

Mennonite Ethics and the Ways of the World: Rethinking Culture for Renewed Witness

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Abstract: Many Mennonites desire the church to be a visible body marked off from “the world” by distinctive practices of Christ-like love and service. However, in light of their increasing accommodation to wider Western culture, acculturated Mennonites like those within Mennonite Church USA face the challenge of cultivating such a witness. This essay argues that Mennonites should not seek new patterns of “concrete separation” from culture, nor attempt to define and drive Mennonite ethics through systematic theology or other normative statements of faith. Drawing on both theoretical and theological analyses of culture it suggests instead that the church develops its visible and distinctive witness not by separating from wider culture, but by making innovative uses and subversive transformations of common cultural elements. The church is more apt to develop and sustain faithful witness when it focuses its energies on enacting and reflecting upon concrete historical experiments in Christian service and community, or when proposals for practical social action drive debates about the nature and tasks of discipleship.

The quest to understand and orient Christianity’s relationship to culture is an important but vexing undertaking. Although Christians of all stripes and generations face the question, the religious sects spawned from the Radical Reformation, notably the Mennonites, have figured prominently in the popular and ecumenical imagination for their alleged consistent, rigorous, and identity-defining approach to the problem of “Christianity and culture.” Yet while celebrated texts of Christian ethics identify Anabaptists as starkly “against culture”—and while Mennonites themselves have sometimes reinforced this view through their self-descriptions and theological expressions—Mennonite relations to culture have never been easily classified.¹

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1. The seminal and most influential text to identify Anabaptists as being “against culture” is H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), esp. 45-82. To argue that Mennonite theology has often reinforced this view is tricky. While Mennonite theological and historical scholarship since the 1950s presents a wide and diverse range of descriptive and normative accounts of ecclesial relations to culture, society, and the state, I am aware of no scholar or official denominational publication explicitly accepting Niebuhr’s analysis—“Christ against culture” is not an active part of the

Due in part to romanticized conceptions of their history, as well as to significant sociological and theological metamorphoses since the middle of the twentieth century, many U.S. American Mennonites feel themselves in something of an identity crisis. “Thanks to the runaway pace of change in American life, the cultural and psychic substance of Mennonite solidarity is rapidly dissolving,” Paul Peachey warned more than forty years ago.² Having invested significant stock in the task of “distinctive witness,” the model of “alternative moral community,” and practices of “prophetic critique,” many contemporary Mennonites are alarmed by what appears to be widespread acculturation within their ranks.³ On the other hand, some scholars have noted—with varying degrees of appreciation or ambivalence—that the church’s movement toward practices of peacebuilding and active justice work has depended significantly on the “abandonment of distinct practices of nonconformity.”⁴ In any case, many Mennonites still desire the church to be a headquarters for radical discipleship and a visible herald of God’s

Mennonite lexicon. Yet the language of separatism, social withdrawal, alternative community, and countercultural witness is so exceedingly common that to cite specific examples would be not only arbitrary but likely obfuscating, as such terms have been employed diversely and with various cultural, missional, activist, or political valences in Anabaptist scholarship since the 1950s. What these views typically do share is the basic conviction that following Christ entails practices of nonconformity or active opposition to certain common cultural elements or actions, and the centrality of this perspective, fairly or unfairly, tends to reinforce the Niebuhrian paradigm in popular perception.

2. Paul Peachey, “Identity Crisis among American Mennonites,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 42 (Oct. 1968), 243. The article was originally prepared for a broader project of the Institute of Mennonite Studies entitled “Mennonite Acculturation.”

3. Empirical evidence for the ongoing cultural assimilation of Mennonite Church USA (MC USA) became widely available in Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2007). Kanagy argued that recent denominational survey data confirmed that “Mennonites are becoming more conforming to the values and attitudes of the larger society—looking more like their neighbors and co-workers than was true for Mennonites 35 years ago” (170-171). He also suggested that the church’s failure to maintain meaningful points of distinction from the broader culture poses a threat to the church’s missional calling (174). In December 2008, *The Mennonite* published an editorial summation of the year’s stories suggesting that Kanagy’s findings regarding “increasing cultural assimilation, increasing political identification, and declining church attendance” reveal Mennonite Church USA as “a church in recession.” See Everett J. Thomas, Gordon Houser, and Anna Groff, “A Church in Recession,” *The Mennonite*, Dec. 16, 2008. For a theological account of the perceived “identity crisis” resulting from acculturation (which predates Kanagy’s study), see J. Denny Weaver, “Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 6 (Spring 1988), 119-145.

4. Ervin R. Stutzman, *From Nonresistance to Justice: The Transformation of Mennonite Church Peace Rhetoric, 1908-2008* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2011). See also Leo Driedger and Donald B. Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking: From Quietism to Activism* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1994); Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: American Mennonites Engage Washington* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996).

peaceable reign, but must now imagine these possibilities in the face of their increasing assimilation within wider culture.⁵ How can the Mennonite church be a sign of God's "upside-down Kingdom" when its members appear indistinct and upright? "It's hard to tell a Mennonite just by looking," states a popular YouTube video developed by MennoMedia in 2010. The video, which aims to introduce Mennonites to a curious general audience, claims that Mennonites instead share a common spiritual ancestry, an interest in the Sermon on the Mount, and commitments to peacemaking and service. But do such common commitments and identity markers show up in the everyday lives and mundane cultural activities of believers in ways that constitute the church as an alternative moral community? If you can no longer tell a Mennonite by looking, but must instead visit YouTube to learn about Mennonite history and convictions, what sorts of concrete social or cultural elements visibly distinguish the community as a witness to God's transforming work in Jesus Christ? Confusion about how to evaluate and respond to these developments suggests a deeper uncertainty among Mennonites about the relationships between faith and culture, church and world, identity and other.

Of course, Mennonitism, like all religious communities, is *itself* a culture.⁶ Mennonite theology, worship, and witness are *cultural activities* or cultural productions. The interface between Mennonites and the broader cultural milieu in which they live is, therefore, a relation among multiple *cultures*. Contemporary attempts to describe, evaluate, and orient these relations, therefore, require theological attention to the

5. It is probably already clear that this paper's primary targets of analysis, critique, and exhortation are individuals, congregations, and institutions within Mennonite Church USA. For the sake of convenience, I will continue to use the broader term "Mennonite" throughout this paper, aware that the accompanying analysis or observations are intended to apply primarily to MC USA. The decision to focus on MC USA is due not only to the need for a limited scope of analysis, but also to a special and committed concern for my own beloved and troubled corner of the Mennonite Church. I believe, nevertheless, that the account of culture supplied here could be of use to all sorts of Mennonites and Anabaptists, whether in North America or abroad. My intention is not to privilege, exclude, or ignore anyone, and I hope the broader theological perspective proposed here is clear enough to bear fruit in or elicit criticism from the broader Mennonite community.

6. A comprehensive argument for interpreting religious communities as cultures would require furnishing a definition of culture, defending that definition vis-à-vis the dizzying and tempestuous discourse of contemporary cultural theory, and then showing how, for example, Mennonites fit under this definition. But since I believe that no currently operable conception of culture would exclude religious communities such as Mennonites, I will assert simply that, insofar as Mennonitism constitutes a (somewhat) shared set of beliefs, values, practices, and stories correlated with a body of institutions, organizations, and groups, Mennonitism is a culture. Conceiving of Christianity or Christian denominations as cultures does not mean that Christian communities, practices, or texts must be worldly creations with no transcendent or divine source. It simply means that Christianity entails ways of life that broadly mark its members in the world.

nature of culture, the formation of cultural identity, and the dynamics of intercultural relations and "boundaries." Understanding how cultures function and interrelate is an important step in discerning how Mennonites can interpret and renew their witness in the twenty-first century. In particular, a sharpened view of the features that mark cultural development, reproduction, and change could help North American Mennonites navigate more deftly the vast complexities of contemporary Western culture. Kathryn Tanner, a systematic theologian, offers such a view in *Theories of Culture*, a pioneering analysis and theological response to contemporary cultural theory. Her analysis could serve contemporary Mennonite ethics in three important ways, which together form the basic theses of the present essay.

First, Tanner argues that cultures are characterized by "interactive process and negotiation, indeterminacy, fragmentation, conflict, and porosity."⁷ Cultures always overlap with other cultures and exist within common social and environmental systems. They share cultural forms (i.e., texts, practices, tools, rituals, values, language, institutions, etc.) with neighboring cultures yet negotiate their meanings and uses in different and sometimes conflicting ways. If cultures form and differentiate themselves by interpreting and employing shared cultural forms in unique ways, North American Mennonites may be able to cultivate a distinctive communal witness without indiscriminately rejecting the practices, "texts," and artifacts of wider Western culture. Rather than pursuing a strategy of separation, they may find ways to foment innovative and faithful Christian practices amid an increasingly cosmopolitan yet seemingly irresistible cultural environment by seeking visibly distinctive uses, surprising transformations, and creative subversions of "the ways of the world."

Second, Tanner contends that cultures are almost never stable, internally consistent, or self-contained wholes. Cultures are not bubbles kept afloat by uniform behavior or a carefully maintained consensus on values. Instead, cultures are characterized by persistent common engagement around important cultural forms and practices.⁸ Agreement about these forms, even within a culture, is never more than partial and tentative; and even the most definitive cultural practices are enacted diversely. Mennonites can thus reevaluate or develop new ways of interpreting both internal diversity and external "boundary relations," while retaining the freedom to discern and evaluate appropriate targets

7. Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), 38. Tanner's text is a key reference work undergirding this essay's thesis and analysis.

8. *Ibid.*, 40-58.

and methods of prophetic critique. Rejecting monolithic or monological ideals of culture, Mennonites may engage in such discernment by embracing a fluid, “conversational” identity defined less by an (ostensibly) accepted set of norms and more by a shared set of questions about the tasks of discipleship in the face of complex moral challenges.

Third, cultures and cultural identities form and change through concrete, material actions and relations. In her descriptive account of cultural theory, Tanner suggests that “historical struggles precede any clearly defined meaning or organization of cultural elements.”⁹ James K. A. Smith, in the first volume of his constructive theology of culture, argues that Christian cultural formation stems properly from “a pedagogy that trains us as disciples precisely by putting our bodies through a regimen of repeated practices that get hold of our heart and ‘aim’ our love toward the kingdom of God.”¹⁰ These thinkers offer Mennonites both descriptive and normative arguments for attending to the primary role of material practices and social action in cultural formation and production. Few Mennonites will be alarmed at the idea that Christian faith and life are practical matters defined in large part by lived patterns of biblical obedience. But Mennonites in the U.S. have often staked the future of their distinctive witness upon successful transmission of a “Mennonite perspective” or by clarifying Mennonite doctrine.¹¹ Rather than seeking to sustain a distinctive community through the maintenance of a Mennonite worldview, the church could seek to become a community of disciples by cultivating a dynamic, praxis-centered model of communal formation and theological reflection. In other words, the church’s response to perceived “identity crises” should not center on doctrinal clarification or the preservation of ethnic folkways but rather on participation in and reflection upon concrete

9. *Ibid.*, 56.

10. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 33.

11. J. Denny Weaver has been the most outspoken proponent of this approach. See, e.g., J. Denny Weaver, “Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity,” 125. Furthermore, Susan Biesecker-Mast has argued that it was precisely this kind of concern that led to the publishing of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995). “As many G.C and M.C. Mennonites became acculturated to the practices and ideologies of U.S. and/or Canadian culture, the question of identity within the church became paramount. Amidst rapid change a new confession was seen as an opportunity to bring the confession up to date with the culture. . . . A new confession might clarify Mennonite identity for internal purposes as well as for the purposes of mission, especially through theological distinctives.” —Susan Biesecker-Mast, “A Genealogy of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*,” *MQR* 81 (July 2007), 374-375. She cites minutes of the Dec. 14-15, 1984, meeting of the Confession of Faith Study Committee found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, which is labeled “Confession of Faith Study Committee,” Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind.

“experiments in discipleship.”¹² Although innovative systematic theologies like J. Denny Weaver’s work in “narrative Christology,” and lingering cultural forms like hymns, quilts, and cookbooks may remain important features of Mennonite faith and life, they should not—and likely *cannot*—define Mennonite identity or drive the church’s witness.¹³ Instead the church should look to places and projects, both past and present, where the church has endeavored to follow Jesus through service to the marginalized, reconciliation of enemies, biblical worship and witness amid imperial violence, and prophetic resistance or pragmatic compromise in the face of complex social and moral challenges. Participating in and reflecting upon such sites of experimental discipleship is a more authentic and effective path toward ecclesial formation and revitalization.

MENNONITES AND CULTURE: AN AMBIVALENT HISTORY

Not all Mennonites may regard the question of “Christianity and culture” as a worthwhile conversation to engage, for all culture outside the church has sometimes been viewed as irredeemable, or, at best, a messy realm of temptation and compromise. The strong dualism of the sixteenth-century radical reformers, and their uncompromising, martyr-ready commitment to the straight-and-narrow, loom large in Mennonite imagination. The Schleithem Confession—Anabaptism’s earliest, and now most widely read historical confession—seems to state the issue clearly:

We have been united concerning the separation that shall take place from the evil and the wickedness which the devil has planted in the world, simply in this; that we have no fellowship with them, and do not run with them in the confusion of their abominations. So it is; since all who have not entered into the obedience of faith and have not united themselves with God so that they will to do His will, are a great abomination before God, therefore nothing else can or really will grow or spring forth from them than abominable things. Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good or evil,

12. The phrase “experiments in discipleship” refers deliberately to the recently published book edited by Joanna Shenk, *Widening the Circle: Experiments in Discipleship* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2011). The book collects accounts of recent Anabaptist-based missional practices, projects, and communities, mostly in North American contexts. The thesis of the present paper would suggest that reflection upon such “experiments in discipleship” might in fact contain richer moral and theological fodder than propositional confessions like the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* or systematic theologies.

13. See J. Denny Weaver, “Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity.” Also, Mark Metzler Sawin, “Moving Stubbornly Toward the Kingdom of God: Mennonite Identity in the Twenty First Century,” *MQR* 75 (Jan. 2001), 89-98.

believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who are [come] out of the world, God's temple and idols, Christ and Belial, and none will have part with the other.¹⁴

For these early Anabaptists, *nothing* good can come from those who have not "entered in the obedience of faith" and thereby "come out of the world." If only abominable things exist outside the true church the question of Christ and culture would appear to be moot.¹⁵

The simplest (and perhaps bleakest) possible narrative of a Mennonite approach to culture would begin here, with Schleithem's separatism, and culminate for Mennonite Church USA in an accommodation to cosmopolitan capitalism in the twenty-first century. In between would be tales of martyrdom, persecution, schism, migration, agricultural success, "quietness in the land," conscientious objection and alternative service, institutional growth, global missions, communal diffusion, peace witness, and (sub)urbanization, with gradual shifts in theological and cultural mores all along the way. We would see the seminal Anabaptist conviction that the world was divided into two kingdoms—and that "believers simply could not live with a foot in both worlds"—slowly erode, becoming replaced with commonplace American Christianity supplemented, at best, with an active focus on "peace and justice."¹⁶ This breezy way of recounting the history of Mennonites in America makes an interesting story, but turns a blind eye to historical complexity and contemporary pluralism, and ignores significant and ongoing historiographical debates about the meaning of the Schleithem Confession and the character of early Anabaptist separatism.¹⁷

14. *The Schleithem Confession*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973), 11-12.

15. Some Mennonite scholars have argued that the Schleithem Confession actually articulates a much more complex and discerning view of the relationship between the church and the world. See John Howard Yoder, "'Anabaptists and the Sword' Revisited: Systematic Historiography and Undogmatic Nonresistants," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 85 (1974), 126-139. See also Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "Anabaptist Separation and Arguments against the Sword in the Schleithem 'Brotherly Union,'" *MQR* 74 (July 2000), 381-402. There is probably some truth to these arguments, especially with regards to Schleithem's Article VI "concerning the Sword." Article IV is nevertheless quite clear that the choice to enter the church entails strict separation from all that which "grows or springs forth" from the secular or sacrilegious worlds.

16. Steve Nolt, "A 'Two-Kingdom' People in a World of Multiple Identities: Religion, Ethnicity, and American Mennonites," *MQR* 73 (July 1999), 487. Nolt's argument challenges this thin narrative with a more complex historical picture of American Mennonites' "multiple identities" and cultural/ethnic relations.

17. On this historiographical debate, see the October 2006 special issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, which includes relevant book reviews as well as responses by nine scholars to C. Arnold Snyder's "The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism, 1520-1530," *MQR* 80 (Oct. 2006).

Yet even scholars who explicitly critique this caricatured narrative often appear influenced by some version of its theology. Gerald Mast, for example, wants the church to become “an alternative moral regime concretely separated from worldliness.” His prescription for this task is “to give more attention to precisely those symbolic and cultural practices Mennonites have been sloughing off in recent decades.”¹⁸ He qualifies this plea to disentangle Christ’s body from the clutches of culture with an insistence that the church’s countercultural practices remain culturally engaged because they respond to Christ’s call to “concrete, material, bodily solidarity with the Other.” The idea is that the church’s witness to Jesus Christ requires both physical and visible separation from worldliness as well as physical and visible worldly engagement: separation *from* the world, *for* the world. In the challenge to “negotiate this narrow and rocky path” Mast suggests that the church in recent decades has strayed on the side of worldliness.¹⁹ Recovering an ethic of nonconformist ecclesial separatism, he says, requires daily attention to the symbolic meanings of believers’ mundane and commonplace acts within the world.²⁰ This engaged separatism demands an intricate show of balance between alternative acts of rejection and embrace of the broader culture. For example, church membership helpfully undermines nationalism, he argues, but Mennonites must “look for traces of God in public spaces and worldly places.” The church should separate itself by “avoiding fads and fashions”—refusing nationalistic rituals and spurning the “daily influx of mass-mediated texts”—yet Christians should also affirm “cultural workers in the popular media.” They ought to critique the symbolic ethos of liberal autonomy, but at the same time read and appreciate poetry because it is connected to the “complicated realm of embodied passion.” The faithful church can be found both boycotting corporations and affirming the work of CEOs.²¹ Evidently gone are the days when there was *nothing* in the world but “good and evil, believing and unbelieving . . . Christ and Belial.”

What is confusing about Mast’s proposal is not that it requires the church to discern carefully on a case-by-case basis how or whether to engage the ways of the world, but that it cloaks an ethic of missional

18. Gerald Biesecker-Mast, “Recovering the Anabaptist Body (To Separate it For the World),” in *Anabaptists and Postmodernity*, eds. Susan Biesecker-Mast and Gerald Biesecker-Mast (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, 2000), 206. Mast is clear that this does not necessarily entail a direct return to the specific cultural practices and forms of earlier Anabaptists (e.g. head-coverings for women), but rather requires discerning visible ways to “avoid,” “refuse,” and “live without” the ways of the world.

19. *Ibid.*, 193.

20. *Ibid.*, 204-206.

21. *Ibid.*, 201-210. For the quote on poetry, Mast cites Scott Holland, “Theology is a Kind of Writing: The Emergence of Theopoetics,” *MQR* 71 (April 1997), 322.

acculturation in the language of “concrete separation.” His basic plan for renewing Anabaptist witness is interesting and operable, and his theological analysis is carefully nuanced, but his argument struggles under the weight of a historical vision of an unworldly Anabaptist culture and a theological ideal of separation that correspond neither to Mennonite reality nor to his own practical advice for the church. Mast seeks an ecclesial body visibly marked by distinctive practices of Christ-like love for the world. Here the language of “concrete separation” is not only a misnomer but misguiding, for it reflects the church’s untenable sense that culture is something from which it is possible to separate, and that engaging the world is something that can be done from the launch pad of a wholly self-generated cultural distinctiveness.

Meanwhile, a new generation of Mennonite historians has challenged the notion that Anabaptism was ever so clearly opposed or concretely separated from culture. “In practice,” argues Steve Nolt, “the two-kingdom world view often fit awkwardly into a real world of multiple identities and responsibilities.” The lived reality of Mennonite groups across Europe and then in North America and elsewhere always allowed for ethnic identities and cultural activities far wider than the traditional boundaries of the baptized community.²² Highlighting the significant proliferation of Mennonite institutions in the twentieth century, Nolt identifies an emergent “institutional approach to Mennonite self-definition,” which, in practice, provides a “smorgasbord-like collection of options leaving individuals free to selectively appropriate elements of ethnicity.” This Mennonite *mélange*, argues Nolt, has its origins, perhaps ironically, in an overzealous separatism and a “false sense of ethnic independence,” while in fact “unwittingly mimicking American professionalism and means of upward mobility under the guise of religiously-defined ethnicity.”²³

Identifying a similar lack of unity—both presently and historically—among Anabaptist internal practices and external relations, John D. Roth argues that Mennonite scholarship and self-understanding alike have wrongly “tended to define community in structural, functional, or normative terms,” and thereby misunderstood the church, its distinctiveness, and its posture toward culture.²⁴ Here, Roth may strike at the root of current Mennonite confusion about both its history and its present cultural ambivalence, suggesting that the quest for a definitive

22. Nolt, “A ‘Two-Kingdom’ People,” 487; 496.

23. *Ibid.*, 499-501.

24. John D. Roth, “Community as Conversation: A New Model of Anabaptist Hermeneutics,” in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. H. Wayne Pipken (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 44.

set of theological doctrines or ethical practices may in fact perpetuate the problem it intends to resolve. Seeking historical and normative grounds upon which to cultivate a distinctive and describable Mennonite identity, the church encounters only competing arguments and irreducible diversity, thereby reinforcing the sense that the church is further than ever from the unity, discipline, and otherness required for faithful witness.

Mennonite uncertainty about faith and culture is not merely a theological issue but also a concrete social reality. Mark Metzler Sawin notes that young Mennonites today are devising novel “cultural markers and new forms of community” to “give themselves a sense of Mennonite identity” despite the “cultural non-distinctiveness of Mennonites today.” These new identity markers are “culturally constructed and change from generation to generation.”²⁵ They include Mennonite websites, hymn-singing, Mennonite cookbooks, and the use of Mennonite artifacts (e.g., quilts and Menno Simons mouse-pads) to decorate urban or suburban living rooms. These cultural forms function as effective Mennonite identity markers “not for any theological reason, but because they make [North American Mennonites] feel connected to the farming, plain-clothed, German-speaking Mennonite culture of their ancestors.”²⁶ The tension at the core of modern Mennonite life, he claims, “lies in the idea of looking back but not going back.”²⁷ These backward glances and the ever-changing cultural responses they inspire may be just enough to maintain the sense of “specialness” that a distinctive identity requires. But if Sawin is correct that modern Mennonite identity lacks a theological component—constructed instead by a material and memorial homage to a cherished or criticized heritage—then the crisis facing the Mennonite Church may not be one of “identity” but rather integrity. The interesting feature of Sawin’s analysis is that it shows the ways Mennonites actually do maintain cultural distinctiveness precisely by appropriating more widespread cultural forms (e.g., hymns, quilts, lentils and rice, and the Internet) and then by using them or interpreting them in unique or characteristically “Mennonite” ways. The troubling element in this portrait of modern Mennonite life concerns the ways these uses and interpretations appear to be oriented fundamentally by a search for distinctiveness rather than by a communal effort to witness to God’s peaceable reign. Somewhere in the complex process by which Mennonites assimilated, maintained cultural identity, resisted yet

25. Sawin, “Moving Stubbornly Toward the Kingdom of God,” 89; 92.

26. *Ibid.*, 94-95. Sawin is here describing women in his own family, but states that “what is true for them, I believe, is also true for many North American Mennonites.”

27. *Ibid.*, 97.

validated these trends theologically, and then turned to take stock of themselves in the twenty-first century, distinctive identity became an end in itself, and both material and theological culture became oriented to this mundane goal.

This grim image of Mennonite Church USA is obviously selective, and leaves aside many of the best and most encouraging features of the contemporary church's life and mission. But the basic challenge posed by the sense of identity-loss and the subsequent quest for cultural distinctiveness is no doubt a fundamental issue facing the church. Although able theologians have attempted to address the challenge by clarifying and reinterpreting some of the tradition's richest and most distinctive insights, their efforts are easily obstructed by unspoken and unsound assumptions about the way nonconformist acts of discipleship relate to the broader culture, about how communal identity relates to doctrines and norms, and about how missional acts of cultural engagement relate to the church's own distinctive theological and cultural development. Roth is likely correct that discerning a way forward will remain difficult without sharpened attention to the conceptions of culture, group identity, and communal formation that underlie both historical and normative interpretations of Mennonite faith and culture.

CULTURE, THEOLOGY, AND THE CHURCH

Kathryn Tanner argues that the era of defining cultures in terms of "sharply bounded, self-contained units" has receded in light of the empirical observation that distinctive groups always form in *relation* to surrounding cultures, sharing but reinterpreting widely available cultural forms, rituals, habits, mores, and social structures.²⁸ Cultures are not self-generating, but rather establish themselves as unique, *relatively* discrete cultures by their distinctive, transformative *usages* of common (i.e., shared with other cultures) elements and forms. Cultural identities are developed and distinguished by "the novel way cultural elements from elsewhere are now put to work, by means of such complex and ad hoc relational processes as resistance, appropriation, subversion, and compromise."²⁹ Theology, as a cultural activity of the Christian church, is therefore never "unsullied" by relations with contemporary—or, for that matter, bygone—cultural developments. Biblical texts stand as living testimonies to the ways Israel and the church made radically innovative use (as well as selective rejection) of the cultural forms of the Ancient

28. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 53-58.

29. *Ibid.*, 58.

Near East and Greco-Roman world in response to God's Word and God's redemptive action in their lives among the nations. For example, Israel borrowed extensively from the covenant codes of their Ancient Near Eastern neighbors (and rivals) in order to understand and express their distinctive experience as saved by and accountable to God. The Covenant—given at Sinai, renewed by the banks of the Jordan, and written in ways that both mimic and subvert pervasive Ancient Near Eastern legal forms—became the definitive center of Israelite communal identity, orienting their life under the sovereignty of God and marking them as a people called to a special mission among the nations. Israel's covenant with God is a biblical example of how God's forming of a faithful community entails innovative and transformative uses of the wider culture in ways that acknowledge God's reign as the normative and existential center of community life. The ability of the church's practices to offer a distinctive witness depends not on any supposed separation or isolation, but on the capacity of its worldly life to evidence an alternative reading of the world stemming from a transformative experience of God.

Beyond the fact that cultures are not impermeably bounded units, argues Tanner, their internal dynamics are also never characterized by full-fledged consensus, univocal agreement, or monistic value dispersion. Even shared texts, common confessions, corporate practices, and agreed upon values mean different things to different people or subgroups. Central symbols, stories, and activities are just as likely to be sources of conflict as sources of coherence.³⁰ Like Roth, Tanner cautions against defining cultures in terms of norms or structures. Eschewing the notion of culture as "a common focus of agreement," Tanner suggests instead that "culture binds people together as a common focus for *engagement*."³¹ Cultural stability is a "temporary precipitate of an ongoing process," while change is an inherent cultural dynamic rather than "deviation from a norm of static stability."³² Of course, this is not to say that change is necessarily good or immune from processes of discernment, evaluation, and potential critique. Rather, the point is that changes occur *inevitably* and emerge in dialectical relation with these same processes of (internal) self-evaluation and (relational) self-definition.

Christianity remains engaged in the dynamic act of examining and redirecting its own faithfulness as a distinctive culture and a witnessing community in an ever-changing environment. Diverse viewpoints within

30. *Ibid.*, 46; 57.

31. *Ibid.*, 57.

32. *Ibid.*, 51.

the church, argues Tanner, are therefore not necessarily signs of inadequate communal or individual formation, for “diversity results not so much from a failure to internalize Christian culture as from proper socialization into the kind of practice Christianity is.”³³ In other words, variation, diversity, and change are intrinsic and proper features of Christian culture.³⁴ Christianity as a culture is—and always was—subject to dynamics of instability, porosity, and internal wrangling over the meanings and uses of central beliefs and practices. So long as the church remains a global community composed of humans embedded in complex social and cultural environments, Christianity will always be a diverse culture, unfolding in multifarious and unpredictable ways. Aware that surrounding cultures are likewise diverse in both values and practices, churches can, and must, distinguish among a culture’s various elements, discerning which components or institutions are adaptable for Christian “use,” and which compel prophetic critique or outright rejection.

Since cultures form boundaries by negotiating the meanings, values, and uses of cultural elements available broadly across multiple overlapping cultures, these boundaries are by nature fluid and essentially relational. Boundaries are determined by how an entire “way of life is situated within a whole field of alternatives.”³⁵ “Cultural elements,” says Tanner, “may cross such boundaries without jeopardizing the distinctiveness of different cultures.”³⁶ Since cultures are neither monolithic nor monological, cohesion occurs around common *concerns*—a shared sense of the importance of the negotiations transpiring around the meanings and applications of various cultural elements, texts, and values. Roth, as a student and scholar of history, echoes this insight. Quoting another historian, David Sabean, Roth contends that communities are “defined by the fact that ‘members’ of the community [are] engaged in the same argument, the same *raisonnement*, the same *Rede*, the same discourse, in which alternative strategies, misunderstandings, conflicting goals and values are threshed out.”³⁷ Roth and Tanner agree that the Christian community should understand itself as a *task*—a *conversation* about the content and character of true

33. *Ibid.*, 159.

34. Andrew Walls, a missiologist, makes a similar point, albeit in a different theological context. See Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

35. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 108; 111.

36. *Ibid.*, 57.

37. David Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture and Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 13-36. Quoted in Roth, “Community as Conversation,” 44.

discipleship. "What unites Christian practices," Tanner argues, "is not, then, agreement about the beliefs and actions that constitute true discipleship; but a shared sense of the importance of figuring it out."³⁸ Argument around shared normative reference points (e.g., Scripture) is crucial to this dynamic, discursive model of Christian community. But such reference points function as sources of diverse viewpoints and subjects of debate; they are orienting and authoritative touchstones rather than molders of uniformity or consensus.³⁹ Roth argues that Anabaptist distinctives, at least historically, are best described "not as a set of fixed, normative hermeneutical principles, but rather as a series of debates into which participants were drawn precisely because they agreed on the importance of the issue being debated."⁴⁰ The church, in other words, is defined more by its debates than by its supposedly ruling ideas. More than a mere historical observation, Roth seems to point toward "community as conversation" as an operative or desirable model of Mennonite self-understanding and engagement.

The risk, however, in this focus on conversation, negotiation, debate, and argument is that these images of cultural and communal identity seem to suggest that the forces shaping community and underlying culture are primarily linguistic, discursive, or cognitive. Roth's model of "community as conversation" could convey an image of Anabaptist life and identity epitomized by open-ended table discussions devoted to debates about ideas. Here, Christian formation and witness occur over coffee and cake, and argument replaces service as the pattern of discipleship. Yet Roth offers his framework precisely as a contrast model to those depicting fixed normative principles as the foundations of Anabaptist communion or interpretive action. His imagery here notwithstanding, elsewhere—in a book called *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness*—Roth argues explicitly that the "discursive" nature of Mennonite community takes shape primarily in the material practices of discipleship and ecclesial life.⁴¹

In any case, Tanner's understanding of culture makes clear that social action drives cultural formation. Culture is "something created and recreated in the 'material' social interactions of which it is an integral

38. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 153. C.f. Roth, "Community as Conversation," 44.

39. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 154.

40. Roth, "Community as Conversation," 44.

41. John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2010). The image from Sabean of strategies, values, and goals being "threshed out" is perhaps also helpful here, for this is not a linguistic or cognitive metaphor, but rather an agricultural one, in which the processes underlying and expressing communal identity are likened to hands-on practices of planting and harvesting.

part."⁴² The distinctiveness of a culture comes about in a dialectic between 1) characteristic or novel social action within a wider social environment, and 2) disputatious communal interpretations of the meaning and value of these actions. Such interpretations in turn (re)shape social action, and the dialectic continues. Furthermore, the interpretive practices in the second prong of the dialectic may themselves take shape as social, communal, or public action. Texts, beliefs, and values, according to William Schweiker, a Christian ethicist, are "understood and reconstructed around social and practical action," and thus interpretive practices require an experiential and pragmatic dimension.⁴³ The discursive practices by which Christian communities come to understand and evaluate themselves are not wordy pauses from the tasks of discipleship; rather, they are "tied to the struggle for justice and mercy through which the phenomenon of God's reign fragmentarily appears."⁴⁴ The church learns about itself, forming and refining its communal identity, when it takes the risk of following Jesus, encountering the Spirit in efforts to witness to God's activity in the world and among the nations.

The Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez argues that the church should approach theology as "critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word."⁴⁵ Perhaps it is time for Mennonites to take this famous suggestion seriously. According to Gutierrez's method, Mennonite efforts to preserve or renew a distinctive form of witness should not begin by formulating a vital "Mennonite perspective" and then afterward seek to apply its big ideas to moral questions and communal practices. This approach, he would argue, gets the relation between action and reflection backward. Instead, distinctive perspectives arise in communal praxis; powerful ideas stem from innovative or characteristic social action. If there is a "Mennonite perspective," it grows out of, and embodies itself in, ongoing and emerging patterns of discipleship and worship that are continually evaluated and reoriented in light of Scripture. Christian understanding and communal identity are *performed*, and thus *practices* become the primary sites of interpretation, wisdom, challenge, and resistance.⁴⁶

42. Roth, "Community as Conversation," 50-51.

43. William Schweiker, "Iconoclasts, Builders, and Dramatists: The Use of Scripture in Theological Ethics," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986), 134; 155.

44. *Ibid.*, 157.

45. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 15th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1988), 11.

46. See Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 33-35. Also see Biesecker-Mast, "Recovering the Anabaptist Body," 207.

John Howard Yoder identifies a similar relationship between action and reflection, tracing theology's emergence as a response to ecclesial practice: "There had to be theology because there was action in the church."⁴⁷ Yoder's historicizing of Christian theology, like Roth's account of Anabaptist hermeneutics, subverts the primacy of fixed propositions and replaces it with a framework in which the lived reality of ecclesial practice drives Christian formation and understanding.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MENNONITE CULTURE, THEOLOGY, AND PRACTICE

Analogues between the depiction of culture offered above and the contemporary Mennonite predicament sketched in earlier sections ought to be fairly obvious. Mennonite historians, for example, are increasingly cognizant that Anabaptist history was shaped from the very beginning by subversions, selective accommodations, discriminate rejections, and, in any case, *relations* with other cultures. Even the supposed "isolation" of *die Stille im Lande* ("the quiet in the land") was a relational practice involving the renunciation of certain common cultural forms in favor of a distinctive appropriation of certain other ones. Nolt's attention to the proliferation of Mennonite institutions in recent years provides another apt illustration of the ways Mennonite cultural uniqueness "is more a matter of *how* than of *what*."⁴⁸ Contemporary North American Mennonites find themselves, like their forebears, "living in a world of multiple identities and responsibilities—identities and responsibilities they [have] often appropriated in a mixed manner."⁴⁹ They inhabit obviously overlapping cultures, and are uncertain how to negotiate and evaluate the meaning of their *already* acculturated social lives. One need not be a close or careful analyst to notice that Mennonites lack consensus on questions that virtually all members consider significant. Mennonites' lived reality seems to match important features of contemporary cultural theory's basic models, and Tanner would argue that these models should therefore be taken seriously for the church's theology and ethics.

Mennonites have often insisted, however, that the descriptive accuracy of an idea or model does not necessarily imply that the church must accept such ideas or models as prescriptive for its own life or self-understanding. The church may *in fact* be divided, acculturated, and accommodated to the world, but it is nevertheless *called* to unity, holiness, and witness to God's reign. Recognizing the Christian

47. Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2002), 393.

48. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 112.

49. Nolt, "A 'Two-Kingdom' People," 486.

community as fragmented and indeterminate, the church might find itself confronted not with “a new agenda for theology,” as Tanner would have it, but rather with a need for repentance and renewal. Tanner’s analysis may be cogent, but it need not be normatively compelling unless it is backed by biblical or theological reasons for its appropriateness to the church. Tanner does, however, provide good theological reasons for taking seriously the above insights from cultural theory, and important Anabaptist theological emphases point in a similar direction.

Already in 1964, John Howard Yoder, in his insightful critique of H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture*, argued, like Tanner, against a monolithic, autonomous, or static conception of culture, and went further to suggest the basis for a biblical and theological interpretation of culture.⁵⁰ “The humanity of Jesus was a cultural reality,” Yoder observed, and “those disciples who follow him faithfully are also within culture, not by accident or compromise, or out of weakness or inconsistency or in spite of themselves, but *by virtue* of their being his disciples.” Culture—not just Christian culture, but wider culture as well—is the appropriate and inevitable setting of Christian faith, life, and witness. For Yoder, Jesus’ concrete ministry and, in particular, his resistance to and victory over the “principalities and powers” are the keys to Christian discernment about which cultural forms should be resisted and which should be accepted or transformed. Jesus’ way of engaging culture transforms the most powerful and pretentious cultural forms by “denying their monolithic unity” and “rescinding their claimed autonomy.”⁵¹ Some elements of culture should be categorically rejected; some accepted with limits; some given new motivation and coherence; and some stripped of autonomy and then used for Christian communication. Others should be created from scratch.⁵²

In Yoder’s work we see how theological reflection on the humanity of Jesus and hermeneutical attention to biblical modes of cultural production authorize a view of culture—and of the discipling community’s relation to it—that entails discursive and pragmatic negotiations around common cultural forms and values. The church, he insists, can engage in these cultural activities without sacrificing its

50. The essay later appeared in published form as John Howard Yoder, “How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*,” in *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture*, ed. Glen Stassen (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 52-55.

51. *Ibid.*, 68-69; 76.

52. *Ibid.*, 69. Yoder has examples for all of these strategies. On pp. 86-87, he appeals to Paul’s use of Hellenistic language, tropes, and presuppositions as a further model of innovative Christian (re)appropriation of common cultural elements. Compare also Yoder’s appeal to “middle axioms” as the Christian’s way of witnessing to the state.—Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 2nd ed. (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 2002).

countercultural witness precisely because the tasks of discipleship involve Christians in the world's diverse and overlapping cultural environments. Yoder, again like Tanner, was aware that this discriminating and ad hoc approach to culture requires conversation, argument, and disputatious commitment to common questions. And Yoder agreed further that this process is a definitive aspect of the Christian community. "The consistency which counts is not trueness to an abstract type," he argued. "The consistency which counts is the concrete community process of discernment, as that community converses, in the light of the confession 'Christ is Lord,' about particular hard choices."⁵³

Like Roth, Yoder here used primarily linguistic and conversational imagery, and he likely employed verbs like "discern" and "converse" in their literal senses, imagining church members sitting down together to talk about ethical issues and discuss moral responses. Yoder's celebrated emphasis on the active life of discipleship and the missional functions of ecclesial practices does not displace the basic Anabaptist image of the church "gathering around Scripture" in expectation of the Spirit, seeking wisdom and guidance for the journey. And yet Yoder argued that the biblical promise of the Spirit's guidance is fulfilled in the "assembly of those who gather around Scripture in the face of a given real moral challenge."⁵⁴ In other words, Yoder situates the conversational practices of biblical interpretation within the material life of communities wrestling with the hard issues that arise when seeking to follow Jesus in their cultural contexts. The church encounters the Spirit when it "assembles"—i.e., when it physically comes together—to interpret and respond to contextual social problems and moral challenges in the light of its Scriptures. Practices of interpretation and conversation are constitutive features of Christian life not because they lead to clear consensus about moral or theological propositions, but rather because in such intentional cooperative efforts to orient discipleship believers open themselves to God's Spirit. The community's discursive practices will likely be most generative when the church's internal tasks of biblical interpretation and loving discernment are embedded in—and responsive to—missional practices in which believers seek to participate in God's healing work in the world.

These insights should caution Mennonites against efforts to define, develop, or patrol the meaning and boundaries of the church through fixed statements of doctrine or by settling upon a distinctively

53. Yoder, "Critique of *Christ and Culture*," 74.

54. John Howard Yoder, "Radical Reformation Ethics in Ecumenical Perspective, in *The Priestly Kingdom* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 117.

Anabaptist systematic theology. Susan Biesecker-Mast's analysis of the development and subsequent functions of the 1995 *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* offers an important case study on the subject. Constructed with a desire to provide the church with a "timeless" statement of Mennonite beliefs amid rapid and disorienting cultural change, the *Confession of Faith*, she argues, in fact failed to reflect or sustain meaningful unity among Mennonites, but instead became *constitutive* of unity.⁵⁵ That is, having functioned initially as the political precondition for the integrative formation of Mennonite Church USA, and then later as an authoritative statement open to selective but binding usage for discipline or expulsion from the newly-formed denominational structure, the document came to provide a list of beliefs that secure and regulate Mennonite fellowship. Although the document was intended to reflect, describe, and guide theological unity, Biesecker-Mast suggests that it has functioned more prominently as a political leveraging tool amid disputatious diversity in both ecclesial practice and belief.⁵⁶ Under this approach, the church's distinctive identity inheres in a fixed and formulated "Mennonite perspective" instead of in the practices of discipleship that constitute the church's mission of witness to God's reign.⁵⁷ The problem here is not that the *Confession* empowers the church to make clear, theologically-grounded judgments about proper Christian belief and practice. The problem arises when the church empowers the *Confession* itself to define Mennonite identity, such that its summary of Mennonite beliefs displaces concrete and communal enactments of discipleship as the center of Christian faith and the way of Christian formation. Among the most interesting features of Biesecker-Mast's analysis of the *Confession of Faith* is her argument that the document's integrative function—its initially successful use as a basis of unity within a diverse and divided denomination—had little to do with the published

55. Susan Biesecker-Mast, "A Genealogy of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*," 392-393. Biesecker-Mast quotes the minutes of the Oct. 28-31, 1982, meeting of the Council on Faith, Life and Strategy of the Mennonite Church as stating that "Another statement should be timeless!" See the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box 1-6-5, "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. She argues that the Council "required" the new confession to "exceed the limits of time and, thereby, be truly authoritative" (393). The *Confession of Faith*, in its published form, however, makes no such claims to timelessness.

56. *Ibid.*, 387-393.

57. For another kind of critique of the *Confession of Faith*, see Steven Siebert, "Modernity's Long Shadow: The Banishment of the Body and the Suppression of Memory in the 'Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective,'" *MQR* 81 (July 2007), 399-426. Siebert's argument—that the *Confession of Faith* more successfully reflects "modernity's distaste for embodied particularity" than it renders the identity of the God of Jesus Christ—is probably overstated. But Siebert does effectively question the presumption that "We believe" statements are the appropriate format for the church's efforts to formulate unity or shape Christians.

content of the confession. "It was not the case that, having been presented with a confession that accurately reflected the convictions of the church, the church became identified with and unified by that document. Rather, it was in talking for ten years about the articles of the confession that the church came to a discourse of relative identity and unity."⁵⁸ The usefulness of the *Confession of Faith*, in other words, resided primarily in the constructive phase wherein churches and conferences gathered repeatedly to discern together how best to articulate the faith and practices of current Mennonite congregations. Here we see how discursive practices embedded in, and responsive to, the lived faith of local communities are temporally, functionally, and theologically primary, even in efforts to distill and centralize church doctrine.⁵⁹

Theologian J. Denny Weaver has been another voice arguing that distinctive theological claims ought to drive the reconstruction of distinctive Mennonite identity. "Theology may be the only comprehensive means left by which North American Mennonites can define and defend a way of living and a worldview which differs in significant ways from the mainstream Western outlook," he claims. "In other words, theology must explicitly pick up the role played previously by cultural and social factors underscoring Mennonite identity."⁶⁰ The church's existence as a concrete alternative to worldly power structures and its capacity to resist the temptation to blend into broader culture ultimately rests upon a "theological decision" to claim as normative certain theological sources.⁶¹ Propelled by this theological strategy for church renewal, Weaver has devoted his career to constructive and compelling theological argumentation, seeking christological formulations strong enough and nonviolent enough to anchor a systematic theology capable of becoming "the explicit vehicle to define who Mennonites are, and the explicit basis for the way Mennonites live in the world."⁶² Weaver's work is often profound, and he has effectively

58. Biesecker-Mast, "A Genealogy of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*," 377-378.

59. This, of course, could have gone otherwise, and its success is much to the credit of the Confession of Faith Study Committee, which intentionally recommended a long, dialogical, and participatory process. See the "Confession of Faith Study Committee Report and Proposal to Formulate a New Confession of Faith," found in the Mennonite Church General Board Files, 1984-86, Box I-6-5, "Confession of Faith Study Committee," Mennonite Church USA Archives, Goshen, Ind. Original citation from Biesecker-Mast, "A Genealogy of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*," 376-377.

60. Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," 125.

61. J. Denny Weaver, "The Anabaptist Vision: A Historical or Theological Future," *Conrad Grebel Review* 13 (Winter 1995), 84-86.

62. Weaver, "Mennonites: Theology, Peace, and Identity," 125. Weaver's most thorough and widely read constructive theological work is J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2001).

argued that consistent theological attention to narrative Christology should continue to shape Mennonite communities. But staking the church's contemporary identity-formation upon such systematic theological formulations neglects the sociological significance of "the formative role of material practices" and the theological fact that "we become disciples by engaging in communal practices."⁶³ The church's capacity to find ways of maintaining a faithful witness to Jesus Christ within contemporary culture depends less on its agreement about unique and important ideas, and more on the ways its faith empowers and responds to innovative and visible social practices.

As Gerald Mast rightly argues, "theology by itself is not sufficient to sustain visible countercultural communities of witness," for theological reflection and active discipleship both entail "the effort to constitute the word as deed and the deed as word."⁶⁴ In other words, cultivating and emphasizing distinctive theological perspectives is important, but is only possible and fruitful when theologizing grows out of concrete practices of discipleship, and when such practices are themselves meaningful expressions (i.e., "words") of faith. The narrative of Jesus exercises normative authority in the community not as a source of regulative principles like "nonviolence" and "nonconformity," but rather as the revelation of the actual existential reality in which disciples continue to live amid the promise of the Spirit's activity and the inbreaking of God's peaceable reign. The church should stake its formation for faithful witness to Jesus Christ vis-à-vis contemporary culture not upon the church's "theological decisions" but rather upon its experiences of God's reign breaking into the world. The theological premise here is that Christians encounter God's work and authority in corporate practices of discipleship because God's reign truly is breaking into the world in Jesus Christ. When the church worships the God of Jesus Christ—and therefore enacts jubilee practices of healing and justice, reconciling practices of forgiveness and love, or prophetic practices of resistance and solidarity—the church attunes itself to God's activity. It is precisely in such practices that the church forms its distinctive social and theological character.⁶⁵

There are dangers, however, in this "pragmatic" understanding of Christian ethics and ecclesial formation.⁶⁶ It is possible that by refusing

63. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 34; 64.

64. Gerald Biesecker-Mast, "Recovering the Anabaptist Body," 198.

65. For a similar argument, see Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness*.

66. In his forthcoming book titled *Sustainability, Social Justice and Christian Ethics*, Willis Jenkins defines and defends what he calls a "pragmatic strategy" of Christian ethics. A pragmatic strategy understands Christian faith and life to be found and formed in strategic efforts to follow Jesus by responding to the world's most difficult social problems. He

the primacy of systematic theology in favor of hands-on contextual communal practices, the church will in fact sacrifice its true mission and compromise its most fundamental identity, losing in its activist zeal the actual substance of Christian faith. When experiments in peacemaking, social justice, solidarity, sustainability, and community provide the contexts for Christian formation and the loci for Christian reflection, the church may risk replacing faith in God's sovereignty with enthusiasm for some liberal ideology; the church may trade worship and the way of the cross for religious rhetoric and progressive politics.

This is indeed a risk, but not an inevitability. The church's experiments in discipleship can remain deeply and explicitly tied to biblical faith for the simple reason that discipleship is itself an act of biblical faith. The church exists as a response to the events of the resurrection and Pentecost, not as the custodian of unique theo-ethical principles. The church is a movement, and its theology, as Yoder suggests, was from the beginning a response to church activity. In any case, the risks involved in discipleship include not only the threat of Pontius Pilate, but also the temptation of Peter to deny Christ when Caesar appears more powerful. Both threats are real, and neither is overcome by good theology or poignant storytelling, but by concrete experiences of God exceeding and transforming visible possibilities, experiences of the resurrected Jesus still present and still commissioning disciples for mission. There is no good theological reason why sustaining the church's theological integrity should require systematizing a distinctive Christian worldview before following Jesus into the fray.

On the other hand, this framework may be vulnerable to insidious problems beyond the more visible risks of forgetting or decentering biblical faith. If Christian faith and community develop in contextual, missional projects of healing justice, then the contingent features of specific social problems could begin to exercise undue influence on the church's identity and theology. When possibilities for practical action are limited by social realities and political exigencies, the church's best efforts at discipleship—and thus the community's definitive expressions of faith—are circumscribed by the wicked features of worldly power structures. In short, if the church is formed in its responses to social problems rooted in rebellious "principalities and powers," then the church risks molding itself to the perverse logic of the dominant political economy.

contrasts this approach to a "cosmological strategy," which focuses on clarifying or modifying a Christian worldview in order to apply its insights and moral principles in context. Jenkins's influence is evident throughout this paper, but particularly in the following few paragraphs. See Willis Jenkins, *Sustainability, Social Justice and Christian Ethics* (Georgetown University Press, forthcoming).

Still, following Jesus is an embodied act of faith that entails active concern for social problems precisely because of the way Jesus reveals God as sovereign and active. The meaning of Christian faith and the character of Christian community are formed and expressed in relation to the world's wounds because God, in Jesus, engaged and took upon these wounds, and because God, through the Spirit, continues to address and transform a conflicted and unjust world. After all, a culturally contingent form of worldly wickedness has always circumscribed the church: the cross. The cruciform shape of Christian faith is the concrete and normative example of how God calls believers to live in and for a broken world. If the church is at risk of losing its integrity, perhaps the real problem is not that the church has lost its deep theological foundation for social practices, but that it has failed to let its social practices become sources for deep theological reflection. If certain sectors of the church have gradually pared Christ's good news into a thin gospel of social change, while others struggle to distinguish today's distinctive brand of American conservatism from Christian morality, the common failure might be not that the church has untethered Christian faith and life from the biblical narrative, but rather that it has lost the discipline of seeing the divine subject of this narrative set loose in the world. The resurrection, which stands as the church's inaugural event, is evidence that God's work exceeds, transforms, and triumphs over the limitations and scars that inevitably mark human efforts to witness to God's reign.

To summarize: Mennonites have authentic theological reasons and resources for taking seriously the ways cultures develop, change, sustain themselves, and relate with others. Doing so would help the church discern appropriate priorities and strategies in its quest to sustain itself for worship and mission in the twenty-first century. Mennonites may become more equipped to cultivate a distinctive witness by embracing an understanding of culture that is less monolithic and more diverse, less static and more fluid, less segregated and more porous, defined less by preconceived norms and more by discursive and pragmatic tasks. Mennonites should set about discerning creative, subversive, or resistant ways of reappropriating—or perhaps rejecting—the elements of North American culture that their social lives have likely already adopted. “Christian practices,” as Tanner argues, “are always the practices of others made odd.”⁶⁷

67. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 113.

THE ARGUMENT APPLIED: TWO EXAMPLES

Consider two recent examples of Mennonites in the U.S. wrestling with wider cultural practices in search of new or renewed modes of faithfulness. In January 2010 the President's Council of Goshen College, a Mennonite college in northern Indiana, announced that the school would break with tradition to begin playing "The Star-Spangled Banner" before sporting events. One week prior to the announcement, James Brenneman, the president of Goshen College, delivered a chapel sermon calling for a "new school of thought" at the college, inviting students and faculty to move beyond the popular "No!" of prophetic critique to embrace the more responsible "Yes!" of constructive engagement. "We need to create a culture of assent alongside our historic culture of dissent," he argued.⁶⁸ As debate among students, faculty, alumni, and the general public raged in the aftermath of the college's national anthem announcement, Brenneman reiterated his argument, and framed the decision to play the anthem as an example of the kinds of creative, selective cultural engagements that would allow contemporary Mennonites opportunities for more fruitful interface with others. What many Mennonites viewed as yet another dangerous capitulation to the creeping hegemonies of nationalism and militarism, Brenneman interpreted as an act of hospitality and even a form of peace witness.⁶⁹ The denomination, in other words, engaged rather directly in contentious negotiations about the meaning and usage of forms and practices borrowed from wider culture.

Throughout the process and in its aftermath, the college worked hard to construe the controversy as an opportunity to practice and model peaceful, constructive dialogue. In what critics might well have viewed as an ironic gesture, Brenneman opened a campus-wide discussion on the national anthem decision by bemoaning "acculturated" forms of communication, arguing that Christ-centered peacemaking requires

68. A transcript of Brenneman's sermon, as well as an archive of press releases, published and unpublished commentaries, and multimedia files concerning the historic "national anthem decision" can be found at <http://www.goshen.edu/anthem/background>.

69. The former view was expressed forcefully in an open letter to President Brenneman from Nekeisha and Andy Alexis-Baker and signed by over 1,500 others; available online at www.jesusradicals.com/theology/resistance-to-the-national-anthem-at-goshen-college-2/. Kathy Meyer Reimer, in her Goshen College chapel address on March 24, 2010, interpreted the national anthem as a "ritual born to show how supportive we are of our nation in wartime." She continued, "It is a ritual done so often and regularly in a game that it doesn't seem 'right' without it. . . . What does it do to our players and spectators to think through the song every time they play? What does the repetition bring into the psyche of each one of us on campus?" The full text of Reimer's address is available online.—Kathy Meyer Reimer, "'Perspectives on the Anthem' Convocation—Against the National Anthem," <http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/03-26-10-anthem-diff444/KathyMey-reReimer.html>.

modeling alternative forms of civil dialogue. Later, *Sojourners* magazine published online an honest yet polite debate between Brenneman and a Christian activist and author, Shane Claiborne, bearing the title "Learning to Disagree in Love."⁷⁰

Although in June 2011 Goshen's board of directors finally revoked the decision to play the national anthem, the controversy's legacy itself remains open to varied interpretations. Brenneman expressed joy at expressions of civility and love that emerged even in the midst of heated disagreements, stressing that such acts reflect the principles of Christian peacemaking. Others see evidence of a widening rift and increasing theological confusion within the denomination.

If the church views this controversy through the lens of a stable and normative conception of culture, then the anthem debates must signal an unraveling or fragmenting of the "Mennonite perspective" and thus of Mennonite identity. Even if the discussions were civil, the fact of such public and passionate disagreement can only mean the presence of one or another kind of error threatening to obscure the Mennonite essence. But if Tanner is correct, then the church can view this controversy as an illustration of the ways the church will sustain and renew itself in the twenty-first century. This story not only makes visible the sort of contentious negotiations around cultural forms and practices that occur every day in Mennonite communities; it also provides an example of how such negotiations can become sites of assembly where communal patterns of discipleship are not just debated but embodied and tested. It shows how developing innovative uses of shared cultural forms goes hand in hand with efforts to discriminate between those components of culture that can be simply appropriated, those that require creative subversion, those needing new meaning, and those demanding prophetic resistance or anathematic rejection. And it shows how the deliberative practices in which such judgments are made can themselves function as either acts of discipleship or sites of resistance, forming the church as a witnessing community or challenging it to become one.

In an address to the Goshen College community arguing against the decision to play the anthem, Kathy Meyer Reimer, a professor of education at the school, posed an interesting rhetorical question: "Can we practice the same ritual played all over the country and expect it to carry a different message, a message of hospitality, just because we are doing it in the context of Goshen College?"⁷¹ The answer her argument

70. The full text of the exchange between Brenneman and Claiborne is available at <http://sojo.net/2010/09/28/oh-say-can-you-see-learning-to-disagree-in-love>.

71. Kathy Meyer Reimer, "Against the National Anthem," <http://www.goshen.edu/news/pressarchive/03-26-10-anthem-diff444/KathyMeyerReimer.html>.

seemed to presume was “no.” But the view of culture advocated above opens the possibility that the answer to Meyer Reimer’s question could actually be “yes,” perhaps, if Goshen College developed practices in which the use of this normally nationalistic ritual really did create hospitable space in which the community could meaningfully communicate its alternative commitments. “Prophetic objections to the wider society are maintained,” argues Tanner, “by the indefinitely extended effort to alter . . . whatever one comes across through sustained engagement with it.”⁷² Again, the more important question is *how*, not *what*. On the other hand, Meyer Reimer might have been right that the college lacked the disciplines necessary to subvert the meaning of such a strong cultural symbol, and that other forms of hospitality would have been more powerful and authentic expressions of the college’s Anabaptist values. Either way, Tanner invites us to see precisely these kinds of debates as constitutive of the Christian approach to culture.

A second interesting case concerns John D. Roth’s notable 2005 C. Henry Smith Peace Lecture, in which he called for Mennonites to take a five-year “sabbatical” from participation in national politics. Concerned that the polarized arena of public political debate was effectively shaping the Christian community’s own discourse and thereby limiting the church’s moral imagination, Roth advocated a break from national politics as a mode of resistance to vitriolic culture wars and partisanship. Roth envisioned this sabbatical not as a practice of purity-preserving isolation, but rather as an opportunity to explore and clarify the nature and purpose of the church’s political witness. Direct resistance to mainstream political culture would be coordinated with efforts to cultivate renewed spiritual disciplines and innovative ecclesial practices more reflective of Mennonite confessions and more responsive to immediate possibilities for alternative forms of political action.⁷³

For various reasons, many saw Roth’s proposal as ill-timed and ill-conceived. Some argued that the consequences of national elections and federal policies are simply too vast and important to warrant even temporary Mennonite truancy, even for the sake of ecclesial renewal.⁷⁴ Others interpreted his call for a moratorium on electoral politics as a plea for “withdrawal.” Because the proposal seemed to rest upon a view of the state as fundamentally violent and the church as “essentially

72. Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 152.

73. John D. Roth, “Called to One Peace: Christian Faith and Political Witness in a Divided Culture,” *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 2 (June 2005). Available (with responses) online at <http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2005June/>.

74. See, for example, Elisabeth T. Harder, “Response to John D. Roth,” *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 2 (June 2005). See also Ray Kauffman’s untitled response published in the same issue of *Mennonite Life*.

compassionate and nonresistant," it suggested a sanguine ecclesiology unwilling to recognize the persistence of violence and oppression within the church itself.⁷⁵ Some of Roth's colleagues recoiled at what appeared to be a regressive move toward a mode of Mennonite political (dis)engagement the church had recently cast aside for good theological and ethical reasons.⁷⁶ The denomination, in any case, made no widespread effort to act upon his suggestion.

Yet Roth provided the valuable service of articulating the nearly-forgotten possibility that, *given a particular set of circumstances*, Mennonite participation in political culture might need to take a radically countercultural form. He offered a disruptive and cautionary word to a denomination still in the bold infancy of its experiments with direct and conventional participation in national politics, harkening back to the not-so-distant Anabaptist insistence that sometimes ruling powers or cultural trends may become "so incorrigible that at the time the most effective way to *take* responsibility is to refuse to collaborate."⁷⁷ And yet Roth expressed no intention of returning to earlier or "simpler" forms of cultural and political engagement. Rather he envisioned the sabbatical from national politics as an innovative contextual response to a dominant political culture that had invaded the church's moral imagination and stunted the development of Mennonite political witness. He thereby called Mennonites into conversation around crucially important and highly contested questions about the nature and tasks of Christian discipleship.

With an appropriate conception of culture, the church could view his proposal as valuable and of ongoing interest—regardless of one's views on the strategy of "sabbatical"—because it provides an example of how critical reflection upon the merits of discrete, already-existing forms of cultural engagement (e.g., participation in electoral politics) can create contexts for theological reflection and moral reevaluation. Like Goshen College's rather different action concerning the national anthem, Roth's proposal for new patterns of Mennonite cultural engagement should be understood as the sort of concrete reform efforts around which the church's disputatious negotiations can become theologically fertile and communally formative. It is possible that such conversations may further polarize the church, but they are worth the risk. Learning to make

75. Linda Gehman Peachey, "Response to 'Called to One Peace: Following Jesus in a Divided Church,'" *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 2 (June 2005).

76. For example, Karl S. Shelly, "A Call for More Partisan Politics," *Mennonite Life* 60, no. 2 (June 2005). Shelly calls Roth a "neo-nonresistant Mennonite" who "seemingly longs to put the political genie back in the bottle."

77. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 154.

ecclesial negotiation—whether in the form of verbal conversation or innovative action—constitutive of the Mennonite Church’s distinctive witness may prove exceedingly important in the twenty-first century.

The primary point here is not that dialogue between divergent perspectives within the church is important and constructive, although this is also true. Instead, the above examples suggest the ways in which innovative ecclesial actions or practical proposals for action can become sites of constructive communal formation wherein the church’s identity and witness vis-à-vis wider culture are more than debated but also developed and formed. Tanner’s insights into the nature of culture help the church see how such common *engagement* can fashion a distinctive community even in the absence of widespread *agreement*. Anabaptist insights into the active and responsive nature of Christian faith can assure the church that this type of communal formation can remain distinctively *Christian* in character.

At the very least, Mennonites should consider how their immersion in multiple cultures and their performances of multiple identities may be more than merely challenges but *opportunities* for witnessing to God’s peaceable reign. Even if consensus is unlikely, the image of Christians discerning together in loving disagreement and reconciled fellowship—particularly when this discernment takes shape as “experiments in discipleship”—would be a breath of fresh air; and perhaps more, a sign of the Spirit’s moving.