

Adapted from the original article:

***For The Sake of the Kingdom:
A Call for Twenty-first Century Mennonites
to Reclaim the Evangelical Heart
of Our Anabaptist Heritage***

By *Eric A. Kouns* , Executive Secretary
of the *Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship*
during it's existence from 1979 to 2003

Introduction: Some Personal Reflections

I am an evangelical Christian who has been profoundly and positively influenced by the tenets of historical Anabaptism. As an evangelical I believe (1) that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, the only authoritative guide for faith and life; (2) that personal salvation is found in Jesus Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone; and (3) that the message of the gospel of Christ must be declared plainly, both by word and deed, and that every person must confess Jesus Christ as Lord in order to receive God's free gift of forgiveness and eternal life.

I am indebted to Anabaptism for heightening my awareness of the need to integrate faith and life, to look seriously at the implications of faithful discipleship, and to emphasize the ethic of love and nonresistance in all human relationships. I also appreciate the emphasis of historical Anabaptism on the inherent separation between church and state, the church as a voluntary community of baptized believers, and the need for discipline and mutual accountability in the community of faith.

I am no historian in any technical sense of that term. As a graduate of a Bible college, a Christian liberal arts college and a Mennonite seminary, I am aware of the theological issues which gave rise to the Protestant Reformation, including its so-called "radical" wing. I admit I sometimes have difficulty sorting out the various branches of sixteenth century Anabaptism, and I can't always recall how the Swiss-German Anabaptists differed from the Dutch and Hutterite strands, but I believe I understand something of the spirit of that sixteenth century movement. I cannot debate the finer points of difference between the thought of Hans Denck and that of Ulrich Stadler, but I appreciate the intensity of their devotion to Christ and their commitment to faithful discipleship. I imagine they would be astonished to learn that their writings had become the subject of academic disciplines such as Anabaptist history and Anabaptist theology.

I grew up among Baptist fundamentalists, moved to mainstream evangelicalism after graduating from Bible college, and joined the Mennonite Church while in seminary in 1982. Some would say that my "outsider's" perspective is helpful in assessing the character of contemporary Anabaptism. Others are convinced that I don't understand Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology well enough to presume to critique the current state of the movement. For my part, as the career diplomat was wont to say, I feel strongly both ways.

On the one hand I think I can offer a helpful perspective in the current debate regarding Mennonite identity and the relationship of Anabaptist Christianity to the broader Christian community. On the other hand I do feel a bit presumptuous offering a critique of contemporary Anabaptism, particularly when my conclusions lead to criticism of an interpretation of Anabaptism which I believe distorts the spirit and soul of the historical Anabaptist movement.

Of course I realize there are many in our communion who, knowing my theological pilgrimage are convinced that "once a fundamentalist, always a fundamentalist." Well, as an ex-fundamentalist I am no stranger to holding forth on any number of issues about which I know relatively little. I suppose that is one reason why I have agreed to undertake a presentation of this sort.

Still, I am a Mennonite. I have pastored two congregations [in a Mennonite] Conference. I have voluntarily aligned myself with this communion, and over the years I have tried to understand our traditions, our roots, our spiritual history. This paper is part of the fruit of that reflection. I have written it with the hope of emphasizing how the strengths of our tradition can impact the broader Christian community in positive ways. I also want to note some ways the strengths of the broader Christian community, particularly evangelicals, can enhance the effectiveness of our Anabaptist testimony before a watching world. My goal in reflecting upon why I am a Mennonite is not to encourage the replication of Anabaptism, as an historical phenomenon, in a twenty-first century context. Rather, it is to examine the spiritual dynamic which gave rise to the historical movement and explore the possibility that "the spirit of the Anabaptist vision" might still provide a relevant and effective motivation and model for the way we "do church" today.

Historical Overview: Revisiting The Anabaptist Vision

Historians tell us there are two important elements in the preservation of any tradition: memory and continuity. Memory entails an attempt to recall an event in its particular historical setting. Continuity describes the way the tradition expresses itself contemporarily.

Anabaptism, as an historical movement, arose out of a particular situation in the sixteenth century. Our situation is vastly different. We cannot transplant sixteenth century Anabaptism into the twenty-first century. Moreover it is

impossible to institutionalize an historical movement, as has been done with Anabaptism through the development of denominations such as the Mennonite Church, without, in the process, losing something of the original movement's vitality and dynamism.

Memory changes. Interpretation varies over the years. Most historians will admit that the times in which we write history will determine what we see in that history and will affect our interpretation of it. When it comes to writing and interpreting church history, our conclusions are also influenced by the doctrinal and spiritual presuppositions and convictions which we bring to the task of historical interpretation.

In December 1943, Harold S. Bender, then dean of Goshen (IN) College, summarized his interpretation of the origins of the Anabaptist tradition in his "president's address" to the American Society of Church History, meeting that year in New York City. In that paper, which Bender called *The Anabaptist Vision*, he argued that, from its origins in Zurich in 1525, the Anabaptist movement swept through Europe as an essentially uniform phenomenon.

Later Anabaptist historians have challenged Bender's assumptions and have questioned his description of a monolithic Anabaptism. They have suggested, for example, that Anabaptism arose in at least three distinct areas--Switzerland, South Germany, and the Netherlands--with each group evidencing characteristics and emphases unique to its own expression of Anabaptism. The book, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Westminster, 1957), notes three main subdivisions within the Anabaptist movement: revolutionary Anabaptism, contemplative Anabaptism, and evangelical Anabaptism.

Dean Bender's summary of the major points of historic Anabaptism is probably too simple and, thus, not wholly accurate. Sixteenth century Anabaptism was, no doubt, far more diverse and varied than Bender's conclusions indicate. Still, the significance of *The Anabaptist Vision* can hardly be overstated, since it summarizes important elements of Anabaptist thought which lend balance and practicality to contemporary Christian living.

The Anabaptist Vision: Three Characteristics, Two Foci

According to Bender, the Anabaptist movement, which arose during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, was marked by three identifiable characteristics. They are:

1. The essence of Christianity expressed in discipleship (*Nachfolge Christi*).
2. Voluntary church membership based on true conversion and a commitment to holy living.

3. The ethic of love and nonresistance as applied to all human relationships, marked by abandonment of all warfare, strife, violence and taking of human life.

Bender further asserted that the "Anabaptist Vision" addressed two specific areas of concern to serious Christians, two foci, if you will. The first of these relates to the essential nature of Christianity. As Bender reckoned it, in Roman Catholicism, grace comes through the sacramental/sacerdotal system. The Reformers emphasized an inner experience of grace through faith in Jesus Christ. To the Anabaptists, however, Christianity is essentially a new life of discipleship involving faithfulness to Christ's teaching and example.

The second focal point of the Anabaptist vision relates to the essential nature of the church. Again, according to Bender, for Roman Catholics the church is an institution. Where the priest is, there is the church. For the Reformers, the church was an instrument of grace. Where the sacraments are rightly observed and the Word is rightly preached, there is the church. For Anabaptists, however, the church is a brotherhood of love in which the fullness of the Christian life ideal is experienced.

Effects of The Anabaptist Vision

Whether by Bender's original intent or not, the publication of *The Anabaptist Vision* achieved at least two effects.

1. It helped to establish the view that the Anabaptist movement was a legitimate element of the Protestant Reformation. In fact, Anabaptism advanced Reformation thought to its logical conclusion. Bender wrote, Anabaptism is the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and thus...a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the apostles. (The Anabaptist Vision, Herald Press, 1944, p. 13)

In support he quoted a portion of a 1524 letter from Conrad Grebel to Thomas Muntzer. A few pages later he reinforced this assessment with the following statement.

The Anabaptists... retained the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, enlarged it, gave it body and form, and set out to achieve it in actual experience. (op. cit., p. 18)

2. It helped to chart a path for American Mennonites between the theological extremes of modernism and fundamentalism. The conflict between these two camps which raged throughout the broader Christian community in America during the 1920s took its toll on American Mennonitism as well.

Conservative Mennonite leaders were uncomfortable with new interpretations of the spirit and vision of sixteenth century Anabaptism which, they believed, were influenced by Enlightenment rationalism. "Progressive" thinkers, on the other hand, concluded that conservative Mennonites had uncritically adopted the dispensational eschatology and rigid Biblical literalism of Protestant fundamentalism.

H. S. Bender's 1943 presidential address to the American Society of Church History helped bring a measure of balance to the theological debate. The Anabaptist Vision reminded Mennonites that the genius of Anabaptism was its focus on ethics, not strictly on doctrine. As Al Keim wrote in Gospel Herald, April 19, 1994, "(t)he key word for the Anabaptists was not faith, but *Nachfolge Christi* (following Christ)."

While Bender recognized the Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship as the evidence of God's transforming grace at work in and through the life of a believer, he did not minimize the importance of a solid doctrinal foundation upon which a life of consistent discipleship must be built. And he described the character of that doctrinal foundation in unequivocal and unambiguous terms. I am convinced, as was Bender, that most 16th century Anabaptists subscribed to the heart of Reformation theology in matters such as the nature of God, the nature of man, the person and work of Christ, and the authority of the scriptures.

Now, before I move on to comparing and contrasting Anabaptist Christianity with contemporary evangelicalism, I offer the following "points to ponder" regarding the viability of the Anabaptist vision as a model for our approach to Christian ministry and discipleship in the twenty-first century.

1. While first-generation Anabaptists recognized that the new birth, God's free gift of grace, empowerment by the Holy Spirit, and other similar doctrines were the fertile soil out of which discipleship is to grow, subsequent generations have focused attention on those points where Anabaptists differed with the heart of the Protestant Reformation. They have made these secondary points the essence of contemporary Anabaptist/ Mennonite religious experience. From this perspective, works of faith (a proper response to God's grace) have become works of merit by which, at least implicitly, some believe they may experience God's grace. A balanced view of historical Anabaptism will recognize and avoid this tendency.

2. If the worthy tenets of historical Anabaptism are genuinely from the Lord, and if, therefore, they have timeless application to faithful Christian living, they should be shared with the broader Christian community. The spirit of John 17 requires it. Otherwise isolationism and arrogance tend to develop, and we are seeing evidence of that within the contemporary Anabaptist/Mennonite community.

3. Anabaptist Christians should not overlook the fifteen centuries of church history which antedated the Reformation era. Nothing in the Anabaptist vision for the church originated in the sixteenth century. It was merely an attempt to recover the spirit of the first century "Pentecost" experience and its results in the lives of believers.

4. Anabaptism is not an end in itself. It is merely one means to the end, which is to lift up Jesus Christ and proclaim the kingdom, the power, and the glory of God. It offers a context within which--by both life and lip, both word and work, both belief and behavior--the good news of salvation through Christ can be communicated to a lost world. Many Mennonites recall the famous words of Hans Denck: "No one can truly know Christ except he follow Him in life." While those words are true, contemporary Anabaptists need to recall that Denck and all the other early Anabaptist leaders assumed an experience of genuine new birth, forgiveness from sin, and the experience of new life in Christ as foundational to a life of discipleship and faithful service. What passes for Anabaptism today, in many quarters, focuses on "works of service" without commensurate emphasis on the new birth as the starting point. They advocate what Sanford Shetler called "discipleship without a beginning."

5. As the title of George Williams' classic text, *The Radical Reformation* (Westminster, 1962), indicates, the Anabaptists have come to be known as the radicals of the Protestant Reformation. Some who profess to follow in the train of the sixteenth century Anabaptists like to use the term "radical" to designate their brand of Christianity, which is little more than social and political liberalism dressed up in religious garb.

We need to recognize, however, that the Latin word *radix*, from which our English word radical derives, meant "the root, heart, or essence." When we talk about "radical" Christians, we need to emphasize the root, heart and essence of the Christian message. That "root" is not a political or social agenda. The "root" or "heart" of Christianity is the cross of Jesus Christ. And that cross is not merely the symbol of suffering or the supreme example of nonresistance, as some contemporary Anabaptists would have us believe. That cross is the only means by which the problem of human sin can be resolved, God's righteous demands can be satisfied, and sinners can come to know God's love and grace and forgiveness. That is the standard by which "radical Christianity" must be measured.

Among the myriad of denominations which make up the tapestry of modern American Christianity, only those in the Mennonite and Brethren tradition claim direct descendancy from sixteenth century Anabaptism. Anabaptists have been caricatured and misrepresented down through the years, but in the past quarter century more and more evangelical church historians have come to appreciate the positive influence of Anabaptism on the Christian community and

the unique contribution of this tradition to a balanced interpretation of church history.

The Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition is a worthy one. The Anabaptist vision remains a viable and relevant framework for consistent Christian living. When it is properly interpreted, and when it has been exemplified by consistency, balance, devotion, and grace, Mennonite Christianity has made a positive contribution to the Christian community and to society at large. I am a Mennonite because I want to identify with a heritage that, despite flaws in its application at times, nevertheless has stood for serious discipleship and a faith that demonstrates itself in service. I continue to believe that this tradition and its worthy tenets still have something positive and energizing to contribute to contemporary Christianity. Granted, it may require some effort to reclaim the evangelical heart of Anabaptist Mennonitism for a new generation of believers, but I think the potential results are worth the effort.

I close this section with two quotations. The first is taken from the book, *The Radical Reformation* by George Williams. Here are the words with which Williams summarizes his 800 pages of Anabaptist history.

The great majority of the mighty host of men and women whose lives we have sketched communicate an overwhelming sense of their earnestness, their lonely courage, and their conviction. They were aware of a providential purpose that informed their deeds. The bleakness, squalor, brutality, and frenzy of the vast scene in which they played their parts was relieved for them—as for us, the spectators—by the intense assurance which these people had that, within the shadow of their crosses, God stood keeping watch above His own. The cumulative effect of their testimony is that Christianity is not child's play, that to be a Christian is to be commissioned. (*op. cit.*)

And then, from H. S. Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision*:
(T)he Anabaptist was realistic. Down the long perspective of the future he saw little chance that the mass of humankind would enter such a brotherhood with its high ideals. Hence he anticipated a long and grievous conflict between the church and the world. Neither did he anticipate the time when the church would rule the world; the church would always be a suffering church. he agreed with the words of Jesus when He said that those who would be His disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Him, and that there would be few who would enter the strait gate and travel the narrow way of life. If this prospect should seem too discouraging, the Anabaptist would reply that life within the Christian brotherhood is satisfyingly full of love and joy.

The Anabaptist vision was not a detailed blueprint for the reconstruction of human society, but the Brethren did believe that Jesus intended that the kingdom of God should be set up in the midst of the

earth, here and now, and this they proposed to do forthwith. We shall not believe, they said, that the Sermon on the Mount or any other vision that He had is only a heavenly vision meant but to keep His followers in tension until the last great day, but we shall practice what He taught, believing that where He walked we can by His grace follow in His steps.
(*op. cit.*, p. 35, 36)

These quotations verbalize the heart and spirit of the Anabaptist vision. They describe the character of biblical Christianity. And they fairly and aptly summarize the reason I am a Mennonite.

Is Anabaptism Evangelical?

Writing in *Gospel Herald*, April 26, 1994, Levi Miller noted that "during the incubation of The Anabaptist Vision, Harold S. Bender described the theology and piety of the Mennonites in the late 1930s this way:"

All the American groups without exception stand upon a platform of conservative evangelicalism in theology, being thoroughly orthodox in the great fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith such as the unity of the Godhead, the true deity of Christ, the atonement by the shedding of blood, the plenary inspiration and divine authority of the Holy Scriptures as the word of God. Neither the eighteenth-century rationalistic moralism of the Enlightenment, nor the modern religious liberalism of the nineteenth century, has had any significant effect upon their thinking, in spite of the fact that individuals here and there have adopted unorthodox views.

(*Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 1937)

Mennonite scholars have written numerous volumes offering varying interpretations of historical Anabaptism and its contemporary implications. Some have emphasized the evangelical roots of the Anabaptist movement and have argued for the essential compatibility of Anabaptist distinctives and evangelical faith. Others have gone to great lengths to point up a perceived incongruity between evangelicalism and Anabaptism.

Much of contemporary Anabaptist historiography interprets the dynamic of sixteenth century Anabaptism somewhat differently than H. S. Bender. For certain, Anabaptist/ Mennonite scholarship of the past 50 years has challenged Bender's assumptions regarding the relationship between Anabaptist emphases and the theology of the magisterial Reformers.

Still, there is solid evidence to support the claim that historic Anabaptism was an evangelical movement, founded on theological presuppositions. The first Anabaptists did not so much devise a new theology as call for a faithful application of evangelical theology in every area of life. The implications of Anabaptism for contemporary Christian living are most faithfully expressed and

experienced with the context of evangelical Christianity, and a consistent commitment to the spirit of sixteenth century Anabaptism requires identification with the broader evangelical community and a repudiation of the influence of rationalistic liberalism on contemporary Anabaptism.

Evangelicalism Defined

Now, what about this "evangelical community" with which I am encouraging Anabaptist Christians to identify? Who are evangelicals, and what is evangelicalism?

If we depend upon either the mainstream media or even much of the mainline denominational press for a definition of those terms, we will conclude that evangelicals are either:

1. traditionalist reactionaries with limited intelligence and education; or
2. dishonest opportunists who use religion as a way to enhance their economic status; or
3. religious fanatics who are a threat to American civil liberties.

Although the term "evangelical" has a rich history, its contemporary use as the designation for a particular theological perspective may be dated from 1942 and the founding of the National Association of Evangelicals. A prominent leader in the evangelical movement of that era, Harold John Ockenga, writing in the October 10, 1960, issue of *Christianity Today*, offered this description of some of the goals and purposes of American evangelicalism at mid-century.

(The evangelical) desires to win a new respectability for orthodoxy in the academic circles by producing scholars who can defend the faith on intellectual ground. He hopes to recapture denominational leadership from within the denominations rather than abandoning those denominations to modernism. He intends to restate his position carefully and cogently so that it must be considered in theological dialogue. He intends that Christianity will be the mainspring in many of the reforms of the societal order.

(from "*Resurgent Evangelical Leadership*")

These goals, intended to set evangelicalism apart from fundamentalism, have been realized only in part. Still the evangelical movement in America has grown in popularity and influence, reaching a "high water mark" of sorts when a *Newsweek* cover story declared 1976 "The Year of the Evangelical."

Broadly defined, evangelicalism is a transdenominational movement comprised of all those who have personally experienced Jesus Christ as their Savior and who seek to share Him others. While the movement has grown dramatically in the past 50 years, theological erosion and pluralism have taken their toll on evangelicalism. Some feel the movement has become so theologically fragmented that it no longer has a coherent self-identity.

To address this problem, the National Association of Evangelicals and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School co-sponsored a consultation of more than 650 evangelical leaders which was held on the TEDS campus, May 14-17, 1989. The goal of the consultation was to determine if a consensus statement could be drafted which would summarize the essence of evangelical belief and practice. In 1990 the consultation published its major papers under the title *Evangelical Affirmations* (Zondervan, 1990), edited by leading evangelical theologians and former Christianity Today editors, Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry. Conclusions from the consultation are summarized in the book's introductory chapter where three marks of "evangelical identity" are outlined.

1. Evangelicals believe the gospel as it is set forth in the Bible, that is, the good news of God's saving work in Christ. The benefits of the work of Christ, i.e. personal salvation and forgiveness from sin, are bestowed upon us freely and graciously and are received through personal faith in Christ. They are not conditioned on our merit or personal goodness but are based wholly on the mercy of God.

2. Evangelicals hold to all the most basic doctrines of the Bible. These include the Trinity; the full deity and full humanity of Jesus Christ; His sinless life, authoritative teaching, substitutionary atonement, bodily resurrection, and second coming; the necessity of holy living; the imperative of witnessing to others about the gospel; the necessity of a life of service to God and human kind; and the hope in a life to come.

3. Evangelicals hold the Bible to be God's Word and, therefore, completely true and trustworthy ("and this is what we mean by the words infallible and inerrant.") *(Evangelical Affirmations, p. 38).*

In a further effort to summarize the heart of evangelical Christianity, the British scholar, Alister McGrath, in his book, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (IVP, 1995), states:

Evangelicalism is grounded on a cluster of six controlling convictions, each of which is regarded as being true, of vital importance and grounded in Scripture. These are not purely 'doctrinal,' if this term is understood to refer purely to a set of objective truths; they are also 'existential,' in that they affirm the manner in which the believer is caught up in a redemptive and experiential encounter with the living Christ. These six fundamental convictions can be set out as follows:

1. The supreme authority of Scripture as a source of knowledge of God and a guide to Christian living.
2. The majesty of Jesus Christ, both as incarnate God and Lord and as the Savior of sinful humanity.
3. The lordship of the Holy Spirit.

4. The need for personal conversion.
 5. The priority of evangelism for both individual Christians and the church as a whole.
 6. The importance of the Christian community (the church) for spiritual nourishment, fellowship, and growth.
- (Evangelicalism and the Future... pp. 55, 56)*

All is not well in the contemporary evangelical movement, however, a fact borne out by a major article in the October 5, 1992, issue of Christianity Today, titled "*Can Evangelicalism Survive Its Success?*". A transdenominational movement, evangelicalism has suffered from a lack of cohesive vision and unifying leadership. Despite its emphasis on orthodox theology, contemporary evangelicalism has seen its theological foundations eroded and its ideology corrupted by the modern phenomena of secularism and materialism.

In a paper titled "*Who Are the Evangelicals?*", delivered at the Evangelical Affirmations consultation mentioned above, Carl Henry noted:

Little more than a dozen years ago, Newsweek magazine in a 1976 cover story heralded "The Year of the Evangelical." "The religious phenomenon of the '70s," reported Newsweek, "was the emergence of evangelical Christianity into a position of respect and power." But in a decade or so, the evangelical movement has squandered much of its moral and spiritual initiative, and secular society has placed a large question mark over its motives, its goals, and even its integrity.

(Evangelical Affirmations, p. 69)

In his response to Henry, Nathan O. Hatch wrote:

The evangelical world is extremely dynamic, but there are few church structures to which many of its adherents or leaders are subject. The evangelical world is decentralized, competitive, and driven by those who can build large and successful organizations. It is this instability that I think is problematic for theological integrity.

(Evangelical Affirmations, p. 98)

This note of pessimism regarding the future of evangelicalism is sounded loudly in a 1991 work titled *The Variety of American Evangelicalism* (InterVarsity Press, 1991), edited by Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston. In this collection of essays the editors reinforce the idea that the movement has no genuinely unifying force and even go so far as to suggest that the term "evangelical" may have outlived its usefulness.

Not all evangelical thinkers are so negative in their assessment of contemporary evangelicalism. Of note is Donald Bloesch, author of more than twenty books, many of which critique the evangelical phenomenon and offer suggestions for its revitalization. In his book, *The Future of Evangelical*

Christianity, first published in 1983 and reissued in 1988 (Helmets and Howard) with an introduction by Mark Noll titled "*The Surprising Optimism of Donald Bloesch*," Bloesch argues for an evangelicalism marked by balance and consistency. He decries the tendency of mainstream evangelicalism to succumb to the influence of contemporary secular culture.

"We are deficiently evangelical," he writes (p. 17) "if we emphasize the person and work of Christ and treat lightly the effect of Christ in the lives of his people." Compare that with the famous quote by Hans Denck--"No one can truly know Christ except he follow Him in life"--and Bloesch sounds amazingly Anabaptist.

Bloesch goes on to offer the following definition of the term "evangelical." An evangelical is one who affirms the centrality and cruciality of Christ's work of reconciliation and redemption as declared in the scriptures; the necessity to appropriate the fruits of this work in one's own life and experience; and the urgency to bring the good news of this act of unmerited grace to a lost and dying world.

(*Future...*, p. 17)

Should contemporary Christians in the Anabaptist tradition hesitate to embrace this kind of Christianity and to identify with others who do likewise? I think not.

The Case for Evangelical Anabaptism

As an evangelical Christian as well as one for whom The Anabaptist Vision summarizes some important marks of consistent, practical Christian living, I have reached the following conclusions regarding the appropriate relationship between evangelicals and Anabaptists.

1. Anabaptism is founded upon the same essential truths (re scriptural authority, salvation, discipleship, etc.) as evangelicalism. Historically Anabaptism has been counted as part of the evangelical stream, just like Pietism, Puritanism, Wesleyan Methodism, Revivalism, etc. Historical Anabaptism is evangelical at heart.

2. Contemporary evangelicalism is a diverse community, and some elements have distorted the fundamental beliefs and emphases. To identify with the evangelical community does not mean that we adopt, or even endorse, every element of faith or practice in every other communion under the evangelical umbrella. It does mean that we claim solidarity with other Christians who share our fundamental commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. Instead of repudiating evangelicalism, we should rather engage in active dialogue with other evangelical communions. We might find that our perceptions of their foci and emphases might have been clouded or distorted. It

may even be that we will all be enriched by the experience of fellowship, cooperation and identification.

4. To repudiate evangelicalism and to argue for a new sectarianism in which we identify ourselves only as Anabaptists is to take a far too narrow view of evangelicalism and reveals a disturbing underlying attitude of arrogance.

The Spring 1991 issue of the Mennonite Brethren journal, *Direction*, explored the theme, "Mennonite Brethren and Evangelicalism." Whether writing in favor of stronger identification with the evangelical community or in opposition to it, the various authors made their case as Anabaptists, not strictly as Mennonite Brethren, so their arguments have value for other Anabaptists who are not from their communion.

With regard to point number four above, I draw heavily on an article in that publication, written by Richard Kyle, titled "*The Mennonite Brethren and American Evangelicalism: An Ambivalent Relationship*." Since his points apply to the Anabaptist community at large, I have taken the liberty, in the quote below, to replace references to Mennonite Brethren with the term Anabaptist. Kyle writes:

Some (Anabaptists)...view American evangelicalism with contempt. In part, such a stance is derived from a narrow view of evangelicalism. Contemporary American evangelicalism is seen primarily as an offshoot of fundamentalism. In fact, evangelicalism is often equated with fundamentalism. This view largely ignores the evangelical traditions not related to the modernist-fundamentalist controversy and the many evangelicals who elected to remain within the liberal denominations. Moreover, this position feeds on the excesses of fundamentalism, (e.g., nationalism, militarism, materialism, subjectivism, and anti-intellectualism) and lumps all evangelicals into the same mold. This stance also focuses on the differences between American evangelicalism and (Anabaptists), while ignoring the significant points of agreement. In some ways this view reflects the old sectarian mindset which has long been a part of the Mennonite-Anabaptist tradition.

Some (Anabaptists) distancing themselves from American evangelicalism have often reasserted Anabaptist distinctives. They have called for a new sectarianism, based on Anabaptist theological principles, to replace the old cultural sectarianism that has gone by the way. (Anabaptists) are to renew their commitment to discipleship, peace, and social justice.

However, such a reassertion of Anabaptist principles is only part of the answer. Whether some like it or not, (Anabaptists) are part of the kaleidoscope that makes up North American evangelicalism....Because evangelicalism does not share some important Anabaptist distinctives does not mean that (Anabaptists) are not part of North American evangelicalism, any more than it

means that Pentecostals are not evangelicals (just) because mainstream evangelicals do not speak in tongues.

Rather, (Anabaptists) should regard North American evangelicalism as a vital but diverse movement, and affirm their relationship to it. They should see themselves as a sub-group in this large movement. At a time when the significance of denominationalism is declining in America, (Anabaptists) need to reassert their historic distinctives, but they should not allow these positions to erect unnecessary barriers to cooperation with other evangelicals. While avoiding the excesses of fundamentalism and popular evangelicalism, (Anabaptists) need to accentuate what they have in common with other evangelicals. Instead of distancing themselves from American evangelicalism, (Anabaptists) can make a healthy contribution to the movement and serve as a corrective to some of its less desirable traits. In the other direction, American evangelicalism has something to offer to (Anabaptists). It can temper some of Anabaptism's less desirable traits, namely a vulnerability to humanistic, liberal and social gospel tendencies.

(Kyle, "*The Mennonite Brethren and American Evangelicalism*," in *Direction*, Spring 1991, pp. 34, 35)

Evangelical Self-Assessment

As an evangelical Christian I readily, if sadly, acknowledge that much of the criticism leveled against contemporary evangelicalism is valid. We can be superficial, materialistic, overly subjective, excessively pragmatic, and marked by an unhealthy fascination with individualism and self-improvement techniques. As an Anabaptist Christian I must admit, with equal sadness, so can we.

In arguing against the identification of Anabaptism with evangelicalism, Delbert Wiens has rightly reminded us,

Evangelical book stores are full of manuals telling us how to manage our families and our psyches. Churches try one technique after another to promote that sort of progress which they call "growth." And instead of the communal statesmanship that (seeks) holiness, we have religious entrepreneurs creating para-church empires or shaping congregations around themselves.

(Wiens, "*Mennonite: Neither Liberal Nor Evangelical*," in *Dialog*, Spring 1991, p. 49)

That is all true, to one degree or another. But it doesn't require Anabaptist discernment to recognize those weaknesses. The truth is that many within the evangelical community are painfully aware of these foibles and are calling their own communion to self-examination and repentance. As evidence I cite only a

few of the works by evangelical authors, addressing this theme, which have appeared in the past few years.

The Body - Being Light in Darkness, Chuck Colson (Word, 1992)

Selling Jesus: What's Wrong With Marketing The Church? Douglas D. Webster (IVP, 1992)

Power Religion: The Selling Out Of The Evangelical Church. Michael Scott Horton, Editor (Moody, 1992)

No God But God: Breaking With The Idols Of Our Age. Os Guinness and John Seel, Editors (Moody, 1992)

The Consumer Church: Can Evangelicals Win The World Without Losing Their Souls? Bruce Shelley and Marshall Shelley (IVP, 1992)

Ashamed Of The Gospel: When The Church Becomes Like The World. John F. MacArthur, Jr. (Crossway Books, 1993)

No Place For Truth or Whatever Happened To Evangelical Theology? David F. Wells (Eerdmans, 1993)

God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams. David F. Wells (Eerdmans, 1994)

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind. Mark A. Noll (Eerdmans, 1994)

The Coming Evangelical Crisis: Current Challenges to the Authority of Scripture and the Gospel. John H. Armstrong, Editor (Moody, 1996)

Here We Stand: A Call From Confessing Evangelicals. James M. Boice and Ben Sasse, Editors (Baker, 1996)

The Compromised Church. John H. Armstrong, General Editor (Crossway, 1998)

Losing Our Virtue: Why the Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision. David F. Wells (Eerdmans, 1998)

The critique of evangelicalism offered by these authors will not likely satisfy most contemporary Anabaptist critics of the movement. I note these

works mainly to illustrate that evangelicals are trying to judge themselves in order to enhance their effectiveness as an instrument for the advancement of the gospel of the kingdom. Contemporary Anabaptist leaders would be well-advised to follow their example instead of devoting so much time to cultivating a self-defensive mindset which leads to theological isolationism.

Contemporary Anabaptism— Where Is It Headed?

Any Anabaptist self-examination should begin with an honest appraisal of the degree to which contemporary Anabaptist scholarship has been influenced by Enlightenment rationalism and the theological liberalism it has spawned. I submit that, for all their efforts to preserve and defend their perception of the essence of historic Anabaptism, contemporary scholars have abandoned, or at least radically reinterpreted, important elements of orthodox Christianity (in the areas of bibliology, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology, for example.)

Contemporary Anabaptism emphasizes some worthy tenets—the importance of the believing community, the church; a call to serious discipleship; a spirit of service; a commitment to peace and nonresistance. But such an agenda, if it does not spring from a life-transforming encounter with God through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, has little more to commend it than any other appeal to altruistic humanism.

Writing in the Summer 1995 issue of the Evangelical Anabaptist Fellowship Newsletter, I listed what I perceived to be the ten most important issues facing contemporary Anabaptism along with a brief discussion of their implications and consequences for the church and the kingdom. As I review that list five years later, I conclude that little has changed in the interim, and so I am repeating that list in this context.

1. Confidence in the Bible as the authoritative, inspired, infallible Word of God is steadily eroding, despite our protestations to the contrary. Biblical interpretation is too often shaped and influenced by contemporary culture. Attitudes and behavior reflect modern sociological and psychological theories more than an understanding of the historical interpretation of the Bible. This problem lies at the heart of all other issues facing contemporary Anabaptism.

2. Orthodox Christology is under assault. Contemporary Anabaptist scholarship is raising questions about the traditional interpretations of the person and work of Christ, particularly the purpose of His crucifixion. In a Gospel Herald article a few years ago, J. Lawrence Burkholder wrote:

Mennonite Christology has changed. For many, Jesus is no longer God incarnate, the mysterious God-Man whose spiritual message was characterized by the claim that 'my kingdom is not of this world.' Rather, Jesus is now viewed primarily as a sinless prophet calling for social change in anticipation of the kingdom of God on earth.

(from "*Mennonites on the Way to Peace*," GH, February 19, 1991)

3. An inadequate concept of human sinfulness and its consequences is distorting awareness of the need for repentance, forgiveness and the new birth. The Pauline concept that unbelievers are "dead in trespasses and sins," needing nothing so much as forgiveness and new life, has given way to the idea that humans are basically good and need simply to be encouraged to "follow Jesus." This distortion of Biblical truth leads to a faulty perception of the purpose of the cross of Christ and the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. If contemporary Anabaptism wishes to reinterpret the crucifixion and the nature of personal salvation, it should also acknowledge that it has departed from orthodox Christian teaching in that regard.

4. Evangelism, which I define as the proclamation of Jesus' sacrificial death as the only solution for the problem of human sin, has been displaced as the focus of the church's mission in favor of programs to address humanitarian and social needs. This is a logical outgrowth of the changes in the perception of human sin and the nature of salvation. Writing in the *Mennonite Weekly Review* in 1994, Willard Unruh noted that "there has been a shift in theology. My grandmother believed non-Christians went to a Christless eternity, but I don't hear that concern now. I sometimes wonder if support for Mennonite Central Committee isn't to some extent a part of our materialism. Things are so important to us that we have sympathy for those who are impoverished materially. But spiritual deprivation is another matter." ("*Do We Still Believe In Missions?*" MWR, July 28, 1994.)

5. An emphasis on discipleship, which I define as a voluntary decision to follow the teachings and example of Jesus, along with an essentially utilitarian approach to the Bible, has resulted in a diminished appreciation for spiritual discipline, personal piety and holy character. A focus on discipleship which does not begin with a call to personal conversion and new birth, however, is not sufficient to address the great inner needs of people in an age marked by hopelessness and despair. It offers no more motivation to follow Jesus than to pursue any other form of altruistic humanism.

Discipleship is not a means to grace, it is a response to grace. While critical of the sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism and Eastern Orthodoxy—a sacramentalism of eucharist, baptism, confirmation, etc.—contemporary Anabaptism verges on a sacramentalism of discipleship, a sacramentalism of community, where what God intended to be a response to His gift of grace has become the means by which it is to be attained. But the New Testament is clear. We are not called to obey in order to be blessed. We are called to obey because we have been blessed, immeasurably, in Christ. Now you are light in the Lord; walk (therefore) as children of light. (Ephesians 5:8)

6. The influence of theological liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, post-modernism, and extreme feminism in Anabaptist/Mennonite educational institutions portends a generation of church leaders without an adequate foundation in orthodox Christian doctrine. Under the influence of contemporary culture, these institutions have abandoned the historical Anabaptist approach to scripture, and virtually nothing merits the designation 'heresy.' This lack of foundation is coupled with a curriculum, particularly in the seminaries, which is long on relational skills and short on Biblical exegesis and preaching. The result is pastors and church leaders with an inadequate sense of God's call, an uncertainty about the pastoral role, a hazy vision for ministry, an indistinct body of foundational convictions, and a sense of frustration as they stand at the interface of religious tradition and post-modern society.

7. Erosion of confidence in the Bible as the authoritative Word of God has issued in cynicism toward all forms of authority, including leadership, church tradition, and historical interpretations of Biblical truth. Consequently, there are few absolutes anymore, all behavior is relative, and practices once denoted as sin (e.g. divorce and homosexual activity) become ever more commonplace and acceptable. Voices that call for adherence to traditional mores are derided as narrow-minded and unloving.

8. Overemphasis on existential ('here and now') discipleship has resulted in a loss of the sense of transcendence in Anabaptist/Mennonite worship. Public meetings of the church focus more on the participants than on the Lord. Anabaptists need to recover an awareness of the presence of God among His people, especially when they meet for corporate worship.

9. An inadequate understanding of the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit has resulted in a religious experience that lacks both power and passion. Where among us is God displaying miracle-working power, touching lives, bodies, and relationships, bringing wholeness, health, and peace? And how many of us eagerly anticipate such manifestations?

10. Excessive focus on human responsibility and insufficient emphasis on the grace of God have led to self-righteousness and spiritual pride. Our greatest need is for God to touch us with a heaven-sent, Holy Spirit empowered revival, resulting in humility, brokenness, and abandonment of all confidence in the flesh as we throw ourselves on the mercy and grace of God for spiritual renewal.

Contemporary evangelicalism may be failing this generation through its shallowness and its tendency to adopt the techniques, the mindset, the values of the society it is supposedly attempting to influence for the kingdom of God. Contemporary Anabaptism is failing this generation because it calls people to a discipleship without a proper beginning, and thus it loses its distinctiveness amid the cacophony of voices telling us what we ought to do without offering us a

compelling reason why and without pointing us to the source of power that makes it all possible.

Evangelical Anabaptism— A Potent Force for the Kingdom

The contemporary evangelical community is not without flaws and limitations. Neither is the contemporary Anabaptist community. Living and working together in harmony and cooperation, however, they create a potent force for good and right and they raise a clear and distinct voice offering the only real hope to a love-starved, self-indulgent, valueless, lost society--the good news of God's grace and love, expressed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

When I hear from those who fear that an alliance between Anabaptist Christians and evangelicals will weaken, dilute or distort our identification as Anabaptists and our appreciation for historical Anabaptism, my first response is, "Whose version of historical Anabaptism are you advancing? Which particular Anabaptist distinctive do you feel is threatened by identification with the evangelical community?" There is tremendous variety among groups and individuals who claim to follow in the train of the early Anabaptists and considerable difference as to which particular distinctive of historic Anabaptism ought to be emphasized.

Sixteenth century Anabaptists stood out from the rest of Christianity precisely because they insisted that life in the kingdom of God was different from life in the world in some fundamental ways. Different values. Different goals. Different ways of setting priorities and making decisions. There are many across the varied mosaic which makes up contemporary Christianity who share that kind of commitment.

Building Bridges, Not Walls

Instead of dividing the body of Christ further by undue emphasis upon those beliefs and practices which distinguish Anabaptists from the broader evangelical community, we should be looking for those areas of common conviction that point up our unity as brothers and sisters in the household of God. When we do, we'll find that, on the essential matters, things like the authority of scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the nature of human sin and God's provision of salvation by grace through faith, there is far more to unite most of us with the evangelical community than to separate us from them. When we make the kingdom our goal we'll find there are multitudes of believers from other traditions who want to join us in that pursuit.

The time has come for Christians who appreciate the Anabaptist commitment to practical discipleship and, at the same time, share a commitment to evangelical distinctives with a significant portion of the Christian community, to take the initiative to enlarge our circle of fellowship and identification. We have much to share with these who are, like us, citizens of the kingdom--much out of our heritage which can enrich their experience of faith.

Likewise they have much to teach us, much in their heritage from which we can benefit. For example, Christians from the Wesleyan tradition can teach us a good deal about personal holiness. Pentecostal/charismatic believers can enlighten us and increase our awareness of the present ministry of the Holy Spirit. Christians from the Reformed tradition have something to say to us about the sovereignty of God and the importance of orthodoxy as a foundation for orthopraxy (i.e. right belief as a basis for right behavior). And we can benefit greatly from association with Christians, like those of Greek Orthodox heritage, whose tradition is far older than our own.

If, as some contemporary Anabaptist scholars have noted, the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement was largely "anti-theological," that is, not marked by a need to codify doctrinal formulations in a systematic fashion, then might not the dynamic of Anabaptism, the insistence upon changed behavior that is consistent with inner faith, have something positive to say to Christians, whatever their tradition? After all, Anabaptists desired only a "walk" that measured up to one's "talk" about personal belief. Surely that emphasis is needed in all segments of the Christian church if we are to make an impact in our world for the kingdom of God.

Different Era, Different Attitudes

The late twentieth century is not the sixteenth century. The world has changed. The sociopolitical climate is different. The shape and character of the Christian community is vastly different. I wonder if our Anabaptist forebears, concerned as they were for the advancement of the kingdom, would approve of the extremes to which some contemporary Anabaptists go to separate themselves and their tradition from the rest of the Christian community, especially evangelicals. Might they have something to say to us about the potential for arrogance and pride that such theological isolationism engenders?

The question for contemporary Anabaptist Christians is not "Can we reproduce sixteenth century Anabaptism, and its particular expression of obedience and discipleship, in the twenty-first century?" Rather, it is "Can we recapture the spirit of Anabaptism, the all-consuming desire to know God and to live as though that knowledge has made a profound difference in our lives?" Or, to put it another way, "How can the history of sixteenth century Anabaptism and the dynamic which brought it about—emerging as it did from the Protestant

Reformation—continue to have an impact upon the entire Christian community in the twenty-first century?"

As Mennonites we can claim certain ties, special ties, perhaps unique ties, to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. But we cannot, and we must not, suggest that we are the sole heirs of the spirit, the dynamic, which gave rise to that historical movement. That original spirit, to the extent that it continues to exist, must belong to the body of Christ, to the entire Christian community, to the degree they wish to embrace it.

First and foremost, we are Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ, sinners redeemed through the work of Christ on the cross, recipients of God's grace through faith in Jesus. That identity supersedes all other labels, including "Anabaptist" and "evangelical." Our primary concerns are to exalt the Lord, proclaim the gospel, and advance the influence of the kingdom of God in the world. We must be willing to look at our tradition, noble as it is, without feeling threatened or becoming defensive, and ask the hard question: To what degree does this tradition assist us in the pursuit of our primary goals?

Anabaptism was an historical movement. It emerged out of a set of circumstances, unique to that era, which cannot and will not be duplicated. We have attempted to preserve the character of that movement by establishing institutions. But we cannot institutionalize a movement without sacrificing something of the vitality and spontaneity and conviction which marked the movement in its first generation.

The Anabaptist Vision has served the Christian community well as an important part of Anabaptist historiography. It has helped us gain a better understanding of a particularly dynamic period in church history. It has deepened our appreciation for Christians who exhibited the courage of their convictions even when it cost them their lives.

I'm convinced, however, and I think H. S. Bender would agree, that the value of his paper will be significantly reduced if it focuses our attention on that historical movement exclusively. Faithfulness to the Anabaptist vision requires that we recognize what the first Anabaptists were actually attempting to accomplish--not the creation of a new phenomenon in the sixteenth century but the recovery of the spirit of the Christianity of the first century. Church history began with the coming of the Holy Spirit upon believers in Jerusalem, not with the baptism of Grebel, Manz, and Blaurock in Zurich.

The kingdom of God was the goal for Anabaptist Christians in the sixteenth century. It should be ours. The glory of God was their driving force. The body of Christ was their context for service and growth. Changed lives resulting in a changed society were the fruit they yearned for their spirit-empowered labors to produce. This is the heart of the Anabaptist vision, and it is

the vision which empowers and energizes faithful Christians everywhere, in every era.

Since this is the vision which empowers and energizes much of the evangelical community, I conclude that evangelicalism and Anabaptism are not mutually exclusive. They are, in fact, exceptionally compatible. More than that, when each is properly understood, they enrich and enlighten each other. For this reason I see not the slightest inconsistency in declaring my commitment to both Anabaptism and evangelicalism and my intent to pursue the distinctives of Anabaptism while maintaining close fellowship and affiliation with mainstream evangelicalism.

As an evangelical Mennonite, I suggest the following five key marks of Evangelical Anabaptism:

1. Evangelical Anabaptism is built on the foundation of historical Christian orthodoxy.
2. Evangelical Anabaptism recognizes the importance of personal holiness, inner spirituality, and a meaningful devotional life marked by prayer and personal fellowship with God.
3. Evangelical Anabaptism emphasizes an attitude of servanthood and the ethic of love and nonresistance as vital elements of faithful discipleship.
4. Evangelical Anabaptism seeks a renewal and a contemporary experience of the dynamic character of first century Christianity, including a commitment to evangelism, worship, and mutual accountability within a caring church community.
5. Evangelical Anabaptism includes a focus on issues facing contemporary Christians in a secular culture and seeks to address those issues from the perspective of Biblical truth.

As I write this in mid-2000, the two largest Anabaptist denominations in America, the Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite Church, are in the process of merging into one new entity, the *Mennonite Church USA*. That merger process has revealed that, among members of these two largest Mennonite bodies, two distinctly different perspectives prevail. On the one hand, many contemporary Mennonites, including most of the denominational leaders, institutional personnel and agency staff, have rejected the idea that Anabaptism is evangelical at its heart and have determined that Mennonitism should pursue a course that emphasizes its differences with contemporary evangelicalism. Some Mennonites, however, desire a return to our tradition's historical and spiritual roots.

Do I nurture the hope that my perspective will prevail and that the new *MC-USA* will take concrete steps to identify with the evangelical community? Not really. But I am encouraged to see signs of a resurgent Anabaptism of the sort I have described in this paper. I don't know yet what form it will take, but I pray that God will touch this communion with a fresh sense of His majesty and His power and His presence. And I pray that evangelical Anabaptism may be blessed with renewed fervor and faithfulness that will bring great glory to Jesus the King until He comes again.

Soli Deo Gloria !