

Reconciling an Ideal with Reality

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When I was asked to share this afternoon, the general topic I was given was that of reconciliation.

“What about reconciliation,” I asked. “Whatever you want.”

So, if what follows is not what you expect when it comes to the topic of “reconciliation”—and I suspect it won’t—all I can in my defense is that I was left unsupervised. 😊

Like so many of our best words—faith, hope, love—“reconciliation” is tossed around pretty liberally, and it can mean different things to different people.

So, it might not be a bad idea to begin with clarifying our terms.

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the word “reconcile” can mean at least three things.

1. **to restore a relationship**; to settle a dispute, to resolve differences
2. **to make consistent or congruous; to reconcile an ideal with reality** – think of “reconciling” a bank statement with a mountain of receipts in your wallet
3. **to accept something**; i.e., “he was *reconciled* to the challenges of his reality – think here, maybe, of the acceptance of a diagnosis

I suspect the first of these three definitions—the restoration of relationship—is most familiar to us. We easily and naturally think of reconciliation in relational terms. We think of a relationship that has been fractured that needs to be mended.

But in this the 500th year of the Anabaptist movement, I want to spend at least a bit of time on the second two.

The second two senses of the word “reconcile” both have to do with negotiating an ideal with a reality.

Anabaptists are nothing if not idealists! Our movement was born out of the conviction that Jesus’ teachings—even the really hard ones!—were meant to be followed!

So, what ideals might we have to reconcile with reality?

Perhaps the easiest way into exploring this is to share a bit of my own story.

I was raised in and have worshiped in Anabaptist churches for my entire life. I have served as pastor at Lethbridge Mennonite Church for nearly fourteen years now (which still surprises me every time I say it out loud!).

Yet I often feel like a bit of a sub-par Anabaptist. I occasionally remark somewhat playfully to my congregation that they might have the least “Mennonite” pastor in our denomination.

They usually laugh politely. At least I think they’re being polite. They’re such nice people—I’m not sure if I could tell if they were being impolite!

Why do I say this?

For starters, I have not been formed in Mennonite educational institutions. My path wound from public school through a philosophy degree at university and ended up at an interdenominational graduate school of theology. I spent one year at Columbia Bible College, but I was there mostly to play hockey, I’m somewhat embarrassed to admit!

It gets worse. I have always loved peace. I consider myself a peacemaker at heart.

But for as long as I can remember, I have wrestled with pacifism. Not in the sense that I don’t want it to be true or don’t think it’s the ideal; but I can see other sides of the story. More importantly, I can feel their force. I struggle to reconcile the pacifist ideal alongside other biblical and moral calls to protect the vulnerable.

This is also personal for me. My wife is of Japanese and German extraction, and members of her family have seen active duty in war. This led to some interesting and very

uncomfortable conversations when I was a naïve and idealistic teenager and Naomi started bringing me around family gatherings.

This uneasiness that has been further complexified by having a soldier for a son. My 23-year-old Ojibwe son has for five years been an active member of the Canadian Armed Forces.

He did a deployment in Latvia last year and is currently preparing for an assignment doing security in Kananaskis for the G7 Summit (which could be interesting, given current geopolitical realities... about which I will say no more!).

I say “complexified” and I mean this. This has not been an easy thing for me to negotiate as a Mennonite pastor, even one who struggles with pacifism.

I’m on board with believers’ baptism, but I understand why people choose infant baptism. I have good friends, committed, faithful Christians, who baptized their children as infants. Whose children confirmed their Christian faith as teenagers and who are engaged and faithful young adults.

I feel the pull of the whole “Let’s just follow Jesus’ plain teachings and not attempt to escape them via eloquent and evasive theologizing,” thing... but I actually really love abstract impractical theology.

And Jesus’ teachings aren’t always very plain. They are occasionally baffling and at times can feel impossible. My work as a prison chaplain has given me a whole new window into how powerless many people feel to do the good that they want to do.

These men and women’s choices are influenced by so many factors outside their control; indeed, many of them seem to not have had a chance in life, so horrific were their childhoods.

Do I tell them to just buck up and try harder? Serve Jesus better? Sometimes. More often, I tell them that God loves them, that their lives have meaning, and that mercy is what Jesus tells us to love and to do.

And exactly how much different am I from those inmates? Are we from them?

I am gravitating, as I get older, toward the more robust theologies of providence and grace that I find in other corners of the Christian family. At our table at lunch, a few people were remarking that Mennonites have a lousy theology of grace. They're not wrong.

Entirely predictably and not at all originally given my social location, I find the liturgies, aesthetics, worship practices of other Christian traditions beautiful and meaningful. Sometimes it connects with me in a way that some Mennonite worship doesn't.

I could do with more emphasis on the Eucharist and less on the sermon. The well-trodden path from low church to High-Church is one that I simultaneously groan at and am drawn to.

I am deeply suspicious of politics, which would have probably made me a good Mennonite a few centuries ago, but weirdly now seems not to. I am not activist enough (or in the right directions) for either progressive or conservative Mennonites.

I have never sung in a choir and struggle to find my line in any song requiring four-part harmony.

It's a wonder, as I rehearse this list out loud (a list which could have been longer!), that my church ever hired me. My church has also had long practice in reconciling an ideal with the reality of their pastor! 😊

Why do I share these things?

Simply because in each of these instances, I have had to "reconcile" my Anabaptist identity with the complexities, challenges, and contradictions of the world and even within myself.

I am not unique here. Each one of us must do this. It won't look the same for each of us. Your details would differ from mine.

But "reconciliation" in the second two senses of the word is a task for each one of us.

We all must personally reconcile ourselves to the Anabaptist story that we have inherited. It won't necessarily fit all of us in precisely the same way and we won't always fit it. That's ok.

I think we must also be honest and say that there is no one pure, pristine Anabaptist theology or identity that we should be trying to preserve or align ourselves with.

Jeff Reimer wrote a recent essay for *Comment* called “How Not to Be a Schismatic” (great title).

The way Reimer describes his journey may resonate with many. Raised Protestant, attracted to Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism, he has never quite managed to land anywhere comfortably.

I want to read a portion of what he says:

It turns out that the most hopeful thing for wayfarers of all kinds to do might be to deflate their expectations a little. **The tidier one’s story of the church is, the more likely it is that one has lost hope—whether from despair, losing sight of the destination, or from presumption, thinking one has already arrived.**

I don’t say this to undermine the self-understanding of any given tradition but to insist that any account of the church, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox [or Anabaptist], must always in some sense be an account of a wayfaring church (even if they conceive of wayfaring differently—and they do).

On a more mundane level, seeking a church that is free of all the things that one finds troubling is a futile endeavour.

Want a church that confirms all your theological priors? Tough...

Want a church without kitschy art and sentimentality? Doesn’t exist.

Want a church without weirdo fringe theologians who say cringey things online? Sorry.

Want a church without intransigent strands of fundamentalism and bigotry? Good luck.

Want a church without abuse? Get in line.

Want a church without sin? Look to the *eschaton*, my friend.

I'm not saying heresy or abuse ought to be tolerated, or that we should do nothing to prevent them or root them out. **I'm saying that any church that is mixed up in the mess and the carnage of human existence is going to be, well, mixed up in the mess and the carnage of human existence.**

If the terms of your commitment to and participation in the church demand the absence of those failures, then what you'll be left with is yourself, a church of one, alone and still unhappy.

As it happens, I do not want to be left with myself. I think I would make very poor company and my church of one would be a very uninspiring one.

Reimer's comments remind me that there is no one pure and perfect expression of the church and there never will be.

Basic Christian theology should have taught us this long ago, but certainly 500 years of Anabaptist history would also make it plain.

We have been *excellent* squabblers and separators. A quick internet search told me that as of 2024 there are 45 000 Christian denominations in the world. Anabaptists don't contribute anywhere near the majority of these, but we haven't exactly resisted the trend either!

We have at times been guilty of a kind of spiritual elitism. *We're the true followers of Jesus.... Everyone else tries to explain his hard teachings away, except us!*

(Think of the "pious ghettos" Suzanne referred to this morning — geographic or ideological.)

In our time, this spiritual elitism can easily morph into social justice elitism where the litmus test for the authenticity of someone's faith is thought to be their adherence to the right positions on a collection of issues. Our politics and our ethics can far too easily become our religion.

We have not always been very good at reconciling the ideal to the reality.

I want to be clear on what I am not saying. I am not saying that we shouldn't seek to become conformed to the image of Christ. We should.

I am not saying that we don't have our convictions about what the way of Jesus asks of us. We do.

I am not saying that some expressions of Christian faith aren't closer and further away from the ideal. They are.

But I do wonder if we can hold these convictions with more grace than we at times have in the past. **If we can acknowledge basic human nature a bit more.**

If we can recognize that Anabaptists have blind spots, too. That we have things to learn from other Christians.

And, perhaps most importantly, to simply acknowledge that, as Paul says, we are all sinners in need of grace.

2 Corinthians 5:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all.

All means all. The cross of Christ is the great equalizer.

It is the means by which God is reconciling the mess and the carnage of the world to himself. How?

The gospel is not that Jesus gave us a bunch of awesome teachings that we are tasked with implementing in a sufficiently competent to change the world.

The gospel is that God, in Christ, gives his life for all. That God does for us what we cannot and could never do for ourselves.

I want to close by bragging about my church a little bit. I'm going to do this to hopefully make it plain that I don't think that seeking to be reconciled to reality and to human nature represents an intolerable watering down of Anabaptist faith or the ideals that animate it.

My soldier son? He had been a rather sparse presence in church for at least the two years preceding his deployment. One day while he was in Latvia, a woman in our church told me that she felt convicted that we needed to do something to show him that we loved and supported him.

So, she arranged for everyone who wanted to in our church to write him a message. The Sunday School kids recorded a video message for him. We sent it away. He said it was very moving to receive this. Since he's come back, he's been coming to church more regularly, even playing guitar during worship.

Over the last decade or so, we have worked with multiple denominations in our city, from very liberal to very conservative, in bringing refugees to our city.

We have welcomed Orthodox Christians from Syria and charismatic Pentecostals from the Congo (one of whom now sings on our worship team).

I'll never forget the beautiful moment with our Syrian Orthodox friends. I was over at their house once commenting on all the icons and incense and saints on the walls. I started to say something like, "You know, as Mennonites we don't have anything like your history or your aesthetic or your rituals..." And one of the women almost physically shushed me!

"Doesn't matter," she said, in her broken English. "Same Jesus." Those two words (and their source) have never left me.

I could tell you more stories about the prison and how working with desperate men and women who retain a spiritual hunger and longing for mercy has clarified and deepened my understanding of the human condition that defines each one of us.

All of these are beautiful truths and relationships that I simply would not have been able to access were I not able in some sense to reconcile myself to the gap between the ideal and the real.

I hope we have a great 500th birthday year. I think there is much worth celebrating—that Anabaptism has offered profound gifts to the broader Christian world. Personally, I'm

looking forward to being in Zurich later this spring to celebrate with Anabaptists around the world.

But as we move into the next stage, as our story moves on from 500, I hope that we will be reconcilers in every sense of the word.

That we will seek to repair strained relationships with Christians across the denominational spectrum. **Including those whose politics we might not share.**

That we will reconcile ourselves to the deep truth of the human condition, which is that none of us see the whole picture, that we all have our blind spots and biases, that we are all tempted to rewrite history—of our church and of ourselves—in ways that flatter us. That we are all sinners, all in need of grace.

As a pastor, I sometimes get questions about heaven, the new creation, the kingdom of God when it comes in fullness.

Will I recognize my loved ones there? Will our relationships be the same? Will there be golf or potlucks? Will there be puppies?

I can't proclaim with confidence on puppies.

I can say with some confidence that there will not be Anabaptists in heaven.

Nor will there be Lutherans, or Anglicans or Pentecostals or Baptists or Roman Catholics or Orthodox or members of the Happy Valley Missionary One True Bible Church (I saw this on a sign in Montana!).

What there will be are beloved children of God, claimed and redeemed by Jesus Christ, who have finally been relieved of the burdens of their sad divisions.

I hope that we will spend the next stage of our journey as Anabaptists, leaning into the future that we believe is pulling us forward.

That we will seek to be a more generous and expansive expression of the body of Christ than we perhaps have been in our first 500 years.

We are, after all, mixed up in the mess and the carnage of human existence. Let's do so with grace, humility, an openness to the gifts of others, an eagerness to show mercy, and a courageous love.

Amen.