

**PRINCIPLES
OF
BIBLICAL
INTERPRETATION**
In Mennonite Theology

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Introduction

The Christian Church is a company of the redeemed gathered around the living Christ as committed disciples. The pledge to follow Him makes them in truth a people of the Word. Believing Jesus Christ to be the Word personified, the Christian Church regards the Bible as the Word of God written. The evangelical Christian, committed to Christ as Lord of the church, affirms that the only sure and adequate knowledge of Jesus Christ is the Word of God written. Here, in the pages of the Bible, proving by its quality, its effect, and its dynamic that it is in truth the Word of God, we meet our Lord, and in Him we meet God. Believing that in Jesus Christ we are confronted with the full revelation of God, we believe that in the Bible itself, Old and New Testaments inclusive, we are confronted by and enabled to understand the Christ.

The Reformation began with a rediscovery of the Bible. It initiated a movement in which persons could become responsible individuals under the lordship of Christ. In addition to the Lutheran and Reformed groups in the sixteenth century, there was a third major Reformation force—the Swiss Brethren.

Nicknamed Anabaptists, they were a group of believers who took the Word of God with absolute seriousness. They refused to compromise the lordship of Christ as they found it expressed in the New Testament, and pressed the Reformation beyond the front being drawn by their contemporaries.¹

Their basic conviction, that man in Christ is a "new creature," led the Anabaptists to regard the Reformation as unfinished so long as theological systems or ecclesiastical structure obscured the lordship of the Master in the life of the believer. Their approach to the Scripture appears to have been conditioned by their first premise of a new life in Christ, not by propositions regarding doctrinal or philosophical implications.² Their experience of the transforming grace of Christ led them to interpret the Christian life from the perspective of the new creature. Discussions of doctrinal differences with other reformers were always in the framework of responsible individual relationship with Christ.

Today the Mennonite Church faces the task of interpreting the vision of its founders.³ To be true to that vision each generation must discover anew the personal meaning of being "in Christ." To do this we must refuse to be satisfied with less than face-to-face commitment to the Lord. Our faith and experience centers in the living Christ Himself. Our interpretation of His Word, that is our hermeneutic, must be consistent with Christ as the central message of Scripture, that persons hearing our message cannot but meet the Lord.

The role of the Mennonite Church has had a significantly increasing influence in contemporary Christendom.⁴ The combination of evangelical commitment and the social aspect of the Christian

faith gives us a unique position in the larger church. But we have come to this time without an adequate articulation of contemporary Mennonite systematic theology. If we would contribute creatively, there are several areas in which we should more clearly articulate our position. First, we need to clarify an alternate Protestant hermeneutic which gives central place to what Christ is continuing to do through His Word and Spirit.⁵ Second, we should create a new awareness of the *transforming* grace of God, until our contemporaries understand the spiritual quality of discipleship *in grace*.⁶ Third, we must share our conviction of the imperative of conversion and of a believer's church, and articulate this in a depth which is enriched by psychological insights.⁷ Fourth, we must contribute a spiritual quality to social concerns which will reconcile men to God in addition to rehabilitating them in social status.⁸ **Fifth**, we need to interpret a theology of holiness in a manner which avoids shallow emotionalism and which provides wholeness of life and moral stability.⁹ Sixth, we need to cultivate a new understanding of the role of the Spirit in the Christian life, that the Christian Church become a more dynamic and mobile force in the international and intercultural involvements of our day.¹⁰ And finally, we need to communicate the Gospel in its simplicity and its grandeur, providing a confrontation of Christ which makes decision inescapable.¹¹

This is no easy task for a denomination which is only a small segment of the Christian Church, but life is too great for us to live it apart from the greatest cause! To increase the difficulty, we are confronted with new problems in contemporary discussions of the Scripture. Today a man may claim to believe the Bible to be fully inspired but mean

that it is inspired and expressed in mythical literary forms. On this assumption he may then outline an interpretation of the Bible from his perspective void of its essential message. To underscore this problem a brief reference to three ideas will be of help: demythologization, depersonalization, and dekerygmaticization.

In demythologizing the Scripture those who follow the German theologian, Rudolph Bultmann, regard myth as a literary device to communicate a greater truth than can be contained in propositions.¹² But we must beware of imposing a humanistic philosophy upon the Bible under the guise of demythologizing, which would result in a perversion of the Gospel and a destruction of faith in salvation, in reconciliation, in a new birth, in sanctification of the Spirit, and so on, as we have known and experienced salvation to be. When one looks for "saintly" products of this new theology, for evidence of discipleship in grace, for the quality of the "new creature," these are conspicuously absent.

In depersonalizing the Gospel we are moved away from a personal relation with "our Father which art in heaven" to a rather vague intellectual awareness of the "ground of being," away from knowing Jesus Christ our Lord in interpersonal fellowship to an interpretation of Christ as a continuing idea. The contemporaneity of Jesus Christ as risen Lord with whom one can have fellowship is lost in the note of commitment to an Idea that lives on.¹³ As a consequence salvation becomes a new grip on life, and discipleship becomes the effort of the flesh in imitating the life and ideas of Jesus of Nazareth.

In dekerygmaticizing, the kerygma or Gospel of reconciliation with God in Christ is altered and the message becomes one of social service. It is an em-

phasis on the here and now to the exclusion of a life beyond, rather than on our being "strangers and pilgrims" who serve others here since we have here "no continuing city." In contemporary thought some are placing anthropology at the center of life instead of theology. Consequently, we are told that rather than meeting God in a way that enables us to be a brother to our neighbor, we actually meet God only in our neighbor. The result is a deifying of man, and instead of thinking of converting our neighbor, we think only of accepting him.¹⁴ The Christian Church needs to rediscover the importance of accepting and serving one's neighbor, but to regard such service as salvation is to pervert the Gospel into a humanistic "righteousness." In contrast, discipleship knows the assurance of salvation and works from the cross. It is the redeemed man who serves his brother in the spirit of "agape," for unregenerate man does not have the power to express this love. Apart from the work of the Spirit we are impotent spiritually and our religious deeds are only psychical.

To be effective Christians in today's world, among other things we need an unshaken faith in the authority of Scripture and a sound method of interpretation.

I

Revelation—God's Self-Disclosure

The basic premise of Biblical interpretation is to regard the Bible as a special revelation. As evangelical Christians we hold the Bible to be the Word of God written.¹⁵ This is not to say that the pages of this Book contain all that God has ever said to man, nor that God has not spoken to man in other ways. This document is the unique source of the Word of God written. Here one is confronted with the full evidence of God's self-disclosure.

Revelation affirms that knowledge has come to us which we would have been incapable of achieving of ourselves. Philosophy is man's processes of reasoning in quest of truth. Theology is philosophy with a "given"—revelation.¹⁶ The knowledge of another always involves the "other." Revelation is the self-disclosure of the wholly "Other." In natural life there are some things which can be learned only through encounter with another, as for example the meaning of friendship or love, for these are areas of knowledge brought to one by involvement with another. In a similar way, revelation is the awakening of a new dimension of knowledge by our having been confronted by God. We have been spoken to, laid hold upon, and convicted by the Spirit of God. It is in this encounter that we come to a knowledge of God. Since we are limited as philosophers to "this side of the line," unless God comes to us from the "other side," we are lost. Revelation means that God in grace comes to us to make Himself known.

This awareness, that revelation is an encounter of God with man, has led some existentialists to say that true revelation is known only in the inner, personal, individual involvement with Christ. This is an aspect of revelation, but it is not the whole of it. Such a position could lead one to rely on existential experience alone and minimize the Word of God written. This reliance upon the inner consciousness is ultimately subjective and leaves one without an objective norm of revelation. Further, this position is unfair to the larger meaning of history and to the evidence in history of God's self-disclosure.

It is also important to distinguish between knowledge "about" and knowledge "of" a person—both are aspects of revelation. In the revelation of God in the Holy Scriptures we have both knowledge "about God," especially in the Old Testament, and knowledge "of God" in Jesus Christ. In one's own experience he must come to the Bible for adequate knowledge "about God," but must also open his heart and mind to the Spirit for the knowledge "of God" in Christ.¹⁷ The Bible contains knowledge about God in which one meets God Himself—the Bible is revelation; it is the Word of God written.

Divine revelation is in no way artificial. God has acted in history, and the Bible is a record of God's mighty acts and their interpretation. Here God is seen meeting man in both demonstrations and dialogue. While many of the demonstrations were in accord with natural phenomena, at other points the reality of the spirit-realm broke into the natural realm to be known as miracle. In such aspects of revelation the divine element was working in the natural elements, often in such a manner as to be recognized only by the eye of faith. At other points God's revelation came in dialogue with man, a

form in which the Bible as the Word of God is understood only when one sees in the dialogue both a word of God and a word of man. Here one must recognize the divine-human characteristics of the Book. Even the "thus saith the Lord" passages are to be understood in the context of the encounter if we are to correctly interpret them.

At other points it is the great overarching themes which make possible the interpretation of the more minor details. This discernment of the unifying themes of Scripture is a part of what may be called "a spirit of Scripture." For example, the differences in some of the accounts reported in the Kings from what is reported in the Chronicles is not seen as contradiction when one discovers that the writer is expressing a "theology of history" rather than a statistical accounting. Only one who holds to a dictation theory would see here contradiction that would threaten his position on inspiration.

To regard the Bible as the Word of God written does not answer all of our problems. Other factors in revelation must be understood to rightly interpret Scripture. A most significant one is what has been called "progress of doctrine." For our study of hermeneutics this can better be expressed as "unfolding revelation." This is not to be confused with an "evolution of God-consciousness," a humanistic concept which places man at the center. Rather, what is meant by an unfolding revelation is that God met man where he was and in a process of revelation He unfolded a disclosure of Himself. This means that God carried man forward in perception until the revelation was complete in Christ.

In the Old Testament, God progressively reveals Himself, until in "the fulness of the time . . . God sent forth his Son." In Christ we do not have an-

other prophet saying things about God, but God Himself now stands among men. The "hidden One" becomes known, and man can say, "Thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." Of this great truth Paul says, "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." Christ is the goal and the culmination of revelation. One has said, "Unless Christ was actually God, we do not yet have a full revelation." We affirm that Christ is very God, and we hold Him to be Lord of the Scriptures, the One in whom we can understand revelation. Today, as on the Emmaus road, Christ enables us to unfold "in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

Anabaptist Mennonite theology, from its very beginning, saw a distinction between the Testaments.¹⁸ Not a distinction which questioned the "grand unity" of the whole but one necessary if we are to see that unity. With this perspective a hermeneutic which sees the whole Bible as on a flat plane is unacceptable. It is evident in the Old Testament itself that it always has more to say about God.¹⁹ When one comes to the New Testament it is evident that the fullness of revelation is now provided in Christ. The amplification provided by the Spirit is solely an interpretation of the meaning of Jesus Christ as risen Lord. The unity of the Book is thereby evident to the believer.

In scholarly scrutiny the so-called contradictions disappear when one sees levels of God's self-disclosure. The different levels in the unfolding of the divine will are steps to a higher level of perception. Matters which appear to be sub-Christian in the Old Testament are to be understood as levels in human experience in which God had not as yet perfected the knowledge of His will. Of this Paul says, "At the time of this ignorance God winked at; but now

commandeth all men every where to repent." In Christ the full will of God is personified. One has said, "The New Testament is in the Old contained, and the Old is in the New explained." To express this another way, all that was said about God before Jesus Christ was said better by Him and all that is said since Jesus Christ is said best through Him!

In the Old Testament this unfolding can be seen in various ways. One example is to be found in the understanding of God. Even now we can scarcely interpret without reading the New Testament back into the Old. Seen first as Creator, God is recognized as Sovereign in the sense of His power and authority. A revelation of His holiness and justice immediately follows, to unfold into a more full revelation of mercy and forgiveness. By the close of the Old Testament period we read repeatedly of His steadfast love and grace, but it is ultimately in Jesus Christ that He is known as "Our Father."

In the New Testament there is progress of doctrine as well. The Holy Spirit enabled the church to see progressively the larger significance of Christ. Some of the earliest books are believed to have been the Thessalonian letters, later the four Gospels and Romans. A brief survey is sufficient to demonstrate that there is much more prominence given to the cross of Christ and the meaning of His death in Romans than in the Thessalonians. When the Gospels are recognized as kerygma, as the character of early church proclamation, rather than basically as biographies of the life of Christ, the differences in the accounts are understandable and expected.

While it takes an understanding of the whole to interpret the parts, the whole is to be seen not as a "flat plane" but as a faithful presentation of God's unfolding disclosure of Himself. Peter implies that

even the prophets desired to look into the things which we have and know in Christ. The Bible is revelation, it is God's self-disclosure, and is to be understood through and in Christ Jesus our Lord. The Bible is God's Word written, in the whole and therefore in the part, each part understood through the overview of a redemption expressed in Christ.

II

Inspiration—God's Safeguarding of His Disclosure

Many men write books inspired by some insight, passion, or love. The writers of Scripture wrote inspired by God Himself. The Bible was born out of the crucible of encounter and experience with the divine. In the pages of this Book men have given to us accounts of their involvement with God. By virtue of this involvement these writings carry an authority of their own.

Belief in the inspiration of Scripture is directly associated with belief in the activity of the supernatural in and through men. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit men could only record their understanding of, and interpretation of, events as they saw them. Events in which God was acting to reveal Himself could be so recorded, but without the work of the Spirit in the writers the product could be only a human document. The claim of the Scriptures is that they are "God-breathed," that "holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." This affirmation carries us beyond a human document of events in which God was acting, to a document in which God and men shared in a manner true to each.²⁰

There is a basic difference between the terms, revelation and inspiration. Revelation refers to the self-disclosure of God Himself, the coming to us of knowledge of God which is not native with man's reason. Inspiration refers to a distinct quality in that revelation, in that the God who discloses Himself acts upon the recipient of revelation to assure correctness in the account.²¹ Whether the early recounting of the acts and expressions of God were by oral transmission or in written form is relatively unimportant if one believes in the dynamic involvement of the Spirit wherever the records of revelation were at issue.

Such "God-breathedness" is not to be applied only to a moment in history when a series of words were written down but to a continuing involvement of the Spirit in the record of revelation. The uniqueness of the Bible is that the Spirit is acting in and through it. "All Scripture is inspired of God. . . ." Today, in this moment, when one reads Holy Scripture, the Spirit acts to insure that one meets God in the very words of Holy Writ. Jesus said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life."

But those words have a unique authority, for being inspired by the Spirit they are accurate expressions of revelation. The fact of inspiration does not call for a dictating of the message, but it does call for an involvement in the exercise of the writer which confirms content and correctness. This may be thought of as an experience of mental editing. The Bible, fully inspired, carries with it a verbal correctness. If this is not true, the very claim of inspiration is lost, for inspiration is the Spirit's work of validating for all time the revelation recorded in the Word of God written. Inspiration means

that the Holy Spirit functioned in a way which makes the Scriptures equally valid in what is said about God and in what is said about man! If the claim of inspiration is denied, then the witness to revelation leaves contemporary man to his own subjective awareness of the existential. But with belief in inspiration, that the Spirit was at work in the writer, we can be brought to an existential relationship with the contemporary Christ.

The inspiredness of Scripture is evidenced in the grand unity of the whole. As a divine revelation it is a disclosure which is equally valid in its revelation of the character of both God and man. Not only is God revealed as Creator, as holy, as just, as merciful, but man is also revealed as free, responsible, perverse, social, and so on. The ultimate disclosure of both God and man is in Jesus Christ, "very God of very God and very man of very man."²² In the ultimacy of Jesus Christ as revelation the Scripture has its authority.²³ In its total witness to Him one finds the grand unity of its inspiredness.

As we turn specifically to interpretations in the next section of this treatise, it is important to summarize here the implications of what has been said about revelation and inspiration for the discipline of hermeneutics. (1) The Scripture is an unfolding revelation which progresses to Christ and finds its ultimate expression in Him. (2) All Scripture is inspired as an infallible disclosure of God expressed in the person of His Son. (3) The New Testament is above the Old in the progress of revelation and is the final rule for faith and life. (4) Christ is Lord of the Scripture and as such judges and reinterprets "sub-Christian" elements of the Old Testament. (5) The Spirit who inspired the Word is the necessary agent in understanding it.

III

Interpretation as God's Contemporary Disclosure

Communication happens when several of us have a similar understanding of meanings. We are all confronted with semantic problems in understanding one another, for words are weighted with meaning from our own backgrounds and experience. One has said, "It is not the Bible which divides us but what we bring to the Bible."²⁴ We come with our minds already conditioned, and in the words of God we still hear the echo of our own. We fail to listen to God in our obsession with our own thoughts.

Interpreting any piece of literature is difficult, even if it be a letter. It is of immeasurable value to know the person if one would understand his words. For this reason one cannot really interpret the Bible unless he stands inside the experience of faith.²⁵ This is expressed by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for . . . they are spiritually discerned." Anselm, in the twelfth century, expressed this as "faith seeking understanding." Similarly we say that one must come to the Bible as to a person whom one would know well, in transparent honesty. This honesty will enable us to hear the voice of the Spirit, through whom we truly hear the Word of God.

In the field of hermeneutics there are some basic guidelines for interpretation. The key to understanding the Scripture is the Scripture itself. The saying that you can make the Bible say anything you want is not true—if you are honest with Scripture. It is our theological presuppositions or our lack of clarity on principles of interpretation, which bring us out at

different points. Let us look more closely at a number of guidelines suggested earlier in this discussion.

First we must interpret in the historical-literary perspective. One will hear the Word of God most clearly when one understands the setting and language in which it is given. To begin with the account of creation one need only compare the Biblical account with beliefs of that day to see the uniqueness of the Scripture's message—God created, He created all things good, and sin is an accident or perversion of the good. Or to use another example, the Scripture introduces God as acting from the very beginning, and reveals God in His acting in the lives of men. To understand this, one must note carefully when reading to see whether a given passage is a word of God, or a word of man in relation to which we hear the Word of God. For example, the advice of Job's comforters was not a word of God, for God exposed them as incorrect, but in the larger context their words are a part of the Word of God to us.

Second, we must interpret a passage in its revelatory progress. This means that we recognize the Old Testament as always pointing toward a more full Word which came in the New Testament. When we recognize that God met man where he was, we not only see sub-Christian levels of thought before Christ (such as polygamy, attitude toward enemies, war, etc.), but we see God forced to communicate in lesser ways than His later Word in Christ. For example, as God revealed Himself as the One and only Sovereign God, He used Israel among nations of tribal gods to show His supremacy. To do so there were wars of which God said, "That they might know that I am the Lord." More obvious illustrations may be seen in the sacrificial system and altars, expres-

sions in which men acknowledged that their forgiveness was costly and required something beyond themselves. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son . . . who . . . offered himself" once for our sins.

Third, we interpret with Christological priority. Living on this side of the empty tomb we now know the "end" of the story. While the Bible is a unit, its unity is in its divine disclosure expressed in Christ. Romans 8:1-4. Christ stands as the ultimate in revelation (Hebrews 1:1-3), for "in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." This means that Christ is the fulfillment and Lord of the Scripture. He not only interpreted Old Testament Scripture in His usage of it, a guide in our usage of the same, but He fulfilled the Scripture and thereby becomes in Himself the full and final Word of God. All interpretations of Scripture can be judged by their consistency with Jesus Christ.

Fourth, we must interpret by the New Testament pattern. In the New Testament use of the Old Testament we discover the ultimate example of interpretation. Jesus' use of the Scriptures is one of the most obvious examples. On the Emmaus road He "expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself." Immediately in the Book of Acts we find the apostles following His pattern. Stephen's message is a vivid example of a new interpretation of the Old Testament from the perspective of the full revelation in Christ. Paul is a master in this, as is evident in his letter to the Romans (a good illustration being his use of Habakkuk's words, "The just shall live by his faith"). Another significant example is in Romans 13 where the state is now not Israel as a theocracy but Rome as the oppressor, yet Paul asks for obedience to the

state; but in the perspective of ultimate loyalty to the kingdom of Christ, he makes clear that the powers are still "ordained of God," or are subject to and are under God. The chapter thus makes clear the same truth Peter expressed regarding our attitude toward authorities, "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Fifth, we should interpret in the spirit of eternal principles. In other words there is a spirit of Scripture which supersedes the letter. By this is not meant a mystical pietism, for one is relating to God as person, but to a spirit of Scripture which in itself is evidence of meeting person and not simply doctrine. This keeps Christianity from degenerating into a mere moralism or a subjective pietism. It also keeps one from sacramentarianism on one hand and legalism on the other. The spirit of Scripture prevents us from reducing Christian faith to a doctrinal system and presents it as a dynamic participation in God's present work, in holiness, in love, and in hope.

To help in understanding the historical background of Mennonite hermeneutics we now turn to the sixteenth-century Anabaptists. The Anabaptists did not have the privilege of writing a systematic theology due to the martyrdom and continued persecution of many of their leaders. Consequently one can only discover statements which reveal their presuppositions rather than a stated hermeneutical principle. In the attempt to harmonize the expressions of interpretation found in Anabaptist writings, I present the following principle:

The Anabaptists had a Christocentric hermeneutic, refusing to regard the Bible as on a "flat plane," taking progressive revelation with a seriousness which saw a "completed faith" in Christ, and interpreted the entire Bible through Him.

For the Anabaptists the total Bible was inspired by the Spirit of God as an unfolding revelation with its fullness in the person of Christ. Revelation not being presented on a flat plane could only be correctly interpreted by viewing each part in its relation to the fullness of Christ. The Schleithem Confession suggests this in the phrase "the perfection of Christ."²⁶ The Augustinian principle, accepted by the Anabaptist Hubmaier, that "the more obscure passages are to be interpreted by the more clear," was applied to the concept of progressive revelation.²⁷ This follows the Anabaptist practice of elevating the New Testament above the Old Testament in its "perfection" or its complete expression of God's will.²⁸ They interpreted the Epistles through the "kerygma," and Christian experience through being "in Christ." Their emphasis went beyond a justification in forgiveness to see a justification in relationship. If Luther's hermeneutical approach was anthropological (beginning with man's need for forgiveness) and Calvin's approach was theological (beginning with God's sovereignty and man's election) the Anabaptist approach could be described as Christological (beginning with the emphasis on Christ's call to a "new creature" expressed in discipleship).

The Protestant who approaches salvation through Paul may be inclined to major on sin and forgiveness, while the Anabaptist interpreting salvation through Christ will emphasize His fellowship.²⁹ Interpreting Paul through Christ, one sees a primary emphasis on the "in Christ" relationship. But to interpret through Christ is not only through the historical Jesus but through the contemporary Christ of experience.

I shall here formulate five principles of interpreta-

tion as an attempt to outline Anabaptist principles of hermeneutics.

Christ Is Both the Subject and Culmination of Scripture, Hence He Is the Key to the Interpretation of Both Covenants.

In hermeneutics one comes to the task of interpretation with certain presuppositions of faith. As an honest interpreter one is to be objective in permitting his presuppositions to be critically evaluated in the process of interpretation. To do this one must honestly admit them. In Anabaptist thought their approach to the Scripture was always with the presupposition that Christ is Lord of the Scripture, the Ultimate in the progress of revelation. Menno said, "All the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, on every hand, point us to Christ Jesus that we are to follow Him. . . . Moses gave the Law and Israel had to obey it until Christ, who was promised, appeared."³⁰ He further emphasizes knowing the will of God as found in the "perfect example of Christ . . ." ³¹ and criticizes those who read the prophets "according to the Jewish understanding."³²

This concept of Christ as the key to interpreting both Testaments appears early in Anabaptist writings. In Grebel's letter to Muntzer he refers to Christ speaking to us in both Testaments as follows: "Whatever we are not taught by clear passages or examples must be regarded as forbidden, just as if it were written: 'This do not; sing not.' (5) Christ in the Old and especially in the New Testament bids His messengers (botten) simply proclaim the word."³³

Another example of this emphasis is found in the words of Michael Sattler, who wrote in 1527, "And

let no man remove you from the foundation which is laid through the letter of the holy Scriptures, and is sealed with the blood of Christ and of many witnesses of Jesus."³⁴ At his trial Sattler expresses himself in a clear designation of his hermeneutical principle; "For I am not aware that we have acted contrary to the gospel and the Word of God; I appeal to the words of Christ."³⁵

One of the finest Anabaptist expressions of this principle of interpretation is found in a Confession of Faith dated around 1600.

The Old Testament is to be expounded by and reconciled with the New Testament, and must be distinctively taught among the people of God: Moses with his stern, threatening, punishing law over all impenitent sinners as still under the law; but Christ with His new tidings of the holy Gospel over all believing, penitent sinners as not under the law but under grace.³⁶

The Inspiration of the Scripture Encompasses Both Old and New Testaments, and Interpreted Through the "Perfection of Christ" Scripture Is the Sole Ground of Authority for the Christian Community.

The Anabaptist position on *sola scriptura* went beyond the Reformers and called in question the *corpus Christianum* mentality (i.e. that the whole social body was Christian), and all the distortion which it had brought with it in other areas of faith and life.³⁷ The Anabaptists simply stood by the decision which Luther had made in Worms, and Zwingli in January 1523, and refused to let the problem of survival interfere with their submission to Scripture.³⁸ This position is seen in Grebel's letter to Muntzer: "Act in all things only according to the Word, and bring forth and establish by the Word the usages of the apostles."³⁹

A sixteenth-century Anabaptist Confession of Hesse, Article One, reads:

We believe, recognize, and confess that the Holy Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments are to be described as commanded of God and written through holy persons who were moved thereto by the Spirit of God. For this reason the believing, born-again Christians are to employ them for teaching and admonishing, for reproof and reformation, to exhibit the foundation of their faith that it is in conformity with the Holy Scripture.⁴⁰

Another Confession of Faith, c. 1600, as recorded in von Braght, speaks in Article XI "Of the written Word of God, the law of Moses, and the Gospel of Christ," of the unity of both the Old and New Covenants seen as preparatory to and as the revelation of Christ.⁴¹ After emphasizing man's sin and condemnation under the spiritual significance of the law, the Confession states: "But Christ Jesus came, who is the end and the fulfilling of the old law, and the beginner and author of the new law, of perfect liberty, and the real, true light, to which all the dark shadows pointed."⁴²

Attention can also be called to the writings of Menno to further establish this as a general view among Anabaptists. "*For by the Spirit, Word, actions, and example of Christ, all must be judged until the last judgment. Otherwise the whole Scriptures are false.*"⁴³ In another passage, quoting II Timothy 3:16, he injects his principle of interpretation into the verse as follows: "All Scripture both of the Old and New Testament rightly *explained according to the intent of Christ Jesus and His holy apostles is profitable for doctrine. . . .*"⁴⁴

In this survey of Anabaptist thought, it is clear that they accepted both Testaments as inspired of

God, but taking progress of revelation seriously they did not look at the Bible as on a "flat plane." Their principle of interpretation frees them from a literalism which may be embarrassing to a modern age without compromising belief in the full inspiration of the total Scripture.

The New Testament Stands Above the Old Testament in the Progress Revelation, Presenting the "Perfection of Christ," and Thus Takes Precedence over the Old Testament in Formulating Principles of Christian Doctrine.

This third proposition is the logical consequence of the preceding. The question of the relation of the two Testaments has been a major one in arriving at Christian doctrine for the entire church. The Anabaptists came to grips with this early in their development.

Calling the first synod held by Reformation Protestantism, a religious gathering apart from state structures, the Anabaptists met at Schleithem in 1527 and drew up a confession of seven articles. In this confession we find phrases which not only emphasize *sola scriptura* but their approach to interpretation, such as "by virtue of the word of Christ," . . . "the sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ" . . . "in the perfection of Christ, however, only the ban is used" . . . "Christ, who teaches the perfection of the law. . . ." ⁴⁵

The later Dordrecht Confession, as an authoritative Mennonite Confession treats in Article V, "Of the Law of Christ . . . or the New Testament," and in Article XIV, on "Defense by Force," we find phrases as follows which bespeak their principle of interpretation: "The Lord Jesus has forbidden His disciples and followers all revenge, ". . .

According to the example, life, and doctrine of Christ . . .” “According to the law of Christ . . .”⁴⁶

Pilgrim Marpeck was one of the leading Anabaptist theologians of South Germany. He wrote extensively and had great influence in formulating the theological position of the Anabaptists. He wrote a book of over eight hundred pages on the contrast of the two Testaments, the *Testamentserlauterung* (c. 1544), designating the old covenant as “yesterday,” while the era of the new is called “today.”⁴⁷ On this contrast between the Testaments the Anabaptists grounded their two most distinctive ethical emphases: “no participation in warfare and bloodshed, and no swearing of oaths, although warfare and swearing were permitted in the Old Testament.”⁴⁸

That this is a method of interpretation, and not a diminishing of the significance of the Old Testament is clear. Menno expresses clearly that the unity of the Testaments is to be found in their spirit rather than literal usage. “If you want to appeal to the literal understanding and transactions of Moses and the prophets, then must you also become Jews, accept circumcision, possess the land of Canaan literally, erect the Jewish kingdom again, build the city and temple, and offer sacrifices and perform the ritual as required in the law. And you must declare that Christ the promised Saviour has not yet come, He who has changed the literal and sensual ceremonies into new, spiritual, and abiding realities.”⁴⁹

This insistence on the New Testament as the norm for Christian living kept the Anabaptists from the position of either the revolutionaries or the spiritualizers.⁵⁰ They believed that God always had a further word to say than is found in the Old Testament, and “that God’s final Word was in the New Testament.”⁵¹ This distinction separated the Anabaptists from Re-

formed Protestantism, for they "refused to place the Old Testament on a parity with the New Testament, choosing rather to make the New Covenant of Christ supreme and relegating therefore the Old Testament to the position of a preparatory instrument in God's program."⁵²

The Word of God Heard in Scripture Can Only Be Rightly Understood by the Illumination of the Holy Spirit, as a Word of Spirit and Not of Mere Letter.

The Anabaptists identified the text of Scripture with the Word of God, but their interpretation rejected simple literalism, emphasizing the spirit of the Scripture. Menno said God would help him speak "in the true sense, spirit, and intent of Christ."⁵³ The Scriptures, he said, "are the true witness of the Holy Ghost."⁵⁴ The spirit of the Scripture and the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit will need to be in harmony if the latter is genuine. The charges against the evangelical Anabaptists—that they depreciated the "outer" (written) Word in favor of the inner Word⁵⁵ was a misunderstanding. For the Anabaptists the Scripture was the norm of the Spirit's work. For the Anabaptist-Mennonite the relation of letter and spirit is not either/or but both/and. In the Word of God there is letter, spirit, and person. This is to say that a distinction is also to be made between the spirit of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit under whose illumination we can grasp this spirit or meaning.

The most consistent way to understand the Anabaptist insistence upon the illumination of the Spirit is not in contrasting it with the *sola scriptura* but by seeing in it the power to interpret the Scripture. They held that a special illumination is given to

every believer to enable him to understand the Word of God.⁵⁶ They taught individual responsibility to seek the interpretation of the Spirit, for each individual needs to understand the Bible message for himself.⁵⁷

This insight is also seen in the trials of individual Anabaptists, and in the remarks pertaining to knowing the will of Christ. In the trial of Sattler, he is mocked by saying he claims to have the Holy Spirit, therefore they should not need to repeat the charges, he should understand them.⁵⁸ Jacques, a French Anabaptist imprisoned at Leeuwarden in Friesland, replied to the inquisitor that "the law of Moses was not our guide, but the teachings of Christ: What was commanded in the law is not commanded in the Gospel of Christ. . . . Jacques then asked him (inquisitor) point-blank whether he had the Spirit of God so as to know the things of the Spirit."⁵⁹ Instead of being answered properly he was slain secretly in the prison, granting no further trial. It is clear that the principle here is an awareness that only the Holy Spirit who is author of the Book can enable believers to interpret it.

The Revelation of Scripture Is a Call to Relationship with Christ, Issuing in a Discipleship in Grace: (i.e. "Nachfolge Christi,") Rejecting Both Legalism and Sacramentalism.

A Christocentric hermeneutic such as we have been examining issues in a strong emphasis on ethics. The call of the Gospel, as understood in the Anabaptist orientation, is a call to a new creature, to relationship with Christ, and to a discipleship of cross-bearing. The Anabaptist-Mennonites see Christ as authoritative in ethics in the same way as He is for soteriology. Only the disciple can really know

Him. Hans Denk said, "Niemand vermag Christum wahrlich zu erkennen, er folge ihm denn nach im Leben." A high ethic and a high Christology are possible only together.⁶⁰ The Anabaptist was a disciple, and the ethical emphasis of the Anabaptists grew out of the new life in Christ.

To profess a new birth meant a new life. To take the name of Christ meant to take His spirit and His nature. To promise obedience to Him meant actually to live out and carry through His principles and do His works. To claim the cleansing and redemption from sin which baptism symbolized, meant to lay off the sins and lusts of the flesh and of the spirit and to live a holy life. To take up the cross daily meant to go out into conflict with the world of sin and evil and fight the good fight of faith. . . . To be a disciple meant to teach and to observe all things whatsoever the Master had commanded.⁶¹

The emphasis on discipleship permeates the writings of Anabaptists. Pilgrim Marpeck is an outstanding example of a theologian who saw the entire life of the Christian to be under the lordship of Christ.⁶² In the death sentence of Felix Manz the statement is made that he is condemned "because he has planned to seek yet others who accept Christ, believe in Him and follow Him, and unite himself with some by baptism. . . ."⁶³ In the conversion of one, Jorg Schad in 1526, Schad testified to wanting to begin a new life and live according to the Sermon on the Mount, and requesting the sign of brotherly love, said that he would do good unto his neighbor as to himself, and wanted water to be poured over him.⁶⁴ The conviction for such a discipleship often led to martyrdom, valiantly expressed in the words of Sattler when on trial for his life: "We will continue in our faith in Christ so long as we have breath in

us, unless we be dissuaded from it by the Scriptures."⁶⁵

From history we come to the present, for "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." God continues His disclosure in Christ and in Holy Scripture through the prophetic ministry of His church. This is the responsible use of hermeneutics in the proclamation of His Word.

IV

Application as God's Prophetic Disclosure

It is when one begins to apply the Scripture to contemporary life that it becomes evident whether one is communicating the Word of God or not. The Word of God came to us in His great redemptive acts, as God moved in man's experience to reconcile man to Himself. The ultimate meaning of Word is Person, for in words person shares with person. To make what he says more important than his person is an insult. God spoke—but not so that we could marvel at the grandeur of His words but so that we would come to Him. Ultimately "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . we have beheld his glory."

One who presents the message of Scripture only in terms of philosophical principles for a rewarding life doubtless has a good philosophy, but he may miss the essential message of sharing life with God in Christ. One who lifts from the Scriptures moral principles for ethical living unquestionably has a superior ethic, but he may miss the person in whose fellowship alone he can find power to live righteously. The application of Scripture must be consistent with its essential message—the ultimate value of a per-

son reconciled to God in Christ. No one truly utters the Word of God unless the message is true to God's work of reconciliation, re-creation, and relation. As inspiration insures the Scriptures as true regarding God and man, so application must be true in relating God and man.

Proclamation is the application of God's Word to our lives today. Too often what is heard is not a Word of God but a word of man. It may be a discourse on God in a chummy fashion which sins against His grandeur and greatness. It may be a massaging of our little egos to encourage us to face life for another week instead of honestly facing ourselves. It may be a legalistic threshing to force the pastor's little ethnic enclave into line. Or it may be a permissive torrent of jargon which makes all norms relative since "unto the pure all things are pure." But when the Word of God truly comes, it will stride through all of this with bold steps, cleansing the temple of its robbers and driving out the perversions which prevent honest souls from meeting God. The Biblical application of the divine will today is always true to the redemptive, transforming message of Scripture.

When we put person ahead of precept in applying the Word of God, we will enhance both our understanding of God and of what He is doing on behalf of man. God as the ultimate is seen as holy, as the one completely whole person in the universe. He does not have a wounded ego that needs to be satisfied, nor does He lay claim on our lives because of needing something from us. In His wholeness He is able to share Himself, to call us into fellowship by His love, to change us into His image for eternal participation in the wholeness of His presence.

The Word of God to man speaks from divine

wholeness to man's perversion both in judgment and grace. While His wholeness exposes our perversion, His love moves to correct it. The application of God's Word begins with this message of grace, the graciousness in which God involves Himself in reclaiming our lives. In faith this reclamation takes place, for faith is the attitude which permits God to be Himself in our lives. The character of this faith-relation is in our belonging completely to Him. This new relation makes of us new creatures, in which experience we become "partakers of his holiness"—that is, we now belong completely to Him.

It is in this belonging that we are becoming. Being changed into "the image of his [dear] Son" is by a work of depth-transformation wrought by the Spirit of Christ. Application of the Word of God is the disclosure of how God Himself is involving us in life in the Spirit. Sharing with Him, we are involved in *being* as prior to *doing*. Rather than a mere activism, a mere epistemological awareness of what He would have us do, we participate in a new character, an ontological level of involvement with the inner presence of Christ.

The church is a fellowship of redeemed sinners in whose midst the living Christ is present. It is a company of the transformed who witness to one another of His meaning in their lives. While this witness to one another can become externalized in ritualism, formalism, or sacramentalism, the church must run this risk and express as a people of God what it means to be in Christ. It is by this expression that the church becomes visible. As people of God we are saying something as we gather to hear the Word, as we worship in praise, as we share in confession and forgiveness, as we pray and sing to-

gether, as we give—in teaching, correcting, or in supporting one another. As a people of God we observe ordinances not as sacraments to “gain” grace but as expressions of living in grace—that is, in baptism we say something of our commitment, at the Lord’s table we say something of our fellowship, in washing the saints’ feet we say something of service, in Christian marriage we say something of the ultimacy in so relating to a person, in the woman’s veil we say something in gratitude for a new freedom that can be enjoyed responsibly, or in anointing the sick we say something about the gift of healing God alone can administer. Whatever is said as a people of God, it must be consistent with the Word of God—that He calls us to a radically new life with Himself.

When the people of God move among men, they express this new life, this belonging to God, not in a judgmental spirit but in a spirit of love implanted by God Himself. *Agape* love is not to be reduced to a mere sociological principle for the ideal society. *Agape* is a “kind of love” not native to man but expressed in and through our lives by the Holy Spirit. This superlative spirit of life can only be experienced when we give ourselves to Him who is love. Among the people of God this love creates real *koinonia*, genuine brotherhood, the esteeming of others as more important than ourselves. In relation to the world this *agape* serves one’s fellowman in relating to each as an agent through whom the particular person can be reconciled to God. One who lives in this spirit will not manipulate or use others, will not coerce or suppress them, will not wound or harm them.

Anabaptist-Mennonites take literally the teaching of Jesus that we belong to the kingdom of heaven

now, and that this relation to the King of kings supersedes all others. Because we belong wholly to Him we are called to obedience in the character and cause of His kingdom. This cause is to reach all men for Christ. As evangelicals there is no person whom we should not seek to win to Christ rather than to destroy. While we are committed to the way of peace and nonparticipation in war, we are not mere pacifists, we are not withdrawing from involvement but are rather in a superior involvement beneath which we cannot operate if we would be true to our Sovereign. And this is not a position for "a sacred few" who serve in ecclesiastical offices, but is the position of any true brotherhood which gives itself to the higher cause even though we be expendable.

One further area of application we shall note here is eschatology. While revelation finds its culmination in Christ, His program in the world has not come to its culmination. The Word of God speaks of a grand and glorious *telos* beyond us. Christ as Lord of lords is known today as Lord of the church—He will ultimately be confessed by all as Lord of all ages and of all men. It is in His actual lordship, though unconfessed by many, that He is judge of the world.

But to apply eschatology is not to attempt outlines of the final details in predictions of His future work. More important is the awareness that the living Christ is at work in the world, and that His work is moving on to its glorious fulfillment. Rather than a "realized eschatology" by which men mean that He has returned in the work He is doing today, there is what might be called an *actualized eschatology*, an actual participation in eschatological living as strangers and pilgrims whose citizenship is even now in heaven. This is one of the significant concepts under-

lying the Mennonite understanding of being separated unto God—we are citizens of heaven, a colony of heaven on the earth!

In concluding this treatise I would add this one reminder. The Word of God is a dynamic self-disclosure of His person continuing into the present. In the Word of God written we meet the very person of God. "It stands written" is still the most authoritative statement in Christian dialogue. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

A few years ago it was my privilege to conduct a cooperative evangelistic crusade in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, a town nestled deep in the great Rockies. On Easter morning speaking to the crowd gathered for the Sunrise Service, I could hear the roar of the river cascading down the gorge through the valley. The illustration that came to mind there makes a fitting conclusion for this pamphlet. Should half the mountain before us have dropped off and dammed up the river, it would not have destroyed the stream. It would only have held it back until the river gathered more volume and rolled across the obstruction, continuing on its way. So with the cross of Christ, it intersected His course but did not stop Him—He lives on. So the Word of God, confronted by new obstacles, moves upon the people of God until the obstruction is cut through. God is the God of the living—His cause moves on.

FOOTNOTES

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