



Military, Policing and Christianity

Opening

What if our theology could get up from our armchairs and move into our world? That would be something worth paying attention to. This is The Armchair Anabaptist podcast.

<intro song> Lay your guns down, down on the floor. There ain't no good in those guns anymore. Take my hand and let me kiss your cheek. Let our friendship be sweet. <end>

“Because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself.”

“And I don't think that we can say we love someone and then shoot them. It doesn't make sense.”

“I always tell folks that, ‘Look at - if you're in a debate and winning the debate becomes more important than reflecting love towards the person you're debating, then do the Kingdom of God a great service and shut up.’”

“How do we encourage people to see nonviolence as something more than a position about war?”

“Because we're not just sitting around doing podcasts and theology, we're actually trying to live our lives as Christians.”

<song> This is a reckoning between you and me. The righting of all wrongs as we eat and as we drink. <end>

Introduction

Kevin Wiebe: You're listening to The Armchair Anabaptist. This is episode #14, Military, Policing and Christianity. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

Jesse Penner: And I'm Jesse Penner, and we are your hosts today. Today we're getting into a question that's going to hit pretty close to home for a lot of us, certainly. I think about myself. I'm a pastor in the EMC and when I think about my congregation, I recognize that while we might have a theological position on some of these things and look to Jesus' teaching on peace as the example for us, the practical truth is that we have police officers sitting in our pews as well as people who are involved in the military or may have family members who are involved in the military, so how do we think about this?

KW: That is a big question, a complex one with a lot of nuance. We're going to be talking to several guests today to help us wrestle through it. We're going to be hearing from Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld, from Pastor Cameron McKenzie, and from Pastor Cyndy Warkentin.

JP: We're going to start off with Pastor Cameron Mackenzie. He is the lead pastor of the Fort Garry EMC, we started off asking Pastor Cameron: in Mennonite circles, the topic of military work is typically talked about in relation to the Anabaptist position, about not going to war. So how does Jesus' teaching impact our views about military involvement?

How Does Jesus' Teaching Impact Our Views on Military Involvement?

Cameron McKenzie: It's harder to draw a straight line from Jesus' views to the question of military involvement. As I think sort of historically about Anabaptism the real problematic question I find in the military and to a lesser extent in policing, but it's there in policing as well, is the requirement to swear an oath. To enter into a covenantal agreement with your nation or with your community to do this. And I think that really deep in what it means to be a follower of Jesus and maybe the reason why I'm an anabaptist more than any other single reason is I'm convinced that to be a follower of Jesus there is there's no room for a covenanted relationship that is not actually embedded in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

So marriage is a covenant relationship. But my marriage is in embedded in our mutual participation in a covenant with Jesus as Lord, when you enter into the military, it is not. It's a covenant that you make with your nation and it's a covenant of almost absolute - I say almost absolute – obedience. I think one of the things that we have to recognize is that our military systems are quite a bit more democratic now than they were even 50 or 60 years ago. We're no longer in the world of the First World War, where soldiers got tied to artillery gun wheels and flogged because they disobeyed an order. The idea was to drill in absolute, unquestioning obedience on all things, which is even more challenging because a Christian is only ever unquestioning in their obedience to Jesus.

So it's more complicated to me, but I think when it comes to the military, our military does lots of good things. When we have flood problems in Manitoba, it's the military that shows up and starts throwing sandbags. When Ontario is being overwhelmed with COVID cases, it was the military that was setting up field hospitals to deal with those COVID cases, it's the military that goes into parts of the world that are stressed by famine or refugees, whatever and a lot of what they do is actually really, really good, valuable work. Even the notion of what the military does now is changed from - the Roman legions didn't do that kind of work. They didn't do community building. They didn't do social service delivery. They were brute force to impose the will of the empire. And our militaries don't do that anymore.

But I would still say at this point in time that the question that a Christian needs to be asking themselves as they contemplate military service is: what do you do with that vow? And remember, I haven't seen our military vow more recently, but it most frequently like the oath that we take in court, and the name of God is invoked in the taking of this of this vow. I often

want to say to people who want to be in the military, I'd like to see you make the vow and just say I'm happy to make this vow, provided I can say, unless it contradicts the call of Jesus on my life. Which the military would say no, you can't do that.

Policing is a little bit more challenging because police forces exist. Perhaps they're coercive force, although even there we see the abuse of police force all the time. It's all around us, but I think the fact that we see it as the abuse of police force is already an indication that we expect something different of our police than we expect of the military.

Again, it's funny. My dad was the police force chaplain. In Winnipeg, he attended all their graduations, he gave Bibles to all the cadets, he would pray with the cadets. He lived for many years in Germany with the Salvation Army, running mobile canteens that used to work with the Canadian and the NATO forces. So they ran Bible studies, they had a Christian bookshop. He would go out into the field with them and serve them coffee and be a place where they could go and talk or whatever. I have all these strange connections to the military. And you know, I still stand in my place going I don't actually think that's where the Christian belongs.

If I had a young man in my church, or a young woman in my church who is looking at a career in the military, I would want to sit down and have a long and diligent conversation with them about the question of loyalty and what it means to swear an oath and how that oath to your country fundamentally compromises the oath that you make to Jesus in baptism, when you say I belong to you, you are Lord of my life. It's a hard question to answer. I know far too many people who have served with distinction and served well, in the military. People I really respect, people whose Christian faith has depth and integrity and vibrancy.

And again, I've been the recipient, John Fedoruk. I mentioned that fellow who was in the Royal Canadian Engineers. He ran this navigators group that I was a part of when I was in high school. He was in our church. That was transformational for my own growth as a follower of Jesus. It in many ways kickstarted a path - I had actually applied to the Royal Roads Military Academy. It still wasn't Royal Roads University then, it was still one of the two military colleges. And I ended up at Winnipeg Bible College instead, and John Fedoruk was kind of responsible for both of those things. I had such high respect for him that the military made sense. But this navigators program that he ran also did its work in me.

And so you know, I have these, these people in my life that I look to, and I go these were godly men. These were godly women. They were not in any way shape or form, trying to be unfaithful to Jesus, we don't quite agree on what that looks like. And if one of them came and wanted to sit in my church and worship with us, they would be welcome to do so. But they might be also needing to be open to vigorous conversation not only with me, but other people in the congregation.

JP: Pastor Cameron made an emphasis that I hadn't heard talked about very often, which is in his mind, the primary issue with military involvement is the covenantal relationship that we're

entering into with another group over and above our relationship with God. I asked him to expand on this.

CM: You know, here's the thing, Jesse. We all sin. The Christian soldier that takes up arms and engages in conflict against a duly identified apply-the-best-rules-of-just-war, et cetera, et cetera, duly identified enemy, etcetera Christian soldiers and actually takes life in that context has not committed a greater sin than I have. We are sinners. That's who we are. So these conversations are not about who's more righteous and who's less righteous, who's holy, or who's less holier, who's a better Christian, who's a worse Christian, what we're trying to do is we're trying to navigate through the scriptures, in the context of the church, what it means to follow Jesus faithfully and to me, to follow Jesus faithfully means Jesus gets the final command on my life, always Jesus gets the final command on my life.

I can throw out the cliches. It's talking about Jon Bonk before and he used to say, Jesus says love your enemies and it's really hard to love your enemy when you've got an M16 in your hand. You know, I get that, but I don't think that's actually the point. I think the point is Jesus commands my loyalty. Over all things Jesus commands my loyalty and I will not put myself willingly, deliberately in a position where somebody else is commanding my loyalty.

So I think that actually within Anabaptist history, though they talk about the sword and they talk about the military and all those sorts of things, the real issue in early anabaptism that really catalyzes this for me is the whole question of the oath. My yes is my yes, my no is my no, my loyalty belongs to Jesus. And having made that decision, I will do everything I can.

If we found ourselves in a position, I mean, I'm old now, I'm lucky, I'm 60, I'm not going to be faced with the questions that you might be faced with, but I could see myself picking up a stretcher and going somewhere and doing Red Cross work. There's lots of ways that a Christian can faithfully live out their calling to Jesus without being a combatant soldier in the military. And we certainly don't want to develop a way of thinking about the military or policing that somehow they're another one of those enemies out there. That "you're a soldier, well good luck to you, but I got nothing to do with you." No, I mean, we're called to welcome people to find their vocation before God. I don't care if you come to me as a police officer or as a soldier. I won't go where you are. I will not encourage my people. I don't think that's what we're called to do. We have a different our colour in this picture is different than that, but if you come and you want to find your vocation before God in this community, we will welcome you with hospitality. And when we get to that hard conversation, this will be a place of love and openness, so that we can walk that journey together.

JP: As we talked about this issue with creating a covenantal relationship with the state, I asked Pastor Cameron if this applied to more than just the military and could apply to other relationships as well, such as political involvement.

CM: Well, you know, there's a time when Mennonites would not, Anabaptists would not have been a part of the government for that very reason. Like I said all of these things become very,

very complicated. What happens when you are in a party political system that is a whipped party political system? Where you actually have to vote as your leader tells you to vote. I think, let's take the abortion debate as an example, I think there's lots of people within the Liberal caucus who are trying to follow Jesus. But they've got a political structure that says this is our stand on abortion and you will vote this way or you're out of politics. It's a hard place to be put and every now and then, politicians come along who say well, I'm going to have to stand as an independent because I'm going to vote my conscience on this.

KW: Pastor Cyndy Warkentin is the EMC pastor of Saturday night church. We posed this question to her about how does Jesus' teachings about nonviolence and loving our enemies impact our views about military involvement. This is what she had to say.

Cyndy Warkentin: Well, I have deep roots in the EMC and in pacifism and so this topic makes me feel uneasy. Yet I know that our Canadian military does a whole lot more than just tours of duty that involve armed conflict. I think at the time right now, while we're recording this, the Canadian military is helping with the cleanup of Hurricane Fiona on the East Coast.

In 1997, during the flood of the century here in southeastern Manitoba, we were really happy to have the military help with the flooding and the sandbagging and the clean up and all of that. I have friends from seminary who have become military chaplains, and I saw their hearts of compassion and their sincere desire to minister to members of the military, both in their spiritual and in their mental health. That was a grave concern to them.

I know people who have joined the military to become dentists or medics or work in search and rescue. So again, there's lots more nuance in that than simply, oh, I'm going to join the army and I'm going to go and kill people or I'm going to get involved in a war. And yet I think that traditionally that's how I might have understood it. I'm glad that I have a more nuanced view now. And yet in spite of all of that, I still can't come to terms with joining the military to fight and kill other human beings. I just don't see how I can live into Jesus' teaching on love your enemies and the peace and unity he sought to bring, and at the same time we try to blow up those with whom we are in conflict.

KW: Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld is Professor Emeritus of Religious and Theological Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. He is the author of the book *Killing Enmity*, and he is the chair of the Faith and Life Commission of the Mennonite World Conference. We posed the same question to him.

Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld: I have no doubt that many in the military are exercising enormous love for those they see themselves as giving their lives for. And to simply demonize everybody who's been in the military doesn't appreciate that. Sadly, most soldiers are sent into battle not because somebody decides to find a way of loving more effectively. It has to do with the power relations between states and a calculus of what it takes, et cetera. We see that on full display right now and my heart bleeds for those Russian soldiers who didn't know what they were being sent to. Who are brutalized and maybe using it in a different way demoralized by this,

who are doing things they will carry with them for the rest of their life. The same thing on the Ukrainian side. There are young men who thought they were musicians and artists who find themselves on the front lines, maybe they have an easier time making the connection between love and their willingness to offer their lives. So I just want to acknowledge that we should be very careful about painting with a very broad brush. People are not in the military to kill as a general rule, they're trained to, but that's not necessarily their motivation.

In fact, in some cases in military recruitment processes, if you get wind that's what somebody's signing up for you don't really want that person to be part of your troop. So that's just the kind of general statement about that.

There are many who have perhaps never understood that their faith in Jesus, of which there are many in the military, somehow links up to this question. But let me just add this: Mennonites, Quakers, Church of the Brethren, and other church groups, including many, many individuals - there's a large Catholic peace movement, for instance – have made the link between following Jesus and not taking up arms and not killing the enemy, but finding ways rather of loving them. So that linkage, I think is a very important one.

I can't imagine right now, however, what stress... There are some Mennonite churches in Ukraine, including a Mennonite Brethren one in Berdyans'k, very close to Mariupol, which is being absolutely devastated right now. What pressure are those young men facing as Ukrainian young men trying to figure out what's the connection between military service and following Jesus? Because many times, what happens if you say no in a setting like that to carrying weapons your alternative is to go to prison and perhaps even to be executed, so there's nothing abstract about the question you raised right now for many, many people in our world. It feels abstract in a sense in Canada, we haven't had conscription for years, so few of us have actually faced that question head on, God, keep us from having to, but you understand what I'm saying.

JP: I really appreciated the nuance that our panelists approached this question with. I think everyone recognized in one way or another that this was not a simple answer or an easy answer. I think if I had to pick, maybe what surprised me most out of this first package of answers, although it doesn't seem shocking as I process it, I don't know if I'd ever heard anybody characterize the issue in quite the same way that Pastor Cameron did when he sort of said, actually more than the issue of violence, our problem here is with the fact that we are covenantally entering into a relationship with something that has the that has a real possibility or risk of superseding our relationship with God.

KW: I think that's kind of taking a step back a little bit, right? Because before someone goes to commit violence at the ordering of the state or from their superior officer or whatever, the reason they're doing that is because they're told to. And the reason they're following through on those orders is because of that relationship they have to the state. And so what this kind of does is taking a step back and says well, let's take a look at that relationship, that covenantal relationship you enter into for a second that's causing you to do this in the first place. Are you

really prepared to take someone's life because of this relationship? Are you going to submit to that even if Jesus tells us to love our enemies?

JP: And of course, what this does is it opens up a whole can of worms around other forms of involvement in our societal life, in our country, that could also sort of trip over those lines. Things like political involvement, things like jury duty. These are questions that Anabaptists have wrestled with over the years, but may be something for an upcoming podcast episode. It does create some of these interesting questions though, that we do need to wrestle through.

KW: I think it's important as well to look at not just the actions themselves, but the relationships behind them. And I know in some of my writing I've looked at poverty, and we often talk about poverty as a lack of money but there's actually this huge series of relationships behind poverty, and that's really what Cameron's talking about here, is the relationship behind violence. At least the violence of war that we're talking about and the relationship behind military involvement and what are the implications of that type of relationship? And I think that's wise actually to very seriously consider that and not enter into that sort of relationship lightly.

JP: As I talked with Pastor Cameron, we both acknowledged as pastors in the EMC that probably what is true across our conference in general is that even though many in our congregations would have a pretty clear line in regard to military involvement, where they would feel that involvement in the military was not appropriate for a Christian, most people in most of our churches would be quite comfortable with the idea of congregation members serving as a police officer and may in fact feel good about this. I asked Pastor Cameron if that was a false distinction, or where the line was between these two things and how we think about them.

Is There a Distinction Between Military and Policing? If so, where is it?

CM: That's a really good question. I don't think there's a line, that's my short answer. I don't think there's a line between those things because I think the same thing runs in policing that runs in the military. You are called upon to take an oath of office that commits you to, puts you in a covenanted relationship with the community and with government, etcetera. You are going to be loyal to the Crown, whatever language we use in those oaths and I haven't seen a police force oath for a while. So I don't think they're actually different, but I understand why we perceive them as different because policing is a real drive to make policing about community service. Though the culture within policing right now is challenging, and for some Christians that would be their whole argument for being there. "If we take all of the Christians out of the police force just imagine what the culture of the police force would become if we took all Christians out of the police force."

I find it interesting when John the Baptist is doing his baptism thing and the soldiers come along. I don't think anybody in John the Baptist's society wanted to join the Roman army. But John has no problem saying to the Roman army you guys be satisfied with your wages, don't

steal, don't extort from people, be satisfied with your wages, you behave yourselves. I don't care if you're the Roman army. I don't care if you're tasked with public order, you don't get to take advantage of people because your office. And the solution wasn't "well, how we'll make the Roman army better is we'll put a lot of good Jewish men into the Roman military and that will make the Roman military a better place." The argument of making something better by bringing a bunch of Christians into it... I'd like to see really, really good examples of where that's actually worked.

I think it was Charles Spurgeon who was over 6 feet tall, big guy, talking to - the story goes and it might be an apocryphal story, you never know when you read these things - a woman in his church who wanted to marry a man who was not of the faith. Was not a Christian. And she said, but I can raise him up. No problem. So Spurgeon put her on a table in his office and then asked her to pull him up onto the table. And of course she couldn't. But one little tug and she came off the table. That's the way that works there. There is this thing that's going on.

But obviously, you're trained to use lethal force in the police, but there's a real, real push for our police force not to be doing that. If we have a model like the English police, where most of them are not carrying weapons, I could see a much better argument. Or, you know, being a part of that kind of a force because the lethal piece is gone. But I think I would make the same argument. There are Christians in the police force, there are Christians in the military. I think it's not the best place for us to be.

And so when I think about encouraging the church to pursue a life of discipleship, I would ask the question: so what do you see the police doing that you think is worth dedicating your life to? And once you've identified that let's talk about how you can actually do that, because you might care about crime. But why aren't you at Inner City Youth Alive working with inner city kids and creating opportunity and building loving relationships with them and teaching them things and mentoring them? Isn't that a better route around crime than policing?

If you are worried about vagrancy or vandalism, why aren't you coaching a soccer team or a baseball team? Or why isn't your church setting up an after-school homework club where kids can come and do homework and be mentored and tutored? I would say, what is it you think the police do that's so valuable and let's see if there's not actually a better way in answer to your discipleship to do that. I think there will always be.

David Kruse. I can mention a person by name here. David Kruse is well known in the EM Conference. He was a part of a group when he lived in our neighbourhood and was a youth pastor here. He was part of a group of dads that just walked the neighbourhood between 8:00 o'clock in the evening and 10:00 o'clock in the evening. In the summertime they rode their bikes, in the winter time they walked and they just walked to the streets and they didn't do anything. They didn't stop anything. But they talked to people. If kids were on the street, they chat with them they would find out what they were there. It was a very proactive way that didn't require the compromises of policing to still be contributing something for the well-being of the neighbourhood, so those are the kind of things that I want us to think about a bit more.

KW: We also talked to Pastor Cyndy about this issue. Is there a categorical difference between military involvement and police involvement? And do you agree with that distinction? This is what she said.

CW: Yeah, I think because policing is often seen more as peacekeeping or as protection in and for society, and maintaining law and order and justice, rather than deadly force. I mean, that's only used in kind of extreme circumstances. I also think in general police officers are dealing more with people on a more personal level. They are face to face with them and they are trained for and they desire peaceful resolution to traumatic situations and so their goal is different.

JP: Right, it's de-escalation.

CW: Yes, and peaceful resolution of conflict rather than, "oh, I'm just going to shoot you." And I know that in extreme cases that does happen but as a rule, it doesn't. And I hope that Christ-followers who join the police force see themselves as peace officers first and foremost and that they actually feel it's a calling and a way that they can help struggling people and show the love of Jesus through their work. And I kind of like the idea actually of having Christian police officers and them setting an example of integrity and compassion for the people that they're working with. Because I think it's really easy as a police officer, and I've talked to police officers where this is the case, where they become really jaded because the darkest struggles of humanity is what they encounter day after day and so I think it's easy for them to become cynical. And I would hope that Christian police officers would continue to see the people that they're dealing with as valuable to God and always be deserving of being treated with dignity. I like the idea of there being Christian police officers because I think that it makes a difference.

KW: We talked to Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld about this issue, about how many Anabaptists may reject military involvement, but aren't quite sure what to make of police involvement. When we brought this issue to him this is what he had to say.

TYN: Maybe I should tell a little story. In this very building, some years ago when I was still working here, we had a series of meetings with police officers from Anabaptist congregations, Mennonite, Brethren in Christ, et cetera. And it was a very, very interesting, moving event. I found it very moving to hear how different their lives are from those that are depicted on television on cop shows. Most of them had never actually used a gun in their line of work. They were trained for it, but most of them had never, and when one of them had and it was a profoundly traumatic experience for which he received a lot of counselling and help, etcetera. So that was very interesting for some of us to hear who tend to abstract this question.

It was also very moving to hear how much they felt marginalized within pacifist congregations. They didn't feel that their work was really understood. They felt they were under a kind of stereotyping of what it is that you really do and represent, especially at the present moment – this was just prior to the defund the police movement and so on. Here's something relevant to

your question. Those who spoke to this question were very clear that they could not be a police officer in the US. Why?

Because in the US, they said the framework of training is military. So the police are trained to, in a sense, think like soldiers and to behave like soldiers and to be... In other words, the people they're interacting with are likely to be the enemy, you might say. And they felt they could not as Mennonites or as Brethren in Christ believers be a policeman there. So I say that because I think it matters hugely on this question where you are a policeman, what your responsibilities are et cetera. These folks spoke about how deeply their passion was to offer themselves for the protection of the community. And that includes the protection of people in the community.

One of them spoke movingly about what it was like to try to deal, help people who were going off the rails due to drug overdoses or mental health episodes. What does it mean to act in a caring and loving way for a person like that, rather than to see that person as somebody who needs to be subjugated? There may be force involved, et cetera, but that was very interesting to me. So where and how you are trained, what it is you're asked to do, has an enormous importance in answering your question fairly.

That said, lest we sort of say Canadian police, good US police bad, I ask anyone on a reservation out west how they feel about the RCMP and you likely are to get a somewhat different take on things because there the RCMP has been, you might say, the national military force leading to the control of restive indigenous populations. I don't want to demonize everybody in the RCMP. I read an article recently about somebody who lived in a largely native town and who was scandalized by what his fellow RCMP officers we're doing. I think Canada has huge issues. We don't just have to look to the south to see them.

I worked for a while as a prison chaplain. Why is the population in prisons, in the federal prison and in the provincial prison system so disproportionately persons of colour and indigenous people? Does that have something to do with whom the police are checking up on? So what do the police serve here? Why are there not more white-collar criminals sitting in jail with those folks? Why are the people who actually in a sense, are in charge of the dehumanizing systems not in the crosshairs of the police the same way? So this is a very complex question.

Some years ago the whole issue of the Conrad Grebel Review was published on policing. I had an article in there in which I basically asked this question. "OK, so you want to be a Mennonite policeman. All right, what's the accountability structure? At what point does Jesus become your commander-in-chief?" The article is sort of rather facetiously called, "Who Calls the Shots." And if becoming a policeman means that Jesus has no ability to say "no, not this," then I would say that's a pretty clear answer to the question.

If we believe in the community of discernment, if you're a Mennonite policeman, you're a member of the church. Does your church have any role to play in helping you to discern how you do your job? Those are all questions about what it means to be in the world, but not of the world. And I'm not closed to the possibility that people can be police officers and be faithful

followers of Jesus. I don't think it's going to be easy, and in many settings it may not be possible. But there may be many other settings in which you can combine your care for the community, for the vulnerable, in which your treatment of people who are addicted, who are mentally ill, who are who are poor, is informed by your passion as a follower of Jesus. I would argue strongly against a clear line saying no being a good Mennonite and being a policeman are incompatible. But I would be very nervous if the interface between those two is settled and it doesn't remain contentious.

KW: I asked Dr. Yoder Neufeld to specifically address churches that have members of the armed forces or members of the police force in their pews, and how they might wrestle with this issue in a way that is appropriate and sensitive to the spiritual journeys of all in their midst. This is what he had to say.

TYN: That's a really good question. Whenever the church has simply had a clear no and said you're not welcome it's paid a big price. It goes back to your question about arrogance. It goes back to your question about judgmentalism. I think at the same time, it's terribly difficult for a community to hold strong convictions and hospitality to others together, but I think that's our calling. I have a brother who is a pastor who's now retired, who was a pastor who had several people in his congregation who had been in the military. This is in Chicago. And who argued with him about the peace position. And I think he would represent one particular answer to your question: how? He would welcome their being conversation partners with him and he would insist on being a conversation partner with them and he would want to make sure that they are welcome, but that they need to agree to be open to growing in insight on this one. And that's a different, that's a different stance.

Some Mennonite groups have largely dropped the strong stance on military and non-resistance from their confession of faith. I think particularly of one. And the problem with that is that you then loosen that tension between the voice of Jesus and the world we're actually living in. So you're a pastor, so you know full well the distance between what we hold up as the call to faithfulness and the lives we actually live. But if we cut the tension between those, then there's no pull towards faithfulness.

So I think the church needs to find a way again and again, not only on this but on any number of issues. Sexuality is the one that's consuming so many congregations now, but there are at another time, it might well be the role of women in the church, or it might well be economic issues, whatever those are, that mix of strong conviction and hospitality that's breaking down in our society right now. If you don't agree with me we cease to communicate with each other. That's better - I prefer to communicate with those who agree with me and you communicate with those who agree with you and never the twain shall meet. That's not the church.

The church is a body in which enemies and sisters and brothers whom you don't get along with are there by virtue of the Spirit's work, so they're close enough that you have to exercise enemy love within the body of Christ. And for that, you need a strong and robust core to the

gospel that keeps calling us. And how to hold that together with explicit hospitality to invite people along and to grow is, I think, the calling.

I think of Jesus, when he was walking with his disciples, this was his chosen circle. Who do people say that I am? Well, then they give any number of answers. Well, who do you say that I am? And everybody else is done, except, of course, Peter. You're the Christ the Messiah. And then, of course, he gets it wrong when he objects that that has to do with the cross and resurrection. What's interesting to me is that those guys are all present again, even after they abandoned him at the cross, even after the resurrection. They're there at Pentecost preaching the word.

Now, how does that happen? How can the church be a place in which the Peters of this world can blow it so thoroughly, but they're invited into a space in which they can change? And be transformed? If you start off by saying you're welcome, you're not, that transformation has been closed for that person unless it happens before they ever get here. I don't know how that speaks to the question of how we deal in congregations. But I think it's the only way in which we can actually be "church" and that's tested most when we don't agree. And that's a difficult thing for Mennonites because Mennonites have usually found that the way to faithfulness is to separate from others. Have yet another division and make it make it small enough so that... and eventually if only I am here, then at least I'll agree with myself, but maybe I won't. If I'm confused, you understand what I'm saying. So I think at the root here is conviction and hospitality and that you don't pay for hospitality by being quiet about the call of the gospel. The gospel makes that space available but provides a challenge within it.

JP: I thought that was a powerful sort of statement from Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld as he explored how he might talk to churches about this issue. The church needs to be a place where we can disagree and actually, probably, in times like these the church ought to be a place where we can model disagreement, healthy disagreement to the rest of the world. It's not supposed to be a place where we're perfect, where we're all in perfect harmony on every issue, the church is meant to be a place of transformation. It's a place where all of us come with some baggage, with some things that we haven't gotten fully figured out, with some sin in our lives, and the church is meant to be a place where, as a community, we gather at the feet of Jesus and listen to him and his teachings and view his life and his death and his resurrection as a model and example for us to go and live our lives as little Christs; as Christians. It's something that we do together in community with people who are different than us. And it's something that we also have to do without ever letting go of that sort of gospel tension of the recognition that Jesus does call us to transformation. Just because we're perfect doesn't mean we stay there, we grow together.

KW: I love that kind of combination of this hospitality, this radical hospitality with people that are different from us and people we may disagree with while also this pull of the gospel, that we're not going to water it down, we're not going to change it just because it makes us uncomfortable. But while also opening our doors and welcoming people to the table, who may

see things in a different way than what we do, and I think that's a very powerful kind of note to add to this conversation.

Our feature song today is actually a song that I wrote called A Dear Old Drinking Game, and yes, it is a little bit provocative. I realize that war does not happen in a vacuum, but I was struck by this idea about war and that might-makes-right and all of that. Now I know that war, as we've seen in our world recently, it's not in a philosophical vacuum. It's not like two people decide we're gonna solve our problem, by I'm gonna send my young men to fight your young men, and that's going to decide who is right. You know, it usually starts with someone invading another country or one country invading another country and then at that point, how do you resolve it? How do you respond to it once that's already happened?

However, when the war is over and one country has won the war, they have defeated the other in battle, the winning country comes home joyful that they have won. And while they are joyful to have won the war, why is being better at killing make them like, morally, ethically, someone who should have won the war? That's the kind of question that I ask, why does sending our young men to fight and why does them sending their young men to fight, why does that determine who should win a war? It seems a little arbitrary to me, and so I suggest in this song, why not just play a drinking game?

Here it is.

A Dear Old Drinking Game - Kevin Aron

Why don't we play a drinking game, to settle our dispute.
We both have everything to gain, but what will either lose?
We will prove who is right, from who can drink the most.
Then the world will see the light, the victor gets a toast.
Let our ale and wine and beer show truth to both our nations,
It will make it crystal clear, a deciding revelation.

A nation's fate left to a game; this doesn't sound to smart,
To let two men just drink it out, the rest may play no part.
Yet what sense does it make, to send young men to fight-
A show of who can kill the best, in the name of light

To kill, destroy; to take a life, in a mighty game of harm
To show how we will bring in peace, though all we know is arms.
Indeed it sounds like we should try a dear old drinking game
It makes no sense but still it does, 'cause this is just insane

Why don't we play a drinking game?

Closing

The Armchair Anabaptist is a Theodidaktos podcast and Theodidaktos is a publication of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference.

You could check us out online at www.thearmchairanabaptist.ca and find us on iTunes, Spotify and wherever podcasts are found.

A special thanks to our guests who have joined us today. That was Pastor Cameron McKenzie, Pastor Cyndy Warkentin and Dr. Thomas Yoder Neufeld.

Our intro song is First Communion by Dane Joneshill and our feature song today was A Dear Old Drinking Game by Kevin Aron.

Our executive producer is Erica Fehr, our producer and audio engineer is Kevin Wiebe and our administrative assistant and wizard of all things web related is Ruth Block. I'm Kevin Wiebe.

And I'm Jesse Penner and we have been your hosts for The Armchair Anabaptist. We certainly hope that what you have heard today will do more than stay as merely food for thought but that it can help inspire each of us to get up out of the comfort of our armchairs and translate into living more like Jesus.

Join us next time as we continue our journey looking at the life of peace and as we dive into a discussion about where the line is. Where is the line in the sand about what a Christian can or cannot do in response to violence? And what to do with people who may draw their line in a different place than we do? That's next time on The Armchair Anabaptist.