

ECONOMICAL WITH THE TRUTH: SWEARING AND LYING – An Anabaptist Perspective

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We're going to talk about swearing. But not just any kind of swearing. Not swearing in the sense of saying naughty words, offensive words, off-colour words, words your mother wouldn't approve of.

We're going to talk about respectable swearing. Did you watch the inauguration in January? Did you see George W. Bush raise his right hand in a solemn gesture, place his left hand on a sacred object – a Bible? Did you watch as he repeated, word for word, the sacred words which the Chief Justice dictated? Or, two years earlier, did you watch as President Bill Clinton began his testimony to the Starr Commission: "I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God"? What was going on in this swearing was not unrespectable; it was as respectable, as solemn, as the USA can get. That's the swearing we're going to talk about. We believe that there's a connection between that kind of respectable swearing and a crisis of truthfulness in our time – a crisis of truthfulness in which people swear oaths, but then are "economical with the truth."

This conviction comes from the Anabaptist tradition, the roots that we are exploring in these Schrag Lectures. We believe that there is life in the roots, and that the Anabaptists can be helpful to us in being Christian today. But the Anabaptists' ideas weren't original. They too believed that there was life in the roots. The root to which they kept pointing was Jesus Christ. It was from him that they got their concerns about truthfulness and swearing. They liked to quote this passage from the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." But I say to you, Do not swear at all . . . Let your word be "Yes, yes" or "No, no"; anything more than this comes from the evil one." (Matt 5.33-37)

This passage has received relatively little attention. In our experience scholars, ethicists, laypeople debate other parts of the Sermon on the Mount, but they tend to find this one not particularly interesting. For according to the conventional Christian interpretation, Jesus is only telling us what we already know: Christians are not to engage in false swearing.

Meanwhile, throughout the history of the West, truthfulness has been a big problem. It is a big problem in Western Europe and America. There is a lack of trust – people joke about it. They don't trust people who sell aluminum siding, they don't trust politicians, they don't trust advertisers. "Economical with the truth" – this is the wonderful phrase of a British civil servant, giving evidence in a case against a former intelligence officer who

had written a book, *Spycatcher*, which said some inconvenient things which the British security services construed as breaking his oath under the Official Secrets Act. And this led to the occasion in an Australian court in which a British civil servant gave testimony which intentionally misled a court; in his words, under cross-examination, he was being “economical with truth”. The irony is not hard to see. To protect the sanctity of an oath a civil servant was speaking with the intent to mislead. Many English people responded to this with a great deal of cynicism. Indeed, in England, where we have lived for the past thirty years, many people believe that there is a general crisis of truthfulness. But oaths seem to be doing well. They are widespread if not omnipresent in courts, British and American. And think of those swearings-in: the left hand on a sacred object, for Christians a Bible; the right hand directed upwards, symbolically towards God. And yet, in recent years there have been spectacular cases of perjury. Think of the O.J. Simpson trial, or the misadventures of Bill Clinton or Casper Weinberger.

For some people this perjury is a sign of a loss of Christian values. They bewail: “This is awful. The offenders ought to be tried, impeached, punished, fined, jailed. We’re losing our Christian values! What we need is truthfulness under oath, like it used to be!” Many Americans, observing the perjury, argue that it is evidence of a need to return to our roots, to the values of Christian civilization in the West, in short to to Christendom.

But what are Christian values in this area? What roots are worth returning to? Are the roots that are worth returning to *Christendom* roots?

Many members of the Anabaptist Network in Britain do not think so. This morning we introduced you to the Anabaptist Network, an association of some 600 people who are returning to different roots, to Anabaptist roots, in which they find inspiration for discipleship and mission today.¹ These people come from many Christian traditions – Anglican, Baptist, Charismatic, even Catholic. And they are discovering that there is life in the roots - not just the Anabaptist roots, but the deepest roots, the roots of the Early Church and especially the root of Jesus Christ. Today as in the sixteenth century, Anabaptists have contended: Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. His way is the way to live. And in Matthew 5 Jesus tells his disciples not to swear, not to swear at all. Many sixteenth century Anabaptists, like early Christians, repudiated the oath; both the Anabaptists and the pre-Christendom Christians did this because their roots were in Jesus. The Anabaptists felt strongly enough about this that they wouldn’t swear at all – even if it meant being sent into exile, imprisoned, or executed. They recognized that the oath was a traditional part of the Christian civilization called Christendom; they acknowledged that Catholic and Protestant theologians could come up with biblical arguments for the oath, especially from the Old Testament. But they compared Christendom with Jesus. And they were convinced of three things:

- Christendom isn’t necessarily Christian.
- An argument can be biblical without being Christian
- The oath is sub-Christian and does not led to a truthful society.

Anabaptism, in England and arguably here in Pennsylvania, provides a way of living for individual Christians; further, it opens up subjects – at times uncomfortable subjects – for debate about a wholesome way forward for society. Anabaptism we believe is useful in helping us to live Christian lives that are Christlike and in enabling us to form living communities of faith. Further, Anabaptism can give us something distinctive, something authentically Christian, to offer in the public square.²

In briefest compass, the Anabaptist contribution to the discussion on oaths and truth-telling is this: tell the truth, but don't swear. A representative quote is that of the early Dutch Anabaptist leader Menno Simons:

If you fear the Lord and . . . are asked to swear . . . continue in the Lord's Word which has forbidden you so plainly to swear, and let your yea and nay be your oath as was commanded, whether life or death be your lot, in order that you by your courage and firm truthfulness may admonish and reprove others.³

But what is an oath? It is made up of two elements. The first of these is a promise to perform some act or to tell the truth; and the second of these is a sanction – a divine sanction. For the promise is made in the presence of divinity who will punish intentional falsehood. The oath is thus a “conditional curse”.⁴

So the oath is a promise or assertion in the presence of God, who will punish one for falsehood. As such it is different from a *vow*, which is a voluntary promise made to God, as in a marriage or monastic vow. It also differs from a *promise*, which is an engagement to do or keep from doing something.

Of all of these the oath is the most solemn, with the most formidable consequences. To consider the ingredients that establish its solemnity, let us look at a woodcut *Flugschrift* emanating from south Germany in the early seventeenth century, *Eine gar schöne Auslegung des Eyd-Schwures* (A Very Beautiful Exposition of the Oath). In this mass-produced tract, both the illustration and the supporting text underline the solemnity of the oath.⁵ The illustration depicts the first element, the hand engaged in the holy ritual gesture of swearing; this hand is labeled “Justice”, with the thumb and index fingers pointed upwards – the thumb indicating God the Father, and the two upright fingers indicating God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. The ring and little fingers folded over are labeled the body and the soul. Next to the drawing is a written explanation of how important it is to each person of the Trinity that one swear truthfully.

In addition to the holy ritual gesture, in swearing there is customarily a second ingredient - a holy object. In President Bush's case, it was George Washington's Bible; in the Middle Ages it might have been a relic, a crucifix, or a book with intrinsic retributive power.⁶ As the person swearing the oath puts his or her left hand on this, a third ingredient comes into play - the holy words, which often refer to God, and which must be said precisely.

But what if one doesn't swear truthfully? Our German document contains a health warning: "*so helff mir Gott nimmermehr*": "so God will never again help me." If I swear falsely, the person swearing is saying, may God never again help me. Indeed, the offended God will punish the perjurer. Throughout most of the history of the oath, punishment for perjury doesn't come from the state; it comes rather from the avenging power of God, in whose presence one has made the statement. If I don't tell the truth, if I don't do what I say I will do, the divine power will punish me. Cross my heart and hope to die!

The oath has been important in societies across history. It was central to societies in the ancient world, to whom it gave society a basis of reliability and cohesion. Lysurgus, writing in Athens in the fourth century BC, wrote: "The oath is the bond that maintains democracies."⁷ These ancient pagan societies knew that the oath was a conditional curse. The Roman aristocrat Pliny the younger expressed this well: "[If my oath isn't true] let the divine vengeance fall upon my own head, and my whole family."⁸ In ancient Israel functioned similarly. A sample comes from Numbers 5.20ff. If a wife has "turned aside to uncleanness" while "under her husband's authority", let the priest "make the woman take the oath of the curse and say to the woman: 'the Lord make you an execration and an oath among your people, when the Lord makes your uterus drop, your womb discharge' . . . And the woman shall say, 'Amen, amen.'"

Despite this solemnity, despite the fear of the curse, people often took oaths lightly. In pagan as well as Jewish society, people took oaths on all sorts of objects on all kinds of occasions to establish the veracity of all sorts of statements and promises.

Into this situation came Jesus of Nazareth. In the fourth "antithesis" of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus linked swearing oaths with truth-telling.

I say to you, Do not swear at all . . . Let your word be 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything more than this comes from the evil one. (Mt 5.33-37)

In this passage there are two injunctions and a warning, which together link swearing and truthfulness. The first injunction is simple: "Do not swear." Jewish rabbis had been growing increasingly severe in their critique of promiscuous oath-taking; Jesus went one step further: he prohibited oath-taking altogether. Jesus' second injunction is a corollary of the first: Tell the truth: Let your words be yes, yes, or no, no. This, says exegete Paul Minear, is a "command for transparently honest speech".⁹ There is, for Jesus' disciples, to be one level of truth-telling, which they practice all the time; not two levels, depending on whether or not they are under oath. There is also a warning: this is very important, an area of spiritual danger. Anything more than the simple yes and no comes from the evil one. Justifying two levels of truth gives Satan a big foothold. In this passage, Jesus is appealing to his disciples: don't be people who are sometimes true and at other times economical with truth: be people who are transparent, transparently honest, all the time.

Most Christians for the first three centuries, the three centuries of pre-Christendom, adopted this approach.¹⁰ During these centuries Christianity was illegal; Christians were

often harassed, at times persecuted to death. During this period when pressured by the imperial authorities they refused to swear, even if they got in trouble. This was a part of the church's teaching. Around 150 C.E. the catechist Justin Martyr, who prepared people for baptism in Rome, stated:

[Jesus'] sayings were short and concise, for he was no sophist, but his word was the power of God . . . About not swearing at all, but always speaking the truth, this is what he commanded: 'Swear not at all; but let your yea be yea and your nay nay. What is more than this comes from the evil one . . . Those who are found not living as he taught should know that they are not really Christians, even if his teachings are on their lips.'¹¹

According to Clement of Alexandria, writing in Alexandria around 200, Christians were "addicted to the truth."¹² Apollonius, who was martyred in Rome in the late second century, at his trial gave witness that the Christians "have been ordered by him [Jesus] never to swear and in all things to tell the truth . . . for from deceit comes distrust, and through distrust in turn comes the oath."¹³ Most of the Christians of the early centuries of whom we have record repudiated oath-taking, affirmed their commitment to truthfulness, and rooted their convictions in Jesus' teaching.

In the fourth century, the Christians' position in society changed; from being a harassed minority they, by the century's end, had become a persecuting majority. And as this happened their approaches to many issues – including swearing oaths – began to change rapidly. The change began with the Emperor Constantine I, who in 337, on his deathbed, was baptized as a Christian. Much earlier in his reign, in 312 with the Edict of Milan, he had started the process of privileging Christianity. By the reign of Theodosius I at the end of the fourth century Catholic Christianity was not simply tolerated; it was the empire's only legal religion. As converts flooded into the churches for varied reasons – including the newly emphasized baptism of infants - a sociological equivalence developed between members of the civil society and members of the church. By the early sixth century imperial legislation required everyone to belong to the church.¹⁴

The result was Christendom – a unitary Christian society which united church members and citizens of the empire under the Lordship of Christ – which was to characterize European civilization for the coming millennium and a half. With the advent of Christendom, Christians began to justify swearing oaths. Leading this change was the now Christian imperial court, which thought it obvious that the operation of government required witnesses to be "bound by the sanctity of the oath."¹⁵ The people of the empire, who were rapidly being Christianized, at times lightly, were also eager to swear. As pagans they had sworn in many circumstances: and now that they were Christians they, to John Chrysostom's disgust, still swore in the marketplace, at work, at home: "Whether you are buying vegetables or arguing over two obols or threatening your servants in your anger, you always call on God as your witness."¹⁶

Many Christian theologians denounced this innovation. In the latter half of the fourth century, in Cappadocia Basil the Great declared, "Swearing is absolutely forbidden."¹⁷ In

Antioch Basil's contemporary, the great preacher John Chrysostom, warned of the spiritual consequences of swearing; it is "a hidden wound, a sore unseen, an obscure ulcer" that leads people to spiritual death. But Chrysostom found that many lay Christians were justifying the oath. Indeed, some believers said, "I take an oath in a just cause."¹⁸

Theologians, led by the great Augustine of Hippo in North Africa, by the turn of the fifth century had begun to refine this. Augustine was in awe of the oath – it was spiritually dangerous. So Christians should never swear, because perjury would lead to God's vengeance, "the stench of a dead soul."¹⁹

But Augustine allowed for exceptional cases. Christians should never swear except in two cases, when it would be tolerable for Christians reluctantly to swear. Augustine lists these in his treatise *On the Sermon on the Mount*. Christians should swear only when it was "a necessity": "swearing," Augustine argued, "is not to be counted among the things that are good, but as one of the things that are necessary." Further, the necessity of the swearing must be qualified by some greater good, i.e. it must enable people to believe "what it is to their benefit to believe."²⁰ With Augustine we find the an early articulation of the justified oath: the criteria of the "just oath" (the term is ours) are similar to those he developed for the just war. What Augustine justified Aquinas systematized. In the *Summa Theologica* (Q89) the just oath became a part of the ethical tradition of Christendom.

In Christendom the oath functioned much like the just war. Its criteria were flexible, and soon oaths were being sworn all over society. In Christendom you simply couldn't get away from the oath. The oath was omnipresent. According to one authority, the oath "became a factor in almost every social relationship."²¹ Christians swore oaths in lawcourts to validate truthfulness. They swore oaths in cities; many cities had an annual Swearing Day, when everyone gathered in front of the city hall and swore obedience and loyalty to the urban community and its rulers. They swore oaths in the countryside, where serfs swore loyalty to their masters and vassals swore fealty to their lords. They swore oaths in the marketplace to vouch for the honesty of weights, the fairness of prices and the integrity of contracts. They even swore oaths in the universities, where students upon matriculation swore to obey statutes of the university.²²

Scholars have observed that, in all this, the oaths were socially located. Generally speaking it was the less powerful people who were required to swear oaths, apprentices to masters, vassals to lords, townsmen to the town council, students to the professors. As one authority has commented, "oaths can be interpreted as a form of social control by those in authority over their subjects."²³

Of course in Christendom, there was a lot of frivolous swearing, even sacrilegious swearing. There was also a lot of perjury – even under oath people often lied. But in Christendom, perjury, significantly, was not a civil crime, to be punished by the state. It was a religious crime, to be punished by God, probably in this life but ineluctably in the life to come.

When the Reformation ruptured the unity of Christendom in 16th century Europe there was much denunciation of the abuses of swearing. Reformers Catholic and Protestant denounced frivolous swearing; they also bewailed the prevalence of perjury – “O, incomparable vice”, exclaimed English Reformer Thomas Becon.²⁴ Their solution to these abuses was a familiar one. As Martin Luther asserted in his *On Worldly Authority*, it was to return to the criteria of the just oath – necessity and the benefit of others. Christians should never swear, *except* “when it may be necessary for the good of the neighbour.”²⁵ In this, as in so many ways, Luther was in the Augustinian tradition.

The magisterial Protestant Reformers justified their position in two ways. They argued that the oath is Biblical: it was not difficult to find passages from the Hebrew Scriptures as well as from Pauline epistles and even the gospels to justify swearing oaths.²⁶ It was also easy to establish that the oath is Necessary. In 1560 the Swiss Reformer Heinrich Bullinger put it succinctly: “The oath is the button, which holds together the whole body of the common good.” Bullinger’s argument is the same, in 16th century Protestant Christendom, as that of the pagan Lycurgus in 4th century BC Athens. It was as evident to the Protestant Reformers as it was to the ancient pagans that there could be no social cohesion without the oath.²⁷ Clearly we are dealing here with something that is profound and primal.

Bullinger proceeded to state the functions of the oath in society: “Through the oath the community is placed under the civil authority, for one swears obedience to it. Through the oath the council is called into being. Through the oath all merchandising, whether buying or selling, honouring goods, debts and contracts are prepared and ensured. Through the oath the unwilling person is compelled [to receive] punishment and justice and whatever is necessary for common tranquility. Through the oath the laws and covenants are established and kept. Likewise, peace is also made through it.” And without the oath? Society would descend into chaos. Bullinger goes on: “So if you now take the oath away, this is all dissolved, counts for nothing, and all together becomes nothing, resulting in such complete confusion and disorder that it is impossible to describe.”²⁸

But what about perjury? What should happen when someone swears falsely? Punishment, the Reformers argued, is in the hands of God. Lutheran Reformer Philip Melancthon stated that “in an oath we ask God as the punisher of falsehood to punish us in earnest if we are lying.”²⁹ This teaching was spelled out for the ordinary person, who might be tempted to swear falsely, by pamphlets which the authorities circulated widely. For a good example of this, let us return to the *Very Beautiful Exposition of the Oath* which we have already looked at. After the drawing and theological arguments at the top of the page, which justified the oath, there were, at the bottom, five cautionary tales illustrating the dire things that happen to people who swear falsely. The last of these is particularly graphic:

A prominent man swore a false oath, and soon thereafter he died. But twenty years later, a female from the same circle of friends died. When the grave was

opened again, they found his entire body consumed, up to the right arm and hand, which was still undecayed, but coal black, with raised fingers, so it is established that through this the very truth would come to light. Therefore arrangements were made that this undecayed right arm and hand should be consigned to temporal punishment of being buried under the gallows, for it had dishonoured God so sacrilegiously, had lied to the Holy Ghost, and had deceived the beloved authorities [“die liebe Obrigkeit”] and his neighbours.³⁰

This was the Christendom world that the Anabaptists lived in. It was a world in which the ‘beloved authorities’, like the common people, assumed oath-taking. The Anabaptists, in contrast, came to assume something else. On the oath, as on other issues, they worked out position gradually, with some regional variation; but from the outset many advocated the position which came to dominate the movement. In obedience to Jesus, they would not swear at all.³¹

Menno Simons, in his *Confession of Distressed Christians* of 1552, stated what came to be a representative position:

If you fear the Lord and . . . are asked to swear . . . continue in the Lord’s Word which has forbidden you so plainly to swear, and let your yea and nay be your oath as was commanded, whether life or death be your lot, in order that you by your courage and firm truthfulness may admonish and reprove others.³²

Because Menno and his coreligionists followed Jesus, they tried to obey Jesus by not swearing, and by being committed to “firm truthfulness.”

What were the Anabaptists’ concerns that led them to reject the oath? As we look at the various statements by Anabaptists on oath-taking we find four. A first concern, especially important to the Swiss Brethren, was humility. The authorities might require people to swear what they are going to do, but the future is known only to God. Jesus had said, in Matthew 5, “‘You cannot make one hair white or black.’ You see, thereby all swearing is forbidden. We cannot perform what is promised in swearing, for we are not able to change the smallest part of ourselves.”³³ Some Anabaptists stated a second concern: that baptism was their sacrament which excluded the possibility of their swearing oaths. In their baptism they had died to their old ways and had been resurrected into new life in Christ. Baptism was their true oath; it was a *sacramentum* (Latin for oath) that bound them to Christ and to each other. Christians could take no oath of allegiance except that which they have already taken in baptism – to their Lord, Jesus Christ, and to his church.³⁴

A third Anabaptist concern, stated especially eloquently by Menno, reflected a commitment to telling the truth. Menno argued that the oath establishes two levels of truthfulness, when people are under oath (and they have got to be truthful) and the rest of the time (when people can say what they find convenient). But, as Menno states, God requires his children to be truthful at all times, not just when they are under oath. We “by the fear of God dare not speak anything but the truth; [we] esteem every word which

comes from our mouth as virtually an oath.”³⁵ Related to this was a final Anabaptist concern, which was one both of social criticism and social vision: the oath doesn’t work in producing a truthful society. Jesus had said in his Sermon that anything more than assertions of truth come from the evil one. In his *Epistle to Martin Micron* of 1556, Menno asked rhetorically: “Can the truth not be told without oaths?” He added, shrewdly: “Do all testify to the truth even when under oath?” The oath doesn’t do what its proponents pretend; it doesn’t lead to truthfulness. But there is another way, rooted in Jesus, that is available to all believers: “the earthly ordinances of men should give way to God’s ordinances if they would be Christian and proceed according to the truth.”³⁶

Underlying these concerns is the Anabaptists’ frequently stated assumption - the teaching of Jesus is practicable and socially relevant. Of course in the Old Testament Law swearing was commanded. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus recognized this (Matt 5.33): “you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times”. As Menno put it: “Christ’s position and doctrine is that Moses has commanded not to swear falsely,” but Christ had gone further: “under the New Testament one should not swear at all.”³⁷ Jesus, Menno contended, had gone beyond Moses. Imperfection has been superseded by “the dispensation of perfectness.” Christians are called to follow Jesus, to walk as he walked, to obey him – regardless of the cost, even persecution.

So the Anabaptists responded to the Reformers’ two concerns. Oath-taking, the Reformers contended, is biblical. To this the Anabaptists replied, by implication, that taking oaths may be biblical, but it’s not Christian. The Old Testament texts are clear, but so also is Jesus who says “But I say to you.” The Old Testament is as a shadow compared to the brilliant light that came with Jesus. The Anabaptist writers pointed out that in his epistle James (5.12) underlined what Jesus had said; and Menno pointed to the early Christian fathers for evidence that the early Christians had forbidden swearing. Upon the Reformers’ second concern, that oath-taking is necessary, the Anabaptists stated a different perspective. Oath-taking, they were convinced, isn’t necessary; it makes for problems. It leads to an abuse of power, to a lack of truthfulness, and to a proliferation of perjury – which infects and corrupts society. What would happen, the Anabaptists pondered, if Christians, instead of swearing oaths, would repudiate oaths and tell the truth? What if Christians would have just one level of truthfulness, not two?

Swearing oaths may use the Bible and sacred objects; it may employ Christian language and be rationalized with Christian theology. But this, the Anabaptists were convinced, is superficial. Oath-taking is not Christian; it’s Christendom. It doesn’t go to Christianity’s deep roots, to Jesus and the early Church. There was no swearing for Christians until Christendom came about, and Christianity became compulsory – and then the oath proliferated along with other deviations from early Christian practice. And then, as Matthean scholar Ulrich Luz of the University of Bern has pointed out, Christian biblical interpretation changed: scholars attempted “to remove the sting of the text and to make its demand easier or to evade it.”³⁸ 318 In Christendom, Christians began to devote their intellects to justifying what Jesus had forbidden and to explaining away what he had commanded. Christendom of course is a many-faceted phenomenon, with its glories as well as its perversions; but the Anabaptists were convinced that on many issues

Christendom represented a structural inversion of Jesus' teaching and the Early Church. In certain key areas, Christendom took Jesus' teachings, turned them upside down, and called the result Christian.

Refusing the oath made life difficult for the Anabaptists. Oath-refusal led to persecution. Refusing to swear on the annual Swearing Day (of allegiance) was tell-tale behaviour, making Anabaptists visible – and arrestable. For many of them this led to exile or worse. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that at times the Anabaptists broke down and swore an oath, the *Urfehde*, promising to obey the established authorities and to participate in the state churches, which was the only way that they could return to their homes and families after exile. So to return to families they swore that they would renounce Anabaptist beliefs and associations – and then they often broke their oaths: they started attending the illicit Anabaptist congregations again. The authorities punished this breaking of the oath in various ways – by execution, by renewed exile, or most benignly by chopping off the Anabaptists' two swearing fingers. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, there were in south Germany quite a few eight-fingered Anabaptists!³⁹

The Anabaptists, of course, struggled to live up to their vision. Their vision was not simply one of not swearing; it was of being people of transparency who belonged to communities of truthfulness. Like most Christians throughout time and space, the Anabaptists didn't always do what they wanted to do. Occasionally, as we have noticed, they swore oaths, especially when they were recanting to be able to return from banishment to return to their families. And they often asked – what does truthfulness require? What does it mean, when in danger, to tell the truth? One of the best-known stories about Menno Simons may be apocryphal; but it has lived on in Anabaptist-Mennonite folklore because it points to a perennial problem for people who are committed to being truthful. The story runs like this:

It was illegal to be an Anabaptist in the Netherlands, and the authorities had put a price on Menno's head. Menno was an itinerant pastor and networker among hidden groups, and he was very influential – so he was a prime target. One day Menno was traveling from one church to another, riding on a stagecoach. Instead of getting into the coach, he decided to ride up front, up high, with the driver. Suddenly policemen dashed up on horses; they were hunting for Menno. One of them shouted, "Is Menno Simons in that coach?" So Menno leaned down and asked: "Is Menno in there?" Someone from inside replied, "No he's not in here." So Menno told the policemen, "They say Menno's not in the coach." Foiled, frustrated, the horsemen rode away.⁴⁰

Now what should Menno have done? Should Menno have said, "No, he's not in there. I'm up here!"? Or was he being prudent, not totally transparent but not technically untruthful? Was Menno being "economical with the truth"? This story has been influential in the Netherlands, so much so that the Dutch idiom for "white lie" is *Meniste leugen*, a "Mennonite lie".⁴¹

The Anabaptists may have made a minor impact upon the Dutch language,⁴² but generally they didn't make a great impact on the European or American history of the

past four centuries. In Europe the authorities silenced and marginalized them; and the historians and theologians who are gatekeepers of orthodox thinking either ignored their ideas or rubbished them. Subsequent church leaders, led by the Protestant Reformers, viewed them as unrealistic and stupid. With reference to their views on oath-taking, the Genevan Reformer John Calvin said the Anabaptists demonstrate a “total lack of intelligence.”⁴³ There is nothing to be learned from them or their ideas.

But, silenced and marginalized though they were, the Anabaptist groups survived. Members of the established Christian traditions, who could not accept the Anabaptists’ views, nevertheless often expressed their respect for them. They were good, godly people, people of simple honesty and transparent integrity. Prof. Donald Kraybill of Messiah College has pointed us to a Pennsylvania Anabaptist, Church of the Brethren businessman-preacher, Cyrus Bomberger, about whom the following ballad has been written:

He’s a full measure man
 He won’t tell you a lie
 When Cyrus rolls his wagons to the scales
 Just wave him right on by
 Level on the level, signed with the shake of a hand
 Unaffected, well-connected
 Simple, honest man⁴⁴

Swearing wouldn’t have made Cyrus Bomberger more honest. His is an embodied Christian virtue, embodied in an Anabaptist. But do the ideas of the Anabaptists - as well as their character – have something to contribute?

We have observed that the scholars and publicists of the dominant Christendom traditions have ignored Anabaptist ideas. But the world has been changing, and increasingly, in many parts of the world, people are now turning to Anabaptism for insight. In England, the Anabaptist Network is a sign of this. Similarly, in the US there many signs of this Anabaptist resurgence, including Messiah College’s Schrag Lectures. The power of the Christendom establishment has weakened: whereas a generation ago regular church attenders attended services twice on a Sunday, now they may regularly attend services twice a month; families now shop together on Sundays; children’s softball leagues now have games on Sunday morning. Christendom, slowly but with accelerating speed, has been unraveling. And Anabaptist insights that had been ignored and put down now seem relevant. What observations might come from the Anabaptist tradition about swearing and truth-telling that might be relevant to the Christian churches today?

For one thing, we can observe that swearing has become less common. People in the Anabaptist traditions can observe this with gratitude. As Christendom has waned, the oath has gradually receded from the day to day experience of most people. Presidents of countries may still be “sworn in”, but not presidents of universities or presidents of corporations.⁴⁵ Businesses are governed by codes of ethics, not limited by oaths. And at colleges such as Messiah, students, in the first week of their residence, do not have to

swear an oath to obey all the dormitory rules or to return all books to the library, so help me God!

Second, people in other Christian traditions – along with atheists - have discovered some similar reservations to oath-taking as Anabaptists have had. The roots are there for others to discover. As Christendom unravelled, the nonconformist Christianity that began with Anabaptism has taken new forms. The Quakers of the 17th century were in many ways an equivalent to the Anabaptists of the 16th century. They were as vigorously opposed to the oath, and as firmly committed to truth-telling, as the Anabaptists; and they caused no end of trouble to the Christendom authorities. George Fox in particular excelled at showing up the Christian incoherence of oath-swearing; and William Penn wrote and campaigned extensively for the freedom to affirm.⁴⁶ In England, the Quakers from 1689 onwards were allowed to affirm rather than swear in court. And where the Quakers pioneered, soon unbelievers and members of other religions followed. Affirmation has come to be a full possibility in US and English law.⁴⁷

Third, truthfulness remains a big problem in societies. In the Law courts, Christendom Christians tried to enforce truth-telling with the oath. They really tried. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Christian spokesmen tried to reinforce the oath with ever more frightening stories of divine retribution. Remember the corpse with the blackened arm! This didn't work, and by the nineteenth century Christians gave threatening that God would enforce truth-telling and turned to the state. Instead, now laws of a new type were passed, laws which punished perjury – with fines and imprisonment. But perjury remained a problem. It is hard to measure this, but studies of perjury across time indicate that it has always been a problem – when it was viewed as a crime against God as well as when it is viewed as a crime against the state. The oath, whatever the sanction, hasn't led to truthfulness in the courts.⁴⁸

As in the courts of law, so also in society in general: truthfulness is a problem. Think of the idioms and expressions that are common today: cover-up; spin-doctor; massaging the truth; fiddling the books. Insurance companies report the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in false insurance claims. In England, when a politician speaks the unguarded truth it's called "making a gaffe." A recent study by Sisela Bok indicated that in many professions "deception is taken for granted."⁴⁹ People in the Anabaptist traditions are quite unshocked by this. They are not surprised at perjury, dishonesty, and people being "economical with the truth." Prevarication, obfuscation and outright lying are constants in European history - in pagan times, in Christendom, and also in post-Christendom. Swearing hasn't improved things. Indeed, swearing has made people think that they don't have to be truthful unless they are under oath.

So what ways forward might the Anabaptists and their descendants offer us in post-Christendom. We suggest three admonitions.

A first admonition: in post-Christendom let's monitor our speech: is it truthful? This raises all kinds of difficulties. We think of the "white lie", the "Mennonite lie." What do we think of the Mennonite Church leader who named his boat "Urgent Church Business"

so, when people phoned up, he could say he was out on urgent church business?! How about the little lies of polite discourse? How are you? “Fine” (even when I have a raging headache). Is it better to give an organ recital? Our point: we must think about our speech and monitor it. We must speak as if in God’s presence. And we must develop the habit – the default setting, if you will – of truthfulness.

This conviction may grow out of repentance. I (Alan) recall becoming aware that I was often economical with the truth. I tended to put the best gloss on things. I was tempted to say what people wanted to hear, or what I wanted them to hear. I had the inclination to be a social liar. One day I came to a realization of this. I felt a deep inner conviction and repentance. And I committed myself: to tell the truth; and when I don’t, when I fail, to ask God for forgiveness, and to write it down in my journal and possibly to tell somebody else. The Anabaptists, we believe, would agree: the way forward in seeking to have truthfulness in society is to become truthful people ourselves. And, especially, this involves avoiding any way of talking that indicates two levels of truthfulness. A political correspondent observed recently that a prominent US politician, when under pressure and wanting to be evasive, would often use the word “frankly.”⁵⁰ Let’s listen for the word “frankly” and its equivalents. Is the person not being frank the rest of the time? We can commit ourselves never to say “frankly,” never to say “to be quite honest.” Never to say “I swear.” As God gives us strength, we will be people who live on one level of truthfulness, not two. The social danger of swearing is that people think that they don’t be truthful the rest of the time.

We will be only partially successful. All of us will mislead others. Perhaps in extreme situations we should mislead – one can hypothesize a hard case in which a Protestant policeman stands at the door asking a woman whether an Anabaptist leader is hidden upstairs. What should she do? Should she tell a “Mennonite lie” – or will God provide a way out? We cannot know. We may pray that God will make us faithful; we may pray that God will forgive us when we falter. But the point is this: God invites us to change, and to grow in the desire that our habits and reflexes may be transformed so that we become truthful people.

A second admonition: in post-Christendom let’s take our homes and our churches seriously. It is in our families and our congregations that we learn to be truthful. These are the matrixes within which behaviour is formed. It is there that we learn to practice “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4.15). We learn to keep a confidence, to be good listeners, and to develop good process. We learn to approach a person with whom we are having difficulty directly, and not to talk about our tensions with third parties (Matt 5.14ff; 18.15ff). We develop the disciplines and the virtues of truthful, transparent people. A renewal of truthfulness in our society will come from intentional Christians who are shaped and formed in believing homes and in congregations of disciples of Christ.

Finally, the most important admonition: let’s follow Jesus. The Anabaptists would emphasize this. He told his first disciples, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14.15). He didn’t say that these commandments would be easy;

he didn't say that they would "work", that they would seem sensible to to people who are not his disciples, that they would lead to success. But he did say that those who obey him will find life in his commandments. And Christians across the centuries who have tried to do what Jesus said testify that time and again God has demonstrated that Jesus' surprising teaching is relevant and practical.

This true even of his words, "Don't swear at all, but let your yes be yes"? But where might this lead? What kind of contribution to society might grow out of this? The English Anabaptist theologian Stuart Murray has pondered this.⁵¹ A lawyer by training, Stuart for many years was an inner city church planter. More recently he has become England's first Ph.D. in Anabaptist history with special expertise in hermeneutics and mission.⁵² As a lawyer Stuart is fascinated by the oath; as an Anabaptist scholar he has studied its history; and as an urban missionary he is concerned to find things that will connect with people who have given up Christianity as old news, something tired and predictable. Stuart has discovered that inner city people in England are bored with Christianity, but that they are intrigued by Jesus.

So he has come up with the following proposal. What if Christians, instead of watering down Jesus' teachings to appeal to people, lived what Jesus taught – and taught it as good news for others? What if Christians did something unpredictable, surprising? What if Christians were to campaign for the abolition of the oath?

And why not? In the United States Christians campaign for other things: for the abolition of abortion, or against sports on Sunday, or to get prayers in public schools. Why not campaign for abolition of something – seemingly so religious – that seems to be against the self-interest of Christians but that Jesus himself opposed? Why not campaign against the oath?

The result would be surprise. And maybe, if Christians obeyed Jesus as well as preaching about him, people would be drawn to following him who is the TRUTH and the life. They would be discovering, with the Anabaptists and with many people today who are re-appropriating Anabaptist insights, that "there is life in the roots!"

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¹ For an interpretation of the Anabaptist Network in contemporary Britain and Ireland, growing out of sixty stories of its members, see Alan Kreider and Stuart Murray, eds. *Coming Home: Stories of Anabaptists in Britain and Ireland*. Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2000.

² For further development of some of these points, see Alan Kreider, "Christ, Culture, and Truth-telling." *Conrad Grebel Review* 15, no 3 (1997): 207-233.

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- ³ *Confession of the Distressed Christians* (1552), in L. Verduin and J.C. Wenger, eds, *The Complete Works of Menno Simons*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956, 519-520.
- ⁴ Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing*. London: Rapp and Whiting, 1968, 59.
- ⁵ The work of Paul Böhm, active in Schwabach and Ansbach, 1604-1631. In Dorothy Alexander and Walter L. Strauss, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut, 1600-1800: A Pictorial Catalogue*. New York: Abaris Books, 1977, I, 88.
- ⁶ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, 44.
- ⁷ Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 79.
- ⁸ *Panegyricus* 64.3.
- ⁹ Paul S. Minear, "Yes or No: The Demand for Honesty in the Early Church," *Novum Testamentum* 5 (1971), 2.
- ¹⁰ For a discussion of oaths in the first five centuries of the Church, see Alan Kreider, "Oaths," In *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson. New York: Garland Publishing, 1997, II, 823-824.
- ¹¹ Justin, 1 *Apology* 14-16.
- ¹² Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.8.
- ¹³ *Acta Apollonii* (Herbert Musurillo, ed., *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 93.
- ¹⁴ For discussion of the development of Christendom, see Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*. Christian Mission and Modern Culture. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999.
- ¹⁵ *Codex Theodosianus* 11.39.3.
- ¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *First Baptismal Instructions* 9.45, in Paul W. Harkins, Paul W., *St John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*. Ancient Christian Writers, 31. Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1963.
- ¹⁷ Basil, *Epp.* 22.1; 199.29; 207.4.
- ¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *Hom on Genesis* 15.17.
- ¹⁹ Augustine, *Sermon* 180.3.

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- ²⁰ Augustine, *On the Sermon on the Mount* 1.17.51.
- ²¹ W. Ernest Beet, "Oath (NT and Christian)," in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1917), 9, 435.
- ²² The literature on oaths in medieval Europe is immense. For samples, see Wilhelm Ebel, *Der Bürgereid als Geltungsgrund und Gestaltungsprinzip des deutschen mittelalterlichen Stadtsrecht*. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1958; Peter Blickle, "Huldigungseid und Herrschaftsstruktur im Hattigau (Elsass)." *Jahrbuch für Westdeutsche Landesgeschichte* 6 (1980), 117-155; André Holenstein, "Seelenheil und Untertanenpflicht: zur gesellschaftlichen Funktion und theoretischen Begründung des Eides in der ständischen Gesellschaft." In *Der Fluch und der Eid*, ed. Peter Blickle. Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1993, 11-63.
- ²³ Edmund Pries, "Anabaptist Oath Refusal: Basel, Bern and Strasbourg, 1525-1538". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Waterloo, 1995, 14-15.
- ²⁴ "The Invective Against Swearing," in Thomas Becon, *Works*, ed. John Ayre, Parker Society. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1843, I, 362.
- ²⁵ See also *The Sermon on the Mount*, on Matt 5.33-37.
- ²⁶ Biblical texts which have been cited as authorizing the use of oaths include Gen 24.2-3; Lev 19.12; Dt 6.13; Ps 110.4; Jer 4.2; Matt 26.64; Rom 1.9; 2 Cor 1.23; 11.31; Gal 1.20; Phil 1.8; Heb 6.16.
- ²⁷ Bullinger, *Der Widertöuffer Ursprung*, 2nd ed (Zürich, 1561, fol 181b; translated by Edmund Pries in his *Anabaptist Oath Refusal*, 266.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Philip Melanchthon, *On Christian Doctrine*, 93.
- ³⁰ Alexander and Strauss, *The German Single-Leaf Woodcut*, 1, 88.
- ³¹ For Anabaptist approaches to oaths, see William Klassen, "Oath," in *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1959), 4, 2-8; Heinold Fast, "Die Eidesverweigerung bei den Mennoniten." In *Eid, Gewissen, Treupflicht*, ed. Hidburg Bethke. Frankfurt-am-Main: Stimme Verlag, 1965, 136-151; Edmund Pries, "Oath Refusal in Zurich from 1525 to 1527: The Erratic Emergence of Anabaptist Practice." In *Anabaptism Revisited: Essays on Anabaptist/Mennonite Studies in Honor of C.J. Dyck*, ed. Walter Klaassen. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992, 65-84; idem, "Anabaptist Oath Refusal".
- ³² *Confession of Distressed Christians* (1552), in *Complete Works*, 520.

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- ³³ *Schleitheim Confession* (1527), art. 7.
- ³⁴ Anonymous Apology, Strasbourg 1528, in Pries, “Anabaptist Oath Refusal”, 197.
- ³⁵ *Confession of Distressed Christians*, in *Complete Works*, 923.
- ³⁶ *Complete Works*, 922-924.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 924.
- ³⁸ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989, 318.
- ³⁹ John S. Oyer, “*They Harry the Good People Out of the Land*”: *Essays on the Persecution, Survival and Flourishing of Anabaptists and Mennonites*. Goshen, IN: Mennonite Historical Society, 2000, 206.
- ⁴⁰ For comment on this oft-told tale, see C.J. Dyck, “Menno Simons and the White Lie,” *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 5. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990, 555.
- ⁴¹ Oyer, “*They Harry the Good People*”, 73, 145. The standard Dutch dictionary, *Van Dale*, has an entry for *meniste leugen*, which it defines as “half a truth, or a phrase or sentence which has been formulated in such a way that the listener can interpret it in a way which is different from what has been said in fact” (personal correspondence with Dr Alle Hoekema of Doopsgezinde Seminarium, Amsterdam, February 5, 2001).
- ⁴² The Mennonite influence upon Dutch society in the past four centuries has been wide-ranging. For an introduction to a large subject, see John Oyer, “European Mennonite Cultural Traditions,” in his “*They Harry the Good People*”, 65-73.
- ⁴³ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, ed. R.W. Torrance and Thomas W. Torrance. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, I, 191.
- ⁴⁴ *Brethren Encyclopedia*. Philadelphia: The Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1978, I, 158.
- ⁴⁵ In 1929 President Herbert Hoover, for Quaker reasons, made an affirmation rather than an oath at his inauguration.
- ⁴⁶ For samples of Quaker testimony in this area, see William Penn, *A Treatise of Oaths: Containing Several Weighty Reasons Why People called Quakers Refuse to Swear* (1675), in *Select Works* (1825), II; George Fox, *Journal* (Everyman Edition), 231.
- ⁴⁷ For the change in British law which give affirmation equal force in law to the oath, see Robin Spon-Smith, *The Law Society’s Guide to Oaths and Affirmations*. London: The Law Society, 1993.

⁴⁸ Helen Silving, "The Oath," *Yale Law Journal* 68 (1959): 1329-1390, 1527-1577; Benjamin P. Moore, "The Passing of the Oath." *American Law Review* 37 (1903): 554-568.

⁴⁹ Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life*. Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978, xvii.

⁵⁰ *Independent on Sunday*, *Sunday Review*, 7 January 1996, 4.

⁵¹ Stuart Murray, "Oathtaking in Vain." *Third Way* March (1990), 12.

⁵² See his *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*. Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2000; also his *Church Planting: Laying Foundations*. Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1998; Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001.