spirit, and strength to live a new and Christ-like life. Third, they believed that human will, cooperation, and effort are necessary in order for God's power and Christ's sacrifice to be effective in one's life. And fourth, they believed that the new birth in Christ is a covenant made between God and the believer, marked outwardly by the sign of water baptism. Water baptism visibly incorporates new members into the body of Christ, the church. This "body of Christ" is more than a metaphor. The church as Christ's body is to be a pure manifestation and continuation of Christ's incarnation in the world: a visible body of the living Christ in his members, possible because Christ the living head of his body is spiritually present in and with his members. Underlying the Anabaptist teaching on living without weapons was a Christocentric spirituality grounded in an active pneumatology.

These sixteenth-century assumptions are not operative in quite the same way for us in the present day. The Anabaptist view of human nature was bleakly Augustinian and prescientific. It is true: human beings today continue to inflict bad choices on ourselves and others; we still suffer from a self-centered alienation from God and neighbor. However, our diagnosis of the problem and the range of proposed responses today is broader and more nuanced. As Christians we recognize and value the spiritual element in human nature, but we recognize that the language of sin and repentance does not exhaust every human condition, situation, and problem. Coming to a knowledge of oneself, repentance, and prayer remain important steps on the Christian journey; but therapy or counselling may also mark key steps on the Christian

way. Our spiritual language today needs to express a broader understanding of the complexities of human nature, brokenness, and healing. Our prayer and hope, however, remains the same for us as it was for our Anabaptist faith parents: may Christ's mercy become our mercy; Christ's peace, our peace.

The Anabaptist understanding of the church as the pure body of Christ "without spot or wrinkle" was put to the test before the sixteenth century came to an end, in the banning and shunning controversies. Over the next four centuries we discovered that the spiritual regeneration of believers—while it produced an astounding fruit of faithfulness, even unto death, and undeniable testimonies to new lives in Christ—nevertheless failed to produce a pure

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church. Anabaptist-descended churches appear to have been made up of less than perfectly regenerated believers, and instead have often been divided, contentious churches. At times this church seemed to be guided in its mutual excommunications by stubborn men wielding lists of external requirements for Christ-likeness, with attitudes that suggested more Pharisaic legalism than Christ-like charity.

The peace witness of this church, maintained in refusals to participate in warfare, might be seen as something of a Pyrrhic victory, given the fading of the spiritual underpinning of connection to the living vine, the emergence of legalism, and the

absence of peace among the churches and the members themselves. No doubt it is a good thing to keep Christ's commandment not to kill; it is far better to refuse to participate in state violence than it is to lend one's efforts to the destruction of human beings. But without a vital spiritual connection to the living vine, can such an ethically based, activist, political peace witness be expected to survive the next great challenge to national peace and security?

Which brings us to the Anabaptist understanding of spiritual regeneration. The majority of Anabaptists who wrote about the subject seem, in light of historical developments, amazingly

optimistic about the new spiritual birth in Christ. Divinization language is common. As Menno himself said,

*Behold this is the nature, property, and effect of the seed of the Word of God. By it man is renewed, regenerated, sanctified, and saved through this incorruptible seed, namely, the living Word of God which abides eternally. He is clothed with the same power from above, baptized with the Holy Ghost, and so united and mingled with God that he becomes a partaker of the divine nature and is made conformable to the image of His Son.*⁶

Renewed, regenerated, sanctified, clothed with divine power, partaker of the divine nature: we conclude today that Menno was describing an extraordinary spiritual process that he may have witnessed and experienced, but that he could not be describing the common spiritual experience of all church members, given the historical evidence to the contrary.

The expectation of Menno Simons and other Anabaptists, that spiritual regeneration would be sudden and thorough and would

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lead to pure members populating a pure church, is an expectation we no longer share—and for good empirical and historical reasons. But this is not to deny the basic truth of the Anabaptist conviction, that a commitment to peace is one of the fruits of a life fed and nourished by the living Christ. This we can say even if we have come to the conviction, as I have, that establishing and maintaining the connection to the living vine is more difficult than Menno seemed to think, and that the fruit will not be the perfectly formed specimen Menno expected to see. Or to put it a different way: it is true that we need to do our part in cooperating with God's

grace, but our efforts to love as God loves will necessarily be flawed and imperfect, because we remain flawed and imperfect. The answer is not to demand more perfection but rather to practice those things that increasingly open us to God's grace.

Dirk Philips provided a more helpful image when he described a gestation period for the new birth. “Where this takes place and is in process as a pregnancy,” says Dirk, “there is the new creature in Christ Jesus.”⁷ Pilgram Marpeck likewise provided a helpful guide to spiritual growth into the likeness of Christ. Marpeck’s devotional reflection remains compelling today.

*Christ forbade . . . vengeance and resistance, and commanded the children who possessed the Spirit of the New Testament to love, to bless their enemies, persecutors, and opponents, and to overcome them with patience. . . . Now we are to reflect upon Him spiritually, upon what kind of a mind, spirit, and disposition He had, and how He lived; the more we reflect upon His physical words, works, deeds, and life, the better God allows us to know His mind, and the better He teaches and instructs us. . . . The more one learns to know Him and see Him spiritually, the more one learns to love Him, to become friendly and pleasant toward Him and, through such knowledge, receives Him into the heart and grows therein. Finally, one jumps with Peter himself, freely and voluntarily, into the sea of tribulations and, concentrating on Christ, casts aside the mantle or the old garment. Through such a knowledge of Christ, we also come to the knowledge of God and partake of the divine nature. . . . In this manner, through instruction and knowledge of Christ’s mind, God places His law into our mind and writes it into our hearts.*⁸

The Anabaptist reading of John 15 rings true: it is not by the striving of the natural person that the fruit of Christ’s peace will be produced and maintained, but only insofar as the divine sap is enabled to flow and nourish both branch and fruit. But the parable is not only about sap. It also makes it clear that real fruit is expected from the grafted branches, in visible forms that reflect the nature of the vine and its life-giving sap. The parable, as the Anabaptists grasped, points both to spiritual nourishment and to actual, living fruit, the integration of an inner “abiding in Christ” and an outer “witness of life.”

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The survival of the Anabaptist peace witness, no matter how flawed in historical practice, suggests that sincerely attempting to live lives that honor Christ's command to love even enemies is also a profound spiritual practice. Attempting to return good for evil, daily loving as God loves, will lead back to the living vine, for radical love of this kind is not "fruit" that grows naturally from our human nature. I believe—although I cannot prove it—that it was Anabaptist Christ-centeredness that managed to keep our peace tradition spiritually alive by something like osmosis, even though we sometimes fell into external demands and practices that lost sight of the spiritual essence. I do not doubt that a more conscious focus on the life and mind of Christ, and a more conscious practice of his way and walk, with the sincere desire to abide in his living presence, will lead to even more abundant fruit.

Notes

¹ Michael Sattler, "The Schleithem Articles," Article VI, in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. and ed. John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973), 39–41, *passim*.

² John H. Yoder, *For the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 47.

³ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 83.

⁴ For example, J. Denny Weaver, "The Peace Church as Worship of God: If We Confess the God of Jesus Christ, a Peace Church Is the Only Church We Can Be," *The Mennonite*, July 1, 2010; online at http://www.themennonite.org/issues/13-7/articles/The_peace_church_as_worship_of_Gods.

⁵ "A Simple Confession," submitted by Andreas Gut in 1588 to the mayor and the council of the city of Zurich; original in the Staatsarchiv Zürich, signature EII, 443, 126–27; my translation.

⁶ Leonard Verduin, trans., John Christian Wenger, ed., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 58.

⁷ Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, Alvin J. Beachy, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Dirk Philips* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 79.

⁸ William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1978), 62–63.

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