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# Seeking the Rhetoric of Jesus

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## Seeking the Rhetoric of Jesus

Susan Biesecker-Mast

**I** COME TO THE QUESTIONS POSED BY THIS VOLUME from a somewhat different background than one might expect. Whereas one might anticipate that I was an Anabaptist first and a scholar second, just the opposite was the case.<sup>1</sup> Before beginning my graduate studies I had never heard of Anabaptism. Indeed, I was poring over Aristotle's *Rhetoric* before I was even a Christian. I thus went through much of my graduate studies (not to mention all of college, high school, and elementary school) without giving a thought to how my studies were impacting my faith—never mind how my faith might impact my scholarship. Not only did these questions fail to trouble me, they never even occurred to me.

The fact that I came to Anabaptism late has been significant for me personally, and therefore important for the way in which I think about the relationship between my scholarship and my faith. That being the case, I want to begin by recounting my story.

### SO, YOU GREW UP IN CHICAGO. . . .

A lot of people, many of them Mennonite, do not like "the Mennonite game" because they understand it to be an exclusionary ritual. As the spouse of an ethnic Mennonite, I can appreciate that critique whenever an ethnic Mennonite who has just established my husband's genealogy turns to me and asks, "So, where are you from?" and I have to answer, "Chicago." My response typically has the same disappointing effect: to bring a warm and easy conversation to a sudden stall. Still, even

as I appreciate the problems with “the Mennonite game,” I also like hearing others play it. I enjoy hearing the names run across lines that stretch out and then intersect, then split and join again into an endless web of generations, until finally and inevitably some (however distant) link is made to the one with whom the game is being played.

It is hard for me to be more than a spectator to this game, because my own roots are in a rather different tradition—namely, that deeply American tradition in which one sets off, often alone (or with one’s nuclear family), usually for a better job and, in so doing, leaves the past and all the relations within it behind.

My parents each grew up in a Chicago suburb, one on the north side and the other on the south. There they were raised to worship God, study hard, work even harder, and above all seek a better life. To these ends my mother got confirmed in her Catholic church, my father went to the Methodist church, and both were the first in their families to go to college. My parents met at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, and their blind date was, by all accounts, the occasion for love at first sight. They got married while they were still students and had my brother within the first year of their marriage. A year and a half later my sister was born. By my parents’ tenth anniversary my mother had borne three children, the family had moved ten times, and my father had gone from selling pots and pans door-to-door to designing washer and dryer parts to selling fasteners all over the Midwest.

From what I can tell, those were fast years in which my parents did not talk much about the fact that they came from different religious backgrounds. Perhaps that is why my childhood religious experience (my brother’s and sister’s, too) was disjointed. Each of us was baptized in the Catholic Church but, as far as I know, never attended a Catholic church.<sup>2</sup> I do remember that we went to a Methodist church for a while when I was little. I also remember that we often went to church Christmas Eve. I recall that I felt strange when we did go to church, because I did not have much of an idea about what to do or say in Sunday school.

By the time we moved to Inverness, a suburb that was then on the outermost edges of the greater Chicago area, my family was no longer attending church. My parents never said why we stopped going. It felt to me that they had simply decided that we did not need church anymore.

In some ways Inverness was a wonderful place to grow up. Our yard was large and there were bushes and trees all around. I loved to climb



those trees and make forts in the bushes. Also, the roads within Inverness were quiet and winding. They were wonderful for long and relaxing bike rides. Importantly, the schools near Inverness were excellent. I was encouraged at home to study hard and was prepared well at school for my college studies.

But Inverness also had its disadvantages. The bushes around our yard were not planted for playing; they were planted for privacy. They were effective. In fact, they were so effective that in the eleven years I lived there I never once saw the old woman who lived next door.

I suppose that the large yards were designed to give each family plenty of greenery to enjoy. But the effect I remember most was that the houses—and thus the people—were far apart from one another.

Finally, the roads that passed between the subdivisions were wide and busy, which made traversing the several miles to town too dangerous for a child. During the school year these barriers, distances, and divisions did not seem significant. But during the summertime, when friends from school disappeared into their subsection of the development, Inverness could feel rather isolating.

### THE UN-ALTAR CALL

About the time I was solidly into adolescence—I was just finishing eighth grade and was not looking forward to three long summer months in Inverness—my best friend told me about a youth program in which her older brother was participating. Scores of teenagers from our area were getting together every Thursday night for outdoor games and rock music. Of course, by this time the bushes in our yard and the forts I had built in them did not hold much interest for me. But lots of teens, many of them male, surely did.

I had a wonderful time that summer. Every Thursday evening I joined a couple hundred other youth at a local park where, organized into our standing teams, we would play poison ball or some other low-skill outdoor game for a couple of hours. Then, as the summer sun began to set, we would head over to the YMCA gym, where a portable stage had been erected, folding chairs had been set out, and a rock band was beginning to play. We would find our seats with our teammates and, after a while, the music would fade into a skit that would dissipate into a cartoon slide show that would prepare us for a message brought by the



youth leader. He was a youth pastor, I now realize, though we never called him that.

As I said, I had a wonderful time. I thoroughly enjoyed being with all those young people, playing games and listening to the music. But I was often unsure of what to make of the Christian message that always brought those evenings to a close. To be sure, my uncertainty was largely due to the fact that I had not had much experience with church. But I was also confused because the whole approach of the youth program was so subtle. It was not clearly identified as a Christian youth ministry; the leader was not called a "pastor," we never heard a "sermon," and we never sang any hymns. As an adolescent who, before going to sleep, had often prayed to a God who was a mystery, this youth program was absolutely intriguing, but also a bit frightening.

Over the course of that summer and into the next school year, I became deeply involved in the program. Rarely missing a Thursday night, I became a regular member of the "core" of my team. I also started attending Sunday worship at the youth program's parent "church."

Toward the end of the summer before my sophomore year, I went to a Thursday night gathering, as usual. I played an outdoor game, as usual, and enjoyed the music and gleaned some insight from the cartoon slide show. Then I settled in for the message. The youth leader, as always, gave a good message—about self-improvement, I think. Then all the lights went out on the stage and suddenly we were immersed in darkness, except for the red exit sign above the double doors. The youth pastor continued. He asked us all to close our eyes and bow our heads and ask ourselves this question: Has Jesus come into your heart and made you a Christian? He repeated the question several times, as if to help us consider it carefully.

I did not want to hear this question. It was not a question I wanted to answer. But there it was, repeated, no less. For a good ten minutes or so I tried to put off the question. I sat there in the dark, waiting for the lights to come back on. Some time later the youth pastor gave us further instruction. He said that those of us who had found Jesus in our hearts could leave, but that the rest of us were to stay.

Apparently, I could not just wait it out. He was going to make me stay there until I answered this question. So I closed my eyes and bowed my head, and I searched my heart. After what seemed like a stretch of time just this side of eternity, I gave up looking because it had become



clear to me that Jesus was not in there. Finally, I opened my eyes and made my way in the dark to that red exit sign.

I never went back to that youth program or its parent "church." I stopped going, not because I thought the ministry was untrue but because I believed that I had been forsaken. Jesus had not come into my heart. Clearly, I was not a Christian.

### SAVED BY THE BODY

In 1987 I started graduate school at the University of Pittsburgh, where I met a peculiar person. In seminars where we were studying Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Lacan, and Derrida (theorists who, especially in the 1980s, were viewed as wholly critical of religious belief), I came to know a young man who was intense not only about the readings and discussions but about Christianity. Odder still, he belonged to some small Christian sect I had never heard of before.

We got to be friends. Over the course of several months, our friendship grew as we spent many late nights at the twenty-four-hour diner, talking about rhetoric, social theory, and the Anabaptists. The first two topics interested me greatly. The last one did not. Perhaps that was partly because Anabaptism seemed to include the commitment that a believer, when faced with violent intruders threatening to harm the person's dearest ones, would not use a gun to stop them. I had never met anyone with such strange and deeply held principles.

As peculiar as I thought he was, I also found myself becoming attracted to him. Late one night, after an engaging discussion about the material in one of our seminars, I asked if I might kiss him. He said yes, and that was great. And then he had a question for me: would I go to church with him? That was not the question I wanted to hear. My turn away from the church was not some casual retreat. I left because I understood myself to have been forsaken, and that was painful. Now this person I was falling in love with was, to my mind, asking me to discover all over again that Jesus was not within me.

I went.

As it turned out my return to church went well. The congregation, which was small, was friendly. I enjoyed getting to know them. I also enjoyed listening to them sing. I would have liked to join them, but I could not sing the words. I felt that if I sang the words I would be lying and



that God would know it. Although I still felt estranged from Christianity, I continued to go to the Pittsburgh Mennonite Church (PMC) with Gerald. In spring 1991, Gerald and I were married by the pastor at PMC. By that time I was serving on at least one church committee and was making a regular practice of engaging in the lively exchanges that were characteristic of our congregational business meetings.

Not long after we were married—and after about two years of worship leading, lots of business meetings, great discussions in our small group, and wonderful fellowship meals—it occurred to me that I should become a member of that church. I thought the time had come for me to say publicly what I believed was already true—that I was committed to that body. John Stahl-Wert, our pastor, seemed pleased with my decision and asked me to meet with him once a week for several weeks in preparation for membership.

At our first meeting John presented me with a choice: to be taken into membership by confession of faith alone or also by baptism. John knew I had been baptized as a baby, and he therefore said that I did not have to be baptized for membership at PMC. But he added that he recommended it.

This choice made me anxious. I knew that I felt a strong commitment to PMC, but I was having no more luck as an adult than I had had as a teenager in finding Jesus inside. As far as I could tell, he still had not come into my heart.

John gave me time to consider this choice. In fact, several meetings and some important study and much discussion passed before he asked me again.

Of course, he eventually returned to the question, and when he did I had a question for him. Can a person be a Christian even if Jesus has never come, even if she cannot find Jesus inside?

I will never forget his answer. He said that if I were to come into membership, I would not do so alone. He reminded me that we were going to ask the congregation, the body of believers, the body of Christ, whether to take me into their membership, their body, Christ's body. He asked me to trust their decision and, if they said yes, to let them carry me forward, let them bring Christ to me.

I was baptized in the Pittsburgh Mennonite Church in spring 1992. Jesus finally came to me in the faces and faith of that body of believers. And by their action and in their midst, I was saved.



### WHAT HAS THIS GOT TO DO WITH RHETORIC?

Now, almost ten years since my baptism, I find myself to be not only a member of a Mennonite church but also a faculty member at a Mennonite college who focuses her scholarly efforts on questions related to the church and even enthusiastically assents to pacifism. I have been through quite a transformation.

How does human transformation like that happen? I believe this is a rhetorical question. As Aristotle instructs us, rhetoric is the art of persuasion. It is an art, he teaches us, because it can be learned and theorized but cannot be reduced to a formula. It is about persuasion because it seeks transformation without coercion. So to study rhetoric is to study how human beings transform their world by discourse and how they are themselves transformed by discourse.<sup>3</sup>

Over time rhetoric has met with widely divergent receptions. In ancient Greece, where Western rhetoric got its start, rhetoric initially enjoyed a good reputation. As the art of crafting discourse capable of moving the *polis* toward some collective action, rhetoric was seen as a valuable and practical art central to the functioning of the Athenian democracy. Later, when the highly styled rhetorics of some famous rhetoricians came to be linked with the downfall of Athens, rhetoric developed a bad reputation as the discourse of self-interested individuals seeking to beguile audiences for personal gain.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, a cursory view of the history of rhetoric suggests that whenever rhetoric has been understood primarily as an art of persuasion that makes democratic decision-making possible, it is highly valued. However, when it is seen as the stylizing of a discourse designed to benefit the rhetorician, it tends to be derided.

In graduate school I learned that rhetoric is best understood as that practical art central to the workings of a vital democracy. However, I also learned that any good rhetorician pays attention to style—that is, to the manner in which a case is made. A good rhetorician will do that because he or she will know that the manner of speaking matters as much as the content of what is spoken. Indeed, a good rhetorician will go even so far as to say that style is also a kind of content.

To study the content and style of a discourse is crucial to understanding how discourse impacts human beings. But that is not enough. An understanding of context and purpose is also crucial. We must consider context because that is always where the rhetorician looks for appeals. The rhetorician must begin where the audience is.



In addition, context is crucial for understanding whether a change has occurred. If we do not know where an audience's members began, we cannot judge whether they have been moved.

Finally, we must understand the rhetorician's purpose. Since rhetoric is discourse by which human beings seek to change their world, we can only appreciate their effort when we have an idea of their aim.

My purpose in offering this brief summary of the definition, history, and critique of rhetoric is to make a simple point: namely, that rhetoric is the discourse of the possible.<sup>5</sup> It is such because it always begins where we are, with the here-and-now, yet always seeks to move us elsewhere. Rhetoric must begin with the world as we know it, because only then can rhetoric make any sense to us. Yet it must also always seek to make that world otherwise, because only then can it be the discourse of transformation.

From the time I began the course work for my doctoral degree to the time I got my first full-time teaching job, I sought to better understand rhetoric as the discourse of the possible by studying the discourses of social movements. I began with the rhetoric of the Sophists, fifth-century B.C.E. teachers and practitioners of rhetoric whose rhetorical skill helped to transform Athens from a culture ruled by blood relations to one governed by the polis. Later, I studied the rhetoric of American women's movements. In my dissertation I sought to discern whether popular feminist books published in the early 1990s by feminists like Gloria Steinem, Naomi Wolf, Susan Faludi, and Marilyn French were truly discourses of the possible—that is, discourses seeking to change patriarchal culture into relations of equality between men and women.

But then my research took a turn.

During the summer before Gerald and I moved to Ohio to begin our first full-time teaching positions, we spent a month in Holmes County, Ohio, with Gerald's parents. Over the course of that month I became thoroughly fascinated by the interactions that tourism was enabling between the Amish and middle Americans. A whole host of questions about the impact that tourism was having on Amish and Mennonite communities in Holmes County interested me. However, most compelling to me was the question of what impact the Amish and Mennonites of Holmes County might be having on middle America. Thus inspired by what I believe to be the potent, if subtle, witness of these communities in Holmes County, my research has come to engage some



additional questions. In addition to asking *how* a rhetorical discourse seeks to make change by way of its appeals and style, I now find myself also asking what change *ought to be* advocated and what strategies *ought to be* employed.

I believe the answer to the first question is best found in the life and teachings of Jesus. Further, I believe that the most compelling interpretation of his life and teachings can be found in the work of John Howard Yoder. Indeed, I believe Yoder was right when he argued that we ought to take the life and teachings of Jesus so seriously as to live according to them—according to, as he put it, “the politics of Jesus.”<sup>6</sup>

The politics of Jesus, I understand Yoder to have argued, call us to recognize that the world is not the kingdom of God and, at the same time, to live each day as if it were. Thus, rather than allow our faith either to be separated from our daily living or to be integrated into it, we should live in the full recognition that the world goes ’round by greed and violence; yet we should choose to live by generosity and peace.

To live by generosity and peace is to live in faith. And, of course, to live in faith is to live the impossible.

In a nutshell, then, since becoming an Anabaptist my scholarship has taken a turn toward trying to understand how the impossible is made possible or how the kingdom of God is articulated in human discourse or, finally, what is the rhetoric of Jesus.

I believe I will spend the rest of my days trying to answer this riddle. Still, I cannot help wondering whether I may already have been given some clues about it in the differences between my experience in the suburban Chicago youth ministry and at Pittsburgh Mennonite Church.

### A RHETORIC OF JESUS?

At the time I stopped attending the youth group and church in suburban Chicago, I was not altogether sure why I felt compelled to leave. I knew it had something to do with the fact that I experienced their “un-altar call” as evidence that Jesus was not interested in me. But now as I think more about it, I believe there was more to it than that. Indeed, I believe my leaving had to do with the manner in which that ministry was done.

Although I did not think about it much at the time, I remember that I was aware that the ministry had begun only after extensive market



research had been conducted. That research was said to have revealed that there were a lot of people in the Chicago suburbs who were interested in God but were put off by church.

In response, this youth and adult ministry was developed to offer God without church. We never sang hymns or referred to the youth or lead minister as "pastors." We never met in a church building and never sat in pews. Even during the worship service on Sunday mornings we never heard a "sermon," but rather a message that sounded like a keynote speech appropriate for a self-improvement seminar.

Importantly, I never thought of the people who gathered for those worship services as a "church," because we did not function as a body. Rather, we were a gathering of individuals seeking insight for our particular lives from our un-pastor.

The youth group did not function as a body either. When we "gathered" on Thursday nights, we always did so first as members of teams competing aggressively against one another to earn team points in the hope that we would be declared the winners at the end of the month. Although I am sure that there was some group cohesion within the core of the team, I also recall that the primary purpose of our gatherings was to memorize biblical passages—again, to earn points. Our sense of belonging owed much to our drive to win.

In a context such as this, where the primary rhetorical strategy was to seem un-churchly, it is not altogether surprising that I was ill prepared for the un-pastor's un-altar call. It came to me as a shock, because it did not fit into the context of outdoor games, rock music, and self-help discourse.

Before the call, the discourse was all about making us feel comfortable, as if participating in the youth group and attending worship on Sunday were just like playing a sport at the high school, going to a concert of your favorite rock group, or watching Phil Donahue. Whether we were scoring team points, clapping to the beat of the music, or sitting in the movie theater seats on Sunday morning, the emphasis was on the familiar. Then, suddenly, all was unfamiliar as we were asked to decide whether we belonged to God.

At Pittsburgh Mennonite Church, my experience was altogether different. PMC was a church formed by a group of believers who came together out of a desire for fellowship, not in response to a market analysis. This was a body of believers that understood itself to be about serv-



ing others, not about having its desires met. At PMC the emphasis was not on the familiar; the pastor's focus was not on making us always feel comfortable. In fact, the contrary was probably more often the case, as John regularly asked us in his sermons to question our habits and examine our assumptions.

In short, this was a congregation that made no sense except as a body. Everything it did it did as a body, whether it was doing its work in commissions, sharing regular fellowship meals, working through differences of opinion at business meetings, or anticipating the coming year at the annual church retreat. Especially significant for me, this was a congregation that believed in a kind of conversion that did not require that I find Jesus inside, but instead placed its trust in a deliberate process of studying the Sermon on the Mount with the pastor, learning about the Anabaptists in a membership Sunday school class, and being carried forth to the baptismal waters by the gathered body, the body of Christ.

If I were only a rhetorical critic and not a Christian, I would conclude from this contrast that both methods of evangelism were successful, since both methods seemed to result in genuine conversions. Indeed, I might even conclude that the method used by the Chicago unchurch was far more successful than the one used by PMC. Whereas the Chicago ministry has since become a megachurch drawing tens of thousands of people every Sunday, PMC is a robust but comparatively tiny congregation.

Yet because I am a Christian as well as a rhetorical critic—and, moreover, a Christian who reads the Bible from the perspective of the peace-church tradition—I must draw another conclusion. That is, that while PMC's manner of evangelism may not have produced as many conversions, I believe it to be a far better effort. Although I do not fully understand what the rhetoric of Jesus is, I suspect that if I ever do, I'll remember having heard it first at PMC. Further, I expect that it will be, like the rhetoric of PMC, a rhetoric that is embodied in the gathered believers, forthright in its witness to the kingdom of God yet nonresistant in its evangelism.<sup>7</sup>

### THE CHURCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

I opened this essay by claiming that my coming to Anabaptism late has been significant for my scholarship. Indeed, that was my initial jus-



tification for recounting my faith story. I made that claim because I think that coming to rhetoric before coming to Anabaptism has shaped the way I tend to think of the relationship between faith and scholarship. Since I was already well into serious study of rhetoric before I became a Christian, I did not tend to ask myself how my scholarship impacted my faith. Instead, I tended to ask how my scholarship might be enriched by my faith.

Also at the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that although I cannot play the Mennonite game well, I still enjoy hearing others play it. What I enjoy about it is the truth that it speaks about the extent to which all of us, whether or not we are ethnic Mennonites, may make sense of ourselves, our faith, and our commitments through the complex web of relations from which we have come and within which we are being transformed. Although I never expect to discover, like so many ethnic Mennonites probably have, that my parents are second cousins, I also no longer live either physically or spiritually in a place designed to produce the experience of isolation. Thus, if I ever do arrive at a fuller understanding of the rhetoric of Jesus, I expect that I will do so through the church. Just as the only way I could find Jesus was through the body, so too will I only come to understand his rhetoric through the body. How could it be otherwise?

So, if I were to draw any conclusion about the relationship between scholarship and faith, perhaps it would be this: Bringing wisdom to the church is not the primary task of faithful scholarship; rather *being in the church* is the first condition for the possibility of doing faithful scholarship.

## NOTES

1. Significantly, five other contributors to this volume (Terry Brensinger, Polly Ann Brown, Perry Bush, Jay McDermond, and David Mosley) also come to it in a similar way—as people who did not grow up Anabaptist.

2. I say “as far as I know” because I cannot remember ever attending a Catholic church; as both of my parents are no longer living, I cannot ask them.

3. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

4. This view of rhetoric is reiterated today whenever social commentators refer to “mere rhetoric”—that is, discourse used, typically by politicians, to mislead the people for their own political gain.

5. I am borrowing this notion of rhetoric as the discourse of the possible from

John Poulakos, "Rhetoric, the Sophists, and the Possible," *Communication Monographs* 51 (1984): 215-26.

6. See especially John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1972).

7. For an essay developing this notion of a nonresistant evangelism, see my "The Aporetic Witness" in *Practicing Truth: Confident Witness in Our Pluralistic World*, ed. David W. Shenk and Linford Stutzman (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1999), 130-47.