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## **An Overview of Anabaptist Hermeneutics**

### **A Summary of Stuart Murray's book *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*<sup>1</sup>**

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#### **Introduction:**

The purpose of this study is to examine briefly how Scripture was used and interpreted by the early Anabaptists during their formative years of the sixteenth century. This study is primarily a summary of Stuart Murray's definitive book on the topic, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*. We will follow the six principles Murray identifies as the essentials of Anabaptist hermeneutics: The Bible as Self-interpreting; Christocentrism; The Two Testaments; Spirit and Word; Congregational Hermeneutics; Hermeneutics of Obedience.

It is my hope and prayer that this study of Anabaptist Hermeneutics will in a small way contribute to the current conversation about the relevance of Anabaptist practice and thought for today's church.

#### **The Context for the Development of Anabaptist Hermeneutics:**

Anabaptist hermeneutics developed alongside the hermeneutics of other Reformers during the sixteenth-century. This was a period during which the rediscovery of the Bible was bringing about major changes in Europe's religious, social and intellectual systems. The recent

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<sup>1</sup> Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2000).



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introduction of the printing press and the distribution of the Bible in the common language of the masses were significant in the spread of the Reformation.

All the Reform movements considered themselves to be biblical people. But Anabaptists read the Bible with a passion. Individuals, families, and congregations studied it, memorized it, recited it, discussed it and sought to apply it to their lives. They not only listened to the preaching and teaching of professional clergy as practiced in the Reformed churches; all members of Anabaptist congregations were expected to participate in Scripture interpretation by asking questions and offering additional insights rather than just passively listening to trained leaders.

Several important hermeneutical issues emerged from the debates between Reformers and Anabaptists, including the relationship between the Testaments, the role of the congregation in interpretation, the importance of the Holy Spirit in hermeneutics, and the significance of obedience in understanding Scripture. However, since the Reformers, through suppression and persecution of Anabaptists, took control of the European religious scene, Reformed hermeneutical practices prevailed through four subsequent centuries. It is only recently that Anabaptism and its unique approach to hermeneutics has been rediscovered and is once again becoming a relevant and a sought after source of insight and practice for believers seeking alternatives to the tired post-Reformation approach to Scripture interpretation.

Anabaptist approaches to the interpretation of Scripture were not developed in seminaries and universities but in the context of local congregations, small groups and at times in prison cells. Unlike the Reformers, Anabaptists were mostly poor, uneducated and persecuted, not unlike the first century Christians. This gave them unique insights into Scripture which were frequently ignored or ridiculed by their powerful contemporaries. No study of hermeneutics must ignore

*"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11*



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the insights and contributions of the many uneducated men and women who lived and died for the principles that developed from their commitment to Scripture.

The Reformers basically presented a uniform hermeneutic but this cannot be said of the Anabaptists. One reason is that the Anabaptists did not have any single theologian comparable to Luther, Zwingli or Calvin. Many early Anabaptists were threatened with imprisonment or death and had to flee from place to place, making concentrated study and writing difficult. Many died a martyr's death before they had the opportunity to write systematically. Menno Simons, the Dutch Anabaptist, wrote extensively and his writings are helpful in a study of Anabaptist hermeneutics but during his life time he was not well known to Swiss and South German Anabaptists and he cannot be considered the spokesperson for the Anabaptist movement.

Unlike the ongoing acceptance by both Protestants and Catholics of the Constantinian marriage of church and state, Anabaptists rejected this foundation of Christendom. Reformer's hermeneutics were influenced by their commitment to Christendom and that influence continues in many cases to this day. Anabaptist rejection of the Constantinian assumptions and values in their hermeneutics offered an approach which many post-Christendom churches and groups are eager to explore today.

We will now consider the Anabaptist principle that Scripture is clear and self-interpreting.

### **The Bible as Self-Interpreting:**

Anabaptists were convinced that ordinary Christians could read and understand the Bible with confidence because they understood that Scripture was self-interpreting. "The words of Christ

*"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ." 1 Cor. 3:11*

are plainly expressed, distinctly and clearly,” wrote Clemens Adler in 1529. “They must be permitted to stand on their worth and truth without any of our additions.”<sup>2</sup> Felix Mantz, the first Anabaptist martyr wrote, “I do, however, know for sure that if only the Word be allowed to speak for itself freely and simply, no one will be able to withstand it.”<sup>3</sup> In the record of Mantz’s trial, he testifies to the key role the Bible plays in his thinking and in its clarity and dependability. “Felix Mantz gives answer that the Scriptures and their bases are so firm that they cannot be set aside or overcome ---- nothing has impelled him to deny infant baptism and to oppose it but the clear and true Scripture.”<sup>4</sup>

While on trial, Anabaptists continued to declare that their views were derived only from Scripture and that Scripture was clear enough to support and justify their views. For example, in 1553, Joos Kindt complained to his inquisitor, “Don’t speak to me of Augustine, for I do not know him; I hold no doctrine save that of the apostles and the prophets, and the words which our Saviour brought from on high heaven, from the mouth of his heavenly Father, and sealed with his precious blood; for this I go to the fire; but Augustine, Gregory, Ambrose, these I know not.”<sup>5</sup> Another inquisitor asked an Anabaptist woman, Claeskan, in 1559, “do you know better than the holy fathers of fifteen hundred years ago? You should think that they are simple.” Her reply is typical of Anabaptist’s confidence that scholarship and theological reputation were not the keys to correct hermeneutics: “Though I am simple before men, I am not simple in the knowledge of the Lord. Do you know that the Lord thanked his Father that he had hid these things from the wise and the prudent, and he revealed them to the simple and unto babes?”<sup>6</sup>

Among Anabaptists, a theological and intellectual approach to scripture was suspect. Using the text from Matthew 11:25, many quoted Jesus’ prayer rejoicing that God had revealed truth to

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 47

the simple and to children as the basis of their confidence in interpreting Scripture. Others noted that many authors of the Bible were uneducated and ordinary men. Menno urged his opponent Gellius Faber to be content with “the plain and simple testimony of Matthew the publican, and of Peter and John, the fishermen, so that he might not deceive the unlearned by such wise reasoning, and lead them from the way of truth.”<sup>7</sup>

Even Balthasar Hubmaier, the most highly trained theologian among the Anabaptists, was committed to the principle of simplicity on the bases that Jesus himself was a carpenter and not a trained scholar. In a debate he argued, “I grant that you are all highly educated, and in fact you are. But I have spoken in simplicity, and my speech can only be and will only be thus. For the Son of the carpenter, who never went to university, has bidden me thus to speak, and in order that I may write it, has himself fashioned my pen with his carpenter’s hatchet.”<sup>8</sup>

Anabaptists recognized that Scripture contains obscure and difficult passages but they expected to understand these by comparing Scripture with Scripture. In *A Simple Instruction*, Hubmaier wrote, “Where certain sayings of Scripture are dark or presented in very short form, from which disagreements may follow, one ought, in order to resolve any difficulty, to place other writings that are clearer and plainer, but related to the same matter, beside the short, dark sayings, as many candles lit together. Thus the bright, clear light of Scriptures will break forth.”<sup>9</sup>

Anabaptists also taught the importance of allowing scripture to interpret itself by reading texts in their context. Hubmaier wrote, “The Bible also interprets itself in that many passages must be viewed in the context of what precedes and what follows. The crucial passage, if torn out of context, will admit to all kinds of interpretations, but if placed in the light of the context will be quite clear and plain.”<sup>10</sup> Dirk Philips taught that not only individual verses must be understood

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 51

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 60

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 61

in their context but that entire passages must be read in the context of Scripture as a whole. “It is neither right nor permissible --- that many passages of scripture must make way for one single passage and be broken, distorted and altered because of one passage, but one passage should give way to many and be understood according to many proofs,”<sup>11</sup>

### **Christocentrism:**

Christocentrism was widely accepted among Anabaptists as a significant hermeneutical key. Jesus was recognized as the one who clarified what was obscure in Scripture. Hans Pfistermeyer wrote, “What Christ has explained and helped us to understand, I will adhere to, since it is the will of his heavenly Father. I accept the Old Testament wherever it points to Christ. However, Christ came with a more exalted and perfect teaching.”<sup>12</sup>

The Reformers also insisted that Scripture’s primary sense was Christological. However, for Luther and others, ‘Christological’ referred primarily to the redemptive work of Christ and the principle of justification by faith. This was seen as Scripture’s primary meaning and became the hermeneutical key to every Scripture passage. But the Reformers seemed to have struggled with Jesus’ words and often used Old Testament references to explain their meaning, as in the example of swearing oaths and justifying war.

Michael Sattler’s basic principle for interpreting Scripture was the “perfection of Christ” which included both the words and the example of Christ. At his trial he responded, “I am not aware that we have acted contrary to the Gospel and the Word of God; I appeal to the words of Christ.”<sup>13</sup> It was by those words that he wanted to be judged as to whether or not he was

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 61

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 70

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 71

faithful to the whole of scripture. Menno Simons placed I Corinthians 3: 11, “For no other foundation can be laid, than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ,” at the beginning of everything he wrote. In 1539 he wrote the classic Anabaptist phrase, “No doctrine is profitable or serviceable to our salvation but the doctrine of Christ Jesus and His holy apostles.”<sup>14</sup> Dirk Philips insisted that “the only touchstone and the only measuring rod is God’s word, and the only foundation is Jesus Christ.” “Jesus with his doctrine, life and example is our Teacher, Leader, and Guide, him we must hear and follow.”<sup>15</sup> Note the special emphasis on Jesus’ life and example and on hearing and following him.

The Christocentrism of Anabaptists meant that they did not read the Bible as a flat document. Generally the New Testament was seen as authoritative over the Old Testament and the life and teaching of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels, were of greatest significance. Again quoting Dirk Philips, “Such and similar signs and figures of divine grace were, indeed, for the most part given from God to the believers in the Old Testament. They all direct us primarily to Jesus Christ through whom we receive grace from God.”<sup>16</sup> As the Old Testament pointed forward to Christ, so the New Testament directed all attention to him, the source of life and power, the example to be followed and the founder and head of the church. Many Anabaptists even ranked the Gospels above the rest of the New Testament because they, above all else, highlighted the words and life of Jesus. For Anabaptists then the first step in hermeneutics was to ask how a passage should be interpreted in light of Jesus life and teaching. He was honoured as the supreme revealer; as the ultimate revelation of God.

Anabaptists acknowledged the Christ of the creeds but their Christocentrism focused less on the creedal Christ than on the historical Jesus. While they agreed with the Reformers on the importance of faith in the redeeming work of Christ, their Christocentric hermeneutic did not

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 71

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 72

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 75

mean that all of scripture need be interpreted by the doctrine of justification by faith. Rather all Scripture was to be understood through the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. His example, his lifestyle, his relationships and his intentions were essential as the basis for interpreting Scripture. Using the Gospels as the primary cannon had significant implications for Anabaptists. Unlike the Reformers doctrinal and propositional focus, which required little more than intellectual discussion and mental assent, the Anabaptist hermeneutic encouraged an encounter; a living relationship with the Lord of Scripture. The German expression "*Nachfolge*" or following after was used to describe the discipleship which resulted from the emphasis this hermeneutic.

The Reformers were suspicious that the Anabaptist emphasis on Jesus as example rather than redeemer was leading them away from the principle of '*saved by grace alone*' and reverting to works-righteousness. However, Anabaptists argued that they were not reverting to works-righteousness. They accused the Reformers of a "*faith without works.*" Dirk Philips stated that while "some nevertheless say that we wish to earn our salvation through our good works, this is as far from our faith as heaven is from earth. For we believe and confess that we are saved through the grace of Christ and have forgiveness alone through his blood."<sup>17</sup>

The Munster disaster was one of the few times that Christocentric hermeneutics was abandoned by Anabaptists. The Munster leaders chose to focus almost exclusively on Old Testament references to justify their apocalyptic vision. By-passing Jesus and his New Testament teaching resulted in disastrous consequences for the Munsterites and resulted in a long standing blight for Anabaptists.

The Anabaptist Christocentric hermeneutic was significant in the development belief and practice in the Reformation. This radical call to a life of costly discipleship represented a middle

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 88



ground between the Catholic emphasis on works and the Protestant emphasis on faith alone. John Howard Yoder wrote of this development, “There being no essential structural connection between Christ and ethics, except the negative one that we are saved by Christ instead of works, Protestants have had to choose between a high Christology and a high ethic. The Anabaptist claim that Christ is authoritative in ethics in the same way as for soteriology --- avoided such a posing of alternatives, and perceived that a high ethic and a high Christology are possible only together.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Two Testaments:**

The relationship between the Old and the New Testament brought about an intense debate between Anabaptists and Reformers. Since Constantine, many issues in Christendom had been decided by reference to the Old Testament. With their new-found access to Scripture, the Anabaptists raised many questions about the appropriateness of these Old Testament references. The earliest letter written by the Swiss Brethren to Thomas Muntzer revealed their attitude toward the two Testaments. “And so we think alike in everything except that we learned with sorrow that you have set up tablets, for which we can find neither text nor example in the New Testament. In the Old it was of course written outwardly, but now in the New it is to be written of the fleshy tablets of the heart, as comparison of the two Testaments shows.”<sup>19</sup>

The Bern Debate in 1538 concluded that “we grant it (the Old Testament) validity wherever Christ has not suspended it and wherever it agrees with the New.”<sup>20</sup> Hubmaier, in his debate with Zwingli regarding baptism challenged Zwingli; “For the sake of the last judgment, drop your

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<sup>18</sup> John Howard Yoder, quoted in Murray, *Ibid*, 92

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

circuitous argument on circumcision out of the Old Testament. We have a clear word for baptizing believers and you have none for baptizing your children, except you groundlessly drag in several shadows from the Old Testament.” He further argued that; “Water baptism is a ceremony of the New Testament. Therefore I demand from you a clear word out of the New Testament with which you bring us this infant baptism --- but you prove infant baptism from Exodus.”<sup>21</sup>

While most Anabaptists stressed the discontinuity between the two Testaments, most did not regard this as challenging the essential unity of the Word of God. Dirk Philips taught that “the true interpreter must develop a hermeneutic which is conscious of the division between the two Testaments and can yet discover their underlying unity.”<sup>22</sup> The moderate South German Anabaptist, Pilgrim Marpeck, pictured the Old Testament as the foundation of a house and the New Testament as the house itself. While he saw the foundation as essential, foundation and house serve unique functions and must be recognized as such.

Treating the Testaments in this way led to major disagreements between Reformers and Anabaptists. Many Catholic and State Church practices were based on Old Testament references, such as defending infant baptism with the Old Testament analogy of circumcision. There were also ethical implications in the two Testament discussion. Many of the views in the Catholic and the Protestant State Churches were developed to support their relationship with the state, so important New Testament passages, such as the Sermon on the Mount, were set aside in favor of Old Testament examples. New Testament teaching was regarded as applying to private life only or possibly also to monastic orders. An early writing from the Swiss Brethren noted with regard to state church leaders that they “Have taken measures whereby force is used in matters of faith and conscience through a Mosaic manner of coercion.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 98

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 99

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 101

For many Anabaptists the decisive passage regarding the New and Old Testament was the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus six times quoted the Old Testament and then said, “But I say to you.” It was on this basis that the Anabaptists believed that the New Testament and the teachings of Jesus superseded the teaching of the Old Testament. In a letter which the Hutterites sent to the Moravian government in 1545 they argued that “the Bible is often quoted to excuse warfare. People say that David and many others waged war. We answer that in the Old Testament times the new kingdom of Christ had not yet been revealed. War was not wrong for David and other devout men who lived before the time when grace was fully poured out by God. But to all those who have been chosen by God (in this time of grace), war is now forbidden.”<sup>24</sup> The reason for this was that in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ had clearly dealt with this by forbidding his followers to practice the Old Testament law of hating enemies and repaying injuries in kind.

The Anabaptist approach was to recognize the Old Testament of real but limited value. It was inspired Scripture but it did not have the same application for Christians as the New Testament did. The symbols and metaphors of the Old were significant but their meaning must be understood by comparing them with the realities of the New to which they always referred.

### **Spirit and Word:**

Throughout the Reformation, the relationship between the Spirit and the Word was a significant hermeneutical issue. Anabaptists struggled how to give adequate room to the Holy Spirit in the interpretation process while still allowing for the authority of Scripture. In this regard, the Anabaptists were accused of erring in both directions. How did Anabaptists view the work of the Spirit and how did they use their understanding of the Spirit in their hermeneutics?

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 101

Anabaptists accepted justification by faith but they did not see the term as adequate to describe their experience of Christ and the Spirit. They recognized that through the death of Christ their sins were forgiven, but their greater interest was in living a Christ-centered life by the power of his Spirit. Menno Simons repeatedly used the term, “new birth” to describe initiation into the Christian life. He balanced commitment to Scripture with the work of the Holy Spirit to which Scripture witnessed and through which alone it could be understood.<sup>25</sup>

The Spirit had a vital role in the work of regeneration in Dirk Philip’s writing as well. The Spirit was the one who wrote the new covenant on the hearts of believers and gave them the power to participate in the divine nature. The Spirit empowered ministers called by God and the Spirit was in fact the interpreter of Scripture.<sup>26</sup> Hans Denck felt that the Lutheran promotion of creedal faith was merely giving mental assent to dogmatic propositions. He stated that the “true faith” was born when the internal Christ was born in the heart.<sup>27</sup>

Heinz Kautz and Hans Peissner were typical of ordinary Anabaptists who expressed concern about the Reformers mental emphasis while they testified to a spiritual, life transforming new birth. They criticized Melancthon’s formulation of justification by faith. “If there was no evidence of a new man in Christ living a different kind of life from what he had lived before, if there is no moral change, then there has been no forgiveness of sins.”<sup>28</sup> It was clear that as Anabaptists spoke about their experience of the Spirit that their primary focus was on ethical change and power for holy living, not on spiritual phenomena.

However, some of the most respected Anabaptist leaders did report charismatic experiences. Grebel, Mantz, and Blaurock, the original Swiss Brethren, were all reported to have had

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 132

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 132

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 132

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 133

visions.<sup>29</sup> Jacob Hutter, in a letter in 1535 wrote that God “Has given me His blessing. He has made His Word alive in me and in many to whom I proclaimed his will, sealing it through the working of his Holy Spirit with mighty miracles and signs.”<sup>30</sup> A more extreme example of charismatic phenomena was a group of about forty imprisoned Anabaptists who spent their time singing, dancing and experiencing visions, before confronting judges with joy and peace and going to execution “as if in a trance.”<sup>31</sup>

First generation Anabaptists also welcomed the activity of the Holy Spirit into their congregational life. Christian Entfelder, a Moravian Anabaptist leader defined the church as “a chosen, saved, purified, sanctified group in whom God dwells, upon whom the Holy Spirit has poured out his gifts, and with whom Christ the Lord shares his offices and his mission.”<sup>32</sup> In a letter to the churches in St. Gallen and Appenzell, Marpeck wrote, “For the gifts of the Holy Spirit are weighty. He moves as, when, and where He wills, giving whomever He desires, through Scriptures, speech, discipline, fear, tribulation, and judgment as he desires and pleases. He is Lord and Sovereign over all, over written and spoken Scriptures which men test, learn, experience, witness to, and judge.” And again he wrote, “In this body the gifts of the Holy Spirit are manifest in each member according to the measure of faith in Jesus Christ for service in the growth of the body of Christ. --- Thus they are trained, preserved, increased, and nourished until they reach the full maturity of Christ.”<sup>33</sup> It is generally agreed that in the movement’s earliest years the church leadership was charismatic in nature and depended on the Spirit’s anointing rather than on institutional or academic training. For example, imprisoned Adrian Corneliss defended himself against the charge that he was ill-equipped to interpret Scripture: “We have

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 133

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 133

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 133

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 135

not studied in Latin Universities, but in the highly celebrated school of the Gospel, of which the Spirit of God is teacher.”<sup>34</sup>

Anabaptist scholar, Arnold Snyder has observed that at least in the first generation of the movement, the experience of the Holy Spirit was crucial to theology and practice. “Without its strong pneumatic (Spirit) base, Anabaptism would have been a very different movement – or no movement at all. The work of the Spirit provided the essential underpinning for biblical interpretation, for conversion and rebirth leading to baptism, and for discipleship. --- Anabaptist ethics and ecclesiology rested on the living presence of the Spirit.”<sup>35</sup> The Reformers also spoke about the Holy Spirit but the Anabaptists were not convinced that the Spirit was allowed to move in the state churches. For example, Zwingli testified, “I understand Scripture only in the way it interprets itself by the Spirit of God. It does not require any human opinion.” But his break with the Swiss Brethren came when he in fact allowed the Zurich city council to decide how Scripture should be understood and applied. It was in response to Zwingli’s turning Scriptural decisions over to city council at the second disputation that Simon Stump’s well known cry burst forth; “Master Ulrich, you have not the right to leave the decision of this question to the Council. The matter is already decided; the Spirit of God decides it.”<sup>36</sup>

Anabaptist leaders, who had witnessed the effect of the Spirit’s work in their people and the ability they now possessed to deal responsibly with Scripture, were more willing to trust the Spirit to protect their members from harmful errors or false applications. Reformers lacked this confidence and as a result, they restricted ordinary members from interpreting Scripture. Statements by ordinary Anabaptists indicated that they rejoiced in this freedom in the Spirit and eagerly committed themselves to the Spirit’s guidance. John Claess urged his brother and sister to, “search the Word of God, and ask Him for His Holy Spirit, and the same shall instruct you in

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 142

<sup>35</sup> Snyder, *Anabaptist*, 96, quoted in *Ibid*, 136

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 137

everything needful for you<sup>37</sup>.” While most Anabaptists did not totally reject natural abilities, they were cautious of placing undue weight on them. The Spirit was the true teacher and guide on whom both educated and illiterate believers could depend. An Anabaptist from Regensburg wrote that “the knowledge of truth does not come from human study --- it comes only to those to whom it is given by grace through the light of his Spirit.”<sup>38</sup> David Joris insisted that interpretation of Scripture was for those “whom God had also inspired. Regardless of what kind of persons they are, learned or unlearned, those correctly divide the Scriptures.”<sup>39</sup>

In summary, we recognize that the relationship between Spirit and Word was significant in the Anabaptist development of a hermeneutic. While they offered different perspectives on the issue of Word and Spirit, their contribution was to provide a middle ground between the Reformers and Spiritualists. In a time of serious debate between Word and Spirit, the Anabaptists were firmly committed to both.

### **Congregational Hermeneutics:**

There are few direct references in Anabaptist writings to the “hermeneutic community.” But Anabaptist beliefs about the nature of the church, the activity of the Spirit and the ability of all to interpret obviously required a communal approach to hermeneutics. Anabaptists’ commitment to the right of all believers to study and interpret Scripture, their understanding of the church as community, their commitment to economic sharing, to discipling each other and their openness to correction from others makes it unthinkable to limit hermeneutics only to individual interpretation and to avoid testing in congregational contexts.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 140

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 141

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 141

In the Catholic tradition the opportunity for individuals to interpret Scripture was non-existent and even priests and theologians were expected to follow the traditions set by the church. Anabaptists rejected the Catholic position that the church was greater than the Bible. Their commitment to *sola scriptura* prevented them from giving such authority to the church. Instead, it was in the local congregation where Scripture was read and studied and its meaning and application discerned. Church leadership and governance were firmly subject to the authority of the Word.

The Reformers spoke of *sola scriptura* as their belief system but Anabaptists were disappointed with how this was put into practice. Anabaptists regarded the doctrinal rigidity and the fixed creeds of the Reformers as human opinions. These should not prevent believers from studying Scripture together and claiming fresh insights as they appeared. They also disagreed with any role political authorities had in shaping the understanding the Bible's meaning. As mentioned previously, they rejected dependence on scholarship and theological expertise as the only source of Biblical truth. We can imagine the Anabaptist response to Luther's insistence that sermons at every service should be read from prepared texts since "there are so few gifted preachers who are able to give powerful and practical exposition."<sup>40</sup>

For congregations to function as discerners of the Word, the congregation would need to consist of committed believers, willing to obey scripture and be open to the leading of the Spirit. The Reformers acknowledged that they lacked the kind of churches that could function this way while the Anabaptists assumed such congregations existed. Anabaptists took seriously Paul's teaching in I Corinthians 14; "*When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Two or three prophets should speak, and others should weigh carefully what is said and if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.*" An early Anabaptist tract criticized state churches for dominance

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 158



by one preacher. “When someone comes to church and constantly hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent, who will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation or confess that God is dwelling and operating in them through his Holy Spirit with his gifts, impelling them one after the other in the above mentioned order of speaking and prophesying?”<sup>41</sup>

In the *Swiss Order*, probably written by Michael Sattler in 1527, the suggestion is given; “When brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it, the others should be still and listen.”<sup>42</sup> The encouragement to “be still and listen” implies a setting in which there is room for discussion and conversation following the explanation. Spitelmaier, an early Anabaptist leader in Nikolsburg wrote; “When they come together they teach each other the divine Word and one asks the others: how do you understand this saying?”<sup>43</sup> According to Marpeck, leadership was a gift and was allowed to freely operate for the benefit of the community but leaders remained subject to the authority of the congregation. In his *Clear Refutation*, he wrote, “The authority of the apostle, bishop, and shepherd is not an authority of ruling or lordship; rather it is one of humility and lowliness so that nothing is done out of a desire to dominate others or to only advance themselves. They are servants of God and of his community.”<sup>44</sup> The term, “servant of the Word”, used by some Anabaptists to designate their leaders seems appropriate, recognizing the authority of Scripture and the servant role of leaders. The term is still used by some Mennonite groups to identify their preachers to this day.

Another indication that at least some Anabaptists encouraged dialogue and interaction between speaker and listeners is the frequent encouragement that congregation members should search the Scriptures to see if what was being taught was in fact correct. This encouragement is

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 161

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 161

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 161

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 164

especially common to Pilgrim Marpeck. In his *Admonition*, he wrote, “we will study the Scriptures, and commend our results to the judgment of every well-meaning person. According to the capacity of his faith, let each man see whether it is so.”<sup>45</sup> Explaining how this should occur, he said, “We eagerly place our confession under the judgment of the holy Christian church, which by the Spirit of God tests all things according to Scripture.”<sup>46</sup>

Menno Simons professed a similar openness to correction and further revelation. He wrote in a *Brief and Clear Confession*, “If you have plainer Scriptures concerning this article,--- if you have a clearer basis, plainer truth, or clearer proof than we have, then assist us, and I will, by the grace of God, change my mind in regard to this matter and accept your view.” And again he wrote, “I could wish, most beloved brethren, seeing that we have given our interpretation of these aforementioned words of Christ, that every Christian would diligently examine whether Paul does not (I Cor. 5) understand them in precisely the same way.”<sup>47</sup> While we know that Menno often fell short of his ideals, his writings indicate that mutual correction was at least a widespread desire among Anabaptists.

While Anabaptists were criticized for their idea of congregational hermeneutics by Reformers who called it simply a pooling of ignorance, the Anabaptist response would stress that interpretation was a matter of listening to the Spirit and of reading the Bible together for it is simple enough for all to understand at least in part. In reality, congregations realized that the value of contributions would vary from person to person. Some would have little to offer and the hermeneutic community was also prone to strong, vocal characters. But the great value of congregational hermeneutics was its refusal to exclude even the weakest members since the Spirit is available to all.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 166

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 167

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 168

### **Hermeneutics of Obedience:**

Anabaptists expressed concern about biblical interpretation which was divorced from application. They had misgivings about too much emphasis being placed on theoretical understanding of Scripture and too little emphasis on practice. In this chapter we will consider the Anabaptist emphasis on the ethical focus as both a prerequisite for interpretation and a means for evaluating the accuracy of a given interpretation. Anabaptists were concerned about the quality of life of state church members. They concluded that there must be a lack in how Scripture was being taught if such poor fruit was produced in the life of members. Anabaptists felt that Scripture was not difficult to understand, but it was indeed difficult to apply because of its costly, cross-bearing nature. Never-the-less, Scripture was to be followed and obeyed if it was to have any meaning in the believers' life and in the church. Communal hermeneutics, as practiced by the Anabaptists, stressed application rather than interpretation. Marpeck stressed that interpreters should not explain the meaning of Scripture and then not take responsibility to apply it. He assured interpreters that "If anyone seeks to do the truth --- God will see to it that he surly finds it."<sup>48</sup> In the South German tract, *How the Scripture is to be Discerningly Divided and Explained*, the first principle of interpretation was "simple obedience to Scripture's clear teaching."<sup>49</sup> It was on this point of radical obedience to the understood Word of God that the Swiss Brethren separated from Zwingli. They agreed with Zwingli on the mass and other important subjects. But they profoundly disagreed on how to apply what they knew to be right. Zwingli chose to leave the application of their beliefs to the Zurich City Council, but the Swiss Brethren saw this as a tragic compromise which undermined the whole hermeneutical process by refusing to obey what seemed so obvious.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 188

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 188

For Anabaptists, living uprightly in obedience to Christ and in submission to the Scriptures which one was interpreting was much more important than higher education, skill in languages, doctrinal correctness, or official positions. The basis of a true knowledge of Christ and of understanding Scripture was a life of costly discipleship. Hans Denck perhaps best expressed this hermeneutical prerequisite with his now well known statement; “No one can know Christ unless he follows after him in life. And no one can follow him unless he first know him.”<sup>50</sup> In *The Sending of Preachers*, Dirk Philips once again stressed the role of the Spirit and the upright life of the interpreter. “He who does not have the Spirit of the Lord does not understand the Word of the Lord and does not experience what is spiritual. How then should he be able to teach God’s Word correctly ---. The other kind of fruit which a true teacher brings forth is a blameless life, walking in accordance with the gospel.”<sup>51</sup>

One aspect of this moral qualification of teachers and preachers, which almost by definition excluded state church leaders, was that Scriptural interpretation must be free from the influence of secular power and vested interests. The Reformers concern not to offend authorities or to disturb their beneficiaries greatly limited their freedom to interpret Scripture faithfully. Hans Hut spoke powerfully against this when he warned, “all believing people who love justice to guard themselves zealously against all profit seeking, pleasure loving, ambitious, hypocritical scribes who preach for money. For they do not want your well-being but the benefit of their bellies.”<sup>52</sup>

Anabaptists expected their call to obedience to result in suffering and they insisted that their interpretation of Scripture should not be influenced by attempts to avoid suffering. In considering who was qualified to interpret Scripture, the call was not only to a moral life but also to a readiness to suffer. Obedience was understood as costly commitment. Menno asked, “Tell me, is not the Word of Christ called the word of the cross? The command to the believing is

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 189

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 191

only this, to deny themselves and take up the cross and follow him.”<sup>53</sup> Dirk Philips stated that “the true teachers must be tried by the cross, because in their words and actions they desire to be different from the world.”<sup>54</sup> Hans Hut said that “no one may attain the truth unless he follow in the footsteps of Christ and his elect in the school of every grief--.”<sup>55</sup>

Anabaptists’ emphasis on the importance of obedience was a major, challenging feature of their hermeneutics. Their insistence that obedience was an essential part of interpretation and their stress on ethical qualification rather than academic or institutional credentials provides a helpful basis for evaluating hermeneutics in the church in Korea and around the globe today.

### **Conclusion:**

Sixteenth century Anabaptist hermeneutics were radical and idealistic. They challenged the traditional hermeneutics of the Catholic Church and of the Reformers. Their challenge was so strong that thousands of Anabaptists died martyr deaths at the hands of those whose hermeneutics were being tested and challenged by the Anabaptists. Since the Reformers and Catholics prevailed, their hermeneutics have continued to influence churches to the present time.

While remnants of Anabaptist thought continue in Mennonite, Hutterite, Amish and other marginal groups, some of the passionate ideals of the original Anabaptist hermeneutics have been diluted by traditionalism, legalism and accommodating to secular values. However, as one who has grown up in a Mennonite/Anabaptist context, I am aware that there is still some evidence of the original ideals discussed in this paper in individuals, churches and institutions

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 198

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 198

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 198



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who trace their history to the original Anabaptists. What is most encouraging is the emerging global interest in Anabaptist hermeneutics for today's post-Christendom church.

It is my prayer that a renewed understanding and commitment to the ideals of the original Anabaptist hermeneutics will bring about a radical renewal in today's global church – both those who have historic links to Anabaptism and all those seeking to recover the power of the Word of God. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit guide us in our study of Scripture.