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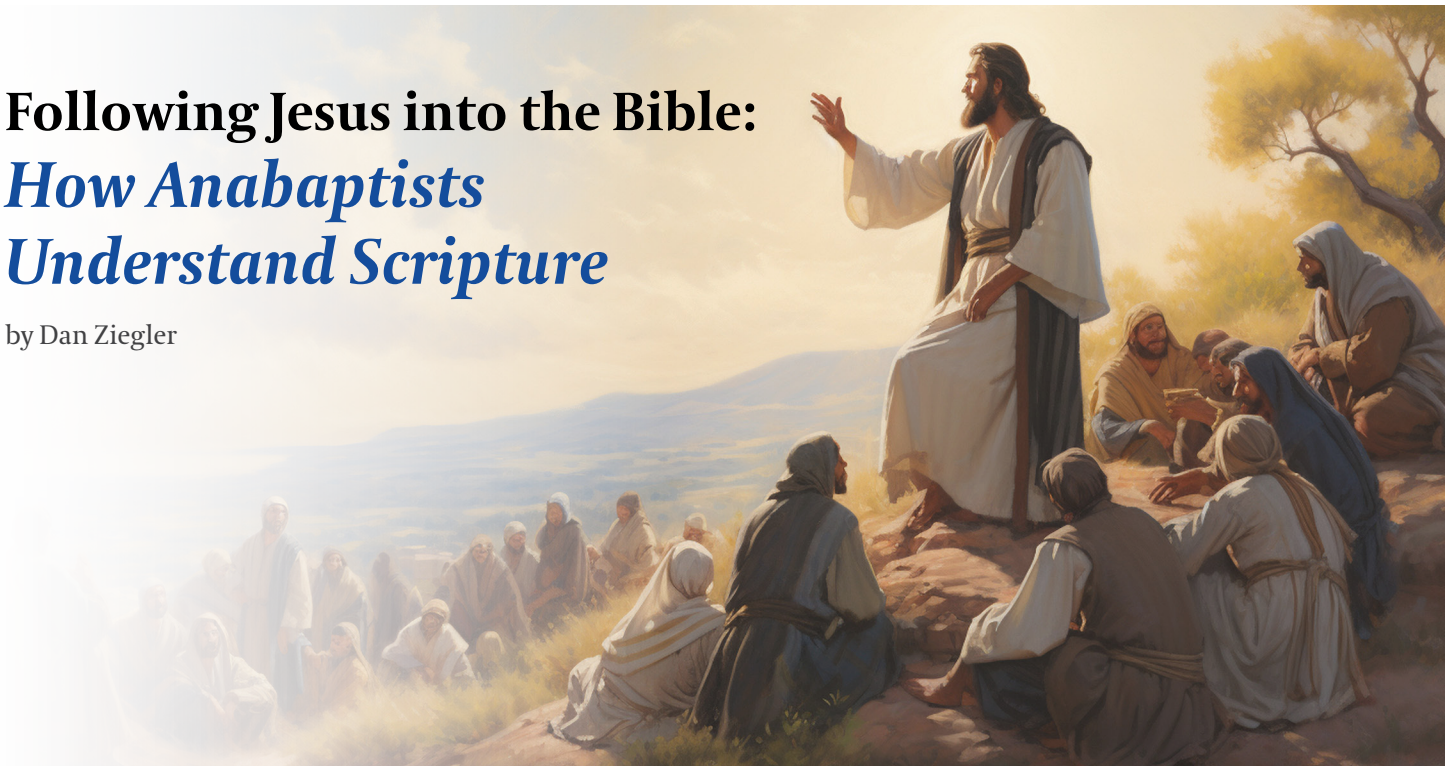
The ADC Disciple

Anabaptist Disciples of Christ is an affiliation of Conservative Anabaptist churches seeking likeminded fellowship, instruction, and accountability in church administration and congregational life in the Biblical pattern of the Apostolic church.



Following Jesus into the Bible: *How Anabaptists Understand Scripture*

by Dan Ziegler

Have you ever wondered what is behind the unique set of convictions that define conservative Anabaptists (Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, Brethren, and related groups)? We Mennonites often call them "distinctives" – deeply rooted practices among the "plain people" that are uncommon within much of the rest of Christianity, like:

- Non-resistance (conscientious objection to violence and participation in war)
- Not swearing oaths
- Not suing another person
- Strong teaching against divorce and remarriage
- A focus on servanthood and surrenderedness
- Simplicity and non-accumulation of wealth
- Foot-washing
- Church discipline
- Abstaining from political involvement
- Mutual aid and communal sharing
- Non-conformity and modesty in dress
- Women's head covering
- Greeting one another with the holy kiss
- Distinct gender roles within family and church, etc.

Are we plain folks privy to some kind of special revelation? Or are we really just quaint cultural oddities – an anachronistic tribe of Germanic ascetics, suffering from the long-term effects of too much scrapple and over-ripe sauerkraut? The truth, of course, is we're neither. We non-conformed Anabaptists are just regular folk, no more astute or intrinsically spiritual than our neighbors.

So, what drives the uniqueness of the conservative Anabaptist faith?

I have been working on that question for 35 years now — ever since my wife and I, as young seekers, left the evangelical faith tradition to become Mennonites. Disillusioned with the vacuity of the dominant culture in America, and how it echoed through the churches of our youth, we were drawn to the way the conservative Anabaptist community lived out a refreshingly clear and united contrast to the values of the world. Now, after decades of immersion in Anabaptist beliefs, culture, and history, I believe I have come to understand what is behind Anabaptism. It is a hermeneutic - a simple yet profound approach to understanding and applying Scripture. Dean Taylor, in a discussion on *The Essence of Anabaptism,* concurred. "Anabaptism isn't a denomina-

tion," he said, "it is a biblical worldview; a hermeneutic…an entire way to interpret the Scriptures."

The movement began almost 500 years ago when several zealous young followers of Jesus started asking some simple yet life-changing questions: "What if Jesus is who He says He is?", "What if He means what He says?", and "What if He's talking to us?" Understanding their response to these questions holds the key to understanding the Anabaptist faith.

#1 - What if Jesus is who He says He is? *(Christocentrism)*

Anabaptists, like all believers, claim the centrality of Jesus Christ and affirm the redeeming power of His death and resurrection. As "Christians" (Christ-ones) we all bear His name! However, for Anabaptists, the relationship with Jesus is more than just a saving one, or even a devotional one - it is also a guiding one. Since we believe Jesus is who He says He is, we Anabaptists acknowledge Him as not only Lord of our lives, but also Lord of the Bible. Thus, we read Scripture Christocentrically – with Christ at the center.

Why Christocentrism?

First, because we recognize Jesus as God in human form. Jesus tells us that if we have seen Him we have seen the Father because He and the Father "are one" (John 14:9). The author of Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus "is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). The Apostle John calls Christ "the Word" (*Logos*), the personification of God (John 1). In other words, Jesus is God as God intends to be known. Because Jesus is the epitome of God's revelation of Himself to humanity, we see Jesus at the center of Scripture. As John D. Martin says, "Jesus is the Word (Logos) of God to whom the word of God (Scripture) bears witness."

Second, because Jesus asserted the centrality of His own teachings. Repeatedly, Christ shared His expectation that His followers obey His instructions (John 8:31, 12:26, 14:15 & 23). In the Great Commission, Jesus prioritized His own teachings, telling His followers to "go into all the world and make disciples…teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). We privilege the instructions of Christ because He privileged them.

Third, because it is the hermeneutic Christ and His apostles used. All throughout his ministry, Jesus revealed Himself at the center of the biblical narrative. For example, in a Nazareth synagogue at one of His first public appearances, He declared Himself as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy (Luke 4: 16-21). Another time, after His resurrection, He spoke to two distraught followers on the road to Emmaus, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Following the lead of their Master, the apostles also used the same approach as they preached Christ. Look at the great sermons recorded in the book of Acts: Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2), Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7), Phillip evangelizing the Ethiopian (Acts 8), Paul at the synagogue of Antioch (Acts 13). In every case, these brothers proclaimed Christ as the object of the biblical text. How can we not approach Scripture the same way?

Reading Scripture Christocetrically means reading all of it in light of Christ. In the Old Testament, we see Him present in creation, and we hear Him spoken of by the prophets. He is typified in the stories of faith, and foreshadowed in the narrative of God's hand in history. We also read the Old Testament in perspective, knowing that Christ has fulfilled much of it, and that He represents a New Covenant "enacted on better promises" (Heb. 8:6). In a similar sense, we understand the epistles of the New Testament are established on Christ and His teachings (1 Cor. 11:3), and they must be read in light of that foundation. The apostles built on what Jesus said and did, and they would never wish to be understood as contradicting their Master.

Since we comprehend Scripture most clearly through the lens of Jesus, we must first strive to know Him deeply. I encourage new believers to immerse themselves fully in the gospel accounts of Christ before venturing into the rest of Scripture - Jesus frames our worldview! As His followers, we need to learn to care about what He cared about, emphasize what He emphasized, and become grounded on His perspective. This is why we Anabaptists focus on themes like the Kingdom, love for enemies, care for the poor and oppressed, cross-bearing, servanthood, and surrenderdness. It is also why theologizing about doctrines that are not vital to the message of Christ is of limited interest to most of us.

Throughout the history of Christianity, Scripture has been used to justify all manner of pet doctrines and ideas. For Anabaptists, any conclusion gleaned from the Old or New Testaments that does not pass "the Jesus test" must be reconsidered. For example, when we hear Christians using Scripture to justify ideas like the prosperity gospel, participation in warfare, or civic religion, we weigh these conclusions against the witness of Jesus, and find these interpretations (not Scripture itself) wanting. D.L. Moody said, "The best way to show that a stick is crooked is not to argue about it or to spend time denouncing it, but to lay a straight stick alongside it." We Anabaptists have learned that laying any doctrine alongside the teachings and example of Jesus is key to attaining "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph. 4:13).

> ***"All the Scriptures point us to the Spirit, Gospel, example, ordinance, and usage of Christ."***

Centering our biblical understanding on Christ is one important way we Anabaptists respond to the question, "What if Jesus is who He says He is?" This Christocentric approach has anchored our view of Scripture since our movement's inception. Even a cursory reading of the early Anabaptists' writings and "confessions of faith" (*Schleitheim* in 1527 and *Dordrecht* in 1632) reveal the primacy of Christ's teaching for our forebears.[1] Anabaptist leader (and namesake of Mennonites) Menno Simons, summed up the Anabaptist position, declaring, "All the Scriptures point us to the Spirit, Gospel, example, ordinance, and usage of Christ."

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(1) For a deeper look at historic Anabaptist Christocentrism, see J.C. Wenger's essay *Our Christ-Centered Faith* (1973) and Stuart Murray's *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (2000)

With Christ at the center of our understanding of Scripture, there are two additional questions and two more hermeneutical responses to those questions that round out the way we non-conformed Anabaptists approach the Bible.

#2 - What if He means what He says? *(Faith in Action)*

When my wife and I started our journey toward Anabaptism almost four decades ago, we were not drawn as much by what Anabaptists believed as by how they lived. I remember being moved by how their commitment to their fellowship extended far beyond church functions, and how simplicity and non-conformity collectively guided their daily choices. Coming out of evangelicalism, a tradition that felt long on faith but short on action, we were challenged by how Anabaptists expressed their faith "in shoe-leather." For them, Christianity wasn't just something to believe, it was something to do – together. As time passed, we began to appreciate more deeply the worldview that was behind this way of living. Our journey was encapsulated by fellow seeker Wayne Chesley, who quipped, "Anabaptism - come for the lifestyle, stay for the theology."

Since the movement's beginning during the Reformation, Anabaptism has always prioritized faith in action. In fact, the first Anabaptists combined a resolute focus on collective obedience to Christ, with a strong sense that they should act on His teachings in their most straightforward sense. This was in stark contrast to the more doctrinaire approach of the Reformers. Mennonite historian Harold Bender observed, "The great word of the Reformers was 'faith,' while the great word of the Anabaptists was 'following.'" Early Anabaptist Hans Denck countered the Reformer's cry of *Sola Fide* (faith alone) with his own motto: "No one can truly know Christ unless he follow Him in life." A few years later, in 1539, Menno Simons famously added, "True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant; it clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful. It has become all things to all people."

"Anabaptism - come for the lifestyle, stay for the theology."

In the evangelical church of my youth, we related to Christ devotionally, focusing more on who He was than what He taught. We saw him mainly as Savior and Redeemer, and as a result, our evangelism focused on repentance and belief, anchored on scriptural formulations like "The Romans Road to Salvation" or "The Four Spiritual Laws." For us, obedience to Christ's teaching was a peripheral notion, and could even be a dangerous pursuit if left unchecked, because it could lead to the dreaded "works salvation."

My eyes were opened when, as a new Anabaptist, I began to enter Scripture through the teachings of Christ, and discovered that He was not only Savior and Redeemer, but Master and King! Believe it or not, I was well into my 20s when I first realized that parables like "the sheep and the goats," or "the wise and foolish builders," were not about believers vs unbelievers, but about "those who hear these words of mine and put them into practice," (Matt. 7:24) and those who don't.

As Anabaptists, we are convinced that Christ means what he says when he challenges us to radical obedience. Jesus spent his ministry years on earth calling his followers not only to confess Him as Savior, but to live out the rule of His transcendent Kingdom of love. In the strength of his Spirit, that is exactly what we Anabaptists are endeavoring to do.

However, an action-oriented Christocentrism does not entirely explain the uniqueness of our conservative Anabaptist expression of faith. In fact, thus far, we share this hermeneutic with our more progressive Anabaptist cousins – yet we live out our faith very differently. So what makes the difference? The answer is found in how we respond to the third question.

#3 - What if He's talking to us? *(New Covenant Biblicism)*

The early Anabaptists were Biblicists. When one reads their writings and confessions of faith, it becomes obvious that not only was Christ central to their understanding of Scripture, but that He spoke through Scripture directly and authoritatively into their lives. They believed that, with the help of the Spirit, the truths of the Bible were accessible to all, regardless of position or education, and that Scripture should be taken at face value - and acted upon! They had little tolerance for "human doctrines, clever reasoning, nor twisting of Scriptures, nor glosses, nor imaginations...but only the plain Scripture" (Menno Simons).

Their devotion to Christ drew them predominantly to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. This didn't mean they felt the Old Testament was unimportant or any less true; to them, it was a rich source of inspiration and understanding about God's redemptive work throughout human history. However, they also recognized that their calling as Christians was, first and foremost, "to be conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29).

This New Covenant Biblicism continues to guide much of our conservative Anabaptist community to this day, as we strive together to live out the simple directives of Christ and his apostles. Our Biblicism is what distinguishes us from our more acculturated/progressive Anabaptist cousins, who are increasingly likely to spiritualize or contextualize many of the Scriptures that we conservative Anabaptists take literally. This Christocentric Biblicism also differentiates non-conformed Anabaptism from other Christian traditions, like evangelicalism (which teaches from a "flat Bible" - all Scripture essentially given equal voice), fundamentalism (which is more Bibliocentric than Christocentric), Catholicism (with its hierarchical/tradition-based approach), Calvinism (and its doctrinaire, Paul-centric hermeneutic), and liberal Christianity (which often contemporizes and relativizes Scripture).

We conservative Anabaptists have decided that Jesus clearly is talking to us! In the Bible, we find a faithful account of His life, His instructions, His miracles, His death and resurrection, along with the witness of His prophets and apostles. We believe Scripture offers us a clear picture of what Christ wants us to know as we strive, with the Spirit's help, to submit our lives to Him.

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(2) For more insight from Harold Bender on early Anabaptism read, *The Anabaptist Vision* (1944)

(3) For more on fundamentalism and its effect on conservative Anabaptism see *Anabaptist Perspectives*' resource, *Fundamentalism and Anabaptism*

Putting it All Together

The Anabaptist hermeneutic is, in a word, discipleship – following Jesus into Scripture. Historian Harold Bender tells us that for the original Anabaptists "[discipleship] was a concept which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ."[2] When Anabaptism is at its best, it is a worldview wholly surrendered to Jesus and given to the work of His Kingdom.

Of course, we must acknowledge that Anabaptism is not always at its best - and not all Anabaptists live by or even recognize the hermeneutic that undergirds our expression of faith. Sadly, for conservative Anabaptists, invasive perspectives like fundamentalism and evangelicalism have made inroads into our churches, and threaten to erode the foundation of our collective witness.[3] Some Anabaptists seem to believe we are simply "Baptists with head coverings," not recognizing that this is an unsustainable proposition. The way we non-conformed Anabaptists live out our faith is a direct result of our hermeneutic of direct biblical obedience to Jesus. [Need proof? Consider the biblical source of the "distinctives" listed at the beginning of this article, and ask yourself why fundamentalists and evangelicals don't share these same convictions]. If we Anabaptists lose our hermeneutic, we lose the basis for our identity as a people.

Sadder yet, not all non-conformed Anabaptists have a living relationship with Jesus. It is entirely possible to belong to a Christ-informed culture and yet remain in spiritual darkness. When culture usurps the throne of Christ in our lives, we are nothing but "whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones" (Matt. 23:27).

Yet, when the living Christ reigns in His rightful place, and sits at the center of our understanding of Scripture, this biblical worldview is a pearl of great price, because it beckons us to give all we are and all we have to King Jesus. You see, in the end, it's not about Anabaptism at all. It's really about being "a people who believe that Jesus is who He says He is, that He means what He says, and that He's talking to us!" [4]

This article originally appeared a two-part essay published online by AnabaptistPerspectives.org

(4) I first heard this sentiment expressed about 25 years ago by Mennonite minister Lynn Miller of West Liberty, Ohio

All Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

Used with permission.
Dan and Wendy and their family serve at a Christian camp and retreat in central Minnesota where Dan is the director. Previously the Ziegler's served with Blue Ridge Ministries in Haiti. Dan was also President of Rosedale Bible College, Irwin, Ohio, for eight years and was director of Spruce Lake Retreat in Pennsylvania before that. Dan enjoys teaching about how Anabaptists historically understood and applied Scripture. The Zieglers are part of a small unaffiliated Anabaptist fellowship.

PASTOR SPOTLIGHT

Luke Stutzman is a retired pastor who served formerly at Agape Christian Fellowship in Berlin, Ohio. He and his wife Lois have four children: Lisa Elaine; Lynelle Joy; Linford, married to Kelly Jo Miller; and Lael, married to Karalyn Sue Kline. They also have six grandchildren.

Luke was ordained as a minister on April 16, 1978 and was ordained as Lead Pastor of ACF November 13, 2011. As of 2021 he has retired from pastoral ministry.

Luke is a retired poultry farmer and is currently a truck driver for Amish Wedding Foods.

Luke reflects on his pastoral ministry – "As I reflect over my years of ministry, I think of my childhood and growing up in a Godly home. My father, who was a minister, always put a lot of importance on church life and attendance. Being called to the ministry as a young man proved to be a challenge, but also a great blessing. I was blessed to have mature, Godly men around me as my mentors, including my father. The journey was not without difficulties, but God has proven faithful through the years!"

Luke recommends the following books – *The Power of the Call* by Henry T. Blackaby and Henry Brandt; and *Fear Fighters* by Jentzen Franklin.

Thank you Luke and Lois for forty-three years of faithful service to the Church of Christ!

ADC Church Profile —

Faith Christian Fellowship (FCF), located in Catlett, Virginia, was founded in 1977 and has a membership of fifty-eight.

The current pastoral team consists of Dave Nisly, Lead Pastor; Ivan Schrock, Pastor; Daniel Burdge, Pastor; and Nathan Beachy, Deacon.

FCF began in 1977 with a group of families under the counsel of several outside ministers left Pine Grove Mennonite Church due to erroneous theological teaching.

FCF is in Fauquier County, which is quite rural with surrounding farms, but it is within a mile of Prince William County which has a population of more than 500,000 and is part of the greater Washington DC metro area.

FCF has regularly supported mission work in India for the past thirty-five years beginning with financial support for Pastor Jacob (Sam Gunti's father) and a church in Budwell, India. After Sam began his ministry and it grew beyond the capacity of FCF, Good Life Ministries (GLM) was formed. FCF continued to support Pastor Jacob at Budwell until his death, and presently provides financial assistance to care for Mary, Sam's mother, as well as GLM and other mission organizations.

Over the years, quite a few members of FCF have worked for Choice Books in Fairfax, VA and now the Bristow office and warehouse. Multiple volunteers from other communities have also been involved in this ministry. Choice Books became a part of the FCF's DNA largely due to Simon Schrock's involvement and leadership. Presently, there are about eight members who work at Choice Books.

FCF is presently working on developing an annual community event to be a connection point for its church and people. This event will replace an annual Thanksgiving potluck and service that was held the Tuesday evening before Thanksgiving for forty-two years until Covid in 2020.

When FCF members gather for a typical service, attendees have traveled from Washington, DC, Alexandria, Culpeper, and Madison areas, involving about a two-hour radius.

FCF is also blessed in having retired pastors Simon Schrock and Wayne Schrock in its midst.

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