
Anabaptist Hermeneutical Formation and Witness in Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia

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For centuries, the central hallmark of Anabaptist conviction has been a shared identity as successor of the Apostolic church—a church that refused infant baptism, mystical change of the Lord’s Supper, and military service. To this list, Frits Kuiper adds biblicism and congregational hermeneutics of Anabaptist interpretation of Scripture.¹ As a congregation in which the Master and disciples unite through adult baptism, the Anabaptist church viewed unconscious baptism as tantamount to blasphemy.² In this context, the church as the true ekklesia separated from the state, choosing to belong instead to the Kingdom of God that both is and is to come.³

Stuart Murray further summarizes Anabaptist hermeneutical convictions into the following six main principles: Scripture as self-interpreting, Christocentrism, the complementarity of two testaments, the consistency of the Spirit and the Word, congregational hermeneutics, and the hermeneutics of obedi-

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1 Frits Kuiper, “The Pre-Eminence of the Bible in Mennonite History,” in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, Occasional Papers, no. 1, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 117–28.

2 Kuiper, “The Pre-Eminence of the Bible,” 118.

3 Kuiper, “The Pre-Eminence of the Bible,” 120.

ence.⁴ John D. Roth recommends that Anabaptists also enhance their convictions about discipleship, worship and praise, and loving to live between times.⁵ Modern and postmodern Anabaptist interpretations, drawing from feminist and liberation theologies, add that Anabaptist formation should include politically disadvantaged community groups not addressed by creeds of early Anabaptists.⁶ And fundamentalist theologians, on the other hand, in contrast to the early Anabaptists, bring a quest for justification of war and slavery.⁷

Although Anabaptism's formation practices have clearly diversified through the ages, its founding theologies and traditions continue to influence followers of the Reformers and other Christian groups, the largest of which is the Ethiopian Mennonite church, Meserete Kristos Church (MKC). This article explores how some key convictions of biblical interpretation by past and present Anabaptists have influenced the formation and witness of MKC.

Anabaptism through the Ages

This section summarizes early, modern, and postmodern Anabaptist interpretive approaches and how those approaches have given shape to the formation and witness of MKC as evidenced in MKC's core interpretive convictions.

Early Anabaptism

Anabaptism was born out of a Bible study circle in the Zurich reformation led by Ulrich Zwingli in the sixteenth century.⁸ It was then instituted by radicals whose conviction about adult baptism rippled out far beyond Zwingli.⁹ Although the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement was composed of a group of laymen, all members were considered ministers (priests and prophets).¹⁰ Discon-

⁴ Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, Studies in the Believers Church Tradition, no. 2 (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2000), 31.

⁵ John D. Roth, *Living Between the Times: "The Anabaptist Vision and Mennonite Reality" Revisited*, accessed April 6, 2022, <https://www.goshen.edu/mhl/Refocusing/JOHNROTH.HTM>.

⁶ Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1983), 22.

⁷ Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women*, 22.

⁸ William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1963), 10. The fathers of Swiss Anabaptism, such as Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, and Simon Stumpf, were drawn into Zwingli's Greek class but eventually deviated from his teachings after serious disagreement regarding infant baptism; mass and images of the church; and separation of state and church.

⁹ Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 10.

¹⁰ Kuiper, "Pre-eminence of the Bible," 128.

tent over the practices of the Catholic Church and Reformers, whose hierarchal ecclesiastical interpretation of the Bible facilitated rampant individual celebrity among church ministers,¹¹ Anabaptists encouraged ordinary individuals in the congregation to interpret Scripture. This move to interpretation by the common person has also been attributed to the fact that ordinary persons could not access the corpus of Scripture.¹² Anabaptists also rejected the Reformers' doctrinal commitments and fixed convictions, which had been sought from political authorities and the state church.¹³ Accordingly, the borders of formation in Anabaptist hermeneutics through the ages have often been drawn by Protestant churches.

Early Anabaptists believed that Scripture was best understood in a congregation.¹⁴ A typical example of interpretation is portrayed in this statement by Swiss Anabaptists: "When brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it; the others should be still and listen."¹⁵ On the more extreme end of this sentiment, some Anabaptist writers preferred that the leader oversee a smooth communal hermeneutic process as a facilitator only, not also as a participant.¹⁶ Biblicism that presupposes the singular authority of Scripture as a transparent, luminous, and simple revelation of the will of God seemed clear to them. They believed that the Bible is sufficient in and of itself to be understood.¹⁷

Early Anabaptists also linked their biblical interpretation with discipleship and obedience. Ethical obedience to Scripture influenced how they interpreted the Bible; they trusted that personal obedience to the standard of Christ's lifestyle would guard against subjectivity of application. Critics of this understanding pointed out that, conversely, there is no correlation between interpretation and obedience.¹⁸ While Reformers gave precedence to theology over obedience,¹⁹ Anabaptists contended that obedience leads to suffering,

11 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 157.

12 Walter Klaassen, "Anabaptist Hermeneutics: Presuppositions, Principles and Practice" in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, Occasional Papers, no. 1, ed. Willard Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 10.

13 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 159.

14 Klassen, "Anabaptist Hermeneutics," 9.

15 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 161.

16 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 163, 164.

17 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 38.

18 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 189.

19 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 188.

which maximizes the potential to explore the life of Christ in the Scripture and to live like him.²⁰ For Anabaptists, preaching the gospel or doing mission was also central to obedience, whereas Reformers' focus on church institutions and territory lacked integrity with a pastoral approach.²¹ The more that early Anabaptists approached Scripture diligently with faith, the more they believed they would better understand the Scripture through the Holy Spirit, the highest interpreter to illuminate the Word.²² Without this proper understanding of Scripture, activism and superficial application of textual interpretation, in their view, would be harmful.

Modern and Postmodern Anabaptism

Modern and postmodern Anabaptists have developed newer traditions that supplant early Anabaptist scriptural interpretation formulations, including the use of historical criticism, liberation theology, feminist theology, and theology of war and slavery.²³ The historical critical method preserves the integrity and authority of the Bible by providing a remedy for the apparent contradiction of the texts and avoiding interpreter bias, based on the conviction that what God communicates is errorless and consistent throughout times and contexts. Consider, for instance, the following texts dealing with slavery and war that seem inconsistent across the Bible:²⁴ slavery under Moses (Lev 19:18, 25:44–46) and slavery in Paul's time (1 Tim 6:1–6) both seem to contradict Jesus's teaching to "love your neighbor as yourself."²⁵ These apparent contradictions, which have led to debate against and for slavery and war by many Western theologians, are abridged and resolved by the historical critical method, which enables the interpreter to "submit his/her own prejudices, tradition, and pre-established beliefs to a fresh encounter with Scripture as divine Word."²⁶ Utilizing but moving beyond the historical critical method, Willard Swartley calls for a holistic approach to Scripture that explores three interacting worlds of biblical

20 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 197.

21 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 201.

22 Murray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 187.

23 These more recent ways of approaching the biblical text are not evenly accepted by MKC local congregations.

24 Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, Women*, 117, 143.

25 Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, Women*, 48.

26 Willard M Swartley, "Beyond the Historical-Critical Method," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, Occasional Papers, no. 1, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 246.

interpretation: the world behind the text, the world within the text, and the world in front of the text.²⁷

Some Anabaptists go even further. While John Howard Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* sought to reaffirm most of the convictions of early Anabaptists,²⁸ his critics offered *Liberating the Politics of Jesus*,²⁹ which argues for the inclusion of politically marginalized groups into Anabaptism. As Western political philosophy centered and propagated democracy, rule of law, and human rights after 1945 (WWII), simultaneously liberation and feminist theologies ushered in these politics based on the conviction that interpretation of the Scripture should adopt social change. While there are constructive feminist approaches, Lydia Harder notes that there are also negative approaches that are suspicious of any form of interpretation of experiences from persons outside the feminist communities.³⁰

Some Anabaptist interpreters view Christological convictions as coopted by a culture of racism, violence, and dehumanization.³¹ Accordingly, the proponents of liberation theology argue that the heart of the gospel proclamation of salvation includes liberation of politically oppressed people.³² Some call for Anabaptist-Mennonites to also include a cultural model of disability.³³ While this perspective is crucial, it is important to recognize that some liberationist views focus so intently on the oppressive function of the biblical texts that they fail to see the possibility that these texts could have more than one legitimate interpretation.³⁴

27 Willard M. Swartley, "Peace and Violence in the New Testament," in eds. Laura L. Brenneman and Brad D. Schantz, *Struggles for Shalom: Peace and Violence Across the Testaments*, Studies in Peace and Scripture, vol. 12 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 152.

28 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994), 87.

29 Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Daryl W. Stephens, *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology through the Wisdom of Women* (New York, T & T Clark, 2020).

30 Lydia Neufeld Harder, "Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark: A Mennonite-Feminist Exploration of Biblical Authority," *Studies in Women and Religion*, vol. 5 (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), 95.

31 Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens, *Liberating the Politics of Jesus: Renewing Peace Theology through the Wisdom of Women*. (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 18.

32 Albrecht and Stephens, *Liberating the Politics of Jesus*, 60.

33 Melanie A. Howard, "Jesus' Healing Ministry in New Perspective: Towards a Cultural Model of Disability in Anabaptist-Mennonite Hermeneutics," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 38, no. 2 (2020), accessed April 7, 2022, <https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/spring-2020/jesus-healing-ministry-new-perspective-towards-cultural>.

34 Harder, *Obedience, Suspicion, and the Gospel of Mark*, 94.

Anabaptist Formation and Witness in Meserete Kristos Church (MKC)

Echoes of Anabaptism's early core convictions and their formational and scriptural interpretative traditions can be heard in various regions of the world. One of those places is Ethiopia, where people found a resonance with Anabaptist formational practices that they had not experienced with other religions of the country in the 1940s and 1950s. This resulted in the birth of Meserete Kristos Church (MKC). In the years since, MKC has adopted from modern and postmodern Anabaptists the following six formational practices: (1) congregational hermeneutics, (2) Christocentrism, (3) nonviolent resistance, (4) separation of church and state, (5) women's inclusion in ministry, and (6) historical critical methods of biblical interpretation. But first, a brief history of MKC's beginnings.

The Birth of MKC

The mission and witness of the Kingdom of God using the distinctive theology of the Anabaptist tradition started in Nazareth (Adama) in 1946 in response to the aftermath of WWII by the Mennonite Relief Committee (MRC) from Elkhart, Indiana.³⁵ In 1948 the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities (EMBMC) took over the work and established the Mennonite Mission in Ethiopia. Daniel and Blanche Sensenig were the first mission director couple. As a result of an agreement with Emperor Haile Selassie, the Mennonites could evangelize among the Muslims and pagans but not the Orthodox, because Nazareth was an "Orthodox area."³⁶ This effectively meant that the missionaries were not allowed to preach outside their compound, since the Emperor's closed policy encompassed the northern and central part of the country.³⁷

In Nazareth, Mennonites transformed the Italian cotton-ginning mill into the Haile Mariam Mamo Hospital (now Adama Referral Hospital), where they started the Dresser Bible School for nurse aides. There they taught Bible along with medical subjects to Orthodox young people.³⁸ As a result, on June 16, 1951, a secret baptism was arranged in Addis Ababa at a missionary home in Gulele. On this memorable Saturday, ten people were baptized and Meserete Kristos Church was born.³⁹

35 Tilahun Beyene, *I Will Build My Church* (Addis Ababa: Mega Printing Enterprises, 2002), 28. Translation of the Amharic texts of the Book to English is mine.

36 Beyene, *I Will Build My Church*, 28.

37 Beyene, *I Will Build My Church*, 34.

38 Beyene, *I Will Build My Church*, 34.

39 Beyene, *I Will Build My Church*, 69.

In many ways, the birth of MKC resembles the birth of Anabaptism itself: The numbers of people and the secret scene of its beginnings—hidden away from infant baptizers and the state—were the same.⁴⁰ And the name of the church—Meserete Kristos/foundation of Christ—was inspired by 1 Corinthians 3:11, which was the banner Scripture of early Anabaptist Mennonites and the foundation for the arguments of their leader, Menno Simons.

Naming the new church proved to be a challenging task for both the foreign missionaries and the Ethiopian leaders because each group was competing to have their own interests represented in the name. Many options were placed on the table:⁴¹ the missionaries expressed their firm desire to include the name “Anabaptist” or “Mennonite” or both, while the Ethiopians resisted abandoning their tutor (Anabaptist Mennonite) and came up with the name “Meserete Kristos.” Six alternative names were presented for discussion: Meserete Kristos Association, Meserete Kristos (Mennonite) Association, Meserete Kristos Mennonite Association, Meserete Kristos Church, Meserete Kristos (Mennonite) Church, and Meserete Kristos Mennonite Church. After a long debate over these options, on August 16, 1956, the group finally came to consensus on the name “Meserete Kristos Church.”

By 2020, almost seventy years after the first baptism, MKC had grown to more than 1,140 local congregations with more than 650,000 members. While the congregations have engaged in various faith practices, the core convictions of Anabaptism are protected in bylaws, teachings, leadership styles, and training by the MKC seminaries.

Six Formational Anabaptist Practices in MKC

1. Congregational Hermeneutics and Bible Study

Like the early Anabaptists, who resisted contemporary challenges from Catholics and Reformers, MKC responded to Ethiopia’s prosecution of communism by holding underground Bible studies and then living out their congregational interpretation of Anabaptism.⁴² By the very nature of the Bible study circle, the members and leaders were not identified by name but instead were all known as “brothers” and “sisters,” thereby protecting them from

⁴⁰ The missionaries were forced to work in secret in Eastern Ethiopia in Harar province at Deder and Bedeno.

⁴¹ Beyene, *I Will Build My Church*, 81.

⁴² Kelbessa Muleta Demena and Mary H. Schertz, “The Text Has Something to Tell Us! Bible Teaching in the Meserete Kristos Church, Ethiopia,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 78–86.

insurgents knowing and using their names for prosecution.⁴³ In addition, the location of the Bible study would sometimes change from week to week for the same purpose. This ended up actually aiding evangelism and mission as the number of believers increased at a very fast rate.

In general, Bible study in MKC today remains as it was in the days of the early Anabaptists—an assembly of lay persons who participate in interpreting the text according to their own understandings. And the leader’s role is limited to facilitating all the members’ engagement in the study. The meetings serve as a forum that creates a social bond among members and also identifies people who need help. In spite of the nonparticipation of many members of the church, Bible study remains the central formational practice of MKC in Ethiopia.⁴⁴

2. Christocentrism

The early Anabaptists were very intentional about training new believers. That training included teaching the faith statements of Hubmaier’s Catechism of 1526 and the Schleithem Confession of 1527. These statements are now replicated in the “Shared Convictions of Global Anabaptists of 2006.”⁴⁵

Christocentrism is another hallmark early-Anabaptist practice embraced by MKC. It is reflected in the church’s faith statement book, the teaching books of disciples and sermons, and congregational decisions. One example of MKC’s adoption of Christocentrism is found in the church’s book for teaching disciples entitled *Following Christ*, which focuses on how believers can practice and imitate the teachings and the life of Christ. This material was recently revised and has been used by many evangelical and Baptist denominations in Ethiopia.⁴⁶

Another example of Christocentric practice can be seen in the discernment by MKC’s 2017 General Assembly that thirteen persons—who were so-called prophets, apostles, bishops, and pastors in Ethiopia and a diaspora abroad—should be classified as heretics, false prophets, and false teachers because their teachings and practices were identified as contrary to the supremacy of Christ. By virtue of this decision, these persons were not allowed to preach or teach in the pulpits of MKC, and MKC members could not participate in their congregation. Politically empowered persons who ridiculed the Assembly’s decision called for police arrest of the MKC president. A counter movement of

43 Demena and Shertz, “The Text Has Something to Tell Us!,” 78–86.

44 Demena and Shertz, “The Text Has Something to Tell Us!”

45 C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Scottdale, PA: Pandora, 2002), 83.

46 MKC is one of only a few church groups in Ethiopia that have their own teaching materials for disciples.

MKC members, however, managed to secure a prompt acquittal of the charges, and the arrest lasted no longer than three hours.

Stigmatization of the church went on for some time. Although the mainline Protestant churches followed the decision of MKC, it was not welcomed by all members of the church. For instance, I was internally challenged to read before the congregation the circular letter containing the decision issued by the head office of MKC, because two of the persons involved in the controversy had previously served in conference programs in my local church. Specifically, I had brought one of them from abroad who served in a teaching conference a year before the decision. Through my studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, I realized the decision had been influenced by Anabaptist Christocentric theology.

Moreover, the same Assembly of the church took a stand to not ordain its ministers as prophets and apostles. The Theological Commission of the Church proposed to the General Assembly that the titles “prophet” and “apostle” had been abused by people clinging to false practices and false teachings and that using such titles would be contrary to the church’s tradition of Christocentrism. As a result, the Assembly stated that since God’s grace is given to the church, the gift of the Holy Spirit should be free to work without ordination. This decision was not endorsed by many servants.

3. Nonviolent Resistance

MKC has teaching material dealing with “conflict resolution” for its leaders and servants, and the head of MKC is involved with social peace work in collaboration with the concerned branch of government. This work includes training on subjects of peace for selected non-believer university and high school students in different regions of the country. It also includes engaging in settlement of ethnic conflicts in the country.

Ethiopia is a conflict-ridden country, however, with war currently breaking out in the northern region, and most believers share the overriding sentiment of resisting or supporting war against the “other.” There is not much room for messages of nonviolent resistance in the pulpits of Protestant churches in general and MKC in particular. Purposeful preaching and teaching of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, specifically Matthew 5:38, is getting old, and believers are largely being left to manage their own personal responses to war.

4. Church and State

In relation to the state, MKC teaches its members that they are not to participate in politics but are allowed to engage in peace and development activities of the community. Particularly, leaders of the church should not be members of political parties, in order to stay true to the conviction that the interests of

the two kingdoms—the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world—contradict each other.

This teaching creates a problem, however, in the rural churches, where every public servant is expected to be a member of the ruling party. If these churches were to follow this guideline, they would have no believers who could serve as leaders. Thus, for rural areas MKC has developed an exception that allows members of a political party to assume leadership roles in the church.

An additional complicating factor regarding MKC's relationship to the state is that the political landscape of Ethiopia is currently changing in many sectors. For instance, because the incumbent prime minister, along with many ministers and higher officials, are evangelical Protestant, MKC members and leaders have been influenced to support political involvement. By doing so, MKC is compromising its conviction that state and church should be separate.

5. Women as Leaders in the Church

The inclusion of women as ministers of the church is also a new spiritual phenomenon within MKC as a result of modern and postmodernism influences. Two decades ago women were barred from ministerial positions, but that practice has recently changed, and women pastors are now allowed to serve the church. Leading spiritual ceremonies like marriage, communion, funerals, and so on, however, is still not permitted for women; these remain as patriarchal services within MKC.

6. Historical Critical Biblical Interpretation

MKC applies a historical critical method of interpretation mostly in its theological seminaries and teaching sermons. The method helps to explore which historical events matter for the text—ascertaining the time period, the first audience, and other possible contexts in which the Scripture was developed. The MKC Bible study guide material uses an inductive system in which observations, interpretation, and implementation of the texts are incorporated. In sermons, teaching and preaching based on a historical critical method has become more accepted than other methods.

With the proliferation of charismatic movements in most places, however, allegorical interpretation and “spirit-led ministries” or psychology-led ministries are engulfing the MKC. Moreover, the introduction of the appointment of “Senior Pastor” in local churches—which brings with the title spiritual and administrative mandates in addition to committee leadership—has caused some deviation from congregational interpretation as a foundational practice of MKC members.

Embracing Anabaptist Hermeneutics and Practice for Effective Witness

Anabaptism offers noble formation practices that help the church live out a Christ-like life now and in preparation for the Kingdom to come. In today's world of spiritual fluidity where celebrity of preachers with their heretical traditions is common, MKC has chosen instead to embrace the early Anabaptist interpretative traditions: congregational hermeneutics with Scripture as self-interpreting; Christocentrism with the complementarity of two testaments and a hermeneutics of obedience; and nonviolent resistance. MKC has also responded positively to the separation of church and state; modern and postmodern Anabaptists' inclusion of women and colored persons; and historical criticism methods of interpretation.

Accordingly, these legacies of Anabaptism are highly reflected in the Meserete Kristos Church of Ethiopia and MKC seminaries. As MKC teaches its Anabaptist identity intentionally, it will prepare its members for the Kingdom of God now and in the future. I appeal to other Anabaptist Mennonite churches in the world to likewise form their members in Anabaptist hermeneutics and practices, thus preparing all for effective witness.