

HOW ANABAPTIST THEOLOGY EFFECTS YOUTH MINISTRY

By Karissa Miller and Mark Horst

This is an imaginary conversation between a Mennonite youth pastor (Eric) and a youth (Emily) who has recently moved into the community and has been attending their youth group.

Emily: Hey Eric, I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute.

Eric: Yea, sure. What's up?

Emily: I was just wandering a little bit about why we do what we do in youth group. In my old youth group, we just hung out and ate pizza.

Eric: Well, that is an interesting question. Actually, the reason that we are doing what we are doing is because our leadership staff talked about what the goal for our youth ministry should be and we came up with some main beliefs that we wanted our ministry to reflect. It is important to us that we use deliberate theology, which is when you actually think about what you believe and in this case, plan your programs to reflect it.

Emily: Why did you have to decide as a group—aren't you the youth pastor?

Eric: As Anabaptists we believe that when we make a big decision no one person can make a perfect choice. We need to work together as a group, pray about it, and search in the Bible for what is best. One person can't do it alone. Also, if we work together, the people involved are able to feel ownership in the decision. Usually when people feel ownership of some part of our group, they are more loyal to it.

Emily: But what happens when you try to decide as a group, but the group is still split?

Eric: That's a good question. Sometimes we don't agree; even when we try to work together as a group.

Emily: So what do you do?

Eric: Well, in our church's history there have been times where we couldn't agree. For example, in the late 1800's there was a disagreement about whether to allow four-part singing in the Mennonite church. In the end, four-part singing was integrated into worship. Congregations that were opposed to this either accepted the change or left the Mennonite denomination.

Emily: Hmm, that's interesting, but you keep talking about Anabaptists and Mennonites. Who are they?

Eric: Well, back in the day when Luther and those other guys had broken off from the Catholic Church they made a lot of changes in the church. This was called the Reformation. Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and others didn't think that the reformation did enough changing. They were not content with some of the things that the church was still doing so they split off again and began another movement. They wanted a self-governing church; one that wasn't connected to the government. One of the biggest changes they made was to not baptize infants and instead baptize adult believers.

Emily: Why did they change that?

Eric: They wanted baptism to be a symbol of a choice someone had made to follow Christ. We also get the name Anabaptist, which means rebaptizer, because of this change. We try to make it so the things we do in youth group reflect our Anabaptist beliefs.

Emily: Like what else?

Eric: Well, we recognize the Bible as God's word to us. It is where we find God's truth and God's expectations for how we live our lives.

Emily: I noticed that we read a lot more scripture here than in my old youth group. We never spent that much time reading or talking about scripture there.

Eric: We think it is really important to spend time talking about the scriptures we read. That way we can come to a common understanding of them as a group. When we work together, we can avoid misinterpreting the scriptures because there are others around to make sure we aren't following our own misconstrued interpretations; we have to make sure they coincide with the interpretations of others. This is the same as us working together to define our vision.

Emily: Don't you guys still disagree on what the Bible means sometimes?

Eric: Well, yes, but when different parts of the Bible seem to disagree, Jesus is the referee.

Emily: What do you mean?

Eric: We look to Jesus and his life to see what he would have done because he is God on Earth; the closest link we have to God. This is another one of our theological rocks, or main beliefs as Anabaptists. We see Jesus as our role model for life. He shows us how to apply his teachings.

Emily: Apply his teachings to what?

Eric: Our normal everyday lives.

Emily: What do you mean?

Eric: Jesus' example in the Bible shows us that we should be the same person whether we are at church or not. He never changed who he was depending on who he was talking to.

Emily: I've noticed that I never see any of the kids from this youth group at the parties on the weekends.

Eric: Exactly. Our goal is to figure out how we can apply the things that we learn at youth group on Wednesday nights to our lives; in school, at home, or at church. And then do it.

Emily: Yea, when I see kids from this youth group at school they act the same as they do at church or on Wednesday nights.

Eric: That is another one of our core beliefs: that we minister to people out of who we are. It is important to be authentic and live out what we believe. This is how we witness to those around us—by letting God's love touch them through their relationship with us. They will not want a relationship with us if we are hypocrites.

Emily: Wow, I never thought about it like that. I came to this youth group because Sarah seemed so cool when I met her. She really seemed to care about me even though she didn't know me.

Eric: Where did you meet Sarah?

Emily: We were actually playing against each other at a softball tournament. We were both between games and she started talking to me in the line for the concession stand. I told her I had just moved to town and we talked a little while and I told her that I missed my home church. It wasn't long before she had invited me to come with her youth group.

Even though I had just met her, I wanted to come with her because she was nicer to me than most of the girls—even those on my new softball team.

Eric: She was actually showing another one of our core values when she talked to you at the tournament.

Emily: What do you mean?

Eric: Well Jesus teaches us in Matthew 5 to love our enemies. You guys weren't technically enemies, but this passage also means loving those who you don't necessarily have a reason to love. Sarah did this when she was nice to you even though she didn't know you.

Emily: Enemy love—is that why we prayed for the people who vandalized the church last weekend?

Eric: Yes, that is exactly why. That passage in Matthew 5 tells also to pray for those who persecute us. Forgiveness is a big part of loving our enemies. This isn't always easy. In fact, usually it is pretty hard.

Emily: Why is forgiveness so important?

Eric: Because Jesus called us to forgive just as he forgave us. When we forgive people it is another way of showing them Christ's love.

Emily: Well what about the people behind the terrorist attacks of September 11? Do we have to forgive them?

Eric: Yes. Jesus calls us to forgive no matter what they have done to us.

Emily: But we still go after them and try to punish them, right?

Eric: No. This is one of the biggest beliefs that separates the Anabaptists from other denominations. We believe in non-violence.

Emily: So you just let them go unpunished?

Eric: Well let's put it in terms of this youth group. Let's say that Sarah spreads offensive rumors about you at school. According to what we believe as Anabaptists, you should not retaliate, you should forgive her.

Emily: So I should just let her off and not do anything about it? How do I know she won't do it again?

Eric: You should try to make peace with her.

Emily: How?

Eric: Well you should talk to her. Don't act out of your anger, act out of your forgiveness towards her.

Emily: What should I say?

Eric: Let her know that you were offended, but are willing to forgive her, put it behind you, and move on.

Emily: What if I'm not?

Eric: Well then you can pray that God would help you to forgive her and be ready to put it behind you. Jesus can help you if you come to him with a willing heart.

Emily: What if I try to talk to her, but we still don't see eye to eye?

Eric: You can always come talk to me.

Emily: So then will you make a decision for us so that we know what is right?

Eric: No, I will just be here to listen and to help you both listen to each other and understand what the other person is feeling. It's called being an unbiased mediator.

Emily: So, basically it is better to talk out our differences rather than act out of our frustrations.

Eric: As your youth pastor I want to encourage you guys to make peace rather than use aggression, whether that be verbal or physical.

Emily: So are you saying that all violence is a sin?

Eric: Well, not exactly. There is a lot of gray area on this subject. Mennonites believe war and violence are wrong, but what someone might do if they saw an innocent child being beaten is another story. Also, not many Mennonites would say that if someone broke into your home and was threatening to injure your family you should do nothing. The bottom line for Mennonites is that killing is wrong, whether in a war or in your every day life.

Emily: What did you say about war?

Eric: We believe that it is wrong. But, let's look at how these beliefs apply to our lives here and now.

Emily: Well, does it mean that we shouldn't support the government and military?

Eric: It depends how you define support. Our church believes that we should pray for the safety of our troops and our government to make good decisions, but we do not support the killing of other human beings who are made in the image of God.

Emily: In my old church we showed our support by having a flag in the church. Why don't we do that here?

Eric: Our number one allegiance is to the Kingdom of God and the church, not to the government. That is why we begin games at the church softball games with prayer rather than the National Anthem. We also don't have a flag because the early Anabaptists strove to keep the church separate from the state and the influence of the world.

Emily: That's not what I was taught, but it definitely makes sense.

Eric: Does that answer some of your questions?

Emily: Yea, but I do have one more... I was wondering why you let so many kids help you lead tonight. I mean, the worship was led totally by youth and you even let Brian lead the Bible study. In my old youth group, that never would have happened. My youth pastor did pretty much all the talking. His wife led worship and then he would talk. As the youth, we were only expected to show up and pay attention until they brought out the snacks and games.

Eric: We do it this way because we believe in discipleship, which means helping people grow in their faith. One way we can do this is by ministering with them by giving them opportunities in leadership positions. This way we avoid ministering at them by

controlling the whole meeting. We, as the adults in the group, don't have all the answers and we can learn just as much from you guys as you can learn from us. Another way that we can all practice our leadership is through service.

Emily: Oh yeah, we went to the food pantry one time with my old youth group. Is that what you mean?

Eric: Well, yes, we do that sometimes. But it is more than just that. A lot of times we don't see the results of our service firsthand.

Emily: Why would you do service then?

Eric: The goal of service is not to get recognition. The goal is to give people what they need; to glorify God, and to expand God's Kingdom. Sometimes you will see the results, but we don't serve just to feel better about ourselves.

Emily: That makes sense. I have to go do some homework, but thanks for taking the time to answer some of these questions.

Eric: Yeah, anytime. I don't want you to just blindly accept what I'm saying, if there are things that you don't agree with, or even if you do agree with them, check them out for yourself. Owning the belief for yourself is very important.

Emily: Thanks, I will!

Works Cited:

1. **"The Anabaptist Movement Begins". Christian History.** 1990. Vol. 9 Issue 4. p38. EBSCOhost, Mary Miller Library. <<http://web18.epnet.com>>
2. Dean, Kenda Creasy. **Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry.** Zondervan. 2001. p.30.
3. Hershberger, Michele. **Notes for Introduction to Youth Ministry.** Hesston College. Fall 2005.
4. **Harper Study Bible. New Revised Standard Version.** Zondervan. 1991. Book of Matthew.
5. Roth, John D. **Beliefs: Mennonite Faith and Practice.** Herald Press. 2005.