

Following Jesus into the Bible - How Anabaptists Understand Scripture Part 1

Have you ever wondered what is behind the unique set of convictions that define conservative Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, Brethren, and related groups)? We Mennonites often call them “distinctives” - deeply rooted practices among the “plain people” that are uncommon within much of the rest of Christianity, like:

- Non-resistance (conscientious objection to violence and participation in war)
- Not swearing oaths
- Not suing another person
- Strong teaching against divorce and remarriage
- A focus on servanthood and surrenderedness
- Simplicity and non-accumulation of wealth
- Foot-washing
- Church discipline
- Abstaining from political involvement
- Mutual aid and communal sharing
- Non-conformity and modesty in dress
- Women’s head covering
- Greeting one another with the holy kiss
- Distinct gender roles within family and church, etc.

Are we plain folks privy to some kind of special revelation? Or are we really just quaint cultural oddities - an anachronistic tribe of Germanic ascetics, suffering from the long-term effects of too much scrapple and over-ripe sauerkraut? The truth, of course, is that we are neither. We non-conformed Anabaptists are just regular folk, no more astute or intrinsically spiritual than our neighbors.

So, what drives the uniqueness of the conservative Anabaptist faith?

I have been working on that question for 35 years now - ever since my wife and I, as young seekers, left the evangelical faith tradition to become Mennonites. Disillusioned with the vacuity of the dominant culture in America, and how it echoed through the churches of our youth, we were drawn to the way the conservative Anabaptist community lived out a refreshingly clear and united contrast to the values of the world. Now, after decades of immersion in Anabaptist beliefs, culture, and history, I believe I have come to understand what is behind Anabaptism. It is a hermeneutic - a simple, yet profound approach to understanding and applying Scripture. Dean Taylor, in a discussion on *The Essence of Anabaptism*, concurred. "Anabaptism isn't a denomination," he said, "it is a biblical worldview; a hermeneutic...an entire way to interpret the Scriptures."

The movement began almost 500 years ago when several zealous young followers of Jesus started asking some simple yet life-changing questions: "What if Jesus is who He says He is?", "What if He means what He says?", and "What if He's talking to us?" Understanding their response to these questions holds the key to understanding the Anabaptist faith.

#1 - What if Jesus is who He says He is? (Christocentrism)

Anabaptists, like all believers, claim the centrality of Jesus Christ and affirm the redeeming power of His death and resurrection. As "Christians" (Christ-ones) we all bear His name! However, for Anabaptists, the relationship with Jesus is more than just a saving one, or even a devotional one - it is also a guiding one. Since we believe Jesus is who He says He is, we Anabaptists acknowledge Him as not only Lord of our lives, but also Lord of the Bible. Thus, we read Scripture Christocentrically - with Christ at the center.

Why Christocentrism?

First, because we recognize Jesus as God in human form. Jesus tells us that if we have seen Him we have seen the Father, because He and the Father "are one" (John 14:9). The author of Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). The Apostle John calls Christ "the Word" (*Logos*), the personification of God (John 1). In other words, Jesus is God as God intends to be known. Because Jesus is the epitome of God's revelation of Himself to humanity, we see Jesus at the center of Scripture. As John D. Martin says, "Jesus is the Word (*Logos*) of God to whom the Word of God (Scripture)

bears witness.”

Second, because Jesus asserted the centrality of His own teachings. Repeatedly, Christ shared His expectation that His followers obey His instructions (John 8:31, 12:26, 14:15 & 23). In the Great Commission, Jesus prioritized His own teachings, telling His followers to “go into all the world and make disciples...teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). We privilege the instructions of Christ because He privileged them.

Third, because it is the hermeneutic Christ and His apostles used. All throughout his ministry, Jesus revealed Himself at the center of the biblical narrative. For example, in a Nazareth synagogue at one of His first public appearances, He declared Himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy (Luke 4: 16-21). Another time, after His resurrection, He spoke to two distraught followers on the road to Emmaus, “and beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27). Following the lead of their Master, the apostles also used the same approach as they preached Christ. Look at the great sermons recorded in the book of Acts: Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2), Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7), Phillip evangelizing the Ethiopian (Acts 8), Paul at the synagogue of Antioch (Acts 13). In every case, these brothers proclaimed Christ as the object of the biblical text. How can we not approach Scripture the same way?

Reading Scripture Christocentrically means reading all of it in light of Christ. In the Old Testament, we see Him present in creation, and we hear Him spoken of by the prophets. He is typified in the stories of faith, and foreshadowed in the narrative of God’s hand in history. We also read the Old Testament in perspective, knowing that Christ has fulfilled much of it, and that He represents a New Covenant “enacted on better promises” (Heb. 8:6). In a similar sense, we understand the epistles of the New Testament are established on Christ and His teachings (1 Cor. 11:3), and they must be read in light of that foundation. The apostles built on what Jesus said and did, and they would never wish to be understood as contradicting their Master.

Since we comprehend Scripture most clearly through the lens of Jesus, we must first strive to know Him deeply. I encourage new believers to immerse themselves fully in the gospel accounts of Christ before venturing into the rest of Scripture – Jesus frames our worldview! As His followers, we need to learn to care about what He cared about, emphasize what He emphasized, and become grounded on His perspective. This is why we Anabaptists focus on themes like the Kingdom, love for enemies, care for the poor and oppressed, cross-bearing,

servanthood, and surrenderedness. It is also why theologizing about doctrines that are not vital to the message of Christ should be of limited interest to most of us.

Throughout the history of Christianity, Scripture has been used to justify all manner of pet doctrines and ideas. For Anabaptists, any conclusion gleaned from the Old or New Testaments that does not pass “the Jesus test” must be reconsidered. For example, when we hear Christians using Scripture to justify ideas like the prosperity gospel, participation in warfare, or civic religion, we weigh these conclusions against the witness of Jesus, and find these interpretations (not Scripture itself) wanting. D.L. Moody said, “The best way to show that a stick is crooked is not to argue about it or to spend time denouncing it, but to lay a straight stick alongside it.” We Anabaptists have learned that laying any doctrine alongside the teachings and example of Jesus is key to attaining “the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:13).

Centering our biblical understanding on Christ is one important way we Anabaptists respond to the question, “What if Jesus is who He says He is?” This Christocentric approach has anchored our view of Scripture since our movement’s inception. Even a cursory reading of the early Anabaptists’ writings and “confessions of faith” (*Schleitheim* in 1527 and *Dordrecht* in 1632) reveal the primacy of Christ’s teaching for our forebears.* Anabaptist leader (and namesake of Mennonites) Menno Simons, summed up the Anabaptist position, declaring, “All the Scriptures point us to the Spirit, Gospel, example, ordinance, and usage of Christ.”

However, Christocentrism alone does not entirely explain the uniqueness of our conservative Anabaptist expression of faith. In fact, we share Christocentrism with our more progressive Anabaptist cousins – yet we live out our faith very differently. So what makes the difference? We’ll discuss that in Part 2 of this essay.

*Note: For a deeper look at historic Anabaptist Christocentrism, see J.C. Wenger’s essay *Our Christ-Centered Faith* (1973) and Stuart Murray’s *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (2000)]

[All Scripture quoted from the *English Standard Version*]