



The *Pulpit Exchange*

It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)
So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8) Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17)

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Significant Anabaptist Distinctives

Significant Anabaptist Distinctives. This message brings into focus some things concerning our history as is obvious as we look at a title like this. Certainly, as we think of this, we might have various responses. Some people may say that they are not necessarily keen about studying history. Others may have a lot of interest in history. Some people enjoy history because the reminiscing aspect of

history and they like stories to be told.

We will not take that approach, although there may be a few illustrations that may be useful. As we think of this matter of significant Anabaptist distinctives we could raise the question, "To whom was this significant?" Is this significant to the Anabaptists or is this significant to us? We will look at it from the vantage point, or finally how it is signifi-

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cant to us and what it should be saying to us.

In Romans 15:4 we read “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.” That is referring to the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the principle is true as it relates to other history as well. The things that were written before, the things that happened and that

were written, we can benefit from that. We might raise the question, “Why should history be a concern?” Why should we be concerned about that?

I want to read several verses from Psalm 78 which probably most of you know, but we will read it again because it is relevant to this type of a subject. It is a reminder of God’s goodness to His people. We could read the entire psalm but it is a long psalm. We will only read the first

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eight verses. I think it puts into focus an answer to this question, why should we be concerned about history or why should that be a concern or a consideration? “Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth. (2) I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old: (3) Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. (4) We will not hide them from their children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. (5) For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: (6) That the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born; who should arise and declare them to their children: (7) That they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments: (8) And might not be as their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation; a generation that set not their heart aright, and whose spirit was not stedfast with God.”

The thought that we would gather from this reading would be that we should learn some

things from history. Hopefully, we can make some applications so that we can benefit from those things that we learn. Then, they in turn would be a help in indoctrinating the rising generation. In Deuteronomy we have a number of times the Lord telling Moses, and Moses relating to the people how that they were to tell their sons and their daughters. They were to retell and rehearse in the ears of the people the mighty acts of God so that this might be impressed on them and that they would remember that. Sometimes people say, “Well, we do not learn anything from history.” That is true for some people, while for other people it is not true. There are those that do learn some things from history.

Jesus said to the pharisees that they “garnish the sepulchres of the righteous” (Matthew 23:29). I think it possibly puts into focus the concern that Pharisees did not believe in Jesus. Therefore, they were not capable of understanding their own history like they should have understood it. We believe that in order to understand Biblical history or in order to understand Anabaptist history, or any other history there is sense in which we must be in sympathy with the principles that were at stake while this history was happening, or while it was being

formed. That is how we can benefit from that.

We consider history as a part of helping young people to understand the travail of God's faithful witness throughout the centuries. It is not that we are standing in a more strategic or more importance place than anyone else, but nevertheless here we are. Which way we will go and what we will do, I suppose does have some bearing on how we understand what happened in the past as well as how we view the responsibility that this present time brings upon us. Therefore, we consider history as a part in helping young people to understand now the responsibilities that we have today and that we face today.

When we talk about history, one of the mistakes that is commonly made is that often we assume too much. We assume that people know more than they actually know about history. A lot of generalities are given and there are things said and implied that people do not understand because we assume that they know it. Sometimes it is amusing how one generation expects the younger generation to know things that happened even before they were born. "Do you not know that?" Well, how could you know it because you were

not even around then yet. Therefore, we get those reminders sometimes.

We will raise a number of questions about the Anabaptists and answer those questions so that we might get an understanding of what we mean by the Anabaptists. That is a rather general term. *Who were the Anabaptists?* A quick answer to that would be that they were those Christians in the 15th and the 16th century who began in Switzerland and Holland. Today, we call them Mennonites. There would be various quick answers that could be given and that at least would be partly right.

The Anabaptists, as we understand and know them today, were the people who came out of the Reformation from the Catholic church along with the Reformed, the Lutherans, and other Protestant. The Anabaptist separated from the Lutherans and from the Reformed and they were the followers of Menno Simons, Michael Sattler, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, Dirk Philips and others. Those are the Anabaptists. They were called Anabaptists because they rebaptized those who followed them.

Anabaptists, of course, is the English term. They were not called that in their country. They were called the *wiertertauffer*,

those who baptized over again. The Anabaptists were the people who came to the surface in that upheaval that we call the Reformation. Often we say the Anabaptist movement began in January of 1525 which is officially right. However, *The Martyr's Mirror* view of the Anabaptists is that the movement was happening long before that. I am inclined to agree with that. A good many years before that there were many of what are known as the Old Evangelicals in Switzerland and Germany that were not a part of the Catholic church, but were true evangelicals. These men who were students of Zwingli and Luther could not go along with Luther and Zwingli in their reformation practices and separated. They established what they considered a Biblical, Scriptural church. These people found each other and that comprised the Anabaptist movement. In Holland the same thing was taking place while there must have been knowledge of these peoples in both places but that was happening at the same time. In Switzerland, and South Germany and Holland and North Germany these things were happening at the same time in the early 1500's. These are the Anabaptists.

We might raise the question,

“What were they aiming to do?” They were aiming to live according to the dictates of their conscience. They were aiming to have peace with God. They were endeavouring to have a pure conscience before God and man. They were certainly not perfect, but they lived God-fearing lives and were aiming to live lives where they were in right relationship with God. Their enemies said that they are trying to be so holy. Actually, they were trying to get back and reestablish the apostolic church again. We would say that was a complement rather than a put down, even though it was intended to be a slander. It reflects from their enemy's writings where we learn some things about them. The Anabaptists were diligent and evidently were so sincere that the authorities feared that the masses of the common people would join them.

They experienced persecution almost from the very beginning. These men — Sattler, Manz and Blaurock — were actually students and associates with Zwingli. Zwingli was the leader of the Reformed church. They said, “Master Zwingli we are only doing what you have taught us and we are actually doing what you have taught us.” Zwingli, when he saw what his

teachings would finally mean in practical outworking, was not ready to have a church that was separate from the state for two reasons. One was that he was not ready to bear the persecution. The other is that he did not want his pay to stop. Those were two reasons and there probably were some other reasons.

What kind of community and government response did they experience? As I intimated before already, they were immediately hounded with persecution and extermination so that some of them from very early within two years of their initial movement already sealed their faith with their life. The story goes on and they were burned at the stake, drowned, slain with the sword, and they had their goods confiscated. Had not the authorities in some other areas shown some mercy to them, quite likely they would have simply finished them off.

It seems like always somewhere there were some civil authorities who had some compassion on them. William of Orange was one of those outstanding men who had compassion upon them. One historian calls him "One of those illustrious princes of the early insights to human freedom." He was willing to grant them liberty of con-

science and he himself was hounded and criticized for not persecuting the Anabaptists. For that reason persecution ceased much earlier than what it did in Switzerland and South Germany. Well, those were the Anabaptists.

Things that the Anabaptists stood for. What was it that they stood for that made them so steadfast? Maybe before we answer that, we might raise the question yet, "Why are we talking about them since we are not facing anything like that today?" In this country we have freedom. Why should we remind ourselves of those times of travail? I think we readily understand that (shall we say) the pleasant conditions that we have today are not guaranteed to us for tomorrow, or for next year. We have no guarantee that we will have this kind of freedom like we enjoy in our day. In fact, the Scripture would prophesy that we might not have that. Therefore, it is always important to keep in mind that we remember that the faith of the Gospel is as Scripture says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

We are talking about them because they are our spiritual ancestors. The Anabaptists had a large progeny. The Conservative Mennonite church is only a very

small minority of the progeny of the Anabaptists. If all those people who are living today who have “in their veins,” blood of the Anabaptist martyrs, I am not sure if we can imagine what for an army that would be. Nevertheless, it would be a large group.

In every generation, it has always been necessary for individuals to decide for themselves whether we want to stand for and embrace these principles. If we do not want to, we do not have to. That is not forced upon us. In fact, there are far more descendants of the Anabaptists who have moved on over and have aligned themselves and embraced the principles of those who persecuted the Anabaptists than what have embraced the principles of the Anabaptists. Far more.

Today, after more than 475 years of history it is a long story and in some cases a rather gruesome story. Be that as it may, it has a resemblance with Hebrews 11. It has a similarity with that. We will not discuss those areas of Anabaptist history because we do not have enough time. Certainly, though we want to again challenge this group and especially young people that this your day. This is your day, and it is your opportunity to embrace these

principles.

We will list about ten of them. That is not all of them, but it would take longer to expound them all. This is your day. My appeal is that you have the same choice that the generation before you had, and all those generations before you. My plea would be that we stop long enough to consider it.

I know that there are those that feel, “Well, what is the use of troubling ourselves with things that happened in the past? You cannot do anything about it.” And, “We are living in different times and it does not apply and so what. We are living for today.” However, the difference between those young people who will think seriously on those challenges and those who will live for time, we have an illustration of that comparison in the Bible. It is the comparison between Jacob and Esau. That is the difference. Esau was a profane man, and Jacob was a man that thought on these things.

We might raise this question also, “Why do we consider it important to teach God’s Word in the Anabaptist/Mennonite context?” Why do we not simply teach the Scriptures and forget about making the applications from Anabaptist/Mennonite History? Why do we not simply

forget about it? God's Word is "quick, and powerful." It is able to discern between "the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). It can convert the sinner with no religious background and certainly that is all true. The fact remains that God has always counted on homes and parents who have a relationship with the Church to raise a new generation for Him.

That is why we teach the Scriptures in the Mennonite/Anabaptist context. We do not place Mennonite history above the Scriptures, certainly not. We believe that they fit together very well. By the law of averages, if this group is average, there is certain percentage of this group that will turn their back on it, and will not value it. We would hope that no one would, but that is the way it has always been. I am simply appealing personally to each one. Let us think about it. Let us take seriously what are the Anabaptist distinctives.

As we think of these distinctives, we want to explain yet briefly the surroundings and the history of what the Anabaptists faced or what these people faced that became Anabaptists in the 1500's. First of all, in relation to social life, they faced the Renaissance. It was a period

prior to that when there was an increased interest in education, learning, and in development. Printing came into existence and interest in reading. That is one thing they faced.

There was also a religious reformation taking place. The Roman church that had held almost dread sway for centuries over a large portion of the world. That grip was crumbling and what the Pope said was no longer law in everyone's mind. Therefore, they faced that change as far as the religious life was concerned. There was the inability for that religion to change the heart of man and to give peace. Those people who became Anabaptists faced the quest for peace of mind and peace of conscience.

From the political standpoint there was much upheaval at that time. Thus, there were long periods of war and most of that was over religious matters, or at least religiously associated matters. In spite of all that, there were people who desired to have peace with God and hence the Anabaptist movement began. It was certainly a time of, shall we say, refreshing. We also want to keep in mind that throughout the centuries prior to that, there were faithful remnants of people here and there, scattered abroad.

If you read in *The Martyr's Mirror*, you will have there a record of the testimony of faithful people in this century and then in the next century. Then, in the next century it gives a little bit of review of that. When we come to the 16th century or the 1500's then we have a different story. There was the movement of God among those people and it was so outstanding that it confounded not only the religious leaders but it also confounded the political leaders. In many cases they joined hands to try to keep it under control, and try to do something about it, but they never could conquer it. Thank the Lord that they could not conquer it.

What were some of the distinctives and what was it that made these Anabaptists willing to die and made them so prolific in spiritual things? I have ten things. I have given this background so that you understand these things, and I think you will understand that as I give these things that it is these things that we are still trying to promote and to hold on to today.

1) *They accepted the Authority of the Scriptures.* Providentially, right around that time is when printing came into being. Therefore, people finally had the opportunity to read the Bible.

There were far more Bibles around. Is it not something that finally when it was possible to have Bibles more numerous among the people that God had people who were ready to believe and receive it? It always has worked that way. Remember what we read in 2 Chronicles 34: 14, 15. It was in the days of King Josiah. They had lost the book of the Law for a while. It was because no one wanted to obey it. One day when they were cleaning up they found the book of the Law. God allowed it be found because He knew that there was a group of princes who would pay attention to it.

Likewise, the Anabaptists discovered the authority of the Scriptures. They read the Scriptures and they simply took it as a message from God to them. Do we want to do any less? No, we must take it as a message from God. Every Anabaptist, it seems to me, ought to be moved when we remember the quote that we read in Anabaptist history. Zwingli and several of his fellow workers were debating over infant baptism and the mass, then Zwingli said, "Well, we will let the town council decide what shall be done." Simon Stumpf said, "The town council does not decide what the Bible has already decid-

ed.” It was that kind of finality. That is a distinctive. If we are willing to continue to be the people of God, we must have it today. We must accept the authority of the Scriptures for what they are and what they say.

Only two years after the beginning of the movement they already had a confession of faith. They already needed to interpret what they believed the Bible taught. Thus, they went a step further, but they believed the Bible and accepted the authority of the Bible as God’s message to them.

2) *They accepted the doctrines of the Bible such as the doctrine of the Trinity, salvation by faith through grace, holiness of life, justification by faith, repentance, the doctrine of original sin, repentance and how sin can be forgiven.* Historians say that the Anabaptists did not formulate any new theology. They simply obeyed the Bible. That was their strong point. They did not discover anything new. For instance, history credits Luther for preaching grace. Well, it was really not new. It was in the Bible all the time. However, in comparison to the Catholic religion it was new. The Anabaptists simply obeyed. They simply did it.

Their enemies had much to say

about them about these subjects. In their criticism we know they accepted what the Bible said. In relation to holiness of life there were numerous testimonies how their lives were simply above reproach so much so that when the authorities persecuted them and put them to death the job for doing that kind of heinous work became increasingly difficult because the population that was not Anabaptist was not in favour of it. Therefore, they had signals that warned the Anabaptists and did all kind of things to help them along and had it not been for that I suppose they might not have survived. God had His way. They believed the Bible and found practical direction and teaching that we still embrace today. It was a simple, shall we say, laymen’s knowledge of the application of theology that always believes that God’s Word is not complicated to the person who wants to do it. It is only complicated to the one that does not want to do it.

3) *Nonresistance.* They had a love for their enemies. It was not only that they refrained from hating their enemies, but they actually loved their enemies. Every young person should have access to the book *Coals of Fire*, where we have story after story, as well as have access to *The Martyr’s*

Mirror. *The Martyr's Mirror* has a whole thick catalogue of martyrs and their experiences. We need to remember that all those that are listed in there are not near all the martyrs of that time, not near all of them.

What kind of a person did one need to be in order to be included in *The Martyr's Mirror* can anyone tell me? Of course, you needed to be a martyr, but what kind of a martyr? Do you know? He needed to be nonresistant. Thieleman Jan Braght received a lot of criticism from contemporary churchmen for being so narrow-minded for including only nonresistant people in *The Martyr's Mirror* — in that catalogue.

They were nonresistant. While the authorities were concerned that they might cause a revolution, there was really never any danger of that because they loved their enemies. They returned good for evil. We all remember the story of Dirk Willems as he was fleeing from his captor. The thief catcher fell through the ice and Dirk turned around and rescued his captor and lost his life for it. It was a story that it is a part of, shall we say, Anabaptist folklore. It was not simply a story, but it was an actual happening.

Nonresistance did also with

that enjoin the separation of Church and State. The State cannot be nonresistant. They learned that back there. Nowadays sometimes there are those who would try to make the state nonresistant. It never did work and never will. Nonresistance was one of their distinctives.

4) *Non swearing of oaths.* The New Testament says they should not swear (it only says it two times) in Matthew 5:34 and James 5:12. Time after time there were those who gave their life who could have saved their life if they would have given in on that and would have sworn the oath, or would have sworn allegiance. The Bible said, "No." So they did not do it. That was one of their distinctives.

5) *The free and voluntary church resulted in an unsalaried, non professional ministry as over against what the reformers experienced.* One's heart still goes out to the Anabaptist leaders who needed to run from place to place and hide and minister to their flock in at night time while their supposedly Christian contemporary preachers were protected by the State and had a good salary. John Calvin in Geneva had a good salary, and was well protected. That was the difference. We have in their own writings

what actually is the voluntary Church, the true Church. These are the six characteristics. 1) Unadulterated, pure doctrine. 2) The Scriptural use of the ordinances. 3) Obedience to the Word of God. 4) Unfeigned brotherly love. 5) Candid confession of God and of Christ. 6) Bearing oppression and hatred for the sake of God. Those six points they had written down. That is what distinguished the Anabaptist church from the State churches.

6) *A life of separation and nonconformity.* They were called out from the world and circumstances certainly did set them apart. For one thing they did not have some of the problems that we have today in trying to help people be separate from the world because the world “kicked them out,” and did not want anything to do with them. They did not belong there in some cases. In other cases maybe they were more tolerant of them. There is ample historical data that would point out their life of separation from the world and it was in every respect of their life, not only in one or two areas.

7) *Believer’s baptism and the importance of baptism and, of course, the rejection of infant baptism.* That was one of their distinctives. How many homes

were broken up because the parents would not allow their children to be baptized? Therefore, that revealed them as Anabaptists when they did not bring their children to the State church to be baptized.

8) *Church discipline and maintaining a clean communion/fellowship.* That was another Anabaptist distinctive. Sometimes that did make some problems not only between them and the world, but it made some problem in the church even as it does today. It always did, and I suppose it always will.

9) *They were delivered from the world’s pleasure program, pleasure seeking and sports program.* They had it then, but not near like we have it today. Certainly, it was. There was no question. They were simply not involved in that. When they were, why they were not Anabaptists anymore. It is about that simple.

10) *The missionary calling of the Church.* They were driven from place to place and sometimes some of those things shifted. Sometimes they were satisfied merely to be able to exist. Maybe their attitude changed toward mission work later because of that. Today, we still sense the need for bringing the Gospel to the world.

The list of Anabaptist distinctives could go on. I have mentioned these ten things. They are things that we are still striving for and holding fast to today. Whether the next generation will have that opportunity, I suppose rests in part with you, whether they will still have that opportunity. Certainly as we think of the Anabaptist distinctives and what that means, we do not believe that this is meritorious to our salvation because we happen to be in this line. Rather, we believe it is a responsibility that we have. Unless we are faithful in it, it will

be required of us.

May the Lord help us that we would appreciate these distinctives and what it cost to maintain them. More than that, may we identify ourselves with them and make them our own and do our part in our generation to promote them. If the Lord tarries twenty years from now when a new group of young people are in our midst, they will also have that same opportunity that you have. In order for that to be true you will need to accept those distinctives. May the Lord bless you.

Understanding Our Distinctive Practices

What do we mean by Distinctive practices? The word distinctive means, “serving to identify or distinguishing.” It is that which distinguishes one thing from another. The term implies that a comparison is being made. When something is distinctive, it is distinctive from something else, or it is different from something else. When we talk about distinctive practices, we mean distinct from what or from whom? We are not thinking of ways that we are distinct from other religions like Judaism or Islam but we are rather thinking of some things that distinguish us from other Christian groups or denominations including much

of Mennonitism.

Our title also has the word, “understanding,” in it — Understanding Our Distinctive Practices. I do not consider myself old. I guess, I would be among the older ones and as an older generation tends to take a lot for granted. We assume that everyone knows why we do the things we do. That is not always a safe assumption. What would you say if someone asked you why the men and women sit on opposite sides in our church services? What would you give as a reason for that? Would you say, “Well, I do not know. We always did it that way. We do not really ever talk about it.” That is not a

bad answer, but I think we probably can give a better answer than that.

The basic teaching on some of the distinctives like separation, nonconformity, and the ordinances, we talk about that in instruction classes and in messages. We have courses on those subjects at Numidia Bible School. In this message we will not be looking at a broad range of distinctive practices. Rather, we will focus on some of those practices on which we normally give as much teaching. The ones I will look at fairly much are in the category of practices related to public worship.

We are not looking at this subject because these practices are being questioned or are under attack. Rather, we need to talk about them before that happens, before we get to that point. Before we look at specific practices, I would like to think a little bit about the reason for distinctive practices. What are the reasons that we have practices that are different from other professing Christians? We are not being distinctive simply for distinction's sake. In other words we are not being different just to be different. There are people in areas other than religion where they are likely to do something different from someone else does

simply because they want to do it differently. That is not what we are talking about. These distinctive practices we will be thinking about and others that we will not be thinking about are rooted in Anabaptist understandings of the Scriptures.

What I will call an Anabaptist understanding of the Scriptures includes an understanding of the importance of the Word of God. Jesus said in Matthew 24:35, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away." We believe this is God's Word. It will stand and we accept it as that. 2 Peter 1:16 says, "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty." What is he saying here? He is saying that when we told you about the Gospel and about what Jesus did, this is not some fanciful story that someone made up, but we were there, we saw Him. We were eyewitnesses of His majesty. He says we were there also with Him when He was in the holy mount and we heard that voice that came from heaven. We were there with Him. We heard that.

Did you ever think that it might be good if God would tell

you what to do in a voice that you could hear with your physical ear? Then, you would really know what God's will is. We know the Bible as we have it as much the Word of God as if we would hear God's voice speaking to us. Peter continues, "And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount" (verse 18). Then he says, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy" (verse 19). What does that mean? I used to think maybe that means that the Bible is more sure than that voice that came from heaven. Yet, we hardly can say that one voice of God is more sure than another voice of God. That is all God's Word. I think what he is saying here is that even though we were not there and were not eyewitnesses like Peter was — even though we did not see Jesus — we have a word of prophecy that is more sure than the "cunningly devised fables." This Book, this Word of God is more sure. We can know that it is God's Word.

Then, he goes on to say in verse 19, "Whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts." Sometimes you read stories of people who are lost somewhere in the dark

and they are going in circles. Finally, they see a light and they head toward that light that gives them direction. The closer they get to it the brighter it becomes. He says that is how we ought to take heed to the Word of God. We ought to follow it as though our life depended on it because it does. We are also in a dark place. We are in a dark sinful world and we need a guiding light. We need to heed the Word of God that way. This Word of God is not the word of man. He says further here that it is the Word of God through holy men. "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (verses 20, 21).

Peter talks about Paul's writings and what some people do to Paul's writings. 2 Peter 3:16 says, "As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction." What does it mean that they wrest the Scriptures? This verse highlights to us the seriousness of twisting the Scriptures to fit our own thinking. It results in

destruction. We do that to our spiritual peril.

Now, saying a little bit more of this idea of what I have called an Anabaptist understanding of the Scriptures. That includes a strict adherence to the Scriptures and the firm conviction that Bible principles need to be applied to life. In other words, we believe that God actually expects us to follow His Word. We may ask, "Do not all Christians believe that?" No, not all professing Christians believe that. In fact, there are many who do not. There needs to be a willingness and a readiness to follow the teachings of Scripture. Sometimes we make the Scriptures harder than they really are. They really are not so hard to understand as we sometimes make them because we are not quite ready to do what it says.

I would like to give an illustration. A brother related to me this past fall after one of our communion services in our district how that after he came into our circles he was corresponding with one of his episcopalian friends and challenged him as to why their church does not practice foot washing. This person wrote back to him and explained that Jesus did not really mean that we should actually wash each others feet. Therefore, this

brother told me, "I wrote back to him and I said, 'Now, had Jesus meant for us to really do it, what do you think He would have said?'" In other words what more would He have needed to say if He really meant for us to do it? I think that illustrates a point that I am trying to make. We are not merely conservative Protestants. We are rather Anabaptists in our thinking and outlook.

The Bible does not spell out all the details of church practice. Therefore, the church needs to decide on an approach and decide how to do these things. We do not believe there is only one right way to do some of these things. On the other hand, I would hasten to say that we do have an historic precedent we believe is consistent with principles of truth. Then, there are good reasons to continue what we are doing. We are not only doing it simply because it has always been done that way. That is not a bad reason to do something, but that is not the only reason we do it. Neither should we become experimental with our forms of worship. We do not change simply for the sake of change or to be like other churches around us. We should beware of too great an interest in variety.

1) *The practice of having simple meetinghouses.* I would ven-

ture to say that for most of us, as we are here in this service, we really have not given much attention to, or if any, to the building. We did not focus on the colour or the decorations, because there really are not any. Therefore, the building is a place for us to gather and accommodate us as we gather together for worship but it is serviceable. This has been a mark of the sectarian groups of the sects who do not fit into the mainline denominations for many, many years. It is related to our basic understanding of what worship is.

“God is a spirit,” (John 4:24) and we worship Him from the heart in a spiritual experience. We gather in public worship to offer praise to our Maker and to be instructed in His ways. We are ready to be challenged and rebuked if needed. We did not come together simply to be made to feel good. Rather, we want to hear what God has to say to us and if that is a rebuke we want to accept that. We do not gather primarily to receive a good feeling through aesthetics. Aesthetics means “something that is artistically beautiful or of a pleasing appearance.” It is something that appeals, or is pleasing to the senses.

I found an interesting article under the heading of public wor-

ship in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*. It talked about the Anabaptist view of public worship. “The Anabaptists believed that the true church is raised up where faith, spirit and power result in repentance and change of life and obedience to the truth. Hence, the Anabaptists placed little emphasis in formal public worship or ceremonies and rejected all liturgy. Persecution, which made meetings difficult and often dangerous, gave added support to this basic attitude.”

Now, listen to this: “The Anabaptists did not come from a week of irreligious, worldly living and expect a beautiful building and attractive liturgy to draw them to God. They insisted that the Christian walks with God constantly in holy obedience and expected their daily life naturally to a climax in the fellowship of the gathered community of disciples, where a major concern was to seek the will of God from His Word and to help one another to higher levels of discipleship.” Further on in this article he says, “In these services the high authority of the Bible, of course, placed it at the very centre of the service. And the reading and exposition of it, or admonition from it was the most important element.”

We do not need an ornate

building with pictures, statues, or stained glass to be in a frame of mind for worship. Really, a fancy building is not consistent with the New Testament emphasis on Gospel simplicity. It is true that some changes have been made over the years. We have more comfortable benches. We have benches with full backs, and a lot of our churches have carpet on the floor. Therefore, there have been some changes. I believe our meetinghouses should be accommodating and serviceable but not showy.

2) *The practice of having a lay ministry.* This is something we do talk about sometimes, perhaps a little more than the other distinctive practices that we are looking at. Our leaders are non-professional and not specially trained. They are chosen by God through the Church. The Scriptural admonition is, “Look ye out among you” (Acts 6:3). This lay ministry is also a free ministry. Maybe I should emphasize the meaning of that word, “lay.” Maybe you wonder why I use that. Sometimes we talk about the non-ordained people as the laity. In some ways that is sort of a misnomer for us because “lay” means the opposite of professional and we do not have a professional ministry. Therefore, in a sense we are all

lay people and that ministry is a free ministry — an unsalaried ministry is what I mean by that. Our ministry are not shackled by depending on the congregation for our livelihood.

We do not think about that a lot because we are familiar with the way we do it. Think about what that would be like if a man who is teaching the people and preaching to the people leading them, is depending on them for his living. That has to affect how he will relate to them. It is also related to a non-liturgical approach to worship. That is a word that we do not use a lot in our circles. Notice that the excerpt that I read from the Mennonite Encyclopedia article used the word, “liturgy.” Liturgy is a body of rites prescribed for formal public worship, especially associated with the prayers and ceremonies used in the celebration of the Lord’s supper or as in some churches it is known as the Eucharist. It is also true that we also use some prescribed formulas for some of our ceremonies like weddings, ordinations, baptisms, and so on. We have not as much in the prescribed formula in the communion. However, what we have is not the same as the highly prescribed formulas used by what are known as the liturgical churches where much

more is read.

The Mennonites over the years were somewhat suspicious of too much emphasis on that. Too much that is prescribed and even the prepared formulas that we do use in the past often were given by memory rather than read. That was the Old Mennonite way of doing it and is still done in some circles today. I am not saying we should go to that, but I am using that to illustrate the point that the descendants of the Anabaptists were suspicious of going the liturgical route. Often the liturgical churches also have what is known as clerical vestments. A vestment is a garment, especially a robe or a gown worn as an indication of an office. This is related to what I said earlier in the point on simple meetinghouses about an emphasis on items of beauty or aesthetics to aid worship.

Since I started getting this in the beginning of Winter Bible School, I saw a picture in the newspaper of an episcopal bishop. He was quite ornate in the way he was dressed with his attire, his sort of a maroon coloured gown he had on and some jewelry — a necklace with a cross and so on. It fits into that whole pattern of having the things that appeal to the senses to help us worship. We believe that

is contrary to New Testament teaching. To be fair, we should say that not all the churches that do not have the distinctive practices that we have are liturgical churches. They are not, but some of them are.

3) *Unaccompanied congregational singing*. In our discipline, in Article VII — Restrictions in item 8, we begin by saying, “Recorded music should build appreciation for the worship hymns of the church, and for congregational type singing. We believe that a cappella singing is the form that most accurately represents New Testament principles as well as the historic Anabaptist, Mennonite faith.” I think that standard reflects a Biblical view.

In Ephesians 5:19 we are told, “Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” Some have tried to argue that the Greek word translated “melody,” there means instruments. I do not think that really can be proven. I think the key thought in this verse is the phrase, “in your heart.” “Making melody in your heart to the Lord.” True worship comes from the heart, and it is not primarily aesthetic, that is, something of artistic beauty. Instrumental

accompaniment does not enhance worship. It can be pleasing to the senses. It sounds nice and it, as I said, can be pleasing but that does not mean that it is worship.

Recently, I was at a funeral in a funeral home and there was music playing as we were assembling there. After the service was over, we heard it over again. It was nice to listen to but it did not constitute worship. We are not saying that four-part harmony does not in any way touch the senses. It does, but we are saying that needs to be secondary. Worship needs to be primary. Music should be seen as primarily for worship. I mentioned unaccompanied congregational singing. A trained choir has a similar effect as what accompaniment does. It is for some of the same purpose. You have people who are specially trained to sing for the rest of the congregation and there is a lot of emphasis on the beauty of it.

Thinking about congregational singing, we also say in our church disciple in Article III — The Church in item 10, “Since the New Testament teaches individual relationship with the Lord and since the Holy Spirit is given to every believer giving him joy which may be expressed in singing, and since spiritual life

and devotion are promoted by participation, congregational singing shall be engaged in all regular worship services.” Then, we go on to make some exceptions for small group singing for special occasions in a witness, in street meetings, cottage meetings, rest homes, private homes, jails, and in a school setting. However, for our worship services and our churches, we engage in congregational singing.

This standard touches on two basic things and that is that every person needs a new song in our hearts which replaces the old song. Then, we have something to sing about. Therefore, every believer has this spiritual experience and can give expression to that. Also, it says that “spiritual life and devotion are promoted by participation.” Therefore, we will have congregational singing.

In our former setting (before the conservative regrouping of the 1960’s) this special singing was coming into the church. It started with (at least as I observed it, I guess I did not see the very beginning of it) my first observation was maybe a quartet singing a few songs at a young people’s meeting. Then, it gradually increased where sometimes there was a chorus present for and gave the program for the entire evening service, not for

Sunday morning services, of course. I remember one time being at Weaverland on a Sunday evening and the church was full from the front to the back and there was a male chorus singing that evening. I do not think I ever went there any other time on a Sunday evening. It was sort of out of our area and there was a brother sitting beside me who almost never got there. He was honest enough to say to me, "You know if there would be a preacher here this evening, I probably would not be here." It attracted a lot of interest.

I feel strongly that we should continue to stand against bringing this practice into our church. Our discipline was deliberately worded by the leaders of that time to exclude special group singing in our worship services.

4) *Another practice and this is one I alluded to earlier is segregated seating.* This is something that is not specifically spelled out in the Scriptures, but it is a practice that has come to us from the past. I am not sure why it is not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures. Maybe it is because it was assumed by the writers of the Scripture in the New Testament that this is how it is done. We have reason to believe that this practice was carried over from synagogue worship into the

Early Church. I personally cannot document this, but I have been taught that and there actually are still today Orthodox Jews who practice this segregated seating in their synagogue worship. That is not what we base this on necessarily, but it interesting to see that this practice, even in other circles, has been carried down to this modern time.

I remember in Bible doctrine class at LMS (Lancaster Mennonite School) under Raymond Charles that he alluded to that practice as related to synagogue worship and brought into New Testament practice from that. One day he asked the class to list things that we do in our church that are purely or simply tradition and not really based on the Bible. One of the students mentioned that practice of separate seating. He did not write that on the list on the blackboard with the other things. He said, "That is not in the same category." Then, he went on to explain where that practice came from. It certainly was done in the history of the Mennonite Church.

The Mennonite Encyclopedia in describing worship referring to the Russian and Prussian groups said, "Seating of the sexes in worship service was formerly universally separate. A description of the Swiss/South German

worship service of the Anabaptists of Switzerland and South Germany mentions men and women sitting separate.”

This is also a practice that was under test in our Lancaster Conference setting. It began by dating couples when they went to church on a date. They would sit together in the evening services. That was quite common in most areas. There were some areas of the church and some congregations that resisted it, or were trying to keep that from coming in. Nevertheless, it was fairly much accepted. I remember an impression that was made on me in my mid teen years when we were attending Winter Bible School at the Ephrata church. Brother Jesse Neuenschwander was speaking one evening in the address and I do not remember what his subject was. I do not remember anything else he said that evening but he said something very much like this, “I will say something that some of you will not like very well. Show me a church that allows mixed seating and deals with a fornicator.” Now, I personally will not be able to verify that from my observation. I would not be able to say that every church that allows mixed seating does not deal with a fornicator, but I do agree with what we say in our

discipline about why we have separate seating.

Do you know what our discipline gives as a reason? This is what we say. This is also in Article III. “12. Due to the contribution that mixed seating makes to the moral breakdown, we will follow the practice of segregated seating for worship services. Weddings and funerals may be considered exceptions.” Separate seating contributes to maintaining a proper social reserve between men and women.

Sometimes it is necessary to cross the aisle after our services, but that is limited and basically the sisters visit with each other after church and the brethren visit with each other. We do not even think about that because we are so accustomed to it. Think of the protection that provides and the reserve that it helps to maintain among us.

Sometimes people feel that it is so nice for families to be able to sit together. I think that is putting too much emphasis on the social. In fact, I came across an interesting idea recently that separate seating actually helps to break up the family unit in our worship services. It emphasizes the fact that we are part of the church family when we are together in our worship service.

Our families are sort of lost, identity is lost, you might say, when we are together as a church group and as a church family that takes the precedence then. I think that there is a lot of truth to that.

Sometimes the argument has been used that there is better control of the children when families sit together. I do not think that has really been proven to be the case. In fact, some things I have heard already it seems like it works the other way when you have mixed seating and the whole family sitting together. There is another benefit to separate seating. This is not the main reason to do it, but this is again going back to when I was about sixteen. Martin Ressler was teaching a singing school at Denver and he quoted a Church of the Brethren man one evening who told him that the two things that spoiled their congregational singing were mixed seating and changing to round notes. Think about that.

5) *Our practice of kneeling prayer in our worship services.* This again is something we mention in our discipline in Article III. “13. In keeping with the following Scriptures: Psalm 95:6; Philippians 2:10; Luke 22:41; Acts 20:36, we will continue the practice of kneeling prayer in our

worship services.” Did you notice the word, “continue” in this statement? This is another practice that was under challenge in our former setting. The Scripture references that are mentioned here, when we say, “In keeping with the following Scriptures:” “O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker” (Psalm 95:6). “That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow” (Philippians 2:10).

Then, we have the example of Jesus Himself as described in Luke 22:41. This is when Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was not a worship service. “And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed.” Our Lord Jesus Himself kneeled down before His Father and lifted up his heart in prayer to Him. We have the example of the apostle Paul when he was taking his leave of the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:36, “He kneeled down, and prayed with them all.” Then, right near that (and this reference is not in our discipline) in Acts 21:5 it says, “And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled

down on the shore, and prayed.”

This again is a practice that comes to us from the Scriptures, of course, but also in our history, this historically was practiced among the Anabaptist groups. Again, I am referring to an article that I looked up in the Mennonite Encyclopedia on prayer. It mentions different Swiss Anabaptist groups and their practice of kneeling for prayer. Then it says, “From Switzerland and South Germany the custom of kneeling in prayer was brought to Pennsylvania and became the universal practice among Mennonites and Amish of all groups of this background in America.” It does go on to say that in the last number of years this practice has been dropped. The Encyclopedia was written in the late 50’s I believe. We know when we think of a posture of prayer that God can hear us in whatever posture we are. We do have some prayers in our services that are not kneeling prayers. We have some standing prayers sometimes.

However, the practice of kneeling is very fitting in the worship of a holy God. While we do not kneel for all our prayers, we should keep the practice of kneeling for prayer in our services. We need to be in humility before Him and in penitence and

yieldedness. We should not become so cultured and sophisticated that it is considered awkward or improper to kneel for prayer. We should put forth some effort to maintain reverence when we are going to and from prayer. It seems to me, from what I have observed, that the discontinuance of this practice is related to a more casual approach to worship. I do not know if you have ever observed this or not, but I have thought about it already. If you go to funerals and settings where they do not ever have kneeling prayer anymore, the language that is used in the prayers is different. It is not as formal. To me, to become more casual in our praying is heading the wrong direction in addressing a holy God and worshipping Him.

The distinctive practices we have reviewed are perhaps not the most important points of our faith and practice. Yet, as we look at the big picture, they are an integral part of maintaining the true faith. Therefore, they are important. Some of these, I said, we hardly think about because we are so accustomed to doing it the way we are doing it. We benefit because those who have gone before us have remained steadfast and have maintained these practices. Therefore, they have

been brought to us. We should not take those benefits for granted. The question is, “Will those who follow us have the same benefits?”

I would conclude with Paul’s

admonition to the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.”

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The Supremacy of the Word

From a Devotional by Eby Burkholder

Sunday, April 2, 2006

Centerville Mennonite Church

Avoiding the Hezekiah Mentality — 2 Kings 20:19

From a message by Clyde Wadel

Sunday, November 16, 2003

Waterloo Mennonite Church

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Youth Book Reprint

Andrew Dunn: An Irish Story *continued*

Extreme Unction.

Andrew thought the Word of God better deserved the character of infallibility than what Father Dominick called the Church; and as he was resolved not to allow a point that could not be proved out of that Word he and his antago-

nist could not agree on this article and so they were obliged to pass on to another that was extreme unction.

“As to this,” said Father Dominick, “there can be no dispute about the matter, for St. James says plainly, ‘Is any man sick among you? Let him call for

the elders of the Church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Name of the lord' (James 5:14). What can you say to this?"

Andrew. "Why, sir, this I will say, that you have repeated only a part of the passage, by which means you keep the apostle's meaning out of sight. He adds, 'and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up: and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.' Now, sir, though I don't pretend fully to understand the matter, I see enough to show me that you put a wrong meaning upon it. You anoint a man, supposing he is dying, to give him a passport to Heaven. But if he should happen to recover he must be anointed over again when he afterwards seems to be in a dying state. A child may see that St. James is talking of the sick man's being raised up after he is anointed by the prayer of faith, so that your anointing and St. James' are two very different things."

Father D. "You're a very presumptuous fellow, and woe be unto you when you come to die if you are not anointed by a priest!"

Andrew. "Indeed, sir, I have not the least intention of looking for it. The Word of God makes no mention of it in the sense you mean; and I have no fear if I die

in a simple dependence on the atoning death of my Saviour that I shall fall short of Heaven."

Purgatory

Purgatory came next before them.

Father D. "So you do not believe in Purgatory since you read the Testament?"

Andrew. "I can find nothing like it there, sir."

Father D. "Can't you, indeed? That's strange, when so many great men could find it there. What do you think St. Paul meant when he said, 'The fire shall try every man's work, of what kind it is'?" (1 Corinthians 3:13).

Andrew. "I think the meaning is very plain, sir. By looking at the passage you will see that the apostle is speaking of the different doctrines which might be taught by different people after the foundation of truth had been laid. Some of these he compares 'to gold, silver, and precious stones,' meaning sound doctrine; and some to 'wood, hay, and stubble,' meaning unsound doctrine. Now he says all these shall undergo a trial at last, and what was so proper to try the different materials which he spake of as fire? If the doctrines were like 'gold, silver, or precious stones,'

we all know that they would receive no hurt by the fire, but the contrary. But if they were like ‘wood, hay, or stubble’ they would be consumed by the fire. But what has this to do with a place to burn the souls of men in, to purify and fit them for Heaven?”

Father Dominick looked at the place and read it over and after he heard Andrew’s explanation, he was surprised that he had never understood it before. However, he did not confess to Andrew that he thought his interpretation right; but told him “that he saw only the surface of the thing, and that the Church, which saw deeper than he, had declared that there was such a place as Purgatory, and that was enough.”

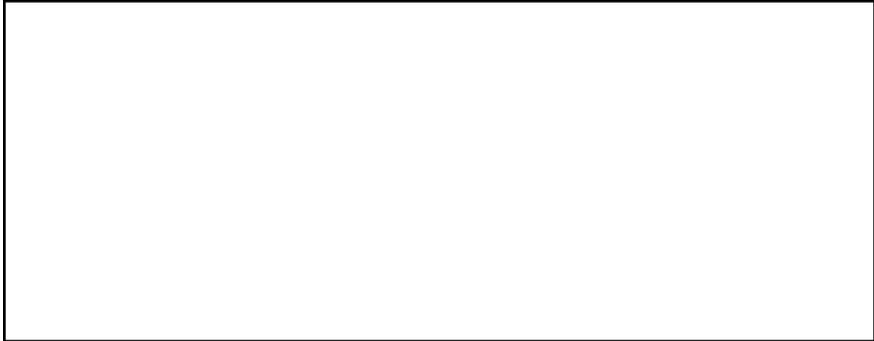
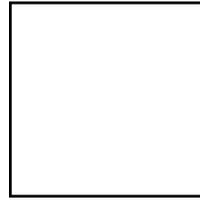
Andrew. “Don’t be offended, sir, if I say what I think on this subject. It is this, that Purgatory would never be so much contended for if it were not for the profit which ariseth from it to the clergy. I can well remember, sir, when I used to give you money to help to pay for masses to get my old acquaintances and friends out of Purgatory. Now, sir, if you have such a power, I think you ought to be very happy to use it, merely out of charity to the poor burning souls, without looking

for any payment. But when I see that all these masses must be paid for before they can be said, I cannot be suspect that the true cause why Purgatory is maintained is the benefit which arises from it to the clergy. Nor can I be persuaded that they are sincere until I see them taking all the pains in their power, without fee or reward, to help the souls that they say are in a suffering state. Even then, though I shall believe them to be in earnest, I shall from Holy Scripture oppose the doctrine, because, beside other objections to it, it gives to Purgatory what is everywhere said to be done by the Blood of Christ. According to that passage, ‘The Blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin’” (1 John 1:7).

Father D. “I told you before, and I tell you again, that you are a most uncharitable fellow, and no one can expect to get any good of you while you think that you know better than the Church.”

Andrew. “The Word of God, sir, is my guide, and I can admit nothing that is not proved from it.”

As they could not agree about Purgatory they were obliged to pass on to Andrew’s next objection.



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