

# The Shenandoah Confession:

## A Critical Introduction to the Next Generation

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### Occupy Anabaptism: A Prelude

When I joined the Charlottesville, Virginia, chapter of the Occupy Wall Street protest nearly three years ago, I was already an accomplished activist with Veterans for Peace, deeply committed to the cause and mission of social justice in light of the prophetic calling. Unfortunately, many of the young people called by the Spirit to our Occupy Charlottesville encampment had no real background in the countercultural work which we were trying to do, and many of their good intentions fell on rocky ground and there they withered in the sun, lacking a deep rootedness. The problem most modern Anabaptists face, whether they are aware of it or not, is precisely the opposite: having found the fertile ground, the many and large branches of various Mennonite and Amish sects grow — but often these branches bear little or dubious fruit, feeding only ethnic enclaves or myopic communities and ignoring the hard work of the Spirit that is demanded of Christians in the world.<sup>2</sup>

At one Occupy Charlottesville press conference that fall — in Robert E. Lee Park under a giant statue of that icon of the failure of violence to deliver the people of Central Virginia — I presented a homily citing Christian ethics and Hebrew Scripture. My tiny attempt to connect social justice to religious

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<sup>2</sup> This is a sensitive topic, hitting a nerve in the Anabaptist community. It is not our intention here to explore the myopic psychologies of the purity ethic, but one example I would offer of this comes from a statement made by Dr. Vincent Harding in a recent interview with Dr. Mark Sawin about his work with Mennonites on behalf of Dr. King and the civil rights movement in the 1960s: “There was a sense sometimes, I remember, of being concerned that too often, too much Mennonite thought was being given as to how to have the cleanest hands, personally, and not how to do the largest work that needed to be done.” (For more on this see: Evan Knappenberger, “Non-Resistance, Civil Rights and Mennonite Identity,” *The Weather Vane* (March 23, 2014): sec. Features.)

truth resonated with some portions of the community, but surprised many of the young anarchist comrades who felt betrayed that I had been “a secret Christian among us this whole time.” The feeling among the dispossessed youth — that they were doing something completely new and unheard-of by feeding the poor, housing the homeless, and educating the public — is stark evidence of the failure of the Christian project. While nearby congregations busied themselves with musical programming, capital improvement budgets, and doctrinal arguments, a bunch of grungy secular kids were out doing the hard work of Christ at all hours of day and night. And when the inevitable confrontations with authority came calling, still the good Christians were absent. No wonder then that the anarchist caucus was so eager to denigrate anyone self-identifying as Christian!

I know now, thanks to my friend and professor Dr. Ted Grimsrud, that there is, embedded in the Mennonite tradition, a deep understanding of the issues we struggled with at Occupy Charlottesville. Questions of authority and power are not new to Anabaptism. Despite the similarities of the Occupy Charlottesville and Mennonite ideologies, there was however no interface between the Occupiers and Anabaptism during my time with Occupy. When we desperately needed the theo-poetic guidance of prophetic awareness to liberate us from the poverty of authority-awareness the people who have been doing this for thousands of years were nowhere to be found.<sup>3</sup>

The quest for right relationships among human beings — the work of wholeness, shalom, and justice — cuts to the heart of what it means to engage the world in the spirit of Christ. The responsibility of those claiming the mantle of the prophetic calling is manifold, and carries implications for the future of the Anabaptist tradition. How should Anabaptists approach justice and nonviolence in a world where fruitless branches will be thrown into the fire?<sup>4</sup> For indeed the whole world has been set on fire.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, there is absolutely no safety in embodying the “quiet in the land” — in fact the very future of the land itself is jeopardized with the ascendancy of ecocide-capitalism and thermonuclear “security.”<sup>6</sup>

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3 I am blending elements of John Caputo, Peter Rollins, Walter Brueggemann, John Howard Yoder, and Walter Wink.

4 John 15.

5 Gospel of Thomas (10): Jesus said, “I have cast fire upon the world, and see, I am guarding it until it blazes.” Also, Luke 12: 49.

6 According to some scientists, the worst climate-change projections may endanger even the existence of bacteria on Earth. For more on the paradigm-shifting nature of the crisis, see Derrick Jensen, *Endgame* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006).

How then should we act as Occupiers, as Anabaptists? What is left to the prophetic imagination in a time of hypermodernism, where personal connection happens on a Facebook screen, where blogging is considered working for social justice, and where ministry effectiveness is measured in “likes” and “+1’s”? The metaphors we have used to understand the place of the church in civilization for thousands of years have collapsed; the desolating sacrilege of the idolatry of violence remains unchallenged in the mainstream.<sup>7</sup> And yet, remnants of the tradition of social justice — including many of the good-hearted Occupiers — still proliferate like weeds in the cracks of the social order, thirsting for the life-giving waters of the homeless activist and Lamb of God, Jesus of Nazareth.

How shall we speak to them, these unhappy anarchists, these traumatized Veterans for Peace, these agnostic university peacebuilding majors, these drop-outs sleeping in strangers’ tents in the cold October rain, shivering for justice and hungering for righteousness? How can we invite the transforming Spirit into our lives? How can we invite it into Zuccoti Park, the jury room and the frat house? How can we enter into the priesthood of believers with all these brothers and sisters? Can we find a common gospel language with which to communicate that good news given to us with joy? What experiential potential waits patiently to assert its forgotten quiet wisdom?

The way Anabaptists approach these questions in the coming years will determine the future of our institutions, the future of the faith, and also the future of the Earth itself. There is nothing less than the priesthood of all believers and the New Jerusalem at stake here — if we actually believe the message of the one who sends us, that is.

### **The Shenandoah Confession of Faith: An Introduction**

In February of 2014, the Anabaptist student organization known as Intercollegiate Peace Fellowship held its annual conference at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley, Harrisonburg, Virginia. Students from seven institutions came together for a weekend of fellowship led by Center for Justice and Peacebuilding research professor Dr. Lisa Schirch, who works around the globe on issues of human security and nonviolent conflict transformation. In her opening address titled “A Tribe Called Mennonite,” Schirch spoke about the foundations of Anabaptist faith, the Schleithem-an-

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<sup>7</sup> See Ted Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement the Bible’s Salvation Story and Our Hope for Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), or Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1992).

der-Raden Confession of Faith of 1527,<sup>8</sup> and summarized five hundred years of Mennonite peacemaking.

Schirch then called participants to speak boldly of their beliefs, each contributing to a Shenandoah confession of faith. Participants in the conference then spent much of the next three days working in groups to define a draft confession of faith in order to better reflect values central to the Anabaptist paradigm. At the end of the conference, a committee was formed of Eastern Mennonite University students including Aaron Erb, Jacob Landis, Christine Baer, Krista Nyce, Chaska Yoder, myself, and a few EMU faculty and others attending the conference from other Mennonite organizations. Together over the course of several weeks, we struggled with theological language until finally, on the 487th anniversary of the publishing of Schleithem, we released our document to the world.<sup>9</sup>

The final draft of the Shenandoah Confession of Faith surprised many, including members of the drafting committee. The language used in the document is theological and relational, uncompromising in the scope of its ecclesiastic endeavor, and somewhat avoids the language of secular theory. It is above all not something typical of twenty-year-old college students struggling through the doldrums of hypermodernity. This is one of the Shenandoah Confession's many strengths, and lives in the prophecy of Joel: "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy . . ."<sup>10</sup>

The eleven articles of confession stand as monuments to the deep belief of those of us called to do the work of the Spirit. This is no idolatry of belief, no shallow self-justification by faith alone; the articles of the Shenandoah Confession, like the articles of Schleithem, are not meant to be mere poetics. The Shenandoah Confession is no Augustinian philosophers' proselytization parading itself under the guise of humility. The "brothers and sisters" who are ultimately the source of the eleven articles are informed by their own experiences doing the work of Christ in the world, having already committed large portions of their lives to the works which give life to faith — something that I hope comes across in reading the document.

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8 Available in translation: John Howard Yoder, "Schleithem Confession," accessed April 27, 2014, [http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleithem\\_Confession\\_%28source%29](http://www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Schleithem_Confession_%28source%29).

9 Bonnie P. Lofton, "'Shenandoah Confession' Emerges from 2014 Intercollegiate Peace Meeting, in Spirit of 1527 Schleithem Confession," *EMU News* (February 28, 2014).

10 Joel 2:28, NIV.

The universalism embedded in the Shenandoah Confession is inherent to the structure of the ideas of a universal Christ, and not some liberal ecumenical language of inclusion. A truly pacifist ethic must flow from a pacifist ontology, and this is one of the ongoing projects that my generation of thinkers has taken up.<sup>11</sup> Because of the theological background of its participants, the Shenandoah Confession speaks also to those in our generation inclined to identify as anarchists. The confession, I hope, can establish an understanding with a group of disaffected young brothers and sisters (like my friends at Occupy Charlottesville,) saying “no” to institutionalized authority, but saying “yes” to a natural form of authority — that form which I believe will ultimately reveal the servant nature of Christ, who inverted the authority of the world and whose yoke is easy.<sup>12</sup>

Speaking from my own experience (and not necessarily for the others who helped to draft the confession), the revolutionary potential of a work like the Shenandoah Confession is that it might speak to anarchists and veterans, LGBT crusaders and Marxists. The intention is not directly evangelistic, and this has been a turnoff to some on the Mennonite right; but the invitation of the Shenandoah Confession to participate in the suffering of the Lamb is radically conservative in a way that seeks to bring conservatives and radicals into conversation together. The truth of Jesus may be political truth, but it is freed from the false dualism imposed on our worldly politics by the powers and principalities.<sup>13</sup>

It was this relational truth — the plural, anexact and yet rigorous, timeless and universal truth of the Logos — that the Occupiers and the Anabaptists

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11 *Co-Editors regret that this footnote was omitted from the print issue.*

I am thinking of young theologians like Nathan Hershberger, Thomas Millary, Jordan Luther, Andrea De Avila-Bilboa, Emily Hodges, and Jossimar Diaz-Castro, influenced in turn by thinkers like Peter Dula, Ted Grimsrud, J. H. Yoder, Peter Rolins, Jacques Ellul, and Slavoj Zizek.

12 *Co-Editors regret that this footnote was omitted from the print issue.*

Mark 10:44 and Matt. 11:30.

13 *Co-Editors regret that this footnote was omitted from the print issue.*

I am thinking of John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), and Walter Wink's *The Powers* trilogy (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984–86).

have been seeking in our separate communities.<sup>14</sup> It is long since time for the Mennonite community to come out of its shell and engage those thirsting for justice, and I pray that the Shenandoah Confession can be a first step in that process.

## The Confession

Presented this 24th day of February, 2014, on behalf of those gathered in Christ at the Intercollegiate Peace Fellowship of Anabaptist colleges meeting at Eastern Mennonite University, to our various communities around the world. Written by participants with inspiration from previous Anabaptist confessions of faith.

### *Preface*

May peace, fellowship, patience and the truth of the love of God be with all who love God. Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord, may the care of the good shepherd and the strength of the lamb who was slain sustain you in your efforts to recognize God's Kingdom which, according to the most holy teacher and savior, Jesus of Nazareth, exists among and within all creation and is the source of life everywhere.

Dear brothers and sisters, we who have been assembled for the 2014 Intercollegiate Peace Fellowship Conference, in the Lord at Eastern Mennonite Seminary in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, make known to all that we have been united in the spirit of fellowship to the common goal of building the peace of a loving and merciful God. The articles to which we confess ourselves we announce here in the spirit of those Anabaptist brothers and sisters who before us made confession together at Schleithem on the 24th day of February in the year 1527, and Dordrecht in 1632, including the various conclusions that have been amended to it by the church since. As those dear brothers and sisters made formal confession into a foundational action of the Anabaptist church, so let us confess ourselves in the hopes of a new and prophetic life in Immanuel, who is God with us.

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<sup>14</sup> *Co-Editors regret that this footnote was omitted from the print issue.*

This conception of theological truth builds on several sources. First and foremost is the philosophy of religion of Christian Early, heavily influenced by Nancey Murphey, Imre Lakatos, William Placher, and others. The term "anexact yet rigorous" is taken from the philosophy of science of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, explicated in their essay *Nomadology: The War Machine* (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 1986). Essentially, I would argue, the theological truth and scientific truth are fully compatible in this system.

*The eleven articles of confession*

The articles of our confession are as follows:

1. Confession of faith in Christ as the foundation of peace.
2. Love as the root of all things.
3. The call of the spirit of God to all for radical pacifist action.
4. Acceptance of the truth of the full humanity of all God's children.
5. Inclusion as the guiding principle of action within the spirit.
6. Accountability of historical wrongs, especially colonialisms.
7. An abiding desire to participate in resilient and just economies.
8. The full and unflinching engagement of creative faculties of believers in service of peace.
9. Embrace of lives of radical simplicity following the truth of God's peace on Earth.
10. Commitment to deep listening and dialogue as the prophetic intention of Christian pacifism.
11. Recognition of failures and continued re-commitment to our principles within community.

*Explication of articles*

Confession of faith in Christ as the foundation of peace. We confess our faith in the peace of Christ that surpasses understanding, and our dedication to the principled peace of the Lord and savior Jesus who taught a bold humility. We embrace the faith even as we work for the good of all people, including people with whom we disagree, or people of other faiths, and even those who proclaim themselves our enemies and seek to do us harm. We seek the realization of the one we follow, Jesus, that the good of all is the work of servants; and in the tradition of him who laid down his life for all people, we embrace our identities as his followers knowing well the consequences of the burden of the cross. We admit that there can be no higher calling than the gospel call to nonviolent action in accordance with the will of the Holy Spirit, and the imminent fullness of the kingdom of the lamb, who does justice with mercy.

Love as the root of all things. Being created in the spirit of love, and saved by the love of Jesus who is our redeemed example of love, we here confess that love to be at the heart of all things. We confess to loving ourselves and others without the world's judgment and vanities; we commit to loving the earth and protecting God's gift of life, the spirit of God itself, and our enemies and neighbors, in praise and thanksgiving. We also confess our belief that our love

must be one that challenges those around us to become better followers of Jesus. Love must be mission, holding others accountable and building them up. True love, we hold, calls people to action in its embodiment and by its very example.

The call of the spirit of God to all for radical pacifist action. This gospel call to act as servants we confess to be the central tenant of the Christian faith. Peace is the vocation of all things made by a just and good creator, we believe. Peace shapes our daily lives and actions whether or not we are aware of it; it is our intention to practice this peace conscientiously around the world and amongst neighbors. The spirit of God calls all God's life back to God, clothed in the raiment of nonviolence, worshiping the wonderful counselor who does justice and loves mercy. We confess that we seek to build institutions upon the shoulders of Christ, the servant who yearns for right relationship among the children of God.

Acceptance of the truth of the full humanity of all God's children. We affirm all brothers and sisters to be equal in Christ. We call for the full privileges and rights of Christ to be granted them without delay. We honor the power and beauty of all life, and seek to enter relationship with it, not avoiding but rather walking toward conflict in the spirit of peace and fellowship. Along with this, we confess that our communities must become places of deep healing, sustainable praxis, nonviolent education and radical acceptance, where brothers and sisters can seek their identities in Christ freely, without fear of prejudice or categorical pre-judgment.

Inclusion as the guiding principle of action within the spirit. We confess that the guiding principle of prophetic action within the will of the spirit is one of active inclusion. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, nor male and female. All people, created in the image of God, are unconditionally welcomed to God's table and to God's salvation.

Accountability of historical wrong, especially colonialisms. We hereby pledge solidarity and yield up positions of leadership to those communities who have been historically marginalized. We seek to affirm their leadership and support peace and nonviolence education by upholding the principles of peacebuilding in our own local and historical contexts. As North American Anabaptists, we confess our need to challenge and reform our own government and lay out peacebuilding alternatives to violence and war.

An abiding desire to participate in resilient and just economies. We see that our world suffers from a lack of care for God's living environment, and we grieve the lack of our participation in an economy that is environmentally sustainable and socially just. We confess our desire to support local enterprise,



invest prudently in clean energy, and remain mindful of our impact on and our role within God's loving creation. We seek to embrace trickle-up change, and we commit to imagining innovative communities along these principles near to our homes, even as we seek God's peace farther from our immediate spheres of influence.

The full and unflinching engagement of creative faculties of believers in service of peace. We confess that we look for creative engagement within our hearts and communities in order to nonviolently pursue restorative justice in the name of a righteous God of wholeness. Violence stifles creative impulses and inhibits our ability to seek the peace of God. We believe in appealing for peace to the creativity of the Spirit, which is that of Jesus, and of the one who sent him.

Embrace of lives of radical simplicity following the truth of God's peace on Earth. In order to focus our lives to the call of God's peace on Earth, we hereby uphold the life of the servant Christ in its simplicity and mission-orientation as the model for all conscientious human activity. We seek to affirm the intentional community of believers without excluding other brothers and sisters, and we disavow egotistical ambition as a basis for peace and faith work. We recognize the impossibility of following two masters, and choose to follow the way of peace despite the possibilities of worldly poverty which can sometimes overshadow it.

Commitment to deep listening and dialogue as the prophetic intention of Christian pacifism. We assert principles of right relationship to neighbor, enemy and self to be the following: deep listening as a means of connection and dialogue; openness to change of identity and opinion; mutual transformation in partnership and in the spirit of the creator; deep reflection before action; and nonviolence.

Recognition of failures and continued re-commitment to our principles within community. We confess that we have at times failed to embody the principles of community. With contrition we earnestly implore God's forgiveness. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, we have not honored God's creation, and we have often left the work of peace undone. Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us recognize our many vanities, our mindless consumerisms. Let us hereby recommit ourselves to the principles of Christian pacifism, the articles of confession above, and the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in the way of nonviolence.

### *Postlude*

Brothers and sisters in God, we most earnestly confess these points to you in hope that they move in your hearts, and excite within you a desire to confess

them also. May your roots — watered in the innocence and strength of the lamb of God — nourish your spirits and give you rest and joy. Also may your wings — lifted by the breath of the Holy Spirit — shield you in the protection of the most high and allow you to walk and not grow faint, to run and not become weary, to soar as eagles. May the peace of God be with you now and always, and may the teachings of the Prince of Peace guide you to the realization of God's presence among us.

Amen.