



16th Century Anabaptists and the Bible

Worship Resources for Mennonite Heritage Sunday, October 28, 2007

The suggested worship service for this year's Mennonite Heritage Sunday focuses on the Anabaptist approach to the Bible in the sixteenth century. How the Anabaptists viewed and used Scripture explains all other Anabaptist theological distinctives; their commitment to discipleship, community, and nonresistance all arise out of their unique approach to Scripture.

What was unique about it? The Anabaptists were not alone in insisting on the importance of the Bible. *Sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), after all, is a phrase that comes from Martin Luther. But no less a historian than Roland Bainton declared that "of all the parties of the Reformation, the Anabaptists were the most scriptural." The Bible was absolutely central to their faith and life.

It is clear that Jesus Christ stood at the very heart of the Anabaptist Bible, both the preexistent Logos of whom we read in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and the historical Jesus who lived and taught his disciples in Palestine. The importance of the former is demonstrated by the fact that when Anabaptists referred to "the Word of God," one has to discern carefully to know if the reference is to the Bible or to Christ, the Word made flesh. One scholar has suggested that for Menno Simons, references to "the Word of God" more often designate Christ than they do the Bible. Thus in the suggested worship service's text and songs below, it may be instructive to consider, at least occasionally, the references to "the Word of God" as being references to Jesus Christ.

Because of that focus on Christ, the Anabaptists' Bible was not flat, which was in contrast to most reformers of that time. Jesus was Lord of Scripture, so, in the words of Menno Simons, "All Scripture must be interpreted according to the Spirit, teaching, walk, and example of Christ and the apostles." While other reformers relied on the Old Testament to make the case for infant baptism and use of the sword, the Anabaptists argued that those practices failed the test of being consistent with the "Spirit, teaching, walk, and example" of Jesus.

This commitment to live according to Christ's teaching and example is a second distinctive: the Anabaptists embraced the principle of the harder reading. As Mennonite storyteller Lynn Miller has said, they insisted that "Jesus meant what he said, and he was talking to us." This was a strikingly unique approach to scripture. Other Christian groups in the sixteenth century tended to avoid the hard sayings either by (a) assuming Jesus was speaking to someone else, such as monks and nuns, or (b) assuming Jesus was speaking allegorically or metaphorically or about some future time, so he

didn't quite mean what he said.

Does this approach to the Bible still characterize us as Mennonites? Should it? Are we still the biblical people that the Anabaptists were? If not, why not? Have we reverted to a flat Bible? Do we no longer affirm the principle of the harder reading? Why have we softened the hard sayings of Jesus? Is it because we are so much more comfortable materially than the Anabaptists were? What has been the role of education in shaping our attitude toward the Bible? What has been the impact of dispensationalism? These are some of the kinds of questions that we would encourage pastors to address as they plan a sermon for this service. For more background on the Anabaptist approach to the Bible, you may wish to consult:

Bainton, Roland. "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*. Vol. 3, *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, edited by S. L. Greenslade, 1-37. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

Bender, Harold S. "Bible." **Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online**. 1953. Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online. <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B5345.html>

Mast, Russell. "Menno Simons and the Scriptures." In *No Other Foundation: Commemorative Essays on Menno Simons*, 35-41. North Newton, Kan.: Bethel College, 1962.

Mennonite Quarterly Review 40 (April 1966): 82-148. This entire issue is devoted to "Anabaptist Interpretation of the Scriptures," and contains the texts of the 1964 Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College delivered by William Klassen, Henry Poettcker, and Walter Klaassen.

Schrag, Dale R., "Anabaptists and the Bible: From *Sola Scriptura* to *Solus Christus*," *Mennonite Life* 44 (September 1989): 12-18.

Worship service outline

Prelude

Call to worship -- attributed to Balthasar Hubmaier

Leader: Rejoice, rejoice, ye Christians all,

And break forth into singing!

People: Since far and wide on every side

The Word of God is ringing.

Leader: And well we know, no human foe

Our souls from Christ can sever;

People: For to the base, and [those] of grace,

God's Word stands sure forever.

Leader: Praise God, praise God in unity,

Ye Christian people sweetly,

People: That he his Word has spread abroad—
His Word, his work completely.

**Leader: No human hand can him withstand,
No name how high soever;**

People: And sing we then our glad Amen!
God's Word stands sure forever.

Note: This call to worship consists of the first and last stanzas of a song attributed to Balthasar Hubmaier, an Anabaptist leader in Austria and Moravia who was burned at the stake in Vienna in 1528. (Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism, translated and edited by H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, pp. 569-571)

Hymn -- *Our Father God, Thy Name We Praise* (Hymnal: A Worship Book, No. 32)

Note: According to the Hymnal Companion, p. 286, the German text of this hymn is "the second hymn sung in every Amish service."

Children's story -- This could be taken in a number of directions. One is to focus on memorization of biblical passages. This, of course, used to be standard practice in Mennonite churches, but one senses that it has fallen out of favor. The Anabaptists committed much Scripture to memory. One only has to read trial transcripts to sense how biblically literate the Anabaptists were. One sixteenth-century Anabaptist supposedly intended to memorize one hundred chapters – not verses -- of the New Testament! C. Arnold Snyder, in his Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College in 2002, characterized the Anabaptists as "thinking Scripture," a process that was helped immeasurably by intimate familiarity with the Bible. One might ask older members of the congregation to talk about how much Scripture memorization they did as children and what its impact on their lives has been.

Scripture readings

Old Testament: - - Psalm 119:1-16, 105

Gospel: - - Matthew 7:24-27

Epistle: - - II Timothy 3:14-17

Note: These scripture readings all focus on the importance of the Word of God.

Hymn -- *The Word of God Is Solid Ground* (Hymnal: A Worship Book, No. 314)

Note: This hymn comes from the Ausbund, the oldest Protestant hymnal in continuous use, still used by the Amish.

Sermon -- *An Anabaptist Approach to the Bible*

Note: For sermon suggestions, see the opening essay and bibliography above.

Hymn of response -- *I Sing with Exultation* (Hymnal: A Worship Book, No. 438)

Note: The hymn of response to the sermon is attributed to Felix Mantz, the first person martyred as an Anabaptist

when he was drowned at Zurich on Jan. 5, 1527. Three years earlier, he quoted I Peter 2:21 to argue before the Zurich City Council that "Christ has given us an example that as he has done so also ought we to do." (The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism, edited by Leland Harder, p. 314.)

Closing word – attributed to Annelein of Freiberg, who was drowned and then burned in 1529

Leader: Be comforted you Christians and rejoice,

Through Jesus Christ forevermore,

Who gives us love and faith.

People: God comforts us through his holy word,

On that we should rely.

Note: The closing word comes from a song attributed in the Ausbund to Annalein of Freiburg, though it likely was written by Ursula Hellrigel. (Profiles of Anabaptist Women, edited by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, pp. 198-201)

Benediction

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This year's Mennonite Heritage Sunday worship materials were developed by Dale R. Schrag, Mennonite Church USA Historical Committee member and director of church relations at Bethel College, North Newton, Kan.