ROSEDALE, Ohio—Rosedale Bible College welcomed over 100 members of the evangelical and Anabaptist communities to its campus November 13-15 to talk about following Jesus in a pluralistic world.

“Following Christ: Discovering a Vital Biblical Anabaptism” was the third symposium sponsored by the Conservative Mennonite Conference college, whose vision is to be a center for the advancement of an engaged and evangelical Anabaptist faith.

In a pluralistic world

John Roth, professor of history at Goshen College, opened the symposium Thursday evening with a discussion of pluralism and what it means to follow and confess Christ in the Anabaptist tradition.

Roth said that one clear gift of the evangelical tradition is its focus on the absolute urgency of Peter’s confession in Matthew 16: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Peter got that right, said Roth, but Peter’s confession was quickly followed by his reluctance to believe that Jesus must suffer and die.

We haven’t grasped the essence of that confession, said Roth, until we are ready to take up our cross and follow Jesus: “The confession must become flesh in real space and time and culture.”

Today’s fractured Christian landscape, with 15,000 tax-exempt Christian denominations in the United States alone, offers a “free market” of religious options, said Roth. Young people are looking in that marketplace for authentic faith, he explained, yet they are suspicious of anyone who claims to know the truth “with a capital T.” They see such a claim as a form of power “that will inevitably justify violence.”

While some churches react to the pluralism and diversity by retreating behind a short list of fundamental doctrines, others are downplaying denominational differences and embracing “a generic Christianity.”

Roth sees some churches within his own denomination, Mennonite Church USA, “jettisoning everything associated with a distinctly Mennonite identity” in an effort to be welcoming and “missional.”

Yet Anabaptists can reach out with the good news of the Gospel in a way that proclaims “truth with a capital T” without being coercive, he said. Following and confessing Christ in the Anabaptist tradition is an invitation, not an imposition.

First, we can invite people to enter the story of God acting in history. “To follow Christ is to become part of the grand story of God’s purposes unfolding in history,” he said. Although we claim this story as the Truth, “it is a vulnerable truth, offered as an invitation, not an argument.”

Second, we can invite people to become part of a new community, the church. “God designed us for community,” said Roth. In the context of the congregation, we can “enter into the hard, joyful work of reconciliation.”
Third, we can invite people to participate with Christ in the healing of our broken world. Christ’s love flows outward to the whole world, “made visible in our concrete actions.”

Fourth and last, following and confessing Christ in the Anabaptist tradition is an invitation to publicly proclaim the good news of the Gospel. Mennonites have sometimes been reluctant to put their actions into words, he said. For many years, he felt awkward about being too explicit about his faith.

“I hoped that if I simply lived a good life, people would eventually take notice and maybe invite themselves to church,” he said, smiling. “Frankly, it didn’t happen.”

Peter tells us to always be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in us, said Roth. We can offer those reasons “as an invitation, not an argument.”

Who needs conversion?

On Friday morning, Jonathan Sauder asked the question “Who needs conversion?” Sauder, who teaches Bible and history at Faith Mennonite High School in Kinzers, Pennsylvania, said when Jesus read from Isaiah in Luke 4, he chose only the words about God’s grace and mercy. Jesus “chose to focus on God’s graciousness.”

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells his followers they need to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, so they can be sons of their Father who is in heaven. He concludes by instructing his followers to “be perfect.” Here, said Sauder, Jesus “redefines holiness as mercy.”

Who needs conversion?

On Friday morning, Jonathan Sauder asked the question “Who needs conversion?” Sauder, who teaches Bible and history at Faith Mennonite High School in Kinzers, Pennsylvania, said when Jesus read from Isaiah in Luke 4, he chose only the words about God’s grace and mercy. Jesus “chose to focus on God’s graciousness.”

In Matthew 5:48, Jesus tells his followers they need to love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them, so they can be sons of their Father who is in heaven. He concludes by instructing his followers to “be perfect.” Here, said Sauder, Jesus “redefines holiness as mercy.”

As Sauder pursued his question, he added, “I do. I need to start loving people. I need to stop thinking if I can get my ethical ducks in a row and if I can separate myself from the people who are an abomination, then, and only then, will God like me.”
Broad-Minded Living on the Narrow Way

Selected quotes from RBC academic dean Phil Weber’s closing address on Saturday

What does it mean for us to deeply embrace the particular understandings of Christian orthodoxy we claim as a “faith tradition” while still recognizing that there are others who actually know and love Jesus, but do not agree with us about what it means to follow him faithfully? This dynamic combination of deep commitment on the one hand and a teachable openness on the other is what I am calling Broad-Minded Living on the Narrow Way. There is such an intense internal polarity in this idea I’m not totally sure it can be done successfully. But if it can, I believe it will be characterized by three things: A posture of humility, a passion for holiness, and a perseverance grounded in hope.

A posture of humility

We must beware the tendency to fashion our understandings of God in the image of our own faith tradition rather than seeking to know Him as he truly is—with all his transcendent “otherness” and inscrutable sovereignty that resists reduction to the neat boundaries of our own theological formulas or our sense of propriety. To put the point crudely—God is not an Anabaptist (or a Lutheran). We must resist the temptation to remove ambiguity by making the Scripture say what we think it ought to say rather than what it actually says. This is equally true whether we are at the center of power in some society or at the margins, whether we are the persecutors or the persecuted.

A passion for holiness

By urging humility and an open heart toward believers outside the Anabaptist faith tradition, I am not arguing for a deprecation of the real and significant differences that, at least historically, have distinguished Anabaptism from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, and even from other evangelical traditions. On the one hand, there is other evangelical traditions. On the other hand, Anabaptism from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, and even from Anabaptist, Baptist, and even from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, and even from other evangelical traditions. On the least historically, have distinguished Anabaptist faith tradition, I am not arguing for a deprecation of the real and significant differences that, at least historically, have distinguished Anabaptism from Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, and even from other evangelical traditions.

Pressing the idea of conversion further on Saturday morning, Sauder examined the experience of the apostles and the early church, observing that they were converted away from coercion and violence. “Conversion is not just a conversion of the will,” he said, “but it is conversion away from the worship of principalities and powers. It is conversion away from the God that the empire claims to represent, to the God that was hanged on the empire’s cross.”

In struggling with the “corpse-making holiness” of God as portrayed in the Old Testament, Sauder ventured into territory that provoked both questions and objections. When asked to clarify his approach to the Old Testament, he acknowledged that he didn’t have all the answers. “I expect to spend the rest of my life with the texts,” he said, “and hopefully, being wrestled to the ground by the texts.”

View of a self-confessed “charismatic, Anabaptist, evangelical, emergent-church sympathizer, modern church pastor, politically liberal and conservative 27-year-old”

On Friday afternoon, Jeremy Miller, pastor of Mennonite Christian Assembly in Fredericksburg, Ohio, spoke about how the ‘under 30’ generation sees things.

The beauty of holiness

Roth’s Friday evening talk centered on worship and “the beauty of holiness.” He described two impulses for renewal in the church today: the growing interest among young people in the emergent church, and the move in many churches toward more expressive worship.
Although the first “suggests a move from the evangelical world into Anabaptism” and the second seems like a move from Anabaptism to evangelicalism, he’s hopeful the two can be reconciled. “I share the premise of the conference organizers that the deepest and most exciting challenge ahead is to bring these two themes of evangelicalism and Anabaptism into closer conversation.”

Worship matters, said Roth, because it’s the way that we name our most basic assumptions about reality and about how the world is put together. It’s the way that we name our ultimate allegiances.

We reorient ourselves and our lives around the Story that gives our life meaning, and we publicly express our loyalty to the author of that story, he said.

Roth addressed traditional Mennonite worship, with its strengths and weaknesses, and discussed the writings of Pilgram Marpeck on the relationship between worship and following Christ.

According to Roth, the Anabaptist rejection of the sacramental system of Catholicism has inclined many of us to assume a sharp separation between matter and spirit that has dogged our tradition from the beginning. This separation, the reason why we need to have a symposium trying to hold evangelicalism and Anabaptism together, he said, is at best, a false and unbiblical dichotomy. At worst, the separation of the spiritual and the material is a Christian heresy.

Marpeck addressed these issues. Roth explained that the incarnation was the center of Marpeck’s theology—everything begins with God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. Marpeck asked, “How do heaven and earth meet? How does the spiritual connect with the material?” How does the invisible transcendent reality of God connect with the visible world of time and space? And contrary, I feel a deep sense of loss when I observe the degree to which the biblical doctrines of nonconformity and nonresistance, doctrines the Anabaptists discovered had been swept under the rug by the medieval church, are once again disappearing from view under the carpet in many of our churches.

They are hard doctrines, but when they are understood correctly, they speak directly to the points where the enemies of our souls—the world, the flesh, and the devil—seek to reduce that primal Christian confession: “Jesus is Lord,” from a radical declaration of allegiance, here and now, to a creedal affirmation, which is something quite different: something far less threatening to the status quo in our personal lives, in our churches, and in our communities; something far less challenging to our desire to be admired, accepted, and successful, or, at the very least, normal in the eyes of the world. Or if not in the eyes of the pagans out there, at least in the view of conservative American Christians.

Sometimes, the Mennonite emphasis on radical obedience and purity has fostered a paralyzing atmosphere of criticism, judgment, and coldness. We need to remember that being a Christian involves knowing God so we can follow him. And I think we are helped when our knowledge of God leads us to enjoy Him, to celebrate his grace for sinners like us and the others who, in truth, never do get it all right. Our striving and our thinking about our own obedience or the obedience of the person in front of us, can get in the way of our worship. Let’s be sure to cultivate that “warm piety” that nurtures the soul and revels in God’s grace.
A perseverance grounded in hope

Our hope, finally, is in Christ—not in our own ability to try harder, obey more obsessively and eventually achieve the stain and wrinkle-free condition of the bride of Christ.

The stumbling block of the gospel is that the righteousness, the godliness we so desperately seek does not come from our own efforts, but from God:

In Colossians 1:25-27 Paul says that he was given a commission from God, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

how does the transformation of the inner person affect what happens on the outside in our daily actions?

If there is a payoff in Marpeck’s theology, said Roth, it is that “it forces us to confront the profound and joyful mystery of the Incarnation in every aspect of the Christian life, including our worship.”

Roth suggested three elements that he thinks are central “if we want to hold the spirit and the body together in a life-giving way.” First, worship should help us remember our baptisms. This could serve as “a kind of reset button” that calls us to a fresh perspective about our most basic allegiances.

Second, we should celebrate the Lord’s Supper more often. “We need the regular practice of the Lord’s supper so that we can remember rightly, and in so doing, be remembered as the body of Christ.

And third, worship should teach us the beauty of holiness. “In our efforts to be holy, we’ve sometimes made the church into a defensive retreat, a contamination-free zone that’s cordoned off from the world.” Yet holiness is not an escape from what’s wrong but “a deep and reconciling embrace of all that is broken and torn asunder in our world.”

The beauty of holiness, said Roth, “calls us not to condemn sins and sinners or to stand around as spectators of the sins and troubles of others, but rather to bear the sins of others as an act of intercession.”

The beauty of holiness calls us “to become fellow sufferers and participants in the sacrificial life of Jesus, as he takes the sins of our children, the sins of our politicians, the sins of our pastors, the sins of our friends, and most of all our sins onto himself. This is what makes a holy world, a holy people, a holy time. How beautiful.”

RBC article continued—

A perseverance grounded in hope

Our hope, finally, is in Christ—not in our own ability to try harder, obey more obsessively and eventually achieve the stain and wrinkle-free condition of the bride of Christ.

The stumbling block of the gospel is that the righteousness, the godliness we so desperately seek does not come from our own efforts, but from God:

In Colossians 1:25-27 Paul says that he was given a commission from God, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

RBC article continued—

Drama at Rosedale!

January 30-31, February 1

One weekend, three events:
Discover Rosedale
Parents’ Weekend
and...

The Magician’s Nephew

A play based on C. S. Lewis’s novel
Directed by Christa J. Kelm

Visit www.rosedale.edu or call 740-857-1311 to find out more.