

**An Anthropologist Looks
at Human Systems:
The Gospel in Our Culture**

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Paul G. Hiebert

How should the Anabaptists live in the twenty-first century in North America? In line with Leslie Newbegin's much quoted question, "Can the West be converted?", we must ask "Can the Anabaptists survive in the West for another hundred years?"

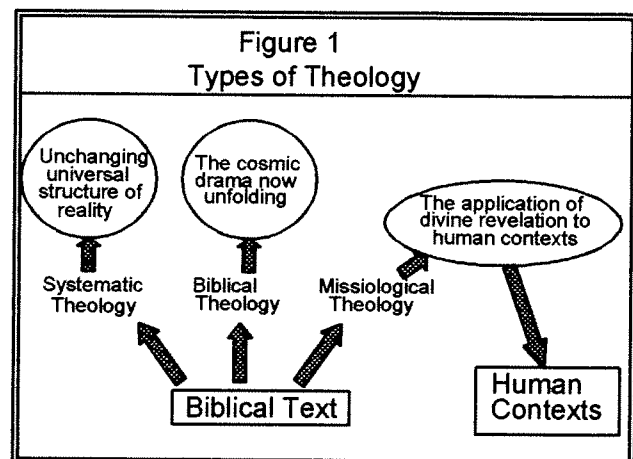
This question is a theological one, but our old theologies do not address it. Using Greek philosophical methods we developed systematic theologies that helped us understand the universal, unchanging structure of ultimate reality. Using historical methods we developed biblical theologies that helped us grasp the big story in which we live. Neither, however, provided us with the call, motivation and method for addressing the historical and cultural particularities of our time.

Let me suggest that what we need is a third way of doing theology, namely mission theology--one that can help us answer the question of what is the church's mission to us and our cultural and society. Mission, Martin Kähler wrote almost a century ago, "is the mother of theology." Theology began as "an accompanying manifestation of the Christian missions," and not as "a luxury of the world-dominating church" (1908, 189-190). David Bosch notes, "Paul was the first Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary (1991, 124)." Most theologians do not become missionaries, but missionaries, by the very nature of their task, must become theologians.

Missiological Theology

What is mission theology?¹ Its central question is: “What is God’s Word to humans in their particular situations?” (figure 1). It assumes that mission is the central theme in God’s acts on earth, and that all Christians are to be a part of this mission. It also assumes that all humans live in the particularity of different and changing historical and sociocultural settings, and that the Gospel must be made known to them in these contexts. Its task is to translate and communicate the Gospel in the language and culture of people so that the Gospel may transform the people and their cultures into what God intends for them to be.

The methods of missiological theology are to exegete the human condition in the Bible and in a particular context today, and to draw lessons from divine revelation for the contemporary context. The process begins either with the study of Scripture or the study of contemporary human settings, and moves



between the two, seeking to build the bridge between Biblical revelation and human settings.

The process often begins with a study of particular contemporary human situations. Here the methods of history and the human sciences are particularly helpful in helping us see the world

¹ I am following Larry Laudin’s analysis of research traditions such as ‘physics,’ ‘chemistry,’ ‘systematic theology,’ and so on. These, he points out, are determined by 1) the key questions they ask, 2) the assumptions they make about the nature of reality, and 3) the methods they accept as legitimate in seeking answers. Theories or theologies are the answers they provide. There is considerable disagreement on this level, but the theories compete because they belong to the same research tradition.

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Can we as Anabaptist Pietists maintain our identity in North America in the twenty-first century? For decades we did so as a marginal community, but what will happen to us as we join the dominant society? These questions raise a prior question: what does it mean to be biblical Christians in our modern world?

To answer this question we must first define what we mean by “biblical Christians.” Many Christians turn to Systematic Theology for an answer.¹ This uses Greek philosophical methods to examine the biblical texts, and help us understand who we are in God’s sight. It is essential that we give greater thought to developing a systematic theology to help us critique the theological fads that engulf us, but it has its limitations. Because it seeks to understand the structure of ultimate reality, it cannot adequately deal with the change, flux and particularity of human contexts and history. Consequently, it is often divorced from everyday life. Moreover, it has a weak sense of mission.²

¹ Systematic theology emerged in the eleventh century when Peter Lombard sought to disengage key theological questions from their original biblical contexts and to arrange them in a logical sequence of their own that would provide a comprehensive, coherent and synthetically consistent account of all major issues of Christian faith, and demonstrate its credibility (Finger 1985, 19).

² Missiology is not a major category in Systematic Theology alongside soteriology, ecclesiology and the others divisions. It is relegated to the field of ‘applied theology,’ which is seen as less important than ‘pure theology.’ Few trained theologians go as missionaries, and many strong departments of theology have no spirit of missions. On the other hand, most missionaries are forced to become theologians, and many leading global theologians began as missionaries.

As Anabaptists we placed great emphasis on Biblical Theology, which uses historical methods to show us our place in God's history. It assumed that revelation is historical in character--that there is a real world with a real history that is 'going somewhere,' and that it culminates in God's eternal reign.³ This approach to theology helps us grasp the unfolding cosmic drama and gives us meaning by showing us our place in it, but it does not help us deal with the application of the Gospel to our particular cultural and historical contexts.

How do we provide a biblical critique of our times? How should we as Christians respond to computers, global TV, Internet and genetic engineering? Too often we preach into space. Our message has little relevance for modern business people living in a capitalist corporate world, doctors caught in a biomedical evolution, and families requiring two breadwinners. We need a third approach to theology to compliment systematic and biblical theologies, namely a missiological theology that enables us to exegete the biblical revelation which was given in specific contexts, to exegete the world in which we live, and to build the bridge between Scripture and our contexts.⁴

Missiological Theology

Missiological theology centers on the mission of God and his church in and to the world.

³ Biblical Theology emerged out of the reaction of Philip Spener and Johann Gabler, and the Pietist Movement to the scholasticism of the post-Reformation theologians.

⁴ I am following Larry Laudin's analysis of research traditions such as 'physics,' 'chemistry,' 'systematic theology,' and so on (1977). These, he points out, are determined by 1) the key questions they ask, 2) the assumptions they make about the nature of reality, and 3) the methods they accept as legitimate in seeking answers. Theories or theologies are the answers they provide. There is often disagreement on this level because theories compete within the same research tradition.

“Mission,” Martin Kahler wrote almost a century ago, “is the mother of theology.” Theology emerged as the early church encountered the world around it, and Paul was the first theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary (Bosch 1991, 124).

What is mission theology? Its central question is: “What is God’s Word to humans in their particular historical/sociocultural contexts?” Missiological theology emerges as the church encounters specific human situations, and involves a four-step process of critical contextualization (Hiebert 1994).⁵ The first is **phenomenological**. This is to exegete the specific human setting in which we minister. Here the methods of history and the human sciences are particularly helpful. Using them we can learn to see the world as the people we serve see it (emic analysis), for this is the ‘reality’ in which the people we serve live and respond. We also develop general theories about humans based on cross-cultural comparison and generalizations (etic analysis).

The second step is **ontological**. In it we study Scripture for guidance in responding to the human condition. We begin with the categories, logic and assumptions we have as humans living in particular historical and cultural contexts, but we must then examine these in the light of biblical truth. Without this critique of our own assumptions, we are in danger of becoming captive to our world.

The third step is **evaluative**. We use our biblical findings to judge our human contexts

⁵ As Anabaptists we have traditionally done what I call ‘missiological theology.’ We have consistently asked “What would Jesus do in this situation?” and sought to make faith live in the realities of our daily contexts. We have been wary of systematic theology for fear of equating it with Scripture or using it to define Scripture.

and to determine our response.

The last step is **missiological**. Here we help believers and churches to move from where they are to where we believe they should be in the light of biblical truth. This transformation is rarely instantaneous or complete. It is a process in which we begin with people and societies where they are, and disciple them over time in biblical ways.

Missiological theology focuses on God's Word and mission to humans in their historical, social and cultural particularities. It rejects the division between pure and applied theology, and sees mission both as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

Exegeting Human Contexts

Using missiological theology to answer our initial question, we must begin by exegeting our North American context. How can we understand the infinite complexity of human existence? Here the theories and methods of the human sciences can help us. I will use a systems⁶ model to examine humans, their institutions and their cultures. We can draw on physics, chemistry, biology and medicine to examine humans as biophysical beings; psychology to study humans as individuals; and sociology and anthropology to understand their social and cultural systems. We must also see humans as spiritual beings in relationship to God, angels and demons who are actively at work in our world.

How do we integrate these various perspectives of the human condition? The simplest

⁶ By 'system' we mean a number of units related to one another in which change in one of the units affects the others in predictable ways. Unlike linear causality in which change begins at one point and affects other elements, in systems causality change can begin at any point in the system and ramify out to the other units.

way is reductionism: to recognize these different systems, but to ultimately reduce them to one foundational system. For example, in the West we recognize psychological and spiritual diseases, but our treatments generally involve chemical and physical solution. Reductionism is easy, but it is false, for it does not recognize the contribution that each of these perspectives offers us.

A second solution is what Geertz (1965, 97) calls the stratigraphic method of integration. In this we use different models of analysis, but stack them up in discrete layers. As we analyze humans we peel off layer after layer, each seen as complete and irreducible in itself, revealing another quite different sort of layer beneath. Strip off the motley forms of culture and we find the structural regularities of social organization. Peel these off and we find underlying 'basic' psychological needs, such as the need to belong, have identity, and status. Peel these off and we are left with biological needs--food, shelter and medical care--that underlie the whole edifice of human life. This stratigraphic approach leaves us with fragmented humans, and a subtle reductionism that gives priority to the lower levels.

Reality is not compartmentalized. To gain a wholistic view of it we need to use the insights each of our disciplines has to offer, and combine these in a 'system of systems' model (figure 1).⁷ In this we recognize the validity of each type of analysis, but we then examine how

⁷ This system of systems approach was outlined by Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, Clyde Kluckhohn and others in Toward a General Theory of Action (1952). Their model consisted of three systems: personal, social and cultural. To this I have added the biophysical system and the material world, and the spiritual system noted in the Bible. The latter is the one we generally leave out of our everyday analyses of life, and one we must restore to the center of our understandings of humans and human affairs.

the systems interact with one another. For example, physical illness can cause psychological depression and spiritual doubts. On the other hand, spiritual struggles can cause physical illness, psychological anxiety and social tensions. Causes may arise in any of these systems, but the symptoms are often found throughout the whole. Consequently, when dealing with human ills, we need to treat the symptoms but also find root causes.

To complete the picture, we need to keep in mind that humans are always in historical contexts. When we study contextualization in structural terms, we must remember that this is an ongoing process, and each human scene is tied to a particular historical context with its antecedent forces and teleological pulls.

I would like to examine two of these systems, namely the social and cultural systems, to examine what we mean by the 'contextualization' of Anabaptism in the North American context at the end of the twentieth century. We need to keep in mind that a full contextualization of the Gospel requires not only contextualization in all five systems, but also in the interconnecting relationships that tie them into a system-of-systems. Before we apply social and cultural analysis to our contemporary setting, we need to understand the nature of these two systems.

Social Systems

All people live in societies--communities of humans who relate to one another in orderly ways. Without some social order, human life is impossible. Even the ascetics living alone in the desert were given life and nurtured by other humans.

Order in human relations is created by each community for itself. It is the result of human interactions which, over time, lead to socially acceptable ways of doing things. Patterns

emerge as people relate, imitate one another, learn from their parents or are forced to behave in certain ways by those with power over them. Patterns, in turn, help people to understand what is going on and how to behave in different situations. Social order makes community life possible and meaningful.

Social systems are not static. They are reinforced or changed every time humans interact. When, as church members, we let Pastor John preach on Sunday morning, we are acknowledging the fact that he is our 'pastor' and we are his 'parishioners.' If we decide someday that he is no longer our pastor, we will prevent him from leading church services. We may even decide we want another kind of pastor, and so change the social order of the church.

Social systems vary greatly from one society to another. In small bands they are based largely on ties of kinship and personal acquaintance. In modern cities they have many layers and are based more on institutions, voluntary associations, networks and contractual relationships.

All social systems have social, economic, political, legal and functional dimensions. By 'social' we mean the *definition, allocation and use of relationships*. These include the statuses and roles of those involved in interpersonal relationships, the networks, groups and institutions people organize, the societal categories of complex societies, and the emerging global social systems. Some relationships are egalitarian--they take place between people who see themselves as equals. Others are hierarchical. Some are informal, others formal--they are carefully regulated by rules of etiquette and order. Some are temporary, and others are lasting.

'Economics' has to do with the *definition, allocation and use of resources*. All societies use material resources. They plow fields, catch fish, build houses, ride horses, make music and

communicate by electro-magnetic waves. Economic resources also include intangible assets such as people's labor, time, specialized knowledge, the right to sing a song and magical powers. Each society decides who owns and who can use resources.

'Politics' involves the *definition, allocation and use of power*. Power is an essential part of all human relationships. It is the ability to persuade, or influence through prestige or moral authority. It is economic power, or even religious power, such as the ability to curse or condemn to hell. It includes the power of the weak to ignore, disobey, boycott and badger. Ultimately, it is physical coercion and the ability to destroy another.

The fourth dimension of human relationships and organization is legal. This has to do with the *definition, allocation and use of legitimacy*. Legitimacy is the people's consent to let certain persons have and use power. A person may use power to take control of a situation, but if she or he does not have the publicly recognized authority to do so, the act will be seen as a revolution. On the other hand, if she or he acts as a recognized leader, the actions will simply be seen as part of normal government.

A final dimension of every social activity focuses on a task or function--the purpose of the activity. People work together to build a road, celebrate a wedding, choose a leader or worship God. In the process they relate to one another using resources, power and legitimacy.

All five dimensions are found in every human relationship and social organization, and all interact with one another. At times it is hard to differentiate between them. For instance, people organize a church to worship God, and communicate the Gospel to the world. The church also has a social side to it. Members seek statuses in the congregation and gather in fellowship.

The church must deal with the economic dimension of life: buildings, salaries, volunteer time and copyrights on songs. It must also deal with political issues such as leadership selection and use of power. It is regulated internally by legal matters such as its constitution, by-laws and rules of order; and externally by government zoning rules, law suits and noise regulations. It is impossible to organize a church that focuses only on worship and witness and is free from economic, political, social and legal concerns.

The Gospel and North American Social Systems

How can an analysis of the North American social system help us keep our identity? Too often we are unaware of the foundations of the greater society in which we live, and, consequently, unaware of how it subtly draws us away from our biblical roots. I will examine four themes underlying North American social systems by way of illustration. Our response to these themes will require much prayerful consideration by the church as a whole, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives.

Materialism, Technology and Consumerism

Max Weber pointed out (1930) that modernity is rooted in the shift from a focus on other-worldly, eternal realities to this-worldly, existential realities. After the fifteenth century, the world of nature took center stage, and supernatural realities were increasingly relegated to private beliefs. Prosperity and the good life--defined in material terms--was seen as evidence that a person was among God's chosen people. This shift gave birth to the sciences, technology and business, with their emphasis on improving life on this earth. Later it led to a growing secularization of western society, and to pragmatism.

This shift is built on a materialist view of reality. As Steven Hawking points out, the foundation of reality is particles. If these are fully understood, we can control all the higher levels. The result is a technological approach to solving human problems. The cure for biological, psychological and spiritual illness is sought in the proper chemicals and, more recently, genetic engineering. Alfred North Whitehead points out that, America not only invents, it has invented the way to invent. The result is a constant explosion of new technology, and a continual remaking of society as the impact of these technologies are felt. The impact of this new technology is as revolutionary as the introduction of print by Gutenberg which broke the monopoly of the monks who copied manuscripts by hand and guarded them jealously. Walter Wriston writes, "Today the marriage of computers and telecommunications has ushered in the Information Age, which is as different from the Industrial Age as that period was from the Agricultural Age. Information has demolished time and distance (1997, 172)." The new technology will not go away.

One result of the rapid electronic technological revolution is the decline of corporate authority and the increase of individualism. In the church this leads to a weakening of denominational structures and church structures, and to 'virtual' churches and entrepreneurial missions.

A second result of modern technology is the rise of consumerism (Fox and Lears 1983, Kavanau 1986). A marked change took place in the North American worldview between 1890 and 1910, when it moved from asceticism to self-gratification, from the work ethic to consumerism. R. W. Fox and T. J. Lears write (1983, xii),

[T]he new professional-managerial corps appeared with a timely dual message. On the one hand they proposed a new managerial efficiency, a new regimen of administration by experts for business, government, and other spheres of life. On the other hand, they preached a new morality that subordinated the old goal of transcendency to new ideals of self-fulfillment and immediate gratification. This late-nineteenth-century link between individual hedonism and bureaucratic organization - a link that has been strengthened in the twentieth century - marks the point of departure for modern American consumer culture. . . . Consumer culture is more than the "leisure ethic," or the "American standard of living." It is an ethic, a standard of living, and a power structure.

Shopping has become a religious experience, providing meaning to life. Buying a suit give a person a sense of purpose and well being for a few weeks, a new car for a few months.

Borrowing has replaced saving as the way to fund our lifestyles. Along with consumerism comes a high valuation on material comfort and affluence. Americans believe their right to have luxurious hotel rooms with private baths, sumptuous food, and smooth quiet cars. Nor are North American churches immune. Air conditioning, comfortable pews, elegant sanctuaries are justified in the name of church growth.

A third fruit of modern materialism is the obsession with entertainment. In the media, substance and reason is rapidly being replaced by image, impression and novelty, and reality by virtual reality. Information is a "thing" that can be marketed irrespective of its truth, meaning or uses. Wars, crimes, and crashes become, without theological explanation, "the news of the day." Entertainment is the underlying ideology of most television and radio. It should not surprise us that television preachers control the content of their messages to maximize their ratings, or, as Neil Postman writes, "Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of

spiritual transcendence (1985, 116-117).⁸

The Brethren in Christ have a strong theology that calls into question the primacy of the material world, without rejecting its importance. The Church will need to address directly the new challenges of the information revolution, drawing on what can be constructively incorporated in its biblical worldview, and guarding against making materialism the new foundation for Christian life. As Christians, we oppose materialism, but it creeps into our churches by the back door. It is seen in our loss of sacred symbols, and, with them, a sense of sacredness itself. It is seen in the fact that many of us have sold out to consumerism and the good life here for ourselves and our children. Sacrifice for the sake of eternity is losing its meaning, and pragmatism and techniques have become an increasing part of our Christian lifestyles and church management.

Mechanistic Bureaucratic Organization

Peter Berger and his associates (1974) point out that the two hallmarks of modernity are built on a mechanistic view of social organization: factories in which we treat nature like a machine and shape it to our purposes, and bureaucracies in which we treat humans like machines and control them for our goals.⁹

Mechanistic social organizations have several key characteristics. First, they focus on an engineering approach to problem solving, and to technique as the way to find solutions. Jacques

⁸ For further analysis of this see Jacques Ellul, The Humiliation of the Word, 1985.

⁹ For an excellent discussion of how the mechanistic worldview displaced the medieval organic/relational worldview see E. A. Burt (1932) and E. J. Dijksterhuis (1986).

Ellul writes (1964, 3-5),

No social, human, or spiritual fact is so important as the fact of technique in the modern world. . . . Technique certainly began with the machine. . . [But] technique has now become almost completely independent of the machine, which has lagged far behind its offspring. . . . Technique has enough of the mechanical in its nature to cope with the machine, but it surpasses and transcends the machine because it remains in close touch with the human order.

Second, they have an obsession with high order,¹⁰ control and management. Production and profit are the supreme values. To achieve them we need to rationalize the processes to ensure efficiency. But efficiency and production are dependent on quantification--if you can quantify you can measure and control. The result is standardization and reproducibility, for nonstandard elements create confusion and chaos.

Third, mechanistic social organizations call for specialization, and overarching controlling orders, which entails hierarchy. Work must be divided into units and logically ordered. Research, planning, and management by objective are essential for those in charge to maintain control. Mechanistic models are intrinsically amoral in character. The supreme value is success, and any means is justified to achieve this.

In this mechanistic world, people are involved in the task of self-creation--they are responsible to engineer themselves to be whatever they want to be. Failure is not due to sin, but to bad decisions, and what people need is not forgiveness and reconciliation, but therapy.

The epitome of mechanical bureaucracy is the corporation, a formally organized association with its own internal social organization and sub-culture. Relationships in it are based on formal contracts--people join expecting to offer some service in exchange for some

¹⁰ We see this in such things as our emphasis on clearly defined categories, well ordered space, and being on time (Hiebert 1994).

rewards. They are free to leave, and the management is free to dismiss them. Roles inside the corporation based on specializations.

Bureaucratic organization is invading western Christianity, and many churches and denominations in North America are organized as corporations, with specialized roles and professional, paid leaders having specialized competencies. Relationships are based on contract and management, and promotions based on performance and achievement. Order, organization, planning, control, and production are valued, and pastors are increasingly seen as C.E.O. who must administer by setting objectives. Church growth is seen as the result of human engineering. This 'spirit of human management' is one of the 'powers' which we must challenge if we are to recapture a biblical vision of the church and of society.

As the Brethren in Christ grow in the West, and as their young move to the cities, the denomination will need to face the challenge of organizing complex institutions such as colleges, missions and denominational activities in ways that preserve their heritage of personal, relational organizations. It is easier and more efficient to run institutions using mechanistic principles, but in so doing the church is in danger of becoming an impersonal corporation, and of trying to engineer God's work for him.

Contractual Associations

A third characteristic of modern society is the shift from the primacy of the group and tradition to the autonomous individual, freedom and choice. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write,

The primary entity of democracy is the individual, the individual for whom the society exists mainly to assist assertions of individuality. Society is formed to supply our needs,

no matter what the content of those needs. Rather than helping us to judge our needs, to have the right needs which we exercise in right ways, our society becomes a vast supermarket of desire . . . (1991, 32).

Given this individualism, it should not surprise us that the most common way North Americans organize themselves in the private sector of society is by voluntary associations or clubs. W. Lloyd Warner notes,

[V]oluntary associations permeate every aspect of [North American] society. Whether for trivial and ludicrous or serious and important purposes, Americans use associations for almost every conceivable activity . . . When “something needs to be done” or “a serious problem must be solved” in the United States, private citizens usually band together in a new association, or use one already available (1953, 191).

Clubs are voluntary associations of individuals for a specific purpose. People gather to meet a particular need, and turn to other clubs to meet other needs. Membership is based on self-interest. Members join with other people having the same interest, not from a sense of duty or commitment to the well-being of the others, but for what they get out of the association. The social glue holding them together is weak and there is always the threat that members will leave.

Francis Hsu writes,

The lack of permanent human relations, the idea of complete equality among men, the contract principle, and the need for definite affiliation to achieve sociability, security and status combine and generate a situation in which club life is of the essence of existence (1963, 208).

Most churches in North America are clubs. Members join by personal choice, and are free to leave if the church no longer meets their needs. Their primary reason for joining is to get something personally out of their participation. Relationships are contractual, and members expect to have an equal say in the way things are run. Club style churches are not true communities, in the biblical sense of the term. Their very structure prevents them from becoming congregations where the new life of *koinonia* is a reality.

If the danger for denominational structures is that they become bureaucratic corporations, the danger for local churches is that they become homogeneous, single interest clubs. Norman Kraus (1974) traces our Anabaptist vision of the church as a covenant community, and calls us to return to our theological roots. Hauerwas and Willimon (1989) point out that we can only maintain this vision if we remain a counter cultural community within the larger society. The Brethren in Christ have the theological principles for preserving a biblical understanding of the church. The question is whether its churches can put these principles in practice and maintain them in the face of the massive stress on individualism, voluntarism and shallowness of the society that surrounds them.

Public/Private Split

As C. P. Snow points out so well (1964), another characteristic of our modern social system is a split between public and private domains of life. In an increasingly complex world that is beyond most individuals'

control, many people dissociate themselves from the bigger human problems as not their problem, and are content to find meaning in their own immediate circle of existence. Each of us experiences this split in our everyday lives (figure 2). At work reasoning and planning

| Figure 2 | |
|---|---|
| The Public/Private Split in North American Life | |
| <u>PUBLIC SPHERE</u> | <u>PRIVATE SPHERE</u> |
| <i>WORK</i> | <i>HOME</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mechanistic, control - rationalized - managed - production, profit | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - relational - freedom, emotions - choice - consumption, entertainment |
| <i>SCIENCE</i> | <i>RELIGION</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - public truth - facts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - private truth - faith |
| <i>INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH</i> | <i>COMMUNITY FELLOWSHIP</i> |

dominate our time. We manage our feelings and become “teachers,” “secretaries,” “workers,” and “preachers.” At home we “let down our hair,” express our real feelings and are persons. At work we build corporations, in private we organize clubs or join crowds that serve our personal interests. One consequence of the split is, as Leslie Newbigin points out (1989), that science is taught in the public sphere as universal truth, and religion and entertainment are confined to the private sphere as private opinion.

The church has struggled with its identity in this split world. Main line denominations tend to see themselves in the public sphere. They speak out on world events, and try to influence governments. Evangelicals, for the most part, have stressed the separation of church and state, and are content to operate in the private sphere, defining spirituality in terms of personal beliefs and emotions. The split raises difficult questions. Should we be content to see Christianity as an answer to our personal problems, but not to the problems of our society and the world? Should we define evangelism only in terms of individual witness? As Anabaptists, we have been uncertain about our relationship to either of these spheres. We want to have a holistic view of the Christian life rooted in the community of the church, but we live in a fragmented society. We want to be leaven in the society in which we live, but not participate in it fully as citizens. The Brethren in Christ ecclesiology points to an answer. Our churches are to be outposts of the Kingdom of God on earth bearing testimony to His reign. This means we must live in the tension of being a counter-cultural community in the larger society, but in the church we need to resist the public/private split that relegates our religious convictions to personal beliefs.

I have given a few examples of how an exegesis of our American social systems can help

us understand the world in which we live, and how that world is encroaching into the church. Such understandings are essential for us to know where the world is encroaching into the church. Only then will we be able to define ourselves within our social context, and seek to maintain our identity as Christians in the coming century. That task belongs to our churches, seminaries and leaders, and will always be an ongoing process, for while the Word does not change, the world in which we do does.

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