

Dear friends,

I well remember the first time I faced the stark realization that I was a Mennonite and different. My fourth-grade friend, Gregory, and I were riding home from public school on the bus. We were talking about our future, how we would always be friends and do things together when we grew up. Then he enthusiastically began to describe activities that from my upbringing I knew to be worldly. Desperate to save our lifelong friendship, I turned to Gregory and said, “You will have to leave your church and become a Mennonite when you grow up.” Thus, the inevitability of our way of life impressed itself on my eight-year-old mind. A year later I made my decision to follow Christ. Of course, Gregory never joined my church, and I do not even know his whereabouts today.

The theme of separation from the world ran strong in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania where I grew up. But I wrongly assumed that, except for our plainness, we believed the same things that other Christians believed. Then one evening at the Chambersburg Mennonite Church, where I was a member, a visiting speaker jolted me with a graphic picture of my martyr heritage. Even after forty years, I can still see Brother Irvin Martin stepping to the edge of the platform to demonstrate how they shoved the head of Felix Manz beneath the water trying to make him recant. Then the preacher showed us how they stripped his bound hands over his knees, thrust a stick between to hold them, then dumped him into the water to drown while his Anabaptist mother shouted encouragement from the riverbank. From that moment I knew that my destiny lay in the faith expressed by Felix Manz, though I but dimly understood what that meant.

Several years later I visited Zurich, Switzerland and stood beside the Limmat River at the place where it had happened. By then, I knew that it was the Protestant reformers, not the Roman

Catholics, who opposed my Anabaptist forefathers in Zurich. I realized that the issues then were freedom of conscience and separation of church and state. Knowing that these were no longer issues in the free land of America, I again wrongly assumed that only our separated lifestyle and nonresistance distinguished us from our neighbours who now actually professed the same fundamentals of faith that we do. This false assumption was driven home by many sermon comments about our “twin distinctive doctrines.” It seemed that we were Biblicists just like the fundamentalists around us except for our two distinctives. Unfortunately, my false assumption was a reality in the beliefs and lives of many in my church. But this I did not realize until many years later.

In the meantime, I struggled through a spiritual crisis that obliterated thoughts of history and heritage. Agonizing doubts about my salvation drove me finally in desperation to surrender all of my life unconditionally to Jesus as my Lord. Brimming with new motivation and power of the Holy Spirit, I began my quest for reality. The Scriptures became an absorbing delight, and I made it my purpose to master the Book. Then new movements in the community began to challenge the worldward drift in the church. Earnest preachers called for a return to “what the Bible says.” Revival would follow when we had “scriptural beliefs,” “scriptural standards,” and “scriptural churches.” The genius of our Anabaptist heritage, we were told, was our forefathers’ insistence on *sola scriptura* (the Bible alone). At first, I agreed. It sounded so right. Certainly, obeying God meant obeying the Bible. But something seemed to be missing.

The secret of my new life was my passion to model my life after Christ, not my preoccupation with the text. For me, the text was not an end in itself, but a means to an end—learning to know the thoughts, feelings, and will of my Lord. But I saw well-meaning people getting stuck in the text. And then the disagreements broke out all around me over what and who were “scriptural.” In the confusion that followed, one thing became clear. Much

sincere teaching and debate focused on sharpening “scriptural” ideas from the Bible, but not on the example of Jesus Himself.

I saw this discrepancy most clearly in our “scriptural” conclusions about mammon. The “Biblical” discussion was impressive. The exegesis put every verse in its proper place. No one could find fault with the “scriptural” logic. There was only one problem. The conclusion did not match the voluntary poverty of Jesus Himself, nor did it ring true to His many clear teachings on the subject, even though we had “scripturally” explained them all. It was a watershed discovery: Being “scriptural” did not guarantee that we would be Christlike—the whole point of being *Christian*.

With new ears I began to scrutinize the teaching around me. The call to follow the Bible was loud and clear, along with the call to obey the Church and separate oneself from the world. But a primary call to focus finally on the example of Christ and follow Him was seldom heard. The rare allusions to modelling the actual life of Christ in everything were usually peripheral to other primary concerns. It was obviously assumed that getting the verses right would make us Christian.

I finally turned again to the Anabaptists. Was Biblicism their secret? To my surprise, I found that the Protestant reformers were the Biblicists, insisting that people turn from the dogmas of the church to the authority of the Bible. Martin Luther gave his people the Bible in German so they could read it for themselves. Zwingli preached through the Gospels verse by verse. Between them, they bitterly debated the meaning of the literal text. It all sounded so familiar. So what then did the Anabaptists do differently?

To be sure, I found that the Anabaptists also turned to the Bible in serious study. But they went “beyond the sacred page” to focus on the Person the Scriptures were intended to reveal. For them, the final appeal was actually *solus Christus*. A credible discipleship was their powerful theme, not a sterile Biblicism

that actually misses the life of the Person. They saw the Scriptures as an “outer word” that would lead the genuine seeker to the “inner Word,” which was Christ. It was the confirmation I needed for the conviction the Holy Spirit had given to me.

Herein lies the great distinctive of Anabaptism. The “gospel” of the fundamentalist still focuses on the text, manipulating verses into proper theologies. Somewhere along the way, we unwittingly adopted their emphasis. But we dutifully tacked on our “twin distinctives.” It is obvious now that this was not enough to save us, and most of my boyhood friends were finally swept into the camp of the Biblicist reformers. The gap between Reformation theology and Anabaptism is as wide today as it ever was. It is the difference between a misguided Biblicism and the true Word of God.

Our critics will say, “There should be no difference between the Scriptures and the Word.” The writer of this book would heartily agree. The glory of this powerful union as well as the tragedy of the unintended separation is shown in his story.

Peter Hoover has not given us a history of the Anabaptists. You can read that history in the many volumes by others. In this book, however, you will meet the Anabaptists in their struggles to live as Jesus would against strong Biblicist opposition. The strength of Brother Peter’s presentation lies in the many actual quotes that allow the Anabaptists to speak for themselves. Obviously, these quotes have been selected and no doubt reflect the writer’s bias (as all books do). But the reader is heartily invited to judge the truth for himself. Have we really followed Christ as our forefathers so passionately followed Him? Or has His pristine example been obscured by many “scriptural” inventions that they would have rejected outright? Does all our emphasis on the church lead us to experience the unique Anabaptist vision for community? Was “the secret of the strength” what we commonly assume today?

This book will likely provoke much fresh and vigorous discussion. It will challenge many long-held assumptions about what it means to be an Anabaptist. Some will see this as threatening and dangerous. Others will be encouraged to focus with new passion on the Person and example of Jesus Christ. With a fervent prayer to this end, we invite you to consider the story you hold in your hands.

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