

Anabaptism: Past, Present, Future

*An overview of the history, opportunities,
and preservation of Anabaptism.*

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Part I

Past: An Overview of Anabaptist History

Walter Beachy

Mennonites in America trace their spiritual and denominational origins to the third wing of the Reformation in Europe during the sixteenth century. Martin Luther led a reformation movement in Germany beginning in 1517. Ulrich Zwingli was the leader of the Swiss reformation, which began in Zurich in 1522. Among the students in the school of ministers in Zurich were several men who were dissatisfied with the pace and the extent of the reforms initiated by Zwingli. The issues of greatest concern were the validity of infant baptism and the nature of the church. These men were later labeled “Anabaptists” (re-baptizers) by their enemies because of their practice of baptizing adult believers.

The sixteenth-century Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches were official state churches. All infants were baptized into church membership, which resulted in a society where nearly all were “Christian” by virtue of baptism. Those who refused to have their children baptized were considered a threat to the state church and the viability of society. Additional issues emerged as the Anabaptist movement withdrew from the Swiss reformation. Those issues had to do with the nature and essence of true Christianity and the doctrine and practice of nonresistance to evil.

The Anabaptists subscribed wholeheartedly to the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed. The Anabaptists were in agreement with the Reformers on such fundamental matters as the doctrine of God, the deity of Jesus Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, human depravity, the new birth, and the literal return of the Lord Jesus. However, their radical Biblicism led

them to differ with the Reformers on the aforementioned issues of infant baptism and the nature of the church. This led the Reformers and the Catholic Church to condemn them as heretics and to persecute them fiercely. Banishment, imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom resulted. Over two thousand Anabaptists were martyred from 1527 to 1550. The last Anabaptist martyrdom occurred in 1571.

The following is a brief summary of the issues that were unique to the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and led them to leave the state churches even though it put them in great peril.

Radical Biblicism

In short, the Anabaptists believed that God speaks man's language and says what He means and means what He says. They believed that the Sermon on the Mount is the ethic by which Christians ought to live. Their understanding was that such radical teachings as loving your enemies, turning the other cheek, returning good for evil, the non-swearing of oaths, and other such lofty ethics taught by Jesus can be substantially practiced by those who are truly regenerate. Menno Simons said, "We seek nothing on this earth but that we may obey the clear and printed Word of the Lord, His Spirit, His example, His command, prohibition, usage, and ordinance by which everything in Christ's Kingdom and Church must be regulated." Thus the commands of churchmen and magistrates were ignored when they violated Scripture. They believed that the Bible is the primary source for doctrine and practice.

The Essence of Christianity is Discipleship

One of the greatest tragedies of the Protestant reformation was that there was no evidence of amendment of life among the members of the church. Luther in his later years even lamented the fact that "the impiety of the people is greater under the Gospel than it was under the papacy." The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity that made regeneration and holy living a matter of intellectual assent to Scriptural doctrine rather than a matter of the transformation of life. True repentance and faith are evidenced by newness of life! The Anabaptists believed in salvation by grace through faith but

insisted that true repentance results in holy living. While the Anabaptists agreed with the Reformers that justification by faith results in right standing before a Holy God (forensic righteousness), they believed furthermore that Scriptural salvation also results in an inner moral cleansing (intrinsic righteousness).

The exemplary lives of the Anabaptists were noted by the Reformers and the common people. They were on occasion accused of teaching “sinless perfection” and/or “works’ religion.” Both of those accusations were vehemently denied. To the Anabaptists, true Christianity resulted in radical discipleship. They believed that true disciples follow the example and teachings of Jesus in holy living and cross bearing.

The Disciplined Church of Believers Only

In the early Christian era, the church was a distinct entity from the state and the unregenerate society. Christian sacramentalism (official societal Christianity) was introduced with the radical changes brought about by Constantine from 311 to 325. After centuries of official state religion, in which a sacramental view of salvation developed, the Catholic Church held that the church is a God-ordained institution that conveys the grace of God to the people through the sacraments administered by the priests. To their credit, the Reformers saw the church as an institution of God for the proclamation of the Word and the observance of the sacraments. This was a move in the right direction, but fell far short of the Scriptural and Anabaptist view.

The Anabaptists held that the church is a God-ordained institution where the Word of God is preached and that it is to be sustained by brotherly admonition, correction, encouragement, and discipline. They believed that the church is to be comprised of those who are truly regenerate, committed to mutual accountability, and voluntarily join the fellowship of believers. Since infants cannot exercise faith and make personal commitments, and since Scripture does not teach infant baptism, the Anabaptists refused to have their babies baptized. They embraced believers’ baptism, which the Catholics and the Reformers saw as a threat to a cohesive

and functional society. Thus, the vigorous harassment and persecution that followed.

The teachings of Jesus in Matthew 18:15-20 and the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 5:1-13 are the primary basis for the Anabaptist/Mennonite practice of church discipline. Our Anabaptist ancestors believed that when sin or deviant doctrine occurred in the life of a member of the body of Christ, Scripture taught that he/she should be approached privately. If no redemptive response occurred, then several more were to go to the erring one. Should that appeal fail, then it should be “told to the church.” If one refused to “hear the church,” then he/she was to be dis-fellowshipped. Discipline was not to be viewed as punishment, but rather as a means of lovingly restoring one “overtaken in a fault” (Galatians 6:1).

The Ethic of Love and Nonresistance

The early church prior to Constantine did not allow any of its members to be soldiers or to hold any political office which called for the use of force in the execution of its duties. During much of that early era, the church was an underground and persecuted people, yet there were extended periods of time in which that was not the case. When politicians or soldiers were converted, they had to give up their coercive office or soldiering before they could be received into fellowship in the church. This teaching and practice was based on the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-48 and the teaching of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:14-13:8.

Since the Anabaptists were radical Biblicists and also were intent on reconstituting apostolic Christianity, it naturally followed that they would rediscover this long-neglected doctrine. Loving one’s enemies, doing good to them, and praying for them meant suffering wrong, even death, rather than seeking justice or revenge. At Jesus’ trial before Pilate, He told Pilate that “If my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight. But now my kingdom is not from hence” (John 18:36). The Anabaptists were convinced that the application of these teaching applied to all human relationships, not just in times of war. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

Conclusion

During the first two generations of Anabaptism, they were zealous in evangelism. However, fierce persecution did drive them to become an underground church that became largely silent regarding their faith. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Anabaptist Mennonites immigrated to America to escape persecution and the military draft for their young men.

The Old Order Amish and other very conservative groups still reflect this loss of evangelism and missions in America. However, many Mennonites began to revive the Anabaptist vision during the late nineteenth century through the twentieth century. While our first commitment must be to the Lord and to His Word, the legacy of faith that is ours from our Anabaptist forefathers challenges us as members of the Biblical Mennonite Alliance. Our deepest desire is to be found faithful by the Lord of the church in the model of the apostolic church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists.

Part II

Present: Missionary Opportunities for Anabaptists

Allen Roth

Imagine that you are standing beside a beautiful lake. A friend whom you have not seen for a long time comes and says to you, “Put out your hand.” He places a rough, potato-sized rock in your hand, telling you to hold it for a while. After he leaves, you stand there until your arm becomes tired. You wonder what this is all about, and how many ripples the rock would make if you tossed it into the lake. Tired of waiting for your friend to return, you heave the rock out into the water. Not long afterward your friend returns and asks, “Where's the rock?” Upon learning you threw it away, he exclaims, “That was a valuable diamond that had not yet been polished, worth hundreds of thousands of dollars!”

Many people are doing exactly that today. Anabaptists have been given a precious diamond, sometimes having rough sides, but being of great worth. Some are throwing this gem away; others are chipping at it until they have almost nothing left. Consider some key Anabaptist principles and the opportunities they present to be effective witnesses for Christ.

Discipleship: From the Anabaptist perspective, the essence of Christianity is discipleship. “He knows Christ truly who follows Him daily in life” (Hans Denck). Christianity is the transformation of life patterned after the teachings and example of Christ.

Brotherhood: The church is a brotherhood with voluntary membership based on repentance and conversion. Membership is not dictated by priest, pope, king or parents, but by one's own free choice. Out of this core value come believer's baptism with a commitment to discipleship and holy living. This belief includes separation from the world, non-conformity, and the practice of loving the brotherhood.

Suffering Love: This is the ethic of love and non-resistance. We will not fight, we will not sue, and we will not take human life in any form. Our history of suffering and martyrdom is outstanding. When Jews talk about the

Holocaust, we can talk about our ancestors' suffering. When Muslims talk about the Crusades, we can talk about Anabaptist martyrs. We refuse to participate in any war and have often suffered for that conviction.

A Biblicist Movement: Anabaptism was a back-to-the-Bible movement. We believe that all clear commands of Scripture, especially those of the New Testament, should be literally obeyed. This core value is absolutely essential for all of the others to exist.

A Compelling Vision for the Great Commission: Court records in Europe reveal that the Great Commission (Mat. 28:19-20) was repeated by early Anabaptists at their trials far more than any other Bible passage.

A Vision for Missions: Anabaptism began with a keen vision for missions and the local church. We have a conservative theology, without which no long-term missionary vision can be sustained.

Advantages in Ministry among Muslims

While Muslims pride themselves on being followers of Mohammad, Anabaptists can say, "We are followers of Jesus." We also have a history of suffering and martyrdom. When one of our forefathers, Michael Sattler, was on trial, an accusation made against him was that he would not defend his country against the Turkish invaders. He fearlessly declared, "If the Turks should make an invasion, they should not be resisted; for it is written, 'Thou shalt not kill.' We ought not defend ourselves against the Turks and our persecutors; but earnestly entreat God in our prayers, that he would repel and withstand them. For my saying that if I approved of war, I would rather march forth against the so named Christians who persecute, imprison, and put to death the pious Christians, I assign this reason: The Turk is a true Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith and is a Turk according to the flesh; but you wishing to be Christian, and making your boast of Christ, persecute the pious witnesses of Christ, and are Turks according to the Spirit." The town clerk replied, "The executioner will dispute with you!" Sattler was then led out to be burned at the stake.

This attitude of nonresistance contrasted sharply with the union of church and state which was in effect during the Crusades. A number of years ago I toured the Alcazaba Fortress in southern Spain. We were led to the very top and allowed to look through the portholes. We could see beyond the castle to the very place where Muslims had camped during their siege of the Christians in the castle. The portholes through which the soldiers shot at their enemies were the shape of a cross! Spanish Christians were anything but non-resistant, using germ warfare against Muslim invaders by catapulting into the enemy's camp the bodies of people who had died from deadly diseases. Our history of martyrdom and suffering is a very precious facet of the gem we hold in our hand, allowing us to empathize with others who have suffered at the hands of persecutors.

An illustration of suffering love is our ability to endure in the face of few or no results. At a consultation of evangelical ministries among Muslims, one noteworthy observation was that Mennonites have the ability to endure in the face of few obvious results. Not long ago I spoke with a gentleman from another missionary agency in Latin America who told me they sometimes get people from Mennonite background to work with them. He said: "Mennonites are great people, though at first they are kind of stubborn, and it can be hard to get them to work with you. But because they are so stubborn, they will endure when everybody else has quit!"

In addition to the key Anabaptist principles listed above we emphasize strong families. We typically have whole families; although they are not perfect units, this is still the norm among us. The result is extended families and connectedness. We place high value on children. In our Anabaptist churches, bearing children is considered a blessing. While in Spain I had the opportunity to hand out literature to Muslims from North Africa. On that day there was a strike among the ferry workers, so no one could travel anywhere. I approached three young Muslim girls to give them some literature, but they refused. They said that they were Muslims and I was a Christian. They asked me if I drank wine; I said I did not, because I was a follower of Jesus. They laughed at me because of what they perceived my Christianity to be. As we talked, God prompted me to show them a picture of my family. When I did, their attitudes immediately changed. Families are

important to Muslims. As a result of this connection, two of the girls and several elderly women accepted Jesus DVDs and New Testaments in Arabic.

Also providing strong connections are our hospitality and work ethic as well as our appreciation of modesty and traditional gender roles with modesty and the head covering for women, and with men uncovering their heads when they pray or prophesy. While we struggle with our culture over these issues, these Anabaptist strengths are very valuable in work among Muslims. Many Muslims are angry with the West due to the immodesty, drunkenness, immorality and broken families in our society. Our Anabaptist emphasis on hospitality is often outdone in Islamic cultures; Muslims may even borrow money in order to give you a good meal! They value the husband as leader and breadwinner, with the wife and mother as keeper in the home. One reason Islam has made such advances in the prison system of our country is that it represents a movement that brings structure, cohesion, and continuity to fractured communities.

Some years ago, DNI was invited by a Spanish pastor named Pedro Reyes to work among Muslims in Spain. When he invited us to come to Spain he said, “You Mennonites have a unique contribution to make to missions among Muslims. I think Mennonites have a special call to work among Muslims.”

When I asked him what he meant, he replied:

“The head covering, modesty, hospitality and family life are part of a culture that is closer to Muslim culture than much of mainstream Europe. Muslims are a community people; so are Mennonites. Muslims who accept Christ are rejected and need a community. They often are not accepted in evangelical churches, nor can they accept the type of dress or focus they see in the churches. We have to reach Muslims in a holistic way. Europeans, including Christians, have thrown off so much, there's hardly anything left to throw off anymore. But you people still believe in modesty.”

Could it be that God has called us, as Anabaptist people, to ministry among Muslims for “such a time as this”?

Advantages in Ministry among Buddhists and Hindus

The unique strengths of the Anabaptists position us to connect with Buddhists and Hindus as well. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Buddhists, travels around the world promoting peace. Anabaptists are known for their focus on peace and non-resistance. We refuse to participate in war and we declare our willingness even to die for the sake of Christ.

In Buddhism, there is also a sense of other-worldliness. Although their desire to get away from this world to whatever is out there (perhaps becoming nothing) seems strange to us, we also have a history of other-worldliness. Jesus said His followers would be “in the world, but not of the world.” Non-conformity to the world is part of our heritage.

Both Buddhist and Hindu cultures have a deep respect for the elderly and for family. Individuals from many people groups around the world say, “You Westerners have nothing to say to us. Look at your families. Our families are in better shape than yours.” I remember one time in New York City seeing a young man about twenty years old get out of his nice car. Next, I saw a frail little old lady get out of the car. The young man, well dressed, bent down on his knees on the sidewalk to touch her feet as a sign of respect.

Another similarity is the love of community. The Buddhists say, “I take refuge in the Sangha” (the community). In many Buddhist countries, all boys are expected to spend time in a Buddhist monastery. Anabaptists also have a love of community. Our barn raisings, auctions, breakfasts, meals, after-church fellowship, ministry conventions, Bible Institutes, and voluntary service opportunities all show our commitment to and love of community.

Buddhism promotes learning to be content with a simple life. This has long been part of our heritage. In the Bible we read that “Godliness with contentment is great gain.”

Buddhists acknowledge the spirit world. For us, instead of saying demonic activity is merely, only, and always a psychological disorder, we believe demons do exist, can inhabit people, and need to be cast out. This is a result of our Biblicism and the belief that the Bible is still relevant today.

Advantages in Ministry among Jews

When ministering to Jewish people, our tendency to have large, intact families can be a great benefit. Our interconnectedness is a strength as well. In some Jewish communities in Brooklyn, NY, a missionary is immediately detected. The word is spread around: “Watch out, some missionaries are here.”

We, too, are an interconnected people. We share the latest news. We get together and ask, “Now what's your last name? Oh yes, now let me think. Do you have a relative named so-and-so out in Holmes County?” And there we go, making connections! Jewish people can identify with this connectedness. We also share some family names with Jewish people. If you go to a Jewish cemetery you will discover Mennonite last names, such as Kauffman or Roth.

We share a history with the Jews of not being in the cultural mainstream and of suffering at the hands of the majority. Jewish people are generally skeptics of the majority. Neither do Anabaptists quite fit the hole into which everybody else fits. Many of us still retain a distinct way of dressing. Not all Jewish people maintain distinctive dress, but Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox do.

Daniel Pollard, who is originally from Trinidad, leads groups of visitors in New York City. One time he led a New Order Amish group through a large Manhattan building with escalators. He followed behind as the New Order Amish group went up the escalator. Nobody knew he was with the group, because they were white and he was not. On the descending escalator was a group of Orthodox Jewish people. He had great fun observing these two groups eyeing each other while they tried to figure out, “Are they us, or what are they?”

As Anabaptists, we tend to be conservative in our spending. With Jews, we share the love of a bargain. There are some widely known sayings that reflect this aspect of Jewish culture. I have heard Anabaptists jokingly say, “If it is free, I will take two!”

Conclusion

These similarities with various cultures and religions create a great opportunity. Could it be that God has called us into the Kingdom for “such a time as this”? In reaching Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews, we are uniquely equipped because of the special values and history of our Anabaptist heritage.

Rejoice because of the diamond that has been given to us! Don't be put off by facets which may seem rough. Don't toss it away! God is polishing us. And remember: greater advantages lead to greater responsibilities. “To whom much is given, much will be required.”

I conclude with a challenge from a story shared with me by David Shenk, who grew up in Tanzania as a missionary child living among Muslim people. He talked with a Muslim religious leader during a meal together in Washington, DC about the Sermon on the Mount, and explained the way Jesus taught us to live. When David finished, the Muslim cleric leaned forward, and with tears running down his cheeks exclaimed, “David, the way of Jesus is beautiful. It's beautiful! Why don't Christians live that way?”

Part III
The Preservation of Anabaptism
Daniel Yoder

Introduction

The future of any movement always hinges on the choices made by the current generation. What is the responsibility of the current generation of Anabaptist adults? How can the values and distinct emphases of the Anabaptist movement be passed on to the next generation? This challenge has faced Anabaptists throughout their history.

For the first Anabaptists, their decision to break with the established church of their day came with a cost which they needed to count. It was not without much thought and prayer that they decided to withhold their children from the practice of infant baptism. In so doing, they were fully aware that their decision to follow Christ threatened their lives. Many of those early Anabaptists did indeed pay for their beliefs with their blood.

The problem facing each successive generation of Anabaptists is articulated clearly by John Roth when he writes:

How can a movement of radical renewal maintain its identity into the second and third generations? For the first generation of Anabaptists, baptized as infants and raised in Catholic homes, rebaptism implied a radical break with the past. By the middle of the sixteenth century, however, a new generation of children had been born to Anabaptist parents and raised in settings predisposed to Anabaptist doctrines and practices. For them, the context of their decision regarding faith was quite different from that of their parents.¹

Build the Right Kingdom

How can the current generation of Anabaptists help to ensure the preservation of Anabaptist doctrine? It may be helpful to consider an analogy. If your goal is to be able to give your children a certain amount of money, what is one thing you must not neglect? At the very least, you must

make sure you have the money! You obviously cannot pass on what you do not have yourself. Your desire to give will be meaningless if you do not have the money yourself. It will be their choice whether or not they accept what you offer, but it is your responsibility to make sure you have something worth being passed on to the next generation.

We must therefore consider the choices that are being made by the current generation. As finite creatures, we are only able to build one kingdom at a time. While it is always tempting to build our own kingdoms, we must make sure we are building the Kingdom of God.

The Scottish missionary David Livingstone made a statement which should characterize the life of every Christian when he said:

“I place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in relation to the kingdom of God. If anything will advance the interests of the kingdom, it shall be given away or kept, only as by giving or keeping it I shall most promote the glory of Him to whom I owe all my hopes in time or eternity.”

The Kingdom of God is present anywhere God’s will is being sought and obeyed. Our homes and our churches must be places which are characterized by a wholehearted seeking of God’s will. The Kingdom of God advances as Christ assumes a position of Lordship in the hearts and lives of people. We must model the Lordship of Christ by being radically obedient in our own lives before we can hope to have a faith worth sharing with those who follow us.

The Key to the Future

To discover the key to the future of the Anabaptist movement we must travel back to the early 1520s. At that time Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich, Switzerland, introduced his students to the Greek New Testament. He was unknowingly watering the seed that became the Anabaptist movement. His students took the Scriptures more seriously than he had expected. The birth of Anabaptism stemmed from a group of young people who had learned to study the Bible. In many ways Anabaptism was a movement which sought

to return to the Bible. That was how Anabaptism started, and it is the only way Anabaptism can be sustained.

The authorities in Zurich rightly recognized the challenge that this Bible study group posed to the Roman Catholic Church. Zwingli was willing to challenge the Catholic system to a point, but many of his students wanted to go farther in pushing for reform. Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Simon Stumpf were students of Zwingli who were willing to take the Bible at face value. As they went beyond the academic approach of Zwingli, they saw the need to challenge the religious system of their day.

Those young men fully expected an understanding of the Scriptures to lead to life change. One of the changes they perceived as necessary pertained to baptism. They saw no Scriptural support for the practice of infant baptism. Rather, they believed that the Bible taught the voluntary baptism of adult believers who confess faith in Christ. The authorities were willing to hold public discussions about those differences. It was important to the authorities to be able to control the changes that would be made.

On the issue of baptism, Zwingli did not side with his students. He deferred to the authorities when he said, “My lords will decide.” His dumbfounded students were shocked that their respected Bible teacher was willing to leave the decision about how to follow Scripture in the hands of the city council. Why was the council weighing in about truths which were presented in Scripture?

Zwingli’s statement was met with this response by Simon Stumpf: “Master Ulrich, the Spirit of God has already decided!”

That powerful statement captures something of the essence of the Anabaptist movement. It expressed a commitment to following the Spirit of God, even if that led to backlash from the council. The Word of God must be followed regardless of the consequences. When faced with a question about whom or what would be their authority, these young men were prepared to declare their allegiance to God and his Word. Their decision put them at odds with their teacher and the authorities, but they were convinced that Scripture was the only authoritative standard.

Our only hope for the future is to cultivate a movement which recognizes that the only safe authority is the Bible as studied under the direction of the Holy Spirit. That conviction gave rise to the Anabaptist movement, which officially began in 1525. We are continually faced by the same questions that faced those young students: What is our source of authority? Is it Scripture understood through the work of the Holy Spirit? Has something else taken the place of Scripture? On all issues facing us, we must echo the words of Zwingli's students: "The Spirit of God has already decided!"²

The Proper Starting Point

If the Anabaptist movement is to be preserved, we must raise up the next generation to be students of the Book. It is likely that many other Christian movements would assert the same for themselves. After all, the Bible is the foundational document of Christianity. However, we must give consideration to the different ways in which Christians can approach the Bible. In *A Third Way*, Paul Lederach acknowledges that he is in danger of being overly simplistic when he writes that "it seems that the various theological streams result from starting at different places in interpreting the Bible. Where one begins has a strong bearing on where one ends!"³

Lederach goes on to discuss several of those different starting points. One such starting point is the Old Testament. Those who take this approach are likely to see Old Testament practices as somehow carrying over into the life of the New Testament church (e.g., viewing circumcision as the foundation of infant baptism). Another starting point is the New Testament. Advocates of this approach emphasize that the New Testament is God's final revelation to us. While many Christians would affirm this approach, a further question is raised. Does the interpretation begin with the epistles (particularly the Apostle Paul) or with Jesus and the Gospels? There are Christian traditions that have begun their interpretation of Scripture on the basis of the words of Paul. For example, Martin Luther's study of the book of Romans led to the doctrine of justification by faith becoming his primary theological emphasis.⁴

Other Christian groups begin their interpretation of Scripture with Jesus and the Gospels. The Anabaptists have historically taken this approach. Lederach summarizes their approach:

All the Scriptures are interpreted from the standpoint of Jesus as He is portrayed in the Gospels. Both the Old Testament and the rest of the New Testament are interpreted from the Gospels. The Old Testament points to Jesus Christ. The letters of Paul and other epistles find their meaning in the person of Jesus, found in the Gospels. At the risk of oversimplification, the Mennonite/ Anabaptist theological stream began with Jesus and the Gospels.⁵

Using Jesus and the Gospels as a starting point does not diminish in any way the importance of any portion of Scripture. As Lederach pointed out, it is in Christ that the Old Testament finds its fulfillment and it is in Christ that the epistles find the historical basis for their theology and instruction. According to John Roth, this approach to Scripture was a significant principle of Biblical interpretation for the early Anabaptists. He helpfully expresses the historic Anabaptist view of Scripture when he writes:

This commitment to reading Scripture through the lens of Christ – what is sometimes called a Christocentric approach to Scripture – is a recognition that Jesus is the final standard for the Christian believer. Thus, all of Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, should be interpreted in a way that is consistent with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.⁶

Equipped to Stand

A generation of skilled Bible students will be able to weather any storm. The Bible contains God's timeless truth. We could attempt to give detailed responses to the particular issues we are facing in 2017, but those challenges will quickly be replaced. New challenges are constantly arising. If we can teach our young people to study the Bible for themselves, they will be equipped to stand against any and every challenge our enemy may raise against the church.

As I teach in a Bible institute setting, I am coming to realize that many of my students have never been taught to study the Bible. We would never think of raising children who are constantly dependent on us for money or food. It is our goal to teach them to work so that they can make their own money and buy their own food. We recognize that we have a responsibility to help equip them with skills and values that they can use in earning money.

In the same way, we must assist our young people in acquiring tools to study the Bible for themselves. Rather than simply giving them food, we must teach them how to farm. We must not be content with handing out pre-packaged doctrines and beliefs. Rather, we must equip them to investigate the Scripture, discover God's truth, and seek God's Spirit in making application of those truths to their lives.

The power of Bible study is seen in this observation by Dwight L. Moody:

I prayed for faith, and thought that someday faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But faith did not seem to come.

One day I read in the tenth chapter of Romans, "Now faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." I had closed my Bible, and prayed for faith. I now opened my Bible, and began to study, and faith has been growing ever since.

A Method

Perhaps many of us are ill-equipped to teach people to study the Bible due to a lack of training on our part. With that possibility in mind, I would like to briefly outline a simple Bible study method. A resource that would be worthy of your study is *Living by the Book*.⁷ This book develops a three-step Bible study process: Observation – Interpretation – Application.

The observation stage involves reading the Biblical text repeatedly and carefully. The question to ask in this stage is, "What does the passage say?" The second step, interpretation, asks the question, "What does the passage mean?" This stage seeks to determine what the Biblical author was conveying to the original readers.

Only when those two steps have been done well can the third step, application, be done. Application considers, “How does it work?” Familiarity with the content of the passage and the intention of the author enables a person to consider how the truths of that passage are to be manifested in daily life. The best way to be a disciple and to make disciples is to study the Bible carefully with a willingness to seriously ask and answer the question, “What should we do?”

Benefits

There are many benefits which accompany learning how to study the Bible. One benefit has already been mentioned, which is the ability to survive in the face of any challenge to the faith. Several more benefits are also worthy of mention. An ability to study the Bible will lead to an increasing ability to answer questions about the Christian faith. That includes parents being willing to answer their children’s questions. If they do not know the answer they must be willing to work to find the answer. Young people are not interested in a faith which can only be explained by saying, “This is the way we have always done it.”

Another benefit is the clarity that will be gained concerning the nature of the Gospel. A generation of faithful Bible students will have a faithful understanding of this core message of Christianity. The Gospel in a nutshell is that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (cf. 1 Timothy 1:15). An accurate presentation of the Gospel must include the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In His life, Jesus taught His disciples in both word and deed (Mark 10:1; 1 Peter 2:21); in His death, He was the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins (Hebrews 9:28); in His resurrection, He defeated the power of sin and Satan (1 Corinthians 15:17); in His ascension, He sat down at the right hand of God where He now intercedes for us (Romans 8:34).

In addition to those benefits, it is my hope that a generation of well-equipped Bible students will produce writers. The early Anabaptists are still being read today. What is being written today that will be worth reading in 500 years? Without ignoring the Anabaptists writers that are currently active,

it should be mentioned that there is room for more people who are willing to write thoughtfully from an Anabaptist perspective.

Conclusion

It has always been a challenge for the Anabaptist faith to be transmitted from one generation to the next. Each generation must first consider whether or not they themselves are truly living the faith. They must also commit themselves to training the next generation to study the Scriptures. Our only hope for the future is to cultivate a movement which recognizes that the only safe authority is the Bible as studied under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Endnotes:

¹ John D. Roth, *Stories: How Mennonites Came to Be*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 88.

² Much of the historical information in this section is drawn from Frank Reed, Biblical Brethren Fellowship, *The Spirit of God Decides*, <https://biblicalbrethrenfellowship.wordpress.com/2012/08/05/the-spirit-of-god-decides/> (accessed February 9, 2017).

³ Paul M. Lederach, *A Third Way*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 17-18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ John D. Roth, *Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practices*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2005), 45.

⁷ Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007).

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