

The story goes on...hallelujah!
May 17, 2015
Philippians 3:7-11, 21

Goal: To challenge the congregation to consider how the Heilsgeschichte stories continue be written by our own lives and how our lives fit into the broader narrative of Anabaptist History.

This morning I was given the task, a daunting task, to cover Heilsgeschichte, God's salvation story beyond our timeline. Now, thanks be to God, the story of God's people, the story of God's faithfulness, the story of God's calling and setting into place a covenantal shalom missional community does not end where our timeline ends in the year 313! However, if you do the math that means that I have the task of covering church history for the past one thousand, seven hundred and two years! Yes, this is where the daunting part of the task comes into place! Perhaps you had a heads up that this sermon would cover that much material and so you wore your comfy clothes and packed a lunch, and dinner, and perhaps even breakfast for in the morning! Now, obviously I cannot cover all those years in detail during the next twenty or so minutes. Instead I will try to make some broad strokes to cover the significant realities of God's ongoing story being written and lived out during these centuries.

As I move through the centuries I do invite us to be mindful of the ways the people of God of each generation continue to live into Heilsgeschichte, God's salvation history. I also challenge us to be mindful of the ways the people of God of each generation have strived to understand and live out their understanding of what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus. Throughout the retelling of the story I also invite us to hold out in front of us our scripture passage from Philippians chapter three to see how the words of this text run parallel at times with the story of God's people and how at other times it might appear to be running perpendicular.

Following the early church, as portrayed in the book of Acts, followers of Jesus mainly met in homes during the next three hundred years and they continued to grow in numbers.

During these centuries the church “was characterized by evangelism, persecution, church organization, doctrinal clarification, and determining the Christian Canon”¹, the Bible. Believers experienced significant persecution as they declared that Jesus was their Lord and not Caesar. As they made this bold declaration they were proclaiming that their citizenship was in heaven and not on earth. Here the story runs parallel to our biblical text. Now “By the end of the second century, the church often required new believers to take long periods of pre-baptism instruction (often 3 years) in order to make sure they were ready for possible suffering. Despite great opposition, the church grew in number. As an early church leader, Tertullian said, “the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.””²

If you look at our timeline, you will see that the last entry is the year 313 and is only listed as Constantine. We can also see that there is an asterisk by the year 313 which denotes that this is a crisis or a turning point in the timeline. Well, things did significantly change with the Emperor Constantine. Constantine had a dream the night before a battle where he heard a voice say “conquer in the symbol of the cross.” So Constantine told God that if he won the battle he would become a Christian. Constantine won the battle which led to the creation of the *Edict of Milan* which declared a toleration of all religions. Within this edict was a call to end oppression for those professing Christianity. Suddenly the persecution of Christians which had been rampant for the past several centuries lessened. It was only then a short while before Emperor Theodosius declared in 380 that Christianity, as only expressed through the Catholic church, was the **only** religion permitted to be observed within the kingdom. Such a reversal from before when the church was persecuted because believers would not profess that Caesar is Lord because they only had one Lord, Jesus Christ!

¹ Marion Bontrager, Heilsgeschichte Notebook, 269.

² Michelle Hershberger, God’s Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life (Herald Press: Scottsdale, PA), 139.

Now, we might at first glance say that what Constantine and Theodosius did were good things for the early Christians which might have lasting positive things for us today in 2015. However, we need to properly understand the context, and how the rulings from Constantine and Theodosius drastically changed not only the nature of the church but also the nature of the Gospel message. Prior to these mandates it was clear that followers of Jesus were set apart from the world around them. Prior to the mandates people experienced years of preparations to make the decision to align themselves with followers of Jesus Christ as followers of Jesus were forced to make choices that placed themselves in difficult and potentially life-threatening situations because of their professing in faith in Jesus. Therefore prior to the mandates choosing to follow Christ and be a part of the body of faith was a **choice** that one had to make carefully. It was not a decision made on a whim because it could very well cost you your life when it became public that you were now professing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Foundational to grasp though is that prior to these mandates individuals had to choose to be a follower of Jesus to be a member of the church, to choose to seek to be faithful in following and living like Jesus, to choose to state that like Paul did Philippians that their citizenship is in heaven.

Following the mandates from Constantine and Theodosius this all changed. Suddenly when babies were born they were baptized and their baptisms were directly connected with their citizenship into the nation – running perpendicular to our passage from Philippians. This process of infant baptism was done to keep track of census for taxation purposes and as a way for everyone to be initiated into the state church. “Now, people were forced into being Christians, or they were considered Christians because of their nationality. As the church became “official,” many Christians didn’t even know that being a Christian meant living a transformed life, free

from sin.”³ Now the nation was filled with people walking around saying “I am a Christian” and yet not having any idea what that statement really means or even a knowing anything about the person of Jesus Christ. Also prior to Constantine the “Christian church was essentially peaceful and committed to nonviolence, the “way of Jesus.” Few served in the military until after Constantine.”⁴ Marion Bontrager offers that “In less than seventy years the church moved from being persecuted to persecuting rather than evangelizing people of other religions!”⁵ The movement from a free church to the state church had swift and monumental changes for the story of God’s salvation.

Moving along, the Middle Ages was a period of time where the church continued to experience great power. In 1054 the one church split into two creating the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church, with both churches claiming to be the real church.⁶ The Pope, the head of the Catholic Church, had great power and authority even to the point at one time of possessing more than the emperor. This is also a dark period of time in the church as the first of seven or eight crusades began in 1095 and continued throughout the next two hundred years. “In the name of Christ, thousands of innocent people, Muslims, Jews, and Eastern Christians, were plundered, killed, or converted at the point of a sword.”⁷

Now fast forward to the 1500s – I did say we needed to do some broad strokes of church history! During the 1500s we read of the Reformation of leaders like John Hus, John Wycliff, and Martin Luther and his “95 Thesis” – reformers who “called for common people to study the Bible for themselves”⁸. It was also during the 1500s that another invention arrived on the scene

³ Hershberger, 139-140.

⁴ Bontrager, 235.

⁵ Bontrager, 235.

⁶ Hershberger, 140.

⁷ Hershberger, 140.

⁸ Hershberger, 141.

that drastically transformed the church. It was the invention of the printing press “which (now) made it possible for people to get books at affordable prices, including the Bible.”⁹ I think today we just take for granted that we have access to a Bible, various translations, and even access to a Bible at our finger tips on our electronic devices. However, before the printing press people did not have access to the Bible, and particularly not in their own language.

Soon after the Protestant Reformation there were other reformers by the names of Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and Georg Blaurock who stood together and refused to compromise what they clearly understood from the Bible. They were convinced that the only way to experience the true church was to join God’s people because you wanted to, not because you were born into it. They knew that membership in the church based on membership in the state was no real Christianity at all and that instead they professed that their citizenship was in heaven. Ah, sound familiar? Grebel and others argued these points vigorously with the government officials, and they refused to have their own babies baptized. At a meeting in January 1525, Grebel baptized Blaurock, and Blaurock in turn baptized Grebel and several others present with them. In that simple act, they defied their government and the state church, returning to the free churches of the time before Constantine.”¹⁰ They were called ana-baptists meaning “re-baptizers”.

The early Anabaptists leaders fought hard to separate church and state, to declare that one must choose to be a follower of Jesus and that furthermore that that choice is displayed through the waters of believers baptism. The early Anabaptist leaders declared and lived out the essence of a free church. Well as you can imagine, “The governments of Europe, both Catholic and

⁹ Hershberger, 141.

¹⁰ Hershberger, 142-143.

Protestant, outlawed the movement, forcing Anabaptists to meet secretly in homes and in forests”¹¹ and like the early church we read of how they were persecuted for their faith.

One of the key components of the Radical Reformation was the call from the reformers for the laity to have access to the bible in their own language. Prior to the reformation the laity would not have had access to a bible in a language that they would understand. Therefore only the priests would have access to God’s Word and therefore they alone could provide an interpretation or teaching from it. However, with the Radical Reformation not only did our Anabaptist ancestors say that all should have a bible they went a step further to also declare that the body of faith, the community, should gather and discern together the word of God. I have to wonder if one the early texts they studied together were the Apostle Paul’s words to the church in Philippi as recorded in Philippians chapter three.

Now even though today we find ourselves in the stream of Anabaptism that began in 1525 there are obviously other streams of Christianity. Here is a slide that shows the creation of additional denominations that emerged since 1525. This graph also depicts the complexities of the family tree of Christian denominations. I will just give you second to begin to digest this diagram. Be sure to note where we come in at the bottom of the screen.

We as Anabaptists, as Mennonites, are only but one stream of Christianity. If you had some free time I would encourage you to start back with the 1527 Schleithem Brotherly Union and read or reread through all the confessions of faiths that Anabaptists and Mennonites have

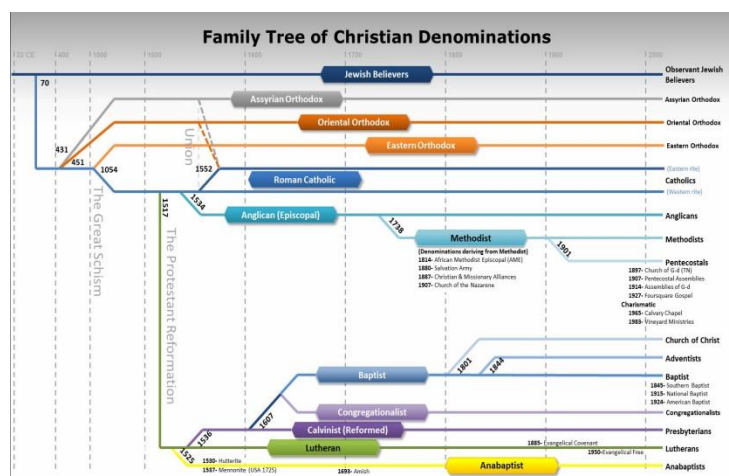


Figure 1 FAMILY TREE OF CHRISTIAN DENOMINATIONS - Copyright © 2012 The Psalm 119 Foundation

¹¹ Hershberger, 143.

written since 1527. If we were to do so we would find several interesting points. First, throughout the past 490 years we as Anabaptists have returned time and time again to working at articulating who we are, what we believe, where we have come from, and our relationship to the world around us. Also in each confession we would find a statement of the choice one makes to follow Jesus and that by that choice we are set apart from the world as we seek to emulate the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. In each synthesis of theology there is a statement that we are to be people of shalom, of peace, of extending love. Within each confession we can read into a proclamation that our citizenship is in heaven.

Some might wonder, if the confessions state similar thoughts why could we not just keep the first confession from 1527? However one must note that every generation in every culture needs to once again rearticulate for themselves and the coming generations “this we believe as Anabaptists because of where we have come from, because of the journey we have been on with God through Heilsgeschichte.” Writing out the confessions is just part of the retelling of the story it does not necessarily mean that the message changes. I challenge us each to consider, how would we tell our own salvation story, our own story of Heilsgeschichte? How do we rearticulate, recapture, retell the story of our own life and faith as well as how our lives fit into the bigger timeline of God’s salvation history? 490 years from now when the church looks back at **our** time in history, what are the stories that they will be sharing about how we lived out our calling to be faithful to Jesus, ways we proclaimed that our citizenship was in heaven?

As we think about our text from Philippians are we able to join this morning with Paul and proclaim “I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord?” We are part of a long story of a segment of God’s people who are striving to live out their calling to proclaim with their very lives that their citizenship is in Heaven. Some of

us were born into this faith tradition and some like me have chosen this faith stream as their own. In fact within my own journey what was pivotal for me was taking a course at Bluffton University with Gerald Mast. What was the course? Anabaptist History and Thought: Advanced Studies in Rhetoric. One of the textbooks for this class was the *Martyrs Mirror*. It was through reading the history of this faith movement that I was able to recognize how my own theology aligned with this movement and furthermore able to acknowledge the value of seeing the big picture of this free church.

For each of us, whether born Mennonite or have chosen Mennonite, for each of us there is still a choice to be made if we will daily declare that Jesus is Lord of our lives and choose to embrace the ways of Jesus which leads to a life committed to loving others, serving instead of being served, and striving daily to become more and more like Jesus. It is my prayer that through the power of the Holy Spirit we can join the Apostle Paul in proclaiming

But whatever were gains to us, we now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, we consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord, for whose sake we have lost all things. We consider them garbage, that we may gain Christ and be found in him... We want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, attaining to the resurrection of the dead. Our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

My word to us this morning is to keep living with enthusiasm into the ongoing story that is being written of God's salvation story! To keep adding your own chapters of how God is at work in and through your lives. Keep inviting others to the story, to the table, to the family of God. And by the grace and strength of God may we profess with our lives, our actions, our words, and our choices that our citizenship, the citizenship that truly matters, is in heaven and by doing so may we proclaim "Jesus, and Jesus alone, is Lord." Hallelujah, the story goes on!