

Anabaptists and mission

These reflections grow out of my missionary commitment and ministry in Belgium from 1950 to 1973 in what has been called a post-Christian culture. Significantly, Anabaptists had been particularly active in that area four hundred years earlier. A post-Christian culture contrasts sharply with pre-Christian areas of missionary endeavor, as it does also with a so-called Christian culture in which the Anabaptists flourished, or with a similar phenomenon in North America throughout much of the twentieth century. My own reflection on this subject is done from within a religious tradition that has emerged from the Anabaptist breakthrough of the sixteenth century. Further, I recognize the influence that Anabaptist studies have had on my own thinking; yet I am not an Anabaptist scholar and must necessarily do much of my reflection with the aid of secondary sources.

At the outset, I must readily admit the importance for me of hearing Franklin Littell's chapter on the missionary motif within Anabaptism, when he presented it to Mennonite Central Committee staff and workers in the spring of 1946,¹ six years prior to its publication in what was to become the classic *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*.² At that moment in my personal pilgrimage, a clear statement of the missionary roots of my tradition—with which I was not then certain I could identify—indeed helped me make the decision to remain with the Mennonite Church.

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¹ Published as “The Anabaptist Theology of Mission” in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21, no. 1 (1947): 5–17. Reprinted in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), chap. 1.

² Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1964). Originally published as *The Anabaptist View of the Church: An Introduction to Sectarian Protestantism* (Hartford: American Society of Church History, 1952).

My use of the word *Anabaptist* in this chapter is not limited to what have sometimes been called the evangelical Anabaptists. Instead, I tend to include the whole pluralistic gamut within the early movement of the radical left wing of the sixteenth-century Reformation and observe it evolving toward a consensus into evangelical Anabaptism around 1550. The great diversity in the earlier years is significant, as George Williams³ and J. M. Stayer⁴ have indicated. But even Littell's presentation, particularly concerning mission, appears also to take that much broader and diverse expression of Anabaptism as the source of his study.

My use of *Anabaptism* here refers to an evolving Christian movement of spiritual breakthrough. It will be seen first as a historical phenomenon, second as a typical stance within Christian history and ecclesiology, and finally as a source for defining the contemporary task in the last quarter-century of the twentieth century. But before looking at those three relationships of Anabaptism to mission, we must first provide an understanding of the latter.

How shall we understand mission?

Historical approaches

In English-speaking Christian circles, the word *mission* usually refers to the organized, institutionalized sending out of spiritually and professionally qualified workers. These workers go from a Christian church, community, and people to a non-Christian religious context such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Islam, or the so-called animism of primal societies. On the European continent in Christian circles, mission most often denotes much more the idea of the essential task of a person or group, or church. These differences in usage have sometimes resulted in a lack of clear communication.

R. Pierce Beaver, the dean of American missiologists, sees mission as an apostolate beyond the congregation and home locality, involving commissioning and sending representatives to witness on behalf of the sending church and its disciples.⁵ This he contrasts to the local apostolate of the church, which is called evangelism. Mennonite theologian John H. Yoder has indicated that when stripped to its root, mis-

³ George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

⁴ J. M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972).

⁵ See R. Pierce Beaver, "The Apostolate of the Church," in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), 263–64.

sion does refer to someone being sent from a geographical or cultural home with a mandate to testify in some other home.⁶ Ray Gingerich, an interpreter of Anabaptist missionary understandings, suggests that mission must extend beyond the etymological meaning to include the witness of the church outside its social perimeters, and to include the forming of new communities.⁷

These are all helpful guides to understanding mission, yet none of these definitions picks up the full implication of what might also be called mission consciousness or the sense of mission. This consciousness was particularly evident among Anabaptists of the sixteenth century; the historian C. J. Dyck has described their particular pattern of zeal growing out of a sense of “sent-ness” as *Sendungsbewusstsein*.⁸ This was clearly distinct from the simple witness of piety and life.

In a different direction, mission as an obedient fulfillment of Christ’s Great Commission has been a major missionary dynamic for the past two centuries, at least since the time of William Carey. This was also, according to Littell, a major part of the Anabaptist thrust of the sixteenth century; it was indeed my own understanding of mission in 1946 as crystallized by Littell’s presentation.

In another direction, the Roman Catholicism of pre-Vatican II times understood mission as planting the (Roman) Church in every region where it was not fully established.⁹ But the post-Vatican II stance sees *mission* rather as the “duty to spread the faith and the saving work of Christ *in virtue of the express command* [of Christ] . . . and in virtue of that life which flows from Christ into his members. . . . The mission of the Church is therefore fulfilled by that activity which makes her fully present to all men and nations,” as compared to *missions*, which “is the term usually given to those particular understandings by which heralds of the gospel are sent out by the church and go forth into the whole world to carry out the task of preaching the gospel and planting

⁶ See John H. Yoder, “Reformation and Missions: A Literature Review,” *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* 22, no. 6 (June 1971): 1–9. Reprinted in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 40–50.

⁷ “Proposal for an Anabaptist Theology of Mission,” manuscript dated January 14, 1974.

⁸ C. J. Dyck, “Early Anabaptist *Sendungsbewusstsein*,” unpublished paper for a church history course at University of Chicago, 1957.

⁹ André Seumois, “The Evolution of Mission Theology among Roman Catholics,” in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Anderson, 126.

the church among peoples or groups who do not believe in Christ.”¹⁰ The importance of the mandate of Christ can clearly be perceived in both mission and missions as understood by present-day Roman Catholicism.

Lesslie Newbigin concluded more simply that mission is the crossing of a frontier of strangeness between faith in Christ as Lord and unbelief in order “to make Christ known and obeyed as Lord among those who do not know and obey him.”¹¹ Here the crossing of the frontier is accentuated, not Christ’s mandate or the missionary’s obedience to it; the resulting church-as-community is implicit only in the expression “obeyed as Lord.”

Mission of the Church: The “Great Commission”

This diversity of understanding of mission calls for clarification. I will use the word *mission* in the sense of fulfilling the Great Commission of Christ (in Matthew 28 and Mark 16). This understanding of mission gives the other definitions and understandings their proper perspective. But in so doing, I have come full circle in my thinking. My own decision and commitment included a clear sense of obedient response to Christ’s commission. I had a clear awareness that this obedience was not an option but was, on the contrary, central to an understanding of the gospel, and indeed was central to my own tradition’s roots in its earliest and most dynamic years.

Over the years, however, the use of the expression “obedience to the Great Commission” seemed to me to evoke and conjure up a wooden literalism on the one hand, and an unbiblical romanticism on the other hand. The Great Commission seemed to deal more with mission activity—mission boards, fund-raising, going abroad, foreign fields—than with the real mission to which the Great Commission calls. William R. Hogg has pointed out how this happened within Protestant missions in general.¹² Since the Bible was seen as the word of God, and the scripture text said “Go!” missionary obedience meant going. So people went to be obedient, and missionary activism has often been the result.

¹⁰ See “Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church” (*Ad Gentes*), in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbot (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 589; my italics.

¹¹ See Lesslie Newbigin, *One Body, One Gospel, One World: The Christian Mission Today* (London: International Missionary Council, 1958), 29.

¹² See William Richey Hogg, “The Rise of Protestant Missionary Concern, 1517–1914,” in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Anderson, 101, 109.

Much of the literalistic obedience, superficial activism, and unwise enthusiasm of the past two centuries merited the critique of Harry Boer, who has written that the Great Commission's "meaning for and place in the life of the missionary community must . . . be differently construed than is customarily done [since it] derives its meaning and power wholly and exclusively from the Pentecost event."¹³ I, too, have experienced and insisted on the importance of the Holy Spirit in the fulfillment of Christ's mission and the whole missionary enterprise.¹⁴ Yet the work of the Holy Spirit in suspending obedience to the letter, superficialism, and the carnality of missionary activism does not remove the fact that that commission is fundamental and central for the existence of the church. In reality, as one reads the account of Luke, it becomes apparent that the command and the promise of the Great Commission came fully alive when the Jerusalem community received the Holy Spirit. It is so reported by Peter in his much later meeting with Cornelius: "He commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead" (Acts 10:42, AV). Christ's prior command gave clear structure and order to the experienced power of the Holy Spirit.

The significance of this prior order of Christ has been effectively pointed out in an exegesis of Matthew 28:16–20 by Karl Barth:

The kingly ministry of the Messiah is here entrusted to the first disciples constituting the king's troops. . . .

As recapitulation and anticipation revealing the hidden reality of the eschatological community, the Great Commission is truly the most genuine utterance of Jesus. . . .

The command to baptize is . . . the transferral of the messianic power of Jesus, the priest of all [people] . . . [and] as baptism constitutes the existence and the nature of all discipleship, teaching constitutes the ways and works of the disciples. . . .

They are to live within the earthly confines of the kingdom of God and to submit to the order of life established there. . . . All baptized become *eo ipso* subservient to this order of service, the very foundation of the Christian community . . . [that] exists only where the things commanded by Jesus are "observed." . . . Because of Jesus' presence the Great Commission of the risen

¹³ See Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 47.

¹⁴ See my pamphlet, *His Spirit First* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1972).

Lord to baptize and evangelize is valid throughout the days of this “last age.”¹⁵

The importance of the Great Commission is also indicated by *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” which begins by citing Mark 16:15: “Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.” This important Roman Catholic declaration reaffirms that the Great Commission is central to the definition and existence of the church.

The personal and corporate experience of the power of the Holy Spirit must mark the ongoing life and history of the church. That will intensify the social and communal character of the church, making its presence an effective witness to God’s purposes. However, both the Spirit and the community can tend—for a moment—to eclipse the Great Commission. But such an eclipse does not remove the all-encompassing mandate-with-promise of the resurrected Lord of heaven and earth; it is indeed operative until the close of the age. The mission of the church is not only defined and created by that commission but response to it must be a major criterion of the church’s fidelity. The effectiveness of the church in giving continuity to the carrying out of that mandate—itself an essential part of “all I have commanded you”—becomes a major determinant of the future of the church. The present study of Anabaptists and mission is done with that understanding of mission.

Anabaptism and mission as a historical phenomenon

As a movement evolving from 1520 to the middle of the century, Anabaptism had its genesis in a context of rapid cultural, social, and political change. The return to the scriptures that had begun before the turn of the century meant that new spiritual and ethical understandings were being fed into that rapidly changing human scene. The development of those understandings was taking place in a situation where the authority of scripture was set alongside other authorities, both ecclesiastical and political. Differing patterns of reformation developed in Germany, Switzerland, and France; yet out of a great diversity of experiences, affirmations, hesitations, and oscillations a Protestant consensus emerged. Lutherans and Zwinglians never came to complete unity. Later developments in England and Scotland underscore the pluralism within that growing consensus. But this diversity within Protestantism

¹⁵ Karl Barth, “An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16–20,” in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Anderson, 63, 67–69.

makes the diversity within Anabaptism all the more understandable. Stayer's examination of the early diverse positions on the use of the sword among Anabaptists justifies his rejection of the facile categorizing by the first generation of American Mennonite historians of Anabaptism.¹⁶

Indeed, early Anabaptism included the revolutionary and the moderate, the chiliast and the ethicist, the charismatic and the weird, libertinism and legalism. Such divergences within the movement did lead to mutual nonrecognition and mutual rejection even among adherents who were then closer to each other than they were to the Protestant consensus or the magisterial Reformation. The major difference between the latter and the Anabaptist movement is to be seen in the relationship of each to the society at large. Where the Protestant Reformers consciously and intentionally assumed responsibility for the mainstream of society, the Anabaptists were a marginal movement. This distinction between mainstream and marginal soon became the difference between legality and illegality. At the same time, the marginal and illegal character of the movement must not give the impression that the impact of the movement was unimportant. On the contrary, the whole society felt that impact.

In that period of rapid change, all society was caught up in an eschatological excitement. When Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* was unveiled in the Sistine Chapel on October 13, 1541, all Rome is said to have flocked to gape at the spectacle, the most urgent in advertising the perpetual imminence of the last day. The city shuddered in awe and stupefied admiration."¹⁷ Martin Luther's own expectation of the imminent return of Jesus Christ was such that from today's perspective he would appear to be like the *Schwärmer*, a term he reserved for those he judged to be irresponsible enthusiasts. Against that backdrop, the intense eschatological expectation that lay behind the Anabaptists' sense of mission is not surprising. But it was not the eschatological intensity that marginalized them; it was rather the ethical, social, and political content of their hope that created their marginality and their impact on society.

Thomas Müntzer's social radicalism, related also to his belief that God's kingdom was coming soon, directly influenced Anabaptism, particularly through one of its greatest evangelists, Hans Hut. The impact

¹⁶ See Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*.

¹⁷ From Leo Steinberg, "Michelangelo's 'Last Judgement' as Merciful Heresy," *Art in America* 63, no. 6 (1975): 49.

of the chiliast Melchior Hofmann on the pre-Mennist covenanters in the Netherlands, and the outbreak of the Münsterite kingdom in Westphalia have left a permanent mark on the Anabaptist stream, even when—following Menno Simons—it was in reaction. The later Hutterian eschatology and the sense of mission it engendered is also a part of a greater stream. None of these tendencies began a new movement of eschatological anticipation; they responded differently to the eschatological urgency characteristic of their times.

Obedience to the command of Christ

Here we must note that one of the major differences between Anabaptists and the magisterial Reformers was the centrality of the Great Commission. This was true of all the tendencies.

No texts appear more frequently [than Matthew 28, Mark 16, Psalm 24] in the confessions of faith and court testimonies of the Anabaptists and none show more clearly the degree to which Anabaptism was different in conviction and type from the intact and stable ways of Magisterial Protestantism. . . . No words of the Master were given more serious attention by his Anabaptist followers than the Great Commission. . . . The form of the Commission seemed to sum up His whole teaching in a glorious program comprehending the whole world. . . . It was fundamental to individual witness and to the ordered community of believers as well. . . . [It was] not only obeyed most seriously, but it was given sweeping application. It applied to all Christians at all times. . . . The Anabaptists were among the first to make the Commission binding upon all members.¹⁸

These words from Littell are confirmed by the research of Wolfgang Schäufele, with the exception that baptism was carried out only by “Anabaptist office-bearers” since “apart from the very beginning of the movement, no ordinary member was authorized to baptize.”¹⁹ “The missionary activity of the ordinary members of the brotherhood was limited to oral proclamation of the Anabaptist message of repentance and salvation which they themselves had accepted, and to which they conformed their own lives.”²⁰

¹⁸ See Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, 109–13.

¹⁹ Wolfgang Schäufele, “The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36, no. 2 (1962), 101. Reprinted in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 70–87.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 208.

This was true not only for the working man who testified to his fellow laborers, according to Schäufele, but also for a remarkable number of women. “The woman in Anabaptism emerges as a fully emancipated person in religious matters, and as the independent bearer of Christian convictions. The gospel was carried aggressively and emphatically into everyday life. The ‘sacred area inside the church buildings’ disappeared as the only place where salvation is mediated.”²¹

Karl Barth has written in his exegetical study of Matthew 28: “The existence of the new community consists not only in the apostles’ preaching of the Gospel and of their fellow men’s listening. It is constantly renewed as the listeners themselves become ‘apostolic’ and as new disciples begin to proclaim the good news.”²² There is no doubt about this being the exegesis of the Anabaptists; this was indeed the dynamic produced among them in a time of opposition and persecution.

The content of discipleship—“observe all things that I have commanded you”—that was to grow out of obedience to the Great Commission was observable within a month after a community formed in Zollikon near Zurich. In his February 18, 1525, letter to the Zurich council, Felix Manz wrote with clear reference to Matthew 28:

[God] has sent his Son with all power in heaven and on earth so that whoever calls upon him and trusts him would have eternal life. In like manner, Christ sent his disciples commanding them that they should go to all peoples to teach, giving them such power from God his Father and through his death, so that all who would call upon his name might have forgiveness of sins and to baptize with the outer sign. So as he was teaching in this way, certain came to him with tears asking that he baptize them—and he didn’t refuse them, but *first taught them love, and unity, and communion of all things, as the apostles also in Acts 2, and to think on the death of Christ and not to forget his shed blood, finally the meaning of the breaking of the bread, and the drinking of the wine, how we are all saved by one body and all washed with one blood and are become a union the ones of the others, brothers and sisters in Christ our Lord.*²³

²¹ Ibid., 113.

²² Karl Barth, “An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16–20,” 63.

²³ See No. 42a, in *Zürich, Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz I*, ed. Leonhard von Muralt and Walter Schmid (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1952), 49; my italics.

A month earlier, Manz had written his Protestation to the Zürich council. On two occasions before the council he clearly stated the centrality of the Great Commission in the preaching, baptizing, and teaching ministries. In the first week after the Zollikon congregation was formed, George Blaurock went into the parish church there and asked the priest what he was planning to do. “Preach God’s word,” was the answer. But Blaurock spoke out: “Not you, but *I am sent* to preach.”²⁴ Here is indeed the *Sendungsbewusstsein* that Dyck has underscored. This same Blaurock, along with Stumpf, “pressed Zwingli most consistently to gather a purified ‘community of all things as also the apostles [had it] in Acts 2.’”²⁵ The community intention of both Manz and Blaurock was an expression of more than “simply Christian charity.”²⁶ Indeed the appeal to Acts 2 is found over and over again.

The other elements of the “all things” that Christ commanded, as reported by Manz, were love and unity. These had been carefully defined by the Zurich brethren in the months that preceded the January 21, 1525, founding of the congregation. An intense study of the scriptures was the basis for those understandings. The faith commitment those understandings had engendered involved a stance like “sheep in the midst of wolves” where violent coercion in matters of faith was excluded. War and violence as method and stance in the word were also excluded on the basis of the Lamb of God himself and his overcoming strategy. Grebel’s letters to Müntzer in the fall of 1524 and to Andreas Castelberger in May 1525 are good expositions of that understanding.

Finally, Fritz Blanke’s *Brüder in Christo*²⁷ describes the way baptism gave coherence to a revival in Zollikon; conviction of sin, repentance, and faith were all elements that took on congregational shape through baptismal commitments. It was on the day following the founding of the congregation in Zürich; the pattern was the same.

All the elements of the Great Commission were clearly present in those early days—an awareness of being sent; preaching the gospel; faith, repentance, forgiveness of sins; baptizing into the body; teaching what Christ commanded, that is, love, unity, community, and the Great

²⁴ Ibid., no. 29, 39; my italics.

²⁵ Cited by Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, 1964, 121n60.

²⁶ It is thus characterized strangely by Ekkehard Krajewski in “The Theology of Felix Manz,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36, no. 1 (1962): 85.

²⁷ Fritz Blanke, *Brothers in Christ: The History of the Oldest Anabaptist Congregation, Zollikon, near Zurich, Switzerland*, trans. Joseph Nordenhaug (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1961).

Commission itself. The final command of Christ became the ordinance of life; it offered a mandate and an explicit strategy that became the center and organizing principle of a whole movement.

Emerging mission strategy

A large gathering—later called the Martyrs’ Synod—was held in August 1527 at Augsburg to work out a clear missionary strategy. One of the major missionaries at this synod was Hans Hut, who had been responsible for baptizing hundreds of Anabaptists. We learn something of how Anabaptists saw mission work from what he taught those whom he sent out. One of them, a Georg Nespitzer from Passau, described the baptismal covenant thus—“to abstain from sins and where one sees his brother sin, shall he punish him; also where there is need, to help so far as body and life reaches; but whosoever wishes not to do this, he should abstain from baptism and zealously stick to that decision.”²⁸

Another of Hut’s converts, Leonard Schiemer—a former Franciscan friar—was sent to Bavaria, Salzburg, and the Tyrol. He described the “fellowship of the saints” in his own articles of faith, where he used the term from the Apostles’ Creed. Citing Acts 2, 4, and 5, he wrote that the baptized “must keep love and fellowship with the congregation.” This was further defined as “holding with his congregation all the gifts received from God, whether teaching, skill, goods, money, or other. . . . [These] he must invest in the congregation’s needs.”²⁹

According to Christian Hege and H. S. Bender, more than sixty leaders and representatives from South Germany, Switzerland, and Austria were present at this important missionary synod. Hans Hut’s presence in this assembly was crucial, since as the leading evangelist he had won and baptized more people in the previous two years than all the other leaders combined. But his chiliasm with its clear prediction of events prior to the return of Christ—expected in 1528—did not have the approval of everyone present. In fact, his views apparently were at the center of the discussions in council, along with the issues of the use of violence and the community of goods.

All the questions were resolved, even if in ways unacceptable to Hubmaier in later discussions. An apparent consensus was obtained, for “in spite of the cruel persecution, no Anabaptist took recourse to

²⁸ See W. Wiswedel, *Bilder und Fuhrergestalten aus dem Täuferturn II* (Kassel: Oncken, 1930).

²⁹ See Lydia Müller, *Glaubenszeugnisse oberdeutscher Taufgesinnter I* (Leipzig: Heinsius Nachfolger, 1938), 67, 56.

violent resistance nor was there evidence of a planned attack against the government in all the cross-examinations even on the rack.”³⁰ There were indeed variations on the theme of the use of violence: Hubmaier accepted the notion of a regenerate magistracy; Hut felt that violence should be put aside until the return of Christ; M \ddot{u} ntzerite ideas were revived in Esslingen yet in 1527; and in the north, the M \ddot{u} nster debacle was still to come.

But these can be seen as variant fringes of a central thrust that put an accent on a community of brotherhood, peace, and unity in discipleship. This inner consensus was to be spelled out again at Schlatten in 1527, in what is known as the Schleithem confession; the need for the definition was again the existence of the fringe tendencies. The central thrust has always needed to struggle with a pull in the direction of a spiritualism on the one hand and the magisterial tendencies toward theocracy on the other hand. Each has had its own forms of deviation from what was perceived by many to be the consensus. For that, the major pull appears to be the coming kingdom of Christ and its manifestation in the life of Jesus.

Thus in a climate of strong eschatological hope, Anabaptist end-time obedience to the Great Commission carried a universality that became particular as baptism created local communities of committed disciples. The forms of economic sharing differed, but the exigency was there; the same was true for the rejection of coercion in faith and social relationships. These dimensions seemed to be essential to the gospel that was preached, to the teaching of what Christ commanded, to the covenant of baptism. The communities developed a three-pronged protest: ecclesiastical, social and economic, and political.³¹ The amazing thing is not that fringe deviations were present, but that the central thrust remained functional in spite of the strong pulls.

One major deviation can be linked to Melchior Hofmann with his distorted dualism, his deformed Christology, and his belief that he was the promised Elijah preparing the final advent of Jesus. He apparently built on earlier sacramentarian influences in the Netherlands and stimulated the movement that at one pole ended in the M \ddot{u} nsterite the-

³⁰ Christian Hege, quoted by H. S. Bender in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 3:531.

³¹ See Walter Klaassen, “The Nature of the Anabaptist Protest,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 45, no. 4 (1971): 291–311. For Klaassen, the Anabaptists “raised questions about basic assumptions of European religion and culture.”

ocracy with its tragic end.³² But his ministry also provided the groundwork for an emerging consensus in the north as it was later formulated by Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, both in constant dialogue with deviant fringes.

It is important to understand the place of the Great Commission in Hoffmann's thought. In his *Ordonnantie* of 1530 he makes it clear that the Great Commission is the ordinance of the Lord which orders all else. This thrust deeply influenced Menno Simons, whose use of the Great Commission often appears to be a simple defense of the practice of "faith first, baptism second."

But a closer reading of Menno's writings makes it clear that it is Christ the king who has given his great command, order, or ordinance, which now orders life in new spiritual, social, and political relationships. That his understanding was strongly flavored by what C. J. Dyck calls a flesh-spirit ontological dualism³³ justifies to some extent Ernst Bloch's critique of Menno as favoring social and political withdrawal, when compared to the earlier thrust of Thomas Müntzer.³⁴ But Müntzer as a "spiritualist" revolutionary, if indeed pulled by an eschatological hope, was not structured by the Great Commission; baptism, construed to be inner, was in the spirit, and spiritual leading superseded the written word. This constituted a major pull away from the central Anabaptist core; the real question is not how Menno compares with Müntzer—the Marxist philosopher's hero—but whether there is another norm for both: the fulfillment of the mission made explicit by the Great Commission of Christ.

The specific Hutterite community model was another derivative of the basic pattern of a missionary community of mutual and total commitment to the leader Christ, carrying out his Great Commission in a confrontation with a *getäuftte Heidentum*.

The "Christ as leader" motif appears to be a major one among the Anabaptists; it needs much more careful study than it has yet received. Erasmus' *Enchiridion* had set a model for the Christian as the "knight under orders" which could understandably lead to relativizing all earthly authorities. For example, nine days after the Zurich baptismal fellow-

³² The coins minted by the Münsterite kingdom had struck around their diameter the first letters of the Latin words in the text of the Great Commission.

³³ C. J. Dyck, "Anabaptism and the Social Order," in *The Impact of the Church upon its Culture*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

³⁴ Ernst Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution* (Munich: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1921).

ship of January 21, 1525, which Williams calls the birthday of Anabaptism, twenty-five members of the Zollikon congregation—including Manz and Blaurock—were arrested; one of their number declared that he “had enrolled under the Dux Jesus Christ and would go with Him to death.”³⁵ The image of the knight in service to his lord was used later by Menno Simons as well. A reading of Anabaptist texts, with that relationship in mind, can give the impression that the use of the pair “disciple-Lord”—or the milder “disciple-Master”—to describe the Anabaptist understanding is probably a weak expression of the sixteenth-century ethos in which Christ was seen to be the new Lord and king in contrast to the contemporary dukes, lords, and kings. The Anabaptists saw themselves much more as subjects of Christ than as disciples. As Christ’s subjects they obeyed the first ordinance—the Great Commission—of the ruler of the realm.

The existence of a mobile community of commitment subject to a universally commanding Lord of the realm created a whole new sociopolitical configuration. It was not, indeed, dissimilar to A. D. Nock’s description of the primitive Christian church: “a holistic reality—a new life in a new people.”³⁶ Indeed the binding character of the Great Commission for all members meant a new exploitation of all the gifts within the community for the sake of the gospel. Early in the movement, in what would today be called charismatic outbursts, the formerly non-vocal and passively receptive people, both men and women, became a responding and responsible people of God. J. Lawrence Burkholder has gone so far as to suggest that the outstanding feature of their discipleship was their obedient response to the Great Commission.³⁷

The way that new sociopolitical reality related to the states and magistracies has only been suggested in passing. Stayer has indicated several tendencies, and even an overlapping of tendencies in adaptation to varying circumstances. My suggestion is that these divergent emerging patterns may be more clearly seen and understood in the light of a model of a typical messianic movement. The phenomenon of messianism and its dynamics may perhaps be effectively employed for a better understanding of the movement than we have had.

³⁵ Cited in Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 125.

³⁶ See A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

³⁷ J. Lawrence Burkholder, “The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship,” in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. Guy Hershberger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1957), 138.

Anabaptism, as a type: Messianic resurgence

Three types of mission understandings in the sixteenth century can be observed. The first is that expressed by the Roman Catholic and magisterial Protestant dictum, *cuius regio, eius religio*. In Protestant countries everyone was Protestant, and in Catholic countries everyone was to be Catholic. The population was Christianized, people believed the gospel, and mission was fulfilled. Particularly among the Protestant Reformers, the Great Commission was regarded as binding only for the early apostles; the apostles had fulfilled the mandate, and the contemporary Protestant state was the beneficiary.

Within Catholicism, this type carried on mission by colonial expansion; the *corpus Christianum* extended itself by annexing foreign territories and claiming them for the church as well as the monarch. Christopher Columbus saw himself as explorer and missionary, and his royal backers shared his perception. Here the Great Commission was binding, but understood as involving the exportation of a total religious, social, cultural, and political complex. It was a new sacral reality imposed on the inhabitants of territories which were to be incorporated.

A second type was that illustrated by the Jesuit order in the 1540s; it is the foreign missionary sent by the missionary order into lands that—if they were not politically annexed through colonial ties—were, nevertheless, often under the impact of, for example, Portuguese commerce. Francis Xavier, active in the Far East, typified the approach that often involved hasty instruction followed by baptism of the masses. A large population was integrated into the church via baptism rather than through strict political expropriation. The missionary specialist was sent by a specialized order to gather in the masses. In Latin America—Mexico and Peru—a missionary in 1536 estimated the baptized at between four and nine million; in reality the missionary was often in the forefront of later political annexation. But the work of a Matteo Ricci in China at the end of the sixteenth century indicates how attempts were made to introduce Christianity within a cultural pattern and a sociopolitical structure without annexation. It was a work accomplished by remarkable experts sent by a highly expert missionary order.

The third type, as we have seen, was that which made the Great Commission binding on all church members; the mission was to those who were of the Christian religion by simple acculturation within a so-called Christian civilization. There, as we have seen, it was a call to become freely subject to the Lord Christ within a disciplined congrega-

tion practicing fraternal community and peace, and whose essential nature was to be for the world.³⁸ It was a rejection of the ecclesiasticism that blessed the existing political, social, economic, and cultural patterns. It called for a congregation of those voluntarily responding to Christ's call, and who then confronted the violence, greed, and domination of that society; the congregation was created by a free response of obedience to Christ.

Free-church tradition

The implications of this type for missionary history are significant for the period starting in the eighteenth century and going well into the nineteenth century, the period Latourette called "the age of the most extensive geographic spread of Christianity." A majority of the missionaries spreading the gospel in other lands in this period were influenced by this free-church type. Because of that influence, parallels between sixteenth-century Anabaptism and nineteenth-century missions are noticeable. Quite often a critique of the colonial regimes was inherent in the missionary presence; active assistance by governments in the nineteenth century was minimal; the missionary movement was a people's movement; women played an important part in this century of expansion. Missionaries set high standards for admission into the congregations which constituted the newly forming "younger church."

According to Latourette,³⁹ in the thousand years prior to this period, mission work involved group movements and mass baptisms. In nineteenth-century missionary practice, entrance into the church came by individual decision rather than by collective movement. The result: at the end of the century in the areas of missionary effort, Christians were a small, disciplined minority with an extraordinary effect on the non-Christian populations.

However, important differences exist between the free-church type of mission in the nineteenth century and the earlier phenomenon of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century. In the latter case, the missionaries were full participants in the history and culture of the people whom they addressed; in the nineteenth century, the missionaries were foreigners working in new languages in exotic cultures among peoples whose history was unknown. Missionaries went from a literate, so-called in-

³⁸ See John H. Yoder, "Die Sendung als Wesen der Gemeinde," *Täuferium und Reformation in der Schweiz* (Weierhof: Mennonitischer Geschichtsverein, 1962), 178–82.

³⁹ See Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: The Great Century in Europe and the United States of America A.D. 1800–A.D. 1914*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1941), particularly "The Process by which Christianity Spread," 47–52.

dustrial society to preindustrial societies conditioned by orality. The sixteenth-century Anabaptist mission was within a common religious heritage and tradition; the nineteenth-century missionary went from one religious tradition—Christianity—to another, and serious confrontation with a new religious system and tradition took place for the first time. In the sixteenth century, generally the underprivileged people protested in faith against the ecclesiastical and sociopolitical domination to which they were submitted.⁴⁰

The nineteenth-century missionary impact was parallel with colonial developments, and the missionaries were identified with those developments even if they opposed certain colonial policies. In the sixteenth century, leadership appeared to emerge spontaneously and charismatically with the development of the movement; this pattern indeed served as a critique of the established church leadership patterns which were not geared to the Great Commission but to established parishes. In contrast to the free-church type of leadership, the nineteenth-century missionary carefully supervised newly planted churches, and leadership models were provided according to established Western patterns. These differences are important.

What can we say about these various types in our contemporary missionary context? First of all, the free-church type has now become the majority position of contemporary Western Christianity. Littell has pointed out how, within the American understanding of separation between political and religious covenants, all American churches have become the first modern manifestations of so-called younger churches, religious communities gathered out of a context of unfaith.⁴¹ From this perspective, most modern Western missions have, for all practical purposes, planted free churches.

Even the Roman Church since Vatican II declares itself to be a free church in this sense; in a striking manner, *Dignitatis Humanae* early refers to the carrying out of the Great Commission as the way to establish

⁴⁰ Even H. S. Bender seemed to recognize the validity of this judgment which he felt was overplayed by the Marxist-socialist theoreticians. "Perhaps H. Richard Niebuhr is right in asserting in his book *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* that the Anabaptist movement was a movement of the socially and economically oppressed lower classes, but it is difficult to apply this theory to the founder of the movement." See "Conrad Grebel," *Menmonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 2:567. Most of the class-theory protagonists recognize, of course, that usually the leadership for the lower classes does not come from those classes.

⁴¹ See Franklin Hamlin Littell, *From State Church to Pluralism: A Protestant Interpretation of Religion in American History* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1962).

religious liberty. *Ad Gentes* begins with the Isaiah messianic text about the “light to the nations” and then immediately quotes the Markan Great Commission. Further, in *Lumen Gentium* the dominating notion of “people of God” (as compared with “body of Christ”) situates the church in a stance not unlike the Anabaptists’ missionary stance in the sixteenth century.

Much of the sixteenth-century uniqueness of the free-church type has now been dissipated with the breakup of Constantinian patterns. We can rejoice that the old state-church patterns have broken up; but the increasing universality of free-church patterns is not as such a subject for rejoicing when we discover free churches, both in the West and in what were formerly seen as mission fields, functioning in unconscious or voluntary liaisons with governments, in societies and cultures, as uncritical supporters of socioeconomic and political patterns. This is not the same phenomenon as the oppressive state church of the Constantinian synthesis, but the fact that it is freely accepted dare not hide the fact that it is also a far cry from the Anabaptist fulfillment of mission. A modern free church is not necessarily a continuity of the Anabaptist vision.

Believers church tradition

The language of free church to describe the Anabaptist-type mission and church has thus shifted in recent years to that of “believers church.” A conscious effort to develop the concept of a believers church as a church type, perhaps best illustrated by the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, was made in 1967 at the Conference on the Concept of the Believers’ Church (Louisville, Kentucky).⁴² Since then, the typology has become better known through Donald F. Durnbaugh’s history that appeared the following year.⁴³ The conference of 1967 recognized both the limitations of the free-church type and the fact that believers church as type has not been commonly used in the expanding ecclesiological vocabulary of twentieth-century Christians.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, since that time the use of the typology has become—at least in Mennonite circles—commonplace. It is an attempt to accentuate, even in a free democratic society, the difference between a mass church—a cul-

⁴² James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believers’ Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969).

⁴³ Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

⁴⁴ Garrett, *The Concept of the Believers’ Church*, 5.

ture religion, a popular church of popular religious acculturation—and congregations of committed believers.

Within the conference itself, the new language—not yet thoroughly defined—was not always helpful to all participants. Dr. Pope A. Duncan suggested that people from believers church traditions should function more ecumenically, “if for no other reason than to discover whether there is any longer any distinction between believers churches and others.”⁴⁵ Yet in the same conference, after process, such distinctions were clearly affirmed. Reflecting the Anabaptist experience, the believers church type was thus defined in relation to mission: “The congregation is called out of the wider society for a communal existence within and for, yet distinct from, the structures and values of the rest of the world. This distinctness from the world is the presupposition of a missionary and servant ministry to the world. At times it demands costly opposition to the world.”⁴⁶

Elsewhere, as a part of that definition, the missionary stance is perceived as working out “the church’s being as a covenant community in the midst of the world.”⁴⁷ Indeed, the Anabaptists did this latter in fulfillment of the Great Commission; we have seen how the economic, social, and political protest was indeed an inherent consequence of the obedience to the “all things” of the effective sovereign over the community—the Christ. One senses that in the shift from history to type, it is possible that the centrality of the Great Commission of the sovereign may subtly be shifted to the self-realization of the community. Part of the shift is a result of the nature of the typology itself. As with the free-church type, it is comparing types of ecclesiastical communities, and by definition in Western experience it is in contrast to the fallen church, the state church, the official national church, or the acculturated church. It is a type still based on the Troeltschian church/sect distinction of Constantinian times.

The fact that the believers church type is, as such, a Western type, growing out of Western developments, could indeed alert us to the problems of its potential irrelevance to the context of world mission, where many situations are clearly similar to pre-Constantinian times in the West. At the same time, in its attempt to recover a pre-Constantinian Christian community, Anabaptism as perceived in the believers church type cannot be wholly irrelevant, even in pre-Constantinian

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 320.

situations. Yet I have heard Mennonite missionaries speak of the irrelevance of the Anabaptist vision to their particular missionary assignments. That vision, the church/sect typology, the free church, and the believers church are all models that help an American church understand itself and refocus its calling in the midst of freedoms and pressures peculiar to its life. The implications of those typologies, however, extend much beyond a denomination or even Western Christianity, even if the typologies do not apply universally.

At the same time, sociologist of religion Allen W. Eister has indicated how the Troeltschian model was “valid for the setting of *cuius regio, eius religio*” but that there was no valid reason for “transporting it across the Atlantic.”⁴⁸ Thus Eister finds it not always helpful in understanding the dynamics of numerous American sects that have developed in a context of separation of church and state. But he finds it even less helpful for understanding the millenarian, messianic, and nativistic movements of the two-thirds world with its cargo cults and separatist churches. Indeed some of these movements may be seen developing in contexts where the free-church type of Western Christianity was involved in missionary endeavor.

Messianic community

For those who believe that the Anabaptist historical manifestation was indeed one that has Spirit-given lessons for the whole church of Christ—“all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2, AV)—I should like to suggest that there is indeed in it a manifestation of another type, more universal and more in line with the missionary mandate. It is the messianic community type.

The French sociologist of religion Henri Desroche, in a lengthy introduction to his dictionary of messianisms gives a helpful and suggestive typology which he calls the messianic cycle. This typology has grown out of his study with a team of collaborators from several continents; it covers the manifestations of messianism within the Christian era.⁴⁹ According to Desroche, following the impact of a messiah on

⁴⁸ See Allen W. Eister, “Toward a Radical Criticism of Church-Sect Typologizing,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 6, no. 2 (1967): 85–90.

⁴⁹ Henri Desroche, *Dieux d'hommes: Dictionnaire des messianismes et millénarismes de l'ère chrétienne* (Paris: Éditions Mouton, 1969), 1–32; this was later expanded into his *Sociologie de l'Espérance* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1973). Desroche defines messianism following Hans Kohn as “essentially the religious belief in the coming of a redeemer who will put an end to the present order of things either universally or for a particular group

a socially, politically, economically, and religiously oppressive human context, a three-directional explosive movement tends to appear as followers believe and follow in the promise of a new holistic humanity, or a new kingdom. The first direction points to that promised coming reality and works already at its creation. But from that direction two major deviations generally appear, resulting from a loss of faith in the coming kingdom, because of its nonappearance.

Both directions tend to justify the previous movement, but in different ways. One deviation emphasizes the religious aspect of the message and of the kingdom that has not appeared; it then reinterprets the messiah in religious terms, forgetting the social, economic, and political dimensions of the hope that person had created. On the other hand, a second deviation emphasizes the sociopolitical aspects of the message, and reinterprets the messiah in political terms. This deviation minimizes the whole dimension of inner life and faith and authenticity which appears to be religious and alien to structural aspects of society that make social and economic changes possible.

Significantly, Desroche points out how from the perspective of the deviations, a messianic resurgence becomes possible as the over-religious again reorients to the holistic messianic community of the original vision. Similarly, the resurgence can come from the political deviation as it again reorients to a holistic religio-socio-politico-economic intention, reflecting the messianic promise.

For Desroche, this is a pattern of hundreds of messianic movements, each with its own variation of the typology which he develops in detail. In this sense, he is not describing Christianity as such, but a universal phenomenon that recurs when conditions in a society appear to engender a messiah. I would differ from Desroche in my use of his typology in affirming, on other grounds, the universal and crucial character of the messianic movement that has grown out of the impact of Jesus of Nazareth whom we confess as *the* Messiah, and whose birth, life, death, resurrection, and return constitute a context of history within which other movements occur, whether in relation to him or in apparent indifference to him and his impact.

But within this typology, Anabaptism itself is seen as a messianic resurgence, a part of a greater resurgence created by the rediscovery of the word of scripture in a context of rapid change. That resurgence

and will install a new order made of justice and happiness;" see "Messianism," *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, vol. 9 (New York: Macmillan, 1933). (See figure 1. *Processes and stages of the messianic dynamic*, in chapter 6 of the present volume.)

deviated in the revolutionary spiritualism of a Müntzer as well as in the magisterial Protestantism of Luther and Calvin, all of which were seen as a revolt against the sacral *corpus Christianum*, so far afield from the commands and intent of Jesus of Nazareth. The spiritualizing of Schwenckfeld and the theocracy of Münster are further deviations from the central consensus of the Anabaptists, apparently shared by Luther and Zwingli, before their realism led them to deviate from the community of faith, love, unity, brotherhood, and peace which the coming kingdom of Christ announced.

In this typology, the sacral oppressive society of Judaism under Rome is simply replaced by the sacral oppressive society of Constantinianism. This latter has been effectively described by Leonard Verduin,⁵⁰ who points out the parallels between the Donatists of the time of Augustine and the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Both, indeed, were forms of messianic resurgence from out of that sacralism.

John H. Yoder, in his paper at the 1967 Believers' Church Conference, gave a description much fuller than the Troeltsch polarization, in delineating—following a suggestion from the latter—four specific ecclesiological and religious models at the time of the breakup of the Constantinian sacral reality in the sixteenth century.⁵¹ These four models were those of the *corpus Christianum*, the *theocratic* type, the *spiritualist* type, and the *believers' church* type. Yoder, in his description of what he calls the classical options seen in the sixteenth-century Reformation, writes: “The same demonstration could be derived elsewhere as well; it seems that the same possibilities spring forth in every age.”⁵² Indeed, following the Desroche typology, within Christianity they spring forth from within a context of the universal messianism fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. The messianic typology situates the believers church in an eschatological tension and indicates how it can move away from its intended vision, how indeed resurgences can spring forth in every time. Elsewhere Yoder has written effectively of a *messianic ethic* and a *messianic community*.⁵³ They are much better perceived in the typology of a messianic cycle, their inherent context.

⁵⁰ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964).

⁵¹ See John H. Yoder, “A People in the World: A Theological Interpretation,” in *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, ed. Garrett, 250–51.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 254.

⁵³ John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

From the perspective of our concern here, as illustrated by the Anabaptists, the Great Commission appears as the vanguard thrust of a universal messianic movement. To understand the history of Christianity as a messianic movement places ecclesiastical realities in much better perspective. But it also suggests a canonical direction for the critique of movements, and not simply four ecclesiastical options, equally valid in inner consistency; indeed it illustrates the New Testament language of apostasy. Most of all it best illustrates the world-kingdom opposition inherent in the biblical data and which is said by Littell to be a basic element in the concept of the believers church,⁵⁴ as illustrated by Anabaptism. Further, the messianic model helps to understand better and interpret the challenge presented by non-Christian messianic movements in the world today, themselves a critique of established Christianity.⁵⁵

Anabaptism and missions today

We have already observed how the Anabaptist missionary thrust within sixteenth-century Christendom differed from the free church-inspired missionary thrust of the nineteenth century in a non-European context. We may appropriately ask what that historical movement can contribute to our modern understanding of the missionary task, even though the context in the last two decades of the twentieth century is again different from both of those periods. The idea of the irrelevance of the Anabaptists' experience for today is based on the assumption that theirs was a response to an unfaithful church in sixteenth-century Europe that in no way parallels the task of missions in a context where the church has emerged from a non-Christian past. This is, of course, true. But when one has understood the dynamics of Christian messianism and its expression in Anabaptism, one can find important parallels and analogies for today's missionary task.

The way the life of the community was ordered by the worldwide missionary task in obedience to the coming Messiah is exemplary. Since the Lord is bringing in his kingdom, it is incumbent on his disciples already to prepare others for the unity, love, brotherhood, peace, and justice of that kingdom in a community of faith where those fruits of his presence are operative in the power of the Spirit of the Lord.

⁵⁴ Garrett, *The Concept of the Believers' Church*, 29.

⁵⁵ Gottfried Oosterwal, *Modern Messianic Movements as a Theological and Missionary Challenge* (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1973).

The sacralism out of which such a breakthrough occurs may no longer be the *corpus Christianum*; it may rather be that of some primal society, or of a techtronic society of the West. In many places of the two-thirds world, one may in fact find layers of each of these superimposed. In each context, in any case, an essential part of the missionary task is to discern those oppressive, destructive, life-denying human patterns that religion tends to sacralize and which the Spirit of Christ denounces as in the biblical world of 1 John 2. This reminds us that the contexts of mission differ greatly, even if the messianic thrust remains the same. It also means that the spin-offs of a messianic thrust may not always be identical in different contexts, but they are recognizable; they should be recognized for what they are—deviations—and not just as pluralism in missionary expression.

The fact that Anabaptism emerged as a messianic resurgence reminds us of the latent possibilities within nonmessianic and establishment forms of Christian religiosity. These indeed are within the historical context of the Christian messianic cycle which contains its own potential, given the right conditions, for a resurgence oriented by the coming kingdom of Christ.

The Anabaptists with their simple grasp of the universal nature and call of the Great Commission never allowed that to hinder them from local, specific commitments as expressions of their obedience which others often interpreted as legalism. The hesitancy arising from sophisticated knowledge of inevitable sect cycles must not interfere with the freedom that sees messianic resurgence as God's own strategy for giving continuity to his purposes in the world. The "weight of sin that so easily besets us" must not receive the bias of favor; that rather must go to the newly created cells of enthusiastic obedience to the sovereign Lord of the coming kingdom.

The Anabaptist identification with the human suffering of Christ, the rejection of the then-current triumphalism of Christendom, and the awareness that espousal of violence was a refusal of Christ—all point to the specific messianism oriented by the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 as fulfilled in Jesus' life. This model of discernment in answering "Who is the Lord?" remains absolutely urgent in our time. M. M. Thomas has written:

The call to . . . three-fold liberation leading to freedom as mastery over nature, as search for self-identity and justice in society, and as creativity with openness to the future, clearly has arisen within the cultural and spiritual climate created by

what has been called “messianic” religions with their historical consciousness, though it has risen in protest against them; and this messianism has been maintained even in the secular ideologies of the modern period. In fact, with the forces of modernity making inroads into all cultures and societies, they are all absorbing the messianic consciousness. . . . Therefore, the spiritual question modernity poses for [humankind] is the question of discerning the character of the messiah and the messianic community and the nature of the hope of eschatological unity which will make freedom a promise of mature humanity to men and women universally, and that of distinguishing them from messianisms which betray that promise and dehumanize men and women.⁵⁶

Finally, the eschatological kingdom orientation of the Anabaptists remains the essential mainspring of mission—of Christian messianism. Neither sixteenth-century deviations nor twentieth-century spiritualisms, Mormon or Moonie, dare function to reduce the driving hope that the history of all nations shall be fulfilled in a “new heaven and a new earth” when “every knee shall bow and confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord.”

Until that time the classic Anabaptist consensus remains perhaps the most important missionary mentor that God has given the church of Christ, except for their servant Lord and the first church that grew out of the obedience of those whom he sent, when he said, “All power is given me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of

⁵⁶ M. M. Thomas, “Two kinds of messianism,” *Ecumenical Review* 26, no. 4 (1974): 558–59. The statement is all the more remarkable because of the author’s own roots in the sacral culture of India. In this connection, his concluding word should also be heeded. In writing of the spirituality of the conquering messiah, the superman who repudiates the suffering Messiah, which leads inevitably to aggressiveness, misuse of earth’s natural resources, abuse of power, etc., Thomas concludes: “Modern history, with the inhumanities of Imperialism, Racism, Fascism and Stalinism, and Vietnam, provides sufficient proof of this. Many moderns are therefore beginning to view the messianic spiritual consciousness itself as the source of dehumanization in the modern world and to advocate a return of [humankind] to the spiritual tranquility of some form of nature-religion, or the unitive spiritual vision of the primal, monistic and gnostic religions. This however would mean the repudiation of the whole experiment of modern history, of the search of men and women for adulthood and maturity in freedom; it would even halt the self-awakening of the peoples of the two-thirds world of Africa and Asia and the significant renaissance of their cultures and religions taking place through the impact of modernity. [Humankind] can avoid these two alternatives—self-destruction in freedom and survival through a return to the womb of unfreedom—only through the messianism of the Suffering Servant” (*ibid.*, 560).

all nations, baptizing them, . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”