

## ПАНОРАМА

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### **MENNO SIMONS' AND MARTIN LUTHER'S INTER- PRETATIVE APPROACHES IN THE PROTESTANT HERMENEUTICAL HORIZON**

Hermeneutically oriented teachings constitute some of the most promising subjects of historical and philosophical research. Those teachings allow one to depart from a one-dimensional understanding of the ontological hierarchy reflected in the subjective horizon; this is done by turning attention to the connection between three constituents: the object of knowledge; the cultural, social, psychological and other contexts of the knower; and the subjective perception of knowing. In this respect, interpretational systems of the radical Reformation and Menno Simons' interpretative approach in particular seem to be of special interest.

H. G. Gadamer demonstrated that the first steps taken by hermeneutics as an independent discipline, associated with Schleiermacher, were quite limited because they aimed at reconstructing the past. Gadamer wrote,

According to Schleiermacher, historical knowledge opens the possibility of replacing what is lost and reconstructing tradition, inasmuch as it restores the original occasion and circumstance ... life. Reconstructing the original circumstances, like all restoration, is a futile undertaking in view of the historicity of our being. What is reconstructed, a life brought back from the lost past, is not the original [Gadamer 2004: 159].

Menno's hermeneutical model was characterized by innovation chiefly because he did not try to reproduce the past in which the biblical text was written, but considered the dialectical relationship between the past and the present. At the same time, this model considered the Bible as a whole unit. Gadamer, following Dilthey, saw it as a faulty, dogmatically based presupposition. Later on, as Gadamer points out, biblical criticism split the text as a whole into a collection of literary sources that

had to be subjected not only to grammatical but also to historical interpretation.... And since there is no longer any difference between interpreting sacred or secular writings, and since there is therefore only one hermeneutics this hermeneutics has ultimately not only the propaedeutic function of all historical research – as the art of the correct interpretation of literary sources – but involves the whole business of the historical research itself [Gadamer 2004: 177].

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Speaking of understanding the text rather than discerning its meaning, Gadamer was thus turning a biblical hermeneutics into a philosophical one, yet in doing so he assumed Luther's hermeneutics (to the exclusion of all others), calling it "Protestant." At the same time, the example of a radical hermeneutics shows that understanding of the text can be seen not as a logical act, but rather as a mode of human existence. This way, the concept of the interpreter's obedience, i.e., his/her experience of the Christian life, is introduced into hermeneutics.

Reformation hermeneutics, just as the phenomenon of the Reformation itself, has recently become an object of serious study; yet in academic circles, Reformation hermeneutics is often seen as mostly Lutheran (and only sometimes as Lutheran and Calvinist), which results in simplifying and even oversimplifying the diversity and wholeness of the philosophical and theological thought of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The methods and principles of interpretation used by radical reformers are hardly ever discussed in the works of the Eastern European authors who study the history of hermeneutics. For example, in A. Bogachev's monograph, *Experience and Sense* [Bogachev 2011], an excellent historical overview of interpretative systems is given. A relatively large amount (about 25 pages) of that overview deals with Protestant hermeneutics, but it is discussed only from the point of view of the classical Lutheran approach to the biblical text.<sup>1</sup> A similar perspective is presented in Z. Lanovik's doctoral thesis on biblical hermeneutics [Lanovik 2006a] and in her articles on the same theme [Lanovik 2006b]. Likewise, lack of attention to Anabaptist hermeneutics is characteristic for the works of Russia's leading scholar in this area, A. Arapov, who defended a doctoral dissertation on *The Hermeneutics of the Sacred Text*. In one of his articles [Arapov 2005], he gives a thorough review of biblical hermeneutics, but the Reformation period is represented only by Lutheran and Calvinist hermeneutics. All this contributes to shaping a one-sided and somewhat limited (in terms of content) view of the historical-philosophical and theological discourse in the studies of the hermeneutical systems of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the academic circles of Western Europe much more attention is given to the hermeneutics of the radicals, especially in comparison with its classical Lutheran/Calvinist counterpart. This subject is discussed in some monographs and dissertations. For example, in the three-volume work *A History of Biblical Interpretation* by Hauser [Hauser 2009], there is a large section analyzing the hermeneutical systems of both magisterial and radical reformers. Oyer compares these two hermeneutical approaches [Oyer 1964], although he does it from a confessional, Lutheran perspective. One should also mention the Ph.D. dissertations by Shelton [Shelton 1974] and Torrance [Torrance 1997], and the works of Packull [Packull 1996]. At the same time, such academic publications as *A Companion to the Reformation World*, edited by R. Po-chia Hsia [Goertz 2004], and *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology* [Bagchi 2004] describe only the historical events and the general theological views of the Reformers, whereas the characteristic features of their hermeneutical programs are only briefly mentioned. This leads to simplified representations of Protestant hermeneutics, something this article seeks to address.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the philosophical and theological differences between the two almost opposite interpretative systems used in the radical and magisterial branches of the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Reformation. Those two systems can be treated as nearly the exact opposites of each other. Doing comparative studies between those systems, we can see

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<sup>1</sup> A similar approach to the history of hermeneutics in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries is used in the articles by A. Bogachov: "The modern rationalistic hermeneutics. Towards the origins of semiotics and criticism," *Sententiae*, no. 2 (2011): 27–41; "The Beginning of the Modern Hermeneutics," *Doxa*, no. 2 (2015): 134–45.

not only the differences but also the strengths and weaknesses of each. This result can be achieved, in particular, by comparing the hermeneutical system of one of the leaders of the Anabaptist movement, Menno Simons (1496–1561), with that of the leading thinker of the Magisterial Reformation, Martin Luther (1483–1546).

The academic novelty of this article consists of the comparison and critical analysis of the respective influence the Lutheran-Calvinist and the Anabaptist approaches had on the interpretation of Scripture. Their interpretative strategies and methods have not been studied until now, resulting in less than complete descriptions of the Reformation era. A similar attempt to widen and specify the philosophical and theological thought of the Enlightenment period (that followed the Reformation) can be found in the works of S. G. Sekundant. He argues that reducing the critical German philosophy to Kantianism is an oversimplification that does not do justice to the complexity of the subject. The excessive emphasis on Kant typical for Reinhold, Fichte, and others who popularized Kant's thought resulted in neglecting the philosophy of Leibnitz, Wolff, and others. Such an approach to the history of intellectual development is unbalanced. In his study of Leibnitz's basic epistemology, Sekundant gives a more inclusive description of that period – something modern scholars can benefit from. He writes,

Without a detailed analysis of Leibnitz' epistemological ideas and discerning their critical foundations, it is, in our opinion, impossible to give definite answers to the question about who was right in the debate on the correspondence between logic (theory of knowledge) and metaphysics in Leibnitz' work and to the question about to what extent Kantian critique of Leibnitz' philosophy was justified [Sekundant, 2013: 33].

Studying Anabaptist hermeneutics also deepens our understanding of the Protestant Reformation and contributes to a deeper and multidimensional understanding of Protestant hermeneutics, which is important from the historical and philosophical points of view.

### **Core Assumptions**

The radical Reformation<sup>2</sup> has a unique place among the reformist movements. Not only was it always persecuted and despised in the Catholic regions, but it also was labeled as heretical and rejected by the magisterial reformist churches. The radicals were executed and tortured by the “enlightened” reformers just as much as by the implacable Catholics. It is well known that Luther called the radicals “Schwärmer” (“fanatic enthusiasts”) [Oyer 1964] and regarded them as sectarian heretics. Perhaps reacting to this attitude some of the members of contemporary so-called “free evangelical churches,” while being heirs of the ideas of the radical Reformation, deny their involvement in the Reformation movement [Prokhorov 2004]. Yet it was the adherents of the radical tradition (expressed in various evangelical movements) who played a decisive role in forming many fundamental democratic principles – above all the concepts of the freedom of conscience and religious tolerance. Also, they offered some original approaches to understanding biblical texts, approaches considerably different from the traditional ones. H. Bender in his classical work *The Anabaptist Vision* wrote,

There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the

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<sup>2</sup> The term “radical Reformation” has become well-established in contemporary research. A. McGrath [McGrath 2008] uses it to describe this religious group. G. H. Williams [Williams 2000] explains why this term is to be preferred.

Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice [Bender 1944: 4].

The radical Reformation represents a broad movement that originated in the context of the general radicalization of European society in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. A. McGrath showed that such movements and figures as humanism, anticlericalism, popular pamphlet authors, peasant revolts, the monastic reform movement, *Devotio Moderna*, the pre-Reformation reformers (J. Wycliffe, J. Hus, G. Savonarola) and others created fertile soil for the reformers' ideas and agenda [McGrath 2008]. From the beginning of the Reformation, the mainstream of this movement consisted of the churches of the magisterial direction (Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, etc.), yet the "left," radical branches within the Reformation were also very active, although extremely heterogeneous. Among them, one can single out the mystical wing, fascinated by prophecies, millennialism, and revolutionary transformation (T. Muntzer, the Zwickau prophets, the Münster community of 1536), and the opposite, rationalist wing that followed literalist exegesis and anticipated the historical-critical method in hermeneutics (M. Servetus, F. Sozzini). But historically, the most stable was the group of biblical Anabaptists (The Swiss Brethren) and their followers, Mennonites, as well as later evangelicals.

Menno Simons, after whom one of the largest and most influential centrist groups of the radical Reformation is named, was not a pioneer in the hermeneutical field of that movement. Neither was he a founder of that kind of Anabaptism that began in Zurich in 1525. He was a Catholic priest in the small village of Pingjum and later in Witmarsum in Friesland. He joined the Anabaptists after the Münster tragedy of 1536. His main contribution was in gathering the scattered Anabaptist groups and beginning their institutionalization. He organized them as churches with some hierarchy, discipline, and, what is especially important for our study, with a relatively stable theological foundation shaped by a certain hermeneutical system of understanding the Bible. He did not personally form Anabaptist theology, but as he heard it from the adherents of such views in the communities of "the brethren" (as they called themselves), he interpolated it onto his understanding of the Bible and then returned it to the congregations in the form of books and other written texts. In his "Reply to a Publication of Gellius Faber," Menno describes his conversion:

Afterwards it happened, before I had ever heard of the existence of brethren, that a Godfearing, pious hero named Sicke Snijder was beheaded at Leeuwarden for being rebaptized. It sounded very strange to me to hear of a second baptism. I examined the Scriptures diligently and pondered them earnestly, but could find no report of infant baptism. After I had noticed this I discussed it with my pastor and after much talk he had to admit that there was no basis for infant baptism in Scripture. Still I dared not trust my own understanding but consulted several ancient authors. They taught me that children are by baptism cleansed from their original sin. I compared this idea with the Scriptures and found that it did violence to the blood of Christ [Simons 1956: 669].

In this narrative the upward movement along the hermeneutical spiral is represented in a clear and most unequivocal way: Menno, having some prior understanding (based on the Catholic tradition and his reading of the Bible), was introduced to the Anabaptist interpretation of the Bible. He also read books written by the recognized leaders of the Reformation. Thus, critically evaluating this heritage and comparing it with the biblical standard, he wrote his works, which later were published and circulated among the radicals, correcting and affirming their congregational understanding of Scripture.

The radicals' hermeneutics, compared with the interpretative system of the classical reformers, was characterized by several important factors.

First, the leaders of the Magisterial Reformation were much better educated and more sophisticated culturally. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Oecolampadius, Melancthon, and others were highly educated humanists, experts in ancient languages. Their reformist views were developed in the academic environment under the influence of scholasticism, which they critically evaluated. The Anabaptist theologians did not have any serious education and relied on peasant common sense and conventional wisdom. Menno Simons was just a priest from a rural area; another leading theologian, Dirk Philips, was a simple Franciscan monk; Melchior Hoffman was a furrier. Naturally, they did not follow the scholastic analysis and could not develop a critical approach to the biblical text the way the magisterial reformers did. Instead of that, they began to form their own, in many ways unique, direction. It was built without the humanistic tools that were so popular among the classical reformers (Luther, Bucer, Zwingli). The radical hermeneutical system was born in the congregations, not within university walls, and that makes the researchers consider the Scripture-interpreting practices of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christians and the very process of creating the biblical text that appeared in the communities of faith as a written expression of the apostolic tradition. The biblical canon, formed within the church, must certainly be interpreted in the church, not in the university; that is how the radicals understood hermeneutics.

Secondly, their hermeneutics was not limited by the political interests of the powerful elites. Free from state control, it was different from the political hermeneutics interpreting the New Testament from the standpoint of Christ's victory and his dominance in society, which implied the power of the church. Unlike the Anabaptist approach, the hermeneutics of the classical reformers was in many ways dependent on societal structures. They understood the church as inseparably connected with the state (and de facto merged with society). A good example is Zwingli's decision to make the city council of Zurich the highest authority in the dispute about the mass (October 1523). His radical followers (Conrad Grebel and Simon Stumpf) considered it a betrayal of the Reformation cause and a political compromise.

Indeed, the reformers always had to take into account their patrons' interests, and that was bound to cause some influence, perhaps subconsciously, on their hermeneutics. It is especially clearly seen in their debates on infant baptism and in the interpretation of all texts related to that matter. Rejection of infant baptism unavoidably led to the idea of the church as a committed minority rather than to Christianizing the whole society. The reformers, no doubt driven by political ambitions, concluded that creating a New Testament church of true Christians was impractical. A much more practical approach was to bring the whole society into the church and influence society with the Word of God. Such a missionary paradigm was gladly supported by city authorities, who through the church gained spiritual and ideological control over all of society. Hence they agreed with the reformers, who in turn received their political support.

The radicals insisted that the church is a community of saints separated from the world. Their ecclesiological principle was separatism – escape from the sin-stricken society and from the state as an institution that used violence against the individual. While the classical reformers had to interpret Scripture in such a way as to keep the society stable and support the existing order of the government, the radicals read Scripture in a free, sometimes revolutionary way – without a need for diplomacy and fear of losing government support. The Anabaptists, no doubt, went to the opposite extreme, developing the hermeneutics of suffering and practicing sectarian isolation, which became the other hermeneutical horizon defining their understanding of the Scriptures.

Thirdly, one needs to remember that the principles of interpreting Scripture characteristic for the radicals in the periods of the emergence and development of the movement in the 16<sup>th</sup> century did not exist as a set of formulas. Contemporary scholars reconstruct radical hermeneutics using the confessions of faith, court testimonies of arrested Anabaptists, and a limited number of written sources. The reason had to do not only with the lack of educated and influential leaders in this movement but also with some disdain for education and learning as an attempt to regain the early Christians' simplicity. It is this fundamental theological intention that was a defining characteristic of the radicals' interpretative system. The ideal of Christianity for them was not in the future, but in the past, and that is definitely a major weakness of this movement.

Lack of a consolidated hermeneutical system also had to do with the lack of coherence within the radical Reformation. It was mostly heterogeneous and did not have a holistic theology. It has always been fragmentary. Different groups, including even those that were cared for by Menno Simons, had different theological views. It might seem that in such a situation one cannot even speak about the hermeneutics of the radical Reformation in the same sense one speaks about the theology of the Reformed or Lutheran churches: their theology is defined so precisely that it practically excludes any development per se. A heterogeneous and incomplete hermeneutical system of the radicals creates considerable difficulties for researchers but also leads to remarkable opportunities for hearing new, unexpected, in many cases highly original interpretations, discovering new hermeneutical horizons. Such an open dynamic system, reluctant to accept fixed confessional formulas, has considerable potential for development and enrichment. Yet, in spite of such variety, Anabaptist hermeneutics does have a discernible framework of orthodoxy accepted by all the groups. In other words, there is an area of indisputable theological doctrines and of universally accepted biblical understanding in all Anabaptist groups that makes it possible to speak of Anabaptist hermeneutics as a system of views.

Studies in Anabaptist hermeneutics began to develop rapidly in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A widely recognized authority in this area is Dr. Stuart Murray, Director of the Centre for Anabaptist Studies (Bristol Baptist College and Chair of the Anabaptist Network in the U.K.). In his works [Murray 2000; 2009; 2015] he gives the following description of Anabaptist principles:

1. The Bible as self-interpretive (it explains itself).
2. Christ-centricity (Christ as the center of the biblical narrative).
3. The New Testament interprets the Old Testament.
4. Pneumatology (only the Holy Spirit may interpret the letter of the Scripture).
5. Congregational or community-based hermeneutics (extraction of correct meaning is possible only in corrective interaction with the community).
6. The hermeneutics of obedience (the true sense of Scripture may be understood only in obedience to it).

Another very influential researcher of the Anabaptist tradition, H. Bender, in his major study *The Anabaptist Vision* [Bender 1944] singles out three basic principles characterizing the Anabaptist views:

1. *Christianity as discipleship*. That is, a true understanding of the Bible is to be confirmed by the godly life of the interpreter. Bender writes,

The Anabaptists could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective "experience," rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inner experience. Repentance must be "evidenced" by

newness of behavior. "In evidence" is the keynote which rings through the testimonies and challenges of the early Swiss Brethren when they are called to give an account of themselves [Bender 1944: 20].

2. *Church as a brotherhood.* A literal understanding of biblical instructions led the adherents of this movement to the idea of separation from society (the German word "Absonderung" means something similar to "segregation"), to the concept of "suffering church," and to the demands for true sacrificial brotherly love among the members of the community.

3. *Love and nonresistance.* This principle was understood as the rejection of all kinds of violence. It was inferred from the priority of the New Testament narrative over the Old Testament one and from the understanding of Christ and his commandments as the decisive focus in interpreting the whole Bible.

Luther's hermeneutical system was based on other principles; it stemmed, first of all, from the historical-grammatical analysis and historical context and it sought to avoid, when possible, allegorizing and all kinds of "spiritual" interpretation. Larry Shelton in his dissertation on this subject gives the following description of Luther's hermeneutics:

His procedure is first of all to gain an understanding of the general "scope" (scopus) of the text. He attempts to determine what the writer generally wishes to communicate. In this process he deals with history and geography as they relate to and illuminate the text and the relationship of God to man. Secondly, he attempts to elucidate the grammatico-philological meaning of a particular passage. In doing so, he conscientiously seeks the exact meaning of the words and warns against construing meanings to fit one's own theological presuppositions. Thirdly, he searches for the primary thought contained in the text, and attempts to reproduce in his own soul the religious atmosphere and experience of the writer [Shelton 1974: 218].

### **Menno's hermeneutics compared to Luther's**

If we compare the way Menno Simons commented upon and understood the biblical text with Luther and even with other Anabaptist leaders, such as Melchior Hoffman's reflections on the sacred text, we find that Simons' interpretation includes basic Anabaptist principles on the one hand, but on the other hand enhances them, filling them with a new meaning.

*Christ-centeredness and typology.* This feature is noticed by nearly all researchers since Christ-centered interpretation is evident in all the works by Simons. Klassen remarks: "Every book and pamphlet that Menno Simons wrote began with his motto 'For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 3:11). He saw Christ to be the focal point of all biblical revelation" [Klassen 1973: 38].

In this particular respect, Simons was not very different from Luther and other reformers. As A. Arapov points out,

Christ-centeredness of Luther's hermeneutics is its characteristic feature, which makes it different both from Erasmus' hermeneutics and from the scholastic hermeneutics. Every passage of the Holy Scripture points to Christ. Luther affirmed that the primary purpose of the Scripture is transmitting revelation about Christ. He expressed this idea in the formula: "Christus Regnum Scriptura" – "Christ is the King of the Scripture" [Arapov 2013: 17].

For Menno, the whole Scripture is read through the Christ-centered lens. He asks rhetorical questions: "Does not the whole Scripture direct us to Christ? Are we not baptized in His

name that we should hear His voice, and be obedient to His Word? Do you not boast to be the apostolic church?" [Simons 1956: 127]. Arguing with Micron, Simons points out: "I will read the Scriptures of the New Testament to you which testify that the whole Christ Jesus inside and out, from head to foot, visible and invisible, is God's only-begotten and first-begotten true Son" [Simons 1956: 857].

Menno's Christ-centeredness, however, did not only mean that the whole Bible speaks about Christ. He also insisted that Christ was the most faithful interpreter of the whole Scripture; thus one should listen only to him and in all things imitate him alone. The classical reformers paid little attention to this aspect of Christ-centeredness. Menno writes,

Tell me, dear friends, what do you do with the revealed and infallible Word and testimony of the Almighty Father, which He Himself has testified of His Son, and said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him? Matt. 17:5. Get this, Hear ye him! But you reject His Spirit, Word, and example, and follow and listen to those who with their spirit, doctrine, and conduct are from the bottomless pit, yes, patent antichrists and false prophets [Simons 1956: 216].

That is, one should not only see Christ in Scripture but also listen to him and him alone rather than Moses or any other teachers. For Menno and his followers it meant that in order to understand the Scriptures one should use not the historical-critical method, but rather an interpretive methodology that Christ demonstrated as he applied it to the Old Testament. For this reason, in Anabaptist practice typological, and often even allegorical, methods of interpretation were used: Christ and his works were being found in the most unexpected plots. The motivation was provided by the hermeneutical example of Jesus and the apostles – as the Anabaptists understood it.

For example, Christ pointed out that the three days and three nights Jonah spent in the belly of the whale are a prophetic indication of his death, burial, and resurrection (Mt. 12:40). One can hardly come to this conclusion studying the Book of Jonah with the classical hermeneutical methods. John in his Gospel quotes the words of the prophet Isaiah (Jn. 12:40) and interprets them: "Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him" (Jn. 12:41, ESV). None of the rabbinical scholars (and not even Isaiah himself) could have interpreted the prophetic text of Isaiah 6:9-10 in such a way that it would point to Christ and his glory. One could be confident that none of the commentators in the Reformed tradition using the scholarly-critical method would have given such an interpretation to the Old Testament text if John had not pointed it out.

Unlike Luther, who despised the allegorical method of interpretation, Simons was quite free in dealing with the Old Testament images; he did not consider their context and sometimes even their literal meaning. For example, he writes,

The whole earth perished in the waters of the flood, because the sons of God looked upon the daughters of men that they were fair, and took to themselves wives of all which they chose, and also because they would not be reproved by the Spirit of God, for every imagination and thought of their hearts was evil continually [Simons 1956: 113].

From the historical-critical perspective, in the text Simons refers to (Gen. 6:2-3) nothing is said about God's Spirit confronting the people living before the Flood; neither are the marriages between sons of God and the daughters of men mentioned as the reason for the Flood. But for Menno, the correct exegesis is not so important as the spiritual edification and the didactic conclusion. This is why he goes on to say, "Reflect upon the lusts with which the marriages of



the world at the present time are begun, yes, how men blaspheming and grieving the Holy Ghost are become like unto the horse and mule; how they all walk in the sinful way, the end of which is hell, eternal damnation, and death" [Simons 1956: 114]. He takes this kind of liberty in handling another Old Testament text: "Precious in the sight of the Lord, David says, is the death of His saints. It is Jesus of Nazareth whom ye persecute and not us. Therefore awake, desist, fear God and His Word" [Simons 1956:118]. The words of Psalm 116 (116:15) that he ascribes to David (although the author of the psalm is unknown) are, in Menno's opinion, addressed to the noble lords and princes who persecuted the Anabaptists. There is an analogy for it: Christ applied to his contemporaries, Sadducees, words that were addressed once to a totally different person in a completely different context: "And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said *to you* by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Mt. 22:31-32, ESV; italics added). Of course, Jesus knew that this text from the Book of Exodus was directed personally to Moses, not to his interlocutors, but he believed that typological redirecting was possible and he emphasized: "what was said to you." Simons often did the same.

Menno's Christ-centeredness was also reflected in the fact that the words of Christ and his example to him were much more important than all the other biblical passages. It is this understanding of Christ-centeredness that serves as a basis for the demand to imitate Christ in pacifism and not to use violent methods for resisting evil. Luther's Christ-centeredness has to do only with salvation – salvation through faith alone – but not with the practical life.

On relatively rare occasions Menno uses examples and illustrations from daily life. For example, explaining the dual (divine and human) nature of Christ, he uses a comparison with a King – Charles V:

Charles V is a son of Austria; he is also a son of Spain; not that he is, therefore, one son out of two sons but he is an only and undivided son. On the side of the father he is a son of Austria, and on the side of the mother he is a son of Spain. Thus, also, is Christ Jesus a Son of God and a son of man; the Son of God on the side of His Father, and the son of man on the side of His mother. Not one son out of two sons but an only and undivided Son, the Son of God and of Mary, as has been shown [Simons 1956: 808].

From the theological point of view, this is a questionable analogy that underlines a role-based relationship in the Trinity rather than a hypostatical, perichoresis-based relationship of the Persons of the Trinity, but it does demonstrate Menno's approach. He used the allegorical method much more rarely, although he did give an allegorical interpretation to the Song of Solomon: he interpreted the bride as an image of the church of Christ. In other words, Menno Simons does not accept the historical-critical approach to the interpretation of the biblical text, but he always easily combines a literal (sometimes even literalist) reading of the Bible with the typological (sometimes even allegorical) method.

This Christ-centered emphasis led the Anabaptists to give radical preference to the New Testament; they believed it had a higher priority than the Old. In a collection of articles commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Menno Simons' death, Mast points out that Menno quoted the New Testament three and a half times more often than the Old; and 40 percent of the New Testament quotes are from the Gospels [Mast 1962: 37].

The Christ-centeredness of the reformers' hermeneutics was formally defined by the words of Christ, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (Jn. 5:39, KJV), and by the apostolic practice of the Old Testament interpretation shown in the New Testament texts. Yet, from the general methodological point of

view, it is clear that Menno and other reformers had a prior understanding of how the Bible was to be interpreted – they had something that can be called “prejudice” in the positive sense of the word. In Menno’s case, such prior understanding is based, above all, on existential revelation rather than culture or some broader tradition, i.e., not on prior understanding (such as the prior tradition or general worldview). Of course, a general prior understanding played a certain role in Menno’s thinking, but his Christ-centeredness was based primarily on his conversion to radical Christianity. He writes about it in his reflections on Psalm 25:

Thus did I, miserable sinner, spend my days and did not, O God of grace, acknowledge Thee as my God, Creator, and Redeemer, till Thy Holy Spirit taught me through Thy Word and made known to me Thy will, and led somewhat into Thy mysteries [Simons 1956: 77].

It is hard to evaluate the veracity of such testimony from a purely academic point of view, but this experience resulted in a qualitative change in Menno’s hermeneutical horizon.

One should point out another very important reason for the Christ-centeredness of the Anabaptist hermeneutics – something largely ignored by many researchers. It was formed in opposition to the Münster movement of Melchior Hoffman, John of Leiden, Jan Matthys, and other mystics: they made the prophetic and apocalyptic parts of the Bible the center of their teaching and used some Old Testament practices, which was detrimental to the reputation of the entire Anabaptist movement. While for the mystics who were building the Kingdom of God on earth by the power of the sword, the central guiding idea was that of a millennium, as it was combined with personal revelations, biblical Anabaptists had to find another foundation in order to separate themselves from the mystics and emphasize that they had nothing to do with the chiliastic revolutionaries. This foundation was provided by such interconnected elements as their Christ-centeredness, by rejecting violence, and by peace-keeping. Pacifism was a hallmark of that movement; it was through the prism of pacifism that Menno and his followers read the entire biblical text. For them, God was above all the God of peace, and in Jesus Christ he gave the message of non-violence to his followers.

*Self-interpretive nature of the Bible and eisegesis.* As nearly all scholars acknowledge, the idea that the Bible interprets itself (*Scriptura Sui Ipsius Interpres*) is typical for all reformers. But Simons understood the self-interpretive nature of the Bible in a way different from Luther, for whom this idea meant the supreme authority of Scripture. According to well-known Lutheran theologian G. Forde, the Bible is above the authority of the reader because it is the justifying, saving, and redeeming Word – *Sui Ipsius Interpres*. Forde sees it as simply a hermeneutical factor correlating with justification through faith alone [Forde 2004: 72]. For Luther, the claim that the Bible interprets itself means that the authority of the Bible is higher than that of the interpreter. For Simons, this concept has an entirely different meaning, and we believe it is important to demonstrate that difference. Menno believed that an obscure biblical passage is to be interpreted by a clearer one.

This understanding stems from the radicals’ view of the clarity and accessibility of Scripture. With childlike naïveté and simplicity, the radicals believed that the Author of Holy Scripture intends to reveal himself to people and to show them the way of salvation and the Kingdom of Heaven. From this belief it followed that he would give everything he wanted to give in the most accessible and multifaceted way, the guiding principle being, to use a modern term, “redundancy of information,” so that different people living in different times and cultures might not lose their way to Heaven. If one agrees with the radicals that the Bible, as a written record of the apostolic tradition, is the most precise and sufficient revelation of

God, then indeed the idea that Scripture is clear and self-interpreting logically follows. Menno writes about infant baptism,

Is there one under heaven who can attest by divine truth that Jesus Christ, Son of the Almighty God, the Eternal Wisdom and Truth, whom alone we acknowledge as the Lawgiver and Teacher of the New Testament, has in a single letter commanded that children should be baptized, or that His holy apostles taught it or practiced it? If so, there is no further need to force us with tyranny and punishment. Only show us the Word of God, and the matter is settled [Simons 1956: 129].

For Simons, the biblical text itself contains both specific instruction and the ultimate proof of its truthfulness. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture was liberating for many thousands of simple believers. It gave inspiration and powerful motivation for the personal study of Scripture, yet it is precisely at this point that the radicals had serious disagreements with the Lutherans and Calvinists.

Murray notes that the Anabaptists disagreed with the classical reformers, who insisted that uneducated people could not interpret Scripture. The Anabaptists believed that scholarly learning brought more damage than help: it obscured the Scripture rather than elucidating it. Also, they were correct in pointing out that the doctrinal emphasis narrows the scope of the study of the Bible and excludes fresh revelations [Murray 2000: 42-50]. Yet the radicals themselves held their own, although different, doctrinal assumptions – perhaps without realizing their influence on the interpretation of the biblical text. This allowed the classical reformers to bring their accusations: the radicals, having no education, simply do not see the interpretative difficulties that are impossible to resolve without sufficient knowledge of linguistics, ancient languages, history of culture, etc. What the radicals call “clear meaning of the Scripture” may turn out to have very little in common with what the authors of the biblical texts intended or implied. For Luther’s hermeneutics, the main task was to search for the original meaning of Scripture. Therefore, as Bogachev emphasizes, in the Magisterial Reformation, philosophical and philological hermeneutics were combined: “... misunderstanding was viewed as the loss of the original meaning, and hermeneutical reconstruction of this meaning was required” [Bogachev 2006: 50].

The radicals, however, had very different assumptions. If it is recognized that the Divine Author provided the meaning of the sacred text in order to influence the reader and not just to describe some ideas or events, then from it follows that the meaning of the text itself expects the reader to be more actively involved, to extract from the text certain lessons and instructions for his or her time and culture, as was demonstrated by the hermeneutics of Christ. In other words, if it is understood that the text was created not as descriptive, but as didactic and prescriptive, then the reader is to become, in some sense, a co-creator of the contextual understanding. From the radicals’ point of view, the Divine Author originally gave the abundance of meaning, which is to be realized as the text is appropriated in the reader’s existential horizon. It bears pointing out here that sacred texts are always read in a biased kind of way. Both faithful followers of these narratives and their ardent adversaries have always brought into the texts their expectations and prior understanding. In doing so, they also create a new, not always correct meaning, which has a negative role in understanding the text.

From this point of view, it is quite easy to explain why certain ideas of Simons, for example, “separation” in family life, were brought into his interpretation of the biblical text and came from his existential experience rather than from the holistic reading of the Bible.

Such an approach is often called eisegetical: a certain meaning, not necessarily corresponding to the original, is brought into the text. This is different from the exegetical approach that seeks to extract the original meaning from the text. Eisegesis is usually criticized, especially by Protestant theologians, who take it as an axiom that the only true meaning is that communicated to the original addressee. But as A. Desnitzky explains, “exegesis asks the question, ‘What does this text really mean?’ and eisegesis asks, ‘What can we think about in relation to this text?’ Eisegesis is not only superficial interpretation (although that happens often), but any rethinking of the text” [Desnitzky 2011: 23].

The pneumatological perspective in interpreting Scripture led Menno and other radical Anabaptists to adopt an approach that was eisegetical rather than exegetical. This practice is based on the understanding that the Holy Spirit not only inspired and led the authors who wrote down the biblical text, but the same Spirit as a living Person participates in the process of explaining and assimilating the text. Menno wrote about it, “It is that wisdom which is not to be brought from afar nor taught in colleges. It must be given from above and be learned through the Holy Ghost” [Simons 1956: 107]. He also said, “Faith accepts this Gospel through the Holy Ghost” [Simons 1956: 115]. It is the work of the Holy Spirit that makes the Scripture clear and self-interpreting for faithful followers of Christ.

The classic reformers could agree that the Bible is clear and self-interpreting in doctrinal matters, but not on the issues of ethics, church structure, etc. Besides, they introduced two levels of understanding the Scripture: the external level accessible to any reader and the internal, spiritual that is attained through illumination by the Holy Spirit. Such division opened the way for biblical criticism that treated the Bible as a regular literary work and applied to it all the scholarly methods. The divine, spiritual constituency was separated from the text itself, relegated to a different dimension, to the experience of faith. In that case, the pneumatological aspect of hermeneutics, although allowed, was treated as an expression of fideism rather than an aspect of the scholarly method.

*The holistic canonical approach.* One of the most remarkable features of Menno’s hermeneutics is his canonical approach, which he considered the most effective tool for the correct understanding of the Bible, and failure to use such an approach was, in his opinion, the main reason for all kinds of heresies and errors. This aspect of Anabaptist hermeneutics is often left underappreciated in contemporary studies. Menno writes about the ancient traditions and the teaching of the Fathers: “Test it first and examine it well in the light of the Word, Spirit, life, and example of Christ and His holy apostles, to see if it is not the true content, intention, doctrine, and sense of the *whole* Scriptures” [Simons 1956: 404; italics added].

“Whole Scriptures” – Menno repeats this phrase very often; it belongs to the core of his theological position. That position is holistic: he tries to bring together what at first may seem like two very different hermeneutical horizons. He joins the horizon of the literal understanding of the Scripture (Word) with that of the spiritual interpretation (Spirit) and tests it by the example of Christ and the apostles. The result, in his opinion, has to conform to the meaning of the whole Scripture, not just a part of it. One can agree with Aaron Schubert’s conclusion [Schubert 2017]: the Anabaptists read the biblical text through the dichotomy of literal and spiritual interpretation, and unity was reached through Christ-centeredness and church-centeredness.

Menno’s holism was seen not only in merging Scripture with life (which made him different from the classical reformers), but also in the attention given to the entire canon of Scripture. The term “whole Scripture” is used throughout the works of Menno: “Read and search the whole Scriptures, the true doctrine and testimony of the holy prophets, evangelists, and apostles, and you will discover most clearly that this godly repentance is to be earnestly

received and practiced, and that without it no one can receive grace, enter into the kingdom of heaven, nor have any hope forever" [Simons 1956: 112]. He makes similar comments about nearly every doctrine. So what does Menno mean when he says "whole Scriptures"? He means above all that interpretation of every part of the text has to be done in the context of the whole, and none of its parts must contradict any other, but only supplement each other.

H. Poettcker in his dissertation on the hermeneutics of M. Simons agrees: "Menno is intent on maintaining the unity of the Scriptures. In his contention with Martin Micron concerning the non-swearing of oaths he expresses the concern, that this matter must be weighed in such a manner that the unity of the Scriptures is maintained, and this will result in the correct meaning being achieved" [Poettcker 1961: 126].

Simons understands the unity of the biblical text not only in terms of the immediate and wider context. All the interpreters in all the times stressed the importance of the context. G. Osborne devotes to the context a whole chapter in his book: he calls it "the scaffolding on which we can build the in-depth meaning of a passage. Without a strong scaffolding, the edifice of interpretation is bound to collapse" [Osborne 2006: 37]. His book represents a classical approach to hermeneutics: the interpreter begins with considering the historical and logical context, and only after that the process of interpretation begins. The historical context is meant to introduce one to the historical situation, issues of dating and authorship, the audience and the purpose of the specific passage. The logical context, in turn, draws one into the immediate environment of the narrative and helps to place the biblical passage in the immediate and larger narrative of the text; eventually, it connects the meaning of a small fragment with a whole book or several books. Simons never uses this paradigm that became standard for the interpreters of the modern era. He sees the Bible as it is – as a whole, not in its original form and historical development. For Menno, the text exists in the form in which it was received by the church and passed into the hands of the researcher. He shows absolutely no interest in who wrote the text or where, and whether it had redactors or appeared at once. He does not look for the original audience of each book; he does not even divide the biblical text into separate books for hermeneutical needs. His conclusions are rarely based on single Scripture verses; but he works with a text composed of parts written by different authors in different historical periods as with a whole, single document. This feature can be called "canonical interpretation," and we would like to lay particular emphasis on it since the scholars who studied Menno's works did not pay much attention to it.

Unlike Menno, Luther always had a "canon within the canon." For him, the Apostle Paul and the Epistle to the Romans play a very special role, and all Luther's hermeneutics is developed on the foundation of saving faith. It is through the lens of this prior understanding that he viewed both the Old and the New Testaments. At the beginning of his sermon on First Peter, Luther says,

Therefore St. Paul's epistles are gospel to a greater degree than the writings of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For the latter do little more than relate the history of the deeds and miracles of Christ. But no one stresses the grace we have through Christ so valiantly as St. Paul does, especially in his Epistle to the Romans [LW 30:4; Pelican 1967].

For Menno, a saying like that would be simply unthinkable. Although he gave the New Testament precedence over the Old, he always had a holistic view of Scripture and based his interpretation on the canon as a whole.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a similar hermeneutical paradigm became known as the canonical approach, associated with the name of B. Childs [Childs 1970; Childs 1984], who tried to turn the interpreters from the search for the circumstances behind the text to the text “as it is.” In interpreting the Bible, Menno almost without reservation held to this system, which is now gaining popularity in different confessional groups.<sup>3</sup>

What is the foundation of Menno’s confidence in the reliability of the biblical text in the form he received? And what biblical text did he use? Poettcker argues that at the time Menno wrote his main work, *Foundation*, he used chiefly the East Frisian version based on Luther’s German Translation prepared by Bugenhagen [Poettcker 1961: 74]. Menno’s works indicate that he knew and used the Latin translation (Vulgate) and the Greek text of the New Testament published by Erasmus of Rotterdam. It means that by comparing different versions of the biblical text, Menno sought to eliminate possible textual inaccuracies. It shows that he had a mature understanding of the dual nature of Scripture and took into account the human factor present in the process of writing and transmission of the biblical text.

*The obvious and “the true sense.”* Like all the reformers of that time, Menno had a tacit understanding of the concept of the “true sense” and its distortions. Unlike the leaders of the Magisterial Reformation, Menno connects the true sense with the existential understanding of the category of the obvious, not with the scholarly analysis leading to the obvious. In other words, Menno is convinced that the Bible is the absolute revelation of God and that it clearly communicates what God wants to say to people of all ages. He is very far from postmodern relativism; he believes in absolute truth and thinks that this truth has been revealed to him in a sufficient way. The full title of his main work, *Ein Fundament unde klare awisinge van de heylsame unde Godtfellyghe leere Jesu Christi uth Godes woort mit gueder corte vervatet under wederumme mit grooter vlyte averghelesen unde ghebeter* translated from Dutch is: *A Foundation and Plain Instruction of the Saving and God-Pleasing Teaching of Jesus Christ, Briefly Compiled from the Word of God and Again with Great Diligence Read Over and Improved*. At the end of the Preface, he writes: “And ... [we] testify before you in Christ Jesus that we neither have, nor know any other positions, faith, or doctrine than that which may be plainly read, heard, and understood in the following from the Word of God” [Simons 1956: 108]. The expressions “plain teaching,” “plain understanding of the Scripture,” etc. are used throughout his works. Menno never questions the authenticity of the biblical text and has not the slightest doubt about its inspired authority. Perhaps he never reflected on why he had a firm conviction that objective truth exists and why the Bible is true. To him, it comes as the result of the self-evident premonition of the Truth and its appropriation without critical analysis.

Menno’s apodictic understanding of the highest authority of the Bible was prepared, in our opinion, not so much by reading theological works, as by his upbringing, the general mindset of his time, and by personal revelation at the time of his conversion. Recounting his conversion experience, he describes his previous state: his colleagues, other priests, were already familiar with the Scriptures, but he was afraid to read them: “I feared if I should read them” [Simons 1956: 668]. In the “Catholic” period of his life, Menno believed that the biblical text is too difficult for direct comprehension and requires an intermediary – an interpreter. But when he had doubts about the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic bread and wine, he turned not to

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI in his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) points out that “the text must be interpreted with attention to *the unity of the whole of Scripture*; nowadays this is called canonical exegesis” [Benedict XVI 2010; italics in the original]. An Orthodox researcher M. Kovshov believes that “the canonical approach suggested by Brevard Childs is of a special interest” for contemporary Orthodox Bible scholars [Kovshov 2011: 153].

Thomas Aquinas or to any other official theologian of the church to which he belonged, but to the text of the New Testament.

Finally, I got the idea to examine the New Testament diligently. I had not gone very far when I discovered that we were deceived, and my conscience, troubled on account of the aforementioned bread, was quickly relieved, even without any instructions. I was in so far helped by Luther, however: that human injunctions cannot bind unto eternal death [Simons 1956: 668].

This testimony indicates that Menno did not only put his trust in the biblical text, but also accepted it without *a priori* assumptions of commentators, and only later confirmed his revolutionary understanding by referring to Luther's intrepid example. Thus, based on trusting the Bible, and not on trusting experience, Simons' holistic canonical system of understanding the Scripture was formed.

*Relevant and applicable hermeneutics.* One of the most characteristic features of the entire Anabaptist movement and, above all, its herald – Menno Simons – was the idea of practical Christianity: the life of Christ is to be manifested in his faithful followers. Menno came to the concept of applicable hermeneutics, i.e., a system of understanding the text that discovers in it new meanings relevant to the changing cultural or social circumstances of the reader and sees ways of applying those meanings to daily life.

This principle was the main reason why Menno did not accept the interpretation of the Bible developed by the classical reformers. Those reformers, especially Luther, were mostly concerned with theology, not ethics. Luther was conducting the Reformation primarily in theology and for the sake of correct theology. He criticized his predecessors – J. Wycliffe, J. Hus, and others – for paying close attention to the moral condition of the church. Luther's theological discovery constituted the realization that God justifies the sinner without deeds, by his mercy through faith. That is why he was suspicious of emphasizing highly moral behavior; it could be viewed as an attempt to earn salvation by holy living. Luther's teaching about saving faith versus deeds and about God's grace versus man's merits was so radical that in practice it led to almost completely neglecting the ethics of Christian behavior and godly living, although Luther himself never wanted that outcome. Luther's paradoxical and even provocative statement, *Pecca fortiter* ("sin boldly"), is often quoted when one wishes to justify some immoral behavior. This well-known phrase comes from Luther's private correspondence – a letter to Melancthon, written in Latin, on 1 August 1521. We will quote this phrase in a broader context to show not only Luther's true intention, but also his rather tolerant attitude to individual sin. John Alfred Faulkner, a famous American historian, translated this letter into English. The passage in question is rendered the following way,

If you are a preacher of grace, preach a real grace, not a fictitious one. God does not make saved sinners fictitiously. Be a sinner and sin boldly [hold yourself for a great sinner], but believe more boldly and rejoice in Christ, who is victor over sin, death, and the world. There is to be sin as long as we are thus [that is, in this life there is bound to be sin, even in Christians, as both the Roman church and the Reformers held]; for this life is not the habitation of righteousness, but we look for, says Peter, a new heaven and a new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted according to the first publication of the English translation of this text: John Alfred Faulkner, 'Pecca Fortiter', *The American Journal of Theology* 18, no. 4 (1914): 600–604.

Obviously, Luther did not deny that a Christian's life should be righteous and godly, but his fascination with theology at the expense of ethics resulted in tragic developments in the practical life of Lutheran communities.

Seeing the results of Luther's hermeneutics and actively criticizing it in his discussions with Lutheran and Reformed theologians<sup>5</sup> Menno chose another system that was based rather on ethics than on theology. For him, the Lutheran idea that "this life is not the habitation of righteousness" was completely unacceptable.

Simons fully agrees with Luther that salvation is given according to faith, not according to human deeds or merits, but he always and everywhere insists that faith has to show itself in good deeds. He writes:

For true faith which is acceptable before God cannot be barren; it must bring forth fruit and manifest its nature. It works ceaselessly in love, enters willingly into righteousness, mortifies flesh and blood, crucifies the lusts and desires, rejoices in the cross of Christ, renews and regenerates.... A fruitless, impotent faith, the kind the whole world has, and which does not work by love, be it ever so learned, wise, eloquent, fine-appearing, and miraculous, is in the sight of God unclean, dead, and accursed [Simons 1956: 116].

Simons and the other Anabaptists, unlike Lutherans and Reformed preachers, emphasized the deeds of faith so much that they were often accused of preaching salvation by deeds. But Simons' soteriological sequence is perfectly biblical: faith comes first, followed by the deeds confirming it; regeneration comes first, followed by sanctification.

This principle that many later researchers called "Christianity as discipleship" logically leads to what Murray characterized as the hermeneutics of obedience. Emphasizing the importance of Christian practice for the Anabaptists, Murray argues that some of their leaders (for example, P. Marpeck) rejected the difference between interpretation and application altogether. According to the Anabaptists, the interpreter cannot explain the Scripture without accepting the responsibility for its application [Murray 2009: 423]. For a long time, the Anabaptist communities kept H. Denck's motto: "No man may truly know Christ, except he follow him in life" [Dyck 1978: 58].

Menno writes to his accusers: "You say, we are inexpert, unlearned, and know not the Scriptures. I reply: The Word is plain and needs no interpretation: namely, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thyself. Matt. 22:37, 39" [Simons 1956: 214]. Simons' argument is the following: the Word of God requires no interpretation because it is based on the commandment of loving God and one's neighbor. To him it is clear that only one who loves, and not one who is educated, acquires an understanding of the biblical text. C. Dyck writes about the Anabaptists:

When this kind of approach is pejoratively identified as biblical literalism it is usually assumed that the interpretation is simplistic, taken out from its historical and grammatical context, and applied legalistically. The Anabaptists, especially Menno, identified this kind of response as an easy attempt to get out from under the hard sayings of Jesus [Dyck 1978: 63].

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<sup>5</sup> See Menno Simons' "Reply to a Publication of Gellius Faber" and his polemics with M. Micron and John a Lasco.



The biblical Anabaptists insisted on applying the biblical text not only in the ecclesiastical or specifically religious life but above all in personal behavior. Simons demanded that the ethical authority of Scripture be applied to all the members of the group, not just to certain classes, as was the case in the Catholic tradition. Also, it is important to remember that Menno insisted on existential, rather than intellectual, knowledge and understanding of the Bible.

This applicable understanding is closely linked with the relevance of Scripture to Simons. To use a modern expression, Menno reads the Bible “here and now,” and he is not very interested in what it said “there and then.” In this, he also follows the example of Christ who used the Scripture, not in a historical way – as a message to the original addressee, but in a relevant way – as a message addressed to his contemporaries. For example, Jesus says, “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’” (Mt. 15:7-8, ESV). Christ quotes the Book of Isaiah (Is. 29:13) and explains that the prophet speaks about the first-century Pharisees, although the historical-grammatical context does not give reasons to think so. Menno does the same. As he writes about the preachers of his time, he puts all of them (except for Anabaptists) in one group and says,

... they shamefully deprive Christ of His honor and gain, and scatter His sheep; with the sword of their deceiving doctrines they destroy the poor souls who are so greatly loved by the Lord, so earnestly sought, and so dearly purchased. They so war against the Word and ordinances of the Lord that we say and teach with Christ: Let them alone; they be blind leaders of the blind [Simons 1956: 169].

On the one hand, such an approach is quite productive if the reader correctly evaluates the context and follows the intentions of the applied text. On the other hand, it is not without its weaknesses, and the main weakness is seen in either deliberate or unintentional application of the prophetic text to a wrong addressee or using it in the way defined by one's theological preferences and biases. In this case, it is not the biblical text that defines the content and purpose of the interpretation; it is rather the interpreter who “forces” the biblical text to conform to his or her intentions. Besides, such use of the text may lead (and has led on some occasions) to its distorted understanding resulting from ignorance of the basic historical circumstances in which it was written; or it may lead to illegitimate allegorical fantasies. Still, such a relevant reading of the Bible turned out to be highly practical because it taught the reader to develop a theological understanding of various situations in his or her life and to view personal behavior from the biblical perspective.

With the magisterial reformers, it was different. Their emphasis on the historical context often prevented readers from forming a personal hermeneutical system. Practically all the reformers in their hermeneutical work stressed the importance of “application.” Performing the historical analysis of the text they often sought to offer moral lessons and show the practical application of what was read. But very often they bypassed the stage of theological reflection and created a direct connection between biblical exegesis and moral teaching. That was a good move, but exhortations to the holy and devout life often sounded just like slogans and truisms and did not take root in the practical life of the listeners. The addressees of such a message knew examples of right behavior offered by biblical characters, but in real life, they behaved quite differently – largely because they had no idea how to apply the biblical norms and values to their daily situations.

Right now the popularity of applicable hermeneutics is rising. According to A. Thiselton, “To appreciate and to appropriate what we seek to understand with sensitivity have priority over the traditional method of scrutinizing ‘objects’ of perception, thought, and

knowledge.... Ernst Fuchs ... insists, '*The texts must translate us* before we can translate them.' The interpreter of the text is not a neutral observer, on the analogy of the supposed stance of the natural scientist or empiricist. *Understanding in the fullest sense demands engagement and self-involvement*" [Thiselton 2009: 7-8; italics in the original]. That is what Menno demonstrated in his works.

*Community hermeneutics.* Another remarkable feature of Menno's approach was his community hermeneutics. It was completely different from the methodology used in the classical Reformation. Luther, Calvin, and other fathers of the Reformation proclaimed that the Bible could be read by everyone, but in practice they allowed only that understanding of the text that they considered correct. It was enforced through their followers' obedience to the confessions of faith, catechisms, and other confessional documents. The radicals did not have unified written documents and, as many researchers point out, they were not bound by their confessions of faith since those confessions tended to be ethical and practical rather than doctrinal. A good example of that is the earliest Schleithem Confession of 1527 that deals almost exclusively with the questions of church polity and the relationship with the outside world.

The mystical and rationalist groups of early Anabaptists most often held to the interpretation defined by the charismatic leader of the group, whereas the biblical Anabaptists came to the idea of community hermeneutics. S. Murray notes:

Anabaptist congregational hermeneutics represented a refusal to endorse the Spiritualists' autonomous individualism, a rejection of the Catholics' drastic curtailing of private interpretation by the authority of ecclesiastical traditions, and a qualification of the Reformers' application of *Sola Scriptura*, which disenfranchised most Christians and replaced priestly tyranny with a tyranny of the preacher [Murray 2009: 418].

Community hermeneutics was based on the characteristic Anabaptist ecclesiology: holiness and unity were seen as the defining features of the church. The Anabaptists believed that the church is the community of saints separated from the world and joined with Christ in baptism. In his works Menno offered the following definition of the church:

... a gathering or congregation of saints, as the Holy Scriptures and the Nicene Creed clearly teach and present, namely, those who through true faith are regenerated by God unto Christ Jesus and are of a divine nature, who would gladly regulate their lives according to the Spirit, Word, and example of the Lord, men who are actuated by His Spirit, and are willing and ready patiently to bear the cross of their Lord Jesus Christ [Simons 1956: 667].

Viewing the church as a gathering of the members who are equal in their relationship to Christ, the radicals concluded that every member of the church is competent as an interpreter since everyone is guided by the Spirit and is directly connected with the head of the church, Jesus. That is why the Anabaptist communities rejected spiritual hierarchy; all members were truly equal in their understanding of the Holy Scripture. That understanding depended on the measure of their faith and on the revelations that each one received from the Lord individually. As a practical result of that, every member of the community could participate in the service, because all understood each other as priests of the Most High God. Such egalitarianism did not encourage the emergence of outstanding commentators but gave to the members an opportunity to correct each other's behavior and interpretation of the Holy Scripture. Thus, if an unusual interpretation or a new understanding of some passage from Scripture appeared, it inevitably was judged by the community or a group of communities.

The collective opinion examined, corrected, supplemented, and enhanced individual interpretations. This led to the enrichment of the content and to reaching a consensus – or, as the Anabaptists were fond of saying, unity and agreement.

The idea of consensus is illustrated by the Schleitheim Confession of 1527. Even the title of this document says, “Brotherly union of a number of Children of God concerning seven articles,”<sup>6</sup> and all the articles (except the first) begin with the phrase “We are agreed,” where the passive voice is used. It hints that the members were not gathered by themselves, but they were united from Above, and thus they came to agreement in their understanding of the Scripture. This reveals a deep spiritual reason why Menno and other biblical Anabaptists believed in the efficiency of the community hermeneutics. They insisted that the Scripture can be better interpreted in a hermeneutical community because the Spirit acts freely there, and only the Spirit can reveal the true meaning of the text. He does it when Christians gather to listen to him and to obey him. From their point of view, outside of the community only intellectual knowledge about the Truth is possible, but knowing the Truth per se is possible only after joining the community of faithful followers of Christ.

### Conclusion

As the comparison between the Anabaptist and classical Protestant approaches to the interpretation of the sacred text shows, Martin Luther's hermeneutics was quite different from that of Menno Simons and other early biblical Anabaptists. Due to several factors, especially the rejection of the radical Reformation by all the religious groups in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, that interpretative model and its founding principles were forgotten, although they do deserve some scholarly attention. In this hermeneutical system, one can clearly see such ideas as the failure of the quest for the original meaning, emphasis on the applied understanding of the text, its self-interpreting nature, etc. These principles, intuitively understood in the radicals' philosophical hermeneutics, bear similarities to the philosophical hermeneutics that was evaluated and developed by Gadamer and his followers in much later periods. The radicals anticipated what the founders of the philosophical hermeneutics would formulate. For them, the interpreter's task was not about perceiving the meaning, but about the ontological development of understanding as a moment in a person's life in the community. Therefore, their hermeneutics turns into a teaching about human existence and thus transcends exclusively biblical and theological horizons. According to the radicals, it is impossible to understand the truth without practical submission to it.

Menno interprets the text of the Scripture not in the historical aspect (as a message to the original addressee), but through the prism of its relevance – as a message to the contemporary reader. This is remarkably different from the historical-critical method so popular in Lutheranism.

The community hermeneutics, practically discovered by the Anabaptist tradition, is gaining prominence in contemporary theological/philosophical analysis, although this area remains insufficiently researched. Many of its questions seem to be quite relevant for contemporary scholarship. For example: how did a local church function as a hermeneutical community (and how can it function this way)? How is a consensus reached? What is the role of the leaders in the process of collective interpretation? All these questions invite further study.

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<sup>6</sup> The full text of the Schleitheim confession in English is given in William Lumpkin's book *Baptist Confession of Faith* [Lumpkin 1969: 23-31]. In Russian it is given in the book “Menno Simons i anabaptisy” (*Menno Simons and Anabaptists*) published in Germany (ed. S. Sannikov) [Menno Simons... 2012: 441-448].

This comparative study of Menno's and Luther's hermeneutics leads one to challenge the widespread view of the Anabaptist approach to the Bible as primitive and unscholarly. Although the principles of radical hermeneutics are indeed based on pre-critical methods of interpretation, studying this little-known movement may have both theoretical and practical importance for the history of philosophy and theology.

According to Wilhelm Dilthey, "The science of hermeneutics actually begins with Protestantism, although the art of exegesis and reflection on it are, of course, much older" [Dilthey 1996: 33]. Of course, Protestant hermeneutics can be understood, in a broader sense, as a forerunner of philosophical hermeneutics. The hermeneutics of the classical Reformation should also be supplemented by that of the radicals; that would allow one to see the richness and the pluralistic nature of the intellectual life of the Reformation period.

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### **Menno Simons' and Martin Luther's Interpretative Approaches in the Protestant Hermeneutical Horizon**

У статті порівнюються герменевтичні стратегії радикального і магістерського напрямів Реформації. Автор виявляє особливості герменевтичних принципів і прийомів розуміння біблійного тексту, запропонованих Менно Симонсом, визнаним лідером анабаптистів, і порівнює їх із аналогічними принципами і прийомами, які практикувалися Лютером і іншими діячами класичної Реформації. Хоча представники радикальної реформації не створили цілісного богослов'я, герменевтика цього напрямку досить важлива для розуміння феномену «протестантської герменевтики».

Інтерпретаційна система Менно Сімонса слабо висвітлена в сучасному історико-філософському й богословському дискурсах. Автор статті демонструє, що причиною цього є панування однобічних стереотипів: переважна більшість дослідників цієї області, говорячи про протестантську герменевтику, звужують і збіднюють цю область знання, зводячи її лише до лютерівсько-кальвінівської герменевтики.

У статті доведено, що Менно Симонс розвивав аплікативну стратегію інтерпретації, узятую ним з євангельських прикладів. Ця герменевтична система будувалася на теоцентричній ідеї особистого Одкровення й живого Присутності, а тому неминуче приводила до (1) принципу самоінтерпретовності біблійного тексту і (2) пошуку «ясного сенсу Письма», який міг бути мало схожим на початковий. Так сформувалася інтерпретаційна модель, заснована на (а) цілісному підході, (б) аплікативній герменевтиці, (в) корпоративній герменевтиці, (г) герменевтиці послуху. Таким чином, мова йде про самостійний підхід, що посідає важливе місце в загальній історії протестантської герменевтики.

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*Сергій Санніков*

### **Інтерпретаційні підходи Менно Симонса і Мартина Лютера в горизонті протестантської герменевтики**

У статті порівнюються герменевтичні стратегії радикального і магістерського напрямів Реформації. Автор виявляє особливості герменевтичних принципів і прийомів розуміння біблійного тексту, запропонованих Менно Симонсом, визнаним лідером анабаптистів, і порівнює їх із аналогічними принципами і прийомами, які практикувалися Лютером і іншими діячами класичної Реформації. Хоча представники радикальної реформації

не створили цілісного богослов'я, герменевтика цього напрямку досить важлива для розуміння феномену «протестантської герменевтики».

Інтерпретаційна система Менно Сімонса слабо висвітлена в сучасному історико-філософському й богословському дискурсах. Автор статті демонструє, що причиною цього є панування однобічних стереотипів: переважна більшість дослідників цієї області, говорячи про протестантську герменевтику, звужують і збіднюють цю область знання, зводячи її лише до лютерівсько-кальвінівської герменевтики.

У статті доведено, що Менно Симонс розвивав аплікативну стратегію інтерпретації, узятую ним з євангельських прикладів. Ця герменевтична система будувалася на теоцентричній ідеї особистого Одкровення й живого Присутності, а тому неминуче приводила до (1) принципу самоінтерпретовності біблійного тексту і (2) пошуку «ясного сенсу Письма», який міг бути мало схожим на початковий. Так сформувалася інтерпретаційна модель, заснована на (а) цілісному підході, (б) аплікативній герменевтиці, (в) корпоративній герменевтиці, (г) герменевтиці послуху. Таким чином, мова йде про самостійний підхід, що посідає важливе місце в загальній історії протестантської герменевтики.

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