

Theodidaktos *Taught by God*

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Come and See!



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Editorial

The Good Place

IT SEEMS THAT THE HEAVEN-craze continues on in the realm of media. NBC seeks to capitalize on the desire of the general population seeking an answer to the afterlife with *The Good Place*.

The premise of the sitcom, *The Good Place*, starring Kristin Bell and Ted Danson, is that when you die you will find yourself in the good place (a heaven-like existence) or the bad place (sounds of torment emanate when explained to the main character). To reach the exalted existence of the good place one must have achieved numerous charitable acts while alive on earth.

Bell plays a woman who finds that she has died and gone to the good place. Danson, some sort of director or manager of this suburb of the good place, explains that her charity has earned her entrance here. These good works are displayed on a TV screen that replays Bell's memories and, specifically, her work in places like Africa.

She asks at one point what kind of people made it to the good place. Danson replies that entertainers like Elvis did not make it (entertainers never qualify). What about Florence Nightingale? Bell is told that Nightingale did not have enough points, nor did Mother Theresa. But Bell more than surpassed the point requirements of selflessness and good works to be there.

There's only one problem, Bell discovers. The memories displayed on the screen are not her own. She was not a good person on earth. There has been a mistake (a mistake in heaven?). Soon the perfect place, *The Good Place*, becomes imperfect and no one knows why. The viewer knows it's because Bell doesn't belong in the good place, and the calamities that result are due to her presence there.

Finally, as the one hour premiere comes to a close, Bell's character receives a note under her door: "You don't belong here." Someone has found her out. Someone knows that Bell was not the good person she was mistaken to be.

To the evangelical believer, the image of heaven portrayed in *The Good Place* would be an abomination, an insult to the Christian who knows what the Bible says about heaven. The saccharine images, the mansions and the soul mates (each one is assigned a mate), the candy-esque setting, are nauseating. One redeeming element eases the Christian mind: the note. Bell's character does not belong in the good place.

That note is the one true piece in the story. When we pass from this life through death, or when Christ comes again, it may or may not be apparent to us when we enter into the glory of Christ—we don't belong here. As we see the face of Jesus for the first time nothing about the setting will matter, relatives and loved ones we hope to see will be a distant second priority, only the glory of beholding our Saviour. Maybe, just maybe, we will pause and realize "We don't belong here." Whether we do or not, it remains true—we do not deserve to exist in the realms of God's kingdom forever and ever.

But that's the beauty of grace. One would hope that

**When we pass from this life through death,
or when Christ comes again, it may or may
not be apparent to us when we enter into
the glory of Christ—we don't belong here.**

NBC might express that sweet reality of Christian faith, but it's not likely. No matter, since we know that only by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ—not by works, so that no one can boast, or count

points, or beat the percentages—we are saved. Yes, we are created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared for us to do. These are not for our glory, but for God's glory (Eph. 2:8-10).

Are you offended by mainstream television's portrayal of sacred Christian truths? I find it fascinating to watch these shows and dissect what passes for the world's understanding of life, death, heaven, and hell. We are given a window into the mind of the unbeliever (or pre-Christian, if you are so inclined) so that we may counter the fallacies of human wisdom. More than that, perhaps we can learn how to present the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to a hopeless and desperate neighbour who has real questions about eternity, the good place. **Θ**



Dr. Darryl G.
Klassen

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Called to Deacons’ Ministry Do EMC Churches Need Deacons? Part One



Dr. Darryl G. Klassen

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CHURCHES throughout the ages have almost universally called people to the positions of priest, pastor, elder, and deacon. In our relevance-obsessed culture, titles and positions are being scrutinized for their usefulness in the modern era of the

church. Of particular importance to this paper is the title of “deacon,” an office in decline in the past couple of decades.

Most worshipers in the local church would be hard pressed to define the role of the deacon, apart from citing familiar scriptures. One young minister, new to

the pastorate, was asked by his senior pastor what role deacons performed in his home church. The young minister was at a loss to answer. His sole experience had been a lightning-fast interview by two burly deacons between Sunday School and the morning service to affirm

his testimony since he was being baptized that morning. That was the extent of his personal connection to any persons called “deacons.”

For two millennia, we have elected or appointed men and women to be deacons in our churches. In recent years local churches have decided that the role of deacon no longer fits the needs of the congregation. Some feel that the task of caring for one another should be every member’s duty and not assigned to a specific office. Others continue to insist that their churches need the officers we call “deacons,” people who will model caring and ministerial support.

The question posed to the contemporary congregation that seeks to provide the full scope of ministry to members, adherents and seekers is this: Do today’s churches need deacons? Does the office carry a biblical relevance that transcends time or has the deacon role outlived its usefulness?

To answer this question sufficiently requires a fresh look at how the Bible defines the role of the deacon, both in the Old and New Testaments. Upon the foundation of the Scriptures, the Church of Christ was built and history testifies to the path these pilgrims of faith took. Let the reader then discern whether these biblical descriptions of the role of deacons’ ministry remain relevant for our purposes in the church today.

Parsing the Term ‘Deacon’

From the Apostolic age to the current era of the Church, deacons’ ministry has been regarded highly among the various ministries of the congregation. Many Church traditions commonly claim Acts 6:1–7 as the origin of the office of deacon when the apostles wisely guided the fledgling church to appoint seven men

to a position of authority and service. Despite this common misconception surrounding Acts 6, deacons’ ministry does indeed find its official beginnings in the first century of the Church.

The term typically used for the office of “deacon” comes from a transliteration of the cognate Greek noun, *diakonos*. In general, *diakonos* can be a servant, a minister, or one who waits on tables (see Matt. 20:26; 22:13; 23:11; Mark 9:35; 10:43; John 2:5, 9; 1 Cor. 3:5, etc.).

The noun does not appear in Acts 6 and deacons are never mentioned in this narrative. Addressing Acts 6 as the

benefit of others, was a form of *diakoneo* (Matt. 25:31–46). The rest of the New Testament affirms this “servant” feature of the term in at least three ways: as servants of God, Christ as a servant of God, and earthly rulers who unwittingly serve God by fulfilling his plans. Paul identified himself and his associates in the ministry as “servants of God” in many of his letters (e.g., 2 Cor. 6:4).

Old Testament Origins of Mercy Ministry

Although we do not find the word *diakonos* in the Old Testament, or a

Hebrew counterpart, the concept of what is called “mercy ministry” does emerge from a study of the Pentateuch. Members of the tribe of Levi, those set aside for service in ministry, were sometimes called upon to serve in the spirit of sacrificial benevolence for the benefit of the less fortunate in the Israelite community.

In Deuteronomy 15:1–11, we find an expansion of the original law given in Exodus 23:10–11 where a fallow year was decreed for the land every

seventh year. During that seventh year, the poor were permitted to gather food from the fields while also being released from crushing debts. Deuteronomy picked up on the humanitarian dimension of the Exodus law and commanded specific measures to be taken to ensure that the main component of the command was carried out, namely eradicating poverty.

In a somewhat paradoxical manner, the passage warns the Israelites that there should be “no poor among you,” but later concedes “If there is a poor man among your brothers....” Poverty was considered a slight on God’s honour; therefore the community must do everything to keep

διάκονος

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origin of deacons’ ministry could then be called a “misconception,” though an understandable one. As a technical term for a church officer there are limited references (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). It does seem strange that Luke, a companion of Paul and the only writer to use *diakonos* to refer to an office, would not apply the title to the servants mentioned in Acts 6. Luke, we assume, did not intend for Stephen and the others to be called “deacons.”

In the Gospels, *diakoneo*, and variations of the term, covers more than waiting on tables. Jesus taught in the parable of the sheep and the goats that providing for those in need, even sacrificing for the

Jesus modeled the life of servanthood to his followers, beckoning them to imitate his servant attitude in all facets of life, especially in the realm of leadership.

a brother from starving or from financial disaster.

The highest ideal in this scenario culminated in a nation that obeyed the Lord's commands for which the Lord would abundantly bless the nation according to the covenant. This explains the prophets' continual rebuke of the wealthy landowners who took advantage of the poor and why the Lord eventually punished Israel for its unfaithfulness to the covenant.

What does this have to do with the role of deacon? The law in Deuteronomy expressed an expectation that all citizens of the kingdom were responsible for the welfare of the poor and the alien. However, there were certain officers appointed to make certain that benevolence was extended to the poor and needy. God's purpose for his people has always included a fellowship of love that looks out for one another.

The New Testament Connection

If one looks closely, one can detect a thematic connection developing between the Israelite community and Luke's portrayal of the eschatological community in the book of Acts. Luke even appeared to quote Deuteronomy 15:4 directly when he wrote of the Early Church, "There were no needy persons among them" (Acts 4:34). In the heady days of the new community of Acts, when everyone shared their possessions communally with the believers, these words rang true.

A further connection between the two communities can be seen in the text preceding Deuteronomy 15. On every

third year of the seven-year cycle a tithe was to be taken to the sanctuary and set aside specifically for aliens, orphans, widows, and those who would otherwise go hungry. For a variety of reasons these people, including the Levites, might be dependent on the bounty of the community harvest.

Since the tithe was brought to the sanctuary stores the assumption could be made that the Levites were in charge of distributing the goods.

If not the Levites, the community elders would take charge and supervise, monitor, or account for the good stuffs given to the poor. While the duty to care for the poor was the responsibility of every Israelite then, each community could be assured that the elders would manage the tithe and care for the poor on their behalf.

As seen in the New Testament narratives of the church, the Deuteronomic principle of charity continued on in the life of the new church. Whether the New Testament church was conscious of such continuity is not clear, but given their knowledge of the Old Testament the connection might have been obvious to them. As community elders were responsible for distributing the food to the poor, so too designated individuals known eventually as "deacons" would take on that duty for the community of faith.



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The Servant-Leadership Model of Jesus

If *diakonos* applies to all believers who are universally called to serve, then the example Jesus displayed becomes a dominant feature in the faith and life of the disciple of Christ. Jesus modeled the life of servanthood to his followers, beckoning them to imitate his servant attitude in all facets of life, especially in the realm of leadership. A key text in this regard comes from the Gospel of Mark (10:35–45).

Previous to this episode, Jesus had predicted his suffering and death at the hands of the chief priests and the teachers of the law. James and John sought an opportunity to gain positions of power within the kingdom, clearly misunderstanding what Jesus was telling them. Jesus indicates that to "reign" with him means to drink the cup and to be baptized with his baptism, a reference to

A study of the Greek text [of Acts 6:1–7] reveals that these seven officers of the church were never called *diakonoi* or deacons, even though a noun and a verb of this word group do appear.

joining in his suffering.¹ James and John respond affirmatively to Jesus' description of what it means to rule with him. Sadly misguided in their ambitions, the disciples' misunderstanding affords Jesus an opening to speak to the calling of his disciples to become servants.

Jesus Sets the Tone

As Jesus teaches his disciples what it means to lead and to rule, he uses the word *diakonos* to explain his own role and subsequently theirs as well. This term does not in any way form the basis for the office of deacon, but it does elucidate what the future church officer should be like. France explains,

The term *diakoneo* is not used with Jesus as subject elsewhere in the gospel tradition, except in the roughly parallel Luke 22:27 (and parabolically in Luke 12:37), though the idea is graphically presented in the footwashing and following teaching in John 13:1–17. It does not denote a particular role, but rather the paradoxically subordinate status of the one who should have enjoyed the service of others. The following *kai dounai* does not so much specify the form of service, but rather adds a further and yet more shocking

example of the self-sacrificing attitude which he in turn enjoins on his followers.²

Although the term *diakonos* refers generally to a servant in this text, Jesus' teaching on discipleship uses the term to denote a lifestyle of self-denying, self-risking, and self-giving lowly service to others. *Diakonos* suggests

the idea of personal service rendered to another person. This *diakonos* will choose activities that are not directed to their own interests but to the interests of others and for their betterment. To some who heard Jesus speak these words, this had an ignoble ring.

First, as a *diakonos* himself, Jesus sets the tone by modeling this servant attitude in his life and then in his death for the redemption of the world. Then the disciples follow the master in his example. As Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he told them, "Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:14–15). Washing their feet was a metaphor for service and an opportunity for obedience, a service that Jesus would ultimately enact fully on the cross.

That Christ's suffering stands alone as being effective for humankind differentiates his suffering from that of his followers (Mark 10:45). Their suffering would not be categorized as vicarious, nor would it need to be since Christ's work on the cross was effective for all time. An undeniably close relationship exists, nevertheless, in that the Christian suffers for Christ because of his or her

loyalty to his or her Lord and Saviour. True discipleship beckons the follower of Christ to step onto the path of suffering with Jesus.

Calling the Seven to Table Ministry

While every believer seeks to follow the example of Jesus' servant attitude, some are set apart to lead and model servanthood. In the book of Acts, Luke recorded in rapid fashion the post-resurrection events of Pentecost and the birth of the church. Not far into the narrative, Luke introduced the episode which many regard as the origin of the office of deacon in the church (Acts 6:1–7).

Pastors, deacons, and churches in general develop their biblical understanding of deacons' ministry on this text in Acts. Many find it tempting to compare deacons to the seven Hellenists who were appointed to handle the practical needs of the fledgling church in Jerusalem.

A study of the Greek text, however, reveals that these seven officers of the church were never called *diakonoi* or deacons, even though a noun and a verb of this word group do appear. In fact, two of the seven appointees moved beyond the table ministry to preach and evangelize: Stephen preached (Acts 6:8–10) while Philip was involved in evangelism (Acts 8:26–40; 21:8). Basing deacons' ministry on the Acts text, therefore, leaves the church on questionable footing.

It remains that similarities do exist between the appointees in Acts and the deacons of Paul's letters. As the Acts church began to grow in numbers, the apostles found that the demands on leadership also increased. The Acts 6 episode explains how the apostles handled this tension and the increase of responsibility. Their solution involved appointing assistants to the ministry whose responsibilities primarily focused on meeting material needs.

1 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 337. ("cup of wrath": cf. Ps. 75:8; Is. 51:17–23; Jer. 25:15–28; 49:12; 51:7; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 23:31–34; Hab. 2:16; Zech. 12:2, etc.)

2 R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 419.

Conflict in the Early Church

Not far into the Acts narrative, a conflict arose concerning two distinct parties within the Jerusalem congregation. Greek-speaking Jewish widows were feeling neglected in the daily distribution of food (v. 1). Greek-speaking Jews, also known as Hellenists, were Jews who returned from the diaspora to live in Jerusalem. Hearing and receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ some became part of the fellowship of believers.

Luke does not go into extraneous detail about the details of the conflict between the two parties, though the Greek-speaking widows were clearly being neglected; the emphasis of his narrative features the solution. The apostles perceptively ascertained that they were unable to personally address this issue since their understanding of their own role was to preach the gospel and to pray. Thus their solution was to hand over this ministry to seven men with specific qualifications that would allow them to concentrate on their primary duties (vv. 2–3).

The Calling to Wait on Tables

The nature of this ministry involved the allocation of food, or as Luke recorded, “to wait on tables.” Luke could have meant overseeing communal meals, or he could have meant the distribution of money. “Tables,” *trapeza* in the Greek, does have a financial meaning in some contexts.³ So whether the administration of food or the handling of alms was meant by “to wait on tables” cannot be known definitively. In either case, the distribution of charity carried the focus of the ministry.

The apostles left the selection of the seven men up to the Hellenist community with a two-pronged requirement. First of all, these men needed to possess a

good reputation that was evident to the community. Secondly, they needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit, evidently living lives that testified to a transformed life in Christ. In response, the Hellenist community chose seven men with Greek names, thus suggesting that either these men were themselves Hellenists or were Aramaic-speaking Jews with Greek names. Once the seven men were selected, the apostles laid hands on them and prayed (Acts 6:6). The result of the proposal and its positive acceptance was continued growth as believers were cared for in this new system.

Again, the connection between the Acts account and deacons’ ministry

letters, deacons’ ministry appears to have become an established office among the leaders of the church. Unfortunately, the New Testament writers do not give specific details of the specific origins of deacons’ ministry.

“Waiting on tables” limits the formal application of the term “deacon” in the early church. There were a wide range of meanings associated with the term, including humble service, sacrificial service, and other specific applications. Two features stood out concerning those in deacons’ ministry: one who served as a deacon in non-church settings did so by the authority of a superior, and the role was that of an assistant to the one in the superior posi-

Paul alone makes reference to deacons as an official position in his letters to the churches. Unfortunately, the New Testament writers do not give specific details of the specific origins of deacons’ ministry.

cannot be easily bridged due to the absence of the term *diakonos*. If deacons simply waited on tables and fulfilled practical or financial responsibilities, then the above description might possibly serve as a template for deacons’ ministry. However, another scripture text provides great clarity to the ministry of deacons than does Acts 6.

The Biblical Qualifications of Deacons

Paul alone makes reference to deacons as an official position in his letters to the churches (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1).⁴ Somewhere between the birth of the church and the writing of the Pauline

tion. This would explain the order of qualifications Paul gave in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 of overseers followed by deacons.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul instructs the young pastor on the qualities required from both overseers/elders and deacons. The lists overlap somewhat; of the nine qualifications for deacons, only two cannot be paralleled in the list of overseers/elders’ qualifications. Since the lists are similar, the reader may question whether they have the same source. However, this inference misses the point of the lists, which are similar because they are describing not the functions of an office, but the character of an individual who seeks to fill that office. Paul counsels Timothy to observe and desire Christian maturity in the selection of deacons. Similarities in these requirements between overseers/elders, and deacons find confirmation in the word “likewise.” (See 1 Tim. 3:8–13.)

3 F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 182. See Mt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15; Lk. 19:23; Jn. 2:15 for *trapeza*.

4 Phoebe could be called a deacon or a servant, depending on one’s interpretation of *diakonos* in this context.

The qualities of the candidates for the office of deacon fall into familiar categories of observable conduct as that of overseers/elders (v. 8). Given the familiarity required for observing these qualities, one might assume that they are appropriate requirements for working in house church contexts. What the relationship of overseers/elders to deacons might be remains unclear, but the order suggests deacons are subordinate to overseers/elders.

Qualities Required of Deacon Candidates

That the candidates be “worthy of respect” implies an obviously respectable status among the brothers and sisters of the church. In the same way, the quality of their speech, an ability to make a promise and keep it, without being “two-faced” or “double-tongued” as the Greek suggests, would be an observable quality.

For the most part, the community of faith would also know through regular and familiar contact whether the candidate drinks too much or pursues financial opportunities inappropriately. To possess these qualities demands that deacons be able to master their speech and behaviour. Someone given to excesses may be apparent to the community and their candidacy may be questioned.

Having a Knowledge of the Faith

Theologically, candidates for deacons’ ministry must have a grasp of the “deep truths of the faith” (1 Tim. 3:9). One of Paul’s favourite terms to describe the gospel, “deep truths,” literally means “mystery.” Paul used “mystery” in a variety of ways throughout his letters: they mystery of God (1 Cor. 2:1), the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4), the mystery of His will (Eph. 1:9), and the mystery of gospel (Eph. 6:19). Here, the mystery of the gospel refers to the essential truth of the gospel, the meaning of Christ’s death for our salvation as revealed to

The Qualifications of Deacons

- ☑ **worthy of respect**
- ☑ **sincere**
- ☑ **not indulging in much wine**
- ☑ **not pursuing dishonest gain**
- ☑ **keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience**
- ☑ **must be tested**
- ☑ **faithful to his wife**
- ☑ **manage his children and his household well**

the church by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6–16).

Testing the Candidate

In some manner, candidates for the office of deacon were to be tested before they were allowed to serve. Curiously, while deacons are to be tested before engaging the ministry, overseers/elders do not go through testing. No explanation was supplied for this curiosity.

Furthermore, Paul does not elaborate on what the examination would consist of, nor how long the examination should take, nor who would do the testing; he only writes that candidates be tested and approved (1 Tim. 3:10).

Final approval by the assembly of believers or by the leadership or possibly both is possible. The basis of the testing may possibly consist of the qualities outlined in the text, or Scriptures outlining the qualities of godliness in general may be used to measure the

candidate’s acceptability. Whereas the wife of an overseer/elder does not appear to require examination, the wife of a deacon did require testing, as indicated by the word “likewise” (1 Tim. 3:11).

Wives or Women (Deaconesses)?

Paul left the modern reader with a dilemma when he turned his attention to the women of this office. Were the women mentioned in verse 11 “deacon’s wives” or “deaconesses”? At the time Paul wrote this letter a Greek word for the feminine of “deacon” did not exist, so he was obliged to use the term “women.”

That Paul writes “in the same way” tends to denote a new group in his address, thus suggesting women who are deacons. However, the reference to deacons’ wives, or women, stands between two references to deacons thus making an allusion to wives plausible. Towner leans toward “deaconesses” pointing to the requirements of the women in question:

The actual qualities expected of these women parallel those expected of men (vv. 8–9). They are to lead lives that command respect, no doubt because they speak prudently with control (NIV “not malicious talkers”), do not drink in excess and generally are *trustworthy* in all things (5:10). The patterns of behavior that characterize overseers and deacons are also to be obvious in the lives of these women. Furthermore, these women represent the antithesis

at Cenchrae (Rom. 16:1). He sees this as evidence that Paul accepted women as leaders in the church.⁶

Managing House and Family

Deacons themselves were required to be faithful husbands and good managers of their households, the same as overseers/elders (1 Tim. 3:12). Paul would have applied the same principle to deacons as he did to overseers/elders in verse 5, that if

Another perspective comes from an ecclesiastical grounding in that a good standing as a deacon will afford the deacon with eligibility for promotion to overseer or elder, thus making the position of deacon a mere stepping stone to greater responsibilities. The latter perspective reflects ambitiousness and seeking places of honour, both of which contradict the example of Christ

Those who desired to be deacons needed to exhibit a consistent Christian testimony in the home and in the public arena of life.

of certain other women who had come under the influence of the false teachers (5:15; compare 2 Tim. 3:6–7).⁵

An argument could be made in favour of deaconesses since nothing is mentioned about overseers’ wives and the qualities expected of them. If overseer’s wives were required to meet a standard of biblical character this surely would have been included. Deaconesses or deacons’ wives, these women were clearly involved in the ministry of helps in the church.

L. T. Johnson prefers the term “helper” as opposed to “deacon” because of the ecclesiastical hierarchy that formal titles promote. Thus Johnson writes that the women of verse 11 refer to “women helpers.” His argument includes the term “likewise” suggesting that women were to be tested as “helpers” in the same manner as the men. That “helpers” be the husband of but one wife (1 Tim. 3:12) does not necessarily identify these women as their wives. Johnson further notes that Paul names Phoebe as a *diakonos* of the church

a leader cannot manage his own household he cannot be expected to be an effective leader in the church.

One who manages his home haphazardly as a tyrant or as an irresponsible individual will likely leave the same impression on the church family. Arising from the deacon’s capability to manage is the question of whether “male headship” is meant, but that issue will not be addressed here.

The Rewards of Ministry

Finally, deacons who serve well gain two rewards from their faithful ministry: “an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 3:13). The “standing” has been understood from two perspectives. One perspective understands the “standing” as moral in the sense of gaining a vantage point for influencing the church body.



in Mark 10 and the second reward “great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.” Deacons will seek a standing in the community of faith and before God only so that they may speak freely on matters of faith. Any other understanding of the text in question would diminish the office of deacon in the church.

These qualifications suggest a high standard of accountability. Those who desired to be deacons needed to exhibit a consistent Christian testimony in the home and in the public arena of life. As with many of Paul’s writings, underlying the instructions lay unspoken questions to which Paul addresses himself.

Perhaps the office of deacon was being filled by inexperienced disciples who were unversed in Christian ethics regarding the poor. Or there may have been a low

5 Philip Towner, 1–2 Timothy & Titus (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 92.

6 L. T. Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 228.

opinion of deacons' ministry so that positions were filled without careful thought. Whatever the context, Paul gave the church a higher regard for the office of deacon and a spiritual expectation of excellence on the part of the candidate for deacon.

Mounce sums up the biblical origins, the philosophy, and even the naming of deacons' ministry, with the following:

As is often the case, the origin of the office is seen in the dynamic and revolutionary teaching of Christ. The greatest serves. Who would be first must be last. A mark of true discipleship is the willingness to undergo sacrificial service to others, whether it be footwashing, serving in the common meal, or some other service. As the church began to grow, so did the need for guidance and structure. Much of the guidance came through those gifted to speak from the Lord, whether it be apostles, prophets, or others. But alongside these always existed the more "practically" oriented gifts of administration and service, gifts that enabled believers to deal with day-to-day needs of the church in meeting the daily needs of the body. It is not surprising that those who excelled at serving came to known as "servers," "deacons."⁷

The Job Description of a NT Deacon

In order to extract a "job description" for deacons out of the New Testament, the recipient of the letter to Timothy must read between the lines, as it were. Paul was not concerned with providing the details that described the duties of a deacon and so one must surmise that for which deacons were responsible. The

following categories emerge out of the text:

Servants and Assistants

Some, such as John N. Collins, suggest that the traditional view of deacons engaging humble service of other people is erroneous. Collins downplays service and exalts the deacon as holding a commission from a higher authority.⁸ Regardless, the noun *diakonos* undeniably means "servant" and the verb in 1 Timothy has the meaning "to serve as a deacon" (1 Tim. 3:10, 13). So the sense from the text remains one of service.

The broad use of the term *diakonos* by the NT writers plainly points to that of serving or being a servant. What with the churches maturing and growing in numbers there grew a need for some sort of assistance for overseers and elders. A special group was commissioned to form that group of servants to assist the ministry of the *episkopoi* and *presbyteroi*. By virtue of their title alone, a deacon meant being a servant. This assistance could take on many forms, but the needs of the congregation may determine what form of assistance would be required, whether liturgical or practical.

People Work

The requirements for deacons, being "worthy of respect" and "sincere" (1 Tim. 3:8), suggests that their work would involve dealing with people. To be effective in their work and to maintain a rapport with the congregants, deacons needed to be people of integrity. In all probability, the deacon would be more

involved in visitation than the overseers/elders. As such, the deacon's wife would be more involved in the ministry with people than the wife of an overseer, which would account for an admonition that deacons' wives be worthy of respect (1 Tim. 3:11).

With the public nature of the ministry, deacons would have to be aware of their role in modeling the gospel and the character of the Christian life and holiness as described in the Scriptures. The nature of their service to others sets a tone for the congregations to follow suit, just as Jesus modeled servanthood for his disciples.

Financial Responsibilities

One could also surmise that since the

Deacons were not limited to practical duties and it may be that they were involved in church discipline and other spiritual matters.

deacon should not be the type of person to pursue dishonest gain (1 Tim. 3:8) that part of their responsibilities was to collect and distribute monies to the poor, sick, and distressed. The verb *diakonein* and the noun *diakonia* are used several times in connection with financial matters.

These are the same terms used of Paul in his collection of funds for the relief of churches (e.g. Acts 12:25; Rom. 15:25, 31; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1). Church finances might then have been entrusted to the care of these deacons. In some cases fiscal management may have been the sole responsibility of these leaders.

Teaching the Faith

Deacons were to "keep hold of the deep truths of the faith" (1 Tim. 3:9) to be able to explain the mysteries of the gospel. This requirement might suggest that deacons are required to teach the gospel truths, a chief responsibility of

7 William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 197.

8 Cited in I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1999), 486.

the overseers. While deacons have been seen as socially involved in the life of the church, their involvement might also include assisting the preachers in educating the congregants.

A deacon was not required to teach. However, this did not mean that a deacon could not teach. Teaching was not the main function of the deacon; that responsibility rested with the overseers/elders. However, where the need arose, deacons could be asked to step in and teach the gospel truths. If teachers were itinerant ministers traveling from church to church, deacons might have been local leaders of house churches and thus shared in the teaching ministry.

If deacons did not have the gift of teaching, a very real possibility, Paul may have taught that deacons were to at least have an understanding of the deep truths of the faith. These servants of the church would be able to understand biblical teaching and discern whether they were hearing gospel truth or not. They may not be pulpit ministers, but they could discern truth from error and privately correct those who erred.

Leadership

As mentioned earlier, Paul focused on the family dynamic of a deacon as part of this requirement code (1 Tim. 3:12). That a deacon had a family does not appear unusual, but the command to manage his household might imply that he was a man of wealth.

The order, “let them manage their children and households well,” distinguishes between offspring and slaves, suggesting that the deacons,

like the overseers, were (generally) householders, people of means and position in the social structure. The concern for this management ability suggests that deacons carried out

Where pastors are deficient in their omnipresent ability, deacons are able to lend a supporting function to the overall spiritual care of the church.

significant leadership duties in service to the overseers, or perhaps (if overseers supervised a cluster of house churches in a locality) on par with overseers but in a more limited sphere (the house church).⁹

Since the deacon may be involved in the teaching ministry to some degree, it can be deduced that the deacon was a respected leader in the community of faith. Deacons were not limited to practical duties and it may be that they were involved in church discipline and other spiritual matters. To what extent would probably depend on the needs of the local church.

Prayer Ministry

Prayer for the sick, despairing, grieving, and any other critical situations would naturally fall under the ministry of the church leaders. Deacons’ ministry has been shown to be a people-focused ministry and thus it would be the privilege of the deacon to pray with his or her congregant. This ministry does not immediately appear in the text, but Quinn and Wacker approach the matter thus:

The link of the diaconal *parresia* with prayer ought to be adverted to, since 1 Timothy 3:13 deals with a right to speak out for the faith and thus refers to both God and human beings. Confidence before the divine judgment and the related confidence in praying... are suggested by the subject of this unit on ecclesial prayer which has occupied 1 Timothy 2–3. Faith in Christ is the ground and matrix of this free confidence to this point and openness of God’s children before their Father.¹⁰

Quinn and Wacker do not have tangible support from other scholars on this matter of prayer as they describe it. However, the suggested approach to this verse (1 Tim. 3:13) inspires a ministry of prayer whereby the deacon speaks to God on behalf of the church. Even if the verse in question does not speak to the ministry of prayer in the deacons’ list of responsibilities, it would not be unreasonable to assume that a prayer ministry belonged to this group.

Summary

Does the biblical record alone offer tangible evidence for continuing on the ministry of deacons in our churches today? It does if we believe that pastors and other leaders are not gifted in all the other areas of ministry. Where pastors are deficient in their omnipresent ability, deacons are able to lend a supporting function to the overall spiritual care of the church.

The Early Church saw the need in terms of physical welfare agents and gave deacons the authority to distribute goods and other supports when needed. This freed the preachers and elders to concentrate on the ministry of the Word and prayer.

In the next issue of *Theodidaktos*, the narrative of the deacon will continue with a cursory examination of the history of deacons through the centuries. *Θ*

⁹ Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, 267.

¹⁰ Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 289.

Radix Anabaptism: Connecting Our Tradition to the Early Church



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ALMOST FIVE hundred years ago, Martin Luther famously nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church. The action is considered by many to be the beginnings of what we now call the Protestant Reformation. Luther's actions opened the doors for reform to sweep through the Western Church.

Yet, to Luther's dismay, those who answered the clarion call for reform did not always agree with the scope and the breadth of his ameliorations of the Roman Catholic Church. Among those who sought to deviate from Luther's program of reform were the Anabaptists. They were labeled as the "Radical Reformers."

The term "radical" as a descriptor of Anabaptists was viewed by some as a euphemism for extremism and fanaticism in their approach to reform. Luther certainly thought so. His favourite designation for all radicals, including

Anabaptists, was "Schwärmer," which can be translated as either "enthusiast" or "fanatic."¹

Luther was not alone in concluding Anabaptists were fanatical or extreme. For example, the various detractors of the Radical Reformers regularly connected the disastrous events of the Münster rebellion as evidence of the extremism of the Anabaptists.² The implications were that Anabaptists were a threat to the religious and socio-political order, and that they might replicate the Münsterite debacle given the opportunity.

It is a misunderstanding, however, to conclude that the Anabaptist movement was "radical" purely in the Münsterite fashion. As C. Arnold Snyder notes, "[there is] a diversity of historical origins, teachings, and practices among the sixteenth century Anabaptist groups."³ We will make no attempt to deny the claim that Anabaptists were radical—even extreme in their sixteenth century

The radicalness of "normative Anabaptism" would be best defined from the Latin root of radical: *radix*, which means "going to the root."

context⁴—but the radical extremism of the Münsterite fashion was not normative of the movement.

Normative Anabaptism, according to historian William Estep, includes such noted people as Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, Menno Simons, and the Swiss Brethren like Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Michael Sattler.⁵ These aforementioned Radical Reformers sought to bring the church back to New Testament and primitivistic roots. Thus the radicalness of "normative Anabaptism" would be best defined from the Latin root of radical: *radix*, which means "going to the root."

It is the exploration of "going to the root" that is our task for the remainder of this essay. Our task is to demonstrate that faithfulness to the *radix* of Anabaptism will necessarily require an engagement and interaction with Patristics sources, which are the writings of the Early Church leaders who lived from the second to eighth centuries.

1 Amy Burnett, *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology: Luther and the Schwärmer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 519.

2 "By making Münster typical of the movement, men were likewise able to blame Anabaptism for the Peasant Revolt," Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 238.

3 C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995), 5.

4 For more discussion on how the Anabaptists were "radical" to the public order of the sixteenth century see L. B. Friesen, *Seditions, confusions and tumult: Sixteenth century Anabaptism as a threat to public order* (Theological Research Exchange Network, 2001).



Michael Sattler preaching in the woods. Oil painting by Mike Atnip.

Our task is fraught with difficulty. Sixteenth century Anabaptists—who are not known for vast theological treatises—rarely quoted non-biblical sources as justification for their reform. Even five hundred years later in our modern context, there are deficiencies in engaging the Patristic voices in Anabaptist circles. As theologian Chris Heubner laments, “Mennonite theology too often skips

suggests that we look towards the general attitude and method of the Anabaptists as the evidence of their primitivism. He writes:

Since it is difficult to prove direct classical influence upon the radicals, *who rarely cited any book but the Bible*, we may remember their debt to Erasmus, Zwingli, Oecolampadius,

How might we make a connection to non-biblical material, and specifically the patristics, as having an influence in Anabaptist circles?

directly from the New Testament to the sixteenth century. We should recall that patristic and medieval sources are part of our tradition too.”⁶ How then might we make a connection to non-biblical material, and specifically the patristics, as having an influence in Anabaptist circles? Franklin Littell

phenomena. It was not a detailed program or body of specific content which was carried over, but a certain attitude and method in reference to antiquity. This attitude and method, when related to distinctly Christian concerns, became the hallmarks of Anabaptist thought.⁷

Littell believes we should look to the early leaders’ education as exposing them to Early Church sources and attitudes. If we also include the education of former Catholic leaders like Menno Simons and Michael Sattler, we can make the case that there was knowledge of the Patristics among the Radicals.⁸ Kenneth Davis goes further than Littell by looking beyond the contemporary influences like Erasmus and suggesting that, “Anabaptism arose from an ascetic tradition stretching back through monasticism to origins both East and West.”⁹

If we can agree with Davis’s suggestion that Anabaptism is a lay oriented ascetic movement, and Littell’s suggestion that we can discern the “attitude and method,” then perhaps rather than looking for specific citations from the Patristics—which are lacking among the movement—our task might be better informed at *observing the practices and teachings* of the movement that bear witness to Patristic influence, an immediate practice and teaching that relates. (We will explore this further in our similarities section.)

5 William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), xi.

6 Chris K. Heubner, “What Should Mennonites and Milbank Learn from Each Other?” *Conrad Grebel Review*, 23 (Spring 2005), 12.

7 Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1964), 79–80. Emphasis added.

8 Williams suggests that Menno Simons has knowledge of the Patristics: “He [Menno] gained familiarity with the writings of the church fathers such as Tertullian, Cyprian and Eusebius.” George Hunston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd Edition (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 1992), 590.

9 Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 51.

Thankfully, for the purposes of our task, we can go one step further and point to conclusive evidence that the Patristics were being utilized by the Radical Reformers, even if they were not quoted extensively or used widely.

While the Anabaptists rarely quoted non-biblical sources, there is one notable exception that connects the Anabaptists to the Early Church: *The Apostles' Creed*. The Apostles' Creed is a direct connection to the Early Church era. While we cannot be certain of the authorship of the Apostles' Creed, we do know that the creed was affirmed and used extensively by the Early Church as precursor to baptism and a regular confession of faith.

The Apostles' Creed was so valued in the Early Church that Augustine famously recited it upon his baptism and when he was commissioned as the Bishop of Hippo.¹⁰ The Apostles' Creed was not

unknown to the early Anabaptists. In the genesis of the movement, "teaching was frequently organized around...the Apostles' Creed, which most hearers knew by heart."¹¹

We know that Menno Simons wrote to a Reformed church leader that he agreed on the "twelve articles," which was a shorthand expression for the Apostles' Creed. Hubmaier, during his imprisonment, used the creed in his *Twelve Articles* as a basis for the confession of faith. "[Anabaptists] considered the...Apostles' Creed to express and represent the essence of Christian faith and doctrine."¹² This is perhaps why, when Anabaptists were brought in on the charges of heresy, their responses

often include a recitation of the Apostles' Creed.¹³ The value of the Apostles' Creed among the early Anabaptists cannot be overstated. This is significant for our suggestion that a faithfulness to *radix* of Anabaptism will necessitate a connection with the Patristics.

A surprising direct example of Anabaptist interaction and engagement with the Patristics is Conrad Grebel. Conrad displayed an appreciation and love for the church father Tertullian. In a letter addressed to his brother-in-law Joachim Vadian on December 29, 1521, Grebel writes, "I am sending herewith the copy of Tertullian, the best I could find and the soonest possible."¹⁴ We know this is no simple gift or errand on Grebel's

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Fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry illustrating the first four articles of the Creed.

10 For more on this see: *The Lutheran Confessions: History and Theology of the Book of Concord*, eds. Charles P. Arand and James Arne Nestingen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 45–68.

11 Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 259.

12 *Sharing Peace: Mennonites and Catholics in Conversation*, eds. Margaret R. Pfeil and Gerald W. Schlabbach (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 213.

13 For more on this see Andrew Pettegree, *The Reformation: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies, Volume 1* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 367–369.

14 *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism; The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*, ed. Leyland Harder (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 160.

15 Ibid, 162. Emphasis added.

16 Davis suggests Grebel's structure of reform may have gained inspiration from Tertullian. See Kenneth Davis, *Anabaptism and Asceticism: A Study In Intellectual Origins* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1974).

behalf towards his brother-in-law.

Grebel read and enjoyed the works of the church father Tertullian as evidenced in a subsequent letter *Grebel to Vadian* (January 30, 1522): "I was full of joy at your enticing letter, not because I rejoice so much, but because you received the Tertullian which for so long you desired, awaited, received with such joy; and having received, you will enjoy it. *Take heed, my Vadian, lest I make you a Tertullian.*"¹⁵ There can be no doubt that Grebel had a personal affinity with the writings of the church father Tertullian.¹⁶ A few years later, in the year

1524, Conrad Grebel continues to display an engagement with other Patristics sources though a letter sent to Thomas Müntzer. In that letter Grebel argued that Theophylact, along with several other Church Fathers, taught that baptism should be reserved for “mature adults.”¹⁷

Grebel was not the only Anabaptist leader to glean from the Patristics. While there is speculation on the exact nature of the Patristic influence among some Radical Reformers (Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, Pilgrim Marpeck, Benard Rothman, Melichor Hoffman, etc.),¹⁸ there is one early Anabaptist leader who valued the voices of the Patristics explicitly through his writings: Balthasar Hubmaier. As Andrew P. Klager, an expert on Hubmaier’s use of the Patristics, writes,

Hubmaier, in contrast to most other Anabaptist writers, frequently referred to the Church fathers in his writings, especially in his major works on baptism. Although Hubmaier made occasional reference to the Church fathers in his *Gespräch auf Meister Ulrich Zwinglis Taufbüchlein* (1526) and *Von dem Kindertaufe... Oecolampadius* (prepared in 1525; printed in 1527), his most intentional and systematic treatment of the fathers appears in his third major work on baptism, *Der uralten und gar neuen Lehrer Urteil* (1526).¹⁹

Baptism, almost more than any other issue, tends to distinguish the Anabaptists as a movement. The Anabaptists rejected infant baptism in favour of believer’s baptism,

This might seem like an oddity that an Anabaptist leader would cite extensively from the tradition of the Early Church. Is this perhaps evidence that Hubmaier is not an Anabaptist proper? Did the Anabaptists outright reject ecclesial tradition in favour of Scripture as the authority in matters of faith and practice?

Klager makes the case that Hubmaier is well established in this Anabaptist tradition of giving Scripture the place of authority over tradition, and quotes Hubmaier as saying, “he will trust the fathers and councils just as far as they use the Holy Scripture, and not more.”²⁰ Klager finally concludes Hubmaier’s position on the usage of the Patristics, which I would like to typify as normative for a faithful Anabaptist interaction with the Patristics.

Ultimately...Hubmaier does indeed desire to invoke the witness of the fathers if used in tandem with Scripture. It is therefore not one’s use of the fathers that Hubmaier is objecting to, but an indifference towards Scripture, that is, the use of the Fathers without consulting the Scriptures.²¹

Parallels Between the Early Church Fathers and the Radical Reformers

Our practice going forward will be to observe the practices and teachings of the movement that bear witness to Patristic influence. We do not have the space here to have an extended discussion of each topic, but merely to note the similarities between the Anabaptists and the Patristics on the topics of baptism and soteriology.

Baptism

Baptism, almost more than any other issue, tends to distinguish the Anabaptists as a movement. The Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, or paedobaptism, in favour of believer’s baptism, also known as credobaptism. For the Anabaptists, “the outer baptism was a sign that an individual had in fact consciously yielded inwardly to the working of God—something no infant could possibly do.”²²

Their detractors, like the Swiss magistrate Zwingli, wrote extensively against the Anabaptist position. Zwingli argued that the weight of church history sided on the issue of paedobaptism. Hubmaier was the foremost Anabaptist voice who answered the critique of Zwingli. As Klager comments, “Zwingli’s hermeneutic and the survival of paedobaptism to the present day took for granted its historicity. The burden of proof was on Hubmaier to demonstrate instead the historicity of credobaptism, the fathers being natural allies.”²³

What evidence did Hubmaier find in support of believer’s baptism, and towards our task, what parallels might exist between the Anabaptist position and the Patristics on baptism? To Hubmaier’s

17 *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, ed. Leland Harder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 290.

18 See Geoffery Dipple, *Just as in the Time of the Apostles: Uses of History in the Radical Reformation* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005).

19 Andrew P. Klager, “Balthasar Hubmaier’s Use of the Church Fathers: Availability, Access and Interaction,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 84 [January 2010], 8.

20 Klager, A. P. (2008), “Balthasar Hubmaier and the Authority of the Church Fathers,” *Historical Papers*, 137

21 *Ibid*, 138.

22 C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Pandora Press: Kitchener, 1995), 88.

23 Andrew P. Klager, “Balthasar Hubmaier’s Use of the Church Fathers: Availability, Access and Interaction,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 84 [January 2010], 56.

credit, he quoted numerous Patristics in his writings, and most notably in his work *The Christian Baptism of Believers* (1525).

Hubmaier cites Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, Clement of Rome, Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine.²⁴ We do not have the space here to cover each Church Father's contribution to credo-baptism, but we will cite a few in support of our task of showcasing the parallels between the Anabaptists and the Patristics.

One such example is Justin Martyr, who is one of the earliest theologians of the church. Justin taught that receiving of faith was a precursor to the waters of baptism. He writes,

Those who are convinced that what we teach is true and who desire to live accordingly are instructed to fast and to

pray to God for the remission of all their past sins. We also pray and fast with them. Then we bring them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated. They then receive the washing with water in the name of God (the Father and Lord of the universe) and of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.²⁵

Notice that Justin Martyr refers to baptismal candidates as “those who are convinced,” which seems to imply an age of reason and a response to faith. Martyr also instructs that the candidates undergo prayer and fasting in preparation of the baptismal rite. All of these prescriptions exclude the practice of infant baptism.

Another example of an early Church Father who endorsed credobaptism is Tertullian, a second century Christian leader from Carthage. Tertullian is one of the richest Patristic resources for the Anabaptist tradition. His writings, *On Baptism*, are the only pre-Nicene Council discussion on the subject. Tertullian is unique in his opposition to the practice of infant baptism, in that he was addressing

a practice that was already occurring in the Church. Tertullian believed that baptism presupposes faith and repentance. He writes,

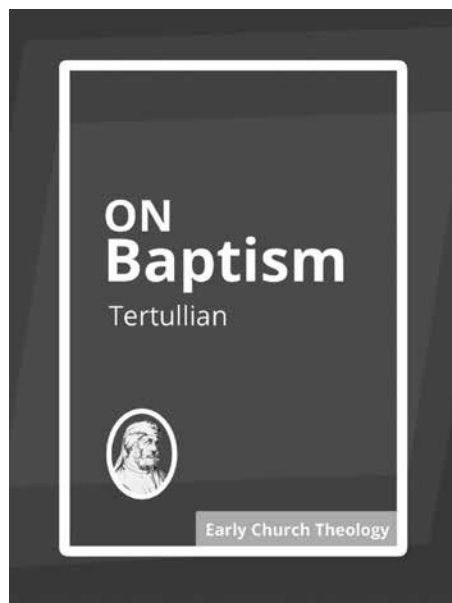
Baptismal washing is a sealing of faith, which faith is begun and commended by the faith of repentance. We are not washed in order that we may cease sinning, but because we have ceased, since in heart we have been bathed already.²⁶

Tertullian reads almost like a second century Anabaptist with his repeated emphasis on freedom of the will, implying that baptism accompanies the act of repentance. As Everette Ferguson comments, “The importance of a clear personal decision before baptism for Tertullian made the baptism of small children appear irresponsible; someone who could not repent must be dissuaded from baptism.”²⁷ Perhaps it is no surprise why scholars like Kenneth Davis have suggested that Tertullian had a notable influence on the Swiss Anabaptist program of reform.

Soteriology

Martin Luther was a sixteenth century Reformer who was tortured with guilt for his inability to be good enough but discovered the beautiful grace of God. Luther's theological shift was the belief that sinners were justified before God by grace through faith in Christ's sacrificial death. Luther was juxtaposing his position against the view of meritorious works achieving salvation. This is why a key feature in the Lutheran dialectic is a counterforce between faith and works.

This was not the only counterforce created by Luther. As Snyder comments, “Luther's understanding of salvation had at the same time removed acetic assumptions that underlay the highest spiritual aspirations of medieval people.”²⁸ Luther's position received plenty of objections from his Catholic contemporaries, but what may have



Tertullian reads almost like a second century Anabaptist with his repeated emphasis on freedom of the will, implying that baptism accompanies the act of repentance.

²⁴ Ibid, 22.

²⁵ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Tertullian, *On Repentance*, 4–6

²⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 365.

²⁸ C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: Revised Student Edition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 45.

surprised him is the pushback he received from the Anabaptists, who did not identify with a Catholic or Protestant soteriology. Snyder's sketch of Anabaptist soteriology is a helpful clarifier at this point:

The radical reformers embraced the emphasis on grace and faith (against the sacramental structure) but disagreed with Luther's conclusion that saving faith changed one's legal status before God (forensic justification) but *did not* change one's essential human condition as a sinner (at once justified and a sinner). The radical reformers argued, rather, that saving grace works in believers to transform them in the here and now, and that believers thus transformed will participate in some way in the salvation process.²⁹

Snyder's sketches of Anabaptist soteriology are a useful starting point towards the aim of our task. There is, however, a theme within the Anabaptist perspective that Snyder tends to neglect, and that we must pursue before looking towards the Patristics. That theme is *theosis* or divinization.

The two notable scholars that expand the view of *theosis* within the Anabaptist context are Alvin Beachy and Thomas

The creature will never become the Creator... but the believers become gods and children of the most high through new birth, participation, and fellowship of the divine nature.

– Dirk Phillips

Finger. Beachy believes that because the Anabaptists viewed grace as efficacious, the implication then is a “divinizing grace.” This divinizing grace is “God’s act whereby He renews the divine image in humanity through the Holy Spirit and makes the believer a participant in the divine nature.”³⁰

Similarly, Finger defines this grace as “not simply a justifying declaration” but “the invisible, one and only, mighty God, making us close to God and at one with him, and able to partake of his nature and character.”³¹ It should be noted that a proper Anabaptist or Eastern Orthodox theology of *theosis* and divinization is in no way suggesting that a person *becomes* God; rather there is a partaking of the Divine nature in which we become *like* God. Dirk Phillips, a contemporary of Menno Simons, sums up this “divinizing grace”:

All believers are participants of the divine nature, yes, and are called gods and children of the Most High...yet

they do not become identical in nature and person itself to what God and Christ are. Oh, no! The creature will never become the Creator and the fleshly will never become the eternal Spirit itself which God is...but the believers become gods and children of the most high through new birth, participation, and fellowship of the divine nature.³²

In what way did the Patristics support an efficacious or divinizing view of grace? Athanasius of Alexandria is perhaps the most explicit example of a Patristic source on *theosis*. Athanasius detailed his position of *theosis* in his famous work *On the Incarnation*. There Athanasius writes that, “The Son of God became man, so that we might become god, and He manifested himself to us in a bodily way, so that we might gain knowledge of the invisible Father.”³³

Athanasius also repeatedly refers to 2 Peter 1:4, suggesting that believers are to be “partakers of the divine nature.” Athanasius was not alone in his teaching of divinization, as it a notable theme throughout many of the Patristics. For example, Irenaeus predates Athanasius’ assertion with a slight variation. Irenaeus writes,

This is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the son of man, so that man by entering into communion with the Word, and thus receiving divine adoption, might become a son of God.³⁴

Another example can be found in Augustine’s Christmas sermon, where he writes, “He who is God became man so as to make those who were men gods.”³⁵ A few other examples of Patristics that espouse *theosis* include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril

²⁹ Ibid, 86.

³⁰ Alvin Beachy, *The Concept of Grace in the Radical Reformation* (Nieuwkoop, Netherlands: B. Do Graf, 1977), 5.

³¹ Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 123.

³² Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, and William A. Beachy, *The Writings of Dirk Philips 1504–1568*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), quoted in Kärkkäinen, *One with God*, 70.

³³ Athanasius, *De incarnatione*, 54, as quoted in Winter, *Immense Unfathomed Unconfined*, 174

³⁴ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses III*, 19, as quoted in Winter, *Immense Unfathomed Unconfined*, 174

³⁵ Augustine (*Sermon* 192, 1; PL 38:1012) as quoted in Winter, *Immense Unfathomed Unconfined*, 174

of Alexandria, and Maximus the Confessor.³⁶ All of these Church Fathers would be uncomfortable with an imputed righteousness that does not lead to the process of becoming like Christ.

To summarize, the Anabaptists' and Early Church Fathers' views of soteriology are remarkably similar. As Finger writes, "Anabaptist understandings of personal salvation involve divinization. Though this appeared in medieval Catholicism, it was, and is, more prominent in Eastern Orthodoxy."³⁷

To this I add the addendum that Anabaptist similarities to Eastern Orthodoxy on their views of soteriology also necessitate a striking parallel between the Anabaptists and the Patristics. For both the Early Church Fathers and the Anabaptists, salvation is more than legal fiction; rather, salvation necessitates an ontological transformation into the Divine nature.

Conclusion

Our task before us in this paper was to suggest that that faithfulness to the *radix* of Anabaptism will necessarily require an engagement and interaction with Patristics. We have discovered in our exploration of this task that the earliest Anabaptists were not completely devoid of a Patristic influence.

There was widespread use of the Apostles' Creed among the Anabaptist movement and some leaders read the Patristics and cited them in their writings. We can presume that the educated

early leaders also had exposure to the classical voices either through the universities or ecclesial training.

We also explored some striking parallels between the Patristics and the Radical Reformers on baptism and soteriology. In each of our topics there was a Church Father that appeared to give credence to the Anabaptist position. Our task of highlighting the connections between early Anabaptism and the Patristics is of vast importance as we consider what it means to be properly Anabaptist. Or, as Andrew P. Klager skillfully wrote, "When we consider the Anabaptist emphasis on ecclesiology and the demarcation of the true Church, it is no small matter that [the Anabaptists] include the Church Fathers in the *ecclesia universalis*."³⁸

Our task of highlighting the connections between early Anabaptism and the Patristics is of vast importance as we consider what it means to be properly Anabaptist.

The radicalness of Anabaptism should not be mistaken as a disavowal of *all* tradition, creeds, and councils. A faithful Anabaptism *radix* should lead us to interact and engage with church history as people of a received faith. It is only when we begin to recognize that our Anabaptist history extends beyond the sixteenth century that we may participate in the healing of ecclesial divisions across the Body of Christ. It is my hope that this essay contributed to the future of ecumenical dialogue, and the recognition of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. *Θ*

36 As summarized in *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions*, ed. by Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 23–29.

37 Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 110.

38 Andrew P. Klager, "Balthasar Hubmaier's Use of the Church Fathers: Availability, Access and Interaction," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 84 [January 2010], 65. emphasis original.



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Responding to Rights, Responsibility, and Reign: A Biblical Perspective on Human Rights



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WHAT DOES THE BIBLE say about human rights? Even if we were to disregard the fact that there was not even a concept of what we consider human rights, never mind the language to describe it, we could reach the conclusion that the Bible does not talk about human rights.

A better question may be: Does the Bible support the concept of human rights as we view it today, particularly as laid out in the Universal Declaration of

Human Rights?¹ This is a question that requires much deeper thought and study.

It is not too difficult to find particular verses supporting the actions of particular articles. For example, Article 3 in the Declaration says, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of persons.” Jesus’ teachings include the promise of “life in all its fullness” (John 10:10 GNT), and the themes of liberty and security pervade the entire Bible, including the Exodus, many of the prophets, and Jesus’ teachings.²

In fact, as shown below, many see the Bible as the only proper foundation for human rights. This does not mean, however, that human rights are necessary for the purpose of the Bible to be fulfilled. Rather, human rights are “one kind of response to God’s graciousness toward humankind” and in a Christian context ought to be viewed as “claims recognized for the sake of Christ and his coming kingdom.”³

Does the Bible support the concept of human rights as we view it today, particularly as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?

1 Referred to hereafter as the Declaration, with the recognition that there are many other no less important declarations regarding human rights, such as [European] Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, and others, which unfortunately cannot be looked at due to space constraints. See <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html> for the Declaration.

2 See, for example, Isaiah 65:17–24, Micah 4:1–5, Luke 4:16–21.

3 Esther D. Reed, *The Ethics of Human Rights: Contested Doctrinal and Moral Issues* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 2.

Introduction

After discussing what human rights are and what justification is given for them, particularly relying on the biblical story of Creation and the incarnation of Christ, the ways in which the Bible is used as the foundation for human rights will be examined. Comparing Mosaic Law to accepted human rights traditions will reveal that the Bible does indeed support the outcomes of human rights, whether or not it supports the concept of rights itself.

Christ’s coming to earth changes all things, including the fulfillment of the law, and how this affects human rights will also be observed. Lastly, the coming kingdom of God and the part human rights has to play in that will be examined, focusing mainly on the responsibilities of followers of Christ to love and serve those around them.

As will be made clear, human rights depend quite heavily on the Bible, but it is in no way a mutual dependence. While the Bible can be used as a foundation for the promotion and implementation of human rights, the biblical perspective and purpose do not require a human rights framework, mainly because striving for God’s kingdom of shalom justice will produce similar and better outcomes.

What are Human Rights?

Human rights is a term widely used in

legal and political literature today, but the meanings of it are so many and diverse that it is often difficult to determine what is actually being meant by it. However, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that was signed by the United Nations in 1948 is a good indicator of what is essentially meant by “human rights.” As the preamble to the document of 30 short articles recognizes, “the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world” is “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.”⁴

Three phrases beg further interpretation: inherent dignity, equal rights, and inalienable rights. Each can find some weak reasoning within secular theories, but require the transcendence of divine absolutes to truly stand strong.⁵ None provide so solid a foundation, however, as the Bible and the life of Jesus Christ.

Inherent Dignity

Human rights are often defined as entitlement to human dignity. In fact, protection of human dignity is both the cause and the effect of human rights. Inherent dignity is found in the biblical story of Creation, where man and woman are created by and in the image of an Almighty God, and in the incarnation of Christ. Though there is much discussion over what the technicalities of humans being created in the image of God

The biblical creation story is the only one that places human beings at the centre of the divine attention, giving basis to the idea of human dignity.

really are, what scholars generally seem to agree on is that humans are of significant worth and were created with a certain purpose.

The biblical creation story is the only one that places human beings at the centre of the divine attention, giving basis to the idea of human dignity.⁶ God treasures the value of human life even from conception, as evidenced by God’s words through Jeremiah: “...before you were born, I set you apart....”⁷

Beyond that, human beings were created for a purpose, as shown in Genesis 1, where Adam and Eve, representing the first humans created, are given dominion over the rest of creation, including the birds, fish, animals, and



Cover image of the illustrated version of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

vegetation.⁸ Like so many of God’s gifts to humankind, this responsibility has not been used as it should, and the results have often been a misuse of the singularity God gave to humans, resulting in damage to the environment. Even worse, the responsibility of humans to each other has not always been fulfilled, despite the fact that all humans have been endowed with dignity.

Although the Fall—the initial disobedience of God’s law—changed the relationship between God and humankind, it did not eradicate the dignity of humans. This is evidenced by God’s willingness to become human in the form of Jesus, which means that “the moment God became man, man is the measure of all things.”⁹

By affirming the Scriptures that now make up our Old Testament, Jesus also affirmed the inherent worth of humankind as created in the image of God.¹⁰ Even further proof than Jesus’ dwelling on earth in human flesh is his action of selfless love towards all humankind by first dying a death he had no reason to die, and then defeating

4 “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

5 John Warwick Montgomery, *Human Rights & Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 111.

6 Christopher D. Marshall, *Crowned with Glory & Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press), 55.

7 Jeremiah 1:5; see also Psalm 139:13, 16. <http://www.gotquestions.org/life-begin-conception.html>.

8 Marshall, 55–56.

9 Karl Barth, quoted in Montgomery, 215.

10 Montgomery, 159.

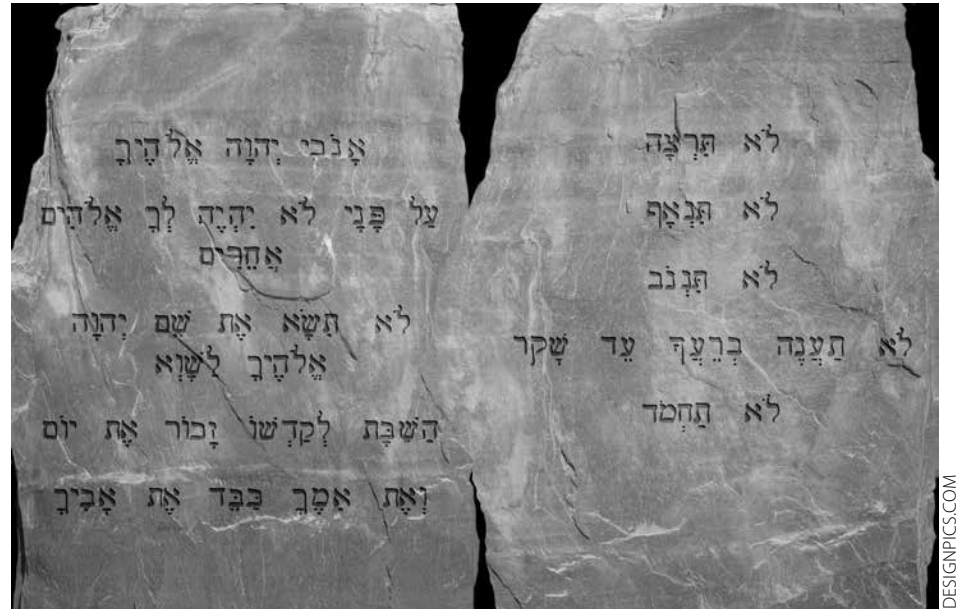
death by his resurrection. In this, human dignity is affirmed and the ground for human rights in all aspects of life and for all humankind is laid.¹¹

Equal Rights

Human rights are often divided “generationally.” While the Declaration encompasses them all to some degree, first generation rights are generally considered civil and political liberties, which limit government intervention and are propounded most vigorously today in Western (Christianized) countries. Second generation rights are, by contrast, economic and social rights that require government action and generally argued for by Eastern countries, while third generation rights elevated by the Third World are often called solidarity rights.

Yet Jesus’ summary of the law—“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and all your strength”—is holistic, encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, and environmental outcomes.¹² No one need is more important than the others, meaning human rights are equally important and indivisible.¹³

The fact that all people were created in the image of God and that all have fallen out of relationship with God (Rom. 3:23) indicates that all should share equally in human rights and responsibilities.¹⁴ This meshes well with the Declaration’s



The Ten Commandments given to Moses are sometimes used as a parallel to human rights declarations.

emphasis on equality. One seeming contradiction to this equality in the Bible, which further proves that the Bible does not rely on a human rights framework, though human rights may rely on it, is the emphasis Jesus puts on the poor. While he came to save all humankind and shows no favoritism, the fact remains that the poor are in the worst position, even in the Old Testament, and deserve the most attention.¹⁵

Inalienable Rights

A third definition of human rights is that they are inalienable. This qualification ties together the ideas of dignity and equality by its meaning that “one cannot stop being human no matter how badly one behaves or how barbarously one is treated.”¹⁶ God’s impartiality is detailed numerous times, particularly in Galatians 3:28, where all social divisions are wiped away in the freedom of Jesus Christ.¹⁷ If rights are divinely given, as could be implied by the dignity given to humankind by their creation, then they must be inalienable.¹⁸ Humans cannot remove what God has set into place.¹⁹ Even if the language of human rights is not used, there can be no doubt that God created humankind unique with a unique purpose and unique responsibilities.

Human Rights and Biblical Law

Now that human dignity and the indivisibility, universality, and inalienability of human rights have been grounded in biblical traditions,

¹¹ Reed, 71–72.

¹² Montgomery, 69, 175–6.

¹³ Marshall, 61.

¹⁴ Montgomery, 175–6.

¹⁵ Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible’s Word for Salvation, Justice, & Peace* (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing, 1987), 123–5.

¹⁶ Jack Donnelly, *Universal Rights in Theory & Practice*, 2nd edition (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 10.

¹⁷ Montgomery, 187–8.

¹⁸ Marshall, 61.

¹⁹ Montgomery, 187.

the human rights themselves will be compared to the biblical law. The Ten Commandments given to Moses are sometimes used as a parallel to human rights declarations. Since we are commanded not to kill others, the right to life and security is implied. The commandment to not steal could be seen as implying a right to property.

However compatible the Old Testament law and the list of human rights may seem, those studying the Bible “must do more than search for superficial resemblances.”²⁰ While the laws of the Old Testament and the Declaration have very similar goals, namely the establishment of peace, justice, and freedom, the justification for their outcomes is distinctly different. The law is given to a people chosen by God to be in covenant with God; human rights are for all humankind.²¹

Obedience to the law, which will result in a society of peace, justice, and freedom, is a response first and foremost to God, resulting in a responsibility towards others. Adherence to human rights is predominantly a response to others, excluding God from the act altogether. The Bible is the story of God’s love for humankind, so it would appear that God’s exclusion is not the intention; thus human rights alone are not the intention of the Bible.

The covenant God made with the people of Israel did include some

language of rights. The rights of firstborn sons to receive the inheritance, for example, or the rights of widows, orphans, and foreigners to receive aid are outlined in several places in the Mosaic Law texts. While these have potential to be human rights, since all humans have potential to be widowed, orphaned, or a visitor to a foreign land, the basis for the right is not on the person’s humanity, but on their need.²²

All through the Old Testament—and the New Testament, which will be examined further below—are examples of how the Bible supports many of the human rights that have become essential to law-making and advocacy today. The rights to life, equality, liberty, and participation are four foundational human rights that find particularly strong authentication in the biblical law books, the story of the Exodus, and through the carrying out of the covenant in Judaic tradition.²³

Some use this corroboration as proof that “covenant law declares, codifies,

The Bible can be used to back up human rights, but it does not require them. Biblical ideals do not necessarily equal entitlements or rights.

embodies, and nurtures key human rights values.”²⁴ In fact, since the Bible was established long before human rights were considered or the values of human rights determined, it would appear that human rights frameworks can find their key values already endorsed in the Bible. The Bible can be used to back up human rights, but it does not require them. Biblical ideals do not necessarily equal entitlements or rights.²⁵

The Difficulty of Freedom of Religion

One difficulty often faced when trying to reconcile the Bible and human rights is the right to freedom of religion (Article 18).²⁶ Since the Bible has become the foundation of the Judaic (the Old Testament) and Christian (Old and New Testaments) religions, to identify the Bible as the foundation of human rights frameworks²⁷ would seem to be abolishing religious freedom in favour of and sanctioning only Judaism or Christianity.

While some Jews and Christians do say their respective religion is the only right one, the Bible they follow says something quite different. A theme of the Scripture is that people, given their inherent dignity, are always given a choice about who they will follow and what sort of life they will live. Jesus “stands at the door and knocks,” but he never forces himself into anyone’s life. In fact, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is necessary in order for people to choose Jesus.²⁸

Human Rights and Jesus Christ

So far the focus has been on the Old Testament, but the Bible is not complete without the story of Jesus and of the Christian Church found in the New Testament. Christ came “not to abolish [the law or the prophets] but to fulfill [them]” (Matt. 5:17 NRSV). If the law is the basis for human rights, then Christ came to complete that human rights

²⁰ Reed, 94.

²¹ Marshall, 69.

²² Marshall, 71.

²³ Marshall, 73–85.

²⁴ Marshall, 85.

²⁵ Montgomery, 179.

²⁶ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

²⁷ Note that many other secular and religious traditions can and do provide foundations for human rights frameworks, but since the focus of this paper is the biblical tradition, they must unfortunately be left unexplored.

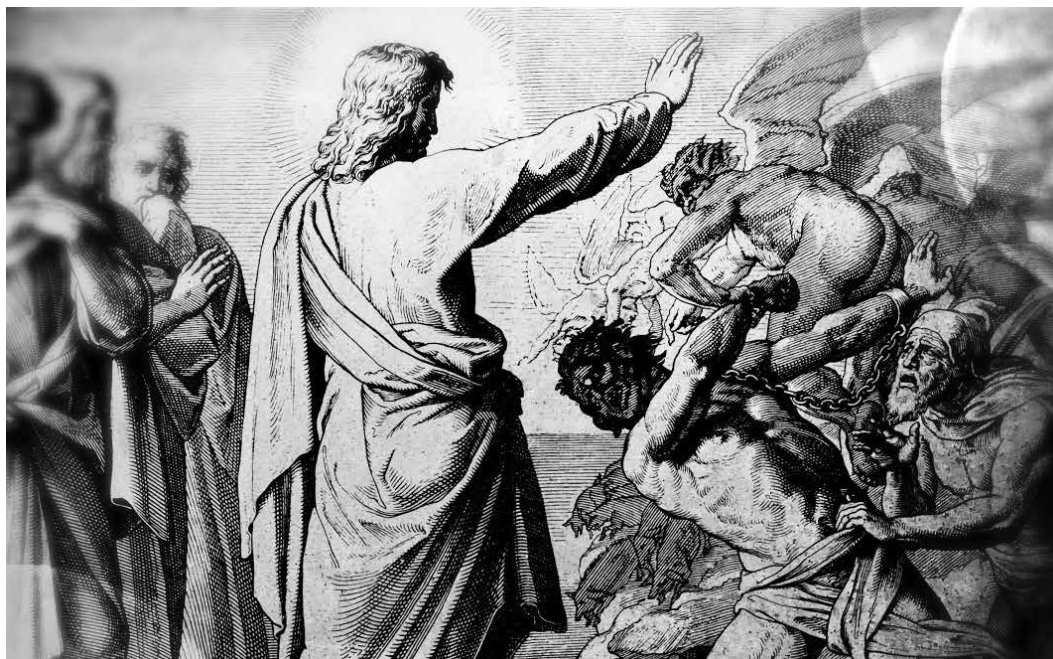
²⁸ Montgomery, 171–3.

framework. However, referring only to the Bible begs the conclusion that “there is nothing self-evident about the role of Christ in the advocacy of human rights.”²⁹

While Jesus clearly valued human life and dignity and, indeed, spent much of his ministry making people’s lives better, proclaiming and procuring peace and justice, he did not do so on the basis of rights. Rather, Jesus healed people’s bodies, minds, and souls because he loved them and he was willing to allow God’s power to pass through him. As for his own rights, Jesus was willing to release them in order to fulfill God’s plan and redeem humankind.

Unfairly brought before the authorities in a direct violation of the right to free speech, not given a fair trial, tortured, and killed though he did nothing to deserve death, Jesus could file perhaps the most legitimate human rights complaint of anyone. Yet he recognized that his responsibilities to the people he loved negated any rights he may have held.

Jesus’ actions alone do not dismiss the notion of a human rights framework laid out in the New Testament. In fact, many scholars view Jesus’ fulfillment of the



CREATION SWAP

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Covenant as evidence that human rights are part of God’s plan of reconciliation to humankind.³⁰ Once again, it is not terribly difficult to find passages that affirm pieces of the Declaration.

For example, Jesus’ willingness to associate with all classes of society, dining with Pharisees, tax collectors, lepers, and common people alike can authenticate the first Article, which states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They...should act towards one

another in a spirit of brotherhood.”³¹ Jesus viewed all people through a lens of love, and focused on the individual as a way to achieving the universal. This is a theme of human rights discourse as well.³² Above all, the universality of salvation is used as justification for the universality of human rights—social, political, economic, ethnic classifications are all abolished.³³

The issue with that is that no one has the right to salvation or to reconciliation with God, which would indicate that the New Testament (indeed, the entirety of the Bible) is more about the love of God towards humans than about rights that humans hold simply because of their humanity.³⁴

Christian Response to Human Rights

What this discussion has lacked so far is what the response of Christians should

29 George Newlands, *Christ and Human Rights* (England: Ashgate, 2006), 2.

30 Montgomery, 215.

31 “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” United Nations, accessed August 8, 2016, <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>.

32 Newlands, 90–91.

33 Marshall, 94.

34 Montgomery, 204.

be to the biblical interactions with human rights. Responsibility is what defines human rights, since the right of one person implicitly suggests the responsibility of another person, group or system. The question that remains then is what the responsibility is of Christians toward others and whether that responsibility finds its grounding in human rights.

It is made clear from the life of Jesus and the teachings of both the Old Testament and the New Testament that followers of God are called to serve others and love them completely. Though it is prudent to keep in mind the fact of their common humanity—every person was created in the image of God—human dignity is not the reason to promote peace and justice, which is to say human rights are not of primary importance. Rather, the actions of Christians towards others should be a response to God's love ("We love because he first loved us," 1 John 4:19 NRSV), which turns the generally egotistic nature of human rights advocacy on its head.³⁵

Christians may, using the Bible for guidance, push for the same outcomes, even the same procedures, as human rights activists. The motivation, however, lies in a "responsibility before God" because Christian action is about "obedience to God's command before it is

about the value of freedom to which every human being has an innate right."³⁶

Laying Down Our Rights

With the "responsibility to God for others' welfare" given to those who choose to follow Christ, it becomes necessary for them to lay down their own rights.³⁷ As noted earlier, Christ provides the perfect example of living a life directed toward establishing peace and justice without claiming rights for himself. Christians,

Human rights can find a foundation in the Bible and can therefore be considered an appropriate response in a life of obedience to God. A human rights framework, though, is not the only appropriate response.

too, must surrender their own rights and even forgo their own freedom in order that others may be freer or better served.³⁸

Some theologies argue that human rights can be incorporated into a Christian lifestyle, as long as it is in the care for the rights of others, and a disregard for the rights of oneself. This agrees with the idea that recognizing the rights of others is part of a response to God.³⁹ As proved above, human rights can find a foundation in the Bible and can therefore be considered an appropriate response in a life of obedience to God.

A human rights framework, though, is not the only appropriate response, and recognition of rights is not necessary to obey God or promote the establishment of God's reign to come.⁴⁰

Preparing for God's Reign

"Hope for the coming reign of God conditions the entire biblical story."⁴¹ Since the Bible is eschatologically based, any discussion of human rights in the Bible must necessarily include reference to what the conclusion of the Bible is: the world is striving towards reconciliation with God, and followers of God should work towards preparing the world for God's reign.

Some say the best way to undertake that preparation is within a human rights framework. Thus, people

have the right to life and security not only because of their humanity, but also because when Christ returns the world will be returned to its proper state. The reason for the implementation of these rights is not obligation to the other person's humanity, but because it is the will of God.⁴² The entire Bible makes it clear that God desires people to live in a just and peaceful society. It can be assured that when the new kingdom comes, it will bring peace, justice, and freedom. Christians have a responsibility to God to work towards that final goal.⁴³

The Hope of Christians

Working in the area of human rights can be discouraging because human rights violations are prominent, and injustice and oppression appear overwhelming. Working towards the coming reign of Christ can be discouraging because the complacency and disinterest of those who should be most actively pursuing the kingdom appears underwhelming. Whether human rights are advocated in the Bible or not, something about

³⁵ Montgomery, 201–2.

³⁶ Reed, 101–2.

³⁷ Marshall, 57.

³⁸ Marshall, 102.

³⁹ Montgomery, 201–2.

⁴⁰ Reed, 102.

⁴¹ Marshall, 107.

⁴² Reed, 72.

⁴³ See Yoder.

the system is not being implemented properly.

The Bible has a solution for this, although one that may bring up more questions than answers. God is in control and God will implement God's kingdom in God's timing on God's terms. This is not to say that people play no part in God's kingdom, or that God does not want to use people. Since Christians can have the hope that God's shalom will prevail, they can actively work towards that, whether by adhering to a Bible-based human rights framework motivated by obedience to God or by diminishing the importance of human rights in favour of a concentration on loving others holistically.⁴⁴

"The natural order is the result of divine command," and the part of Christians is to conform themselves to that natural order by following that divine command as a response to the love of God, who administers justice and mercy.⁴⁵

Conclusion

To disregard human rights is considered nearly blasphemous in today's North American society; to worship them would be blasphemous to God. Since many of the desired outcomes of human rights frameworks are similar to those of the God's coming reign as detailed in the Bible, Christians do not need to disregard human rights, but recognize that they find their basis in the Bible, not vice versa.

Human rights are equal, inalienable entitlements based on human dignity. The creation and the incarnation strongly support the notion of inherent human dignity, equality is a theme of Jesus' teachings, and inalienability is proven by God's gift of salvation for all. Human rights can find their foundation in biblical

⁴⁴ Marshall, 114.

⁴⁵ Reed, 171–2.

⁴⁶ Newlands, 165.

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law and in the teachings of Jesus Christ, although there are many other religious and secular traditions that can also provide a foundation.


For Christians, the main purpose of human rights is the responsibility they imply all people hold to God to care for the people around them. God neither requires nor prohibits human rights, but calls for a holistic love, which will result in a society of peace and justice. Principally, "God's goal is fulfilled in the flourishing of every human being."⁴⁶ Human rights, though not explicitly outlined in the Bible, can be one way to respond in love and justice and prepare the world for the coming of God's reign. *ø*

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The GSTM is a special place that helped me—by its faculty who care and think, students from different traditions, and subject matter that stretched the soul—to serve in the Church. The bursary for EMC students helped a lot, too.


David Kruse MA (Theological Studies),
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 CANADIAN MENNONITE UNIVERSITY

The Evangelical Mennonite Dilemma



Layton Friesen

Layton Friesen, a ThD candidate at the University of Toronto, has served as a pastor at Crestview Fellowship and Fort Garry EMC. He holds a BRS (SBC), an MCS, and an MTh (both Regent).

FREE DANCE LESSONS may be the proverbial Mennonite dilemma, but here's one more serious. I see a dilemma emerging in evangelical Mennonite life that I trust can be used by the Spirit to spark new thinking.

This dilemma is honest and I hope it is fruitful—that is, I am not arguing that it stems from sin or compromise, but that the Spirit has led us into this conundrum to deepen and widen our grasp of the gospel. We don't know how this dilemma can be solved yet. It will be exciting to see how the Spirit will untangle this.

The Issue

Most evangelical Mennonites now consider infant-baptized people and their churches to be fellow labourers in God's vineyard. We may not accept them as members of our churches—some do and some don't—but we are ready to accept them as fellow Christian participants in the work of the Kingdom.

A few examples illustrate a broad pattern: Wycliffe Bible Translators, an associate mission of the EMC, works closely with the Catholic church and sometimes produces both a Protestant

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and a Catholic edition of a Bible translation. Mennonites and Roman Catholics join together to host Franklin Graham festivals. Since his early crusades Billy Graham reached out to welcome Catholics to help him with his work.

EMC churches have evangelized using the Alpha course, developed by Anglicans, sometimes teaching it in cooperation with local Catholic parishes. Inner City Youth Alive, a mission dear to EMCers, cooperates with St. Aidan's Anglican Church to provide a Christian private school in the inner-city of Winnipeg. In many para-church groups like InterVarsity Fellowship, Mennonites happily serve alongside their infant-baptized colleagues.

What is interesting is not how radical this feels, but how normal. In our mission work outside the congregation it appears we have long-since accepted the fact that these are fellow Christians with whom we are united by the Spirit to carry out Christ's mission. Obviously, much has changed since the sixteenth century, not least that believer-baptists are not being hunted and killed by infant-baptists. But something else is afoot.¹ To do Kingdom work churches seem eager to work together across barriers that would have been uncrossable mere decades ago.

We do this even though modern Mennonite statements of faith, including the EMC's, still define baptism by rejecting infant baptism. We may not explicitly denounce infant baptism like the old confessions, but it hardly matters. Our positive confessional statements still describe baptism as the mirror image of infant baptism, emphasizing active belief, repentance, and assent to discipleship at the time of baptism.²

1 There have been no martyrdoms in our Dutch Mennonite tradition since the 16th century, and yet this new attitude towards other churches is mere decades old.

2 See also the *Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective*: "Baptism by water is a sign that a person has repented, received forgiveness, renounced evil, and died to sin, through the grace of God in Christ Jesus. Thus cleansed, believers are incorporated into Christ's body on earth, the church." The form of such a statement is shaped by our historic rejection of infant baptism.

What Our Ancestors Did Not Face

That, I want to suggest, involves us in a historical, theological, and biblical dilemma that our Anabaptist ancestors did not face. I am pointing out the obvious when I say that Menno Simons would not have considered the infant-baptized people we now work beside to be baptized Christians suitable as fellow evangelists and missionaries.

There was little that united the disparate branches of early Anabaptism, but one thing all had in common was their utter rejection of infant baptism. Menno said it is “an invented rite and human righteousness,” an “infracture and perversion of the ordinance of Christ,” a “harmful superstition that destroys the Lord’s baptism completely” and “of the Antichrist and of the bottomless pit.”³ In Balthasar Hubmaier’s catechism he states what every Anabaptist believed:

Leonhart: What is your opinion of the infant baptism which the water-priests use?

Hans: Nothing other than that the adult child gives a bath to the young child, thereby depriving it of the real water baptism of Christ.⁴

And though it is true that Anabaptists generally did not teach that one was saved through being baptized, according to almost every source I have read from the 16th and 17th century, all believed that proper baptism was a foundational mark



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of the Church.⁵ If one had not received the proper baptism, one was not a member of Christ’s Church and likely not even saved.

At the very least, it is impossible to imagine Menno, Hubmaier, Sattler or Marpeck saying that infant- and believer’s-baptism people could partner in the work of the Church. They simply were not part of the same Church.⁶ Hubmaier said, “Where baptism in water does not exist, there is no Church, no brother, no sister, no fraternal discipline, exclusion or restoration.... For there must be some outward sign of testimony by which brothers and sisters can know one another, though faith be in the heart alone.” Menno Simons said, “Always

At the very least, it is impossible to imagine Menno, Hubmaier, Sattler or Marpeck saying that infant- and believer’s-baptism people could partner in the work of the Church.

remember that there is no holy church of Christ other than the assembly of the righteous, and the church of the saints, which ever acts in harmony with the Word and ordinances of the Lord, and with no other doctrine.”⁷

17th Century Assumptions

In the confessionalization period of the 17th century, we find the same assumptions. Though Thieleman van Braght, the writer of the *Martyrs Mirror*, charitably extended the title of true Christian martyr even to members of rival Mennonite groups killed for their faith, such largesse could not include those baptized as infants. The *Martyrs Mirror* structures its whole presentation of true martyrdom since the time of Christ around adult believer’s baptism.

3 Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons: c.1496-1561*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1966), 513–14.

4 H. Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder, eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 350.

5 The only exception to this would be the spiritualists who rejected all outer ceremonies.

6 I am not saying that Menno and others believed all non-Anabaptists were damned. Despite the harsh rhetoric, the 16th century was not as concerned about adjudicating individuals as saved or damned as it was about establishing what was the true church.

7 Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 235.

If the person executed rejected believer's baptism she or he could not have been a Christian martyr of the Church. And, of course, other church traditions placed the same doctrinal restrictions on their martyrs. No early Lutheran martyr collection would recognize Anabaptist martyrs.⁸

The Dordrecht Confession, adopted by Dutch Mennonites in 1632 and still in use today among conservative groups, put it eloquently, but just as harshly for those not baptized rightly: "We believe in, and confess a visible church of God, namely, those who...truly repent and believe, and are rightly baptized; who are one with God in heaven, and rightly incorporated into the communion of the saints here on earth." By "rightly baptized" the confession means believer's baptism.

Something New

My point here is that when we both reject infant baptism and partner with infant-baptized people we are doing something new. No early Anabaptist saw illegitimate

baptism as an issue over which well-meaning churches could disagree and still work together. Illegitimate baptism was a deal-breaker. And in this the Anabaptists were similar to other churches at the time and many still today.

No church then believed that one could get baptism utterly wrong and still be the Church of Jesus. It has been a staple of Christian theology of the Church, broadly speaking, that to belong to the Church one must be baptized.⁹

It is a fact that should make us sit up and take note: Menno Simons, the Dordrecht Confession, the *Martyrs Mirror*, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and the Lutheran Church agree *against us* that one cannot utterly reject a church or person's baptism and still consider that church or person a co-working member of the Church of Christ.

New Testament Understanding of Baptism

We may, of course, choose to differ from

this consensus, but we first need to go on and ask whether the New Testament's understanding of baptism is more on their side or ours. If my reading of Scripture is correct, the fellowship of the body of Christ is formed through the confession of baptism. Galatians 3:27–28 is a good example: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ." Paul is celebrating the dashing reconciliation that happens within the church and her mission as members are "baptized into Christ." This is in agreement with 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit."

Baptism is the door through which the Spirit ushers us into a communion of unity in the Church. This is the Scripture our EMC *Statement of Faith* uses to link baptism with membership in the Church.

I take it we don't merely mean that baptism enrolls one on some list stored in the church office. We mean that after baptism a person is mingled now in the Church of Christ, both local and universal.

From these two texts I would conclude that if we discover some missional unity between Jews, Greeks, slave, free, male,

and female in the Church that is not rooted in baptism, we are not dealing with Christian unity. This conclusion is affirmed in Ephesians 4:1–6, a text concerned with "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

There are not many Bodies, several Holy Spirits, numerous Lords or assorted baptisms which come together in some aggregate in the Church; there is "one body and one Spirit, just as you were

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8 The best resource on reformation-era martyrdom is Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2001). The current Mennonite project to collect stories of modern people who suffer for Christ, *Bearing Witness*, also focuses on those who have received believers baptism. <http://www.martyrstories.org/about/#mission>

9 The (Lutheran) Augsburg Confession says "For true unity in the church, it is enough to agree about the teaching of the gospel and the use of the sacraments" (article 7). The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England says "Baptism is...a sign of Regeneration or New-Birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church." The Roman church has always recognized Protestant and Anabaptist baptism in principle, but takes a case by case approach depending on whether the practice is trinitarian. They may recognize the baptism of churches they are not in full communion with, but if the baptism is rejected they do not consider there to be communion.

The missional unity of the Church, the calling and bonding together of this apostolic pilgrim band on the move, happens through Christian baptism—water baptism.

called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” There is only one baptism because there is only one God in sovereign rule in the world.

Replies to This

There may be some replies to this. First, some might say, Friesen obviously has a *sacramental* view of baptism, but if we are only rejecting another church’s *symbol*, why can’t we still work together? I would argue that our dilemma holds either way. Baptism may be a believer taking a stand, symbolized by water, or it may be the Spirit working sacramentally through the water; churches taking either approach have traditionally rejected people with illegitimate baptism as members of the Church of Christ.

Or someone may reply that these texts do not talk about *water* baptism, but only an inner baptism of the Spirit. And so our infant-baptized partners may have illegitimate *water* baptism, but their *inner* baptism binds us together in Christ. But if only Scriptures that explicitly mention *water* in the baptism count as guiding



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the ordinance of baptism, we have no Scripture to use at a baptism service at all.¹⁰

Further, when the Holy Spirit’s promise was unleashed at Pentecost they clearly were pouring water on people. They said “repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.... So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons *were added*” (Acts 2:38–41, emphasis added). Here water baptism was the door to church membership for three thousand people.

Further, Paul’s own water baptism was clearly linked to his mission to the gentiles in Acts 22:15–16. This is entirely in agreement with the Pauline Scriptures mentioned above. The missional unity of the Church, the calling and bonding together of this apostolic pilgrim band on the move, happens through Christian baptism—water baptism.¹¹

A Summary of Our Dilemma

So, to summarize our dilemma. Scripture says we are baptized into the unified mission team which is the Church. The early Anabaptists as well as most other church traditions have agreed throughout history that to be the true Church, we must “baptize rightly.” We, along with our Anabaptist ancestors, have denounced infant baptism as no baptism at all. But now the Holy Spirit seems to be uniting us in mission with people and churches whose baptism is infant baptism! What are we to make of this?

Of course, there is a cooperation that Christians can have with people of any or no faith. Joining the town campaign to clean up roadside litter does not require Christian unity. Churches should gladly pitch in with Muslims, atheists, Mormons, and Rider fans. But the fellowship involved in carrying out a Franklin Graham Festival is different. This is done as fellow Christians joined together by the Spirit in obedience to Matthew 28:19. Jesus makes trinitarian baptism the instrument by which the Great Commission is carried out. Can it be carried out together by a people who utterly reject each other’s baptism?

Resolved the Dilemma?

Now, you may have already resolved this

10 These are the very texts that Anabaptists used to show that *water* baptism demanded an adult faith.

11 For this reason, in my view, it is problematic that many para-church organizations do not require baptism of their workers. If they wish to be doing the work of the Church, they need to recognize the primal rite by which the Church commissions all people to mission, which is baptism.

dilemma in your mind. I suspect many of us have eased the tension in the last decades by shifting missional unity away from baptism to a belief in Jesus that has little to do with baptism. We say, these folks believe in Jesus like we do; therefore we can set aside our differences over church rituals, roll up our sleeves, and get to work. We say, in terms of Ephesians 4:4–5, these people are part of the one body because they have the one faith in the one Lord even though they do not have the one baptism. So they are three for four?

Could it be that in order to ease the awkwardness of this dilemma we have recently softened the Scriptural meaning of baptism, and made less of baptism theologically than our Anabaptist ancestors did?

Someone else may say, what Layton is really trying to do is convince us to admit infant-baptized people as members of our churches. I think good reasons can be raised for such a move, but that's a complicated one and it does not necessarily solve our dilemma.

On the one hand, it makes no theological sense to reject people as members of my church, but then partner with them in a Franklin Graham festival. But on the other hand, if church membership is to have real theological and spiritual meaning, it makes no sense to welcome people as members if we cannot see a Scriptural basis for their baptism.

In my experience, for many people enlightened liberal tolerance demands that we not judge another person's spiritual journey. But tolerance does not argue that infant baptism is Scriptural, only that it is trivial enough to be tolerable. Tolerance achieves "acceptance" of infant-baptists only by trivializing what these people understand their baptism to mean.

This dilemma will not be solved when we adopt an inclusive tolerance for infant baptism. How can one put this delicately? If we cannot provide a scriptural defence of infant baptism as a Christian baptism, if we cannot maintain that these people are baptized, we should be very careful

about assuming we are fellow-workers in Christ's mission.

A True Dilemma

Let me emphasize that this is a true dilemma. No one has yet managed to truly reconcile believer's baptism and infant baptism. They seem logically opposed. Believer-baptists say personal willing is *essential* at the time of baptism. Baptism involves the sinner's full, hearty, Spirit-blown *Yes!* to God and his Church. Infant-baptists, however, insist that the *lack* of personal willing is precisely the gospel meaning of baptism. Baptism for them testifies to God loving us before we could love him or respond to him.

That is a great divide. It is difficult to argue that these are two legitimate ways of practicing the one baptism, like pouring and immersion.

And yet, no one can deny that our present cooperation in mission is the work of God healing the Church. This seems like a clash between what God has done in the past (Anabaptism) and what God is doing now (partnering us in mission) and it's genuinely bewildering.

A Trialogue

Representatives of the Mennonite World Conference, the Vatican, and the Lutheran World Federation have been engaged in dialogue on the subject of baptism for the past number of years. According to a friend on this commission, John Rempel (see the accompanying interview), resolving the divide is difficult, even among highly motivated and fraternal theologians. These do seem like mutually exclusive baptisms.

There are two moves that tend to make union more hopeful, but both are controversial to their respective sides. The divide lessens as infant-baptist churches reject indiscriminate "cultural" baptisms and insist that baptized infants actually be raised in the church by Christian parents. Second, as believer-baptist churches emphasize the objective,

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spiritual meaning of baptism, it becomes conceivable that a person might be able to give personal assent to her baptism *after* it occurred.¹²

My prayers and support are behind initiatives like this that seek to play catch-up to what the Spirit is doing in our midst in bringing us together on so many other levels. Could the division over baptism end? Humanly speaking it's impossible,

but that has not stopped the Church before. Menno Simons could not have predicted Billy Graham.

May the Spirit who led us through the Anabaptist reform and into surprising cooperation with these strangers in Christ-centred mission grant us the wisdom in the coming years to bring interpretation, confession, and mission again into unity. *o*

12 To recognize the objective content of baptism is to believe that there is more going on than just a person taking a stand, that God is at work as well, beyond the personal willing. As the objective is emphasized it becomes more thinkable that the subjective could come before or after the actual baptism. To the extent that baptism is *purely* subjective, that is, utterly dependent on personal commitment *at the time* of the baptism, infant baptism must be illegitimate.

An Interview About a Tri-Lateral Discussion

Layton Friesen and Dr. John Rempel



Layton Friesen (left) is a ThD student at the University of Toronto.

Layton says that Dr. John D. Rempel (ThD, St. Michaels; pictured at right) "is a retired pastor, academic, and MCC worker who became a friend and mentor to me in his role as director of the Toronto Mennonite Theology Centre. I was attracted to his deep love for the Anabaptist tradition of the sacraments, his keen interest in reconciling this with the larger Church, and his concern that the sacraments be a transforming part of church life. He has recently been involved in a tri-lateral dialogue with representatives from the Catholic, Lutheran and Mennonite churches. I asked whether I could interview him about that experience."



The interview has been shortened and edited.

Layton: Why, after 500 years of mutual condemnation, are Mennonite, Lutheran and Roman Catholic Church theologians *now* coming together to talk about baptism? What is in the air now?

John: Over the past 50 years people in many churches have been convicted by the realization that Christ prayed for the unity of the church (John 17). Gradually the weight shifted

from what divides us to what we have in common. In the 1980s Lutherans in West Germany sought out dialogue with Mennonites concerning their historic differences.

These initial exchanges with Lutherans led to the dismantling of stereotypes they had held of each other. The Lutherans became freshly aware that in the 16th century they had persecuted Mennonites. These conversations spread to France,

Canada, and the United States. In 2010 the Lutheran World Federation made a soul deep public apology to Mennonites for having persecuted them. It left a profound impression on Mennonites.

Even though Mennonite encounters with Catholics did not reach the depth of the Lutheran ones, there was a five-year dialogue between them on the healing of memories.

In this new climate of respect and trust both the Catholics and Lutherans confided to the Mennonites that one especially painful difference continued between them, the refusal by most Mennonite congregations to accept members from infant baptizing churches without baptizing them on confession of faith. The hope of this five-year long trilateral dialogue on baptism is that misunderstandings and prejudices we have about each other's baptismal practices could be overcome, and we would be able to see the theological differences more accurately.

Layton: What are the key divides that have occupied your conversations together? What still separates us?

John: Catholics and Lutherans understand sacraments as signs that bring about what they signify. They hold that when an infant is baptized in the name of the Trinity and in the power of the Holy Spirit, the person, according to Romans 6, dies with Christ and is raised to new life.

We believe with them that salvation is entirely God's initiative. But we insist that the person being baptized needs to receive God's gift of grace by faith. Our dialogue partners emphasize that the parents and congregation believe on the child's behalf until it is of age.



MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE: ELEANOR MILLER

Co-chairs of the Trilateral (Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite) Dialogue Commission on Baptism (from left): Luis Augusto Castro Quiroga, Friederike Nüssel, Alfred Neufeld.

They add that in some countries a child will not be accepted for baptism if at least one parent does not make a personal confession of Christ.

This different view of baptism leads to a different understanding of the church. Mennonites believe that the church is to be made up only of those who have accepted Christ and promise to live in the Spirit of Christ. Lutherans and Catholics understand the church on a local level as a parish, that all the baptized in a given geographic area are in its care and should be drawn closer to Christ through its ministries.

Layton: Have you been surprised by anything in your colleagues' perspectives on baptism?

John: In the papers presented and the prayers spoken most of the members of the other delegations have demonstrated a deeply personal faith in Christ, a love for Scripture, and a commitment to faithful discipleship, sometimes including nonviolence. And they believe that this is the norm for being a Christian. Because of this I found our historic prejudice that associates infant baptism with a less personal faith to be untrue. Our partners had a great concern to lead the people in the care of the church to active faith and discipleship.

In my experience of the dialogue the difference lies not so much in our understanding of faith as in the relationship between faith and sacrament, as I mentioned earlier.

John D. Rempel: "Our dialogue partners emphasize that the parents and congregation believe on the child's behalf until it is of age. They add that in some countries a child will not be accepted for baptism if at least one parent does not make a personal confession of Christ."

Layton: Is it possible for an Anabaptist to now see some validity in an infant baptism?

John: All of us are burdened by the reality that Christians who read the same Bible and rely on the same Holy Spirit can come to different conclusions. This is true between fellow church members as well as fellow denominations. Historically Mennonites have said that Jesus' teaching and his atoning death make it unmistakably clear that those who follow him must love their enemies and cannot ever take human life.

Today some Mennonites would say that they can understand why some churches teach the just war theory and make room for violence as a last resort. Both positions ground their conviction in the Bible and early tradition. If there can be a legitimate difference of interpretation concerning peace without disfiguring the Gospel, could this also be the case with baptism?

In my view, this is the most important theological question facing the Mennonites in the trilateral dialogue.

Layton: What wisdom do you have for Mennonite churches in the meantime who are struggling with how to partner with infant-baptized people in their midst, even while their theology is still very much "believer's baptism"?

John: We should not lessen our conviction that believer's baptism is the norm of the New Testament and the early church. Yet sometimes the Holy Spirit gives us intuitions that take us beyond theological categories.

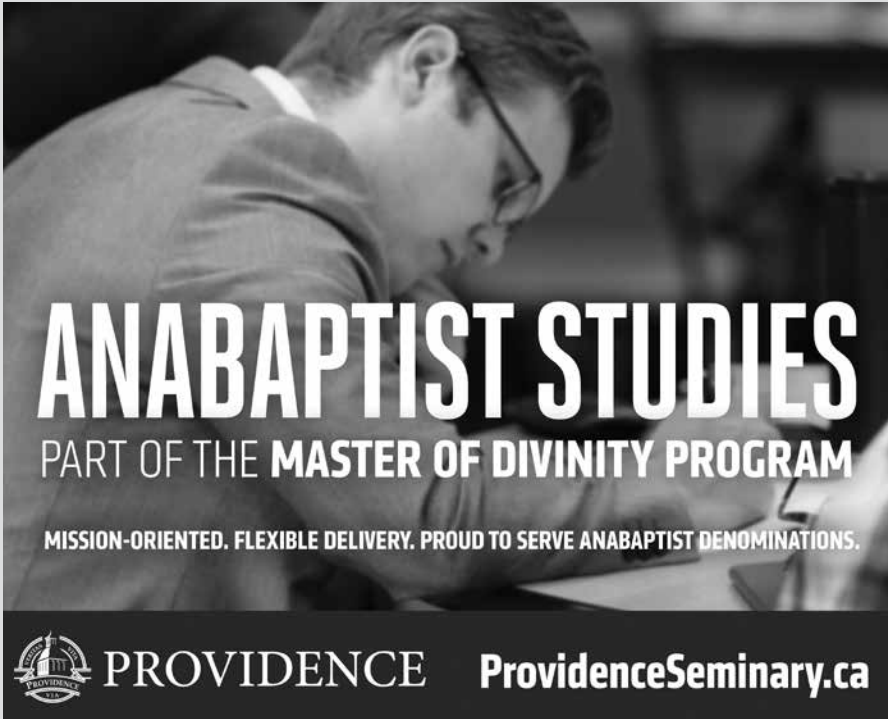
When we work together with an Anglican on an evangelistic mission we simply know that we have a common

Where this Spirit-given sense of like faith is present we should join hands for the sake of the Gospel. Where co-operation doesn't hinder our own faithfulness we should partner with other parts of the body of Christ. Where that is not the case we should stand apart.

faith in Christ as Saviour. When we work together with a Baptist on taking risks for the sake of nonviolent approaches to conflict, we simply know that we both follow the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount. Where this Spirit-given sense of like faith is present we should join hands for the sake of the Gospel. Where cooperation doesn't hinder our own faithfulness we should partner with other parts of the body of Christ. Where that is not the case we should stand apart.


A deep sense of common cause does not mean that there aren't theological

and ethical questions that have to be examined. That is why we have dialogues like the one on baptism. Most of these "dialogues" happen not on an international level, but in neighbourhood Bible studies and citywide peace marches, between pastors who belong to a local ministerium. When the questions get really big and far reaching, like baptism, we need the wisdom of each denomination on the global level. *Θ*



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Feature Sermon

John 1:35–43, 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Hebrews 1:1–4, 2 Corinthians 3:1–3



Come and See!

Hyoungjin (Frankie) Kim

Hyoungjin (Frankie) Kim is the pastor of Pelly Fellowship Chapel. He holds a BA in Educational Technology (Hanyang Cyber University, Seoul) and an MTS in Christian Foundations (Tyndale).

THE BIBLE IS important for every Christian because it is God's revelation and Word. God has shown his mind and heart through the Bible. Through the Bible we can know God and we can see God; we can experience God. This is why there are huge amounts of Bible study materials and courses about reading the Bible.

I took an Inductive Bible study course before entering a Bible college in Korea. It was an Inductive Study Bible course by Kay Arthur. It was six-month course, but I did not realize it so I took the exact same course twice. After two months I realized that it was the same course, but a different lecturer. Anyway, it was really good for me to understand the Bible, and I am still using the method when I study the Bible by myself.

Whether people use this method or not, reading the Bible is really important for every Christian because the Bible is the Word of God; and through the Bible, we can know God's will and mind. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God [is] living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart." Therefore, when a person experiences God through the Bible, it might change the person because he or she can see him by the Word of God.

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are you staying?"

³⁹ "Come," he replied, "and you will see."

So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.

⁴⁰ Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus.

⁴¹ The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" (that is, the Christ). ⁴² And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas" (which, when translated, is Peter).

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me."

– John 1:35–43

Today, we can see people who met the Messiah; and when they met the Messiah, they were changed by him. After that, they started spreading him out to others. Through this passage we can learn about faith and evangelism. Sometimes we think that evangelism is complicated and difficult, but when we read today's verse, we may know that it is not our work so it is not difficult and complicated. In fact, it is the matter of faith. As we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, we evangelize people by faith in Jesus Christ.

Inspiration

Now, firstly, I want to deal with faith. Every biblical book has its own structure.

In order to understand the structure, we need to know about inspiration of the Bible. We already know these Bible verses. Second Timothy 3:16–17: "All Scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

All Scripture is given by God according to his inspiration. Understanding the inspiration of the Bible is one difficult part for us, but it is important because it gives us a proper ethical point. However, the problem is that people, especially scholars, have

different understandings of the meaning of inspiration.

Some people believe that the Bible is dictation from God. Dictation Theory: God dictated the books of the Bible word by word as if the biblical authors were dictating machines; God said everything to his servants and then they wrote it exactly.

The other one is Verbal Plenary Inspiration: This view gives a greater role to the human writers of the Bible, while maintaining a belief that God preserved the integrity of the words of the Bible. “The effect of inspiration was to move the authors so as to produce the words God wanted. In this view the human writers’ individual backgrounds, personal traits, and literary styles were authentically theirs, but had been providentially prepared by God for use as his instrument in producing Scripture”¹

The last theory is Organic Inspiration, which is that the thoughts contained in the Bible are inspired, but the words used were left to the individual writers. God inspired the writer’s writing style, experience, and even their thoughts.²

Nowadays most scholars accept Organic Inspiration. According to this theory, we should understand many things in order to understand God’s Word, the Bible, fully and completely. I also accept this theory; and when I read the Bible, in general, I check the meaning of words and structure of the scripture. When I started the Gospel of John for the first time, I figured out the definition of some words such as Logos and the light. Through it, I tried to know the writer’s idea and intention. In fact, people have an intention when they write.

Luke is Best Example

The introduction of Luke is the

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best example. Let’s read Luke 1:1–4: “Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.”

Now, Luke indicated his purpose of writing. His aim or intention was to write a gospel according to a chronological order. As Luke followed his intention

¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God[a] may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

– 2 Timothy 3:16–17

when he wrote, John also knew the purpose of his book. Even though he did not indicate his aim or purpose, we can know about it when we know its structure. While Luke wrote his gospel according to historical order and logical structure, John used his experience about the Messiah, Jesus. And its structure is a kind of deduction. He gives a clue or an idea for the first time in each chapter, then he illustrated the Messiah and his experience.

¹ “Biblical Inspiration,” *Wikipedia* (accessed Aug. 6, 2016).

² Louis Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 4th edition (London: Banner of Truth, 1960), 52.

The Meaning of Logos³

According to this one, let's follow today's passage. In order to know his aim, it is good for us to know the meaning of Logos. John says that The Word was in the beginning and it was with God. And the Word itself was God. In this statement, we can see a specific term. It is the Word.

In the Greek language, Word is *Logos*. Literally, it means the letter, alphabet. The other meaning is the act of speaking. Why did John use this term, Word, when he made the statement of Jesus Christ? We can understand it through these two meanings: a letter (alphabet), the act of speaking, and the letter (epistle).

First is a letter. A letter, the alphabet, is the basic element of a word.

Actually, a sentence starts from an alphabet. This is the basic and the foundation of the sentence. If there is no alphabet, we cannot start to write. We cannot read.

Have you ever heard about Wycliffe Bible Translators? It is a mission organization which translates the Bible into different languages. They have already finished over 1,000 language versions of the Bible, and still they are working on others.

When they arrive at a tribe, they try to figure out whether they have the alphabet or not. If they have an alphabet, they start to learn the alphabet. If they don't, they start to make their own alphabet. After that, they can start to translate the Bible to their language. This is the function of the letter, or alphabet. Through this element, we can know that the Word is the foundation of all things. Let's read John 1:3: "All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made."

The second is the act of speaking.

In general, the act of speaking has two functions or model. The first one is conversation and the other is the letter or epistle. Conversation is so important in the Bible because it indicates the relationship with God. In Israel's understanding, they cannot see God directly, but they can have conversation with God because their ancestors had known God through conversation. Let's read Genesis 17:1-2: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, 'I [am] Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly.'"

Conversation is so important in the Bible because it indicates the relationship with God. In Israel's understanding, they cannot see God directly, but they can have conversation with God because their ancestors had known God through conversation.

This is the conversation between God and Abraham. Another one is Exodus 3-4, which is the conversation between God and Moses. In fact, there are numerous conversations between God and his servants in the Bible. David, Solomon, and the Prophets. They could know God through conversation. And, in the beginning, God created all things in the act of speaking.

Let's read Genesis 1:3, 6, and 20: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.... Then God said, 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and

¹ In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. ⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

– **Hebrews 1:1-4**

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³ You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

– **2 Corinthians 3:1-3**

let it divide the waters from the waters.' ...Then God said, 'Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.'"

The Bible is God's Love Letter

The other case of the act of speaking is the letter, epistle. In fact, the Bible is God's love letter to us. Throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, God has shown his love to us through Jesus Christ. Through the epistles in the New Testament, God has taught us about Jesus Christ. Through these letters, we can read of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

³ It is based on James Strong's Greek dictionary, "Logos" (3056).

Hebrews 1:1–4: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by [his] Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of [his] glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become so much better than the angels, as he has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they.”

These verses talk about God’s revelation. This is because the Bible is God’s revelation. After that, like Jesus Christ is the letter of God, the Bible says that we are the epistles of God. Let’s read 2 Corinthians 3:1–3: “Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some [others], epistles of commendation to you or [letters] of commendation from

you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, [that is], of the heart.”

God made us his epistle. While we are reading the Bible to know God and his love, people read us in order to know God and his love. Therefore, epistle and letter is the revelation of God. It is the way of showing God himself.

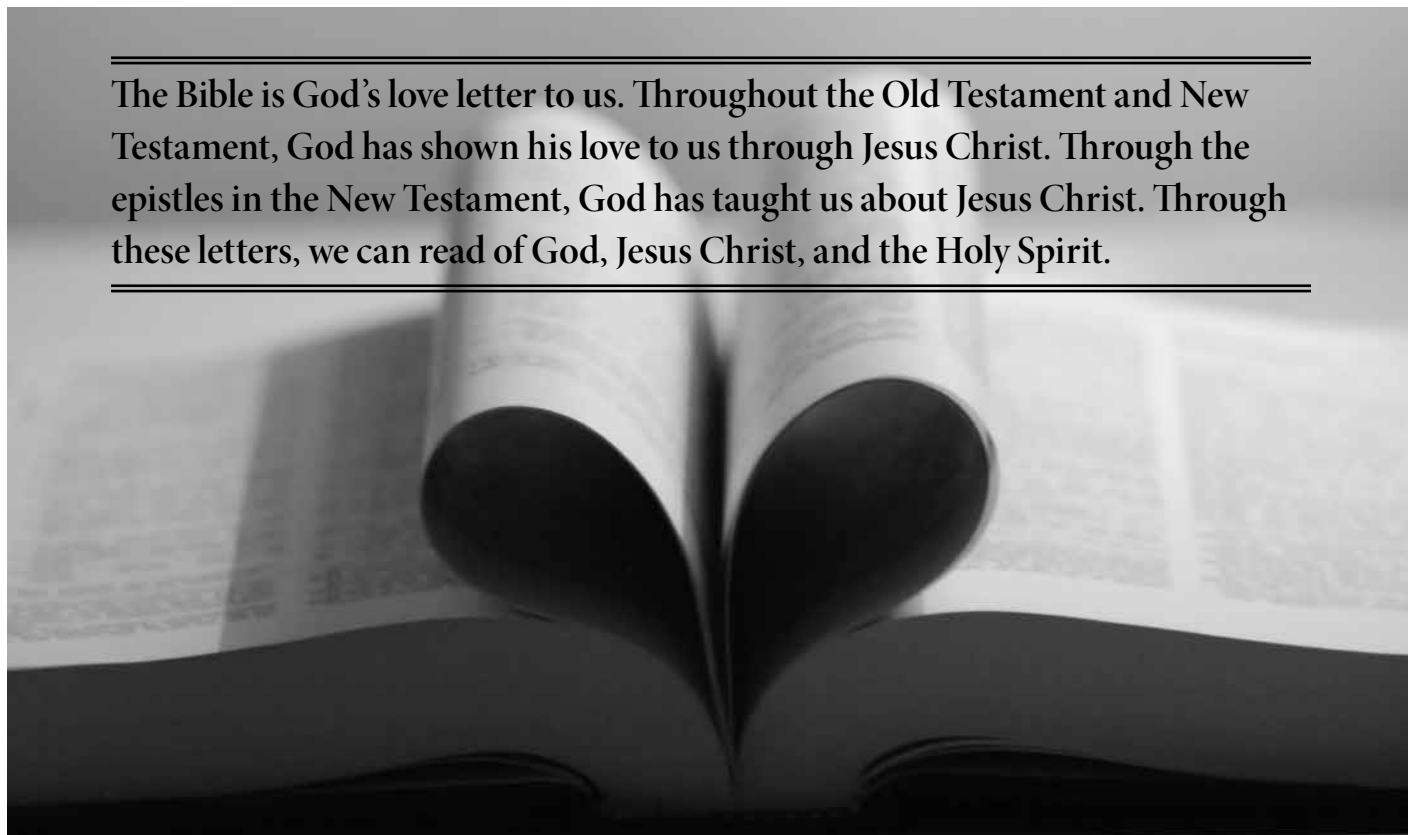
Now, I shared the meaning of Logos. It is an alphabet, letter, and the act of speaking, conversation. This is the key point of the Gospel of John. Conversation, the act of speaking, is the main idea of the gospel of John. While Mark showed Jesus’ miracles, John had a lot of conversation. In the gospel of John, the conversation with Jesus is the act of miracle.

Jesus Wants a Conversation

Today, when Jesus called his disciples, he started having the conversation with them. Through this conversation, those who talked to Jesus were influenced or convinced and then they became Jesus’ disciples. According to the Gospel of John they were the first disciples. However, it not only occurred in the New Testament. Conversation is the common way of speaking in the Old Testament. When God called a servant, God started talking with them and then he made a person as his servant.

Let’s look at Jonah 4:8–9: “And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah’s head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, ‘[It is] better for me to die than to live.’ Then God said to Jonah, ‘[Is it] right for you to be angry about the plant?’ And he said, ‘[It is] right for me to be angry, even to death!’”

The Bible is God’s love letter to us. Throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, God has shown his love to us through Jesus Christ. Through the epistles in the New Testament, God has taught us about Jesus Christ. Through these letters, we can read of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.



When God showed his plan to Jonah and when God explained to Jonah, he did not command him. Rather, he had a conversation with him; then Jonah was convinced. This is the common form or way in the Old Testament.

Conversation, talking with God, is important thing for every Christian because God wants to talk with us. God wants to have the relationship with us. The reason why God saved us or redeemed us is to talk with us. This is why God became our Father and he made us to say to God, “Abba, Father.” Galatians 4:6: “And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’”

This shows the relationship. If there is no relationship between two people, there is no conversation. The reason we have a conversation is that we have the relationship. Likewise, because God has reconciled us through Jesus Christ, we can have the conversation through Jesus Christ.

Because God gave us his letter, the Bible, we can have the conversation with God through the Bible. In this point, worship and prayer is to talk with God. Through worship, when we pray and praise, we can have conversation with God. Worship is not just to fill our heart and mind with something. Worship is to talk with God. Prayer is talking with God. It is not to call only for God’s blessing. We can listen to the voice of God through prayer.

Therefore, Jesus showed us true relationship. Our Christian life is like that. We have a restored relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We cannot talk

with God when we were sinners. When we were enemies of God, we could not have a relationship with God. However, when Jesus came, when Jesus died and rose from the dead, he restored our relationship with God. And we can call God as our Father.

Knowledge and Faith

Finally, through this passage, we can know about faith. When we read today’s passage, we can find that John did not give any clue or reason when the first disciples were convinced by Jesus.

Faith is based on God’s Word, the Bible. The reason why our faith doesn’t grow up is that we do not read the Bible. This means that we are not interested in God’s Word.

However, they made a decision to follow Jesus. When we think of faith, sometimes we think that when we find a reason or clue, we can have faith. However, knowledge doesn’t give faith.

Rather, when we have faith we can have a proper knowledge. For example, when I was young, my cousin said to me that your parents brought you from the bridge in my hometown. At first, I did not believe it. However, when my mother disciplined me severely, I remembered his word. Then I started to struggle that they may not be my real parents. Faith does not come from knowledge. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God. Romans 10:17 says, “So then faith [comes] by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

Therefore, faith is based on God’s Word, the Bible. The reason why our faith doesn’t grow up is that we do not read the Bible. This means that we are not interested in God’s Word. In this point, many people think that when they listen to a sermon, they believe that they listened to the Word of God. But I say that they are not listening to the Word of God. It is listening to preaching. The Word of God is the Bible. The Bible is God’s revelation. Preaching is a kind of commentary on the Bible. Preaching is based on the Word of God. Therefore, God’s revelation is only God’s Word, the Bible.

Conclusion

In conclusion today, Jesus met two disciples of John and then he had a conversation with them. Finally, they were convinced. Now, it shows that when a person meets Jesus Christ completely, his life will be changed because Jesus is the

Messiah. Jesus is the power to change. Jesus is the power to save. And faith is not to have knowledge, but to hear the Word of God.

The Word of God indicates it is Jesus. This means that when we meet Jesus purely, we can hear the Word of God. We become interested in the Word of God because the Word of God, the Bible, illustrates only Jesus.

Let’s experience Jesus. Let’s read Jesus through the Bible. Let’s pray to God to make us know Jesus through the Bible. God will show us his plan and mind when we start to read the Bible. God will show us his Only Son Jesus when we start to hear the Word of God. **✠**

The Final Word

The Demise of Doctrine

***B**ECAUSE OF THE DISINTEGRATION OF VALUES and societal stability, we have, for the most part, shifted from preaching on doctrinal themes to focusing on pragmatic applications of Scripture. The majority of our pulpit, seminar, workshop, and writing emphases now focuses on families, sexuality, identity, relationships, bitterness, forgiveness, cultural conflicts, and a host of other valid ministry concerns. Noting this trend, U.S. News & World Report observes, “Many congregations have multiplied their membership by going light on theology and offering worshippers a steady diet of sermons and support groups that emphasize personal fulfillment.”*

Dealing with contemporary issues is not the problem. Our fault has been that we have dealt with them without grounding our treatment of them in the basic doctrinal realities that undergird them. Much of what we hear today is perceived by the average listener as being true because it is better than the alternative, because it works, because it will make life better, or because it will make them happier. Those all may be true, but that is not the reason we should be committed to biblical formulas for living. Biblical principles are imperative because they are applications of the authoritative Word of God and grounded in fundamental doctrine. They are practiced by a true follower whether they ‘work’ or not, make us happy or not.”

— Joseph M. Stowell

From *Shepherding the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 23–24. At the time of publishing, Stowell was the president of Moody Bible Institute.

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