

If you say the words evangelical Anabaptism to some people here, you might see their eyes brighten, and you know they're turned on. This evening, however, I want to speak to the person who hears the words and says, 'oh, do we have to?' I'm imagining the person who sees those words Evangelical Anabaptism in a title, takes a deep breath and says, 'ok I can get through it and hopefully it will be over soon.' I'm imagining a person not exactly turned off, but certainly not turned on. Too many syllables in that phrase. They're not afraid of syllables, but they are afraid that a new life in Christ can be needlessly complicated by labels like Evangelical Anabaptist. I say Evangelical Anabaptism to this person, and it feels a little heavy and a lot unnecessary.

I'll try to speak for you, if you will let me. Evangelical to you sounds like a bunch of stuff from a previous generation. It is not the language of praise, worship or relationships. It has strong associations that you don't necessarily want to own. It's kind of stiff, and has too much to do with another dreadful phrase, doctrinal positions. Evangelical has a whiff of irrelevance. It doesn't sound fresh. I don't share all those feelings, but I think I understand how a person could get there. Evangelical when it becomes a Christian subculture can get weirdly out of touch with Jesus.

If Evangelical weren't bad enough, we've married it to another word scary word, Anabaptism. Once again, if you'll allow me, Anabaptism sounds like 450 years ago. You begin to see woodcuts from the Martyrs Mirror in your imagination--grisly torture scenes and so on. You're afraid I'm going to bring up Balthaser Hubmaier and Felix Manz and you can never keep those guys straight. Lest you think I'm being glib, let me say that had I not found the Swiss Brethren in books 26 years ago, I might not be standing here today. I'm one of the nerds I guess, but I understand that if those earlier Anabaptists taught us anything, it was that power of Christ is much more than a history lesson. They would have been the first to inform us that the gospel can't be passed along as part of an ethnic package. For it to be the gospel, it has to be choice that not only each generation has to make, but each individual within that generation must make.

Its an old Mennonite dilemma, does Anabaptism matter only at family reunions or at Church Sunday morning? I'll take the Sunday morning option. I hate to think what a Sairs family reunion might come up with religiously--it would not be faith in Jesus Christ.

Rosedale Bible College seeks to be a center for an engaged Evangelical Anabaptism, and I seek to be a part of RBC, not because I'm an academic egghead who would be better off living in another century. I want to be part of a center for engaged Evangelical Anabaptism, not because I'm toeing a line drawn 500, 100, or even 10 years ago. I do it on purpose as a modern person in a post-Christian, and post-modern world (I promise that's the last time I'll say post-modern). I come to Evangelical Anabaptism, because that is where my reading of the Bible has taken me, and I hope, of course, that the Holy Spirit has guided me. I'm going for it consciously, on purpose, and by choice. I find the idea of Evangelical Anabaptism not only useful, but powerful.

I pick up Evangelical Anabaptism looking back for reference-- I'm no the first to arrive here, but I have no intention of going through life as a follower of Jesus constantly looking over my shoulder to get directions from Menno Simons. If I were to do that and he could talk back to

me, I think he would tell me to quit messing around and look at the Bible instead. Much less am I trying to travel back in time to embrace a model of life in Christ that was worked out 500 or even 100 years ago. To look back for reference is fine, important really, but to uncritically imitate it might leave me merely quaint in the year 2006. If living in the past is what it means to be Evangelical or Anabaptist, I'm afraid I have to step out. As I have hinted, I do not come from a family or world of believers, and I cannot afford to encumber my Christian witness with anything unnecessary. Anytime I have, the results have not been good. I want to get to the point about Jesus without unnecessary complications.

As I see it, Evangelical Anabaptism is the most suitable expression of the Christian faith for the times I live in. The Lord has me here in our time, and I have to know how to live and witness in my time and place not in someone else's. I have to know what it means to be faithful now not then, to not be conformed to the world that I face, not the world someone else faced. I have to know how to speak about Jesus to the world I live in, just as Paul and Peter spoke to theirs, just as Menno and Marpeck and Grebel spoke to theirs.

There are other ideas about evangelical and Anabaptism on the market. What do I mean when I say them at RBC? Mind you, I wasn't asked to speak on behalf of all the faculty, but it looks to me like we're pretty close to one another in these matters. There are those in other places who might hotly contest our, if I may say our, version, but I can't worry about that. Tonight I'm not going to take the time to try to answer objections posed by other ways of using the same words. Tonight, I'm speaking to the "do we have to" person. I want to describe the power in these ideas.

When I say evangelical, first and foremost, I rejoice in the rebirth from heaven that I have experienced. Quickly then my attention shifts and I see friends, relatives and acquaintances who do not know Jesus Christ the way we do. When I say evangelical, I am speaking of the good news, of the need and possibility of a new life in Christ. When I say evangelical I'm taking hold of the idea of conversion, of being born again, of a direct and personal encounter with the God who made the world. Evangelical for me is a word that charges forward with banners flying, and on them are verses like John 3.3 when Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Or 2 Corinthians 5.17 when Paul says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." And Galatians 2.20 where Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

It is true enough that this approach can be made too simplistic or be robbed of almost all of its meaningful content. What better place than a Bible college, though, to try to make sure that doesn't happen? The idea of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ can be lost for many reasons--one is simple shallowness--not grasping the significance of what you are saying. It also can be lost by reducing it to a program for social change. It can be lost by assuming that it is automatically transfers parent to child in an ethnic community, and thus everyone is a believer, some just have it a little more together than others. It can be lost by not ever having been found, if you will. In other words, people raised in families and churches that blithely assume that

being there is the same thing as being saved.

Evangelical is not a word that appears in the Bible. It is a sometimes useful adjective of our making. We don't own the word, and you don't have to look far to find those who use it or have used it for other purposes. But it is still useful to us. Let's concentrate on content. Evangelical thinking insists on the need for a personal relationship with Jesus. Even that expression has to be defined further in order to be meaningful. Lots of people in our world don't know much about Jesus, and don't know quite how one has relationship with what they assume to be a "dead person." They don't know much about that so-called dead person what he said or did, or how any of it could be exactly personal.

The core belief of our Evangelical faith is that Jesus is alive, and we are to deal with him directly and personally. This is the starting place. There are things that need to be clarified, or at least said, in order to come out at a correct understanding of Jesus, and grasp what it means to be in a personal relationship with him. We can do that.

When the faculty at Rosedale Bible College gathered to define key evangelical positions, we agreed on a draft statement with six points. I'm not going to read it. We weren't trying to say everything, but to speak to those who wanted to know what we meant when we said "Evangelical Anabaptism." Among those things we felt necessary to say was that the Bible is without error in all it affirms. Being without error says something about the Bible (no mistakes), but nothing about us (full of errors), so we elaborated and said the Bible is our final authority for faith and practice. It is fashionable, even among Evangelicals, to be cynical about stating that the Bible is our final authority, but here we must remain unfashionable. We also stated that historic Christian orthodoxy is Biblical, and thus, being evangelical means being orthodox. There is no need for each generation of Christians to reformulate the most basic beliefs that all Christians share. We also affirmed the idea that being evangelical isn't something that happens only personally and internally, but that it naturally translates into being witnesses for Christ. We said that witness is both a proclamation and a presence. There are things we will do and things we will say, and neither side of that witness can be lost. We agreed that we needed to state the need for a healthy relationship with a congregation, and the need for a dynamic spiritual life as we become more like Jesus.

In short, there was nothing stuffy in our understanding of the word evangelical. So if that would be a fear of yours, relax. As we looked at Evangelical it was not a cold, dry doctrinal chart. It was all about a new life in Jesus Christ. Evangelical is one way of saying that we can understand and grasp God's power to save us and change us, and that we wish to share this.

We don't gin this power up out of human emotion. Here is where a Bible College and its classrooms can play an especially useful role. A flighty emotional approach to faith that glosses over the part supplied by the brain will not ultimately satisfy, and will probably lead people to dangerous ideas that they don't know how to exclude. A person who wants to just "feel it" or "experience it" and not think about it, is in grave danger. Once again, what better place than a Bible college to equip someone to have a faith that reflects what Jesus said "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." (Mark 12.30) We cannot leave any of those elements out and claim to be following

Jesus faithfully. We can't leave any of those elements out without experiencing serious loss!

The fact is that all of us practice our faith according to the way we have thought about it, and a Bible College that teaches Evangelical Anabaptism helps you think about it. There is no question of shutting off the brain—it's on whether you ask or not. The only question is whether we think about faith clearly or poorly.

Evangelical, at least as I've described it, goes down pretty easily for most of us, but what about this other word, Anabaptism? Isn't that the real unnecessary weight? Isn't it a hold-over? Isn't it more of the cultural expression of the CMC that people just naturally leave behind with all other sorts of ethnic quirks as they become less isolated? Won't using a label like that do little more than assure that our churches will be a little off-center? Won't grow? Aren't we giving a little wink and a nod and saying that by preserving Anabaptism, in dark heavy type, we will find a way to always maintain a little bit of legalism just for old time's sake? After all what would a Mennonite be, if weren't for a little bit of the "old legalistic charm?"

I say right away if Anabaptism is something extra, something optional, something separable from being consistently Evangelical, then I don't have a lot of time for it and we should give it the old heave-ho. But I don't see it as something extra to paste on to the gospel. I see Anabaptism as one understanding of evangelical faith and practice. If I didn't think it was the right one, I'd have to become an evangelical something else. Evangelical as a word raises many questions and someone will always have to ask what kind of evangelical? I say Anabaptist.

There is nothing arrogant about taking the name Anabaptist. Nothing here is intended to be exclusive, or isolate me from the larger church. It is simply the best I can do. I assume others do the best they can do, too. I might not like that fact that we don't agree on all points of practice with other evangelicals, but that is reality. I am willing to own Anabaptism, and I am willing to try to promote it as the most logical, natural and coherently developed expression of being Evangelical.

Let me tell you it doesn't mean. I don't think it means that people who call themselves Anabaptists are more righteous, try harder, work harder, are more consistent in the things almost all Christians agree on, or that Anabaptists are in some way special among God's people. I don't think the word comes to us problem-free—from Muenster to modern Mennonite theological liberalism or to just the fact that the standard was set pretty high early on and we don't live up to it very well, the term Anabaptist has its liabilities.

I do think that we understand the faith a certain way, and we can't help but do this. The way we think about faith will lead to differences. I don't think those differences are trivial or bad, and, as a matter of fact, some of that *difference* the world is more than ready for.

Let me elaborate on this sense of readiness. As I look around the evangelical world I see it getting fed up with the gospel being reduced. Those who are insightful point out that these reductions only offer the unbeliever more of what they are already up to their necks in, namely psychological prescriptions, healthy living, family advice and politics. These reductions are wearing out on believers, too. Even previous advocates are finding this gospel-reduced less than satisfactory.

There is a general fatigue among evangelicals over a gospel that isn't grounded

anywhere, and races from fad to fad, that plays to the worst rather than the best of our inclinations. I think there is a general weariness with evangelicalism that has little stated content, because of the fear of “turning someone off.” I sense this weariness among evangelicals. Unfortunately many of them in frustration turn their back on their own evangelical tradition and seek their answers in Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. It’s a growing trend. They’re tired of shallow, and I don’t blame them, but I’d like to get there first. RBC should get there first. I suspect these people who longing for more would be more than a little open to hearing about what Anabaptism can contribute to their understanding of their evangelical faith. Watch out, some of them might even join us.

When we look outside the faith, I sense a another kind of confusion with regard to evangelicalism, and here Anabaptism has a lot to offer. In particular I’m referring to the feisty, harsh and overly opinionated approach to issues that characterizes so many self-appointed evangelical media heros. How is someone who is declared a political enemy in the name of Christ, going to hear the good news from the person who they perceive to be attacking them? Some evangelicalism is very heavily influenced by this kind of political rhetoric. The call is strong, shrill and constant from some quarters, and it is in my opinion a mistake. I don’t think I’m off the mark when I say that when unbelievers are surveyed about what they think about Christians, they don’t think about our belief in the resurrection of Jesus and what it means to them, but rather they think of a series of political positions.

These are some of the reasons that I say evangelical Anabaptism is not only the approach that makes the most sense to me, but something I think the world is quite ready for.

When the faculty at RBC looked at the issues, and thought about what an Anabaptist understanding of these evangelical truths looked like, we saw several beliefs that we needed to mention. You will notice, that these points weren’t hair-splitting comments on Christian practice, they are, rather, beliefs in the purest sense—the sense of what you think about something. We can assume different people will practice them at least a little differently.

Among the things on our Anabaptist list, we wrote down our belief in the finality of the New Testament. Hebrews 8.6 says Jesus, “has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.” To say the New Testament gets the last word is not to demote the Old Testament, or to say that is less the word of God. It is to say that the New Testament gives instruction about our life under a new covenant. This doctrine is, as I see it, a core belief of Anabaptism— the one that caused Anabaptists to reject infant baptism, to reject participation in warfare, to try to hold the standard of love for one’s enemies and to insist on a kingdom apart from the world. It is this subordination of the Old Testament to the New Testament, that causes the picture of Anabaptist church life to place a higher priority on the community life of the church and to emphasize the priesthood of all believers rather than take church models and leadership models that are a hybrid of Old and New Testament scriptures.

(1 Peter 2.5) says of the church “you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” It is simply not the picture of corporate spiritual life that God gave the Jews.

Nonconformity is an idea that has created a lot of pain in Mennonite history, and it seems always to have allowed for legalism and authoritarianism to flourish, but it is a New Testament idea, and abuses of the past can't change this picture of the Church living a nonconformed life in broader society. In our RBC statement we wrote, "Following Christ requires conformity to both His teaching and His example, enabled by the transforming power of God's Spirit and evidenced by nonconformity to the values and influence of the world." There is no legalism there, it is firmly rooted in the idea that God is doing something to us, not that we're doing something special for God.

As we think about Anabaptism, we don't want to fall into the trap of taking everything that is good in all expressions of faith in Christ, planting a flag on it, and claiming it for Mennonite history. It would be a cute trick, if we could get away with it. The fact is that many believers have found the same ideas in scriptures. The idea of a free church, of a priesthood of believers, even of striving for nonviolence, have all been taken up by other groups. Likewise, though, there are some ideas that seem to recreate themselves in evangelical churches, like the attempt to dominate society by political or social force and Christianize it, or to begin to slowly wed the gospel to a given culture so that soon the line between Christian and other loyalties becomes pretty blurry. The history of Anabaptism is hardly spotless in this regard, but it is possible to look past its imperfections and get hold of what they were aiming at--a church and a Christian understanding based on the New Testament which describes the church as new brothers and sisters who were formerly either indifferent or even enemies.

I Peter 2, again, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; 10 who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy." Believers come together across all the lines that formerly divided them. When we live under the gospel we experience the end of belligerent nationalism, racism or even ethnic pride (even ethnic pride!). My ancestors had more than their share of that, how about yours?

Is any of this really new? I suppose the spirit of it is not new. I was not born when RBC was founded, and it would be close to 25 years after I was born that I might have heard distantly something about the place. I used to always think, "what a brave little place." As to whether what we've said about Evangelical Anabaptism is new, I think if we could overcome some cultural shifts and changes since the founding of RBC, we'd find that the drive to have a Bible college that didn't cheat the Bible part, and that taught from the perspective of evangelical Anabaptism has always been the goal. As the CMC accommodates itself to more change and many good changes in the name of reaching out and not carrying needless, sometimes even damaging cultural baggage, the need to restate this goal of evangelical Anabaptism becomes more pressing once again. I started out with the idea of addressing an imaginary person who doesn't find these ideas too exciting. Of course, I don't know if I've convinced such a person that there something more dynamic, more vibrant, a little more shall we say somewhat sloppily, of the Holy Spirit in Evangelical Anabaptism. Only that person can tell me. I want that person to know that evangelical Anabaptism is not a liability, but actually an asset when telling the

world about Jesus Christ, and when developing a consistent beliefs and Bible interpretation. I want that person to know that I expect the flow of people who have traditionally been outside this world to increasingly find their way here.

I have crossed two lines in my life. First I became a Christian, but then later I crossed another line and became an Anabaptist. The second line was simply the result of trying to figure out how to follow and how to understand my faith. I don't think I'm a fluke, just like I don't think Evangelical Anabaptism is an historical accident that happened to a bunch of Germans 500 years ago and then by a serious of quirky events somehow survived, and somehow you got saddled with it. I think it is a choice to be made deliberately-- on purpose. It is a good choice.

In conclusion, it is a good time to be an Evangelical Anabaptist. It is a good time to be an Evangelical Anabaptist at RBC. A faculty and administration are in place that can articulate the idea of Evangelical Anabaptism and discuss intelligently how this will affect other areas of Christian life and practice. My colleagues are ready to explain to Anabaptists how the word Evangelical must shape and complete their understanding of what Anabaptism means, and they're ready to teach other evangelicals how we see the Anabaptism as a consistent application of principles they already accept.