

# Striving Towards Dependence:

## An Alternative Mennonite Anthropological Witness in Late Modernity

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### Abstract:

Few things appear as self-evident and unquestionable for the moral life in Western late modernity than the absolute good of independence and autonomy. The identity of this “reflexive self” consists of being choosers and consumers, self-producing life from the unlimited options presented by Western liberalism. Recent Mennonite theologizing around the practices of baptism and foot washing shows an affinity for this independent self, and thus potentially shares in its vulnerability to the destructive aspects of consumer capitalism. This article posits that a more authentic Christian identity lies in being a dependent creature, who receives its self from God and the church rather than from its own self-production. By recognizing her need for God and the church, the Christian eludes the domain of consumer capitalism and offers a bold alternative witness to the world. This article will offer suggestions on how the Mennonite practices of baptism and foot washing might be recovered and reimagined to form Christian disciples more faithfully into followers of Jesus.

In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

To be Christian means that we must be embedded in practices so materially constitutive of our communities that we are not tempted to describe our lives in the language offered by the world, that is, the language of choice. Only then will Christians be able to challenge an all too tolerant world that celebrates many gods as alternatives to the One God who alone is worthy of worship.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 116–7.

Few things appear as self-evident and unquestionable for the moral life in Western late modernity than the absolute good of independence and autonomy. Whether in regards to raising children, empowering marginalized persons to participate in social life, or encouraging people to make their own health care decisions, an impulse of liberal society rests in individuals pursuing independence as a requisite to human flourishing. In this context, human identity consists of being *choosers* and *consumers*, self-producing life from the unlimited options presented by Western liberalism.

But does this vision of the individual as self-originating maker accurately denote human identity? And if not, does the church offer a compelling alternative to this view? As Mennonite Christians living in Western, late modern society,<sup>3</sup> it is tempting to understand the church as being composed merely of voluntaristic, consensual individuals who freely choose to gather and share life together. Yet this view alone misses crucial dimensions of human life and risks turning Christians into isolated monads autonomously producing their own faith. An identity as independent chooser not only fails to speak truthfully to the human condition, but also entraps persons in the forces of consumer capitalism and marginalizes those vulnerable persons whose ability for purposive agency remains highly limited.<sup>4</sup>

This article will argue that the autonomous self of late modernity misrepresents human identity, and excessively advocates independence as a nonnegotiable human good. Relying so heavily on independence not only alienates persons from one another, but also places persons firmly within the domain of consumer capitalism. A brief look at contemporary popular theologizing re-

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3 This article will intentionally refer to the contemporary period in the west as being that of “late modernity” rather than the more common “postmodernity.” While the “post” of postmodernity can mean the situation following in the wake of modernity, the popular use of the term often means instead the supposed closure of modernity and the birth of a new age. I understand this view as being somewhat premature and potentially missing the continuities of the present time with that of the modern period. See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

4 Consumer capitalism — sometimes referred to as “late capitalism” — differs from “free-market” capitalism by its need to manufacture needs rather than goods in order to maintain growth and production. In a world already saturated with basic goods, corporations require the consumption of ever higher levels of superfluous products to sustain growth targets. For more, see Anastasios S. Korkotsides, *Consumer Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2007), and Benjamin Barber, *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), esp. chap. 2.

veals that North American Mennonites are highly susceptible to unconsciously accepting this mythic self. Recovering and returning to a human identity as dependent creatures potentially offers a more authentic vision of human flourishing, while also presenting an emboldened witness to the excesses of late modern liberalism.

After articulating some methodological assumptions and limitations, this article will begin by articulating the terrain of late modern identity. The social imaginary and practices of the late modern character reveal a highly “reflexive self,” which conceives of itself as maker of its own destiny and embodies this view through discursive and bodily practices. This project will then show how recent reflections from Mennonites on the ecclesial practices of baptism and foot washing potentially cohere too closely with late modernity’s reflexive self. Following this will be a consideration of Christian identity as being a dependent creature, recognizing the inherent need of humans for God, others, and the world. Finally, suggestions will be given on how the Mennonite practices of baptism and foot washing might be reimagined to enable them to form Christians more accurately into authentic followers of Jesus.

### **Starting Points: Methodological Assumptions and Limitations**

A feature of late modernity is the demand to state one’s positions and assumptions clearly before proceeding with one’s argument. This article will respect this principle by stating some methodological assumptions and limitations of this work.

#### *Independence as a relative good*

The critique of the independent, reflexive self of late modernity offered here does not include a claim that autonomy and agency represent evils or absolute distortions of being human. The capacities of independence and autonomy can assist in furthering human flourishing, and thus represent human goods. Yet this article will insist on autonomy as a relative good, rather than the absolute good often advocated for in late modernity. In other words, independence always remains dependent on other religious and social factors in claiming to be a human good. The goal of autonomy does not require elimination, but must always be sought in terms of “relational autonomy,”<sup>5</sup> “dependent agency,”<sup>6</sup> or

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5 See the collection of essays in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6 Leslie Pickering Francis and Anita Silvers, “Liberalism and Individually Scripted Ideas of the Good: Meeting the Challenge of Dependent Agency,” *Social Theory and Practice* 33, no. 2 (April 2007): 311–34.

“dependent-independence.”<sup>7</sup>

This article will follow feminist moral philosopher Eva Feder Kittay’s suggestion that morality and anthropology must begin not with the autonomy of the isolated individual, but with the inherent vulnerability and dependence of human life. Kittay boldly wishes to relativize the contemporary use of “interdependence” in describing the human good. For Kittay, too often interdependence means “simply the mutual (often voluntary) cooperation between essentially independent persons.”<sup>8</sup> In privileging dependency, Kittay wishes not to deny human interdependence but to “find a knife sharp enough to cut through the fiction of our independence.”<sup>9</sup> Such an intense focus on independence not only speaks untruthfully to the human condition, but also threatens to place particularly vulnerable persons in a subhuman status. At the same time, this article will assume that this illusion of the autonomous self acts as a pernicious myth for *all* human persons.

*An article grounded in the community of L’Arche*

This article could not have been conceived or written without the author’s eleven years of participation in two Canadian L’Arche communities. This international federation of communities of people with and without intellectual disabilities sharing faith and life together represents not just good service provision. Rather, they act as alternative moral communities which expand the ethical imagination. Living and becoming friends with people with cognitive impairments challenged my own unconscious belief in the autonomous individual and forced me to acknowledge the inherently relational dimension of human beings. I discovered quickly in my graduate studies that respecting the lives of those I had lived with would compel me to take dependency seriously.

The culture of L’Arche conceives of the dependency of people with cognitive impairments not as “problems” to be ameliorated, but as a constitutive aspect of being human. Kittay’s fear of the dominant myth of the independent self casting long shadows on those with cognitive impairments becomes very evident when sharing life with these persons. The grace of communities like L’Arche rests in their exposing of this illusion, and converting the nondisabled to acknowledge dependence as a potential means to relationship rather than an

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7 John Swinton, Harriet Mowat, and Susannah Baines, “Whose Story Am I? Profound Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of God,” *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15, no. 1 (Jan–March 2011): 5–19.

8 Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xii.

9 Kittay, *Love’s Labor*, xiii.

absolute impediment to independence.

*The benefits and limitations of context*

The context of this article rests in Mennonite identity within a Western, liberal, specifically North American society, which also stands as the social position of the author. It is incumbent to acknowledge that this represents a limitation in regards to speaking about Mennonite identity in late modernity. The self-evident fact that most Mennonites reside outside of North America and Western Europe means that the analysis and conclusions of this article remain partial for the global Mennonite community. Insights and reflections of Mennonites in the two-thirds world, where the autonomous self has less of a hold on the moral imagination, must be sought because they will only enrich the contemporary discussion on identity. These voices are crucial in presenting a different conception of identity and human being to those of us in the enculturated West, and challenging our capitulations to the myth of the independent individual.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, reflections on being Mennonite in the one-third world can offer evidence for the fruitful discernment for Mennonites in the global South of the benefits and limitations of Western late modernity. Thus even despite its weaknesses, hopefully this project will find points of connection with others in the global Mennonite/Anabaptist family.

*On being a Mennonite (in late modernity)*

Keeping in mind the unstable and tenuous concept of identity, this article assumes the notion of a discernable Mennonite identity. While no longer requiring a North European ethnicity, the following discussion supposes that being a Mennonite in late modernity rests in being historically and theologically connected with the sixteenth-century Anabaptist reformers. This article assumes that being Mennonite also acknowledges the debt contemporary Mennonites have to the diverse array of congregations which attempted to live out the Anabaptist story in the centuries which followed the Radical Reformation. Thus Mennonite identity is not merely ethical or social or confessional but also *ecclesial*; being a Mennonite requires not just belief or just ethics, but also demands being part of a body of believers who discern the workings of the Holy Spirit in the congregation and the world.

While this article does not wish to repeat John D. Thiesen's wish to "bury"

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10 For example, the African-initiated theology of Ubuntu offers a radically different theological anthropology, much more ready to accept the inherently social and dependent nature of human life. For a Christian articulation of Ubuntu, see Michael Battle, *Ubuntu: I in You and You in Me* (New York: Seabury, 2009), and *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1997).

the recent trend to remake all things Mennonite into “Anabaptist,” I do share his warning about the temptation to jettison (the often messy) four centuries of Mennonite history in favor of a supposed pristine Anabaptist foundation.<sup>11</sup> Thus this article leans heavily on the language of “Mennonite” rather than “Anabaptist” in describing the thought and practice which undergird contemporary views of Mennonite identity. This is not meant to disqualify those congregations practicing faith under the banner of (Neo-) Anabaptism, but only point to a desire to root this examination in a historical and living instantiation of faith called “Mennonite.” Hopefully those calling themselves Anabaptists can benefit from any of the insights which result and linger from the following discussion.

### The Reflexive Self of Late Modernity

One cannot begin to sketch the terrain of the late modern self without also mentioning the birth of modernity which arose out of the Enlightenment. Ideas such as the turn to the subject, individual freedom, and human progress cannot be understood without placing them within the context of the paradigm shift that occurred in Western Europe after the Reformation. Enlightenment thinkers believed that this new era represented a chance for humans to transcend the limitations of contingency through a greater control over the natural world. And along with the mastery of the environment came more mastery over one’s own life situation.

With the emergence of modernity came the notion that the good life includes the intentional choosing of one’s identity and conception of the good, what philosopher Charles Taylor refers to as “authenticity.”<sup>12</sup> Conceptions of identity in antiquity through to the Middle Ages placed the person firmly within their social context, and determined to a large degree people’s vocations and identities. Identities were as much received as created in this milieu, and thus remained mostly fixed by kinship relations and larger social factors. Along with the Enlightenment’s turn to the subject came the desire to free the self from the tyrannical external imposition of identity, and place it in the hands of the individual. Authenticity and autonomous subjectivity increasingly became incorporated into conceptions of the good life. Impediments to an authentic choosing of one’s good came to be seen either as, at its most benign, obstacles

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11 John D. Thiesen, “To Bury, Not to Praise,” in *Anabaptist Vision for the New Millennium*, eds. Dale Schrag and James Juhnke (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2000), 124.

12 For Taylor’s articulation and history of the rise of authenticity as a marker of Western identity, see his *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), and *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

to be transcended or, at worst, oppressive social imaginaries to be conquered and eliminated.

One can see this view of morality in the work of the influential political theorist John Rawls. Rawls takes as axiomatic that persons in liberal societies possess the autonomous subjectivity and independence to conceive their own good.<sup>13</sup> People require these capacities because of the lack of consensus on moral notions of justice, and thus each must decide for her- or himself their own *telos*. However, this demand is not due merely to a lack of societal notions of the common good, but rather meets the need for an “authentic” and happy life. Thus for Rawls, “the good is what is *for him* the most rational long-term plan of life given reasonably favorable circumstances. A man is happy when he is more or less successfully in the way of carrying out this plan. To put it briefly, the good is the satisfaction of rational desire.”<sup>14</sup> According to Rawls, the good must be centered in the individual, and must be self-originating and independent, freed from external impositions of the good from other individuals and institutions. Once persons arrive at their own notions of the good, they can then negotiate and intentionally enter into contractual relations with others also pursuing their own life plans.

Unbounded from external forces imposing kinship or social identities, the self becomes free to create and pursue its own notions of the good. This results in what sociologist Anthony Giddens refers to as the “reflexive self” of late modernity. According to Giddens, no longer does the self merely have a choice as to its self-identity, but now it must constantly choose and discern its own story amidst a plethora of competing options.

In the post-traditional order of modernity . . . self-identity becomes a reflexively organized endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options.<sup>15</sup>

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13 John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14, no. 3 (1985): 240.

14 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 92–3.

15 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 5.

For the authentic person of late modernity, the good life demands the “reflexive awareness” which constantly monitors the circumstances of life to make sure they match their own chosen “lifestyle.” Entailed in this awareness is the notion that self-identity “is not something just given . . . but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual.”<sup>16</sup>

When identity becomes a matter of continual (re-)creation rather than open reception, *choice* becomes an absolute requirement for a healthy sense of self. According to theologian Hans Reinders, personal choice as a means for self-expression and self-affirmation dominates the narrative of contemporary society. This “choosing self”:

presupposes that the good life for human beings is coextensive with a chosen life. What follows is that “goodness” and “meaning” is conferred on people’s lives by virtue of their own authorization . . . . [T]his is usually expressed by the claim that people need to be respected as “the authors” of their own lives . . . . In order to have a life that is properly called “good,” they must be in control of how they choose to live their lives.<sup>17</sup>

The choosing self can only conceive of the good in regards to a life self-imagined and self-created. Those features of life which appear as “givens,” as persistent aspects of identity which contradict or impede individual life plans, come to be seen as objects of suspicion eligible for elimination or modification. In this view, all things exist merely as malleable tools for individual self-expression.

At the same time, valorizing choice to such a degree sits well with consumer capitalism. The fundamental orientation of the late modern self is as *consumer* and *chooser* of a myriad of “lifestyles” and self-made identities. In a culture of planned obsolescence and 24/7 shopping, the need for constant monitoring and tweaking of identity demanded by the reflexive self finds a ready partner in the malls and box stores of most North American urban centers. If late modernity has expressed a pervasive distrust of meta-narratives, the human story which capitalism embodies and promotes has more than weathered the storm and escaped close scrutiny.

A quick glance at the late modern bodily practice of cosmetic surgery reveals this reflexive self in action. Formerly the practice of the “rich and famous,” cosmetic surgery has increasingly become accessible to the point of sometimes

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<sup>16</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 52.

<sup>17</sup> Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 136.

becoming merely a “medical” procedure.<sup>18</sup> The “reflexive project” of the late modern self consists not only in creating abstract conceptions of the good. In addition, the reflexive self manipulates and modifies the body as a tool for carrying out its life plan and a means of expressing its created identity. As feminist Kathy Davis explains:

Cosmetic surgery is not about beauty, but about identity. For a woman who feels trapped in a body which does not fit her sense of who she is, cosmetic surgery becomes a way to renegotiate identity through her body . . . . For a woman whose suffering has gone beyond a certain point, cosmetic surgery can become a matter of justice — the only fair thing to do.<sup>19</sup>

When the body does not match the identity of the autonomous choosing self, it must be shaped to match the individual’s self-originating conception of the good life/body.

In this “makeover culture,” the individual transformation of the self is not just encouraged but *demand*ed.<sup>20</sup> Carl Elliot sees this attitude alive and well in the rise of the use of enhancement procedures in the USA. In an era where people conceive of themselves as managers of life projects, self-fulfillment becomes not a gift to be received in community but a demand and duty to be made and created.

Once self-fulfillment is hitched to the success of a human life, it comes perilously close to an obligation – not an obligation to God, country, or family, but an obligation to the self. We are compelled to pursue fulfillment

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18 For numbers in the USA, see the website for The American Society for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, “Cosmetic Surgery Increase in 2012,” accessed May 15, 2013. <http://www.surgery.org/media/news-releases/cosmetic-procedures-increase-in-2012>. Lest one think cosmetic procedures merely a phenomenon in overdeveloped countries, see the figures from the website for the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS). “ISAPS International Survey on Aesthetic/Cosmetic Procedures Performed in 2011,” accessed May 10, 2013. <http://www.isaps.org/isaps-global-statistics-2012.html>. For numbers for Canada, see the ISAPS report.

19 Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 163.

20 Meredith Jones explains “makeover culture” as when “Self-renovation by whatever means is compulsory and never-ending. Self-improvement is something that makeover culture insists everyone needs: it is a continuing enterprise that may be realised via home renovation, lifelong learning, career enhancement or body-work such as cosmetic surgery. Good citizens in makeover culture are in a permanent state of becoming something better.” *Skintight: An Anatomy of Cosmetic Surgery* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 57.

through enhancement technologies not in order to get ahead of others, but to make sure that we have lived our lives to the fullest.<sup>21</sup>

And rather than freeing the self, Elliot sees the drive for self-determination as firmly placing people within the domain of consumer capitalism.

One also sees the choosing self alive and well in the Western discursive practice of advertising. In previous eras, marketers directed consumers to external exemplars and models of perfection through “aspirational” marketing. However, Steve Maich and Lianne George claim that now goods are sold through the constant affirmation of the individual as the center of the universe. Maich and George call this the “You Sell.” “Where marketers used to primarily sell products or brand values, they’re now selling You — an idealized, self-actualized version of yourself — back to you . . . *You* are the real good. We — or rather You — have become the only real product anyone is pushing.”<sup>22</sup> As identity becomes more and more a self-originating product, corporations are more than happy to assist individuals in building their patchwork selves. Thus Dell offers, for example, customized computers not as appliances but as extensions of self-identity. While the illusion of consumer control is maintained, Maich and George claim that the You Sell only cements the power of marketers in defining the late modern self as a “super-consumer.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus while the reflexive self of late modernity aspires to independence in order to make its own life and good, it still remains firmly within the grip of external forces of control. As it constantly maintains its self-originating identity, the choosing self distances itself from others and looks with suspicion on the givenness of life. Anything outside the control of the late modern self can only be conceived as an impediment to its life plan and thus in need of elimination or modification. Yet the choosing self remains highly vulnerable to the manipulations of corporations, continually selling brands as customizations of individual identity.

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21 Carl Elliot, *Better Than Well: American Medicine Meets the American Dream* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 303.

22 Steve Maich and Lianne George, *The Ego Boom: Why the World Really Revolves Around You* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2009), 20.

23 “Out of the triumph of the You Sell has evolved a breed of super-consumers, whose spending habits are driven by the desire to express themselves. In this world, consumption becomes a kind of performance, limited . . . by the availability of credit.” Maich and George, *The Ego Boom*, 70.

## Mennonite Theology and Praxis Meet the Reflexive Self

How do contemporary Mennonites fare in regards to the dominance of the reflexive self of late modernity? Certainly one could argue that communal bonds in Mennonite communities have weathered the storm of North American hyper-individualism. Yet the highly subjectivist and agential bias of Western faith leaves Mennonite identity susceptible to some of the excesses of the reflexive self, particularly when notions of identity are assimilated unintentionally from the broader culture.

A first glance at early sixteenth-century Anabaptist thought reveals a potentially ambivalent legacy. One can certainly pick up signs of the need for a highly subjective and intentional choosing self. The Radical Reformers clearly believed that faith must originate in the individual, not in external institutions or social pressures. Being identified as a Christian or becoming a member of the church required a previous *decision*, encountered and arrived at within the subjective individual. Authentic Christian faith must begin from within the individual through an intentional and rational choice to follow Christ.

Yet one should exercise caution before too quickly attributing ideas of a late modern reflexive self onto the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers. It is a continual temptation to project notions of autonomous agency onto people in antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>24</sup> According to the late Mennonite theologian James Reimer, free will for medieval persons always emanated first from God's prevenient calling. "In the premodern voluntarist tradition, free will was ultimately derivative, and subordinate to the mystery of divine will, election, and providence."<sup>25</sup> The demand to continuously monitor and autonomously choose for one's self was a foreign concept for medieval Europeans, the Radical Reformers included. Faith for these latter persons was never a matter of mere reflexive decision, but always depended on the work and action of God and the Holy Spirit.

Late modern Mennonites, however, do not have the same culture with which to formulate identity. Mennonite theologians have expressed concern at the high levels of subjectivism and individualism present in some Mennonite

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24 See Timothy Reiss, *Mirages of the Self: Patterns of Personhood in Ancient and Early Modern Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

25 A. James Reimer, "Christian Anthropology: The Perils of the Believers Church View of the *Humanum*," in *Mennonites and Classical Theology* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora, 2001), 536.

practice.<sup>26</sup> Whether this reflexivity comes through North American revivalism's emphasis on personal conversion, or in more liberal stresses on activism, Mennonite faith communities risk becoming mere voluntaristic associations of like-minded, Rawlsian individuals. As Reimer mentions, "with the radical nominalism of the modern period, and the loss of all sense of transcendent realism, voluntarism as understood by the Believers Church is in danger of undermining the very ethic it once sought to undergird."<sup>27</sup> The independent choosers advocated in some current reflections of Mennonite practice come to look dangerously similar to that of late modernity's reflexive self. A brief look at contemporary practice of the ordinances of baptism and foot washing will illustrate how the choosing self reveals itself in the Mennonite ordinances of baptism and foot washing.

In *Ask Third Way Caf *, Jodi Nisly Hertzler relates answers to queries made on the *Third Way Caf * website by people expressing interest in Mennonite faith and practice. In response to the question "What is accomplished by waiting to baptize members?" Hertzler gives the following answer:

the benefit is that only people who have deliberately made the choice to be baptized are in fact baptized. The choice to live a Christ-centered life is not an easy one. It's a major commitment that a person makes to God and to the church family, and it's not to be taken lightly. When an infant is baptized, the sacrament seems to Mennonites to lose some power, as it reflects the parents' beliefs and not the child's . . . . [W]e reserve baptism for people who can make the choice for themselves and can understand the meaning of what they are doing . . . . We believe the church is strengthened when made up of adults who have made the decision to follow Christ and be baptized and can remember the impact of that ceremony in their Christian walk.<sup>28</sup>

The emphasis on choice and decision in this response could not be clearer. In this conception, faith is for those who can intentionally choose from various options, and originates in the individual rather than external forces (like

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26 For examples, see Marlin E. Miller, "The Mennonites," in *Baptism & Church: A Believers' Church Vision*, ed. Merle D. Strege (Grand Rapids, MI: Sagamore, 1986), 23–24, and "Baptism in the Mennonite Tradition," in *Baptism, Peace, and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions*, eds. Ross T. Bender and Alan P. F. Sell (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press for the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, 1991), 53–54. See also John D. Roth, *Practices: Mennonite Worship and Witness* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2009), 199–200.

27 Reimer, "Christian Anthropology," 536.

28 Jodi Nisly Hertzler, *Ask Third Way Caf : 50 Common and Quirky Questions about Mennonites* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2009), 22–23.

parents). The demand for memory implied in this statement coheres with the reflexive self's need to monitor one's commitments and one's chosen identity.

Conspicuously missing from this answer about baptism is any mention of God or the church in one's being baptized. The stress remains firmly on the actions and motivations of the individual, with the "power" of the ceremony coming from the choice of the person rather than any divine initiative. Hertzler gives no sense of the place of the community of faith in preparing and calling the candidate to baptism. In addition, the "strength" of the church here comes from *individuals* making the choice for a "Christ-centered life[style]," rather than the presence of the Holy Spirit within the congregation moving persons to the baptismal font. One can certainly applaud the emphasis on personally following Christ. Yet without acknowledging God's role in the process, Mennonite practice risks making baptism a purely human act.

Consider also the shift in the meaning and practice of foot washing, another Mennonite ecclesial practice. Keith Graber-Miller claims that the meaning of the rite has changed for Mennonites as their identity as a group has changed.<sup>29</sup> Mennonite theologizing has maintained the traditional interpretation that foot washing signifies both humble service and the need for cleansing from sin. Graber-Miller found that as the Mennonite Church shifted from a passive, withdrawn stance to a more activist one, the service theme of the rite eclipsed the notion of foot washing as an act of cleansing. This activist orientation is present in references to foot washing on the *Third Way Café* website. Of the scanty allusions to foot washing on the site, one does include a quote from the Dordrecht Confession about the ordinance being a cleansing from sin. Yet the service theme receives more attention. For example, Mennonites "observe footwashing because we believe that Jesus calls us to serve one another in love as he did. Foot washing becomes a symbolic act of service to one another."<sup>30</sup> Thus the prevalence of interpreting foot washing as service rather than receiving forgiveness or cleansing means that contemporary theologizing appears

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29 Keith Graber-Miller, "Mennonite Footwashing: Identity Reflections and Altered Meanings," *Worship* 66, no. 2 (March 1992): 148–70.

30 Third Way Café website, "Rituals," accessed March 30, 2014. [www.thirdway.com](http://www.thirdway.com). Article 13 of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has a similar bias. The short article and commentary have seven references to service and just two regarding the theme of cleansing in regards to foot washing. General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church, *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), 53–54. One also notices the predominance of the service theme by noting that one reference to cleansing is how *service* cleanses one from sin (54).

much more comfortable being foot washers rather than being the foot washed.<sup>31</sup> Certainly, the church can perform and interpret foot washing as a ritual of service. Yet questions arise when foot washing as an ordinance of *reception* has been virtually dropped from Mennonite theologizing and catechetical texts around the practice.

A Mennonite identity caught up with the choosing self appears much more comfortable building houses or taking care of others, rather than letting him- or herself be cared for. The image of a community of solitary heroes may appear to challenge the dominant story of consumer capitalism. Yet this picture still abides by the rules and narrative of the individualistic and subjective self. Mennonite practices need a more holistic and earthly likeness to truly counter the hold the reflexive self has on the Western moral imagination.

### Christian Disciples as Dependent Creatures

If the fundamental orientation to life of the reflexive self is towards independence, the truthful anthropology of the Christian self begins with *dependence*. The Christian recognizes in Paul's speech in Athens the utter reliance she has on God for her fundamental existence: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The person of faith understands his dependence on God and others from birth to death and everything in between. Rather than being a sign of weakness in childhood or old age, or a temporary anomaly for the adult, believers acknowledge that an utter reliance on others for life is constitutive of the human condition. Christians recognize that the choosing self's belief in a self-originating and self-monitoring identity represents nothing less than a pernicious myth which erodes authentic human community. Christians acknowledge dependence as a fundamental truth of being humans created by God rather than gods creating their own reality.

Thus the primary identity of the Christian is that of being a *creature*, limited and fragile, yet created by a good God for a mission in the world. A creature knows that it does not make its own identity from the disenchanting raw mate-

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31 For the emphasis on being foot washers, see the articles by Tripp York, "Dirty Basins, Dirty Disciples, and Beautiful Crosses: The Politics of Footwashing," *Liturgy* 20, no. 1 (February 2005): 13–15, and Mark Thiessen Nation's "Footwashing: Preparation for Christian Life," in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells (Maldon, MA: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 2011), 479–90. For a critique of this view of foot washing using the thought of Jean Vanier, see Romand Coles, "'Gentled Into Being': Vanier and the Border and the Core," in eds. Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 208–28.

rials of the external environment, but understands its identity as a gift of grace. Without the grace of God pervading and invigorating all of life, all work and striving come to naught. So it goes with the church as well. “The Church is a community of those gathered not by choice but by grace,” writes moral theologian Paul Wadell. “We are there only because God has summoned us in Christ . . . . [T]he crucial fact is that God’s choice of us precedes and must govern our choice of one another. It is God acting through Christ who constitutes the community of faith, and it is God’s action which shape and determine our own.”<sup>32</sup> Knowledge never originates in the individual self, and Christian community never forms primarily around like-minded, voluntaristic individuals. Rather, the Trinity preveniently calls and invites believers into the divine life and into the body of Christ. No one lives, let alone survives, without being radically dependent on God and others for human flourishing.

Thus being a creature means understanding that people are created not to be independent, autonomous agents but dependent on one another.

As Christians we know we have not been created to be ‘our own authors,’ to be autonomous. We are creatures. Dependency, not autonomy, is one of the ontological characteristics of our lives. That we are creatures, moreover, is but a reminder that we are created with and for one another. We are not just accidentally communal, but we are such by necessity. We are not created to be alone.<sup>33</sup>

Nothing could be more foreign for the Christian self than to believe that it alone builds and constructs its identity.

Because the Christian is created to live in community, she understands identity formation as a fundamentally *communal* exercise. A creature never becomes a self in isolation, but depends on the social recognition of others. The formation of identity is a dialogical rather than monological process, one in which the self is created just as much by the stories others tell about us as about the stories we choose and create.<sup>34</sup> The Christian knows herself to always

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32 Paul J. Wadell, “Pondering the Anomaly of God’s Love: Ethical Reflections on Access to the Sacraments,” in *Developmental Disabilities and Sacramental Access: New Paradigms for Sacramental Encounters*, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1994), 69.

33 Stanley Hauerwas, *Sanctify Them in the Truth: Holiness Exemplified* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 147.

34 “None of us really tells or owns our stories. We are all people who are storied by a Creator God who resides within a narrative of creation, cross, and redemption that we can share in but can never own.” Swinton, Mowat and Baines, “Whose Story Am I?”, 11.

belong to a broader story due to her dependence as a creature. Not only does the believer understand herself as a part of the story of Jesus, but also acknowledges that that story means nothing outside the community which attempts to embody it on a daily basis.

A continual state of vulnerability accompanies the Christian's dependence on God and others. While the reflexive self only sees vulnerability as an obstacle to the successful pursuit of its life plan, the believer understands fragility as not only being a part of his creatureliness but also as the mode which makes him *available for relationship* with the other. As the seventeenth-century Christian theologian and mystic Thomas Traherne evocatively suggests, "Wants are the bands and cements between God and us . . . the ligatures . . . the sinews that convey senses from Him into us, whereby we live in Him and feel His enjoyments."<sup>35</sup> The presence of the other represents life for Christians, because without others life and flourishing cannot occur. As Jesus welcomed humanity into the divine community through calling them friends, so must believers extend that same hosting to others. Christians understand hospitality not as throwing dinner parties but of a copious welcome of the stranger, the same welcome they received as creatures from a welcoming God.

The limitations which come from creaturely vulnerability train the believer in learning how to receive grace and the gift of the other. Late modernity's bias towards self-construction demands a self always and everywhere in control of its life plan, ready to use the givens of life to further its goals of self-fulfillment. Feminist philosopher Soran Reader sees this bias as a truncation of human being, and believes that "patience" as much as agency defines the human person. Reader suggests that:

passivity, inability, necessity/contingency and dependency are as constitutive of personhood as the 'positive' aspects of action, capability, choice and independence which according to the agential conception are necessary and sufficient for personhood on their own. Along with agency comes patience. Along with capabilities, come inabilities. Along with freedom, choice, and rationality come constraint, necessity and contingency. And along with independence come dependencies.<sup>36</sup>

While the late modern choosing self stumbles at the seemingly severe restraints

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On identity being a "dialogical process," see Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 33–34.

35 Thomas Traherne, *Centuries*, I.51 (London: Mowbray, 1985), 24.

36 Soran Reader, "The Other Side of Agency," *Philosophy* 82, no. 322 (October 2007): 592.

of patency, the Christian creature knows the “other side of agency” as self-evident truth. Receptivity and openness to the grace of God in others and the world stand as fundamental markers of creaturely identity.

What creatures wait for and receive are not disconnected spirits but living, breathing, vulnerable *bodies*. The reflexive self can easily live alone inside its own life plans and pursuits of rational desire, remaining oblivious to how bodies need others to truly flourish. “A mortal body is a dependent being,” writes John Dunnill. “If I think of my *self* as a mind or a spirit, I may think that I am self-sustaining, without needs; but as a *body* I need people.”<sup>37</sup> Creatures recognize the needs of others through their own need, and thus do not thoughtlessly buy from a disembodied brand but seek some connection with the bodies behind the product.

In addition, Christians know that bodies are not mere raw material for identity construction, but are gifts from a good, Creator God. Learning how to receive their bodies as gifts trains creatures in how to suffer those contingencies of life which cannot be eliminated or ameliorated. Rather than seeing bodily imperfections merely as defects for modification or removal, creatures know how to patiently accompany and suffer with the other without needing to eliminate the sufferer. For example, a Christian who recognizes the inherent limitations of creaturely life can discern in a (potential) person with Down’s syndrome not a “genetic abnormality” but a precious gift of a loving Creator. To identify oneself as a dependent being means knowing that bodies need other bodies, and that God has created a church abounding in difference and diversity (1 Cor. 12).

Furthermore, when Christians realize how fundamental dependence is to true human being and flourishing, they also realize that the real moral exemplars of creatureliness are much different than the heroes promulgated by the choosing self. In a church of mutual dependence, people with disabilities or other unalterable limitations become not defectives but potential *teachers* in what it might mean truthfully to own Christian identity. The church needs communities like L’Arche and Word Made Flesh, who have discovered that the vulnerable stand less as objects of charity than as potential friends of wisdom and humanity.<sup>38</sup> These communities have discovered that the choosing self, hell-bent on independence and control, can never truly flourish because it lives a lie. Only as dependent bodies utterly reliant on God, one another, and the

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37 John Dunnill, “Being a Body,” *Theology* 105, no. 824 (March 1, 2002): 112.

38 For more on the international federation of L’Arche communities, see [www.larche.org](http://www.larche.org). Information on Word Made Flesh can be found at [www.wordmadeflesh.org](http://www.wordmadeflesh.org).

planet can humanity receive the grace to understand authentic human identity.

Communities like L'Arche reveal a Christian truth: that all identity must be grounded in the knowledge that no one is independent, but fundamentally belongs to the Other. Theologian John Swinton states it eloquently:

In a very real sense we belong to one another; I am because we are . . . . We need to belong before we can understand the true meaning of such things as autonomy, freedom, and self-representation. When we belong to the Christian community the true meaning of these terms becomes quite clear: in Jesus there is no autonomy, freedom or self-representation. We are slaves to Jesus (1 Cor 7:22). Autonomy is a cultural illusion; personhood emerges from gift and relationship; creation and friendship; freedom comes from enslavement to Jesus and self-representation emerges as we learn what it means to live out and live within the image of God: Jesus. It is as we learn what it means to give up or at least to reframe these culturally important social goods, that we learn what it means truly to be human and to create the types of community wherein humanness can be actualized.<sup>39</sup>

Christian creatures see through the seductions of the You Sell as cultural illusions which deny the truth that relationships rather than self-representation represent true human goods. Disciples live out of an identity defined by Jesus, and thus depend on the Trinity for all self-definition.

### **Practicing a True Christian Creaturely Identity**

Conceptions of human identity never remain merely abstract ideas, but inevitably become embodied in practices. This article has shown how recent popular theologizing and praxis around the Mennonite sacramental practices of foot washing and baptism potentially cohere too neatly with the late modern reflexive self. While the intention behind these ordinances may desire to act as an alternative to the excesses of late consumer capitalism, its subjectivistic and individualistic tendencies potentially dull its efficacy as a counter-narrative.

The following are tentative suggestions on how Mennonite sacramental practices might be renewed, reimagined, and reinvigorated to more faithfully witness to the gospel and Christian identity. By paying more attention to God's initiative in the ordinances, recognizing the church as subject in the community's ritual activity, and recovering the body in worship, Mennonites might become formed into dependent creatures given to the world as witnesses of Christ's peace.

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<sup>39</sup> John Swinton, "From Inclusion to Belonging: A Practical Theology of Community, Disability and Humanness," *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 16, no. 2 (April 2012): 184.

*Reemphasizing God's initiative in ecclesial practices*

Christians attuned to creaturely life acknowledge that all of life is utterly dependent on God, and that the church is not merely a voluntaristic gathering of like-minded individuals but a body called into being by God. Believers thus understand themselves not fundamentally as choosers or makers but as *receivers* of God's grace. As Mennonite theologian Irma Fast Dueck explains, in worship:

we discover our identity lies not primarily in the culture from which we come, the family into which we were born, or the church denomination that shaped us: our identity lies in the Trinity – in God through Jesus Christ and as revealed by the Holy Spirit. In worship we discover who by the grace of God we are, and who we are meant to be. This is an identity we do not earn or achieve or create, but receive as a gift.<sup>40</sup>

With God as actor, the human role in the ordinance concerns itself less with what it needs to do than what it needs to receive. Reemphasizing the priority of God's action not only might help curb a Mennonite tendency towards self-originated activism, but also coheres with the robust pneumatology of the first Radical Reformers. A common element in the thought and practice of sixteenth-century Anabaptists was the crucial place the Holy Spirit had in conversion, the preparation for baptism, and for Christian life as a whole.<sup>41</sup>

When Christians acknowledge God as first and primary actor, they know that they never name themselves but are fundamentally named by God and by others in the body. Sacramental practices emanate as modes of God's grace, transforming persons from autonomous monads into friends belonging to Christ and the church. Joel Shuman and Keith Meador go on to say that worship reminds Christians "that their lives are no longer their own, but gifts from God to be received as such . . . . [Baptism] embodies a narrative of reception, witness, and sharing with a full acknowledgement of our utter dependence on the other for our present communion as well as our eschatological vision of hope for the future."<sup>42</sup>

A focus on baptism as an act of God first and foremost challenges the

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40 Irma Fast Dueck, "Worship Made Strange," in *The Church Made Strange for the Nations*, eds. Paul G. Doerksen and Karl Koop (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 116.

41 Thus writes Pilgram Marpeck, "Without the artistry and teaching of the Holy Spirit, who pours out the love, which is God, into the hearts of the faith, and which surpasses all reason and understanding, everything is in vain." Quoted in Roth, *Practices*, 204.

42 Keith G. Meador and Joel James Shuman, "Who/se We Are: Baptism as Personhood," *Christian Bioethics* 6, no. 1 (April 2000): 79.

choosing self, who believes that it can make its own life. Rather, when the church stresses the Holy Spirit as agent of grace in the ordinance, Christians remember that believers are all created and continually being created by God in total gratuity and care. Foot washing has the potential to reveal this aspect of grace in a powerful way by emphasizing that Christians cannot wash themselves but must be washed by another. Foot washing embodies humanity's reliance on God and one another for the recognition of the gift of their lives. In learning to have their feet washed, Christians recognize the power of the Holy Spirit in gratuitously (re-)creating persons into the people of God.

*Recovering the church as the primary subject of Mennonite practices*

Dependent creatures know that the reflexive self's rejection of social institutions as constraints on freedom merely pushes people further into the organizational domain of late consumer capitalism. Truthful Christian identity requires belonging to and participating in the body of Christ. According to Stanley Hauerwas, "We require practices through which we learn that we do not know who we are, or what our bodies can and cannot do, until we are told what and who we are by a more determinative 'body.'"<sup>43</sup>

Thus practices like baptism and foot washing produce not merely individual believers but a *community* of faith. The church does not consist of atomized selves but of a new social reality which changes and becomes more the body of Christ every time sacramental practices are performed. Recognizing the church as a subject in Mennonite practices coheres with the original impulses of the sixteenth-century movement. The solid and robust ecclesiology of the Radical Reformers could not conceive of the mere contractual gathering of individuals believed by the choosing self. Instead, it recognized the church as the Body of Christ in which individuals never believed alone but always in communion with one another.

This communion means that faith consists not in a perpetual monitoring of one's inner motivations and allegiance to God, but requires a community which can remember God when the individual forgets. It should come as no surprise that a condition like dementia strikes fear into the heart of the reflexive self. When a successful life plan demands a continual knowing what one is doing, the prospect of forgetting can only mean the death of the self. Yet when the church performs sacramental practices not as individuals but as a body, it trains Christians in seeing that even though one may forget, the body remembers

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43 Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 24.

through the performance of rituals like foot washing and baptism.<sup>44</sup> A Christian identity as dependent creatures affirms that a Christian faith cannot exist in isolation but must be in relation with others. Just as our faith never wholly originates with us but comes as a gift from God, so our faith must never be only for us but for the church, God's people.

*Paying attention to the body*

Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least a significant minority of people express concern at the highly cerebral dimension of worship in Mennonite congregations. Mennonites have inherited an anti-sacramental orientation which served as a corrective to medieval abuses, but has also often failed to recognize how praise and thanksgiving require not just minds but also *bodies*. At the same time, a burgeoning choosing self feels quite comfortable leaving matters to an inner subjectivity, whether that be in matters of worship or self-fulfillment. The combination of these two tendencies means that bodies are important when they break down and need to be repaired or modified, but otherwise life and faith primarily center in the head.

The Christian living out of an identity of creatureliness understands life as fundamentally a *bodily* life, and that the practices of the church form and train the body into a cruciform shape. Believers recognize faith not primarily as a state of mind but as a bodily practice, a trust that the body knows and performs before the intellect grasps. Communion in the body of Christ is not one of disembodied minds pursuing their own life plans, but of bodies called by the Trinity into communities of faith.

Mennonite pastor Isaac Villegas writes eloquently on the centrality of the body in the practice of foot washing. On his experience of letting his feet be washed by an older African American man, Villegas relates how "I didn't say anything. I just sat there, submissive, receptive, letting him take me, my feet, into him, his hands — a moment of union, our union in the body of Christ. God's revolution happens when you let someone take your dirty feet in her hands, because with those hands comes Christ's love."<sup>45</sup> The self-evident nature of the body in the rite revealed to Villegas how dependent Christians are on God and one another. Foot washing is a "practice that breaks down walls of

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44 For an excellent attempt to "re-describe" dementia in the Christian community, see John Swinton's *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012).

45 Isaac Villegas, "A Holy Hybridity: Reflections on a Footwashing Service," *The Mennonite*, April 2, 2012, accessed March 23, 2014. [www.themennonite.org/issues/15-4/articles/A\\_Holy\\_Hybridity](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/15-4/articles/A_Holy_Hybridity).

self-sufficiency and opens us to receive God's loving care from another."<sup>46</sup> This nonviolent care of one another needs not the surgical modifications of biomedicine nor the product customizations of the You Sell. Instead, dependent creatures know that all that is needed is a community of faith, and the towel and basin which can make enemies friends and create a peaceable witness to the world. "Jesus didn't tell us to wash our own feet but to wash each other's feet. For in letting someone wash our feet, we draw closer to our fundamental neediness; God's sustaining grace washes over us."<sup>47</sup> Recognizing dependency lets the body be the body, rather than the perpetual project for the reflexive self. In baptism and foot washing, letting those bodies be creates a body from which Christ is witnessed to the world.

Incorporating more liturgical gestures within Mennonite worship could assist in training members how to be authentic Christian creatures. Worship is a fundamentally *communal* activity which requires *bodies* that give praise and thanksgiving to God. By paying attention to liturgical gestures within worship, Mennonite Christians let their bodies communicate their thanks to God and receive God's love in return. At the same time, they also affirm that they can never truly know God on their own. Just as bodies cannot survive long on their own, so Christian identity centered around independence and self-sufficiency remains truncated and wholly insufficient. The Christian self is nothing less than a body within a body.

## Conclusion

This article argues that the reflexive self of late modernity untruthfully promulgates and practices an identity of the human as an independent chooser. The ever alterable self of contemporary Western liberalism leaves persons suspicious of the givenness of human contingency, while also training them in the practices of consumer capitalism like cosmetic surgery and the You Sell. Recent theologizing around Mennonite practices reveals a highly subjectivistic and agency driven self, potentially mirroring too closely the excesses of the late modern social imaginary. This turn to a more independent self risks eclipsing the Radical Reformers' belief in the prevenience of God's action for the Christian life, and thus threatens to alienate Mennonites from the font of ethical action they seek to emulate.

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46 Isaac Villegas, "Sheeplike Love: Grace and Truth: A Word from Pastors," *The Mennonite*, April 1, 2011, accessed March 23, 2014. [www.themennonite.org/issues/14-4/articles/Sheeplike\\_love](http://www.themennonite.org/issues/14-4/articles/Sheeplike_love).

47 Villegas, "Sheeplike Love."

A turn to a more dependent and creaturely identity stands as a potential alternative witness to the dominance of the reflexive self. Increasingly incomprehensible to a late modern world held captive by the vision of the autonomous individual, the Christian acknowledges her fundamental need for God and others for her very being. Human contingency represents not an impediment to the moral life, but the font of true human flourishing where patience and receptivity lead to a communion of bodies in a Body. The Mennonite sacramental practices of baptism and foot washing offer training grounds for supporting this kind of theological anthropology. By reimagining and returning to a more truthful identity as dependent creatures of the living God, Mennonites might offer a bold witness to a world intolerant of those unable to speak for themselves. And by so doing, Anabaptists could not only serve the poor but also learn from those disqualified others the power of God who brings a peace the world cannot give.