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Teaching Resource

An Anabaptist Theology of Service

By Arnold Snyder

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Some weeks ago, I received a request from Bert Lobe to consider describing and reflecting on how the sixteenth century Anabaptists understood diaconal service, and how that understanding and practice developed historically. The idea was that this kind of study might provide a basis for discussion and discernment for the MWC Deacons Commission.

The assignment proved to be more complex and challenging than I had imagined. I had to go back and do considerable research, and although I devoted significant time to it, what I managed to gather together is just a bare beginning. My hope is that you will find some nourishment and inspiration in looking back at our history and the biblical understanding that motivated our parents in the faith.

I would have liked to have done four things in this presentation, but I have managed to do only two. As an introduction, I will make some general observations about how the Anabaptists did theology. In the second place, I will outline the Anabaptist theology of service that emerges from their sixteenth century writings. Following this outline, I had hoped to give a few historical examples of how the original Anabaptist theology of service actually came to function in historical reality. My purpose in doing this was not to minimize the original ideal, but rather to point to the very real historical difficulties involved in actually incarnating a theological ideal. Finally, I had some questions and comments for discussion with the Deacons Commission.

Since the limitations of time have not permitted the elaboration of the third and fourth points I had hoped to address, we can perhaps address them in our discussion time together, following the presentation.

I. The Anabaptists and Theology

Given what we generally understand “theology” to be in our time, perhaps the best way to begin addressing a topic with “theology” in its title is by clarifying how the Anabaptists **did not** do theology. The sixteenth century Anabaptists did virtually no systematic or dogmatic theological reflection. That is, they did not consider the Trinitarian categories of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as intellectual issues that needed to be clarified and explained. They took for granted the Trinitarian creedal affirmations they had received from their Christian tradition as a whole. They simply affirmed “the faith,” as they called it, and when questioned about their faith, they tended to recite the Apostles’ Creed. So, we look in vain to Anabaptist testimonies if we hope to find original systematic or dogmatic theological work. The Anabaptists did think “theologically,” that is, they thought, spoke and wrote about God, salvation in Christ, renewal and strengthening by the Holy Spirit and the Christian life, but they did not ask speculative or dogmatic questions or exercise the syllogistic logic common among the theologians of their day.

However, the Anabaptists did do creative theological work in several other areas. First and most importantly, they had a vital interest in Scripture and as a result, they constructed what I would call a **biblical** theology. The Anabaptists came to Scripture in what we might today call a “naïve” way; for them, Scripture was simply the written word of God that gave witness to the living God. However, they read Scripture not in search of dogmatic truths, but rather with a real expectation of finding truth and light for their pilgrimage as children of God.

Their theological biblical work was thus concentrated by their practical interests – or as Robert Friedmann would have said, their *existential* interests – which directed their careful re-reading of both the Old and the New Testaments. We find ample evidence of this practical biblical work in the court records and testimonies they left behind, in the biblical concordances they published, and especially in the many thousands of hymns they wrote, sang and published. What they were looking for, as they read Scripture, was God’s concrete guidance for their lives. They believed, as they said in more than one place, that God’s word was clear and provided direction for the disciples of Jesus Christ – insofar as would-be Christians were ready and willing to listen and obey.

The reason I would call the Anabaptist reading of Scripture a “theology” is that they imposed a logical order on the biblical texts, an order which is not there in the original collection of texts in the Bible. Their way of organizing, reading and interpreting the biblical texts reveals their biblical theology. It goes without saying that others in the sixteenth century (and since) ordered, read and interpreted Scripture in their own distinct ways. Anabaptist biblical theology is identifiable by the particular order and interpretation it applies to the Bible as a whole; it has a particular “shape” that marks it as Anabaptist.

The Anabaptists did not write separate treatises in which they articulated their biblical theology as a theology, so when we speak of an Anabaptist biblical theology, we are extrapolating and describing the theology that is visible and implicit in their organization of Scripture. It would take a longer discussion, but I believe a substantially coherent Anabaptist biblical theology can be demonstrated, based on the Anabaptist affirmations of faith and practice of the majority of sixteenth century baptizers.

Along with developing a biblical theology, the Anabaptists also expressed a **spiritual** theology. They wished to know how God in Scripture was directing them on the way back to God’s presence and kingdom. As they pondered these questions biblically, they came to the conclusion that they were being called by the living God, first and fundamentally, to repentance and spiritual rebirth. The Bible, they believed, contained the rule of life for disciples and pointed to the living God who was calling His children to follow. The rule of life they read in Scripture made clear to them that everyone’s life had to be fundamentally re-oriented – turned on its head from the inside out – if one was going to begin walking in the Way of Christ. The door into the Way of Christ was through repentance, spiritual rebirth, and submission to God’s will. Or to say this another way, in their interpretation of the meaning of the biblical words, the Anabaptists expressed a spiritual theology.

Thirdly, Anabaptist theology was also an overwhelmingly **practical** theology. The Anabaptists knew that spiritual renewal and conversion were fundamental existential reorientations, but they read in Scripture that those who are spiritually reborn become new persons, here and now, and live new lives, here and now. Spiritual birth thus has a practical result. Those who are spiritually reborn in Christ will incarnate a Christ-like life in this world. The practical theology of the Anabaptists was grounded scripturally, but more specifically, was grounded Christologically in the life and teachings of Christ.

If the Anabaptist story ended here, we would be describing an individualist reforming movement. The Anabaptists, however, were convinced that the rule of life they read in the Bible led individuals, *necessarily*, to become members of the community of believers, the body of Christ. As they read and interpreted biblical history, the Anabaptists saw that God continually sought a relationship with His people *as a people*, beginning with Adam, then with Israel and then with the community of

believers, through Jesus Christ. The community of believers, they read in Scripture, is the Body of Christ, a body whose members are made up of repentant, converted, and reborn believers. So the biblical, spiritual and practical theological quest of the Anabaptists resulted in a particular **ecclesiology** or understanding of the church – which was, again, Christologically based. The church is the covenanted Bride of Christ, the Body of Christ, of which He is the bridegroom and head.

But, to finally come to the question, did our Anabaptist faith parents have a **theology of service**? The answer is that yes, they most certainly did. They grounded their understanding of service in the Bible, they expected a life of love and service from those who had been reborn spiritually and baptized into the Body of Christ, and they saw the church as the primary location where Christian service would be incarnated, nourished and practiced. I believe it is safe to say that not only can we find a theology of service in Anabaptist testimonies, but even more, we must say that service is integral to the Anabaptist understanding of the Christian life.

In separate documents I have collated Scripture references on service and *diakonia*, as well as some Anabaptist statements on the same subjects. In what follows I will try to summarize and organize a mass of material into a brief description of the Anabaptist theology of service, following the words and testimonies of the sixteenth century Anabaptists themselves. I discovered that I could do a pretty good outline of an Anabaptist theology of service just by carefully reading the earliest *Ausbund* hymns, which were composed in a castle dungeon in Passau in 1536. I will be citing extensively and primarily from these hymns. But the views of the early hymn writers are not peculiar to them; rather, they are the same interpretations found in a wide range of Anabaptist testimonies, from all regions.

II. An Anabaptist Theology of Service

The Anabaptist theology of service is like a plant that sends out roots in several different directions at once. It is difficult to be systematic in describing this root system, since the roots sometimes get tangled up with each other. Nevertheless, I have identified six main “roots” of the Anabaptist theology of service, along with some off-shoots and sub topics. The organization is mine – there is no Anabaptist writing that has organized the “theological root system” in this way – but my description is taken directly from Anabaptist writings, and I believe the sources do speak for themselves.

In overview, the Anabaptist theology of service can be described in relation to the following:

1. God the Creator
2. Jesus Christ
3. The Holy Spirit
4. The Church, Body of Christ
5. Biblical examples and exhortations
 - 5.1 Christ's example: love in action
 - 5.2 The Law of Love
 - 5.3 Service
 - 5.4 Generosity
 - 5.5 Possessions
 - 5.6 Stewardship
6. Liturgical affirmations
 - 6.1 Baptism
 - 6.2 The Lord's Supper
 - 6.3 Foot Washing
 - 6.4 The Common Chest

1. God the Creator

The Anabaptist theology of service is rooted first of all in a deep appreciation of what it means to affirm that God is the Creator of all that exists. In the *Ausbund*, the earliest published Anabaptist hymnal, hymn 107, stanzas 2, 3 and 4, says of God: "His power is unspeakably great. He encompassed all things, be it near or far. ... The height, depth, width, and also the breadth he has prepared. He has surrounded them with his Word. ... Every created thing exists in God. Whatever has life, he gave birth to it all." In *Ausbund* hymn 111, the hymn writer also speaks in awe of God the creator and, in a lovely image, affirms that human beings are "encompassed by God like seeds are in an apple." In spite of God having created all that has exists and has life, however, the original harmonious goodness disappeared when humankind "gave heed to the counsel of the serpent." (*Ausbund* 107, stanza 6). With this, humanity fell into sin.

This sounds like a normal Christian theological account of the creation and fall, until we read the following commentary on possessions, in *Ausbund* hymn 108: (stanza 19)

God's Church cannot be one where life is lived in possessiveness (avarice), since Jesus Christ is not where avarice is. The devil has given it (avarice). [The devil] likewise took private property when he raised himself up against God, who has brought all things to life.

Seen in the context of God's good creation and the fall of humanity into sin, it seemed clear to this Anabaptist hymn writer that the "fallen" human tendency towards possessiveness, avarice and covetousness is simply the devil's contribution to our existence, and not an expression of God's original will for humankind. What is needed is a rejection of Satan, a conversion away from the devil's world of rebellion against God, a conversion away from self-interest, away from grasping the world's goods as if they were ours to have and to hold. To follow Jesus Christ means to reject the fallenness of rebellion against God.

These Anabaptists believed that Scripture was clear: all of creation is, in fact, God's creation. We can claim to "own" nothing at all. When we become children of God rather than children of the world, we see this truth with clarity and we can be expected to act accordingly.

Two biblical examples about possessiveness and avarice are cited in *Ausbund* hymn 108: Exodus 16:14-36 and Acts 5:1-11. When God gave the Israelites manna in the desert, "whoever picked up more than he ate, it became wormy." Here God was teaching the hoarders a lesson: God provides what is needed, but accumulating God's gifts beyond what is needed is not allowed. In another example, the book of Acts tells us that Ananias brought what he claimed were all his earthly possessions to Peter, but he actually was holding some back. For this lie against the Holy Spirit he was struck dead. The hymn concludes:

(stanza 23)

God punishes the covetous multitude since he created every single thing that exists. Whoever wants to possess something for himself has broken the counsel. He steals the Most High's honor. His reward, therefore, along with the rich man, he will have in hell.

In this simple, sung sermon we have the outlines of an Anabaptist theology of creation and an understanding of how followers of Christ should hold possessions. Grasping possessions is in fact pretending to own what is God's and not ours at all. In the biblical record the Anabaptists read the principle that the biblical economic standard for believers is sufficiency, having the necessities of life, not an accumulation of surplus. Those who hoard more than they need are demonstrating their continued allegiance to the fallen angel Lucifer and their lack of trust in God. The Anabaptists re-affirmed what was a favorite quotation among sixteenth century peasants: The earth is the Lord's!

Here is a theological insight from simple believers that we would do well to ponder today, in our environmentally degraded and surplus-crazy world. Our world would be a very different place if the majority (or even a significant minority) of the estimated two billion Christians living today

recognized that we hold God's creation in sacred trust; that we need to think seriously about "what is enough"; that on the grounds of our Christian convictions, we should challenge the view that the world is a fallow treasure field, to be plundered at will by the quickest and the strongest.

2. Jesus Christ

At the heart of all Anabaptist thought about service and the Christian life is Jesus the Christ, God incarnate, the Savior of sinful humankind.

Anabaptist theology is strongly Christocentric in at least three distinct ways. First our Anabaptist faith parents affirmed Jesus as the Christ, with no hesitation. But in the second place, they also affirmed that Jesus is the risen, living Lord who grants new birth to believers by the power of the Holy Spirit. By means of the new birth, the risen Lord comes to dwell in the hearts of believers. And finally, our faith parents also affirmed that the Jesus revealed in the Gospels is the teacher, example and model that disciples should strive to follow. Anabaptist writings give ample evidence of all of these Christological affirmations.

2.1. Jesus Christ brings salvation

Ausbund hymn 107 sings the salvation story in 38 stanzas. It begins, as we have seen, by telling of God's unspeakably great power as the creator of all, of humanity's fall from grace, and God's attempt to restore humanity through the law, which the hymn calls "a shadow to reveal the heavenly substance" (stanza 12). By stanza 14 the hymn turns to Jesus: "Christ the lamb came on the earth and took on himself human weakness," it begins, and then recounts how in Christ, God took on human flesh and suffered "a bitter death for our sin and guilt" (stanza 19). After his resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to comfort "all who have faith in him" (stanza 21).

Here we have a solidly orthodox understanding of the work of Christ on the cross as the gracious author of our salvation. If Christ had not come to earth, suffered and died for us, there would be no more to say. The Anabaptists were thoroughly evangelical in emphasizing the Good News of salvation through Christ.

2.2. Jesus the Risen Lord brings spiritual rebirth

Beginning with the 22nd stanza of hymn 107 the emphasis shifts from Christ's saving work on the cross **for us** (the evangelical emphasis) to our needed response to Christ and his subsequent work **in us** (the Anabaptist continuation of the evangelical emphasis). This is a crucial Christological turn that is fundamental to all Anabaptist theological affirmations; to my knowledge it is a unique emphasis among Reformation theologies. The emphasis on Christ's work "in us" led Anabaptist Christians in a strongly incarnational and practical direction. When we return to the *Ausbund* hymn, we read in stanza 22:

Now you should note well how one should be receptive of Christ.
You should make a covenant with him from the bottom of your heart
and turn from all sins.
In this way you will be clean in your heart.
Christ bends down and directs his Spirit to you. He will give you new birth.

This stanza is remarkable in what it affirms. Notice first that although God has graciously offered salvation in Christ, we still must respond to that offer of grace in order for it to become effective for us: we must become "receptive of Christ." Our status is not simply changed "for us" by Christ's sacrifice; as believers we must "receive" Christ in a fundamental, cleansing rebirth. Other Anabaptist writings speak here of repentance, yielding to God, and conversion. This hymn simply says we must "make a covenant" and turn from our sins. The Anabaptists believed that God's

invitation requires a response and assent from human beings, or else the offered mercy in Christ will go unfulfilled.

The “covenant” of which this hymn speaks is most fundamentally, an inner change of heart. Other Anabaptist writers speak of a “covenant of a good conscience” before God, alluding to 1 Peter 3; others speak of a spiritual baptism. What is clear is that a new spiritual covenant is established with God “from the bottom of one’s heart.” The result is a spiritual rebirth, a gift of grace from the Risen Lord.

The subsequent stanza of this hymn is even more remarkable for the way it describes the new birth in Christ.

(stanza 23)

If God the Lord gives you his Spirit and you no longer hang onto creatures,
then you will also be **a dwelling place of the pure divinity,
of his manner and nature.**

In your heart will you taste his goodness and his very great power,
for which you will keep yourself naked and faceless (*gelassen*)

(stanza 24)

If you, therefore, live in Christ and do not resist, God has given you new birth
of water and of the Holy Spirit so that you are called a child born of God.

You know your Father always through Jesus Christ alone,
who has become your mediator.

(stanza 25)

If you have touched Christ, you will now be guided and led by the Holy Spirit
who directs you into all truth and also clothes you with God’s righteousness.

Here we have an exalted, almost mystical vision of the living Christ indwelling in the yielded believer. These Anabaptists sang about Christ’s manner and nature coming to dwell in their hearts, of divine power incarnating and manifesting itself in and through them.

When Menno Simons described the new birth he used similarly exalted imagery. A person who has had the seed of the Word of God planted in the heart, he said, is clothed with the same power from above, baptized with the Holy Ghost, and so united and mingled with God that he becomes a partaker of the divine nature and is made conformable to the image of his Son. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 153).

The Anabaptists were Spirit-filled believers!

3. The Holy Spirit

The roots of the Anabaptist theology of service are already beginning to get tangled up. It is God who reigns over all creation, and who deserves all honor and praise; it is Christ who offers salvation to humankind, who brings the possibility of new birth and who comes to dwell in the hearts of believers; it is Christ’s Spirit that does this work – or is it the Spirit of God, or is it the Holy Spirit, and is there any difference between these differently-named Spirits?

It seems that the dogmatic distinctions between the persons and functions of the Trinity simply didn’t matter that much to the Anabaptists. They didn’t take much care to distinguish carefully between the various names for the manifestation of the spiritual power of God. It was the divine Spirit and the work of that Spirit that mattered to them, not the “proper” name for that Spirit. Nevertheless, the Anabaptists did speak frequently and specifically about the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit. In writings summarizing the creeds, for example, the Holy Spirit is described in orthodox terms as the third person of the Trinity. But most often we read about the work of the Holy Spirit in renewing and sustaining believers.

The spiritual birth, which leads to believers partaking of the divine nature, is often referred to as the work of the Holy Spirit, as Menno Simons said above. In 1526 Balthasar Hubmaier wrote in a confession of faith:

I believe and trust that the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in me, and that the power of almighty God has overshadowed my soul like Mary's, and that I was conceived a new man, and born again of your living immortal Word, and in the Spirit. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 25)

The Holy Spirit works in the souls of believers as it did in Mary's soul, resulting in the birth of a new human being.

Peter Riedemann would write in 1542

We believe that ... [the Holy Spirit] also teaches, directs and instructs us, assures us that we are children of God, and makes us one with God so that through his working we thus become incorporated into and partakers of the divine nature and character. And this his work – God be praised! – we experience within ourselves in truth and power in the renewing of our heart. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 78)

Riedemann here also uses the high language of "incorporation" into the divine nature, and calls this the work of the Holy Spirit. In Riedemann's writing we also hear the echo of a personal testimony: "we experience within ourselves," he says, the Holy Spirit's work of "truth and power" in our renewed hearts.

To cite just one more Anabaptist witness, Menno Simons' co-worker, Dirk Philips, outlined the spiritual process of rebirth in some detail in 1556:

...every person (after having come to the age of discretion, and able to distinguish good from evil) must by the enlightenment, operation, and declaration of the Holy Spirit be born again into a new divine being, yea, into the fellowship and likeness of Jesus Christ. He must be transfigured into the same image, from glory to glory, yet all by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:18), and thus by the Holy Spirit created anew in the image and likeness of God through Jesus Christ. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 67-8)

It may seem that we are here a long way from a "theology of service," and have wandered by accident into a revival meeting. But in actual fact, the spiritual birth of children of God is the fundamental change that leads to a theology of service. It is the spiritual birth of the new person that changes the old "fallen" relationship of humanity to God and God's creation; the "spiritual transfiguration into the likeness of Jesus Christ" leads to the next destination on the spiritual pilgrimage: the church, the Body of Christ.

4. The Church, Body of Christ

The new birth in Christ is a spiritual rebirth of individuals, but the spiritual covenant in the heart, the Anabaptists believed, must be marked by the external covenant sign of water baptism. The new birth as a whole is a birth "of water and of the Holy Spirit." As a covenant sign, water baptism thus testifies publicly that a new birth has taken place inwardly, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The result of the inner new birth is a public commitment, in water, to a new life of righteousness, and a commitment to the company of other baptized members of Christ's Body. And, baptism is also a commitment to endure possible suffering, which the Anabaptists called the baptism of blood.

Ausbund 108 (stanza 5)

Baptism is in Jesus Christ a covenant born of a good conscience. (1 Peter 3:21)
(stanza 12)

The Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, assigns three witnesses for us.

The two are called water and Spirit. The third, blood, that is, suffering.
(stanza 13)

In baptism, therefore, one will be received into the fellowship.
(stanza 14)

What fellowship is in Jesus Christ learn to recognize in the body.

There the members are together, and take the same residence.
So too in Jesus Christ his Church is included in him.
She is his body alone, permeated with his power.

In the Anabaptist reading of Scripture, the community of believers becomes the Body of Christ, grounded in water baptism as the external covenant sign with God, visibly testifying to the new covenantal relationship between God and His people that goes back to God's original intentions. As the Anabaptist leader Peter Riedeman wrote, God first made a covenant with Adam, then with Abraham and his descendants, then with his people Israel through Moses, and finally established a new spiritual covenant through Jesus Christ. Riedeman writes:

This is the covenant of childlike freedom; of which we also are the children
if we let ourselves be sealed by this covenant and submit and surrender ourselves
to its working. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 157)

It takes "surrender" to the Holy Spirit to accept a spiritual rebirth, and it takes "surrender" to the visible Body of Christ to be "sealed" by water baptism as a visible covenant sign. Water baptism depends for its power on the spiritual covenant; nevertheless, the water is not optional. It was commanded by Christ and visibly brings together, as a single body, individuals who have met the living God and have been reborn as new persons. The reborn members come together subsuming their individuality in fellowship and communion with each other and with their head, Jesus Christ. This is no casual social club or gathering of convenience. The communion of baptized believers, the Body of Christ, is a radically new communion and fellowship empowered by Christ himself; it is "permeated with Christ's power" as the *Ausbund* hymn says.

For many of us today, the biblical phrase "Body of Christ" is a metaphorical description of the church: the church is "like" a body. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, took the phrase quite at face value. The church was to be, they believed, the incarnate Body of Christ on earth, empowered by Christ's Spirit, concretely demonstrating (incarnating) Christ's love for the world by its actions. The church as the Body of Christ is no less than a literal continuation of Christ's incarnation.

At this point we may well ask whether we, today, are prepared to accept this crucial affirmation on the way to an Anabaptist theology of service. To consider the "Body of Christ" as a *metaphor* for the church keeps the realities of the case at arm's length: we are "like" limbs and members of Christ's Body, and we approximate Christ-like functions. To affirm, as did the Anabaptists, that they were literal members of Christ's Body requires an *incarnation* of Christ's life, not an approximation. It is on this conviction that the Anabaptist theology of service is grounded.

In order to be Christ's Body incarnated and visibly present and active in the world the church and its members will need divine power and support. The Anabaptist theology of service was grounded firmly upon the understanding that members of Christ's Body were empowered by the Holy Spirit to live as embodiments of Christ – remember the lofty mystical affirmations of the divine power living within. In fact, it quickly becomes evident that the radical Anabaptist understanding of the church as the Body of Christ is a key step on the way to a radical theology of service.

The first conclusion the Anabaptists drew from the nature of the Body of Christ was that there would be peace, unity, love and radical economic sharing within that body. Hear how the writer of *Ausbund* hymn 108 describes the church:

(stanza 18)

... Her fellowship is in Jesus Christ, truly in his peace.

Just as a loaf has many kernels that are composed together, so is God's Church one. They give up their own possessions.

To the Anabaptists, the logic of the case was clear: with our repentance, conversion and spiritual rebirth at the hands of God, we have become new persons who have left old allegiances behind. Goodbye Satan and the blind seduction of supposedly "possessing" what is rightfully God's! Goodbye life devoted to self and sin. With our rebirth we have become children of God and

members of Christ's Body, no longer taking our marching orders from our individual desires or from the values of the world, but rather hearing God's voice and following his Son in obedience. Our spiritual and water covenants of baptism testify to this radical "turning around" of our nature, our being, and our allegiances. A radical spiritual renewal thus results in a radically new attitude towards the creation, towards brothers and sisters and towards possessions.

At the head of the Body of Christ is Christ himself, the divine spouse, with whom believers are now united. Anabaptist writers appealed often to the words and the example of Christ himself as providing the outlines of their practical theology, as we will see below. But it is important to underline here that the foundation for their practical theology of service was spiritual in the first instance, and exemplary in the second. The Anabaptists called on believers not simply to "imitate" Jesus as disciples, but more fundamentally, to internalize and take on Christ's nature and virtue as persons. The power to serve others, they believed, comes from Christ in us and with us. It is this spiritual power that makes Christ-like living possible: new persons live in new ways.

The writer of *Ausbund* hymn 119 describes the indwelling of Christ as the presence of the Christ-like virtue of servanthood.

(stanza 8)

Take to heart, therefore, the virtue of Jesus Christ
in that he did not seek to be served at any time.

He says, "I have not come that I should be served, (Matthew 20:28)
but on behalf of all the pious I would give up my life."

(stanza 9)

In this way he demonstrates humility and lowliness and furthermore great love,
which he showed when he was on earth among his disciples.

He washed their feet and demonstrated love to them. (John 13:4-5, 34-35)

(stanza 10)

He spoke this way to them: "Let it go to your heart
what I now have done for you.

You should keep it as an example. In this way you should fulfill it:

by loving one another. It is my father's will that no one should forsake the other."

By his words and his example, Jesus called for and demonstrated his willingness to serve others out of love, and he asked his followers, the members of his Body, said the Anabaptists, to be and to do likewise.

The Anabaptists claimed not only Jesus' words and deeds as exhortations or examples; they also looked more fundamentally to the presence of Christ "in their hearts" as the enabling power that allowed them to be servants as well. So Dirk Philips would write that New creatures in Christ Jesus are those who are born again out of God the heavenly Father through Christ Jesus and are renewed and sanctified through the Holy Spirit, who have become participants of the divine nature, of the being of Jesus Christ, and of the character of the Holy Spirit. (Dyck, Keeney, Beachy, *Writings of Dirk Philips*, 310)

The aim and the goal always remained not simply to "imitate" Christ's actions or simply obey commandments, but rather to **become** ever more like Christ.

Therefore, the expectations for the baptized community of the re-born, the incarnated Body of Christ, were high indeed: they will be united in the love of God as expressed by Jesus Christ their Lord. As members of the very Body of Christ, they have "put on" the very virtue of Christ.

Ausbund 119 (stanza 19)

Let us therefore diligently keep the unity in the Spirit* * Ephesians 4:3-4.
undivided in the faith, as Paul commands us, even through the bond of peace,
now and always, since we are all members constituted in one body.

(stanza 20)

O you dear brothers and sisters together! Since we are all members

in one body, let us show faithfulness and love to each other,
by which God will be praised on his highest throne.
(stanza 21)

For he, before all things, has commanded love, after which let us strive
always unto death. It fulfills the law, just as has been shown us.
Put on willingly, therefore, the virtue of Jesus Christ.

By now it should be clear that a radical approach to possessions is grounded first in a new understanding of God's rule over all, second in a radical evangelical understanding of Christ's work for us and in us, third in a spiritual rebirth that recreates us as children of God, and fourth, a new understanding of what it means to have become a member of Christ's living Body. The result is a radical understanding of what it means to receive and share God's gifts.

We all receive gifts from God the creator – spiritual and material – and as members of the one Body of God's Son, we rejoice in sharing these gifts as we receive them.

Ausbund 108 (stanza 25)

You must also be helpful to your neighbor, as the gift is given you,
so that he, too, as a member, will be upheld unto life.
O how fine it is in Jesus Christ where brothers and sisters are together
in unity here in time and have all things in common! (Psalm 133:1)
(stanza 26)

Members of Christ share spiritual and corporal gifts.

They have, therefore, the divine kingdom and
divine fellowship with them likewise.

Such a Church, which is chosen to God's honor alone, favors no individual.

He has given her new birth.

(stanza 27)

This Church alone is given to Christ as a spouse
which avoids all sin in time and lives in purity.

O Church of God, keep your marriage pure! Do not let the Rebel tear it away
from you. He wants to take Christ from you.

The members of the Body of Christ have turned away from the Adam's fall into sin, away from the tyranny of possessions, away from the deception of satanic grasping. As reborn children of God, they now take their direction from Christ, and resist the forces that try to separate them from Christ and the unity of His Body. The sharing of gifts in love, as those gifts are received from the generous hand of God, is a mark of the Body of Christ, as it was a mark of Christ himself.

5. Biblical examples and exhortations

The roots of the Anabaptist theology of service are thus established in the three persons of the Trinity and in the church as the Body of Christ. Followers of Jesus are called, the Anabaptists believed, to supernatural acts of incarnated love, service and generosity. Associated with this understanding were a variety of scriptural admonitions and exhortations that reinforced and added depth to their understanding. We will note six biblical examples and exhortations below; certainly more could be added.

5.1. Christ's example: love in action

The supreme example of love and generosity is Christ himself, who demonstrated his love by dying on the cross. It is to this example that disciples are called.

Ausbund 119 (stanza 11)

He demonstrated love with all his power when he, for our sake,
was fixed to the cross. Love was always unfeigned with him.

All who want to be healed must become like him.

(stanza 12)

If we want to become like Christ, we must always love one another on earth, not only with our mouth but with true deed, just as John writes (1 John 3:16-18), "Whoever loves only with words, look for where that love abides.

(stanza 13)

"If someone should have worldly goods, whether few or many, and sees then that his brother is going to suffer want, and if he would not quickly give to him the gift which he has received, how would he then give his life for him in death?"

The degree of love that Jesus exemplified, which was to love to the point of death, is the same degree of love to be expected from the members of his continuing incarnated Body on earth. It is this supernatural love that is expected to dwell in the hearts of reborn believers.

To put the case negatively, if members of Christ's own body are unwilling to share worldly goods, which are God's and not even theirs, how can they be expected to die for one another? How can the supernatural love of God (as exemplified in the selflessness of Christ) be said to dwell in people who have more material goods than they themselves can possibly use, and yet who hoard these goods and turn away from brothers and sisters in need?

This is the question posed by the writer of the first Epistle of John, and it was a question the Anabaptists loved to repeat to their inquisitors, when they were questioned about their radical economic views. In a testimony written from prison in 1527, most likely by the Anabaptist Hans Seckler from Basel, his fundamental justification for radical sharing is a reference to the first letter of John, chapter 3:17: "I will stay with what is written [in the first epistle of John, chapter 3(:17)]. If someone sees his brother in need and shuts his heart against him, how is the love of God within him?" (QGTs III, 153). The 1536 *Ausbund* hymn was repeating a common Anabaptist biblical argument for sharing goods out of love for those in need. Their reading of 1 John 3, however, is grounded not simply in a "biblical literalism," but in a robust and well-rooted biblical theology of service.

5.2. The Law of love

Not only was Jesus himself the supreme example of love, giving his life for others, he also pointed to love as the highest commandment, and enjoined his disciples to love as he had loved. The Anabaptists were very aware of the centrality of love and its relationship to a life of service. *Ausbund* hymn 87, for example, points to the Last Supper and Jesus' commandment of love.

(stanza 9)

Whatever happens outside of love cannot please God.

Note, therefore, this account which occurred at the Supper. (John 13:34-35)

Christ gave his disciples a new commandment

which is love. The Lord Jesus Christ said to his disciples:

(stanza 10)

"Now I give you a new commandment which you must certainly keep,

that you should love one another just as I give myself

out of love for you, even as far as death and great distress.

You should also, therefore, love and heartily serve one another.

(stanza 11)

If you will serve one another, everyone will recognize

that you are my true disciples."

The hymn writer of *Ausbund* hymn 119 quotes 1 John 4:20: "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." The hymn writer draws the conclusion that the way to love God above all is to love the brothers and sisters and concludes, "Note this, all you pious! Observe love well." A theology of service could, in fact, be summarized in Jesus' command to his disciples, that they should simply love one another as he had loved them.

5.3. Service

It is worth noting that the hymns of the *Ausbund* point to “service” in three different ways. While we may hear the word “service” as emphatically pointing to the *material* needs of brothers and sisters, following the example of Jesus and the appointing of deacons by the apostles, the Anabaptist hymn writers pointed just as often to service directed to God himself. When they thought of “service” they remembered the Creator and Sustainer of all things. *Ausbund* hymn 109 says: (stanza 6)

Understand! The worthy king, through his eternal counsel, has
founded heaven and earth out of nothing through his Word.
All creatures together were created to his glory.
They must serve him alone, and be obedient to him since he is the Lord.
(stanza 7)

He exercises power, therefore, in heaven and earth.
He bears all things, the Scripture teaches us, through his power.

This hymn brings us back to the starting point of the Anabaptist theology of service, namely the honor due to the Creator God whose wondrous works we are privileged to enjoy for a time. As children of God we are called in the first instance to serve God in what we do, respecting God’s creation as the gift that it is.

The highest example of human love and service, of course, is Jesus himself, not only in his death and sacrifice, but also in the way he humbled himself before others while on earth. References to Christ-like service also abound in Anabaptist writings, as in *Ausbund* hymn 87, cited above as an example of a reference to the law of love. *Ausbund* hymn 119, which we have also already cited above, makes reference to Jesus’ washing of his disciples’ feet, and prefaces it with the following: (stanza 8)

Take to heart, therefore, the virtue of Jesus Christ in that he did not seek
to be served at any time. He says, “I have not come (Matthew 20:28)
that I should be served, but on behalf of all the pious
I would give up my life.”

In serving others, Jesus served God and left us an example and a command that we should be of that mind and do likewise. Pilgram Marpeck put it eloquently when he wrote in 1532:
For it is the Spirit which testifies to Christ [Romans 8:16] and reveals the gifts of the service of the body of Christ and the whole world; he [the believer] does not strive to rule but denies himself. He divests himself and surrenders everything at the feet of Christ, and is given only to service. Although in Christ he is a lord and child of all, he does not consider all things as things to be grasped; rather, he humbles himself for servanthood, for Christ the Son of God did not consider his divinity as spoil but served friend and foe, did good and loved even to death [John 13:1].” (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 58)

The Spirit testifies to Christ and bears the fruit of humble service in believers who have surrendered themselves to Christ.

The third form of “service” noted in the *Ausbund* hymns is serving Christ himself as the only Lord. Hymn 121 immediately draws the conclusion (certainly warranted in the sixteenth century) that serving Christ as Lord will mean persecution. Why? Because the world is devoted to possession, but the believer is devoted to Christ as Lord. The hymn maintains that serving Christ above all means turning one’s back on possessions and the attachment to earthly things.

Ausbund 121 (stanza 7)
Since Christ has pointed out (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13)
that no one can serve two lords, he must forsake one.
The one he must love, and the other he must hate.
(stanza 8)

Whoever therefore wants to be a servant of Christ,
let him give himself willingly. He must suffer persecution.
He therefore follows Christ and shuns evil.

(stanza 9)

He certainly will soon be despised. With Christ he must suffer insult
from this evil world, which puts its hope in great possession,
in silver, gold, and money.

(stanza 10)

But that all will pass away, and whoever will give himself to it,
he will perish with it. Even if he had the whole world,
he must, nevertheless, finally die.

(stanza 11)

What then do his great possessions help, by which he harms his soul?
How will he save it? No earthly treasure helps him.
It can heal no more.

(stanza 12)

Now examine the Gospel (Luke 16:19-31).

It tells us about a rich man who had to perish in this way
because he wanted to live and be happy. Surely, then, he had to die soon.

(stanza 13)

It will happen this way to all who gather treasures here for themselves
and despise God's word and rather pursue temporal possessions.
They do not consider the eternal.

The stark choice between serving Christ and serving Mammon seemed clear to the Anabaptist hymn writer: one serves either one lord or the other. Serving Jesus Christ is the way of life; serving Mammon is the way of death.

Among Anabaptist writers, it was Pilgram Marpeck who took particular interest in the concept of service as the primary function of the church. Marpeck understood that the church, the Body of Christ, has a particular calling to incarnate the presence of Christ in the world through its service. His words are worth repeating and worth pondering further.

...all external service of Christ, and of those who belong to him in the time of this mortal life, serves and prepares the way for the Holy Spirit. [This external service consists] of external preaching, teaching, miracles, baptism, foot washing, the Lord's Supper, discipline, chastisement, and admonition. ... In order to preserve the true fellowship of the faithful, we are commanded to keep the ban, together with the Lord's Supper, in remembrance of the true love of Christ and his gracious deed in his death. In the time of his mortal life, Christ did not rule; he served. He sent his own to serve, not to rule. Man is to be served by Christ and his own, and man is to be prepared for the Holy Spirit." (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 78).

With a profoundly missional understanding, Pilgram Marpeck notes that the "external" work of service done by the church and its members, the Body of Christ, is actually preparing for the work of the Holy Spirit. The "liturgical" or "worship" functions of the church, from proclamation of the Word to celebrating the holy ordinances, are actually "services" done to prepare the way for the coming and presence of the living God, in the person of the Holy Spirit. "Service," Pilgram Marpeck understands, is all of one piece: proclamation is "service" as much as is serving the material needs of our neighbors.

A temptation in our time is to separate "service" in its sense of material aid to those in need, from our "religious" service of worship to God. Marpeck and the *Ausbund* hymn writers remind us that as members of the Body of Christ, our service is both worship and generosity. Our service is a seamless whole, not a choice of one or the other.

As a last point of reflection, below, I would like to suggest that our worship and our service can and should be consciously joined together and incorporated with one another. As the Body of Christ, we

have been given many opportunities, as Marpeck noted, to incarnate the love of God in the world by our service of worship and praise, as well as by our humble service to others who have need.

5.4. Generosity

In light of what has gone before, it may seem excessive to even mention generosity as a virtue that will be manifested by the reborn children of God. One may simply assume that those who are born of Christ's Spirit and are dedicated to service in love to God and others will be generous with the gifts they have received. Menno Simons certainly thought so. His indictment of the lack of generosity of "so-called Christians" is well-known.

Is it not sad and intolerable hypocrisy that these poor people boast of having the Word of God, of being the true, Christian church, never remembering that they have entirely lost their sign of true Christianity? For although many of them have plenty of everything, go about in silk and velvet, gold and silver, and in all manner of pomp and splendoryet they suffer many of their own poor, afflicted members (...who have received one baptism and partaken of the same bread with them) to ask alms; and poor, hungry, suffering, old, lame, blind, and sick people to beg their bread at their doors. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 241)

Of course, in 1552 when he wrote these words, Menno never imagined that his words would ever apply to any Christians who would bear his name. He was directing his comments to "other Christians." "True Christianity," Menno believed, will be revealed in its treatment of the needy (Matthew 25:31-46). We do well to ponder his words today.

5.5. Possessions

The subject of how to treat earthly possessions has run through every facet of the Anabaptist reflection on Christian service. From what has been said already, it is clear that the sixteenth century Anabaptists had a very radical view of possessions, beginning already with the view that notions of "ownership" originated with the devil himself. From the start, Anabaptists were accused of preaching "community of goods," following the example of the early church in Acts 2 and 4, in which members laid their possessions at the feet of the apostles, and all received "according to their need."

The logic of the case certainly inclined the Anabaptists towards practicing community of goods: their theology inclined them in this direction, as we have already seen. But the question for Anabaptists became: can we continue to "hold" property if we are not *attached* to that property in our hearts, or must we give over our possessions into the care of the church community, following the apostolic example in Acts? A difference of opinion on this question led to a schism among Anabaptists: the Swiss Brethren and the Mennonites followed the first of these views; the Hutterites followed the second. We will cite just one example from each of these parties.

An eloquent early speaker for the communal position was Ulrich Stadler, who was writing in 1537. He draws the simple conclusion of an economically-united church community from the logic of unity of the Body of Christ.

In brief, *one, common* builds the Lord's house and is pure; but *mine, thine, his, own* divides the Lord's house and is impure. Therefore, where there is ownership and one has it, and it is his, and one does not wish to be one with Christ and his own in living and dying, he is outside of Christ and his communion and has thus no Father in heaven. If he says so, he lies. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 235-6)

Stadler's view was expanded and elaborated on by Jacob Hutter, Peter Riedemann, Peter Walpot and other Hutterite writers. Peter Riedemann would write in 1542, for example, God from the beginning ordained nothing private for man, but all things to be common. But through wrong taking, since man took what he should not and forsook what he should take, he drew such things to himself and made them his property, and grew and became hardened therein. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 238-9)

Hutterite arguments were strong, following the theological reasoning already well-established by earlier Anabaptists.

As a spokesman for the non-communal Anabaptists we can cite Pilgram Marpeck. Marpeck had roots in Moravia (where the communal Hutterites had numerous communities) and had pointed disagreements with the Hutterites. He wrote the following in 1542, clearly with the Hutterites in mind:

No coercion or commandment, however, made (the believers in Acts) share all things communally. Rather, the sharing was done simply out of a free love which caused the community to be of one heart and soul. ... Among the believers, there is only a free giving of love, and no coercion. Each individual may give or retain.

Such a practice is unlike the practice of some who, desiring to have common property more out of greed than of love, coerce others into giving, even though common property is best when it comes from the freedom of love. The Corinthians, Macedonians, and Romans did not share their possessions, as Paul clearly shows in 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. (it is cited). Here it can be clearly seen that community of possession was not practiced in all churches.

But, even though they control their possessions, such true believers do not say in their hearts that these are theirs; rather, their possessions belong to God and the needy. For this reason, among true Christians who display the freedom of love, all things are communal and are as if they had been offered, since they have been offered by the heart. (Klaassen and Klassen, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 279)

For Marpeck, the “coercing” of believers into giving all their property to the church community missed the important point that giving and sharing must come from a heart filled with love, not an act of obedience demanded by an external law. To this argument the Hutterites would counter that if hearts were in fact filled with such love, it wouldn’t be a problem to live in community of goods.

Here we will leave the debate, noting only that even following Marpeck’s non-communal argument, the conclusion about possessions is still radical enough: true believers do not claim possessions, “rather their possessions belong to God and needy.”

5.6. Stewardship

We can be brief with reference to stewardship, since the argument has already been made above: we are not owners of any piece of God’s creation; we are simply “stewards” or caretakers of what has been given to us as gift. So Balthasar Hubmaier, who was not a “communal” Anabaptist, would write in 1526:

...[everyone] should have regard for his neighbor, so that the hungry might be fed, the thirsty refreshed, the naked clothed. For we are not lords of our own property, but stewards and dispensers. Assuredly no one could say that we claim that one should take his own from anybody and make it common property; rather we would say: if anyone would take your cloak, give him your coat also.” (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 233)

Hubmaier here denies the persistent rumor that Anabaptists were forcing members to give up their property and share it communally. No, he says, all we are saying is that we give willingly to those who have need. Or, as the Anabaptist prisoner Heine Seiler testified in Bern in 1529, “a Christian has his own possessions, but where there are poor people, he shares with them and does the right thing, for he is no more than a caretaker.” (QGTS III, 203).

Here is a fundamental affirmation of an Anabaptist theology of service: We are caretakers and stewards of God’s creation, not owners of it. The earth is the Lord’s.

6. Liturgical Affirmations

As Pilgram Marpeck and other Anabaptists recognized, “service” includes worship, proclamation, prayer and praise as well as the generous serving of the needs of others. To conclude this outline of an Anabaptist theology of service, it seemed fitting to reflect on how the ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper that we practice could be focused to express more openly the theology of service that lies implicit in these symbolic acts. Likewise, it is worth noting that in the sixteenth century, the symbolic liturgical act of the washing of feet was a direct reference to service, in obedience to Jesus’ request that his followers observe the same. And finally, observing the “common chest” for surplus funds, to be distributed to the needy, was also incorporated into sixteenth century Anabaptist worship, usually as a deliberate part of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

In other words, a theology of service can and should be integrated into our worship lives, as a symbolic and worshipful expression of the Christian life of service to which we have committed ourselves. “Service” should not be an added component, an afterthought after the praying and singing is done, but rather needs to be integrated as a vital part of our prayer and praise.

There is no time to elaborate this line of thought further, but my hope is that others will in fact be inspired to more closely incorporate service into our worship, and worship into our service. They belong together.

6.1. Baptism

The ordinance of baptism (in Spirit, water, and blood) is celebrated in our communities with the baptism of adults in water, whether it be water by aspersion or immersion. On this occasion of public proclamation and witness, we could and should also take the opportunity to explain that with this water, we are also proclaiming the dedication of a life to Christian service. Menno Simons wrote in 1552:

Those who accept this announced Christ by a true faith... show indeed that they believe, that they are born of God and are spiritually minded; that they lead a pious, unblamable life before all men. They have themselves baptized according to the commandment of the Lord as proof that they bury their sins in the death of Christ and seek to walk with him in newness of life. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 69-70)

The “new life in Christ” that we celebrate and proclaim with water baptism is a powerful public commitment that we who are baptized intend to serve others as Christ has served us.

6.2. The Lord’s Supper

We are accustomed to clarifying that our Mennonite and Brethren celebration of the Supper is not a “sacrament,” but is a “remembrance.” We are less accustomed to clarifying that as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper we are also celebrating uncompromising love one for another, to the point of death if necessary. The Lord’s Supper can be a powerful time for re-affirming our commitment to love and serve one another and the world. Pilgram Marpeck wrote in 1542:

Thus, if we intend to preserve the Lord’s Supper correctly, it is vital that we, by loving each other, diligently study and seriously follow the example of our Master. ... Let us remember that the Lord’s communion can rightly be seen as a physical meeting. When Christians assemble, they are to be girded with love for one another, in the same way as Christ loved them, in order that they might thereby confirm and reveal the love of believers *in Christ*.” (Klaassen and Klassen, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 264)

Our celebrations of the Lord’s Supper are “physical meetings,” they are tangible events. So also must be the love we profess for one another in those physical meetings: it must be love that is revealed in action and that reveals the love of Christ.

As Menno Simons wrote in 1552: “Those who accept this announced Christ by a true faith... break the bread of peace with their dear brethren as proof and testimony that they are one in Christ and his holy church... They walk in all love and mercy and serve their neighbors.” (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 70) Or again, as Dirk Philips said so eloquently, what we mean to say with the celebration of the Supper is “With the gifts which we receive from God – be they spiritual or natural – we likewise serve our members for the perfecting and edifying of the body of Christ, and all this in love.” (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 135)

The Lord’s Supper can and should proclaim a theology of service as an integral part of its thanksgiving and remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice.

6.3. Foot Washing

Pilgram Marpeck, who appears to have been among the first Anabaptists to practice foot washing as an ordinance, wrote as part of his reflection on the Lord’s Supper, quoted above: After Christ had washed His disciples’ feet, He said, among other things: ‘I have left you an example, so that you, too, do as I have done to you’ (John 13:15). The meaning of Christ’s words, beyond a doubt, is to give all His apostles, who were prepared to die with Him, a clear understanding that they should observe the holy communion in His memory, as a model of love. (Klaassen and Klassen, *Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, 264)

Symbolically re-enacting Jesus’ humble action of washing feet speaks a powerful language of humility and service. Dirk Philips, who instituted foot washing as a “third ordinance” of the church, thought that foot washing should first of all symbolize the washing away of sin by Jesus “that we may become cleaner day by day” but, Philips wrote, The second reason why Christ has instituted foot washing is that we should humble ourselves one to another, Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:3; 1 Pet. 5:5; James 4:10, and hold the companions of our faith in great esteem, Rom. 12:10; for this reason, that they are the saints of God and members of Jesus Christ, Col. 3:12-13; and that the Holy Spirit lives in them, 1 Cor. 3:16. This Christ teaches us with [the words of John 13:14-17].” (Dyck, Keeney, Beachey, *The Writings of Dirk Phillips*, 367-8)

Here Dirk Philips goes well beyond a simple “imitation of Jesus’ humility” and points to the depth of our love and concern for the brothers and sisters of the Body, as persons in whom the Holy Spirit lives. One recalls here other faith traditions that respect the divine in others with symbolic gestures. Given the Anabaptist understanding of the birth of Christ within, such an interpretation of the symbolic act of foot washing is appropriate and powerful. On many levels, the washing of feet does symbolize and express a deep theology of service.

6.4. The Common Chest

When we look to the sixteenth century practice among Anabaptists, it is worth noting that the early Anabaptists incorporated giving to the “common chest” as part of their worship. In our churches today this is expressed as “taking up the offering,” and can be somewhat removed from a full-fledged theology of service. In the more trying circumstances of the sixteenth century, need was more immediate and the act of giving to the common chest was intimately tied to supporting those who had need.

Leopold Scharnschlager, who was a co-worker with Pilgram Marpeck, described the practice. It is worth quoting in some detail, since it is one of the few descriptions we have of how “giving” was incorporated into worship in the sixteenth century. Whenever they have thus come together an elder, or if there is none, a senior brother, should, for the Lord’s sake, be concerned for the poor members. This should be done with wise, sincere, gentle, not offensive nor aggressive, but earnest, emphatic words [to the members at large] that their hearts may be moved to willingness and mercy and that the way and power of love grows according to God’s pleasure. Above all a brother should always have a box or bag nearby with the knowledge of the church members, so that every member knows that a free offering or

thanksgiving may be put into it if the Lord so admonishes either during the meeting or after. This must be done in order that, whenever necessary, the poor may be given something according to the necessity of each and the amount available. The brother who is in charge of the money is to distribute it with diligent care in a good conscience and the fear of God. ...it is a holy office (Acts 6:1ff.). (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 128)

Here we see that in Scharnschlager's congregation in 1540, there is a deliberate emphasis in the worship gathering to care and be concerned for "the poor members," and that a trusted member functions as a "deacon," overseeing the common fund. The common chest is an expression of worship, with gifts given as "the way and power of love grows."

In another testimony from the sixteenth century the Anabaptist pastor Pfistermeyer reported on the support of pastors. In the churches of his experience, he reported to the authorities, ... it would happen that once those in need had been looked after, the balance would be used for support of the preachers. Anything left over after that would be distributed to the poor. (cited in W. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 124)

In the Swiss territories in 1531, pastors were "supported" in their work only after the poor had been looked after, but it is clear that the funds to do either came from the common chest funded by the gifts of church members. The connection between worship and the giving of gifts was clear: caring for those in need is part and parcel of worshipping and praising God.

7. Conclusion

The Anabaptist theology of service is rooted in Scripture, read and interpreted in a particular way. The Anabaptist understanding of the biblical account of creation and the human fall into sin is essential to understanding the Anabaptist view, since "ownership" of property is seen as a manifestation of sin and the fall, and as part of the human rebellion against God. In the second place, the Anabaptist understanding of the work of Jesus Christ as being both "for us" and "in us" is also an essential component of the Anabaptist theology of service. Christ's atoning work must take root in our hearts if we are to take part in the kingdom of God as re-born children of God. Rebirth by the Holy Spirit thus reorients our fallen inclination to sin – and included in this reorientation is a reversal of our inclination to grasp "property" for ourselves. All created things rightfully belong to God. Finally, the Anabaptist theology of service is given concrete expression in the Body of Christ, which carries out the loving service He originated and enables in His own.

The hinge on which a theology of service depends, therefore, is a spiritual one which, nevertheless, will lead to a visible new life that reflects Christ's nature. Christ's nature is described by Menno Simons as "humble, meek, merciful, just, holy, wise, spiritual, long-suffering, patient, peaceable, lovely, obedient, and good." (CWMS, 55-6) This is the ideal depiction, then, of the Christian's own character and nature, to the extent that the believer has "surrendered" to the working of the Holy Spirit.

I believe it is important to underline the spiritual element when describing the Anabaptist theology of service, in particular because in our time, the spiritual and the physical aspects of "service" have so often been separated in practice. The Anabaptist theology of service, that is, the diaconal understanding that is found at the beginning of our faith tradition, has no room for such separation of spirit and body, or of worship and service. The divine work of serving one another's needs, as those needs arise, is spiritually nourished at its root or it will not exist as Christian witness. Christian service calls upon our spiritual resources in that it demands an accounting of our standing before God, of our spiritual condition of "surrender" to the living power of the Spirit in our lives, of our trust in one another as fellow members of Christ's Body, of our trust in God's power, providence and care (as opposed to our reliance on our own guarded resources).

A theology of service that continues to stand in the Anabaptist tradition, therefore, needs to find its natural home in the spiritual and worship life of our church communities. It is in this foundation and base that it needs to be rooted, and from which it needs to grow.

Our faith tradition came to discover, over time, that perfectly regenerated members of Christ's Body were in short supply – being overwhelmed by the numbers of imperfectly-regenerated members. Our faith tradition thus came to the awful discovery that the perfectly-incarnated church was more a hope for the future than a realistic expectation for the present. This sad fact was quite evident already in Menno's own lifetime, as he spent his final years not preaching about the new birth (as he had begun), but rather trying to negotiate church discipline and schism. The "pure church" is not yet; a perfect implementation of an Anabaptist theology of service, it now appears, will also have to await the second coming of Christ in glory.

Nevertheless, in this "not yet" time, we still are called to the same fundamental spiritual and life reorientation that our faith parents identified. In the intervening 400 years or so, our faith tradition has had to negotiate and re-negotiate the boundaries of faithful living, as a reading of our history demonstrates. Perhaps we can say that the Anabaptist diaconal ideal is just that – an ideal that cannot be perfectly lived out – but I don't believe that we can say that our faith parents were mistaken in their reading of what we have been called to as disciples of Christ.

It seems to me that some reorientation is called for. First of all, we are called to a new life in Christ, but we should persistently acknowledge the need for God's continual grace and help: we need spiritual help on a daily basis. In the second place, we should freely acknowledge our human limitations and imperfect efforts. Together we will incarnate an imperfect Body of Christ. But to the extent that we remain grafted to the vine, we have the promise that the fruit of love will be tangibly and physically manifested.

May it be so.

Arnold Snyder
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