

THE NEW CITY

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The history that began in this very place nearly five centuries ago, with one group of people gathered around one Bible, listening to one man (Zwingli) preaching daily from the Gospel of Matthew has resulted in at least two communities, two identities, and two traditions too often one over against the other.

The Scripture passages chosen for us today offer two images of God's city, two parables of God's people, each one symbolizing one of our traditions. The Zechariah passage (2:5-9, or 2:1-5) can represent a Reformed tradition of the church as state-church or a peoples' church, as community open to all citizens without exception while giving allegiance to the Lord. The second (Mt. 5:14-16) is typical of Anabaptist-related traditions of the church as the community of disciples following Jesus in life daily, separated from the world while witnessing to it.

Yet, when held up as mirrors to our own history and identity, the passages we select as self-characteristic can function as texts of self-condemnation, or at least as calls to confession.

CONFESSING SINS

Reformed Christians: a city open to the world?

Zechariah addresses an appeal to those still living in exile, exhorting them to return to the city whose new conditions he envisions. This city will be an open city, a city for exiles, a city for a great multitude of people and other creatures. It will be a city that needs no walls for security and cohesion because the Lord himself will be present to protect and to provide. "I will be a wall of fire all around it, says the Lord, and I will be the glory within it."

From a 16th century Anabaptist point of view, this passage must have seemed more like a "condemnation" of the Reformed Church's practice of state-church theology than the

model for it. For Felix Manz and his siblings in the faith, Zurich or its church was finally not an open city, not a new Jerusalem, not a place of justice and peace to which they or a multitude of others could return from exile. They did not have the impression that Zurich authorities were depending only on the presence of the Lord for the city's protection, provision and glory. This city must have felt to them like a closed city, one in which they were declared foreign, one from which they were exiled outside the high wall or into dark death in the waters of the Limmat.

Anabaptist Christians: a city on a hill, light to the world?

In Matthew, Jesus addresses an appeal to those who have voluntarily exiled themselves from established society in order to follow him. He sets before them the vision of a new city, a new society, a new community that is not "of the world" yet fully "in the world." And not only will this city be fully in the world. It will be there as "salt and light." It will be there in such way that no one can avoid tasting it or seeing it, how it lives, whom it follows, on whom it depends for protection and provision, whom it glorifies. "A city built on a hill cannot be hid. (...) Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

For some of us who claim Anabaptist tradition as our own, these words of Jesus resonate more like a "condemnation" of significant parts of our history than their source or inspiration. Several of the earliest radical reformers, including Felix Manz, no doubt envisioned large-scale transformation of society or at least vigorous witness to it through communities of believers living in its midst. But after persistent persecution, many found themselves sooner or later in tightly knit, separatist communities, without significant prophetic or evangelizing fervor. Many of us have voluntarily stayed there, marginalized, little more than a footnote in church history or, more recently, found relief in some form of accommodation to host societies. After lighting the lamp, we hid it under the bushel where it neither illuminates good works nor provokes offerings of glory to God.

Fortunately, this tale of two cities—the open city inhabited by the Lord and the city set on a hill glorifying God—reminds us not only of our limits. It also points to gifts we have received and can offer one another, and others. The Bible not only calls us to confession. It also calls us to share God-given gifts in the body of Christ and beyond.

SHARING GIFTS

The Reformed call to open community

Today, in the spirit of Zechariah, you—Reformed Christians—open your city and the church in it not only to daughters and sons of those put to death or exiled in the 16th century and later. More importantly, you open yourselves to another look at the convictions those exiles incarnated. Today you take steps toward right remembering, toward right relations, toward fuller communion with former adversaries. Today you demonstrate your openness to depend on God for protection and provision. You manifest your faith that the Lord will be the wall of fire around you and the glorious presence in your midst. This is a precious gift and a clear message to the Anabaptist-related community worldwide, indeed to the whole ecumenical church.

May we be ready to receive your gifts! May we be ready to receive not only your humility and generosity this day but also, more fundamentality, the God-given elements in your experience, tradition, identity, and imagination of the open city.

Growing up in a Mennonite church and studying in Mennonite educational institutions, I learned early on that “Jesus is Lord.” But I attribute the deep realization that Jesus is Lord of history and of creation—of the whole world and all that is within it—to the witness of Reformed Christians. My brand of Mennonite theology focused on the lordship of Christ over the church, over the new city set on a hill.

Reformed dialogue partners lifted up Jesus as Lord of all, not only of the church but of the whole world and everything in it. The church is called to shape society as much as possible according to God’s will, they said. If the issue of peace is adequately to be addressed, they added, looking Mennonites straight in the eye, the Gospel must be related not only to questions of war and military affairs, but also to all that constitutes life in the institutions of civilization that were intended to preserve and enhance human life—families, economic and technological systems, cultural patterns, and political. After all, it was a theology of Reformed orientation that was most able to give guidance and language to the resistance of Protestants to Hitler, partly in the form of a “Confessing Church. Since then, several generations of Mennonites have received much from Reformed teachers and

partners: from Karl Barth, André Trocmé, Jacques Ellul, Jürgen Moltmann, Milan Opocensky, Lukas Vischer, to name only a few. Thank you for this gift.

The Anabaptist call to be a city on a hill

It may be simpler to see what others can give us than what we can give them. When other Christians look at today's descendents of Anabaptists, they typically see several gifts. When they look at Amish, they see the gift of simplicity. When they look at Hutterites, they see the gift of economic sharing. When they look at Mennonites, they see the gift of peacemaking. Each of these gifts does have something to do with living as a free church, as a believers church, as a peace church, as a community of disciples living as salt and light in the world.

In a book named "Body Politics, Five Practices of the Christian Community Before the Watching World," the most influential Mennonite theologian of the 20th century names five components of life in the city built on a hill which give light if appropriately extended into the world.

1. "Binding and loosing" (Mt. 18:15ff.), known also as the "Rule of Christ," a biblical process of reconciliation and moral discernment.
2. "Breaking bread together," also called the "Lord's Supper" and the "Eucharist," understood as including or implying economic sharing among the members of the community of believers.
3. "Baptism" practiced as entry into a community where social, ethnic, and national categories and hierarchies no longer apply or separate
4. Living the "fullness of Christ" in which every member of the community—and not only the pastor or preacher—has a distinctly identifiable, divinely validated and communitarian empowered role.
5. Applying the "Rule of Paul" (I Cor. 14), that is, making decisions through a process in which every church member may be inspired by the Spirit to speak, then validating that word by the consensus of the entire group.

Are these gifts twenty-first century Anabaptists have to offer to other Christians and the world? Perhaps sometimes, when we actually practice what we preach. But in any case, I expect that Reformed Christians will be surprised to hear these practices called typically "Anabaptist." After all, most of them are at least partly rooted also in earliest Reformed convictions or theology. And their rediscovery by 20th century Anabaptist historians and theologians is rooted in dialogue with 20th century Reformed historians and theologians.

Even the gifts we may have to offer you are in some sense gifts you have already given to us!

MAKING ALL THINGS NEW

Our traditions are important to us. They are important to us because we believe them to be vehicles of truth and, perhaps even more, because they are places of belonging: they are our traditions, our identities, our places of belonging. Shortly after the Mennonite World Conference began dialogue with the Catholic Church under the theme "Towards a Healing of Memories," I received an anonymous letter leveling the charge that we were "betraying the blood of the martyrs." To offer confession, to respond to confession, to take steps toward reconciliation and then beyond reconciliation into fuller unity can feel like betrayal of truth and loss of identity.

But these fears assume that identity is something static and its preservation contingent on defending "our" tradition over against "others'" traditions. Yet the Lord is the wall of fire around us and the glory in our midst. We who have confessed our faith belong neither to ourselves nor to our traditions—each of which contain distortions. We belong to Jesus Christ and to the one body of Christ in whom "everything becomes new."

There is, after all an ultimate biblical vision of the new city, one no doubt inspired by and fulfilling the earlier visions of Zechariah and Jesus.

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth (...) and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (...) I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And this city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations" (Rev. 21:1-2, 22-27).

This new city is our common horizon and our shared future. But before we enter it, while continuing to live together in exile, we have many more steps to take along the path re-opened here today.

Twenty years ago, after sharing in a public service of confession and communion in this cathedral, followed by consultation in Strasbourg, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Mennonite World Conference wrote a message and a study booklet for member churches worldwide:

“The time has indeed come,” they said, “for us to look afresh at our relationship to each other and to our common calling to follow Christ in church and world. It is our hope that this booklet will prompt and facilitate renewed conversation in our worldwide fellowships on these matters. Theological and practical considerations suggest that the conversation begin at the local level. (...) Mennonite/Reformed relations—the areas of agreement and disagreement, the extent of fellowship or cooperation already established—vary from setting to setting. Each situation calls for its own agenda” (pp. 7-8).

“MWC and WARC would like to be informed of local and regional initiatives. In approximately two years we will report the development and results of these conversations. At that time also, we will consider appropriate next steps” (p. 2).

There was little response to the call issued 20 years ago. There was nothing to report after two years, and not much more after two decades. Meeting in occasional special events to seek and extend forgiveness is simpler than sustained dialogue and cooperation, not to mention the long and hard work of growing into unity in the one body of Christ. So together we, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and Mennonite World Conference, announce our hope that the events of this day in Zurich and future dialogue in Switzerland will serve as a catalyst and example to Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites and Reformed worldwide. Where we encounter one another with a common commitment to Scripture as normative and openness to mutual correction and sharing, we can expect to be led by the Spirit beyond our brokenness into God’s new city.

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