On Mennonite preaching
A review article

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The most recent contribution to the growing list of books on preaching in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is *Anabaptist Preaching: A Conversation between Pulpit, Pew and Bible*, edited by David B. Greiser and Michael A. King (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2003). Its subtitle identifies three actors and an action that lie at the heart of preaching: the preacher (pulpit); the gathered congregation (pew); and the contents and vision of faith (Bible). The action in question is conversation.

Another way of picturing the relation of pulpit, pew, and Bible is as a dance, as Nancy Heisey suggests in her contribution, "Premodern text to postmodern ears: Steps across the hermeneutical bridge . . . or joining the circle dance." She understands hermeneutics as a circle dance done to the rhythm of the Holy Spirit. This dynamic, relational, and playful image provides us with a lively picture of one who preaches, the many who also engage the Word directly, and the life-giving Word that inspires the community. In what follows, we will focus in turn on the three participants in this dance. Then we will consider some aspects of the dance that goes on between these actors and the wider world.

Of the twelve contributors to *Anabaptist Preaching*, one is from the Church of the Brethren, one is Mennonite Brethren, and one is from MC Canada. The remainder are members of MC USA. Thus, this volume looks at preaching from the standpoint of those who are part of mainstream North American Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. While the primary source for this essay is *Anabaptist Preaching*, we will also note in passing several other works on preaching in this tradition.

The pulpit

Mennonites have ranged from holding the pulpit in high esteem, even according preachers unchallenged power, to fostering skepti-

cism of the preacher. David Greiser gives a good thumbnail sketch of this tension in "What exactly is Anabaptist-Mennonite preaching? A nod to the ancestors." He concludes that Mennonite preachers have generally preached in a communal voice, with the understanding that "preaching is always a part of an on-going conversation" (24). But what role does the preacher play in the conversation? Is the preacher herald, storyteller, prophet, pastor, proclaimer? Each role has implications for how the preacher's power is viewed in relation to the congregation.

Mennonites are becoming more comfortable with the notion that the preacher, whether storyteller or proclaimer, is engaged in persuasion. In "The ethics of persuasion in preaching," Dennis Hollinger lays down guidelines for ethical persuasion, with emphasis on the congruity between the preacher's character, actions, and words (187–94). Michael King notes that in the postmodern era, when the pastor's authority has to be earned, the preacher's persuasion should be as a weaver of enchantment. Weavers do not tell but show the beauty of the gospel, inviting others to see the world through an alternative script ("Weaving enchantment: Preaching and postmodernity," 35–39).

In recent decades, preachers have claimed status of storytellers partly as a way to foster ongoing congregational conversation. While *Anabaptist Preaching* confirms this reality, it also indicates that we are becoming more comfortable with speaking about the preacher as authoritative and persuasive—although we are quick to qualify these terms!

The pew

Like many congregationally oriented denominations, Mennonites have stressed the role of the congregation in the preaching event. More than many other Protestants, we have understood preaching in the context of ongoing conversation, which has taken a variety of shapes through the years. The early Anabaptists, who met in small groups, discussed the Word the preacher brought. Nods and comments were witnessed from "the bench" of elders in some eras. In our day, sermon discussion or sermon response may follow the sermon, either in the context of worship or in a Sunday school class. We have taken the priesthood of all to mean that the preacher does have a word to speak, but so do others.

Among Mennonite preachers these days there is ferment around a model June Alliman Yoder describes in "Collaborative preaching in the community of interpreters." The preacher collaborates not only with the Spirit, the text, the experts (commentaries), and the worship setting, but also with the congregation. To make this collaborative reality concrete, Yoder advocates a method, similar to the one articulated by John McClure in *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995), in which a team from the congregation meets with the preacher both before and after the preached sermon. This process assures congregational contribution to each sermon, and it also creates an increased sense of congregational ownership for the preached Word (117–19).

A factor related to the communal nature of preaching in our tradition is the tension between speaking to the individual hearer and to the congregation as a whole. Do preachers address the Word to a collection of isolated individuals, or do they address the body and hope to form a congregation? While many of the articles in *Anabaptist Preaching* touch on this issue, Lynn Yost and Nathan Showalter especially address aspects of forming community through preaching. Yost's article, "Preaching for a hearing: The sermon in human consciousness," summarizes David Buttrick's efforts to take seriously both individual and social consciousness in the enterprise. Buttrick echoes Anabaptist thought in his contention that the sermon is heard primarily in a communal context (147). Showalter gives practical advice on building up the church in multicultural and intergenerational settings. The Bible, he reminds the preacher, is a multicultural, bilingual, and interfaith book; these characteristics have obvious parallels with our postmodern, interfaith, and multicultural settings (135–46).

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw a movement in preaching in North American Protestant circles characterized in part by a "turn to the hearer." The person in the pew began to be taken seriously in the event of preaching. One fruit of this turn was the pervasiveness of the narrative mode in preaching: hearers appreciate and are engaged by the gospel through story. The Anabaptist tradition has had much to contribute to discussions on the turn to the hearer, because the hearing and interpreting congregation has

been central to preaching ministry from the beginnings of Anabaptist movement.

The Bible

Mennonites have sought to be a biblical people, with biblical preaching being the norm in the pulpit. But what is biblical preaching? James Waltner's 1971 study of preaching among General Conference Mennonites, *The Authentication of Preaching in the Anabaptist Mennonite Tradition* (Ph.D. dissertation, School of Theology, Claremont, CA), found that the scriptures and the theme of discipleship were central. A generation later, Mary Schertz ponders the matter of biblical preaching in her contribution to *Anabaptist Preaching*. Biblical illiteracy is a problem in many Christian groups, but Schertz points out that for preachers, the larger issue concerns their knowledge and experience of the entire canon. Because Mennonite worship increasingly relies on the Revised Common Lectionary, sermons tend to deal with a single text, sometimes in ways that obscure the larger story of salvation in the biblical canon (68). Schertz's title says it all: "Preaching and the Bible: First we have to read it."

As Renée Sauder observes, North American preachers have been focusing not only on narrative approaches to preaching but also on narrative texts from the Bible. Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm and David A. Stevens point to other parts of the canon and other kinds of preaching that deserve attention. Wilhelm, in "God's Word in the world: Prophetic preaching and the gospel of Jesus Christ," notes the importance of prophetic preaching. She distinguishes between topical social gospel preaching and Jesus-centered prophetic preaching. Through a study of the words and ministry of Jesus, she concludes that prophetic preaching includes lament as well as proclamation of God's passion, promises, and possibilities for humanity (85–89).

Given North American Christianity's recent penchant for narrative preaching, how do we preach on important theological tenets? Mark Wenger's article, "Theological preaching in an age of doctrine lite," gives practical advice for creating effective sermons on doctrine. Keeping God as the centre of the sermon and concentrating on one doctrine in each sermon are approaches Wenger suggests, with a view to keeping the sermon theologically

sound (124–26). Ervin R. Stutzman, in "Preaching grace to hardworking people," ponders how we speak about grace to people with a strong work ethic. We are reminded here of the Anabaptist theology of grace which precedes and pervades our lives of faithful discipleship (202–204).

The essays in *Anabaptist Preaching* that focus primarily on the Bible push us to preach from more than the stories of Jesus. We need to bring to our preaching a sense of the entire canon, grasped theologically. Texts from the Hebrew Bible and non-narrative Gospel passages, such as those in which Jesus chides the Pharisees, beg to be preached. The epistles of Paul, neglected in our preaching, can serve as conversation partners as preacher and congregation explore theological convictions such as the grace of God.

Conversation

Though many of the articles in *Anabaptist Preaching* deal directly or indirectly with the dance that goes on between pulpit, pew, and Bible, the articles by Michael King and Nancy Heisey are significant in encouraging preachers to bring themselves to the biblical text, with conversation in mind. King makes a case for eisegesis (along with exegesis) of biblical passages. Eisegesis has for centuries been frowned on in biblical interpretation, because the interpreter is supposed to get out of the way to ensure a true reading. With the help of Hans Georg Gadamer, King notes that it is precisely when we bring our concerns—our pet peeves and loves—to our reading of the Bible that we gain understanding and are engaged by the world of the text (39–40).

Finally, pulpit, pew, and Bible dance and converse in a worship space. The air between the dancers is saturated with the joyful spirit of God and with our praise of God. The preaching moment happens in the context of worship. Rebecca Slough's chapter, "Acting the Word: Preaching in the context of worship," describes several worship patterns, noting the place and role of the sermon—God's Word coming into the congregation—in each. She reminds the reader that God's Word to us in worship and our responses to God in worship must not squeeze each other out (180–81). A telling comment is buried in a footnote: in her experience, preachers and worship leaders rarely attend each

other's seminars: on both sides of the divide, ignorance abounds regarding the ministry of the other (185, n. 12).

Conclusion

In Mennonite colleges, seminaries, and churches in the United States in the late 1960s, Russell L. Mast, fresh from a sabbatical in Scotland, gave several lectures on preaching. His fellow Mennonites were eager listeners. Those lectures were published as *Preach the Word* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1968).

While Mast would not have described preaching as a dance, and while he could not then envision the present interest in preaching in the narrative mode, his book in some ways parallels *Anabaptist Preaching*. Both books are less occupied with delivery and technique than with the larger concerns of hermeneutics, the place of the pulpit in relation to the pew, the place of Jesus Christ's ministry as a model for preaching, and the relationship between our word and God's Word.

Mast too was integrating the work of theologians and homiletics scholars of his time in his effort to construct a theology of the Word for Anabaptist-Mennonites. He used the wisdom of Emil Brunner and T. F. Torrence; *Anabaptist Preaching* uses the wisdom of Gadamer, Buttrick, and Walter Bruggemann. While Mast was pondering the role of authoritative proclamation in the context of the disintegration characteristic of the modern world, *Anabaptist Preaching* witnesses to our pondering and praying about the role of persuasive proclamation in a context of emerging postmodernity.

Considered side by side, *Preach the Word* and *Anabaptist Preaching* give us a picture of the state of homiletics among Mennonites in North America. We are a people of pulpit, pew, and Bible, ever conversing—dancing—in worship, with the Spirit, one another, the scholars around us, and the culture in which we live. The last sentence in Mast's book, written four decades ago, has an almost postmodern ring about it: "So preach the Word, humbly but without apology!"

About the author

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