

## Jesus Our Centre

On January 7th I preached a sermon where I attempted to tie epiphany into the first sentence of our statement of purpose. Patty has been working through some Mennonite history and we have had some guest speakers since then. I am picking up where I left off, going into the second sentence of our statement of purpose, which coincidentally ties in very nicely with the topics that Patty has been preaching about. On the screen is the portion of our statement of purpose we will discuss today.

### **We seek to teach an Anabaptist understanding of scripture, led by the Spirit to imitate Christ in word and deed.**

This is a pretty standard statement at Mennonite churches, but what exactly is an Anabaptist understanding of scripture? While many people here may understand this very well, it can never hurt to have a refresher, because it is shockingly easy to attend a church without knowing the intricacies of beliefs in a way that these sentences make sense. I grew up Mennonite but I sometimes have a hard time pinning down exactly what a Mennonite understanding of scripture really means, it is not necessarily something you are taught during church. I often just thought it was Rollkuchen and being frugal growing up. I am part of an interdenominational ministry initiative where I work with folks from traditions like Catholic, United Church, and Lutheran. They think of Mennonites as about peace and four part harmony. Despite growing up Mennonite I learned so much from my class “Anabaptist History and Thought” at college and it opened my eyes more to our history and the actual beliefs that are central to us. Patty has been working a lot through this based on some recent classes she has done about reimagining Anabaptism. Our history has at times been messy, and a variety of beliefs and thought patterns have come about. That is why I think the word “seek” is a very important disclaimer when we talk about our Anabaptist understanding. In fact because Anabaptism was brought about because of a desire to interpret scripture in community, and without unilateral authority, I think saying *We are the ones who teach Anabaptist understanding*, is quite unAnabaptist. We are seeking to teach based on principles passed on through the Anabaptist tradition over the years. By saying we are seeking, we

acknowledge that other people might pursue these same Anabaptist principles and end up in a different place than us.

So what are these things that make up our pursuit of an Anabaptist understanding? Stuart Murray summarises the Anabaptist understanding of scripture in 6 principles, that we will quickly go through, he has an article that is more detailed that you can look at. The 6 principles are on the screen.

### 1. The Holy Spirit is the Interpreter

Anabaptists advocated that the Holy Spirit must be relied on for interpreting scripture. They believed in not only the mystery of scripture, but also in relying on God for authority instead of humanity. Peter Riedemann, a member of the Hutterites summarised this well, stating *“As the scripture came by the Holy Spirit, we must let it be judged by the same”*. If the Spirit inspires authorship, it can inspire interpretation as well.

### 2. All Can Interpret

Anabaptism exists almost as a reformation within a reformation. There were several reasons that they did not align with the reformation, one of them being their belief they had not gone far enough in dismantling authorities. It is true that the reformation was instrumental in extinguishing the stranglehold the pope, councils and priests had on biblical authority. Anabaptists however did not want to just get rid of the papal authority to have it replaced with the authority of the preacher. They believed that anyone could contribute to the interpretation of scripture. Biblical scholarship has progressed, and we may value it more than in the past, but this key for interpretation is a great reminder that the Holy Spirit and application of texts trumps scholarship. Scholarship is useful, but so are perspectives outside of scholarship, and what really matters is how we live, not how we read.

### 3. The Congregation is the Hermeneutical Community

So if everyone is capable of interpreting scripture, can that not just lead to chaos. If left unchecked absolutely. We are not able to follow every

idea or every interpretation from every person. The authority for determining which ideas to take and which ideas to leave is not given to a pastor or a scholar. It is given to the community. *“Those with teaching gifts and theological training were welcome to participate, offering insights and resources, but they were not to overrule others or expect their interpretations to be unchallenged.”* It is important to interpret scripture in community, and today with the advances in technology and the accessibility of different perspectives in literature we are able to do so relatively comfortably. It is important because it helps keep us grounded and accountable, which helps us avoid putting too much of our bias on the text. Diversity in the interpretive process is also crucial, as different viewpoints and experiences enrich our reading of the text.

#### 4. The Prerequisite and Goal of Interpretation is Obedience

I once saw a point, probably just on the internet that stuck with me. They talked about how Jesus’ teachings were focused on how to live and what to do, and by the time we entered the Christendom era, the creeds were focused on how to think and what to believe. These both have a place, but it is an interesting point, and I think at the heart of this next interpretative principle. The Anabaptists felt afraid that too much scholarship changed the focus from application to exegesis, and enabled people to evade obedience. They advocated for entering into the text looking to live it out, and used it to guide their interpretations on ethics and behaviour. This is why in our purpose statement it says in **word and deed**. Murray has a great quote in his article that I think sheds some light at how we get where we are as a church with our interpretations. *“Ethical concerns also acted as a filter on proposed interpretations of the Bible. If outcomes of proposed interpretations resulted in unethical behaviour, injustice, or compromise, rather than enhanced discipleship, community life, and missional impact, these interpretations were to be regarded as illegitimate and unacceptable.”*

#### 5. Jesus is Center

This is probably the most important part of our interpretive guidelines and very helpful for figuring out how to live according to a complex book like the Bible. The Bible has a lot of texts that feel inconsistent when put side by side, so deciding to leave anything that does not line up with the life and teachings of Jesus behind can simplify our quest for truth. This understanding is how we as Anabaptists arrive at more unique positions like nonviolence. The Bible has regular expressions of violence, but Jesus routinely condemns violence in all its forms. When we arrive at these tricky points, we follow Jesus, who is our centre.

#### 6. New Testament Takes Precedence

This interpretive guideline is very similar to the previous one. Jesus' radical teachings about how to live in this new kingdom superseded the teachings of the Old Testament. While Christendom could easily be supported by using Old Testament scriptures, it could not be supported based on the teachings of Jesus, and how his first followers chose to live out those teachings. Christendom looked similar to Old Testament theocracies, but the early church looked more like the Anabaptist vision of discipleship.

These ways of understanding the Bible are not perfect, and while we may try to interpret scripture in a way that reduces the risk of the Bible becoming a means of acquiring power, we are not perfect. Our history still has similarities to Christendom, in that we also fall guilty of using religion for our gain. These interpretive guidelines that focus on hearing multiple voices, and adopting a Christ Like attitude are the best we have, and hopefully help us stay on the right track.

The scripture that we read this morning is a good example of Jesus being the centre of our reading as a church. When Jesus begins talking about his message of self denial for the love of others- in his case even to the point of death- Peter becomes upset. How can the most influential man he has encountered be accepting death for the sake of others? That is not success and that is not power. Jesus defies these systems and ideas, and that can be uncomfortable at times. Jesus goes on with this difficult message, calling those around him to enter into this denial of self and

surrendering of life to God. It is in these moments, where we often are left scratching our heads and wondering, "How is this good news?". How is giving up ourselves a hopeful message at all? The message does not end with death, it ends in rebirth- in resurrection. Our Anabaptist understanding of scripture is centred around this message. Follow Jesus in giving up, so that rebirth can take place. Our Anabaptist predecessors believed that if they surrendered their claims to power, fortune and influence, they could make space to bring about new life in the world. They got this idea from Jesus, after seeing the way his surrender brought new life, both in himself and also in his followers. These followers started a radical and impactful movement. This was only possible by engaging in self denial. It could be argued that the Anabaptist interpretation of scripture where Jesus is at the centre came out of a hunger for hope. They wanted something different. They wanted to see the change that Jesus' original movement made.

Today we still hunger for hope. We want to see new life and rebirth in the many spaces that we exist in. It can be hard to follow in Jesus' footsteps when we are hungry for something better, because Jesus' way doesn't always make sense. Placing Jesus as our centre enables us to focus on death and rebirth.

This concept goes far beyond an understanding of the afterlife. For example, let's say we are wronged by someone. We want revenge and vindication. If we put Jesus' teaching at the centre we can deny ourselves that craving for revenge. We can let that part of ourselves die, and make space for the rebirth of forgiveness in our lives. The death of our greed can mean new life for generosity. When we deny our comfort, we can make space for justice to be born. There are countless ways that Jesus' message of death and resurrection can impact our lives. We try to live different because we are hungry for something different. We are hungry for hope. So as we go into our week as a church, let us adopt an Anabaptist understanding of scripture, where we keep Christ at the centre, focus on our actions, and work together. May we imitate Christ in word and deed. May we adopt the message of death and resurrection, denial and rebirth. Let us be aware of the things that need to fall away, so that new life can take place. Amen.

## Works Cited

Murray, Stuart. "Anabaptists and the Bible." *Anabaptist Mennonite Network*, 2017, [amnetwork.uk/resource/anabaptists-and-the-bible/](http://amnetwork.uk/resource/anabaptists-and-the-bible/).