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# Anabaptists and Postmodernity

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## INTRODUCTION

### ***Anabaptists and Postmodernity: A Risky/Risqué Proposition***

*Susan Biesecker-Mast*

#### CONSIDERING AN ANACHRONISM

The title of this book was intended simply to bring together two concerns: Anabaptist identity on the one hand and our postmodern cultural moment on the other. Thus the purpose of the book was to inquire about the relationship between the two. The aim was to seek answers to such questions as what it means to be an Anabaptist today, the extent to which postmodernity presents problems and possibilities for Anabaptists, and how Anabaptists ought to live out their faith in the contemporary context.

However, in bringing together Anabaptists and postmodernity, the title also raised an important question about their very pairing—namely, does *Anabaptists and Postmodernity* speak an anachronism? By what logic, if any, can we link with our cultural moment the Anabaptists who struggled (too often until death) for a believers baptism, the separation of church and state, the visible church, and pacifism? Today (in the United States, at least) few care whether we baptize or dedicate babies; the highest law of the land guarantees freedom of religion; the most visible among us (the Amish) are a major tourist attraction; and young men have not been drafted since Jimmy Carter was president.

One afternoon last summer when Gerald (my spouse) and I, as well as twenty-three other Mennonites, were enjoying another in a string of days packed with awe-inspiring historical sights on our European Heritage Tour, tour guide John Ruth put me on the track of a possible answer to the question of whether we dare fruitfully link Anabaptists and contemporary culture. While we were stopped somewhere in the Palatinate, John retrieved from the belly of the bus a copy of the *Martyrs Mirror*. Later, once we were underway, he read us the author's invocation. There Thieleman van Braght confesses,

Ah! how often did I wish to have been a partaker with them [the martyrs]; my soul went with them, so to speak, into prison; I encouraged them in the tribunal, to bear patiently, without gainsaying or flinching, their sentence of death. It seemed to me as though I accompanied them to the place of execution . . . saying to them in their extremity, Fight valiantly dear brethren and sisters; the crown of life awaits you. I almost fancied that I had died with them; so inseparably was my love bound up with them; for Thy holy name's sake.<sup>1</sup>

As I have read that passage repeatedly since, I have wondered whether those of us who would call ourselves Anabaptists (or even spiritual descendants of the Anabaptists) would be capable of such a confession. Could we presume a relationship of such strong identification with the sixteenth-century Anabaptists as van Braght apparently did? Indeed, could we, like van Braght, wish actually to have been a partaker with them? Moreover, even if we could honestly say that we wished to suffer for our faith as they did, could such a wish (however genuine) ever have integrity as long as we live in times in which our cultural distinctives and faith commitments seem only to register as tourist attractions when they register at all? Or would such a wish at the beginning of this third millennium merely romanticize what it once meant to be called Anabaptist?

Is *Anabaptists and Postmodernity* anachronistic? To put the answer simply, yes. And before we rush to lament that disjuncture, we ought first to appreciate all the gifts it makes possible for us. Indeed, we ought to thank God for the gap between us and our spiritual forebears.

We should thank God for the movement of history by which the sixteenth century gave way to the seventeenth, the Thirty Years War to Reason, monarchies to democracies, religious persecution to tolerance, and the Middle Ages (in the West at least) to modernity. We Anabaptists in the West have been blessed by modernity and the emergence of nation-states and political ideologies that have rendered state-sanctioned burnings at the

stake nonsensical. We should be mindful of the rights, benefits, and privileges we enjoy as subjects after modernity, lest we be tempted to view pre-modernity through a nostalgia that erases the suffering and thus the courage we admire in our forebears.

To pair Anabaptists and postmodernity, then, is anachronistic insofar as the pairing seeks to bridge an impossible chasm between two very different times. However, admitting that chasm does not necessarily oblige us also to say that the Anabaptists are irrelevant to us. On the contrary, such an admission makes the sixteenth-century Anabaptists all the more relevant to those of us who aspire to become early twenty-first-century Anabaptists.

If we were simply to assume our relationship to sixteenth-century Anabaptists (whether by a logic of blood or cause), in what sense could we call ourselves faithful? In what sense could we be full of faith to Anabaptism, not to mention Christ, if we were to depend on some historical or biological continuity for our commitments which we inherit apart from our choosing?<sup>2</sup>

Whenever we engage the sixteenth-century Anabaptists through a presumption of continuity, whether of cause or blood, I think we do so in error. Whenever we assume that the story of the Anabaptists is our story, then try to relive it, we make a mistake. This is so for several reasons. For one, both the presumption of continuity and the effort at imitation ignore the historical chasm that separates us from the sixteenth century—a chasm that accounts for our rights and comforts. In addition, and more importantly, both reduce our faith to a historical accident. We experience the truth of this claim whenever we in the North American context look into the faces of our youth and worry that their commitments are more an accident of birth than an outgrowth of faith.

Rather than begin from the presumption of continuity, then, I think we should begin from the presumption of difference both between the sixteenth century and the present as well as between the Anabaptists and ourselves. When we pay attention to the differences between the sixteenth century and our own, we become capable of resisting the temptation to romanticize from a safe distance a horrible time in which the powers that were could not see their way through to religious tolerance.

Further, when we recognize differences between the Anabaptists and us, we can appreciate that our heritage is not a given but a gift. Indeed, only from the presumption of difference can we see that the Anabaptists were so very much unlike us—antagonists that they were, preferring not to but ultimately being willing to be tortured and martyred for their faith.<sup>3</sup> Moreo-

ver, only from the presumption of difference can they teach us. For what would we have to learn from them if, in fact, they were just like us? My point is perhaps subtle, but I hope also significant—that the condition of possibility for our leap of faith is the studied recognition that there is, indeed, a gap.

### MINDING THE GAP

Whatever differences there were among sixteenth-century Anabaptists—and apparently there were many—it seems fair to say that they shared a common problem: they were intolerable in their time.<sup>4</sup> Of course, theirs was a tumultuous era, coming as it did between two rather different historical moments. On the one side was premodernity. This was a period in which the Catholic Church enjoyed orderly control of its religious subjects and territories. Feudal lords exercised profitable and paternal rule over illiterate peasants and inherited lands.

On the other side was modernity, a time in which “the people” revolted against the rule of monarchs and wrote their God-given rights into declarations of independence for individual property owners. In between was the time of the Anabaptists, when capitalism was emerging in the context of feudalism, when a mercantile class and wage laborers were coming to replace serfs, when peasants were starting to understand themselves as individuals, when printing presses and commerce created a need for literacy, when civic authorities were starting to think like nation-states.<sup>5</sup>

In this in-between time—between the one church and nation-states—the question that had to be answered was this: What was to be the relationship between church and state? For Catholics and Reformers, the best answer was that it would be a cooperative one. The Catholic preference was for a church that retained its headship by legitimating the relatively autonomous workings of the state. The Protestant envisioned a church able to enjoy the protection of the state as long as it gave civic matters over to the state. Whether from the Catholic or Protestant perspective, then, the relationship between church and state was to be a relationship of complementarity.

Not so for the Anabaptists. For the Anabaptists the church was to be an alternative, even an antagonist, to the state. It was to be other than the world. The church was not only to aspire to be, but actually to dare to live, as if it were the kingdom of God on earth. As John Howard Yoder summed up this view so well, for the Anabaptists, the church “combine[d] the defenselessness of the church under the cross with the persistence of a prophetic

critique which refuse[d] to be stilled by the claimed moral autonomy of the political realm."<sup>6</sup>

Neither Catholic nor Protestant leaders could tolerate the Anabaptist view of the church and the state because that view did not presume, as both of theirs did, that the church and the state ought to exist in a cooperative relationship. The threat posed by the Anabaptist view of the church and state was, of course, made most concrete in the Anabaptists' believers baptism. Indeed, so well did adult baptism exemplify the antagonistic separation between the church and state that it became the epithet by which the Anabaptists (re-baptizers) were popularly known.

Ours is a decidedly different problem shaped by an altogether different time. Living as we do on the other side of modernity, or what has been called postmodernity, our problem is not that we are intolerable but, rather, that we are adorable. Of course the point is not to antagonize the world for its own sake. On the contrary, if we are to antagonize, we must do it for Christ's sake. But suppose we believe, as John Howard Yoder has insisted, that as a people we are "called today to be what the world is called to be ultimately."<sup>7</sup> Suppose we are convinced that the full reign of God is not yet here. Then it seems to me we ought to differ—and differ significantly.

But to differ significantly these days is one of the hardest things anyone can set out to do. That is because we live in a moment characterized by late capitalism. Now economic growth apparently depends less on the production of the assembly line worker (as in industrial capitalism) and more on the consumption of the Wal-Mart shopper. Thus Gretchen Morgensen, in the business pages of the *New York Times*, writes matter-of-factly that "Retail spending, after all, accounts for two-thirds of the output of the United States." Moreover, she goes on to say, not only do American consumers now account for most of the production in the United States, they are also becoming increasingly important to production in other, especially Asian, countries.<sup>8</sup>

To keep the U.S. economy growing and to buoy economies of other nations as well, then, American consumers must keep buying. But with all those storage units filling up, one has to wonder what more we could possibly need. For the white, middle-class (or better) shopper who is the target of unsightly numbers of marketing dollars, nothing really is needed.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for these shoppers it is not a question of need. Rather, consumption is a matter of desire. "Where do you want to go today?" Microsoft asks. Not surprisingly, the greatest desire of all among the consuming citizens of a global village dominated by Coca Cola, Nike, and CNN is to be unique.

However, the consumer economy alone is not what makes differing significantly so hard. The consumer economy and its capacity to reiterate every difference *ad infinitum* may help create our insatiable desire for uniqueness. But it is the media culture that has hitched that desire for uniqueness back to the consumption of every emerging difference.

For example, for some time Nike ruled the "athleisure" (athletic shoes for leisure wear) shoe market with its high-tech, high-performance casual shoes. But with that market domination also came the problem of consumer boredom, especially among youth. American youth, a crucial sector of the athleisure shoe market, grew tired of Nike's approach through the nineties. Thus emerged Airwalk, an athleisure shoe manufacturer that linked casual athletic shoes to a countercultural youth—the urban, slacker, skateboarder against whom villages and city councils write ordinances to keep Main Street sidewalks and shopping center parking ramps clear of them.

Airwalk's strategy, however, was not so much to market their shoes to these skateboarders, though that was part of it. Rather, it was to create an identification between Airwalk shoes and a certain countercultural identity, on the one hand, and millions of youth looking for a difference, on the other. To buy the shoe, went the logic of the marketing approach, was to link with that countercultural identity. Apparently, American youth liked the link Airwalk offered between something like the edge of culture and their identities. The shoes sold like mad. Indeed, in the first five years of this marketing approach, Airwalk made more than \$750 million worth of sales.

Now, however, Airwalk has its own problem. Airwalk's success in achieving a large market share threatens the viability of its claim to sell a shoe that marks the distinctiveness of a countercultural identity. Thus Airwalk finds itself caught in an interesting tension between its strategic link to a counterculture and its placement on the shelves of upscale department shoe stores.<sup>10</sup>

What this brief example suggests is that it is hard to maintain a distinction even when, like Airwalk, that is precisely what you must do to survive. The example also indicates how easy it is for countercultural identity, like that of skateboarder, to be co-opted by a marketing strategy. When differences seem no longer to be the necessary effects of secure essences but, rather, issue from the play of differences in a system of arbitrary (though interested) signs, any difference (however countercultural initially) can apparently be linked to any thing, or person, or appeal. And in these days in which marketers are well aware of our desire to be unique, we can be sure

they will be looking to hitch their wares to any difference that has potential for significance.

If differences are co-opted so easily, and if cultural difference is one of consumer/media culture's best marketing strategies, then how can anyone (not to mention us would-be twenty-first century Anabaptists) even hope to differ significantly? Put another way, how can we aspire to be a visible church in a context in which countercultural difference is one of our consumer/media culture's best marketing strategies?

### *A RISQUÉ PROPOSITION*

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot." (Matt. 5: 13, NRSV)

"By this counsel we are all taught . . . that we must not love the world and things therein, nor conform to the world; that we through faith must die to our evil flesh and conquer the devil, lead an upright, irreproachable, pious life through faith, and in all things act according to the will of the Lord." (Menno Simons)<sup>11</sup>

To escape the welcomed yet distracting e-mail inquiries about the conference that inspired this collection, Gerald and I slipped out of Bluffton to finish our conference presentations. Fortunately, our need to leave Bluffton coincided with a meeting in Goshen for another upcoming conference. Unfortunately, all the hotels in picturesque settings around Goshen had no vacancies. So we settled for a room at the Holiday Inn Express just across U.S. route 33 from a Goshen Wal-Mart. As I wrote by the window, I could see Wal-Mart across the highway, the semis loaded with campers and manufactured homes traveling down route 33, and the Amish buggies turning off the highway and into the Wal-Mart parking lot. I could not have asked for a better setting to inspire meditation on Anabaptists and postmodernity.

There they were, the Amish, our spiritual and historical kin, differing in all the ways we can imagine—horses, buggies, plain clothes, four-hour Sunday worship services—and pulling into a Wal-Mart only too happy to provide them with special parking accommodations, including a garage on the edge of the parking lot where up to six buggies and horses can be hitched under a protective roof.<sup>12</sup> So there the Amish park their buggies and, once inside Wal-Mart, there the Amish shop in their favored way—frugally. They shop Wal-Mart, the store that "sells for less," because therein the Amish can buy "more with less."

In these ways, then, postmodernity's consumer culture and the Amish simple life fit like the beautifully dovetailed corners of an Amish-made pie safe. Thus I witnessed postmodernity's seamless accommodation of difference for our consumer economy's profit, as I peered over my laptop and across U.S. 33.

But if the Amish dovetail with postmodernity so well, whether by shopping at its discount superstores or, perhaps, even more significantly, by serving as proof to middle-American tourists that it is still possible to differ significantly in our global village, then why did a network voice in postmodernity's consumer/media culture take an apparently hostile stance against the Amish? In February 1997, during sweeps week, ABC's *20/20* aired a dramatic exposé of "the dark side of Amish life"<sup>13</sup> in Holmes County, Ohio. *20/20* contrasted the Amish as "an ideal image of [a] gentle, God-fearing people" who seek "simplicity in their daily lives [as they] reject many of the conveniences of the modern world, such as electricity and telephones," with "case after case of . . . violent and sometimes brutal punishment." In brief, what *20/20* "revealed" was that the Amish "live lives of secrecy" in which "petty rules" (*Ordnung*), forced ignorance (education limited to the eighth grade), and physical abuse are not only tolerated but may even be encouraged as sanctioned forms of obedience training.

To offer visual evidence for the underside of Amish life, *20/20* used a variety of video techniques, including slow-motion shots of Amish walking in a group that encouraged viewers to see the adults as pulling the children down the street. They also cast youth, telling stories of childhood abuse, into dark shadows "for their own protection" and for our entertainment.

But the most dramatic video/exposé moments in the show came with the story of George Edwards, the nonethnic but former Amish man who was trying to "rescue" his two children from their allegedly abusive ethnic Amish mother. In exchange for *20/20*'s financial backing, Edwards invited *20/20* cameras to videotape his farm-to-farm search for his children.

When Edwards finally learned of their location, the television audience was treated to a backseat view of his highway chase of the mother's buggy. Once the van overtook the buggy, viewers witnessed up-close the face of the stoic mother as the sheriff pulled the screaming children from the buggy. But if that scene disturbed the audience, later close-ups of the little girl's delighted face during her very first telephone conversation were certainly designed to please viewers—average middle-American viewers, that is.

*20/20*'s exposé of the Amish upset Amish and Mennonites in Holmes County and elsewhere because of its selective and dramatic treatment of

Amish life. These communities were right to be upset with *20/20's* representation of the Amish as well as *20/20's* tactics for getting the story they wanted to tell. However, by reconsidering this *20/20* piece not from the perspective of what it "does" to the Amish but for the purpose of discerning what kind of ideological work it can be read as doing on behalf of middle Americans, we may gain some clues toward a visible church that matters.

The *20/20* segment claims to "reveal" to middle Americans that the otherness of the Amish, however seemingly charming or inspiring, is, above all else, a "secret." Thus Amish otherness not only enables coercion and abuse of children but also encourages it. The segment seeks to persuade its audience that the simple and communal life of the Amish, which may be alluring to middle-American tourists of Amish country is, in fact, a front for cultural pathologies and criminal behavior.

Second, the segment lets the viewing public "see for ourselves" that such secrets can be brought to the light of day with the help of technology—those advances in gizmo know-how that the Amish tend to eschew. In this way the audience "learns" that surveillance cameras (whether found at ATM machines, department store dressing rooms, or convenience store checkout counters) are, in fact, for all our protection, even the protection of Amish children who would one day commit themselves to a subculture that rejects them.

Finally and most importantly, this segment "teaches" its viewers that those who appear to be otherwise—that is, who seem, in *20/20's* words, to be "an ideal of a gentle, God-fearing people"—are, in fact, no better than any typical middle-class American. For when we look closely at the "rescued" little girl who is neither fully Amish (she is too young to have been thoroughly indoctrinated) nor fully middle-American (she is too new to middle-American life to have been influenced by it), what we discover is that she loves telephones, video games, and television.

As a pre-ideological subject this child "proves" to us (like no middle-American child could) that American life with all its technological wonders is what any one of us would choose naturally. "Resistance is futile," to borrow a phrase from *Star Trek*, not because we are incapable of resisting but (*20/20* is arguing) because we would always prefer not to resist at all.

The *20/20* exposé of the Amish, then, "teaches" Americans that the Amish are not separate and charming but secret and criminal, that technology does not obstruct good family and community relations but instead enables us to catch others who would harm them, and that our desires for technology are not cultural inventions but are rather perfectly natural. This

ideological work is important for our consumer/media culture. It props up the fiction of readily available and meaningful choice, which is central to consumption. Then it simultaneously sustains the idea that consumption and technology are natural choices in the context of any alternative that might inspire us to abandon both.

The ideological work *20/20* is doing is also important for us because, when we read it against the grain, it tells us Amish distinctives are significant. If they were not, then it would not make sense for *20/20* to run an exposé of those differences. It would make no sense for *20/20* to attempt to convince middle Americans that the Amish are "just like us" (to quote the segment's closing line) if, in fact, middle Americans were not tempted by Amish people's critical engagement with and thoughtful rejection of technology. Indeed, I suspect that *20/20* aired a story on the Amish during ratings week precisely because its producers recognized that many middle Americans are at least intrigued by the cultural critique that the Amish perform in their daily practices.

So again, as disturbing as this *20/20* segment is on a number of levels, it helpfully reminds us that the Amish do differ significantly. The elegance of their simple life and their thoughtful resistance to the seemingly inevitable influx of technologies of communicative speed contest the twin propositions that consumption is a meaningful expression of choice and that technological advances are either necessary or desirable.

My point is not that we should reject technology. My point is rather that it is possible, though admittedly difficult, to differ significantly. My point is also that we may learn something about how to differ from our Amish brothers and sisters whose cultural indecency in an age of cultural indifference is inspiring. Truly theirs is an "indecent" life, as the most conservative Amish walk around daily with no shoes on, seeing no need (as I certainly do) for taking a shower every day, and making their way through the world with not so much as a telephone in the house, not to mention an answering machine, caller ID gizmo, television, VCR, cable hook-up, computer, e-mail server, satellite dish.

Amish indecency calls us to consider, among other things, which post-modern technologies we have decided are necessary, natural, and/or desirable. What of their costs do we fail to count? I am thinking of the call that disrupts dinner, the television commercials that encourage our children to cry out from the grocery cart for some sugar-coated cereal, or the e-mail messages that a few years ago were not even a part of our existence but now are so commanding of my attention that I sometimes feel compelled to leave

town to ignore them. Indeed, I cannot help but wonder whether the 20/20 segment functions much as do the cages still hanging in St. Lambert's Church in Münster, left over from an earlier indecent Anabaptist experiment: a reminder to nonconformists that they risk an unseemly end.

## A RISKY PROPOSITION

Then Job answered the Lord: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . . I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42: 1-6, NRSV)

"If we do not desire willfully to oppose the Holy Ghost and reject the grace of God, it is impossible to believe that a true faith can be without regeneration and without obedience, and that this obedience can be without promise."<sup>14</sup> (Menno Simons)

As I have said, I am not arguing for a wholesale rejection of technology. The Amish in their wisdom do not even do that because they know that meaningful resistance is not about reaction. My point has to do with agency, choice, decision. The point is not to turn away from the world, since after all we must live in it. It is about seeking ways to be in the world but otherwise, according to the teachings of Jesus.

What I am calling for is for us to get serious about empowering our own agency in the world in which we live. Given the principalities and powers of these days (especially the consumer/media culture), we can begin by reading critically those media texts we do watch or technological wonders we do take into our lives. We can stop ignoring texts as if they were merely entertainment or using technologies as if they simply made life easier. We can start to read them as a primary mode of creating and preserving the troubled and complicated world in which we live. Then we begin to diminish their power over us and start to assert our agency or power with them.

When we subject media texts to that kind of engagement, we can learn from them, against the grain of their ideological workings, that our times are relativistic largely to the extent that our consumer/media culture seeks to make them so. The media encourage the proliferation of ultimately meaningless differences because in so doing they create an insatiable desire in us for a difference that matters. For our consumer/media culture, the difficulty of the difference is just fine. And its short shelf life is even better since, as I

have argued, that is precisely the condition of possibility for our return to the mall.

When we read our consumer/media culture critically and learn that all differences are not necessarily the same but are made the same largely for the marketing purposes of that same consumer/media culture, then something remarkable becomes possible. For perhaps the first time we become open to hearing what our consumer/media culture would prefer to keep silent—namely, the voices of the others of that consumer/media culture that might dare, like the Amish, to witness to another way.

But if it is difference we are really after, then we should be aware of the risk we are taking. If we begin to listen to such others, there is no telling in advance what else we may do. As Jacques Derrida argues in his close reading of Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham and Isaac, every other is of God, because God is wholly other. Thus to come to the other is also to come to God. And to come to God is always to avail oneself to God, to give oneself over to God and, thereby, to risk oneself before God. Hence, whenever we seek out the other, even the other voice of a media text, we seek God and put ourselves in God's hands. Finally, precisely because God is wholly other, totally not us, we cannot know God's purpose or God's plan. Thus, we can never know in advance what will become of us. That is the very serious risk of seeking the other.

If we do take on this project of engaging our consumer/media culture critically to hear its other, we should do so defenselessly—that is, not to try to find the answers we are looking for but rather to make ourselves available to unexpected challenges and surprising contestations to who we are and who we have been. Although I have not argued that we should “kill our televisions,” I also cannot promise that when we have spent some time critically engaging, say, the various media representations of the Amish from the *20/20* segment, front-page articles on cocaine-selling Amish youth, or films like *For Richer or Poorer*, we will not, in fact, find ourselves throwing out our televisions.

As I said at the outset, I believe the relationship between the sixteenth-century Anabaptists and postmodernity is an anachronism. The two do not mix. We will not get them to synthesize. Like the Anabaptists, the Amish are significantly different from us too. Unlike us, they have figured out a way of living that offers a visible witness to our consumer/media culture's preferred view. We could take (and many of us have taken) these relations of significant difference to mean that neither the sixteenth-century Anabaptists nor the Amish have much to say to us. Thus we could (and

many do) put them aside. But if we did that, we would forfeit the chance to consider the possibility, however unlikely, that precisely in their otherness breathes the Spirit of our transformation toward that wholly other who is God.

Throughout this introduction, I have been seeking to warn against taking either of two familiar yet unhelpful postures in relation to sixteenth-century Anabaptists. Early on I argued that we should not presume continuity by history or blood with sixteenth-century Anabaptists since doing so undercuts the condition of possibility for faith. Then I suggested that we should also not presume that, because of their differences from us, the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century have little or nothing to teach us.

Instead I am inviting us to take another more difficult approach: studying the gap between us. By investigating the gap that stretches between the sixteenth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, we learn that our Anabaptist forebears inspire us to differ significantly. By studying the gap between the Amish and ourselves, our contemporary brothers and sisters teach us that it is possible to differ significantly. Whether and how we will aim to differ significantly, or to witness, will be our question of faith.

These essays seek in their various ways to answer that question of faith and its accompanying questions. Shall we seek to differ? What would it mean for us to do so? Should we endeavor to antagonize? And if so, what or whom? If we should try either to differ or to antagonize, how? What type of differing could serve as a witness these days? What should our witness say?

### A RADICAL CHORUS?

Shortly before the conference from which these essays came was convened, a letter to the editor appeared in the Mennonite press.<sup>15</sup> The letter suggested that the people gathering for the Bluffton conference were really not very radical. Indeed, the writer indicated that watching *Seinfeld* reruns would probably be more productive than attending the conference.

I do not wish to discount watching *Seinfeld* reruns, especially given the case I have just made on behalf of a critical engagement with consumer/media culture. And most conference presenters and participants would probably acknowledge that they have not yet become adequately radical as Christians. Yet I am not willing to concede altogether the point that gathering at the conference was insignificant.

I doubt that, taken individually, the participants at this conference were especially radical. Certainly we were no more radical than the partici-

pants of most such conferences. But gathered together as historians and poets, pastors and chemists, parents and administrators, rhetoricians and philosophers, we were at the very least two or three come together in Jesus' name for the purpose of thinking through what it might mean to be a visible church in these times. Moreover, in these days in which gathering face-to-face seems to become ever harder amid ever more pressing demands for speed and efficiency, that familiar gospel claim seems only to turn more radical with time.

In that spirit of gathering, we have brought together in this collection some of the voices of that conference. These chapters speak from a variety of disciplines, generations, and perspectives. Each endeavors to help us discern a meaningful difference and to make a significant witness in these times. But given their differences, it is no surprise that there are gaps in and between these essays, just as there are gaps between ourselves and our Anabaptist forebears. It is our hope that these gaps will inspire further questions and conversations.

The essays collected here have been arranged into seven parts plus this introduction. Part one, "Radical Christianity and Postmodern Theory," takes up directly the question as to what posture radical Christianity ought to adopt with respect to postmodern theories. Thus with this section the reader is invited to plunge right in to the theological and theoretical complexities of the question this book pursues.

In the opening essay of that section, Stanley Hauerwas argues that postmodern theory is best understood not as a radical departure from a modern thinking that rendered God irrelevant but as the cultural logic or handmaiden of an advanced capitalism that has ruled God out of order as well. As a discourse suspicious of all grand narratives and constitutive of fragmented subjects, postmodern theory, Hauerwas continues, is no friend of Christianity and makes excellent consumers for a global market. Yet, Hauerwas further argues, the church may not only survive but flourish in this global market if the church learns to be an international community speaking from a position of moral authority insofar as it gives voice to local people.

In the second essay of this section, Peter Blum alerts us to a problem of Truth, which is its tendency to coerce assent and underwrite programs of violence. However, by way of a productive dialogue between the work of Michel Foucault and John Howard Yoder, Blum urges us to resist the temptation to respond to this problem of Truth with apathy. He invites us instead to engage our world through the particular and noncoercive witness of the gospel.

The first section of the book closes with Thomas Finger's contribution, which addresses the problem of Truth from the question of whether Anabaptists ought to make universal truth-claims. Finger recognizes the relevance of postmodern critiques of the practice of making universal truth-claims. However, by way of a philosophical and theological analysis of certain universal truth-claims in Christianity, Finger argues that Anabaptists are obliged to deal in universal truths conceptualized not as epistemological foundations but as eschatological goals.

In part two, "Anabaptist Storytelling and Historical Memory," we turn our attention to stories, whether of the gospel, on the one hand, or of Mennonite experiences, on the other. We ask how stories function as well as how they might be told amid postmodern theories and exigencies.

This section begins with Michael A. King's essay in which he, also engaging the work of Foucault, asks whether Foucault's theorization of power, according to which our Anabaptist stories are effects of power, is the story we want to tell. Determining that though the Anabaptist story can benefit from Foucault yet dare not become thoroughly Foucauldian, King urges us not to seek a return to a modern view that truth and knowledge are outside power. Rather, he invites us to consider with Gadamer that the truths we have received through time, while not objective, can still be affirmed as true.

With Paul Tiessen's essay we encounter a close reading of Dallas Wiebe's story (in *Our Asian Journey*) of a small group of nineteenth-century Russian Mennonites who traveled to Central Asia to meet the returning Christ. Tiessen's reading of Wiebe's novel teaches us much, not only about postmodern novels in their formal and stylistic features, but also about the power of stories to constitute identities, to dismiss the other as unworthy, to violate the history of those who would be forgotten, and also (and perhaps most importantly) to subvert the "proper" stories by engendering regard for the indecent actions of dreamers and visionaries.

John D. Roth's essay closes out part two and gives us a glimpse of a historiography emerging among some historians through which stories are told with an ear not only to continuities but also to discontinuities between times. In Roth's telling of the stories of the South German Mennonites at the turn of the nineteenth century, we learn of the tensions and struggles through which these Mennonites forged their identity and their practices in a moment of transition between premodernity and modernity.

Part three, "Marginal Voices and Church Polity," invites us to hear the dissonant voices of past, present, and beyond for the disturbances they may

speak into the way we have been the church. Thus Scott Holland asks us to heed Ernst Bloch's call that we do theology from the cages in which the Anabaptists of Münster were punished for their heretical attempt to bring forth the reign of God into the here and now. From these cages—places of delegitimation from which Anabaptists since Menno Simons have been running—Holland argues, we may speak of and for the underside of Christendom wherein God dwells.

Seeking the underside of both Mennonite "experience" and Canadian culture, Hildi Froese Tiessen's essay directs our attention to some Mennonite writing that employs "postmodern irony"—the use and misuse of dominant modes of understanding on behalf of alternative understandings—for the purpose of productively interrogating "proper" culture, be it Mennonite or mainstream. Through her readings of works by Di Brandt and Rudy Wiebe, Tiessen introduces us to spaces between Mennonite tradition and postmodern fragmentation wherein destiny gives way to possibility.

With Jeff Gundy's essay we return to the problem or, rather, possibility that comes with the question of Truth. If Truth is a problem—if we humans cannot settle on an absolute Truth—Gundy reasons, then a great opening is made in the discourses we have inherited for all the many voices so far silenced. If these voices are to speak to our heritage meaningfully and into the silences artfully, then they will bring us both good and bad news but news, in any case, by which we may work out our peoplehood together.

In part four, "Practical Discipleship and Liturgical Renewal," contributors ask us to re-examine the ways we live our faith in our daily and worship practices, often encouraging us to discover "new" ways of making "old" practices witness to our troubled world and local communities. In his essay, Gerald Biesecker-Mast takes contemporary sensitivity to the limits of Platonism as an occasion to outstrip dualisms like word and deed for a non-resistant "discipleship of performance." By way of such a discipleship that is otherworldly in its defiance of violence done in either word or deed, he hopes, we may bring forth audaciously and lovingly the reign of God.

Concerned that urgent calls for meaningful Mennonite distinctives cannot fully be answered by either systematic theology or high church liturgy, John Richard Burkholder offers a theology of worship that seeks to transgress traditional Christian demands for the altar and sacrifice. Burkholder takes our postmodern condition (which, he argues, frees us from having to ground a theology of worship in philosophical foundations) as an opportunity to think worship beyond the conventional logic of Christ as scapegoat. He makes the case (via René Girard) for a theology of worship (as

service, work, ministry, and praise) according to which worship is not a cultic dying but instead a living and self-offering discipleship.

Also seeking to transform traditional conceptions of worship, in particular those conceptions that have obscured the extent to which singing forms faith, Marlene Kropf lets us hear the testimonies of numerous Mennonites who say their experience of singing is sacramental. In these post-modern times, Kropf argues, in which so many of us are seeking multi-sensory engagements with God, singing has the potential to become all the more significant and powerful as a kind of sacrament.

Part five, "Religious Particularity and Social Identity," offers three strategies for re-constituting Anabaptist-Mennonite identity now that no single origin or story can persuasively function as its secure anchor. J. Denny Weaver's strategy is to write a theology grounded in the teachings of Jesus according to which a peace witness is constitutive of the Christian community. Such theology remains marginal but could disrupt Christendom hegemony, Weaver argues, if Anabaptist-Mennonites would take seriously the particularity of their and Christendom's theology, thus risking a choice between a church of the common ground and a church for the culturally disenfranchised. For Weaver, the choice could neither be more obvious nor more difficult.

Douglas Jacobsen approaches the question of Mennonite particularity from a suspicion of the so-called possibilities of postmodern pluralism for Mennonite community. Unconvinced that postmodernity bodes well for particularity, Jacobsen argues on behalf of a hybrid (or *mestizaje*) vision by which Mennonites might accept and even celebrate, rather than resist or ignore, the diversity among Mennonites and others through a politics of compassion and an ethics of forgiveness.

Seeing similar perils between the would-be faithful of medieval and hypermodern times, Gerald Schlabach, in the third essay of this section, urges us to become Catholic Mennonites who resist the speed and consumerism of these days by making a vow of stability. By this vow, he argues, we would resist contemporary trappings of endless and repetitive desires for the new with the freedom that accompanies self-conscious slowness, long-suffering patience, and uncoerced obedience, which are of God, our saving rock.

Part six, "Peace Witness and Political Commitment," consists of three essays that take the peace witness so seriously as to consider what it would mean for social relations and political commitments if we were to become dedicated to it. In his meditations on the gospel of peace, John Stahl-Wert

urges us to welcome the new millennium with a renewed commitment to the truth of Jesus as enfleshed, a truth that undoes all our hatred of flesh, whether ours or someone else's. For if we were ever to live by that commitment, that incarnation of peace, that affirmation by God of God's love for all, then, Stahl-Wert muses, we would through our fleshly lives begin to create a new world.

Chris Huebner's essay works us through three key theological arguments from Alisdair MacIntyre, Jacques Derrida, and John Milbank. He contends that these three thinkers, in their departure from or theorizations of our relationship to God via friendship, tend to reproduce dualistic conceptions of our relationship to God as either aesthetic or concrete. Written out of the notion that the church is the body of the forgiving and suffering Christ, Huebner argues, Mennonite theology enables us to participate in the very life of God as it unites rather than opposes aesthetics and reality. Such theology calls us toward a following that does not merely repeat Jesus' life, as well as toward acts of reconciliation and forgiveness that transgress violence.

Finally, Thomas Heilke compares modern, postmodern, and Anabaptist discourses on politics at the level of their eschatologies to inquire into their differing visions of hope. Modern articulations of the political order always aim for a specific and concrete outcome, and postmodern versions give up all concrete forms of hope through politics. Against such tendencies, Heilke argues, an Anabaptist counter-vision of hope sees in the potent remainder of all political aspirations a space in which God's grace and peace may come. Thus, according to Heilke, although politics are not irrelevant (since at their best they may serve as the space in which the message of salvation may be proclaimed and heard), they are also not our salvation. Rather, our salvation is in remaining faithful to God's reign of grace and peace in this world.

The book closes in part seven, "Cultural Captivity and Christian Freedom," with two critical inquiries into the possibilities in postmodernity for Christian freedom. Leo Driedger surveys characterizations of postmodernity as compared to premodernity and modernity as well as discusses thinking being done by postmodern theorists. Driedger argues that postmodernity, when understood against the backdrop of modernity, does mark a departure from modernity's "iron cages" and opens the possibility for a new Mennonitism that might embrace new communities, experiences, art forms, and ways of knowing.

For J. Lawrence Burkholder, postmodernity also presents a possibility. The freedom it makes available versus its suspicion of, for instance, cate-

gorical imperatives, may enable us to be disciples of Jesus and responsible inhabitants of the larger social order at the same time. So far, Mennonites have taken the freedom of postmodernity as an opportunity to conform to the world. However, such freedom might as easily enable a nonconformity by which we could become socially responsible disciples of Jesus through freely chosen and thus generously offered self-sacrifice. The test of our success, he challenges, will be precisely the extent to which such self-sacrifice becomes a reality.

Despite their differences in disciplinary approaches, Anabaptist perspectives, and generational concerns, all the chapters in this book, I believe, challenge us to think through difficult questions toward a meaningful Anabaptist witness for these times. We hope that the differences and gaps in and between these essays will inspire productive thinking and energetic conversation on the issues (whether or not best understood through the rubric of postmodernity and postmodernism) that we face.

## NOTES

1. Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1997), 5.

2. For the persuasive and eloquent development of this argument, from which these claims are borrowed, see Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Willis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

3. The *Martyrs Mirror* often recounts the gladness with which Anabaptists faced their executioners. To us this may seem strange, even oddly masochistic. But another reading of their stories is available. What their stories do say is that the Anabaptists resisted their pursuers when they could by fleeing towns and living in hiding. Thus they did not seek out martyrdom. However, once they determined that their deaths were near, they typically greeted them gladly as potent witnesses to their faith. Importantly, nothing maddened the powers that were more than to hear Anabaptists singing on their way to the stake or praying on behalf of the executioners. So infuriated did the executioners become in the face of this Anabaptist refusal to let their persecutors have the last terrible word that executioners often took to cutting the Anabaptists' tongues out or screwing them to the top of their mouths.

4. I am, of course, referring here to the polygenesis thesis according to which the origins of the Anabaptists are considered to be so diverse as to disable the unity once claimed in the work of such church historians as Harold S. Bender. For a recent critique of the polygenesis thesis, see Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), and Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "Anabaptist Separation and Arguments against the Sword in the Schleithem *Brotherly Union*," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, forthcoming issue.

5. This is a very brief summary of Stephen Toulmin's characterization of the shift from premodernity to modernity in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New

York: Free Press, 1990).

6. John Howard Yoder, "'Anabaptists and the Sword' Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 85.2 (1974), 139.

7. John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1994), ix.

8. On this point, Morgenson writes the following: "Everybody knows that the American consumer has been the high-octane fuel behind the nation's decade-long economic boom. Retail spending, after all, accounts for two-thirds of the output of the United States. But it is becoming increasingly apparent that American shoppers are also fueling the recoveries just starting to be charted in depressed economies overseas." Gretchen Morgenson, "U.S. Shoppers Shoulder the Weight of the World," *New York Times*, June 20, 1999, sec. 3, p. 1.

9. Of course, there are plenty of people in need in the United States. But those in need tend not to be the "targeted shopper" about whom I am speaking here. Indeed, the shopper most energetically sought after is the (especially male) middle-class (or more affluent) shopper between the ages of 18 and 49.

10. This example has been developed from the following article: Gary Strauss, "Battle's afoot: Airwalk tries not to trip," *USA Today*, July 31, 1998, 1B-2B.

11. Menno Simons, "The New Birth," *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1984), 101.

12. According to John D. Roth, that garage was actually a cooperative effort between Wal-Mart and the Amish around Goshen.

13. All quotations from this 20/20 segment were taken from an ABC News videotape of the February 21, 1997, broadcast of 20/20, produced by Ene Riisna and Frank Mastropolo.

14. Menno Simons, "Christian Baptism," *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 265.

15. D. R. Yoder, Letter to the Editor, *Mennonite Weekly Review*, July 16, 1998.