



REUNION

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ANABAPTISTS AND THE BIBLE

by Marion G. Bontrager

Is killing and violence in military and police service sin? Two opposite traditions come from the same Swiss roots; Swiss soldiers, considered the best fighters in the 16th century, and the Anabaptist Swiss Brethren Church, now called Mennonites! Swiss Vatican guards continue the violent tradition. The Mennonite Church represents the oldest continuous Christian non-violent tradition.¹

Why do Christians disagree about whether it is God's will or a sin for Christians to execute persons or kill them in war? For a number of reasons: The first is because Christians differ in how they make ethical decisions. Secondly, because of how they read/interpret the Bible (their hermeneutics). Thirdly, because Anabaptists understood that being Christian is to follow Christ, not merely an experience or a theological belief. Fourthly, they believed they were to follow Christ in all of life, not merely in personal relationships.

When Christians debate or discuss the ethics of war and violence they often talk "past each other." They know they disagree but not why.

Traditionally, Christians have used four "truth sources" in making ethical decisions, Scripture, Church tradition (past decisions), reason, and experience. People will disagree with each other if they don't prioritize their truth sources the same way. Reason says that someone has to engage in war or violence to keep law and order and Christians would do the best job. If that or some other truth source is ranked above Scripture, then persons will surely disagree about engaging in violence and killing.

But two Christians who rank Scripture as the highest truth source may still disagree about engaging in violence because of how they read/interpret the Bible. Some Christians claim to read the Bible "just as it stands," but really everyone interprets the Bible "as they understand it!" Everyone approaches the Bible with assumptions about how to read/interpret the Bible.

The assumptions or presuppositions we bring to the Bible determine what the Bible says to us about God's will, including engaging in violence. We talk "past each other" when we are not aware of each other's hermeneutical approach to the Bible (starting assumptions or presuppositions). Then it's easy to doubt the other person's sincerity and openness to truth and God's will. All church traditions teach a hermeneutical approach to the Bible whether people realize it or not.

Personal attacks or doubts about the other person doesn't solve the problem. Only when we become aware of our own hermeneutical presuppositions or assumptions can we become aware of the other person's hermeneutical approach.

Mennonite Church theology is more than just Protestantism with some cultural items and ethics such as non-violence or nonresistance tacked on to the gospel. **The Christ-centered reading of the Bible was likely the most foundational distinctive of the 16th century Anabaptists.** That approach to the Bible leads to biblical nonviolence, enemy love, adult baptism, separation of church and state, and following Christ in all of life among other distinct emphases.

Anabaptist Mennonites really have a Christ-centered, not a Bible-centered faith. Jesus Christ is the center of the Bible both spiritually **and ethically**. At first glance it appears all Christians believe that. Christians generally believe that Jesus is the fullest revelation of God "spiritually and ceremonially" but not "ethically." There are three basic hermeneutical approaches to reading/interpreting the Bible today with their results. All three attempt to deal with the differences in the Bible.

The so-called "**flat-Bible**" approach to reading and interpreting the Bible sees all passages as equally authoritative. Nevertheless, all Christians choose which passages in the Old and New Testaments they recognize as authoritative today. For example, those with the "flat-Bible" deal with the violence in the Old Testament and the enemy love, nonviolent teachings of Jesus by dividing life

into two realms: the corporate and the personal. The Old Testament teachings are for our corporate life (public office, military, police, etc...) and Jesus' teachings are for our personal one-to-one relationships. God has two opposite wills at the same time! That is how most Christians approve of killing in war or executions but consider it sin to do it in their personal life. With this approach God has two wills at the same time, one for corporate life and another for one's personal life.

The flat-Bible approach is as old as Augustine and Ambrose who had to come up with a way for Christians to engage in war after Church and state began coming together after Constantine's edict in 313 C.E.. This approach leads to persons like the Nazi leaders claiming "not responsible" at the Nuremberg war crimes trials after WW II. They were just obeying the orders of the state that was responsible. The executioner or those who dropped the atomic bomb do not claim personal responsibility for their action.

The second "**dispensational**" approach to the Bible is more recent, begun by the Englishman John Darby (1800-1882) in the mid 1800s. This popular approach among many evangelicals today divides the Bible and history into numerous different eras or dispensations as do the Scofield Reference Bible and Ryrie Study Bible. God's will changes in different dispensations. So God's will also changes from the Old Testament dispensations, to Jesus, to today, and to the future. God has many different wills. The interpretation about Jesus and his teachings goes like this: Jesus came to establish the kingdom. But since the people rejected him he went to plan B and established the church instead. So we now live in the Church dispensation and Jesus' kingdom teachings are for the future millennial kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is for that future dispensation. So the first issue in inductive Bible study is to determine what dispensation a teaching was meant for and what dispensation we are in today. This approach to the Bible undermines the teachings of Jesus about enemy love and nonviolence.

Some Mennonites read the Bible with a two-stage dispensational approach in which God's will changes from the Old Testament to Jesus. The problem with this approach is that it ignores the Old Testament because they see only the disagreement between the two testaments. Marcion in the second century C.E. went to the extreme of discarding the Old Testament completely. How could the God of the Old Testament and Jesus in the New Testament be the same God? That problem remains for the two-dispensation approach; God's ultimate will changes. Has it changed some more?

The third or Anabaptist "**Christo-centric**" (Christ-centered) hermeneutical approach to the Bible sees Jesus as the fullest and supreme revelation of God. A primary passage was Hebrews 1:1-2. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things.... He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being...." The Anabaptist Hans Pfistermeyer wrote in 1531, "The Old Testament has been fulfilled and explained by Christ. What Christ has explained and helped us to understand, I will adhere to, since it is the will of his heavenly father." ² The south German Anabaptist leader Pilgrim Marpeck wrote the most extensively about the relationship of the two testaments and a Christ-centered approach.

Jesus revealed most clearly how he "read/interpreted" the Old Testament in Matthew 19:8. He responds to the question of why Moses allowed divorce; "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning." Jesus contrasted Moses' law from his own teachings and from the "beginning." Jesus also contrasts his teachings with the old when he says six times in the Sermon on the Mount "You have heard, but I say to you." My students remember the principle with the simplistic jingle, "When the Bible doesn't agree, Jesus is the referee." However, Jesus also finds agreement in the Old Testament when he says he came "to fulfill it" not "to do away with the law." Jesus is completely faithful to the Father, so he is the fullest revelation, his life and teachings the ultimate will of God for us. Someone has said, "Jesus said what he meant, meant what he said, and he was also speaking to us."

The Christ-centered approach finds **both** agreement and disagreement between the two testaments. God's "ultimate" will does not change but God worked with a people who were faithful at times, and less faithful at other times. God in his grace continued to work with the people in a "remedial" way trying to make the best out of their disobedience. (Some refer to that as God's "redemptive" or "permissive" will.) Remedial is preferred since "redemptive" can mean that God merely forgives the disobedience, and "permissive" can mean that God's doesn't care. Remedial means God continues to work with the results of their "hardness of heart" to raise the level of the people's faithfulness.

While Israel was not to have a human king (Yahweh was their king) God did not abandon them when they created one. Instead Yahweh set up rules for the King (Deuteronomy 17) and sent prophets to remedy the disobedience. God kept working with the "clay" that was resistant and

lumpy many times. (Jeremiah 18) The Law of Moses represents God's remedial will in contrast to the "beginning" and what Jesus models and teaches. (Matthew 19:8) When we go back to the Old Testament and some of the prophets, we understand the remedial will of God and find unity between the two testaments. In this view the Bible is the story of God dealing with the up and down, faithful and unfaithful people rather than a flat book of verses that dropped out of the sky unhooked from salvation history.

It is crucial today not to confuse the ultimate and remedial will of God and teach the remedial ethic as God's ultimate will. The church has to work remedially with people's unfaithfulness. But the Jesus ethic, not the remedial ethic is the inspired authoritative standard for Christians today. While all of the

Bible is inspired, it is not all equally authoritative. There is a big difference between a Bible-centered faith and a Christ-centered faith! While some would say "Back to the Bible," Anabaptist Mennonites would say "Back to Christ." Nevertheless, I have found individual Christians in both Catholic and Protestant Churches who somehow came to a Christo-centric reading of the Bible ethically.

¹ The earlier Waldensians and some of the John Hus followers were nonviolent but both groups have essentially lost the ethic today.

² Anabaptism in Outline, Walter Klassen, Herald Press, 1981, p. 149

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"AMISH IN THE CITY"

On July 28 UPN will air a reality show called "Amish in the City" with a two-hour season premiere. It will be followed by 10 more one-hour episodes. At Menno-Hof we have worked very hard to keep this program from becoming a reality. But, in the final analysis, greed and the entertainment value of putting the Amish on TV has won out.

Ted Marena of The Center for Rural Strategies www.ruralstrategies.org said, "Leslie Moonves, (CBS President) is doing this reality series in place of the "The Real Beverly Hillbillies" because the Amish don't have as much lobbying power."

Here are four things to keep in mind as you discuss the show or contact United Paramount Network 310-575-7000. (from The Center for Rural Strategies)

- A reality television show about the Amish is by definition an insult to this religious community, no matter the perceived quality of the show's content. Amish generally believe television is a violation of their beliefs.
- Les Moonves claims the show will respect the Amish. You can't pay youth to violate Amish beliefs on one hand, and respect the Amish on the other.
- Broadcast television stations receive free federal licenses. This is a reckless use of public airwaves.
- Mocking a group of rural people because they are perceived to be different is intolerant and mean spirited. Making money off such an enterprise is unconscionable.

Reality shows in America have taken our culture to a new low level of mindless and senseless unreality. We at Menno-Hof consider this an affront to the Amish. The Amish are a strong and vibrant Christian community. A few young people on TV will not affect the group in a major adverse way, but I suspect it will be another opportunity for the public to form opinions about this group while the Amish themselves will be doing some deep soul searching.

BOOK REVIEW

The Amish: Why They Enchant Us by Donald B.Kraybill. Herald Press, 2003, 48 pp. \$7.99

Kraybill has given us a concise and authoritative overview of the Amish, one of America's religious groups. The Amish often considered quaint and outdated, are a flourishing and dynamic people

who have found a way to preserve their identity and values. Diversity and common practices among the Amish are described for the reader. The author also explains many of their puzzling practices and shows how they continue to flourish and grow in a modern high tech society.

From the Director's Desk

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." John 5:39-40

Jesus spoke these words to the religious leaders of his day about how they read Scripture. My sense is that Jesus would tell the Christian world the same pointed kind of message today. "My friends, you're getting it all wrong. You search the scripture not to find Jesus, but to find arguments to prove your own Biblical positions."

Some Christians almost worship the Bible, (bibliolatry) instead of the God of Scriptures. "The Bible itself is not his revelation, it is the record of his revelation." – William Barclay

There is only one proper way of reading the Bible—to read it as all pointing to Jesus Christ. If we read it in this fashion, then many of the things that puzzle us can be seen as stages leading us toward Jesus. It is very crucial how we read the Bible. If we indeed accept Christ as God's highest revelation, then we must read the Bible in a Christ centered manner. This contribution from the Anabaptists may very well be our best gift to the world. It will affect how we live out the Kingdom of God in the here and now. Thank you, Marion Bontrager, for helping us to understand this important concept.

–Joseph Yoder

Visitors to Menno-Hof

All of our visitors have interesting stories. Here's a snapshot of a few of our many visitors from the last quarter.

John Kuzel –John gave his piano students the summer off so he could travel cross-country from Bear Harbor, Maine to Seattle, Washington on his bicycle.

Joe Hurley –Joe is a reporter walking 3,600

miles on his "Route 6 Walk." Along his route he's always ready to give you a great report on his walk. Check his web site www.route6walk.com for his progress

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary brought a group of inquisitive High School seniors and graduates who are interested in possible seminary sometime in their future. The group is called **Explore**.

David Luthy and Joe Stoll from Alymer, Ontario brought their families, staff from Pathway Publishing Corporation and their youth group for an afternoon visit.

Norman, Rita, Almas, Danial and Neil Jaddou are an Iraqi family now living in Detroit, Michigan. They graced us with their presence in May.

Visitors: January – July 2004 — 15,996 ***** May '88 – July 2004 — 691,392

Menno-Hof gratefully acknowledges memorial gifts received in honor of Ernest Hooley and Roy Sauder

Reunion is published quarterly to keep our friends informed of happenings at Menno-Hof. Questions and comments are welcome.

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