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### An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective

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I want to begin with a word of thanks to Prof. Theo Dieter and the other organizers of this unusual gathering. We are all used to commemorating anniversaries of our traditions with special celebrations. But the invitation to reflect together on the “ecumenical challenge of an anniversary” is a remarkable expression of ecclesial vulnerability. As a Mennonite, I am grateful and humbled to participate in such a gathering and hope that you will receive my reflections in that spirit.

#### **Introduction**

In the fall of 1615, an anonymous publication appeared in the countryside around Basel that caused great alarm among city officials. On the surface, the pamphlet—titled *Christian Thoughts* (*Christliche Bedenken*)—could hardly have been more innocuous. Numbering 40 pages, it consisted entirely of quotes, drawn without commentary from the early writings of Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli and other heroes of the Reformation. Nonetheless, the Basel City Council—in close communication with authorities from Zurich and Bern—immediately shut down the printing press where the tract had been produced, arrested and imprisoned its compiler, and attempted to destroy all extant copies of the pamphlet.<sup>1</sup>

How are we to account for such an allergic reaction to a seemingly harmless text? The answer, as it turns out, offers a revealing glimpse into the complex relationship between the Anabaptist movement

and the broader currents of evangelical reform in the sixteenth century that we have come to label the Reformation.

In this essay I would like to begin with a brief review of the contested relationship between the Anabaptists and the early reformers. I will then reflect at somewhat greater length on how tensions rooted in the very origins of Anabaptism have persisted in our tradition ever since. In some ways, the past is never history—unresolved debates from the Reformation have been part of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity for nearly 500 years. Finally, want to conclude with a few thoughts, both positive and critical, about the future of the Reformation legacy.

### **A Contested Beginning**

At the time of the first adult baptisms in Zurich in January of 1525, which marked the formal beginning of the Anabaptist movement, leaders of the group regarded themselves as full participants in the movement of evangelical renewal that eventually became known as the Reformation. They shared an enthusiasm for the principle of *Sola Scriptura*; they read the pamphlets of the early reformers; and they participated eagerly in lay bible studies, always asking themselves how Scripture might be rightly applied to their lives. When Luther and the other reformers began to express criticism of the church in the years after 1517, many early Anabaptist leaders could be found among their followers.

Nevertheless, Anabaptist interpretations of scripture—especially in the wake of the Peasants' War of 1525—were too radical even for the reformers. Whereas Roman Catholics and the early evangelicals alike baptized infants, Anabaptists argued that true Christian baptism assumed a prior recognition of one's sin, followed by a conscious decision to accept God's gracious gift of forgiveness and to say "yes" to the invitation to become a disciple of Jesus. This practice of voluntary (or believers) baptism not only challenged 1000 years of tradition, but it also defined the church as a voluntary community, separated from the "fallen world"—thereby raising doubts about whether Europe could legitimately consider itself a "Christian" society. Furthermore, by calling on Christians to refrain from oaths, participating in lethal

violence, or serving in magisterial offices, the Anabaptists seemed to threaten the foundations of political stability. And their commitment to economic sharing and social equality unsettled traditional assumptions about wealth and social order.

Although these teachings may not sound so radical today, political and religious authorities in the sixteenth century generally regarded the Anabaptists as both *heretical* (a threat to orthodox Christian doctrine) and *seditionous* (a threat to the authority of the state). As a result, the lines separating the early Anabaptist movement from the emerging Reformation (or “evangelical”) groups quickly hardened. In Zurich, for example, Zwingli denounced the “rebaptizers” (*Wiedertäufer* / Anabaptists) as hot-headed trouble-makers. In 1529 an Imperial Edict issued at Speyer declared anyone who practiced rebaptism to be subject to execution without an ecclesial or civil trial. Luther and his colleagues—horrified by the bloody specter of the Peasants’ War and eager to persuade the Holy Roman Emperor of the orthodoxy of their own movement—vigorously disavowed any connection with the Anabaptists.

In 1535 events that unfolded in the north German city of Münster confirmed everyone’s worst suspicions—namely, that the Anabaptists were violent revolutionaries who perverted Scripture, confused the minds of ordinary Christians, and destroyed public order. If Catholic authorities saw in Münster the natural consequences of the Reformation in general, defenders of the emerging Protestant traditions were equally insistent that their churches had nothing whatsoever in common with the radicals.

Despite the fact that Anabaptist leaders—most notably Menno Simons—explicitly denounced violence, the perception of Anabaptists as violent extremists persisted. Indeed, European authorities were so troubled by Anabaptist teachings that 2,000-3,000 Anabaptists were executed during the course of the sixteenth century, with thousands more imprisoned, tortured or exiled. Well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a standard Protestant church history text, citing the writings of Luther and Melancthon, identified the Anabaptists as the “deformation of the Reformation.”

For Anabaptists living in Moravia, south Germany, and Switzerland the events that unfolded in Münster had nothing to do with their understanding of the gospel. From their perspective it was the

reformers who lost their theological nerve following the Peasants War when they turned against the popular Reformation (or *Volksreformation*) and their own principle of *Sola Scriptura*. To be sure, the reformers had heroically rejected the authority of the pope and the Catholic Church. But when faced with the question of their own survival, they willingly put the future of the Reformation into the hands of civil magistrates, thereby creating a territorial church (*Staatkirche*). In the following decades, they would accept the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, acknowledge the prince as their *summus episcopus*, openly support the execution of the Anabaptists and other dissenters, and set Germany on a course that made Protestant consistories a handmaiden to the state in the long union of *Thron und Altar* that characterized the German church through the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Which brings us back to the collection of quotations compiled in the *Christliche Bedenken*.

Despite numerous mandates calling for their eradication, Anabaptist dissenters continued to persist in the Swiss regions around Zurich, Bern and Basel. In 1613 a decree issued by the Zurich council likened the stubborn persistence of Anabaptism to a “cancer.” In September of the following year, officials there arrested a seventy-year old, self-educated Anabaptist farmer named Hans Landis, and judged him guilty of “seditious rebellion” for his refusal to refrain from preaching. Hoping not to attract public attention, the authorities beheaded Landis early in the morning.<sup>2</sup> But his execution created a public stir, giving rise almost immediately to a folk ballad commemorating Landis as a martyr, and eliciting a torrent of protests from both Anabaptist and Reformed leaders in the Netherlands. As it turns out, the quotations from Luther, Melancthon, Brenz, and others that appeared in the *Christliche Bedenken* were all appeals to Catholic authorities dating back to the early 1520s passionately defending the “freedom of the Christian conscience”—in matters of faith, the early reformers had insisted, arguments could not be resolved by coercion or violence.

The rhetorical strategy of the pamphlet’s compiler was clear and simple: the same logic you Protestants once used to defend your vulnerable movement against the Catholic inquisition should apply to us as well—we, too, are children of the Reformation! The response of the authorities—to destroy a

book consisting solely of quotes from their own religious heroes—underscores just how important it was for Protestants to insist that the Anabaptists did not belong among the heirs of the Reformation.

### **Unresolved Reformation Debates within Anabaptism**

In the centuries since then the debate over the legacy of the Reformation has played itself out in a variety of ways *within* the Anabaptist tradition itself—just where *do* we fit within the grand story of church history, or the particular drama of the Reformation? I want to highlight three ways in which this debate has found expression in our tradition, beginning in each instance with the strengths of each position (as I see it), but also noting the profound limitations of each of these voices.

#### *Catholic Roots – Anabaptists as “Married Monastics”*

If you would ask Mennonites today whether we are closer to Catholics or Protestants, most would undoubtedly argue for the latter—our history begins with the Reformation. Yet many of the most distinctive elements of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition can be traced explicitly to Catholic roots, especially to the rich tradition of late medieval monasticism. Indeed, it might be useful to think of the more conservative Anabaptist groups (the Amish and Hutterities, for example) as “married monastics.” It is no accident that Michael Sattler, the author of the Schleithem Confession, spent his formative years as a prior at a Benedictine monastery, or that Zwingli and other reformers denounced the Anabaptists as a “neue Möncherei.” Both monastics and Anabaptists (think “Amish” here) have argued that the decision to follow in the path of Jesus begins with a conscious vow of obedience that relativizes all other allegiances. Both insist that the Christian life can only be lived in a visible, disciplined community, in which the will of the individual is subordinated to that of the larger group. Both assume that Christ’s “counsels of perfection” in the Sermon on the Mount form the basis of the Christian witness—characterized by nonviolence, shared possessions, and mutual vulnerability.

For nearly five centuries these themes have continued to characterize the Mennonite experience. Nearly everywhere Anabaptist groups have settled, their commitment to believers' baptism—combined with a reluctance to swear oaths, bear arms or integrate fully into the surrounding culture—has resulted in an identity of nonconformity and separation. At times political authorities reinforced this separatist mentality by imposing special taxes, restricting their freedom of movement, or making toleration conditional on a promise that Mennonites would not proselytize. At other times, Mennonites voluntarily adopted habits of cultural separation. In south Russia and North America, for example, the persistence of the German language, combined with deep memories of persecution, strong family networks, an emphasis on intermarriage, and tightly-knit community settlement patterns, all contributed to their sense of being “a people apart.”

At its best, this impulse toward a separatist ecclesiology testified to the seriousness of Christian conversion, expressed in a transformed way of life and a visible, corporate witness to the world. But there has also been a distinct downside to this monastic legacy. At their worst, traditional Mennonite communities have become spiritually-inert, ethnocentric enclaves, focused primarily on their own survival. The call to Christian discipleship and the principle of mutual accountability could easily harden into legalistic, and sometimes oppressive, forms of church discipline. The principle of voluntary baptism could become a routinized rite of passage into adulthood. A commitment to communal consensus frequently squelched the charismatic gifts of the Spirit and threatened to reduce Christian faith to a joyless conformity to group expectations. The resulting fusion of culture and faith—what Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder once described as a “*corpusculum Christianum*”—often belied the principle of voluntarism and became oppressive and tradition-bound—committed to maintaining outward forms but bereft of an inner spiritual vitality.

*Protestant Roots – Anabaptists as Radical Reformers*

In the context of this stubborn sociological pattern, Anabaptist-Mennonite communities have consistently found spiritual renewal by appealing quite explicitly to themes that emerged directly out of the Reformation.<sup>3</sup> One could cite dozens of renewal movements (or “reformations”) in Mennonite communities across the centuries that were animated by an appeal to the authority of scripture over tradition, and a strong emphasis on the atoning work of Christ, whose unmerited gift of grace relativizes all human ordinances and frees Christians from the burden of works-righteousness.

Indeed, virtually all of the many renewal movements within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition adopted the word “evangelical” in their name, and most would be quite happy to identify themselves without reservation as Protestants. Far from being the “deformation of the Reformation,” many Mennonites have argued, we are really Protestants who believe in salvation by grace, and have then simply “accessorized” this most basic truth with the accidents of our historic particularity (believers baptism ... and maybe pacifism).

From a historical perspective, there can be little doubt that this on-going renewal impulse has been a crucial factor in our survival. And from a theological perspective, I take the return to evangelical themes as a gift of God’s grace and providence. Reminders of our Reformation roots have helped to challenge those separatist and legalistic impulses that have often made us arrogant and aloof—and imparted a new sense of joy in the experience of God’s gracious love.

Yet these same impulses of evangelical renewal have also been deeply problematic. In almost every instance, evangelical renewal among Anabaptist groups has led to more individualistic forms of faith, a retreat from the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and greater assimilation into the culture of their times.<sup>4</sup>

Here I will cite only one example, since it took place very close to our meetings here in Strasbourg. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and Napoleonic reforms, Mennonites living in South Germany were granted a new status as full citizens. After centuries of living at the margins of

public life, Mennonites suddenly found themselves equal under the law with their Catholic, Protestant and Jewish neighbors, free to worship exactly as they pleased.<sup>5</sup>

In the context of this new-found freedom, Leonhard Weydmann—a Mennonite pastor at Monsheim and one of the first seminary-trained and salaried Mennonite ministers in the Palatinate—set out to compose a new catechism for Mennonites in the region.<sup>6</sup> The traditional catechism, he wrote to a friend, was “outmoded” and narrow. In the interests of creating a catechism better suited to the theological insights and political realities of the day, Weydmann drew heavily on the counsel of Protestant (*evangelisch*) clergy from several neighboring villages—a gesture fully in keeping with the ecumenical spirit of the times.<sup>7</sup>

Weydmann’s new catechism appeared in 1836, and in subsequent years his contacts in local Protestant circles intensified. In the 1830s and 1840s Mennonites in his congregation and elsewhere borrowed heavily from Protestant hymnody, redesigned their church buildings on Protestant models, read deeply in Protestant devotional literature, and began sending young people to study at Protestant mission schools and seminaries.

From a theological perspective, however, the result of this flurry of ecumenical engagement remains rather ambiguous. Although Weydmann’s revised catechism retained brief references to nonresistance and adult baptism, he consciously dropped the principle of church discipline, making these distinctive themes optional rather than a test of church membership. The fundamental organizing principle of Weydmann’s new catechism was the doctrine of the atonement. An emphasis on moral regeneration had virtually disappeared, and teachings regarding the nature of the church had become generically Protestant.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, within a generation the principle of nonresistance virtually disappeared from the German Mennonite vocabulary. Today the cemeteries of most Mennonite congregations in south Germany today are filled with the graves of those who “died for the Fatherland” in deadly combat with fellow Christians from France or England or North America.

Still, the very persistence of the evangelical impulse within Anabaptist-Mennonite history suggests that it offers Mennonite communities some elements of the Christian faith that is lacking in their own tradition.

*Primitivist Roots: Anabaptists are Neither Catholic Nor Protestant*

In the middle of the twentieth century, a third model of engagement with the Reformation emerged among North American Mennonites—sometimes called “neo-Anabaptism” or “the recovery of the Anabaptist vision”—that sought to find a basis for Anabaptist-Mennonite identity distinct from both the thick ethnicity of a separatist community as well as the cultural accommodation of Protestant civil religion.

One expression of this new approach was captured best in a small book by the historian Walter Klaassen, intended for a popular readership, titled *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*. In this reading of church history, the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were radical biblicists who leaped over over 1000 years of church history with the intention of restoring the basic beliefs and practices of the primitive church. At a fundamental level, the Anabaptists were neither Catholic nor Protestant. Their theological debts were to the Sermon on the Mount and the early church in the book of Acts; and their historical debts were to that long line of faithful dissidents who had endured persecution at the hands of the official church from the time of Constantine onward.

Another, even more popular, articulation of this theme can be found in the works of the prominent Mennonite theologian, John Howard Yoder, whose *Politics of Jesus* in 1972 located the church’s apostasy in the “Constantinian” accommodation of the church with political power in the fourth century—a Catholic heresy that the Protestant state-church simply carried forward. Yoder’s arguments were taken up by other scholars who heightened the fundamental uniqueness of Anabaptist theology.

Thus, for example, in a 1980 landmark history of the Mennonite mission movement titled *Gospel vs. Gospel*, Mennonite historian Theron F. Schlabach<sup>8</sup> sharply criticized 20<sup>th</sup> century Mennonite missions for

the way in which it borrowed wholesale from the broader theological currents of American Protestantism in its focus on the inner drama of personal salvation and “saving souls.” Over against this understanding of the gospel, Schlabach posited an alternative Anabaptist gospel—what he called a “full orbbed” vision of shalom, in which salvation was inseparably joined to the transformed life of the believer in daily discipleship and the witness of the gathered Christian community.

More recently, theologians like J. Denny Weaver have insisted that the atonement theology of Anselm—that seemed to anchor human redemption in the actions of a blood-thirsty, violent God—was fundamentally incompatible with Anabaptist-Mennonite understandings of nonresistance, hermeneutics and ecclesiology.<sup>9</sup> And other Mennonite theologians have questioned the authority of the classic Christian creeds—challenging both “credalism” as antithetical to the lived reality of Christian discipleship, as well as the tendency of the early creeds to truncate the life and teachings of Christ in their focus on metaphysical categories and linguistic precision.

For these scholars, descriptions of Anabaptism that identified them as “children of the Reformation” overlooked the truly radical essence of the Anabaptist movement. Far from being a source of renewal, the Reformation—and much of church history itself—had become a problem from which the Mennonite Church needed to be saved.<sup>10</sup>

There are many problems attendant to this definition of Anabaptists as “neither Catholic nor Protestant,” not least its blatant ahistoricism. The Anabaptist movement clearly emerged within a specific historical context; it simply cannot be understood apart from the Catholic and the Protestant soil within which it took root. To deny this reality may serve the normative ideals of a theologian, but it does a disservice to historical credibility. Yes, the Anabaptist movement did indeed represent a distinctive expression of Christian faithfulness—the very existence of Anabaptist martyrs makes it clear that meaningful choices regarding theological convictions were being made. But whatever was new or original about the Anabaptist movement can never be extricated from its historical context.

A more subtle problem is the way in which these approaches have fostered a form of Mennonite identity that is ultimately rooted in “otherness” ... a need to define ourselves “over against” the larger Christian tradition rather than in some sort of living, symbiotic relationship with it. Such a posture reinforces a long-standing tendency among Mennonites to define themselves by what they were not—nonconformists, nonresistant, “neither Catholic nor Protestant”—sometimes leaving us without a foothold for a positive witness or a way of engaging in meaningful ecumenical conversations.<sup>11</sup>

### **Theological Tensions, Contradictions and Conundrums**

Another way of describing the legacy of the Reformation within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition is to acknowledge several theological tensions, or even contradictions, lurking within the most distinctive features of our confessional identity that we have largely managed to suppress. In the spirit of ecumenical vulnerability, let me list four such themes that I regard as potential blind spots in our theological tradition—each of which can be traced back to our Reformation origins.

#### *1. The Gift and the Burden of Religious Voluntarism*

From the beginning, the Anabaptist movement was defined by the principle of voluntary baptism. Yes, the gift of God’s salvation is completely unmerited—it is not something we earn; yet we have also taught that God does not coerce faith—the offer of salvation must be freely received. As a consequence, we have affirmed adult, or believers, baptism and the freedom of religious conscience. These convictions, we believe, are theologically coherent, consistent with scripture, and in accord with the witness of the early church.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, however, our strong emphasis on voluntarism has also led to several persistent unresolved questions. What, for example, is an appropriate age of baptism for those raised in the church? Depending on how one understands conversion, the freedom of the will, the age of accountability, or the

meaning of church membership, youth raised in our congregations can be baptized anywhere from age 5 to age 30 (following the example of Jesus).<sup>13</sup>

Then there are the perennial questions of the relationship of grace to the freedom of the will. If coming to Christ requires a conscious act of volition, does it not inevitably follow that the individual initiates salvation and is therefore somehow “responsible” for his/her own salvation? Officially, we say no; yet sometimes our members—wondering if their response is adequate—experience a persistent uncertainty about the assurance of salvation that can lead to anxiety, depression and “serial conversions.”<sup>14</sup>

An even more problematic consequence of our focus on a voluntary commitment is the way it feeds into the pervasive individualism of the modern world, making the decision to follow Christ simply one more consumer-oriented choice that promises to enhance your life. In the modern context of religious pluralism, voluntary baptism can easily be confused with the “right to make up one’s own mind” and with secular notions of individualism and autonomy.<sup>15</sup>

I do not believe that the solution to these challenges lies in a return to infant baptism or the doctrine of double-predestination. But Anabaptist-Mennonites would benefit by more intentional conversations with other Christians about the deep theological tensions inherent in our commitment to voluntary baptism.

## *2. The Ambiguities of Biblical Hermeneutics*

Free church heirs of the Protestant tradition look fondly on that stirring moment at the Diet of Worms in 1521 when Martin Luther stood before the assembled authorities of Europe and defiantly defended the freedom of individual conscience in matters of biblical interpretation. The Anabaptists learned from the reformers that the authority to interpret Scripture does not reside in the papacy, or in the teaching office of the Catholic church, or in the traditions of biblical interpretation established by the

Church Fathers. Instead, the Bible is accessible to ordinary Christians; its meaning is plain; and its word sufficient for guiding the church in all matters of faith and practice.

On the surface, these principles sound quite appealing. But when it comes to the real work of biblical hermeneutics, claiming the authority of “Scripture alone” always begs the question. After all, Scripture is inevitably read through the lens of a particular theological tradition and interpreted with authority by some individual or institution. Most Reformation groups quickly adopted extra-Biblical “lenses” to guide their interpretation of scripture: authoritative confessions of faith, for example, or the creation of a teaching office anchored in the ritual of “ordination.”

Most Anabaptist-Mennonite groups, however, have been reluctant to frame biblical hermeneutics in these formalistic ways. I do not mean to suggest that our tradition has read scripture arbitrarily or randomly.<sup>16</sup> But our suspicion of tradition, institutional hierarchies, timeless confessions, and the learned exegesis of biblical scholars has sometimes blinded us to the full richness of the biblical text; or made us susceptible to the eccentric teachings of charismatic individuals; or even, at times, cynical about the authority of scripture itself. In the absence of formal mechanisms for defining hermeneutical authority, debates over how scripture should be interpreted have frequently been the source of divisions within our churches.

### *3. The Ecclesial Confusions of a Congregationalist Polity*

Like the other reformers, the Anabaptists were united in their rejection of papal authority and Roman Catholic claims to speak for the “universal” church. Yet one of the most frequent questions addressed to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century was: what is the *basis* for your ecclesial authority? Who ordained your preachers to teach the Word of God? By what right do you set up your teachings over against those of the established church?

Although these questions may seem trivial to modern Christians who are quite at ease with the splintered nature of the church and quick to regard faith as a personal right, at stake here are substantive matters that have significant consequences.

In the absence of overarching framework for ecclesial authority—such as that provided by the Catholic sacerdotum, or the Anglican episcopacy or the Lutheran Augsburg Confession—understandings of ecclesial unity in the Anabaptist tradition have often been determined by the local congregation. In some settings this has taken the form of a clearly defined set of doctrines (a tendency toward Fundamentalism) or a list of ethical practices (such as the *Ordnung*, or discipline, of the Amish).

But one consequence of our congregationalist ecclesiology is an enduring confusion about the relationship of the local congregation to other Anabaptist-Mennonite congregations or to the larger Christian church. As a result, the witness of our church can sometimes seem to be divided. And ecumenical conversations are rendered difficult since it is not clear who speaks—and with what authority—on behalf of “the church.”<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. *Anxieties About the Sacraments*

The sixteenth-century Anabaptists—influenced especially by Zwingli—largely rejected the sacramental theology of medieval Catholicism. The Catholic understanding of the sacraments, they argued, promoted a mechanistic understanding of grace (*ex opera operato*) that turned salvation into a commodity, reduced believers to passive recipients, and transformed the clergy into all-powerful intermediaries of God’s presence in the lives of ordinary believers. Yet the wholesale rejection of these perceived abuses within the Catholic church has left our tradition with a very ambiguous understanding of the sacraments.

Contemporary Mennonites are often quick to assure those present at the Lord’s Supper that the bread and wine are “merely” symbols. The communion meal is about solidarity and mutual equality.<sup>18</sup> Christ is present “only” in spirit. What matters most, we say, is a transformed heart and a changed way of life. Yet

this uneasiness about the sacraments can easily leave our congregations oscillating between an abstract Spiritualism and liberal works-oriented social service organization. God is present at baptism and the Lord's Supper, we insist—but our reluctance to embrace the spiritual reality of God's presence suggests that we are, in the end, not very clear just how God is made visible in the world. The result is a view of worship that can easily focus primarily on ourselves—our performance, our emotions, our words.

None of these theological conundrums—inherited from the sixteenth century—have crippled our church; many of our congregations are thriving. Yet these issues continue to lurk at the edges of our church life as barely hidden tensions, or even contradictions, that remain unresolved. We often simply ignore them—despite our own cognitive dissonance—because addressing them openly seems to threaten so much that is a given. Clearly, Anabaptist-Mennonites would be well-served by entering into more intentional conversations with other Christians about our mutual understanding of these themes.

#### CONCLUSION: What of the Future?

Thus far in this essay I have suggested that the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has had a deeply contentious relation to the Reformation era. Born out of the same struggle that produced the rich legacy of Protestantism, we have remained ambivalent—even conflicted—about how best to integrate those impulses from the Reformation that are carried forward in our tradition.

I would like to conclude, very briefly, by sketching two possible directions for the future—both extremely promising, though they seem to be moving in quite opposite directions.

The first is to simply offer a word of testimony regarding the profound significance of the recent ecumenical overtures by the Lutheran World Federation regarding the condemnations of the Anabaptists in their central statement of faith, the Augsburg Confession. Although significant theological differences remain between Lutherans and Mennonites, the Lutheran invitation to engage in the hard work of “right remembering” has led to a jointly-written history of our Reformation beginnings—one that both sides could recognize as a fair telling of the story. That initiative culminated in very moving worship service

on July 22, 2010 when the Lutheran World Federation, meeting as a general assembly in Stuttgart, formally asked for—and received—forgiveness “for the harm they have done to Anabaptist-Mennonites since the time of the Reformation.”<sup>19</sup>

Equally significant were the mutual commitments we made to each other. Mennonites, for example, committed themselves to greater care in the way we tell the stories of our sixteenth-century Anabaptist martyrs. At times in the past we have “claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority or nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that has fostered a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance.” (107). We will continue to honor those who have suffered for their faith—and a commitment to the power of nonresistant love, even in the most extreme circumstances, remains central to our understanding of following Jesus. But during the past year Mennonites in North America have begun to pursue an open conversation about the problems inherent in an identity of suffering. And conversations with the Lutherans have helpfully complicated our telling of the Reformation story in general. As we concluded in our joint statement, “The past cannot be changed; but we can change the way the past is remembered in the present” (108).

2. My final thought is a bit more unsettling because it raises questions about the larger meaning of the Reformation in general. When the MWC and LWF appointed members to serve on the International Study Commission, we both included a representative from the global south. Yet in the conversations that ensued regarding the historical context of the Augsburg Confession, the specific arguments of Luther and Melancthon, the legacy of Anabaptist martyrdom, or all the layers of historical and theological identity built up over five centuries of history in Europe and North America, it became clear—sometimes painfully clear—that these issues simply did not have the same relevance for the rapidly-growing Lutheran and Mennonite churches in Africa as they did for the Europeans and North Americans.

That experience—and my work as director of the Institute for the Study of Global Anabaptism--has prompted me to raise questions about whether the debates of the magisterial Reformation are as central to the unfolding history of the Christian church as we assume. When the history of the Christian church is

told a century from now, clearly the most significant story of our time will be the astounding growth of “global Christianity,” especially in the southern hemisphere. You have, no doubt, heard the figures. Although we habitually think of Europe and North America as the center of Christianity, already in 2000, more than 60% of all Christians resided in Asia, Africa and Latin America. By 2025 that figure will grow to 70% and the percentage will likely only increase in coming decades.

This fact may call us to a fundamental reorientation of our perspective. The primary actors in the drama of global Christianity today—the fastest growing groups—are not the groups we associate most closely with the Reformation, but rather Catholics, nontraditional Protestants (Pentecostals/Charismatics), and indigenous Christian movements (AICs). And among these groups the central theological issues of the Reformation—e.g., debates over the freedom of the will; justification by faith; the nature of the sacraments—barely register at all. Evangelical movements in the global South are generally alienated from the mainstems of Western universities, and they are largely unaware of the Reformation origins of Protestantism. Instead, their theological focus of churches in the global South tends to be on themes of healing and poverty (health and wealth); on the active presence of the Holy Spirit; and on missions.

All this suggests that for church historians in the future, the events of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe are not likely the most useful point of reference. Indeed, it is thinkable that the history of various Orthodox groups—or the history of those 16<sup>th</sup> century groups traditionally at the historiographical margins: the dissenters, radicals, spiritualists and heretics—will be more relevant for understanding the churches in the global South than narratives anchored in the Reformation. And it is entirely possible that the renewal of all our confessions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will come about, not by revisiting the debates of the sixteenth century, but by a greater attentiveness to the amazing work of the Spirit at the edges of our traditional centers.

I end where I began—profoundly grateful to the Lutheran Church for the invitation to participate in this conversation; and representing a group that is deeply indebted to the Reformation for its very existence. May we all be open to the on-going, surprising and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit who is always at work renewing and reforming.

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1. On the basis of research by historian Hanspeter Jecker, we now know that the author of the text, Heinrich Boll, had heard of Landis' execution from an extensive report written by Rudolf Egli, a well-known Anabaptist leader from the area. Egli had witnessed Landis' death and had composed his recollections shortly thereafter in response to a request by an Alsatian Anabaptist who wanted a firsthand account to share with his congregation. At Boll's prompting, Egli sent him a copy of the account to Boll along with a request that he tear it up after reading it so that it did not fall into the hands of authorities. Thus, reports circulating about Landis' execution helped to bring into print form arguments for religious toleration that had hitherto existed only in manuscript form.—Hanspeter Jecker, *Ketzer, Rebellen, Heilige: Das Basler Täuferium von 1580-1700* (Liestal: Verlag des Kantons Basel-Landschaft, 1998), 274-75.
2. The archival sources for the story of Hans Landis are located primarily in the Staatsarchiv des Kantons Zurich (SAZ)—with references scattered throughout the EI-7 and EII-443 signatures and the Ratsprotokollen—and in the Handschriftenabteilung of the Zentralbibliothek Zurich (ZBZ). Secondary accounts include: Paul Kläui, "Hans Landis of Zurich (d. 1614)," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22 (Oct. 1948), 203-11; Barbara Bötschi-Mauz, *Täufer, Tod und Toleranz: Der Umgang der Zürcher Obrigkeit mit dem Täuferlehrer Hans Landis* (Lizentiatsarbeit, Uni. Zurich, 1998/99); S. H. Geiser, *Die Taufgesinnten Gemeinden in Rahmen der allgemeinen Kirchengeschichte*, 2. Aufl. (Courgenay: Christian Schmutz, 1971), 405-10; and Cornelius Bergmann, *Die Täuferbewegung im Kanton Zürich bis 1660* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1916), 68-102.
3. Another, quite different, form of renewal within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition can be seen in the emergence of Old Order groups seeking to enliven Christian commitment by recalling the humility and suffering of Christ and by renewing and reinforcing lines of separation between church and world. I describe this form of renewal in the introduction to *Letters of the Amish Division: A Sourcebook*, trans. and ed. John D. Roth, 2nd ed. (Goshen, Ind.: Mennonite Historical Society, 2002), 1-17.
4. See, for example, J. Howard Kauffman, "Boundary Maintenance and Cultural Assimilation of Contemporary Mennonites," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51 (July 1977), 227-240 and Theron F. Schlabach, "Reveille for 'Die Stillen im Lande': A Stir Among Mennonites in the Late Nineteenth Century," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 51 (July 1977), 213-226. A more general expression of a similar concern can be inferred in the findings of a sociological survey presented in J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1975), 83-100 and in a subsequent study Howard Kauffman, J., and Leo Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic: Identity and Modernization*. (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1991), 210-230 and 253.
5. Cf. Johannes Müller, *Die Vorgeschichte der Pfälzischen Union* (Witten: Luther Verlag, 1967).
6. Leonard Weydman, *Christliche Lehre, zunächst zum Gebrauch der Taufgesinnten in Deutschland* (Crefeld: J. H. Funcke, 1836).
7. Cf. John D. Roth, "Context, Conflict and Community: South German Mennonites at the Threshold of Modernity, 1750–1850," in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, ed. Susan and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, 2000), pp 120–44.
8. Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel vs. Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980). It is also the central theme in the collection of essays edited by C. Norman Kraus entitled *Evangelicalism and Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979).
9. Weaver has put forward this general argument in numerous publications, but the most systematic version can be found in J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite and Amish Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1997); see also C. Norman Kraus, "Interpreting the Atonement in Anabaptist-Mennonite Tradition," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (July 1992), 291-311 and "American Mennonites and the Bible, 1750-1950," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 41 (Oct. 1967), 309-329.

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10. Things reached a point where J. Nelson Kraybill, then president of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, found it necessary to publicly defend the term “evangelical” in an essay “Is Our Future Evangelical?” *Canadian Mennonite*, Feb. 11, 2002, pp. 6-7, which was then frequently reprinted in other Mennonite periodicals (e.g., *The Mennonite*, March 5, 2002, pp. 14-16; *Die Brücke: Täuferisch-mennonitische Gemeindezeitschrift*, May, 2002; and *Our Faith*, Summer, 2002).
  11. Although the historian Walter Klaassen has since backed away from this language, his highly popular book *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ont: Conrad Press, 1981) went a long way to reinforce this impulse to ground Mennonite identity in oppositional language.
  12. See, for example, the recent encyclopedic study by Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2009).
  13. If the only thing at stake in conversion is a young child’s conscious remorse for an inherent inclination to disobedience, then baptism could occur at age 5 or 6. If the emphasis is on a Christian maturity sufficient to meaningfully participate in the baptismal vow to “give and receive of counsel,” then a somewhat older age for baptism would seem more appropriate, perhaps 16 or 18. But if the central concern is a genuinely “free” decision— independent of outside pressure or subtle forms of coercion—then baptism should probably wait until a child has left the parental home and is fully capable of choosing a life outside the Christian community. I treat these questions more carefully in *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2005), 59-73.
  14. In his early magisterial history of the Mennonite Brethren church, P. M. Friesen described this tendency among n Russian Mennonite circles as “Mennonite melancholia.”—P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia, 1789-1910* (Winnipeg, Man: Christian, 1978), 212. See also Jeff Gundy, “Scatter Plots: Depression, Silence, and Mennonite Margins,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 18 (Winter 2000), 5-27.
  15. “While there is no inherent conceptual tension between discipleship and voluntary church membership,” writes Stanley Hauerwas, “... in liberal cultures too often voluntary church membership is translated into the right to make up one’s own mind.” “Such a church,” Hauerwas concludes, “too often reproduces ethnic, class, and national identification in the name of freedom. Accordingly,” Hauerwas continues, “the church as a disciplined body becomes a community of like-minded individuals who share the conviction that they should respect each other’s right to make up his or her own mind.”—Stanley Hauerwas, “Whose Church? Which Future? Whither the Anabaptist Vision?” in: *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Uni. of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 71, 73.
  16. In point of fact, both groups have given an enormous amount of attention to the question of hermeneutics. For some sense of the range of this literature see, for example, Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*. (Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 1999), , Willard M. Swartley, ed. *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives* (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984); or Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1983).
  17. This is not to detract from the significant conversations recently undertaken by the Mennonite World Conference with Catholics and Lutherans, resulting in the publication of *Called Together to Be Peacemakers: Report of the International Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World Conference, 1998-2003*, ed. Willard Roth and Gerald W. Schlabach (Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 2005) and *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ. Report of the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission* (Strasbourg: The Lutheran World Federation and The Mennonite World Conference, 2010). But since the Mennonite World Conference is not a church body, the ecclesial status of these statements remains rather ambiguous.
  18. I explore this tendency in more detail in John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2009), 193-211.
  19. On “ecclesial repentance,” see Jeremy Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).