

## **From Persecuted Prophets to Privileged Pacifists**

[CMCL Sermon January 28, 2018, by Jonathan Sauder]

In the name of our mother, in the name of our brother Jesus, and in the energy of the spirit, greetings!

Today I want to continue our theme of this month: acknowledging the gifts and liabilities that an Anabaptist and Mennonite heritage has given us. I'll briefly sketch a history of the shift from being persecuted prophets to becoming privileged pacifists.

First, though, a look at two of the lectionary scriptures for today. In Deuteronomy 18:15-20 Moses is represented as announcing that Moses will not have the last word. God will speak to future generations through future prophets. And each generation will have to wrestle with the question of which prophets are authentic and which are counterfeit. In First Corinthians chapter 8 we have advice for a much later generation on how to stay in community when equally pious prophets disagree on what is permissible and what is not for a congregation living in a culture of idolatry. The apostle Paul's position is that not all consciences are created equal and that some faithful disciples of Jesus can participate with good conscience in the sort of civic ceremonies that include reference to idols that would overwhelm and damage the consciences of weaker, more simple-minded believers.

Today, some Mennonites practice conscientious tax resistance. They inform the IRS each year that they are not paying the government the percentage of their income that would normally be spent on financing the United States military. Instead they are sending that percentage, each year, to organizations that finance the survival of the victims of war, pollution, and famine. Other Mennonites interpret such resistance as a violation of the principle of nonresistance and, instead, pay their taxes in full. They have conscience against disrespecting the very government that legalizes their privilege of exemption from military service and that records the deeds that protect their acreage from the clamorous claims of those whose children have no land, no money, and whose best hope of a reliable income is often to join the military.

There has never been only one way to be nonconformed or prophetic. Neither in Paul's time, nor Menno's, nor ours. Steve Nolt reminded us a few weeks ago in his sermon that the debacle at Munster, where self-proclaimed prophets took over a town and forced all adults to be rebaptized, was not an episode that we may write out of Anabaptist history. It was one expression of Anabaptist zeal in the 1530's.

But even for those who want to censor the historical record and say that the Munsterites "weren't really Anabaptists," (as though we can vote people in or out of that category from a distance of

five centuries), it is still obvious that there was a great deal of mutual recrimination between groups that we would all recognize as conscientious Anabaptists. For example, the Hutterites, who first adopted a common purse when they were refugees running for their lives and later turned this temporary survival tactic into a permanent regime of Christian communism, did not hesitate to call the Swiss Brethren false brethren. They accused them of outright disobedience to Jesus because of how they owned private property and paid taxes for purposes of military use and *gotzenopfer*, or, “idol’s money.” The Swiss Brethren retaliated with accusations against Hutterites of emigration without paying outstanding debts at home, harsh child discipline in a commune that separated children from parents, and refusal to pay taxes merely because they might be used for military purposes. (Endnote 1) Obviously it’s not only modern Mennonites who’ve differed over war taxes.

Both the self-designated Apostle Paul and the self-appointed prophets of Munster were sure that Christ’s return on the clouds was so imminent that there was no time left to live out a full term conventional marriage. Of course, their recommendations were different. Paul had conceded that monogamy was preferable to fornication, while the Munsterites thought that a sudden shift to forced polygamy was in order. Menno Simons, in following decades, took Paul as his authority for saying that if someone converted to the Anabaptist faith but their spouse consistently refused to, the rebaptized believer could dissolve the marriage and marry an Anabaptist instead. Did you know that Menno Simons was more liberal than Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster? When did you last hear of our pastor telling someone that “because your spouse is still refusing to give up Lutheranism and become Mennonite you are now free to set up housekeeping with another eligible Mennonite?” The possibility that we hold marriage in higher regard in our congregation today than either Paul or many of the early Anabaptists should prevent us from combining nostalgia for a Golden Age in the past with cynicism about “historical drift” in the present. And the fact that from their very beginnings Anabaptists accused each other of unfaithfulness to the principle of Biblical Nonconformity should prevent us from claiming that only one group can today claim to be the true heirs of the Anabaptists, whether we would prefer to confer that honor on those who still today drive horses or those who drive what one of our former pastors once referred to over the pulpit as the “Toyota Pious.”

We wouldn’t have our Bible had there not been prophets like Moses with enough confidence to announce that the greatest of all the gods had entered into a personal contract with a tribe of landless refugees and that their tribal order, with its regulations of every detail from sabbath-keeping to menstruation, was now one and the same as the law of God. We wouldn’t have Christianity as we know it without a man like Paul insisting that God was going to send Jesus back so soon that there was no

longer enough time to make Gentiles into ritually observant Jews and that therefore all nations now have direct access to the God of the law without having to conform to the rituals of that law. We wouldn't have Anabaptism as we know it today if not for impatient hotheads in Switzerland who insisted on such a rapid pace of parish reform that they were soon thrown out of the parish and, not being able to have their original wish, decided to make a principle of having a new kind of church which didn't require everyone in a parish (or region) to become a part of it. (The hotheads at Munster apparently didn't get this memo?)

Our tradition's many points of origin across time are, all of them, fragile and contingent. They need not have happened when or how they did. And if our impetuous founders, whether ancient or medieval, were here today, we'd probably experience most of them as too obnoxiously self-assured to be trusted to shape our precious traditions of faith.

How Anabaptist are we? Pastor Susan raised that question in her sermon last week. And part of her response, as I understand it, was that potential strengths and weaknesses frequently derive from the same source and that this is true of both individuals and communities. Nonconformity, she said, has, historically, been about both self-righteous sectarian segregation *and* anti-imperial pacifism. She reminded us that although Mennonites have used Romans 12 primarily to justify nonconformist separatism, it's really about transformation. A process, as you know, which is not easily scripted in terms of purity versus compromise or liberal versus conservative. She echoed Martin Luther King Junior's call to a "creative maladjustment" with empire as a stance that would honor the Anabaptist heritage in our time.

Today we read a few verses from one of MLK's favorite poems, "The Present Crisis." In another stanza, James Russell Lowell reminds us that "worshippers of light ancestral make the present light a crime." He was trying to convince his 19<sup>th</sup> century fellow Christians that the institution of slavery could no longer be tolerated in good conscience just because it had been tolerated by genuine Christians in previous centuries. Among the minority of American Christians inclined to agree with him were some nonconformist, broad brimmed and big bonneted folk called Quakers. I think there's no finer example of a Jesus believing tradition willing to learn a new morality in a new century than that of the Friends. Quakers were at the forefront of advocating for an expanded prison system in Britain and America in early modernity. They thought that prisons were more restorative and rehabilitating than Christian Europe's common practices of government-sponsored torture, dismemberment, and public, ritualized lynching. But then, instead of clinging to this prison agenda with whitening knuckles and eyes piously shut to the pain of caged humans through the centuries that followed, they remained, instead,

genuinely “traditional.” And, as Steve Nolt reminded us in his sermon, traditions are about combining things old and new. African-American prophet Angela Y Davis (who, unlike U.S. Mennonites, was honored by being named onto the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list for a while) has pointed out that by the 1960’s and 1970’s Quakers were again at the forefront of the abolitionist movement. (Endnote 2) They recognized that regardless of how well-intended some early modern prison programs may have been, American racism had merely replaced slavery with a prison industry. And, choosing to align their consciences with the victims of the economy they participated in, rather than with its managers and beneficiaries, the Friends began calling for the abolition of the entire system of putting humans in cages.

To be faithful to a tradition is to allow it to change in order to serve humanity. Traditional Jews such as the writers of Isaiah and Jesus of Nazareth thought that even the Sabbath was made to liberate humans rather than that humans were designed to serve the Sabbath. Statements such as these are misrepresented if they are labeled as either “liberal” or “conservative.” They are genuinely traditional.

But not all accommodation of tradition across time is faithful accommodation, of course. It is my understanding that Anabaptism has largely moved from being a prophetic movement to a privileged holding pattern. Note the contrast, for example, between these two quotes:

The first is from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century court records of Michael Sattler, a former prior of an abbey, who left his post, married a woman from the Beguine order, and accepted adult baptism. The Catholic prosecutor had accused him of siding with the Ottoman Turks who were at that time threatening to conquer Vienna and sweep across Europe. Here is a part of Sattler’s statement to the court: “I appeal to the words of Christ.... If the Turks should come, we ought not to resist them; for it is written: Thou shalt not kill. We must not defend ourselves against the Turks and others of our persecutors, but are to beseech God with earnest prayer to repel and resist them. But that I said, that if warring were right, I would rather take the field against the so-called Christians, who persecute, apprehend and kill pious Christians, than against the Turks, was for this reason: The Turk is a true Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith; and is a Turk after the flesh; but you, who would be Christians, and who make your boast of Christ, persecute the pious witnesses of Christ, and are Turks after the spirit.” (Endnote 3)

Here’s a second quote, this one from a formal letter of congratulation to Adolf Hitler when he came to power. The letter was from the Conference of East and West Prussian Mennonite Congregations. They expressed “deepest thanks for the mighty revolution, which God has granted our nation through your energy.” (Endnote 4)

The Anabaptist movement emerged from the fundamental conviction that God is a partisan of the poor and an opponent of politically and socially respectable economic predators. This economic,

spiritual, and social solidarity with the victims of Christendom's social ethics meant that Anabaptists were seen as a threat to the survival of Christianity itself. Their allegations of moral equivalency between Christian and Islamic soldiering and their recommendation of ecclesial communism for the relief of the poor made them the target of specially recruited secret police. Soon, their most articulate leaders were killed or banished. So, how did Anabaptists devolve from economic dissenters, so critical of wealth accumulation that the Christians around them called them "*communisten*" in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to a tribe capable of hailing Hitler as an almost Messianic deliverer from Bolshevik communists?

Surviving Anabaptists found ways to maintain their communal existence by farming and manufacturing without vocally critiquing the dispossession of peasants and the unfair treatment of workers. Ecclesially internal mutual aid began to take the place of socially disruptive solidarity with Christendom's most vulnerable. Quiet cooperation with government took the place of political protest. Separatist holiness replaced public denunciation of social injustice. As the prophetic edge of the tradition, the energy that had initially earned them the derogatory designation "Anabaptist," wore off, their identity became more tribal than missionary, and more defensive than critical. As I see it, this shift in identity is accurately reflected in the group designations deriving from founders' surnames: Menno(nite), Amman(ish), and Hutter(ite). Such patriarchal or ancestral designations strike me as quite appropriate because when radicals become privileged, what was once a movement becomes a holding pattern. When an ethnicity comes to be admired as an economic and agricultural powerhouse for a nation state at war instead of hated as an enemy of civil religion and a threat to the survival of the nation itself, I find tribal designations to be much more appropriate than words like "radical" or "Anabaptist."

A large part of the Mennonite shift from activism to quietism over the centuries was accelerated by the granting of formal privileges from nobles, monarchs, and, eventually, nation states. Note that the roots of the word "privilege" indicate "private law." After being the special targets of laws designed to extinguish their movement, it is easy to see why privileges would be accepted quite eagerly and interpreted as gifts of God. Let's take a quick look at some of these special laws against Anabaptists.

When burnings at the stake by Protestant and Catholic defenders of Christendom backfired by producing new proselytes to Anabaptism, more systematic tactics were adopted. In Bern, Switzerland, for example, from approximately 1600 to 1800, Mennonites were imprisoned on starvation diets for years at a time. From around 1650 through 1800, Mennonites and Amish in Southern Germany were not legally citizens, as they had not been baptized as infants in state churches, and thus could not inherit land. They would rent for decades at a time, sometimes for 99 years. Sometimes, after they had

improved a farm for two generations, the owner would void the rental agreement and evict them. Mennonites and Amish were barred from burying their dead in communal cemeteries. In some regions, Mennonites and Amish paid a special head tax because of their ethnic identity, and were restricted to farming and forms of labor that were not considered to be trades or crafts. (Endnote 5)

A natural response to such persecution was to emigrate when possible. Mennonites moved to regions where they were able to lobby rulers for property rights and exemption from military conscription. (Endnote 6) “Beginning with William of Orange’s *Privilegium* for the Dutch Mennonites in 1577, there were documents issued for Mennonites in the Palatinate, East Friesland, Holstein, Denmark, Prussia, Poland, Russia, Mexico, Paraguay, to name the most comprehensive documents.” (Endnote 7) When Mennonites accepted Czarina Katherine’s invitation to the Ukraine in the late 1700’s, for example, they received a formal *Privilegium* granting them, among other things, exemption from the swearing of oaths, exemption from military service, and the sole rights to producing beer, vinegar, and brandy in their new territories.

Mennonites in the Ukraine largely maintained their German language and culture along with their religion. Their adherence to the *privilegium* made them the *de facto* lords of the local peasants around them who were not thus privileged. When the Leninist Bolsheviks came to power during World War I and Stalin during world war 2, Mennonites were targeted by private gangs and by the communist government and were killed or exiled as *kulaks*, exploitative land-holding oppressors. During both wars, the German army temporarily pushed back the Russians from the Ukraine and many Mennonites followed the German military retreat to escape their enemies. Thus their tendency to see Hitler as a deliverer.

My own Mennonite ancestors were among those who migrated to Pennsylvania before Czarina Catharine’s invitation to the Ukraine. Responding to the sales pitches of William Penn, who traveled the Rhine river valley recruiting “settlers” for the “new world,” they came to America to lay claim, at long last, to fertile farmland that they could legally pass on to their children. At first, Ben Franklin was appalled at the number of Germans settling west of Philadelphia, and complained that one could travel from Northern Virginia all the way to Allentown and get along just fine without speaking a word of English. But such fears at the immigrants’ lack of desire to learn English was soon unwarranted as my people became “white” through their cooperation with colonial displacement of indigenous populations. (It is this process that is at the core of “Whiteness” on our planet. For historical evidence that whiteness is not primarily about skin color, see Endnote 8)

After describing a 1744 treaty encampment in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where Native Americans and European-Americans formally renewed their agreements to live in peace, Mennonite historian John Ruth notes that the surviving documents tell us more about the sentiments of the indigenous people, who were very aware that they were being treated unfairly, than they do about the thought processes of the so-called “settlers.”

“To a later generation pondering that great land transfer, the thinness of the historical record is disappointing. Whereas persecution had tormented the Swiss Anabaptists into writing down their experience, peaceful takeover of some of the best soil in the world seems to have kept their fortunate great-grandchildren too busy to record their thoughts. Easier to find are financial records such as Hans Moser’s claim of damages for trees debarked on his farm by Indians for their dwelling during the Lancaster treaty.” (Endnote 9)

Unlike the Mennonites in the Ukraine, Mennonites in Ohio and Pennsylvania were not driven to allegiance to a national *Fuhrer* by marauding gangs and the back and forth skirmishes of Red and White armies. But they did retain a form of “two-kingdom” thinking, assuming that allegiance to Jesus’s kingdom manifesto in the sermon on the mount would render them apolitical. Their self-understanding was that of subjects, not of citizens. They maintained this self-understanding long after the American Counterrevolution of 1776 (Endnote 10), in which colonists successfully defeated two direct British threats to the White American Way of Life: the threat of curtailing the slave trade and the threat to begin honoring treaties with Native Americans. After they were unwillingly transformed from being *subjects* of the British Crown to being valued *citizens* of a “white” “nation” constituted by its oppression of African and American nations, Mennonites kept on reading the Martyr’s Mirror and the New Testament, neither of which knew anything of citizenship and its responsibilities. They happily maintained their privileges within the new colonial settler state. By now their privileges were becoming a large part of their identity.

Large portions of North America’s Amish, Brethren, and Mennonite tribes maintained conscientious objection to personally participating in war. This stance became an ethnic peculiarity and a privilege aggressively negotiated and renegotiated with Washington D. C. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Amish, Brethren, and Mennonite power brokers who could not in good conscience use their influence to advocate for government intervention on behalf of the formerly enslaved populations on which the U.S. economy was founded, did not see their conscientious “separation of church and state” as an impediment to undertaking direct advocacy with the federal government for their own privilege of exemption from military draft. As a “private law,” or “*privi-legium*,” pacifism soon became a privileged

stance rather than a prophetic stance. Whereas Anabaptist conscientious objection was a vocal denunciation of Christendom's militarization, Mennonite conscientious objection soon learned to contribute to the military state economically in exchange for the privilege of keeping Mennonite youth out of the army. Farm deferments were granted during U.S. warmaking years in the twentieth century precisely because total war was a war between national economies rather than only between warrior classes.

I think it is high time to interrogate the frequent use of such terms as "historic peace church" to describe the biological and ecclesial descendants of Anabaptists. When a church's survival comes at the cost of collaboration with European colonialism, what sort of "peace" is being promoted? Is not peace of private, personal conscience the enemy of prophetic witness against empire in such a context?

Here's another quote to consider. This one comes from the mid 1900's, long after Lakota, Dakota, and Nakoda tribes were displaced to make room on the prairies for Mennonite and Hutterite tribes. "I don't see why a German who eats a piece of bread should torment himself with the idea that the soil that produces this bread has been won by the sword. When we eat wheat from Canada, we don't think about the despoiled Indians." Any guesses about where that quote is from? Anyone? It's a bit of ethical reasoning from an Austrian named Adolf who had deep admiration for the moral fortitude of White U. S. Americans who routinely perform the amazing theological feat of interpreting land cleared by genocide and an economy powered by slave labor camps as being special gifts from God -- as their Manifest Destiny. The quotation itself was published in a book called *Hitler's Table Talk: His Private Conversations*. (Endnote 11) The Fuehrer called his largest new colony, in the Ukraine, a new American West. Being a "white" man, he said that it was the duty of Germans "to Germanize this country by the immigration of Germans, and to look upon the natives as Redskins." (Endnote 12)

When I consider the logic behind Hitler's quote about our shared ability to consume Canadian flour without the least pang of conscience, I realize that I have a great deal more in common with him than I was schooled to believe. (Endnote 13) Perhaps the Apostle Paul's leniency in 1 Corinthians 8 will excuse my annual attendance at Thanksgiving Day Feasts where God's personal relationship with "his" chosen nation is traditionally celebrated by communicants who identify themselves with the legacy of "the Pilgrims." Peter, a prominent Apostle of the ancient Eastern religion of Christianity, is said to have asserted that "love covers a multitude of sins (1Peter4:8)." Western civil religion, at least on this continent, apparently trusts that Thanksgiving covers a multitude of atrocities. My inherited conviction that gratefulness is a sure route to a good conscience is just one aspect of my multifaceted White privilege. This sermon, I hope, is a slight divergence from my natural (ethnically mediated) tendency to

share the vision of U.S. emperors. I do not aspire to the moral confidence on display in Bush the First's 1988 statement, for example, that "I never apologize for the United States of America. I don't care what the facts are." (Endnote 14)

My own sect of origin is a small quietist congregation that considers itself Anabaptist but has convictions against both social justice activism and political advocacy for the American empire's most vulnerable populations. I grew up grateful for my heritage but was excommunicated in my early thirties for contesting a few of the contradictions inherent in our tradition. I am now a grateful member here at CMCL, where we have our own gaps between stated ideals and daily practice. I have no recipe for consistency or clear path out of complicity. I do not propose to scapegoat any Christians of centuries past whose survival depended on substituting quiet, personal objection to war for public denunciation of Christian empire. But I do wrestle with the consequences of that form of survival. Their movement slowed into a holding pattern and their empire-threatening counterculture became a tourist-attracting subculture. Nor am I interested in calculating blame in my day. Comparisons of ethical superiority and inferiority engage in just the sort of moral calculus that I take to be invalidated by the Christian gospel to which I hold myself accountable.

As the poetry of Lowell (Endnote 15) and the witness of the Friends reminds us, fruitful ethical deliberation is not about judging the past or labeling our neighbors but about keeping our moral future open.

Healthy religious moral formation helps people to see that we are not merely accountable for "obeying" our conscience; we are accountable for the *content* of our conscience, as well. The etymology of the word "conscience" suggests "knowing with" someone. When religious ethics are funded by a real commitment to "knowing along with" the victims of a society, religious conscience can be leveraged to alleviate suffering rather than to justify it. But when conscience is privatized, when moral consciousness is no longer social, economic, and political, some of the most conscientious, "peace loving" residents of the globe can live in happy collaboration with an ecocidal and genocidal world order.

In 2004, George W. Bush privately told a few Amish admirers in Lancaster County "I trust God speaks through me. Without that I couldn't do my job." Somehow, five centuries after the flare-up and extinguishment of the Radical Reformation, the Amish seem a very appropriate audience for that imperial disclosure of confident conscience.

I conclude by insisting that the Amish are not unique in their ability to craft an *ordnung*, a religious code of ethics, that exists in quiet symbiosis with empire. Until people of all traditions learn to name and dismantle our own privileges, especially those that seem most innocent or virtuous, we will

continue to have conscience against vulnerably listening to the suffering populations among and around us.

Is there hope for whitewashed Mennonites such as myself? Perhaps, because tradition is not yet at a lifeless standstill. If Christians can learn to read Christianity against itself, there is a possibility that the current slogan, very popular with activist Mennonites today, will get us moving again: “No justice, no peace.”

Adult baptism is by now a rite of passage in most instances, rather than a change of allegiance away from the imperial economy and into solidarity with its victims. My hope is that Mennonites can become radical again by renouncing a conscience that conforms to privilege and recovering a conscience that “knows with,” and aches along with, the countless victims of our massive privilege.

#### Endnotes

1. Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525 – 1618*, Cornell, 1972, pages 39-40.
2. Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*, Haymarket Books, 2016, page 23.
3. *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* edited by Yoder, Herald Press, 1973, page 72.
4. Benjamin Goossen, *Chosen Nation: Mennonites and Germany in a Global Era*, Princeton, 2017, page 123.
5. John S Oyer, *They Harry the Good People Out of the Land*, Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen, Indiana, pages 58-59.
6. Goossen, *Chosen People*, page 21.
7. Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, page 80.
8. David R Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White; The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*, Basic Books, 2005.
- Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, Routledge, 1995.
9. John Landis Ruth, *The Earth is the Lord’s*, 2001, Herald Press, page 245.
10. Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of America*, New York University Press, 2014.
11. quoted in Goossen, *Chosen People*, page 149.
12. Goossen, *Chosen People*, page 147-148.
13. Hitler read U.S. history and shared the moral vision behind the forced marches and concentration of unwanted populations into “reserved” areas. He “often praised to his inner circle the efficiency of

America's extermination – by starvation and uneven combat – of the red savages who could not be tamed by captivity." (John Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, Ballantine, 1976, page 959)

If you don't read Carroll P. Kakel III's book *The American West and the Nazi East*, at least take a look at its cover. The two black and white photographs of pioneer wagon trains (with their bonnets reminiscent of our locally famous Conestoga wagon) are quite similar in many respects. But they depict different continents and different centuries. The top photo was taken in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the region of Nebraska territory. The bottom photo was taken during the Nazi era and shows a wagon train of pioneers headed east into a different frontier.

See also James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model*, Princeton University Press, 2017.

14. quoted in Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: The "New World" Through Indian Eyes*, Houghton Mifflin, 1992, page 212.

15. The two most daring and brilliant lines of Lowell's great poem could perhaps serve as the motto of anyone who is genuinely committed to a living, and therefore changing, tradition:

"New occasions teach new duties; Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of truth."