ROSEDALE, Ohio—The faculty and staff of Rosedale Bible College welcomed 70-100 members of the evangelical and Anabaptist communities to its campus November 15-17 to think and pray about building up a church that knows and follows Christ.

“Knowing Christ: Renewing an Evangelical Foundation” was the second in a series of three symposia sponsored by the Conservative Mennonite Conference college, whose vision is to be a center for the advancement of an engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith.

“Speakers were fair in their analysis of both the strengths and weaknesses of past and present American evangelicalism and Mennonite Anabaptism,” said Marion Bontrager, who teaches biblical studies, Anabaptist history and theology at Hesston College. “They identified the positive contributions of evangelicalism...but also how evangelical theological and political influences have undermined crucial Mennonite Anabaptist commitments to a holistic Jesus, gospel and discipleship.”

Shaped by our past
Nate Yoder, associate professor of church history at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, opened the symposium Thursday evening with an overview of the impact of revivalism on American Mennonites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

“The Mennonite awakening’s most direct impact upon Mennonite congregational life came through the introduction of revivalism,” he said. Traditionally, most Mennonites were baptized as adults and became members of the church about the time they were married.

Revivalism did not obliterate this pattern, said Yoder, but it did shift the focus to the individual’s personal experience rather than their relationship with the church. It also resulted in an increased emphasis on uniformity in the church’s expressions of nonconformity, which in the Mennonite context was an innovation.

Influenced by our contemporaries
David R. Swartz, who studies 20th century evangelicalism under George Marsden as a doctoral candidate at the University of Notre Dame, spoke on “True Evangelical Faith” Friday morning.

Swartz suggested that American evangelicalism is characterized sociologically by a uniquely American preoccupation with individualism, by the dilemmas of middle class affluence, and by attempts to align the work of the church with political agendas on both the right and the left.

He also highlighted “three theological distinctives of American evangelicalism that are contributing to contemporary Mennonites—and that, in fact, remind us of our evangelical Anabaptist forebears of the 16th century:” an emphasis on conversion, on evangelism, and on a “warm piety” that challenges the stoicism of traditional Mennonite religious practices.
The strategy for Anabaptists, said Swartz, should be one of humble “selective resistance,” seeing evangelicalism neither as an enemy to be feared nor as an alternative to be idolized, avoiding its dangers but embracing its contributions.

The new birth and New Testament priority

The next speaker, RBC faculty member Reuben Sairs, said that as evangelicals we have a profound responsibility to serve as witnesses for Jesus Christ. “As evangelical Anabaptists, this call to evangelism comes down both family trees, and we cannot permit it to be lost.”

Whatever else is part of the discussion, Sairs suggested, everything else must get in line behind the possibility of new life in Christ.

Sairs challenged evangelicals to examine the Anabaptist claim that the New Testament must take priority over the Old, a claim which leads to a renunciation of violence and a stronger sense of nonconformity to the world.

“Anabaptist evangelicalism would have avoided the disastrous identity of Jesus Christ with politics and culture in North America that has surely contributed to the failed evangelism of our time.”

And to Anabaptists, Sairs said let’s hold on to the new birth, “the call to Christ, a solid evangelical soteriology that invites sinners to salvation without mumbling.”

On Friday evening, Rich Nathan, senior pastor of the Vineyard Church of Columbus, Ohio, encouraged participants to keep a vision of the kingdom of God as the lighthouse by which they orient themselves. The kingdom is a place of healing, he said, and of peace, reconciliation, and care for creation. He shared how these themes have shaped his own journey, including his questions about the adequacy of just war tradition.

Nate Yoder concluded the symposium on Saturday morning with an exhortation to think seriously about how we live out the kingdom. He offered a critique of fundamentalist and evangelical influence and suggested steps that participants could take to “nurture discernment” personally and in community.

Jeremy Miller, pastor of the CMC church Mennonite Christian Assembly in Fredericksburg, Ohio, said that he found himself “becoming agitated at the seemingly bridgeless canyon between theory of what should be and the reality of what is. Having said that, the Symposium was well designed and much of this tension was addressed with Nute’s presentation on Saturday.”

David Greiser, the director of Hesston College’s pastoral ministries program, said that he was “impressed by the scholarship of the presenters and by their clarity in articulating both the promise and the perils in combining two traditions.”

He added, “Rosedale Bible College is a gift to broader Anabaptism in its desire to articulate a theology out of the two movements that have most deeply influenced the majority of American Mennonite churches.”

This article appeared in a slightly edited form in the December 3, 2007 issue of the Mennonite Weekly Review under the title “Melding two traditions.”
WHAT THEY SAID (IN A LITTLE MORE DETAIL!)

**Editor’s note:** Listen to the talks online at www.rosedale.edu (click on the Evangelical Anabaptist Symposium button on the home page).

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**Revivalism, aggresso-conservatism, and lost opportunities**

**Nate Yoder:** More about Nate Yoder’s opening presentation, which provided an overview of the impact of revivalism on American Mennonites in the late 19th and early 20th centuries:

Traditionally, most Mennonites were baptized as adults and became members of the church about the time they were married. While the commitment they made was before God, there were powerful communal overtones in this ceremony.

“Revivalism did not obliterate...this view,” explained Yoder, but it did shift the focus to the individual’s personal experience rather than their relationship with the church.

Revivalism in Mennonite circles emphasized counting the cost of a conversion and taking seriously the idea of discipleship. With revivalism came more specific expectations about how individual members would conform to the congregation’s corporate nonconformity to the world, particularly in matters of dress.

In contrast to Quakers, who abandoned plain dress during the time of revivals, Mennonites stressed “simplicity and uniformity of attire,” said Yoder. When we look back today, we need to understand that what looks like “old-time religion” to us was actually innovative in its context.

But over time, the changes introduced during the awakening tended to harden into traditions. “The idea was that any change was a loss of faithfulness,” said Yoder. The problem was that “inflexible buttressing” also blocked natural development within the church and produced unbearable pressure for piability and application.

“Mennonite fundamentalists would have served their cause better had they acknowledged their own innovation in establishing the aggresso-conservative ethos in the 1890s and the early 1900s.”

The children who grew up under them in the 1930s and 1940s assumed that legislation uniform dress had long been part of the Mennonite tradition. “Considering change heresy, they were denied the opportunity to apply to their own context the vitality which the awakening had been for their parents.”

In his Saturday morning talk, Nate asked what we should do with our heritage. There is something wonderful, he said, when a tradition nurtures you and tells you who you are. In thinking about how we live out the Kingdom, we need to be like the sons of Issachar, who knew their times and knew what Israel should do.

He challenged his listeners to take concrete steps toward nurturing discernment about who we are, what we believe, and how we live out those beliefs. These steps included reading and studying the Bible personally and in community, taking steps of obedience as beloved disciples, discerning partnership with Jesus in continuity with the saints who have gone before, reading Scripture again “for the first time,” recognizing prosperity and privilege, discerning our context, and consciously seeking the Spirit of God through all of this.

Nate’s talk led naturally into a later time of prayer and laying on of hands for participants in the symposium.

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**Setting up road signs for Kingdom living**

**David Swartz:** Here are my evangelical credentials: I grew up in a town just 20 minutes from here. I went to the public schools there where I was the only Mennonite in my graduating class. So I mostly hung out with pagans and evangelicals, which are not the same thing. I listened to the evangelical radio station WEEC that played James Dobson each morning, followed by the national anthem each day at noon. They occasionally played a Rosedale Chorale song, but it never quite fit juxtaposed to Bill Gaither and the Christian elevator music. Then I went to Wheaton College, considered until recently to be the heart of “evangelicaldom.”

But my parents also inculcated a sense of my conservative Mennonite heritage. During our morning devotionals before we left for school, we not only read classic evangelical devotional literature, but also the Martyr’s Mirror. Who needs Folger’s to start off the morning if you’ve been looking at a hair-raising woodcut of Anabaptist executions….

I had a wonderful childhood that left me with two heritages. In many ways, my life has since been spent trying to figure out whether I want to combine the two, or ditch one or both. That my childhood was a very good one makes me inclined for psychological reasons to want to combine the two. But I’ve also developed theological convictions for combining the two. That’s why, on a personal level, I was so excited several years ago when Rosedale launched its campaign for a more self-conscious, intentional evangelical Anabaptism….

[David examined evangelicalism historically, sociologically, and theologically, then concluded…]

So are these theological or ecclesiastical contributions of evangelicalism—belief in the necessity of conversion, activism, Biblicism, evangelism, and piety—more
distinctly evangelical than Anabaptist? After all, that is what I’m implying. My answer is that for whatever reason, some parts of 21st-century Anabaptism on the ground need to recover these elements—or at least claim them in a more explicit way.

In a normative, ahistorical sense, however, I would say that they most certainly are not. Anabaptism claimed—and claims—to be biblical. So does evangelicalism. That is why Ron Sider says so often that “Real Anabaptism is evangelical. Real evangelicalism is Anabaptist.” When both are authentically biblical, they ought to be the same. Except that each interprets Scripture in different ways—especially the New Testament—which is a talk in itself.

…It’s important not to overly trust the claims of evangelicalism, or of Anabaptism. For a whole host of sociological reasons, evangelicalism is typically not Anabaptist. It baptizes the military. Similarly, Anabaptism can stop being evangelical. Perry Bush tracks the evolution from nonresistance to pacifism, sometimes even to a pacifism that is no longer rooted in the gospel….

So…if what evangelicalism sometimes looks like is really more Anabaptist, if what Anabaptism looks like is really more evangelical, if the boundaries are so profoundly blurred, what’s the point? Why bother calling ourselves anything? Why discuss these issues at all?

…First, these blurred boundaries should prompt us to cultivate a spirit of humility. If things really are this messy, then we shouldn’t set up evangelical or Anabaptist idols or straw men. On one side, there are those who want to paint evangelicals as the true defenders of the faith and criticize Mennonites as apostates. Proclaiming ourselves as “Evangelical” Anabaptists seems to be a positive, straightforward statement of identity. But it can also be read as a negative [assessment of other Mennonite groups]….

On the other hand, there are those who want to paint evangelicalism as the dark side. Evangelicalism is not a dark evil horse entering our Mennonite village to sweep away our cute little Swiss-German, and now Hispanic, boys and girls. Nor is Anabaptism pristinely pure. We’re sociologically driven too. Wealth and politics have done a number on us too. We shouldn’t exaggerate differences.

Yet there are differences… American evangelicalism sometimes acts as a foreign body intruding on what I think are biblical Anabaptist distinctives. We need to be attentive to the faults of “lived” evangelicalism on the ground, not just their theology. There are a lot of ex-Anabaptist groups out there who have lost biblical ideals of nonconformity and nonresistance. I don’t want that to happen to us….

Even when evangelicalism hasn’t stolen these ideals, it has sometimes corrupted those ideals. As in the case of “happy dualists,” as Jon Showalter calls nonresistants who cheer for smart bombs as they slam into Baghdad (though the nonresistant wouldn’t drop them herself), who cheer the next execution of a killer, who lobby for lower taxes so you can build a bigger house. I don’t want to lose the “sad dualism” that prays for peace, that visits inmates in death row, that doesn’t care so much about high taxes because you’d just give the money away anyway. Let’s pray about this, let’s educate our children and members. Let’s resist some of the intrusions of evangelical sociology.

I’d like to end with a word for you students out there… I want you to remind yourself and your peers of the value of academic exercises like this. In Jeremiah 31 God commands the Israelites to construct road signs, or guideposts to help them on their journey back from exile. “Set up road signs; put up guideposts. Take note of the highway, the road that you take.

“This is what the Lord says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’”

The point is that kingdom work is best done in context, when we are aware of where we have come from and where we are headed. This symposium is a guidepost. And so it is good that we are gathered here to thoughtfully reflect on evangelical Anabaptism….

But we can’t end with talk. In true Anabaptist fashion, this symposium should not end with a statement of doctrine, but instead result in practice—a living out of Menno Simons’ declaration that “True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant.” …Don’t just be evangelical Anabaptists in a theoretical sense; don’t just think evangelical Anabaptist thoughts. We all need to go do evangelical Anabaptism.

Inviting sinners to salvation without mumbling

Reuben Sairs: We sense that we are doing something that is not merely academic, but is part of our obligation as church men and women—leaders, many of us. Our definition and vision must have academic integrity, but it must be pastoral, it must be alive. As evangelicals we see a world that is lost spiritually for whom we have the profound responsibility of serving as witnesses for Jesus Christ. We can’t treat that as an academic issue, in the worst sense of academic. As Evangelical Anabaptists this call to evangelism comes down both family trees, and we cannot permit it to be lost….

[Reuben surveyed critiques of evangelicalism]

All the criticism and soul searching of contemporary evangelicalism…must surely indicate a group that tolerates an almost unprecedented amount of merciless self-criticism. If it doesn’t kill us, it can only make us stronger. No amount of falsity exposed in the broader movement nor refinement of perspective has changed my mind that the central question of human existence is the possibility of a new life in Christ.

The academic revision of Anabaptism, on the other hand, comes largely from within the Mennonite world, but it hasn’t really spoken for us. The revisionists have consistently identified pietism, evangelicalism, or fundamentalism as an intruder in Anabaptist Christianity, but quite consistently and con-

David R. Swartz, who studies 20th century evangelicalism under George Marsden as a doctoral candidate at the University of Notre Dame, spoke on “True Evangelical Faith” Friday morning.
spiciously failed to state that theological liberalism is the real intruder, the interloper, the foreign element in our time. In short, Anabaptism deprived of the new birth, unmoored from confidence of a univocal inspired Bible, doesn’t look like Anabaptism at all to us. If an Anabaptist subspecies with such features has been discovered, it’s interesting but not compelling. That group didn’t speak for us then or now.

We are certainly not alone in affirming the indivisibility of evangelicalism and Anabaptism. Yet at these symposia we’re hoping to find our own way of looking at it....

A common concern with Anabaptist-inspired evangelicalism is this idea that it is represent-ative of the so-called evangelical left. Speaking for myself, I am determined that in not stepping to the political right (a mis-take many evangelicals have made) I must not step to the political left. Wouldn’t it be better to not step in the direction of social activism at all?....

It is nonetheless a healthy and timely chal-lenge to us here at RBC in defining our Evangelical Anabaptism to prove that our agenda isn’t really ‘no agenda at all’ when it comes to ideas of service motivated by the love of Christ in our lives. Our evan-gelism must be distinguished from that species of evangelical that has reduced the gospel almost to jingoism, and our Anabaptism likewise must be distinguished from an identification with its mirror image on the left....

Today in our own evangelical world we have the various post-modern, emergent church discussions. How do they fit into this discussion? Will these new trends prove that evan-gelicalism is a dinosaur that ought to have the decency to die?

My guess is that they do not change our discussion here much at all. I’ll venture that they will not turn out to be too radical for us, and that they will probably prove to not be very radical at all. They may well challenge the cultural packaging of evangelicalism, but I think they still have to answer some of the ques-tions Anabaptism puts forth.

I’ll make some specific challenges to the ‘who cares, it’s all over anyway?’ critics. How will you exclude dangerous and destructive ideas, if it is not through critical Bible reading and discussions that argue points to conclusions, as opposed to reporting on everyone’s feelings? Will intuition and good intentions keep people from prejudice and super-stition? I think Evangelical Anabaptism might be flexible enough to keep us from going down on the ship of modernism, but protect us from the excesses and wrong turns that new, energetic move-ments always make.

I only hope the new movements will be rad-i-cal enough. Because personally, I don’t real-ly care who wants to pierce their navel and tattoo their faces, but I do wonder whether as followers of Jesus Christ a believer can resist popular patriotism that sends Christians to war.

As much as the discussion of epistemology intrigues me, in practical terms I wonder how the emergent crowd will understand pastoral authority in the church, how they will process thorny divorces and remarriages, what they will do when some of THEM are over 50 and have a whole lot more money than others...I’m wondering if they will not reflect most of the same pathologies of the established church, and wind up being not much of an alternative to our host societies. I suppose I’m crazy enough to suggest some Anabaptist models....

When all is said and done and sorted out cul-turally, I still share this evangelical impulse that sees a lost world and cannot sit quietly on Jesus’ offer of salvation. I can tolerate a wide variety of expressions of faith as long as it includes that as a primary focus.

Evangelical beliefs, if extended consistently and logically, not only support but require an Anabaptist expression of the faith...We challenge our evangelical family to exam-ine our claim that the New Testament must take priority over the Old, and that when it does, it will lead to a different picture of the Christian life than we see in much evan-gelicalism, which will call for a renunciation of violence, and a stronger sense of what it means to be on a narrow way and thus non-conformed to the world....

So at this time, on the eve of an election year, when many evangelicals will be calling for a renewed effort to restore or strengthen the close identity of the nation with the church and the gospel, we must challenge evangelicals as to the wisdom of this. It’s a mistake, a common mistake, rooted in a move made first, I suppose, by Constantine, but which can only be sustained by mak-ing...a very selective series...of extensions from the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures to the church.

Is it bearing good fruit? Is it helping spread the gospel? Is it bringing light and healing? Is it seasoned with salt, so to speak? I sug-gest that it is crippling evangelism both in our country and outside of it, that its tone is increasingly shrill and desperate, and that it fundamentally cannot be compatible with the spirit of Jesus because of its naïve belief in the value of worldly political power and violence.

In conclusion, the challenge for this year’s symposium must be to Anabaptists. I challenge those who want to hold on to Anabaptism that the new birth, the call to Christ, a solid evangelical soteriology that invites sinners to salvation without mumbling, can’t be a lesser priority. I don’t want Anabaptism without conversion, and the world doesn’t need Anabaptism without it.

We can’t allow Anabaptism to be held captive on the one side to a tourist attraction religion, no matter how refreshing or roman-tic it might appear, if it is clearly not a viable choice for a sinner in the 21st century.

On the other side, we can’t reduce faith in Christ and eternal salvation to a series of social commitments that for all intents and purposes are the image of a liberal Protestantism ethos and its naïve embrace of various progressive pet projects. Anabaptism is more than a human community of gentle seekers who believe in the right causes.