

Anabaptist Approaches to Scripture

August 3, 2013

Introductory Comments



- ▶ If Anabaptists understood Anabaptist hermeneutics better, it would *not* be clear whether modern Mennonites would want to identify with them or not!
- ▶ Ben Ollenburger: "How do you plan to approach this?"
- ▶ Loren: "I could identify an Anabaptist or two whose hermeneutics I liked, then define 'Anabaptism' by those representatives."
- ▶ Ben: "If so, you wouldn't be the first to take that approach!"



Sola Scriptura

- ▶ The single most powerful and most radical hermeneutical principle of the Reformation (originated in a late medieval debate over the role of scripture vs. tradition).
- ▶ Not unique or distinctive to Anabaptists: broadly shared by Protestantism.
- ▶ Positive and negative truth claims:
 - Positively: The Bible alone can serve as authority in the discernment of God's will.
 - Negatively: Tradition and/or ecclesiastical authorities are subject to the authority of the Bible.
- ▶ In its historical/ecclesiastical context, this was a valuable and important insight for the church.



Biblicism

- ▶ Short definition: adherence to the letter of the Bible.
- ▶ Positive definition: biblicism means valuing deeply, in theory and in practice, the words of Scripture.
- ▶ Negative definition: doing what the Bible says without worrying about what it means or whether it makes sense.
- ▶ 16th-century Anabaptists were "biblicists"
- ▶ ... as were other Protestants ... as was everyone in the Christian West.



Biblicism

- ▶ Anabaptists were neither unique nor distinctive in this regard. Even the Roman Catholics were biblicists (the issue was whether the Bible was the *only* source of revelation or one of two).
- ▶ I remain impressed with how well the average Anabaptist knew his or her Bible, as indicated in the *Martyr's Mirror*.
- ▶ If valuing the words of Scripture highly, count me in.
- ▶ If doing what the Bible says without thinking, we are *not* biblicists today, and rightly so.
- ▶ It is not an intellectually valid option; even Jesus made interpretive choices.



Sola Scriptura

- ▶ It is philosophically suspect to separate “the Bible” from “readings” of the Bible, ... and therefore from ecclesiastical authorities and tradition.
- ▶ *Sola scriptura* can unnecessarily undermine ecclesiastical authority and tradition and it *can* divorce Scripture from the church.
- ▶ The Bible is a gift from God ... but it is a gift that came through the church.
- ▶ As a principle, *sola scriptura* does not explain *how* the Bible functions vis-à-vis tradition, ecclesiastical authority, experience, or reason.



1. Spirit and Word (Two-Fold Word)

- ▶ The “outer” word is what Scripture says.
- ▶ The “inner” word is how the Spirit uses the “outer” word to penetrate the understanding in a way that is expressed in life.
- ▶ J. H. Yoder in danger of over-individualizing this.
- ▶ Hans Denck went so far as to distinguish Scripture from the living Word of God.
- ▶ It is never enough to say what the Bible says; the goal must always be, “What is the Spirit saying to the churches?”



1. Spirit and Word (Two-Fold Word)

- ▶ Anabaptists were accused of being out of balance on both sides of this debate: over-literalistic, over-spiritualistic.
- ▶ And in fact, they were, depending on the Anabaptist.
- ▶ In general, the Swiss were more literalistic, while the Dutch recognized importance of the Spirit in interpretation.
- ▶ This is a valid “principle” that is both highly significant and highly complex: proper biblical interpretation requires listening and responding to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

2. The Rule of Paul (Congregational Hermeneutics)



- ▶ The Bible is best read and interpreted in the congregation—not in the private study carrel and not even in theological seminaries.

3. The Rule of Christ (Mt. 18:15-20)



- ▶ The hermeneutical principle:
 - The promise of the Spirit's blessing is for practical discernment for discipleship, not for timeless abstract truth.
 - The community's hermeneutic is binding for that time and place.



4. Christocentrism

- ▶ The revelation of God in Christ is the pinnacle of divine revelation. All other revelation—biblical or otherwise—must be understood in light of Christ.
- ▶ More than just a theoretical (christological) hermeneutic; this is also a hermeneutic of discipleship: the focus is on Christ and on following after Christ.



5. The Priority of the New Testament

- ▶ *In speaking of "a new covenant," he has made the first one obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old will soon disappear (Heb. 8:13).*
- ▶ Anabaptists generally equated OC with OT, NC with NT.
- ▶ Exceptions: Andreas Fischer and the Sabbatarian Anabaptists; the Münsterites.



5. The Priority of the New Testament

- ▶ Most Anabaptists were at the “discontinuity” end of the continuum between continuity and discontinuity of the testaments.
- ▶ The OT has authority only where Christ has not suspended its authority and where it agrees with the NT.
- ▶ The OT is important “background” for the real substance of Scripture: the NT.



5. The Priority of the New Testament

- ▶ Marpeck: One should not preach from both testaments “in an indiscrete manner.”
- ▶ One possible reason for the preference of the NT in Zürich: both Zwingli and Bullinger strongly asserted the unity of Israel and the church.
- ▶ The Anabaptists were suspicious of their use of that “unity” to support the *status quo*.



5. The Priority of the New Testament

- ▶ Packull: One possible reason for the preference of the NT over the OT: NT was available in Zürich in German in 1524, the OT in 1529.
 - But ... many could read it well enough in Latin, while others were Hebrew scholars (e.g., Grebel and Mantz).
 - A Hebrew scholar, Mantz quoted exclusively from the NT.
- ▶ Menno quoted NT about 3x as often as OT.



5. The Priority of the New Testament

- ▶ The Anabaptists rejected a literal reading of the OT.
- ▶ The Anabaptists accepted the authority of the OT insofar as it supported the promise/fulfillment paradigm.
- ▶ The 16th-century minimization of the authority of the OT (understandable in context) should largely be repudiated today.
 - Both testaments are Scripture.
 - The promise/fulfillment scheme does not adequately explain the relation of the testaments (despite reaffirmation by MCs in 1977).
 - Christocentrism remains as a check on the misuse of OT.



6. Epistemology of Obedience

- ▶ “No one can know Christ unless they follow after him in life, and no one can follow him unless they first know him” (Hans Denck).
- ▶ “The Anabaptist genius lay not in any exegetical technique or hermeneutical novelty or even in any theological discoveries, but rather in the simple (and expensive) commitment to do what Jesus says.”

—Ben C. Ollenburger, “The Hermeneutics of Obedience: Reflections on Anabaptist Hermeneutics,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard Swartley. Text-Reader Series, no. 1 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 49.



6. Epistemology of Obedience

- ▶ Obedience is not only the *goal* of hermeneutics; it is also its *prerequisite*.
- ▶ One is in a better position to learn from the Spirit’s leading (through Scripture) if one is committed to hear from and respond to the Spirit’s leading (through Scripture).
- ▶ Murray’s critique of this approach (pp. 201-202) is helpful.

7. The Bible as Self-Interpreting



(The Perspicuity of Scripture)

- ▶ But ... there is also plenty in Scripture that is *not* plain and interpretation is always required (whether it is the “interpretation” of an obedient response or whether it is the “interpretation” of hermeneutical analysis).
- ▶ This principle is somewhat tricky, and probably should be repudiated while retaining Menno Simons', John Bell's, and Pontius's insights.

Anabaptist Hermeneutics: Seven Principles



1. Spirit and Word (The Two-Fold Word)
2. The Rule of Paul (Congregational Hermeneutics)
3. The Rule of Christ (Hermeneutics for Discipling)
4. Christocentrism
5. The Two Testaments (NT is Better than the OT)
6. The Epistemology of Obedience (Discipleship-Centered)
7. The Bible as Self-Interpreting (“Perspicuity”)

The Bible in Post-Reformation Mennonite History

A Few Themes

Basic Thesis



- ▶ As inspiring as it may be to think about the 16th-century Reformation, it might not be as useful for us as looking at later developments.
- ▶ How Mennonites think about and use the Bible has less to do with what happened in the Reformation than with what has happened since then.

Historical Development #1: The Enlightenment



- ▶ In 18th-century Europe, the Enlightenment with its emphasis on rationalism and on historical method was to play a significant role in the Mennonite Church.
- ▶ But not in the 18th or 19th centuries—not until the 20th century.
- ▶ Its effect on the church was and is indirect: it came primarily through the higher education.

Historical Development #2: The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy



“In the early 1900s a small but extremely significant group of emerging leaders in the Mennonite Church allied themselves theologically with the cause of Fundamentalism and for a generation guided the denomination in that direction. This loose alliance introduced into the Mennonite tradition a strain of religious expression that was alien to it both theologically and ethically.”

—C. Norman Kraus, “American Mennonites and the Bible, 1750-1950,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Willard M. Swartley, p. 131.

Fundamentalist-Modernist Debate

Affected the Old Mennonite Church More

John Horsch (Aug 1, 1918, *Gospel Herald*):

The present is a time of crisis for the Christian Church in general and for the Mennonite Church in particular. It is realized today by thinking believers at a crisis is upon us greater than any other which the Christian church in her long and eventful history was called upon to face. The church cannot ignore the fact that between the old Bible faith and the New Theology there is a great gulf fixed. ... This is a question of life and death to the church.

December 6-7, 1918: Virginia Conference

George R. Brunk I said that he had two reasons for coming to the eighth annual Mennonite Conference of Virginia:

- (1) "To lift my voice against the corrupting and blighting influences at work against the Church, and save this conference from destruction."
- (2) "If I fail to do that, to at least cleanse my own hands."

The next morning:

In view of the fact that liberalism for many years has steadily gained ground in spite of all efforts general and local made to control it, what action can this Conference take to safeguard our district from its blighting and destructive effects, and prevent the undermining of the old faiths?



Article 1 (1921 Garden City)

- ▶ We believe in the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible as the Word of God; that it is authentic in its matter, authoritative in its counsels, inerrant in its original writings, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Ex. 4:12; II Sam. 23:2; Ps. 12:6; 119:160; Jer. 1:9; Matt. 5:18; 24:35; II Tim. 3:16; II Pet. 1:20, 21.
- ▶ Most of the Anabaptist and Mennonite confessions of faith had no article on the Bible. Exceptions:
 - The 1659 Confession drafted by van Aldendorp, van Heuven, Andries, and van Maurik, and printed at Utrecht under the title Een Belijdenisse.
 - The Cornelis Ris Confession of 1766 (Hoorn, Holland).



1941 Statement of Doctrine

Approved by Board of MBS in 1945

- ▶ Article 4:
- ▶ We believe in the divine inspiration and the infallibility of the Bible as the Word of God and the only trustworthy guide of faith and life.
- ▶ Key words provided by Fundamentalism are missing from this statement: *plenary, verbal, inerrant*.
- ▶ The MFD and the issue of eschatology led to the founding of Grace Bible Institute in 1943.



1963 (Old) Mennonite Confession of Faith

- ▶ Drafted by J. C. Wenger
- ▶ Did not include “plenary and verbal inspiration” (from 1921 confession).
- ▶ But did proclaim it an “infallible guide” and affirmed its “full authority.”



Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church (1977, MC Conference, Estes Park)

- ▶ In 1977 the (Old) Mennonite Church met in their “general conference” at Estes Park, Colorado.
- ▶ They received and adopted a statement on the Bible entitled “Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church.”

Historical Development #3:



The Rise of Postmodernism

- ▶ Postmodernism is a critique of modernism.
- ▶ As such, it is never entirely “post-,” but rather exists in tension with modernism.
- ▶ Modernism represents a confidence in reason and in a structured world order, such as meta-narratives.
- ▶ Postmodernism represents questions about such confidence, large structures of understanding, and meta-narratives. It undermines the subject/object distinction and sees life more as a web of inter-relationships than as a structure.

Historical Development #4:



The Rise of the “Inductive Method”

- ▶ The inductive method of Bible study is often related to Dr. Traina and the New York Biblical Seminary.
- ▶ The method entails close attention to the biblical text without the use of commentaries, biblical dictionaries, or other “helps.”
- ▶ Helped the church to take the Bible seriously without having to deal with all of the historical-critical questions.
- ▶ Credited by C. Norman Kraus with helping the church move from a Fundamentalistic conservatism to a non-Fundamentalistic conservatism in the mid-20th century.

Where is MC USA Today with Regard to the Bible?

»» Eleven Current Challenges

Current Challenge #1: The Loss of Biblical Literacy



- ▶ Anabaptists/Mennonites maintained a remarkably high level of biblical literacy until relatively recently.
- ▶ In the last 40 years or so, basic biblical literacy has declined remarkably, due to a broad-based ambivalence about the Bible and its authority today.
 - Knowledge about people, dates, events
 - Sense of an over-arching them or story line

Current Challenge #2: Increased Busyness and Nonuse



- ▶ The biggest single mistake in proper interpretation of the Bible in the church today is simply ...
- ▶ nonuse ...
- ▶ ... the widespread failure to read the Bible in the first place.
- ▶ If we could do anything in the church to address biblical literacy, I think we would do best to address it at this level.

Current Challenge #3: The Legacy of the Modernist-Fundamentalist Debate



- ▶ Destructive in its dismissively condemnatory discourse and tendency to cut off relationships with others.
- ▶ Conversations on Faith, 1980s, Laurelville: conversation about open vs. closed canon.
 - J. Otis Yoder: "My Bible has a back cover! Amen?"
- ▶ The tendency to polarize hermeneutical options and a "my way or the highway" approach to biblical interpretation.
- ▶ Appeals to the Bible as a discussion-stopper rather than a contribution to the church's mutual discernment of God's voice in the Scripture.
- ▶ Mennonite church leaders need to challenge more directly the voices of those who polarize the church with a sincere but misdirected equating of personal conviction with readiness to condemn others.

Current Challenge #4: Relativistic Existentialism



- ▶ Unwarranted ego-centrism in the study of Scripture.
- ▶ Each person may have his or her own opinion, but not every opinion is equally valid—at least that is *my* opinion!
- ▶ The church needs to find ways to value people and their opinions—especially voices on the margin—without giving up on the difficult task of discernment—even a discernment that declares some responses to the Bible to be unacceptable.

Current Challenge #4: Relativistic Existentialism



- ▶ Perry Yoder talked about the “author game”: reading the text as if I can read it any way I want. “To me this passage says”
- ▶ One Mennonite pastor so tired of hearing this that he began to ask, “What if you were dead? What would the passage mean then?”
- ▶ Not a particularly kind or gentle approach, but it serves as a valuable check on a certain kind of ego-centrism.

Current Challenge #5: Under-Reliance on Scholarship



- ▶ Temptation to ignore scholarship, both the books and the scholars in our midst.
- ▶ We generally value expertise in most areas of life, but not necessarily when it comes to the Bible.
 - Why? Because we have had some bad experiences with the experts.
- ▶ Attaining knowledge, wisdom, and expertise takes time, patience, and additional resources to make use of them.

Current Challenge #6: Over-Reliance on Scholarship



- ▶ Flip side just as dangerous.
- ▶ Some people feel so disempowered that they cannot imagine any Bible study or reading on their own without a boatload of (intimidating or comforting) commentaries or scholars at their elbow to tell them what all of this means.
- ▶ We are rapidly (and unfortunately) getting away from the Rule of Paul—the principle that the Bible is best interpreted in a congregation gathered to discern God's word.
- ▶ Scholars must not *substitute for* the gathered, reading, discerning congregation ... but they should *contribute to* the process.

Current Challenge #7: The Temptation of Self-Protecting Sophistication

- ▶ Sometimes we are too clever and too sophisticated.
- ▶ When someone quotes a Bible verse, we smile inwardly and know we can't take it all that seriously ... or we feel sufficiently aware of what the Bible says that we don't bother to read it regularly or to study it.
- ▶ Despite the real and present hermeneutical challenges, the church would do well to approach the Bible with a predisposition to learn and to respond to God faithfully (principle of the epistemology of obedience).
- ▶ We need a second-level naïveté.

Current Challenge #8: The Harmonization of Scripture

- ▶ Wonderful debates in Scripture, and not just between OT & NT.
- ▶ Debates between OT authors and between NT authors are more intense and interesting than any between the OT and NT.
- ▶ We are comfortable with harmonizing, pretending as if every passage is saying the same thing in different ways. We have blinded ourselves to the real-live debates about ethical issues that God gave us in the Scriptures and the unique literary artistry of each author.
- ▶ These debates tell us something about living with
 - the capability of Scripture to mean more than one thing
 - ambiguity as the people of God (what happens if we don't know truth?)
 - rereading and reinterpreting scripture for a new situation

Current Challenge #9:



The Fragmentation of Scripture

- ▶ The “other side” of harmonization: seeing no coherence or unified message in Scripture.
- ▶ Fits well with postmodern thought: there is no one universal truth; there are many truths.
- ▶ If the Bible reflects many different ancient times and cultures, why should this time and culture take it seriously?
- ▶ The crucial question: Does the Bible, given all its wonderful and perplexing diversity, nevertheless bear reliable witness to the one true God? If so, it is enough.

Current Challenge #10: The (Over-?) Abundance of Wonderful Resources



- ▶ Books on the Bible
- ▶ Books on biblical hermeneutics
- ▶ Curriculum materials
- ▶ People—pastors, teachers, and scholars who can bring the Bible alive on the congregational level.
- ▶ It is really wonderful—a good problem to have.
- ▶ The down side: we are so perplexed and confused by the flood of resources available that we don't know where to start.
- ▶ Start anywhere and everywhere ... just start!

Current Challenge #11: Lack of Good Experience



- ▶ Experience contributes significantly to who we are.
- ▶ Experience contributes significantly to how we think.
- ▶ We learn from our own ... and from others'.
- ▶ Powerful experiences (good ones and bad ones) shape us—our values, our passions, our priorities.
- ▶ Good experiences with the Bible encourage us to come back for me.
- ▶ Bad experiences with the Bible encourage us to look elsewhere.
- ▶ Here is a call for the faithfulness of the pastors: try to give your people good experiences with the Bible.

Where Are We Today ... and Why?

Historical Developments

1. The Enlightenment
2. The Modernist/Fundamentalist Debate
3. Postmodernism
4. The Rise of the Inductive Method
1. What responses do you have to presentation? What is helpful? What is problematic?
2. What is missing in these lists?

Current Challenges

1. Biblical Illiteracy
2. Busyness and Nonuse
3. Lack of Patience
4. Relativistic existentialism
5. Under-reliance on scholarship
6. Over-reliance on scholarship
7. Self-protective sophistication
8. Harmonization of Scripture
9. Fragmentation of Scripture
10. Abundance of Resources
11. Lack of Good Experience