

Evangelicalism, Anabaptism, and Being the Church in a Post-Christian Culture:

An Interview with David Fitch

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Introduction

North American culture is undergoing a profound post-Christian shift. As a culture, we are moving away from shared language and assumptions of Christianity. The church as we've known it is moving to the margins.

As the broader North American church struggles with how to be the church in a culture that is growing increasingly disinterested in God and religion, there has been a growing interest in Anabaptism as a resource for addressing our cultural context. A growing number of Anabaptist voices are joining larger conversations taking place across theological traditions, particularly Evangelicalism.

Along the way, we've also seen the rise of Neo-Anabaptism, a term that still seems a bit fluid in definition. Some use it to refer to those who have come to Anabaptism from some other tradition and embrace it from or outside a traditional Anabaptist place. Others use it to describe those who seek to learn from Anabaptist history and incorporate the theology into other theologies or approaches. Still others emphasize it being influenced by post-modern and -colonial thought, particularly the critique of power. An approach to Anabaptism through the writings of Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder is yet another aspect I have encountered in relation to this term.

Last year, I attended the inaugural gathering of Missio Alliance, a collaborative movement among Evangelicals across a range of theological traditions who are seeking theological and practical guidance in facing what it means to be the church in an increasingly post-Christian culture. Interestingly, the conference enjoyed a solid presence of Anabaptist voices, ranging from those

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in historical Anabaptist traditions to those who identify themselves as Anabaptists within other theological bodies.

Dr. David Fitch was one of the latter. David, who defines himself as an evangelical Anabaptist, is an original founder and current board member of Missio Alliance. He is also the founding pastor of Life on the Vine Christian Community, a missional church in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, and the B. R. Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary. With fellow Life on the Vine pastor, Geoff Holsclaw, David co-authored *Prodigal Christianity*, which explores and offers a creative vision for missional theology and practice in a post-Christian culture.

Recently, I reached out to David to talk with him about the ongoing and growing conversation between Evangelicalism and Anabaptism, Neo-Anabaptism, and what it means to be the church in a post-Christian world.

Interview

Carmen Andres: *If I'm not mistaken, you grew up outside of a denomination that stands in the Anabaptist tradition, yet found a home within its theological vision. Briefly, tell us about that journey. How did you come to find a home in Anabaptism?*

David Fitch: I grew up your classic white mainstream Evangelical. Then I came to the realization that mainstream Evangelicalism was not engaging the cultural issues that I was being faced with as someone in their twenties. Going off to seminary (I went to three or four different evangelical seminaries), I became disillusioned with evangelical fundamentalism. I went to a more classic liberal seminary, Garrett Evangelical, and did my PhD at Northwestern University. I found Protestant liberalism to be a different version of the same and equally as vacuous as evangelical fundamentalism. It accommodated cultural issues; it didn't engage them.

So, to make a long story short, it was really through that prolonged intellectual struggle in my life — which also entailed working as a financial services account executive for a while, so I was in the world, so to speak — that I arrived at Stanley Hauerwas. He reset or disrupted the existing categories completely and gave me the wherewithal to navigate a world that had completely and totally shifted in my lifetime. That journey then led me to John Howard Yoder (RYFC).

CA: *Why did you include "RYFC" after Yoder?*

DF: Whenever I quote Yoder now I put in parenthesis "RYFC," an acrostic for "recognizing Yoder's flawed character." It's important that my Mennonite USA brothers and sisters know that I am aware that there are some difficulties here.

Having said that, those figures — Hauerwas, Yoder, and then there came philosophical figures like Charles Taylor, Steven Toulmin, and Alastair MacIntyre back in the early 1990s — helped me piece together a way of being Christian authentically in the world. From there on, I became a leader in churches, organizing communities of mission, and got involved in the missional church movement with some of my early writings. And I just got deeper and deeper and thicker and thicker into the leading question of the church's engagement with the surrounding culture. And, to be honest with you, the Anabaptist and the Neo-Anabaptist frameworks were the ones that helped me the most.

CA: You mentioned Neo-Anabaptism. Is Neo-Anabaptist a term you use to describe yourself?

DF: Yes.

CA: How do you define the term?

DF: I use Neo-Anabaptist to differentiate myself from historical Anabaptists. And yet, I am jumping onto themes that have been sustained within the Anabaptist movements — and I say “movements” in the plural because, in my experience, there is no one pure stream of Anabaptist thought, at least historically.

For example, we have these themes about post-Christendom, or Constantinianism. We examine the church's relationship to the state and all power structures; we question alliance with them as protocol. Once you take that out of the picture — that the church is no longer aligned with the state and power structures in society — discipleship becomes really important because we can't depend on the state to keep us in line or to guide us in our life. We as his people must ourselves be responsible to follow Jesus. So, the Person and work of Jesus and Christology take the center place in our life.

And of course kingdom becomes really important as opposed to an individualistic kind of Protestant spirituality. This becomes a whole life discipleship under the lordship of Christ. And that means there's going to be a community that's at the center of our lives, and that's going to be the church. The hermeneutic of the community is going to take a central place in our lives because we're not depending on the broad culture anymore to tell us what to do.

And then lastly, out of all this comes the understanding of nonviolence and peace — that God has not chosen to enter into the world and redeem the world through violence, through coercion, or through hierarchy, but he comes in and through relationship, reconciliation, peace, renewal by the cross and the resurrection. Those are all immensely important Anabaptist themes, and they really come out of a different way of self-understanding that happened within the first Anabaptists, who saw that they really couldn't become aligned with

various state forms of Christianity in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

So, that's the Anabaptist part. But then there is the "neo" part of it — and it all depends on who you're dealing with. But we're all working off post-Enlightenment, post-liberal, or post-structuralist ways of thought. Some call it postmodern ways of thought: this loss of foundations in society, the loss of hegemony by one culture. I personally play off of the radical democracy movement, political theorists like Slavoj Žižek, ideological cynicism, how we understand the formation of ideologies, and how it takes a community to even engage and not be thrust into the power of ideologies that shape us.

And so "neo" means we're working off of all those ways of thought. We could include Hauerwas as the founder, but Hauerwas was playing off Yoder, the Yale school, postmodern hermeneutics, Wittgenstein — all those things. That's the "neo" part of it; the old themes with the current philosophical constructs that we're all trying to figure out, and they just fit together like hand and glove — for me, anyways.

CA: In addition to Neo-Anabaptist you've also used the word "missional" a couple of times. We hear that word tossed around a lot these days. How do you define missional? In what ways did Anabaptism help you shape the way you approach or define it?

DF: First, the missional movement has emerged or been birthed in both Protestant mainline and evangelical churches. Some common themes are that God is at work in the world, that God — in the sending of his Son and the professing of his Spirit into the world — is a *sending* God, and that God has a mission and that's part of who he is. And the church is part of that mission. It's not the church that has a mission, but it's *God* that has a mission and the church is part of it. The church is part of something bigger than itself, and so the church must be engaged outside its four walls to be truly authentic in its life with God in mission.

The second piece or realization of the missional movement is that God has come in Christ incarnationally to be with and among us. That means we too have to be with and among people. We can't segregate ourselves off into a bunch of attractional services that ask people to come to us, get what they need, and then go home and live in isolation.

At first glance, you might think some of those themes are in antagonism with Anabaptism, but I would argue, no. When we see that we are in a post-Christendom world and we're no longer a massive Protestant consensus of United States of America, we can see that we're actually in mission. That helps

us understand the new dynamics of the church.

We have a lot to learn from the Anabaptist movements in terms of how we engage a world as a minority — because we *are* now a minority. We're not a majority, and we're not in power anymore — just like the Anabaptists said we always should be, we now are, and now we have to deal with it. The Anabaptists have already been dealing with it, and they can help us think through it again.

Likewise, with incarnation. The Anabaptists teach us how to be local and engaged on our own terms — humbly, nonviolently, in service *to* our local community. We do this not by taking into our own hands the power of a state or a broad universalist logic — whatever you use to impose your will on society. No, we must be local and engaged communities of witness. That's one of the strengths of the Anabaptist thought.

So, when you put these things together — post-Christendom, discipleship, nonviolence, community, local community engagement — that's a whole way of engaging the world that helps missional people. A lot of us come from Protestant mainline denominations who are used to being in power, or we are even Evangelicals who still think we are in power, and we don't know how to think in the Anabaptist way. We need to learn from the Anabaptists.

CA: You've talked a little about how you have been formed by historic Anabaptist thinkers and writers. Have you had interactions with historic Anabaptist communities? What do you see as their current role in the theological discourse?

DF: I'm an evangelical Anabaptist. That probably makes no sense to many of my Mennonite brothers and sisters because when they hear the word evangelical they think George W. Bush or Republican politics. Predominant in Evangelicalism is either Jerry Farwell or Jim Wallis, both of whom (even though Wallis originally, I think, had Anabaptist impulses in his thought) have become people who want to align the transformation of society with state politics.

Well, that's not all of us Evangelicals. I'm an Evangelical who sees the main impetuses of Evangelicalism as being a respect for the authority and the history of Scripture, the centrality of the cross, and the Person and the work of Jesus Christ and the supremacy of that work. We also have an evangelical activism about us that, at certain social times in our history, has been mainly, "Let's get the gospel out to as many people as we can." I think those impulses are helpful for the Anabaptist world to listen to and hear from, but also we Evangelicals need to reframe those strengths with the humility and the insights of true Anabaptist thought.

I think that the conversation between the Evangelicals and Anabaptists is immensely important. Every time I go speak with Mennonite and Ana-

baptist groups or I'm invited onto their campuses to talk, I learn something that reshapes how I think about the practice of church and the practice of evangelism. Likewise, I think that I've been able to be an encouragement to Anabaptist groups in the way I say, "Hey, you already have within your traditions many of the worked-out historical solutions — or at least directions to go — to deal with the cultural dilemmas all of us Christians are facing in the new post-Christendom West, in North America and Europe."

I'll give you one more example. Some parts of the Mennonite world have been active in peacemaking and that trail blazed for all of us how to work for peace and not just talk about peace, not just talk about a kind of withdrawal pacifism. No, let's be out there being witnesses to, cooperating with, and working for the peace of Christ.

Evangelicals can learn from Mennonites and Anabaptists, and Anabaptists can learn from us. We can learn from John Howard Yoder (RYFC), and we can learn that to say "Jesus is Lord" is to also say "we are not." And therefore we can enter in with humility, vulnerability, and mutual submission, and submit to what God's doing in the conflicts with other religions, the conflicts between tribes, and the conflicts between nation states. We can bring peace, and we don't have to deny the supremacy of Christ. I think that's where Evangelicals and Mennonites and Anabaptists can learn from each other.

I hope that's helpful. I'm talking with a lot of nuances.

CA: Having lived and worshiped in Mennonite Brethren churches, I appreciate your observations on the tensions between Evangelicalism and Anabaptism and ways we can learn from each other. You've mentioned the nonviolence or peacemaking aspect of Anabaptism. How does peacemaking impact your life and the way that you live?

DF: It takes all the coercion and the anxiety out of evangelism. We Evangelicals believe in evangelism, but often we've been unaware of the power posture that we take in the world. For a long while we were in charge, or at least we thought we were — and some of us still think we are. We're not, but some people still think we are.

So, what Anabaptism helps us understand is that we are no longer in charge. God is in charge, and God is at work. Evangelism becomes a posture of being present *with* the least of these, the hurting, all people and being patient. We just let God do what he is going to do through our witness so that when someone comes up to us and says, "What is this thing that makes you tick?" we're always there ready to give an account, as 1 Peter says, of the hope that is within us.

It takes the coercion out. When we engage our culture, we no longer engage it out of a posture of power — we know what’s best for you, we know what you need to do with your schools, we know what you need to do with your hospitals, we know what you need to do with this, this, and this problem. No, it enters a place quietly *in submission* as servants and quietly discerns what’s going on with God in our midst and around us. And one by one, we give witness to what God is doing in evangelistic efforts and in social justice efforts, just by being present and patient.

Those are themes — humility, incarnation, nonviolence — that Anabaptists can teach us a lot about how to inhabit as a way of life. We now become convinced that God does not work in the world through violence, through coercion. That’s not the way he works. There will be no salvation, there will be no redemption, there will be no renewing of all things through those things. There might be preservation of some things, but there will not be renewal or redemption of all things through any of that.

So that’s how we live our lives and that informs so much of life on the ground in mission. It changes, I would argue, the whole ballgame.

CA: You’ve talked about how Anabaptism is speaking into and helping us understand the increasingly post-Christian cultural context that we’re living in, especially the valuable insights Anabaptists bring to the conversation because of their experience of being on the margins. Missio Alliance is sponsoring a conference this September to explore the way Anabaptist thought and theology is a growing resource for shaping missional approach and witness in this cultural context and provides some answers to a growing weariness of polarities in evangelicalism. I would argue that there is a growing weariness with polarities even within the historical Anabaptist churches as well. Can you talk about this some more?

DF: I agree with you that, in my small interactions within Anabaptist traditions, their schools and churches, there is a wearisomeness with the internal battles and polarities just like there is in Evangelicalism.

Let me give you an insight into what’s going on in the life and thought of the Neo-Anabaptist movement. We’re seeing two extreme reactions — and this is even true in missional thought. First is a defensive reaction. “The Bible says this” or “You need to get in line” are responses of a withdrawal from or failure to communicate across lines in the culture. On the other hand, there’s accommodation — “We agree with you,” “We want to support you with whatever you’re doing,” and “God is at work in everything you’re doing, let us affirm you, come alongside of you” are common phrases we hear. In both cases we lose mission because either we withdraw and get defensive and antagonistic against

culture, or we totally inhabit and bring nothing to culture.

Anabaptism refuses those frameworks. It almost overcomes and throws them upside-down. Let me fill in what I mean by upside-down. We don't even see that by inhabiting a community of the kingdom we're not making judgments against or for the culture. We are now *in* and *with* the culture, discerning what God's doing. And we are no longer in control. Both the accommodative and the defensive positions want to maintain control and stay in power. When you give up power, you lose a lot of the problems.

So, Anabaptist thought and vision is speaking into the cultural challenges that we're facing in ways that these two traditions — Evangelicalism and Protestant mainline thought as well as, I think, the Anabaptists themselves — need to come to grips with and find refreshing. And I think that's where a lot of the attention and enthusiasm is coming from and why this conference is even going to take place. There's just a lot of interest. People are asking, "Please help us find a way out of this antagonistic mess we're in. It sure looks like you're saying some fresh things that seem to make a lot of sense." So, there are resources here for evangelicals.

CA: You also speak about this weariness and discontent a growing number of us in North America are experiencing with theological and political labels and polarities in Prodigal Christianity, a book you wrote with Geoff Holsclaw, with whom you pastored Life on the Vine for ten years. Tell us a little about the book and why you and Geoff wrote it.

DF: The book's about how to reframe being church in the world, locally engaged, incarnationally — and what are the theological frameworks for that, and how do we think about gospel, Scripture, and church as a result of those frameworks.

For me, the most engaging part of the book is how this changes the way we frame the cultural challenges of our day. In the book, we address three of them: the world of injustice and political powers, the world of alternative sexualities, and the world of pluralist religions. How do we live our lives as witness to the kingdom of God in the midst of these three things? Those three areas are dividing our churches or, at least, they are dividing our evangelical churches. I think they might be dividing a lot of Anabaptist driven churches as well.

I wanted to show how, by making a space for the practice of the kingdom, these things get worked out in transformative ways — largely via noncoercive, nonviolent practices. Out of mutual submission to the lordship of Christ, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the basic core practices of being the people of God, and his presence in the world, God starts to work and God transforms. It's a whole

new way of engaging our world as the church.

Now when I say a whole new way, I'm an Anabaptist; I don't think it's new at all. I think it was the way things were for a couple hundred years before the Constantinian synthesis happened. We've been trying to rid ourselves of some of those bad habits for a long time. So, it's just reconstituting some of the ways of being the church — you might say John Howard Yoder's body practices (RYFC) translated and put into practical use for a missional local congregation.

CA: You've mentioned several times this theme of noncoercive and nonviolent practices in place of power and control. As I was reading your book, I was attracted to the model you present and yet at the same time I was thinking this is a scary way to go because you are giving up control and power.

DF: It's a never ending battle. We want to take control. We work for justice — but for *your* justice and *your* views of justice. You want control. But it's not about you, and it's not about *your* justice. God's at work bringing *his* justice in through Jesus Christ. Can you cooperate?

The minute you overstep the boundaries of violence, coercion, hierarchy, patriarchy — all the things that humans use to control — God's power and his ability to work in a situation is removed. *He* removes it; he will not cooperate with the violence of the world. That's a little oversimplified, but I think you get what I'm saying. God can use violence in ulterior ways but, ultimately, that's not his direct way of overcoming evil in the world.

CA: Do you see this concept of power and the way God prefers a nonviolent way of working as distinctly Anabaptist?

DF: I'm almost prepared to say an unqualified yes. That's the insight of Anabaptists. The insight is implicit, if not explicit, throughout the Anabaptist processes. Even Münster, when they made the huge mistakes, out of that we learn violence is a mistake. So, it's implicit everywhere in the Anabaptist movement, but it becomes most prominent and best systemized through the 1960s, 70s, and 80s and the work of John Howard Yoder (RYFC).

CA: A criticism of Anabaptists in North America is that some areas of leadership are made up largely of middle class white men, and the lack of people of color and women's voices is a sad fact when it comes to some theological and church conversations. How can an Anabaptist identity shape our response to this problem? What can we do to bring these voices to the conversation?

DF: First of all, I believe Anabaptism and Neo-Anabaptism have the best singular response to power and hierarchy. If women are not full participants in the ministry of the church, it's a denial of who we are as Anabaptists.

If there's anyone who should be able to overcome patriarchy, it should be Anabaptists; therefore we are not being true to ourselves if we have not extolled women in the ministry. It's in our theology. I can't speak for Anabaptist history — I don't understand it all — but I know that Evangelicalism got co-opted by power and certain logics having to do with Scripture. That's where we lost it. I don't know how Anabaptists lost it, but we must recover it. And we are recovering it, big time.

Let me add this: anytime women have been in ministry with the charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit in full authority with men, the church has exploded. Anytime women have been out of authority due to patriarchy or hierarchy, the church has turned into a maintenance organization. We have to understand that, and we need to understand that Anabaptist thought is one of the best contributors for women empowered for full authority there is in the Christian history.

On the racial diversity issue, Anabaptism comes from Europe; it's historically white. Sometimes it takes white men speaking to white men, or white people speaking to white people, to call them into who they are. Sometimes, that's the way it's going to look. We've got to tell ourselves what's wrong with us ourselves, and it's already there in our history to do that. We need to call ourselves to righteousness.

In the same way, there is a logic in Anabaptist thought that is so powerful and so central to racial reconciliation, and therefore we should be at the forefront of this.

Both Evangelicals and Protestant mainline churches are on course with diversity, racial reconciliation and a reflection of the church as Jew–Gentile, as one. But the problem is that we subsume our efforts to implementations of power relationships which have more to do with enforcement as opposed to the practice — the very core practice of reconciliation and presence one with another.

I hope you got what I'm trying to say there. What happens is we either do something mechanically where we have the token African American in a conference — which no one, including the African American, buys — or we try to manufacture diversity through various means. I am, by the way, an admirer of affirmative action, and I think quotas sometimes have to take place. I support laws and civil rights. But these efforts are basically going to be preservative. They're going to preserve and order something which is still mechanical.

It's not until we actually become *present* with one another, live alongside one another, get to know one another, hear our stories — not so that cultures are obliterated but where all differences are respected yet all are mutually sub-

mitted to — that a new thing is birthed that no one can manufacture. It's a work of God.

For that to happen, it has to be grass roots, on the ground — and there's nobody better prepared to do that or who understands those dynamics better than, in my opinion, the Anabaptists. Granted, we have failed at this in many ways, but it's there and it's ready to go.

Read James Cone's book, *Martin & Malcolm & America*. Martin Luther King tried to integrate Blacks with the white dominant culture and, in his later opinion, the Black person in America got subsumed into power relationships with white people. It didn't work. Likewise, Malcolm X said the Black race has to have an integrity unto its own self; he said until we have integrity ourselves we cannot relate to anybody else. And he was right on that. But he believed the only way to do that was violence; he was wrong on that one. One place where the best of Martin Luther King and the best of Malcolm X's theologies come together is in Anabaptist thought.

CA: What do you mean that the best of both come together in true Anabaptist thought?

DF: According to James Cone, the early Martin Luther King understood non-violence, but he subsumed the Black concerns into white ones. He integrated Blacks into existing white society not understanding that white society was polluted with corrupt power relationships. This was Malcolm X's critique of MLK. On the other hand, Malcolm X understood the need for an inherent identity or else the Black American would get obliterated by the white dominant culture, but he didn't understand nonviolence like Martin Luther King.

Anabaptist thought, in my opinion, brings the nonviolence of Martin Luther King and the integrity of each culture of Malcolm X, including the African American, together in one mutual submission space with all races, and God creates a new thing. The practices of mutual submission, nonviolence, communal hermeneutics, local engaged practices of Eucharist, reconciliation of being with one another — those are the places where that can happen. And the Anabaptists should be at the forefront of that. We have to be the ones at the forefront of God working a new diverse people of one Lord and one baptism. To me the Christian Community Development Association movement as led by John Perkins is a place we Anabaptist types can go to learn what our own theology looks like on the ground in terms of bringing racial reconciliation and renewal to our neighborhoods.

CA: We've talked a lot about our North American experiences. Have you had conversations with those outside North America about the challenges we are facing here

regarding post-Christian culture? Who are the voices that we need to be listening to outside of North America that can help us as navigate this new terrain for us?

DF: I grew up in Canada, and I'm well familiar with the cultural issues in churches there. And I've spent some significant time in France working with international workers. My evangelical circles are just awakening to what Anabaptist theology is. Yet each time I talk or present, bells go off, light bulbs turn on, and a whole new way of understanding mission is enabled by the categories of Anabaptist theology, practice, and church.

Emmanuel Katongole wrote a book called *The Sacrifice of Africa*. I can't really say it's Anabaptist but, my goodness, if anything unwinds the colonialist problems that remain in Africa after the colonialist regimes have left and discusses overcoming the recycling of colonialist power structures in developing world countries like those in Africa, that's the book. As an African and a Roman Catholic priest, he gets the issues of power and working for peace. His book would be at the top of my list of voices and places where people are working on the ground for the peaceful formation of communities of mission and peace to overcome violence.

CA: One last question. For all of the talk about the shift in global Christianity from North to South, significant power — particularly economic — differentials remain, leaving the impression among many that this new global reality is simply an old case of "separate but equal." Given that, what actually connects or fosters relationships between North and South that reflects the biblical image of the body of Christ? What does Anabaptist thought have to teach us about this?

DF: For years the United States has looked at the Global South in terms of the "haves" and the "have nots." We, the USA, are the "haves" and they are the "have nots." We have viewed these inequities in terms of Gross Domestic Product and other economic measurements based in capitalism. The Christian response was to push for aid in one direction, from those who have much to those who have much, much less. In all of this, we overlooked how our "help" in terms of money and resources exacerbated the power relationships that had caused the poverty and abuse in the first place. Many of those corrupt power regimes we must go through to distribute mass amounts of aid are the legacy of colonialist exploitation of the past from the West. We must break down how we indeed participate in these power relationships when we fund aid through them.

Neo-Anabaptist thought helps us see there is a lot more to the reordering of economic relationships than money. Capitalism is not the world's answer. It helps us see how we must in essence divest of power if we are to enter a place

as a participant in renewal. If we seek to engage the world with our wealth, we must enter into space and time relationships where we are receivers as much as we are givers. Where we learn as much as we receive. Where our money becomes part of a reciprocity. Where we are purged of our own ills as much as we help and relieve those we inhabit the world with on the other side of the globe. This kind of mission is made uniquely possible by Neo-Anabaptist thought because it gives us a critique of capitalism, wealth, and American consumerism that enables us to be stripped of the illusion that our economic system is somehow good and will solve the world's problems.

CA: Is there anything you'd like to add that we haven't talked about or that came up as we were talking?

DF: It's time for Evangelicals to listen to Anabaptists. And if Anabaptists can give us grace for all our mistakes over the past hundred years, I think it would help Anabaptists to listen to us Evangelicals. But we need to come together in humility. Sometimes Evangelicals are not practiced in that, so Anabaptists probably need to give Evangelicals a little grace and patience. Having said that, I think it's a really important discussion to have.