Obedience to the Law of Christ. An inquiry into the function of the Mosaic law in Christian ethics from a Mennonite perspective
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Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 2

The doctrine of justification by faith as foundation for Christian ethics

§ 6. A common understanding of justification

Most often we find that a discourse on justification starts with an anthropology. We state as our first premise that man is a sinner and that this is a defining trait of human beings. His tendency to evil is so ingrained in his being that no effort on his part will be able to solve the problem of his inner weakness and immoral tendencies. At most, he is able on his own to curb his immoral desires outwardly or to be restrained by fear of violent retribution. Even in his positive tendencies, in his love for offspring and parents, there are traces of egoism and self-serving evil that make him less than perfect even in that. If man is understood like this, he is part of the problem of evil in this world and not part of the solution. “Nobody is righteous”, Rom. 3:10. Most often this is accompanied by an exaggeration of the demand of the Mosaic law. William Romaine could write about young believers’ ignorance of the full demand of the law, tempting them to legalism:

Secondly, from their ignorance of the law. They are not acquainted with its nature; for it demands what they cannot pay. It insists upon an obedience, spiritual, perfect, and uninterrupted; for the least offence, if but in thought, it comes with its fearful sentence. “Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.” On him who does not continue in all things, and not one man ever did, this sentence takes place; and if he was to live a thousand years, he could not do anything to repeal it. The law will always be to him the ministration of condemnation, and the ministration of death, and that is all it can do for him. It provides no remedy, and gives him no hope, but leaves him condemned to the first and to the second death; and yet, such is the blindness of the sinner, that he will be still leaning to the law, and afraid to trust wholly to the righteousness of Christ. 59

Man obviously does not live up to the perfect standard that God has set for him; creation is a broken reality, in need of redemption. Not only in his individuality, but more particularly in his social organizations, ranging from the “natural” life of families, tribes, nations to the social institutions of the state that are meant to curb his evil passions, man is unable to redeem himself. And even if he did reach a condition of controlled evil, this would not alleviate the more basic fact that man as such is estranged from his creator in his innermost being. Not only part of him, but his whole being is alienated from its intended condition. Man is a sinner before God and not only before his fellow-humans. Man is unable to do good. And the solution does not lie in the institutions that restrain him, but in a change of both his condition and his situation before God. As the “Puritan Catechism” states:

17. Q. Wherein consists the sinfulness of that state whereunto man fell?
   A. The sinfulness of that state whereunto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, (Romans 5:19) the want of original righteousness, (Romans 3:10) and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin, (Ephesians 2:1; Psalms 51:5) together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it. (Matthew 15:19)
We are guilty, unjust and corrupt, weak and unable to redeem ourselves. We are under the power of sin and even our conscience is unable to be our guide. After all, I might know what is good, and yet find myself unable to do it (Cf. Romans 7). Sin is the human condition: it is the inability to do good and the corruption of my will and conscience so that I do not do what
I can know as good. We can find the same kind of anthropological condemnation of humanity in other catechisms as well. The gospel Luther taught may be summarized by this quotation from his Small Catechism:

For when we had been created by God the Father, and had received from Him all manner of good, the devil came and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil, so that we fell under His wrath and displeasure and were doomed to eternal damnation, as we had merited and deserved. There was no counsel, help, or comfort until this only and eternal Son of God in His unfathomable goodness had compassion upon our misery and wretchedness, and came from heaven to help us. Those tyrants and jailers, then, are all expelled now, and in their place has come Jesus Christ, Lord of life, righteousness, every blessing, and salvation, and has delivered us poor lost men from the jaws of hell, has won us, made us free, and brought us again into the favor and grace of the Father, and has taken us as His own property under His shelter and protection, that He may govern us by His righteousness, wisdom, power, life, and blessedness."

Here we find a different emphasis, not on our condition, but on our situation. It is release from captivity, from the bondage of sin and death and salvation from eternal damnation that gets the prime attention. The situation described therefore does not sound like an anthropology at all, but like a fundamental theological statement of our situation before God. Sin therefore, defines man not only in his anthropological condition but also in his theological situation. The first describes man’s inability and corruption as something intrinsic to man, the second his status of alienation from God and of being captive to forces outside himself. Both the human condition and the human situation are therefore to be defined as ‘sin.”

Still, whether the statements focus on the condition or the situation of man, the complete weakness and absolute inability of man to stand before God equals the emphasis on the brokenness of creation and the power of sin that was expressed in the Westminster catechism.

God is unable because of His character of absolute righteousness to let pass the sins of man. There is an absolute necessity for justice. He must remain true to the law and punish the sins of man and can only do so by condemning man to (eternal) death. If God wants to redeem man, He cannot overlook the demand of justice. It is not His “metier” to forgive, as Voltaire had put it. The price that God demanded for this satisfaction must be fully congruent with the debt that mankind had incurred for its sins. Most of all, sin was an offense against God’s majesty and honor. Divine grace had to comply with the demand for justice in order to be operational in the forgiveness of humankind.

And now comes the main point. Into this dismal state of affairs God wanted to bring a decisive change; faith affirms a historical initiative on the part of God. There is another basic determination of mankind: man is a created being, intended by His Creator to be good and to live by his relationship with God. The existing anthropological condition of man is neither his original state nor is it desired that he remain like that. If man was unable by his own obedience to God’s revealed will to redeem himself, then only God’s initiative could bring it about. God therefore had to reveal Himself both in His justice and in His infinite mercy and did so through the Cross of Jesus Christ.

For sin to be removed, it had to be atoned for. Only death could remove intentional sin. On the cross, Jesus Christ died as the expiatory offering for all and the substitutionary offering for all believers, at the same time satisfying God’s demand for justice and expressing His merciful love for mankind. Behind this is a reference to the idea that grounds the sacrificial theology of the Old Testament: that sins (unintentional transgressions against the covenant law) can be symbolically imputed to an innocent animal and then are removed through the death of the animal, i.e., are removed from history and are no longer part of the (moral) life of the perpetrator. Extending this imagery to include all sins (and not merely sins by mistake; intentional sins were ultimately atoned for by the death of the perpetrator) and combining it with
the notion of the martyr’s death that atoned for the sins of the whole people, the human sacrifice of Christ could be seen along those lines as expiatory sacrifice. This sacrifice for all sin had to be the eternal Son of God, because only a divine intermediary is able to die in someone else’s place and to be completely innocent and free from sin at the same time.

Through Christ, then, the ethical condition of man changed, since all guilt and sin have been removed to satisfy God’s justice, and for all those who accept in faith that God has worked through Christ, this expiation becomes a personal reality: God reckons our faith as righteous and effectual. No effort on man’s part is necessary to obtain this forgiveness, only the sovereign act of election and redemption by God. The believer is therefore justified by faith and not by works of the law. A typical expression of this atonement theory can be found in this quotation from a modern Baptist preacher.

The real issue is this—What did Jesus Christ do? Did the Son of God die to make salvation a possibility for all men, or did he make an infinite satisfaction to divine justice, accomplishing the eternal redemption of his people? The modern theory of the atonement is this, the Lord Jesus Christ died at Calvary to make it possible for all the people of the world to be saved, though he did not actually secure and make certain the salvation of any. And when any sinner believes on Christ, the blood of Christ becomes powerful and effectual to save him. This notion makes the blood of Christ a dormant and useless thing until the sinner’s faith makes it meritorious and effectual. But what does the Word of God say? If there is anything plainly taught in the Bible, it is this, the Lord Jesus Christ did actually put away the sins of his people, and did actually obtain eternal redemption for us when he poured out his life’s blood unto death at Calvary (Rom. 3:24-26; II Cor. 5:21 Heb. 9:12,26).

The doctrine, summed up catechetically and in its general Protestant version above, is not a marginal issue within Christianity. According to Alister McGrath, a variant of such a doctrine of justification is the “real center” of the theological system of the Christian Church, which betrays a certain Protestant emphasis. Without “proclaiming, in word and sacrament, the truth of what God has done for man in Christ,” the community of faith cannot exist. To be more precise, the doctrine aims at explaining how God has set man into a new relationship to himself. It is a description of God’s redeeming acts in Christ and therefore expressive of the essence of the gospel. Before we go into the issue of sanctification, the ethical condition that is defined by this doctrine of justification, we need to understand in particular how this doctrine differs from competing approaches to salvation.

McGrath may be right that this doctrine is at the center for Protestants of Lutheran and Calvinist persuasion, but it might also be called the greatest stumbling block, since no other issue has so divided the Church as this one. Justification has been discussed as identical to, or at least as intrinsically connected to deification through the Spirit (Eastern-Orthodox tradition) and righteousness through faith and works (Anabaptist tradition); as grace perfecting nature (Catholic tradition); in connection with the nature of repentance and conversion, becoming the bone of contention between Lutherans and Anabaptists; as a prerequisite of sanctification with the rise of Calvinism; as a secular optimist ideology of man’s divinely received goodness in modernism; as part of the vision of the eschatological Kingdom in contemporary social theology. Each of the three words in “justification by faith” has been understood in as many ways as there are participants in the theological debate. We must give our inquiry a more specific starting point: what then is the general outline of the Reformed view on justification?

§ 7. Luther: justification as the pattern of sanctification

The question before us is how Reformed doctrine explained God’s response to the situation
and condition of man. The Reformation took the doctrine of justification by faith to be the center of Pauline theology and thereby as the center of the gospel of Christ. "Justification" was considered a "legal fiction" because it involved the act of amnesty on the part of God, based on the righteousness of Christ as its external ground, that was imputed to believers. It was not a declaration of righteousness based on any intrinsic quality of the believer. Imputed righteousness remained very much disconnected from any objective and empirical achievement by the believer, since man could not win God's favor through works of the law or by any other merit (not even in the sense that the intrinsic righteousness of the elect after being sanctified by God in the eschatological future was the real basis of His declaration in the present).

In the words of the 17th-century Westminster Confession of Faith, God justified by "pardonning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their person as righteous." It was similarly stressed that not even faith, through which justification was gained, could be counted as a work of merit, since faith was a gift of God and not "an act of believing or any other evangelical obedience." Of course, we must not take this notion of legal "fiction," which means to exclude any intrinsic righteousness of the believer, to imply that justification has no basis in reality at all. God justifies man based on a substitutionary atonement that is very much real. The declaration of amnesty is a judgment in truth, though the righteousness on which it is based is alien and imputed and is intrinsically that of another person, i.e., Christ.

The so-called imputation is, however, not merely declarative, but also constitutive. It signifies the beginning of a process of sanctification of which man's evangelical obedience is the visible sign. If "imputation" is not about reality but a mere legal fiction, then it would make no sense to speak of Adam's sin being imputed to his posterity (so Rom. 5:12, 15 in this way of reading), nor of the imputation of the sins of the believers unto Christ. In these cases it would not be sufficient to take imputation to mean "declaration" only. So the language of "legal fiction" must not lead us astray here: Reformed doctrine might use legal metaphor, but it is very much aware that it is precisely that. The legal metaphor is a description of a spiritual reality. To Luther, the declaration is a creative judgment, a "making righteous by declaring righteous." As a consequence one might say, that to Luther, not only justification is by grace alone, but also sanctification is by grace alone. The pattern of justification (extrinsic, solo verbo, on the basis of God's sovereign act alone) was the pattern of sanctification as well. What was then the connection between justification as extrinsic act and the works of faith?

In principle, the forensic and the effective dimension of justification were not separated sharply in Luther's or Calvin's time. Justification could also comprise the entrance of the believer into the community of the Church, in which the justified could be counted as one of the just and be transformed by the creative force of the Spirit. The strict usage would refer to imputed righteousness, meaning that God would not remember the sins of the believer, would give to him the righteousness of Christ, and would reckon him to be righteous because of Christ's righteousness. Though Luther sometimes accentuates this forensic element, there is at least an eschatological dimension of justification in its wider usage, in which the believer will become intrinsically and fully righteous (cf. Pesch, 1981, p. 130). Besides that, however, Luther often expressed that faith is the most basic act of a person, and has its center in his behavior. To Luther, the declaration of righteousness was a creative judgment.

As we have seen, such a doctrine, which flows from the founding event of Christianity, must of necessity become the only foundation of discipleship and Christian obedience, the very heart of Christian ethics. From this central doctrine, all forms of obedience are seen as the fruits of gratitude, resulting from the fact that the justification takes us out of fallen creation and sets us apart. One of those fruits might be a specific ascesis: we make use of the world as if we do not use her to the full (1 Cor. 7:29-31) and the children of the wedding party will fast after the bridegroom is no longer with them (Cf. Matth. 9:15). All our works get the character of witness, they are demonstrations of our trust in God, anticipatory to His promise.
of a new earth, where righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13). Prayer and obedience and patience are the ingredients of this sanctification that is expressed more as inward than as outward reality. Ascesis then becomes a general attitude of response to a changed situation: our being in the world as a provisional state.

The Reformation, of course, particularly opposed the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, which it considered to be unclear (Luther against Augustine) or false (Luther against Thomas Aquinas) on the issue of man’s cooperation with God’s grace, allowing human merit to become grounds for redemption. That is presumably why the doctrine got such a polemic edge in the expression “by faith alone,” which formula was nowhere in the Bible except in Luther’s translation and possibly also in James’s rejection of popular Paulinism. The centrality of the doctrine is therefore in this sense a specific characteristic of the Reformation. Yet, without this doctrine or any other vision of what God has done for man in Christ, there can be no Christian Church, as McGrath has reminded us. For in the gospel, as Paul put it, the righteousness of God is revealed from (God’s) faith to (human) faith and it is that message which has the power of salvation to every one that believes (Rom. 1:16, 17). Such a clear statement on the core message of the gospel could hardly be ignored.

The emphasis on the revelation of God’s righteousness and the act of justification as extrinsic to the person of the believer has profound consequences for theology and ethics. Through it, the Church inherited the problem of the disjunction of the teachings of Christ with the doctrine of His person and work. The life of Jesus and His relationship to 1st-century Judaism, and the gospel of God’s Kingdom as He preached it, could then only be understood as a preparatory stage in the unfolding of the gospel as Paul understood it to be. Paul’s word of the risen Christ, that we “do not know Him any longer according to the flesh” summarizes that viewpoint. One of its main characteristics is the position that the Sermon on the Mount was meant to increase the awareness of our inability to perform works of the law, and was not meant to function as a code for actual obedience.

Furthermore, beginning from such an interpretation of justification, the development of an early Christian ethics and casuistry, as exemplified, e.g., in James, Barnabas, and Clement, can then only be seen as a return to legalism. The soteriological emphasis of Paul is perceived to give way to a disconnected doctrine of “good works.” This vestige of Judaism must then be a return to (in a theological sense) pre-Pauline ideas of unclear Jewish-Christian origin, or the result of the Christian-Jewish debate, and in either case a major deviation from the gospel. For any doctrine of good works that does not begin with justification as an extrinsic act of God leads to a denial of God’s saving act in Christ, and it therefore endangers the very heart of the gospel. Human righteousness and divine redemption are seen to be mutually exclusive.

This does not mean that the value of good works is denied, but that they are interpreted as a consequence or expression of faith. Faith itself is “the true fulfilling of the First Commandment” (Luther). Without faith, good works do not justify. But with faith, good works are not performed as if they stood on their own. Faith is the commander in the process, work only the witness. The work itself needs no commandment, it occurs by itself with the Christian. And all emphasis on works in the synoptics is merely intended to warn the believers not to neglect their obedience. All deeds of man need an inner connection to the principle of faith that “outward” works of prayer, fasting, acts of repentance etc. never have. Whether they are considered to be effectively provoked by gratitude or obedience, they have faith, i.e., the inner certainty and acknowledgment of God’s righteousness in Christ, as their principle. They are outward expressions of an inner acceptance of an objective reality, and that inner reality is the will of man which is obsessed with God’s will, not the will of man acting independently and of its own accord in conformity to the will of someone else. They are in that sense emphatically not intended as works of obedience. Christian ethics as concerned with works of faith implies nothing less than a change in the ontological status of human freedom.
Nevertheless, works are the sign of living faith (James 2) that works the good through love. So the result of living faith is a life of works that show and express the inner faith. In principle, therefore, justification, though in itself an extrinsic act of God and a legal fiction, is not just an objective change of our legal position before God. It leads by necessity to a subjective transformation as well, which is then shown by outward acts insofar as they are in conformity with faith. This can be shown from a passage from Luther’s introduction to the letter to the Romans, where he states:

Instead, faith is God’s work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God (John 1:13). It kills the Old Adam and makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. Faith cannot help doing good works constantly. It does not stop to ask if good works ought to be done, but before anyone asks, it already has done them and continues to do them without ceasing. Anyone who does not do good works in this manner is an unbeliever.\(^66\)

If faith in this sense is the source of good works, it is indeed something else than obedience, which must be aware of what is demanded before doing it. Obedience, by contrast, would not be constant, and would not work without being asked, and, most importantly, it would include an awareness of being motivated to act from within. The commandments are seen as the extrinsic and direct motive for obedience, and the concept of such an obedience seems to imply a self-centered awareness of duty. In this self-awareness of acting upon a commandment, faith seems to be violated, since it necessitates that man be directed to himself instead of to God. If faith is the transformation of inner man (hearts, spirits, thoughts and powers), then the works of faith can never be separated from life. Faith, then, is the total condition of inner man in his transformation by God, and as such is the standard of good works.

John Dillenberger said it as follows:

In faith, man stands before God in the light of grace. For him, even at his best, there is no other possibility. Hence, for Luther, good works are not determinative of one’s relation to God; they follow from faith as day follows night, as good fruit comes from a good tree. Where there are no works, there is no faith; the seriousness and joy of belonging to God are not known.\(^67\)

So works flow from faith and are the consequence of it. It is obvious that Luther was adamant that works and faith go together. But the problem lies in the relationship that the believer has with his works:

But the temptation of the believer is to look at the works which he does in faith and suddenly to reinstitute works and merit as a new form of slavery in the very citadel of the freedom of the gospel. For Luther, the ethical rigor of the New Testament and of the law should convince the Christian that he, too, is still sinner.

The emphasis on “faith alone” is meant to intervene where man might try to impose “works of grace” as a new kind of obedience that does not flow from faith, but replaces it. But in this sense, faith as “joy” and the feeling of intimacy with God is set up as the standard of behavior: It implies taking the ethical demands of the New Testament, of Christ in the gospels, merely as a pedagogical measure to instill in us even further the impossibility of obedience. Obedience is replaced by the inner feeling of submission; instead of acting against my own will by accepting God’s will as higher authority, I must “dislocate” my own will, or mortify my “flesh” and let God act through me.

Moreover, the very looking at one’s works spoils them. Genuine works point to God, not self. This is why Luther can declare that, apart from faith, all works are nothing but “truly wicked and damnable sins.” On the external, moral level, they may be better than other courses of action. But in terms of their total orientation, that is, in terms of one’s status before God, they are of no effect. On that level, everything is a matter of relationship, a rela-
tionship into which man enters by virtue of God’s unaccountable activity. Confronted by God, man cannot depend on a combination of works and faith, or faith and works, but only in faith not without works, or of faith active in love. The Christian is to live and to struggle, to be a Christ to his neighbor, and above all to trust God.  

The reference to the works of faith is in a way ambiguous. It is not claimed that faith enables man to work out his salvation in obedience to Christ. The reason we are commanded to do good works, or rather, bring forth the fruits of faith, is faith itself, not the desire for redemption or reward. The Catechism of Heidelberg states (Sunday 32, resp. 86) that good works are helpful to be assured of a justifying faith. If works of gratitude are there, then the reality of faith that is their cause is also there.

At a formal level, the logic of this argument is shaky. The syllogism that would deduce the existence and reality of faith from the existence of the works of faith is valid only if the works of faith are there only if faith works, if we have a correlation between the two. The works of faith must then be recognizable as by faith alone, and not able to be produced by secular motivations. If we lose the conviction that there is such a thing as a specifically Christian act, then this correlation is lost, and the deduction will not work. We cannot deduce the reality of faith from doing good as such. But the 16th and 17th centuries apparently did not have this problem, so it could be argued that good Christian works were present but were merely testimonies of God’s work in us. As Calvin stated in his Institutions:

Conscience being thus founded, built up, and established is further established by the consideration of works, inasmuch as they are proofs of God dwelling and reigning in us [italics mine]. Since, then, this confidence in works has no place unless you have previously fixed your whole confidence on the mercy of God, it should not seem contrary to that on which it depends. Wherefore, when we exclude confidence in works, we merely mean that the Christian mind must not turn back to the merit of works as an aid to salvation, but must dwell entirely on the free promise of justification. But we forbid no believer to confirm and support this faith by the signs of the divine favor towards him. For if when we call to mind the gifts which God has bestowed upon us, they are like rays of the divine countenance, by which we are enabled to behold the highest light of his goodness; much more is this the case with the gift of good works, which shows that we have received the Spirit of adoption. (Inst. III, 14, 18)

The outward reality of the works of obedience is there to give testimony to the reality of faith, not to give that assurance to others as signs of the authenticity of the faith, nor are they the intended goal of faith, though that goal is expressed in Paul, e.g., in Rom. 6:4. And of course they are certainly not intended to secure salvation as a necessary addition to the effect of faith.

As the fruits of faith, the works of gratitude are not performed for their own sake; in fact they are not performed at all. It should be asked whether we have here a reference to works of obedience, since obedience in a general sense implies an activity of the human volition in compliance with the will of another. The activity of the will is there in order to achieve the intended work, not to produce it as a mere sign of its own presence or to signify its extrinsic source or motivation. If the works of faith do not have that character of submitting my freedom to the known will of God, it is doubtful whether we can speak of obedience in this sense of the word. But if there is no specific Christian character to our works, which would formally be expressed by faith-obedience, the question is what Christian faith can have to do with ethics at all. We are left then either with a reference to the narrative context of Christian acts, as if there is a moral order in which moral acts would work better, e.g., to produce the Kingdom of God which Christians alone know about, or, we would have a reference to the motivation of Christians to do good. The definition of that good would be left to contemporary society. The contemporary development of Protestant ethics has shown how difficult it is to determine
the specific Christian contents of ethics. Secular humanism has been able to ground approximately the same historically Christian values on the basis of human dignity or the requirements of rational freedom.

§ 8. Roman Catholic doctrine: sanctification as prerequisite of justification

The Council of Trent opens its statements on justification with the thesis that man cannot "be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ." The grace of God, according to the second canon, is not merely lending assistance to man’s effort to live justly and merit the eternal life. All of this seems to be in accord with basic Reformation teaching.

The opposition to Reformation doctrine, however, comes through clearly in canon IX, where it says:

If any one saith, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such a wise as to mean that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to obtain the grace of justification, and that it is not in any way necessary, that he be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.

By taking up Luther’s emphasis on “faith alone” and opposing it to the notion of a cooperative work of “grace and charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit and is inherent in them” (Canon XI), the subjective transformation of man’s condition is emphasized above the legal and objective transformation of man’s position before God. Catholic doctrine presents us with a view of God in the end establishing righteousness in a believer, not merely declaring him righteous from the start. Obviously, different notions of righteousness and justification are involved here. In Roman Catholic doctrine, justification is the opposite of wickedness and as such something we do (Jer. 22:3); it is, though resting on God’s grace, our own. In Reformed doctrine, justification is the opposite of condemnation, and righteousness is only attributable to Christ. In Roman Catholic doctrine, being righteous is the opposite of being a sinner. In the one, justification is used legally; in the other, intrinsically or ethically, we might say, if such terminology would not add to the confusion by being ambiguous in itself.

§ 8.1 Augustine: making man righteous

The etymology of the word iustificatio that Augustine introduced proved to be of the utmost significance for the development of western theology. Augustine takes it to mean: justum facere, to "make righteous", iustitia therefore refers to a quality within man and not God. And what a justus, a righteous man, was, could be gleaned from Cicero and through him from Aristotle: iustitia meant reddens unicuique quod suum est (to give to each his own), or what is most often referred to as distributive justice. The Latin verb iustificari then takes on the meaning of being righteous instead of being righteoused, whereas the Greek verb dikaioun connotes being considered or estimated as righteous. So the question now became, how does God make man righteous? First of all, faith must be given to man since man’s freedom is not perfect. Man’s free will is taken captive by the Fall of Adam and cannot attain righteousness unless it is set free from its captivity under sin by divine action. This is not a denial of free will, since it functions within man as the ability to choose between good and bad, and on that basis he will finally be judged. Grace must come in, however, to heal this defective freedom and make it capable of striving for the good and desiring salvation.

Faith as a gift from God does precisely that. God operates within man’s rational soul to make him believe the gospel. However, man also has to receive this gift and appropriate it for himself. The divine operation leads to cooperation between man and God. Justification by
faith is therefore initiated by God but its goal is to restore man's own will to desire to do the
good. Only when man cooperates with divine grace will he become perfected and righteous.
So we must distinguish between the act of justification that initiates a process within man that
produces faith and restores his freedom, and the process of justification in which man cooper­
ates with God in his own sanctification. Augustine expresses this cooperation in several
places. Let us quote Augustine's own words here:

Now no man is assisted unless he also himself does something; assisted, however,
he is, if he prays, if he believes, if he is "called according to God's purpose;" for
"whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of
His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover, whom He
did predestinate, them He also called; and whom He called, them He also justified;
and whom He justified, them He also glorified." We run, therefore, whenever we
make advance; and our wholeness runs with us in our advance (just as a sore is said
to run when the wound is in process of a sound and careful treatment), in order that
we may be in every respect perfect, without any infirmity of sin whatever, a result
which God not only wishes, but even causes and helps us to accomplish. And this
God's grace does, in cooperation with ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord, as
well by commandments, sacraments, and examples, as by His Holy Spirit also;
through whom there is hiddenly shed abroad in our heads that love, "which maketh
intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered," until wholeness and sal­
vation be perfected in us, and God be manifested to us as He will be seen in His eter­
nal truth.\textsuperscript{75}

The work of divine grace in man's justification therefore boils down to "assistance" of
man's liberated freedom, the initial justification being precisely this liberation of free will that
is required to even desire to do righteousness. This cooperation of God is not exclusively
based on faith in Christ, as Augustine states:

And this God's grace does, in cooperation with ourselves, through Jesus Christ our Lord, as
well by commandments, sacraments, and examples, as by His Holy Spirit also."

Commandments, which allow man to acquire merit before God, though still seen as a gift of
God to the sinner. Sacraments, baptism in the first place, without which there can be no sal­
vation. Examples of holy living, to be emulated by the believers after their conversion. And
the Holy Spirit, which sheds the love of God in our hearts and is given to us in justification.
Justification therefore comprises the process of sanctification as well as the ethical and spiri­
tual renewal of the sinner through the workings of the Holy Spirit. Finally, man receives faith
and love by divine action, but if God has not given him perseverance, he will miss his final
goal of becoming a righteous person, i.e., justification.

Now what effect does this doctrine have on the basic shape of Christian ethics? Augustine
makes a difference between the substance of an act (officium) and its inner motivation (finis).
Righteousness is the possession of good will (on the basis of effective or operative grace) and
the actualization of that good will through cooperative grace. Only a Christian, therefore, is
able to do a good work in the face of God. A correct inner motivation is only possible through
the work of the Holy Spirit that causes love to be the inner motivation of that work. If man's
ability to perform a good work is dependent on his inner motivation, and if that is only re­
stored by the act of justification, then righteousness is only possible on that basis.

Of course pagans are able to perform good works according to their substantive character,
their officium. In other words, they can follow a rule of behavior which produces a correct
deed. But they do not acquire merit before God, since the source of these acts is not the aim of
achieving divine righteousness but their own defective free will in independence from God.
Only through justification is man able to submit his will totally to the will of God so that the
source (motivational power) of his acts is God alone, and only through this can there be a
righteous deed and, ultimately, a righteous creation again. The inner motivation is deemed so important here that it becomes the criterion for the distinction between good and evil. Up to a point, then, the outward reality of a moral act is denied to have significance. It is then obvious that such a position can hardly be called “legalist,” as if it only accentuated the outward character of a human act. But it posed the question of what constituted the proper inner motivation and how man acquired it. Luther’s answer, that a good deed flows from faith, is not unlike Augustine’s position in this respect.

We see in Augustine the emergence of what we might call the typical Roman Catholic doctrine of justification by faith. Righteousness is the opposite of wickedness; it is a real and inherent property of man, intrinsic to his nature as the ability to do righteousness, understood as to give to each his own. Since man’s liberty has been defective since the Fall of Adam, he needs God’s grace to be restored. God’s gift is the gift of faith, whereby we can seek God and strive for perfection. Then, in a secondary act, God’s cooperative grace steps in to assist man’s restored liberty toward the state of perfect righteousness, which will eventually be reached fully in the future. Justification by faith could therefore never mean: justification by mere knowledge or intellectual assent. Faith that saves is a trust in God that transforms man from the condition of wickedness into the condition of grace that works righteousness.

But how can man in his state of depravity be said to possess this faith? If God gives this faith, man is no longer depraved and wicked, but justified intrinsically, and if God did not add justification to the gift of faith, the faith that is left would merely be an intellectual assent that does not save. Augustine, then, takes justification to be all about God’s grace, declaring man righteous and making him righteous intrinsically. The cooperation that is demanded of man is in itself a gift of grace and not a human contribution which God only needs to perfect.

Despite this stress on grace, however, Augustinian ethics is primarily concerned with the change in man’s condition and not with his situation. Grace acts more like a teacher, restoring freedom, guiding man through the sacraments towards an improvement of his inner will. Justification is not the decisive pattern of sanctification, but only the removal of an obstacle that lies in its path. Christian ethics is about self-improvement, even if such is only possible through the grace of God, and it is an inner reality, not shown in the material nature of the specific Christian acts that are required. One and the same act, in conformity with the rule of behavior, could denote a good deed with merit for a believer and still be a sin for a non-believer who lacks the proper motivation.

§ 8.2 Thomas Aquinas: cooperative grace

We must turn now to the position of St. Thomas Aquinas. The notion of cooperation does not seem to (formally) diminish the sovereignty of God’s grace or its necessity. Without grace man is unable to do any good; he is not only not perfect, but lost. He cannot acknowledge what is needed for salvation without grace, he cannot acknowledge even what is his natural good, he cannot love God above all else, and he cannot earn eternal life. Man needs grace in two forms: as healing “form” and as divine movement. Only God’s grace as movement is necessary to be prepared for the reception of grace as form, to endure within the state of grace and to avoid sin. The theological basic statement is therefore: nothing can be done without grace, but with grace, it is man who is doing it.

The basic necessity for God’s grace is the radical submission of man under the power of sin. Grace changes this situation by effecting a change within man’s soul. God creates the conditions under which man can receive this changing effect. Grace is a relationship between God and man that effects something in man precisely because it is God’s activity. Grace is therefore a movement within God toward man, and results in a “quality” or a changed condition in man. If God’s grace had no such effect, and if man was not brought into such a condi-
tion, then God would in a way hold himself back precisely where He gives Himself fully. We would be able to withstand God's grace, or else the concept of grace would lack the correlated notion of power. The Christian existence needs to have a quality of spontaneous self-movement in the love of God, otherwise the notion of a personal communion of life between God and man would become illusionary. So grace is understood as doing something within man and providing thereby the basis for what man can do himself, because the ultimate goal of grace is a free response from a liberated human being in moral action, and not only in acknowledgment. God's grace, therefore, is the arrival of God's eternal love in the center of human existence, by which man is removed from the limitations of his nature unto a communal life with God. God's grace is completely sovereign in this work.

So what about the cooperation of man? God's grace works twofold: as "assistance" and as "form." (1) As assisting grace, the operative principle is the way God causes in man an act of volition by which he turns from evil to good. As cooperative principle, however, the volition that is set in motion by God commands other activities that work together with the primary volition. (2) The form-principle of grace as operative, however, gives a new being; cooperative grace, the response of man worked by God, leads to a new activity by man under the guidance of his new being. The justification of the sinner can be called an effect of operative grace: turning man from evil to good, transforming him into a new being. Merit, on the contrary, is the cooperative side of both aspects of grace: the activities that follow the primary volition toward the good, and the deeds of man that are under the guidance of his new being, all of which are workings of grace under the double aspect of coming to man from the outside, but as God's activity having an effect in the innermost self of man.

In the Summa Theologiae II, 2ae, we find Quaestio 113, entitled: "About the effects of grace." Article 1 discusses our topic: "Whether justification of the ungodly (impious) means remission of sin?" This first article deals with the question of whether the justification of the impious lies only in the remission of sins. If justification signifies a transformation of man, a change in a man's soul, the removal of guilt that is extrinsic or forensic cannot be equal to it. Every change or transformation means a change from one condition into its opposite. But a remission of sins does not signify such a transformation into the opposite. If we look at the removal of guilt in a different light and see it as a purification, Scripture seems to attribute that to faith, as in Acts 15:9. By faith their hearts have been purified. The soul of man is made free from sin by the act of faith.

Thomas answers this question and the objections by stating: If we speak about justification in the passive mood, it signifies a being-changed into righteousness (justitia) in the same way as heating signifies a change to being hot. Such justice can then be considered under three aspects: (1) as a certain condition in which a man lives, including a certain relationship in which man stands to his fellow-men. And (2) as a direction of man's reality with respect to the common good of all men, as social justice. There is still a third sense of justice: (3) the right relationship between man and God.

This third sense of justice is either something which belongs to man by his nature, as could be said of Adam after his creation, or it could be said to come to exist in a man who is transformed from one extreme into the other. And that is what is meant by the phrase: justification of the impious. The word "justification" derives its meaning from the goal of the act; the being righteous, and not from any intrinsic (forensic) meaning of the act itself or its source. I John 3:4 makes it clear that injustice means sin, disobedience. So being transformed into a state of justice must mean: the removal of that state of sin which is disobedience. In that sense, justification does mean the remission of sin, but not into a condition of innocence or removal of guilt, but into a positive new condition: being righteous. So evidently Thomas agrees with Augustine that justification must mean that a man is being made righteous intrinsically. The removal of sin can then only be a condition to be fulfilled in God's economy of
salvation, in order to produce that condition in a man.

If we can take Augustine and Thomas to be our only sources here, it is the basic view of the Roman Church that forensic declarative righteousness is combined into one process together with effective sanctification, a transmutatio quaedam de statu injustitiae ad statum justitiae, as Thomas puts it. Bonaventure called it a repair of the soul. Justification as an act of God within man is not extrinsic because an act of God toward man can never be extrinsic! How could God be limited by our nature in His effects on us? One might argue that only when a new paradigm for human consciousness (as monadically closed unto itself) was about to break into European culture could the possibility of a forensic and outward justification be expressed as the most fundamental. Luther’s emphasis on the paradox that we are justified precisely “as” sinners brings out this duality of our extrinsic status and our intrinsic condition quite sharply. The Reformation’s opposition to medieval Catholic teachings on justification and grace was in part prompted by the new paradigm of human consciousness and the anthropology of man’s utter depravity. But in its medieval shape, justification meant a change in the human condition first, and a change in his situation before God second.

But there remained also this basic difference: whereas Catholic thought focuses on the inner condition of man, aspiring to an inner submission to the will of God while considering the outward deeds to be important too, Protestant thought focused even more on this “inner” reality while grounding it on the absolute extrinsic nature of justification as the new situation of man before God. The inner morality of Catholicism that was bound to outwards acts of piety was replaced by the destruction of external morality in Protestantism. Both agree that the external moral deed cannot be the bearer of a specifically Christian character. (Augustine after all sought the difference between good acts of unbelievers and those of believers in the intent behind the deed.) Both agree that obedience to God is not shown in outward acts as such. Both agree that the difference between believers and non-believers cannot be ascertained on the basis of “works.” But to Catholicism, the nature of the inner response and transformation is first of all about the real human condition and not the human situation.

In our survey of the issue we have found so far that both Protestant and Catholic doctrine ground man’s redemption in the work of God’s grace in Christ, but differ on the meaning both of justification and of faith as part of that redemption. Protestant doctrine takes justification as the declaration of amnesty that is based solely on Christ’s righteousness, which in turn provides the condition and pattern of sanctification; Catholic doctrine speaks of a transformation from being wicked to being righteous, effected by God’s grace. In the one, God’s grace intervenes from the outside and grants a radical change in the inner life and the status of the believer; in the other, grace operates within human nature and offers symbolic aid through the sacraments: grace perfects nature. 16th-century secular anthropology seems to provide one cause for the difference. The assessment of the intrinsic depravity of human nature, the relocation of the center of man in his moral self-awareness and the closed nature of human individuality, provided the background. We must turn now to the Anabaptist position and see how it is related to the basic model of the Catholic and the Reformation positions. We will try to show that in Anabaptism the separation between condition and situation that defined the common ground between Catholics and Protestants is dropped in favor of a different model. What Anabaptists defended against is the insistence on the “inner” nature of either condition or situation that led to the schematics of inner condition and outer situation, or inner situation and outer condition. Both faith and its corollary in works were “external” in the sense that they were both commanded.
§ 9. The distinctiveness of Mennonite faith

The Anabaptist position is most often portrayed as a response to the Lutheran doctrine of "justification by faith alone," and we will try to approach it from that perspective. The controversy over the relationship between justification and sanctification can be considered at least in part to be the cradle of the Anabaptist movement. As Balthasar Hubmaier wrote in 1526:

"Faith alone and by itself is not sufficient for salvation. ... Faith must express itself also in love to God and the neighbor... Faith must be active in love (Gal. 5). Therefore faith by itself is like a green fig tree without fruit, like a cistern without water, like a cloud without rain.... we boast about our great faith, but have never touched the works of the gospel and faith with the smallest fingers.... I confess this article with all my strength: that faith by itself alone is not worthy to be called faith, [ital. mine] for there can be no true faith without the works of love."80

The "absence of a visible renewal and sanctification of individual and corporate life" (Voolstra) was the main point of dissent between Lutherans and early Anabaptists. Anabaptism firmly sided with those who held that faith, and faith alone, was the basis of man's relationship with God and his fellow-man, defining as it did his ethical situation. But the corollary and aim of that faith was to the Anabaptists "becoming like Christ through learning obedience with him to all that God has commanded."81 The laxity of Roman-Catholic moral and ethical behavior was in part responsible for the Anabaptist movement.82

The Anabaptists' view on the external nature and descriptive contents of obedience was decisively different from Luther's, who had emphasized the certainty of salvation and the quieted conscience. Lack of assurance was to him an incentive for adding good works to faith, whereby faith lost its central position and justification was annulled. But to early Anabaptists and in particular to the later Mennonites, a faith without moral improvement of life would hardly deserve that name, and an insistence on man's inability to obey after conversion was tantamount to a denial of God's transforming grace. As Keeney expresses the issue: "The gift of faith not only changed the status of man before God, it was also active in transforming the individual."83 That was an emphasis that remained close to the Catholic doctrine of man's cooperating with grace, but emphasized in contrast the gift of faith and God's initiative in transformation. As we will see, the notion of the shape of human liberty and the consequences of the Fall of mankind were controversial as well, Anabaptists in general affirming with Augustine the renewal of human liberty to mankind as a necessary prerequisite of divine judgment. But this renewal was never understood to amount to an autonomous liberty that had to act on its own in conformity with grace to achieve its purpose.

Without ignoring these differences, it is believed that the early Anabaptists agreed generally with the overall Protestant position. According to Walter Klaassen, to name one classic example, the Anabaptists had no argument with the core doctrine of justification as presented by Luther, Calvin and other Reformers.84 The difference was that they rejected the Lutheran view that since faith was the basis of salvation, moral behavior as well as works of righteousness were secondary, or at least relatively unimportant. The ethical requirements of the gospel were not seen as the preparatory indictment of the law in its effect on the human conscience but as the visible sign of the reality and authenticity of faith. Faith meant to be called into a covenant relationship with Christ, within which our obedience was the very first requirement. Faith in the context of ethics was not the standard of all behavior as something that belonged to the inner self, as in Luther's insistence on faith as the first commandment, and it was not the inner criterion for outward action as in Augustine, but only its presupposition. Faith as a gift of God enabled man to be obedient. Obedience, as the visible sign of faith, was faith
shown outwardly, and this drive to externalization was taken as the essential feature of inner faith.  

Obedience and faith were sometimes practically synonymous, as is shown, e.g., in Menno Simons’s Fundamentboek, where the gospel is more often conceived of as to be obeyed (including the response of faith) than as to be believed. Obedience was not understood as an inner acceptance, but as a manifest outward response and as existing only in outward actions in conformity with the commandments of Christ as set forth in the New Testament. This outward response proceeded from sharing the nature of Christ. If man shares the divine nature, “he too must be characterized by a love for God and man which results in obedience to the commands of God and is evident in his relationships with men.”

It is important to note, according to Klaassen, that notwithstanding this emphasis on the saintly life, the Anabaptist doctrine of justification was “in no essential different.” The difference would reside in the emphasis only. The innovation of Anabaptism in the beginning of the 16th century was not in the formulation of the doctrine itself nor in the acceptance of its importance, but in the added understanding of faith as a free and unforced obedience to Christ and the resolve not to let that faith retreat either into sacramentalist objectivity nor into the pure inwardness of man’s self-consciousness.

Undoubtedly this insistence on man’s obedience implied the perception that man was able to submit to God’s demand, so that it came into conflict with the anthropological presuppositions of the magisterial Reformation, to wit, their development of the doctrine of the fall of mankind and its corollary: God’s election. But to Anabaptists there could be no shrinking from the consequence of the fact that there was such a thing as a demand for obedience: if obedience was not possible, Christ’s teachings on a “more perfect righteousness” (Matthew 5:20) would have been a mere pedagogical preparation for Paul’s central message of justification by faith that was interpreted by Lutheran Scholasticism and modern evangelicals alike as salvation through assent, which of course, besides falsifying the real condition of redemption, made Paul’s gospel more important than Christ’s teachings. This consequence was rejected. Christ’s teachings were read as straightforward demands that should be obeyed, not as preparation to the doctrine of grace. Christ not only did the will of God unto the Cross and thereby imputed righteousness to the faithful by paving the way for a new covenant, he also taught it as a commandment for those who accept His call to discipleship. The life of Jesus in the flesh was understood on the basis of Menno’s incarnation doctrine to imply that Christ should be taken as the Example, in the sense of the Imitatio Christi of Tyhomas a Kempis (translated in Dutch as Navolging van Christus, following of Christ). According to Keeney, the sentimentalist individualism of Thomas a Kempis and the Brethren of the Common Life was transformed by the Anabaptists into a similar moral emphasis applied now within the framework of the Church and in conflict with the world.

There was a Catholic mood to all of this, even though there was no hint of an explicit infusion doctrine. Justification in its Anabaptist version retained much of the Augustinian sense of becoming intrinsically righteous. Man really did become righteous because of his faithful following of Christ and his participation through spiritual rebirth in the divine nature (and not by his reception of sacraments or by doing the outward works of penance), and that necessitated a further presupposition: that the beginning of that discipleship was a free act of the will to submit to God, implying adult baptism and the rejection of the radical doctrine of sovereign election.

It was held by many that his state of righteousness could be lost. The esteem for human liberty was so high that they accepted that the possibility of choosing against God and falling into disobedience was still there, even after conversion. Faith as a condition of covenant relationship was perpetually based on a connection between inner resolve and outward action. To the experience of a life of faith belonged the capacity for repentance, which implied in its turn
that perseverance was essential. Justification was not a metaphysical or legal condition that was there beyond the grasp of the believer. Acts and perceptions of God’s involvement in life strengthened the inner conviction, which itself motivated outward action. Faith was about living the life of faith, not about a state of mind in man’s inner being being untouched by the conditions of everyday life, nor was it based on heavenly bookkeeping that assigned status without an experiential reality in the believer’s life. That God’s action of justification was extrinsic did not mean that man’s reception remained a pure inner acceptance.

On this issue, therefore, Anabaptist doctrine remained quite close to traditional Roman Catholic teachings. Its view on justification was not based so much on the inner experience of guilt and the inability of man to achieve righteousness, which had especially prompted Luther’s thinking, as on the experience of repentance and contrition as a means of restoring communion with God. To the Anabaptists, justification was not a possible escape from the painful duty of achieving righteousness, but a powerful aid in achieving it.

The Anabaptist tradition, for a variety of reasons, was necessarily ambiguous in some respects because of this origin within the Reformation. While the Anabaptists, with the Reformation, stressed the importance of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as the basis of man’s renewal, they denied Luther’s view and emphasized evangelical obedience and perseverance to the point where it seemed (to Luther at least) to become the primary prerequisite of salvation. Sometimes they were represented as a charismatic movement, but equally well they could be portrayed as a legalist form of Christianity with emphasis on sanctification and individual holiness. To modern Mennonite theologians since the beginning of the century, there has been the tendency either to represent Mennonites as Protestants who emphasize obedience but cling to justification by faith as Luther taught it, or as having freed themselves from the issues of guilt and salvation to produce a more this-worldly ethics of moral involvement, especially in the radical peace movement and in post-Mennonite liberalism. The question must be asked: how can we understand the Mennonite position? Is it a Reformed position with an added emphasis on sanctification? Or did it remain a Catholic position, because of its more optimistic anthropology and its insistence on the intrinsic reality of justification?

As a matter of fact, this ambiguity about the Mennonite position in these matters is not a new phenomenon, and we should pay some attention to wavering attempts to establish a clear position. Anabaptist teachings in the 16th century ranged from spiritualist and charismatic to legalist and moralist, to which the Dutch Mennonite movement, especially, added its involvement in modernism and liberalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. In recent times efforts have been made to provide one single definition of the Anabaptist movement. After World War II this discussion evolved from a theological into a historical discourse and introduced the notion of a “polygenetic” origin of the Anabaptist movement. We will discuss two documents that still provide some unifying vision of the Anabaptist movement. First we’ll discuss “The Anabaptist Vision” by Harold Bender, and then we will return to the Schleitheim articles that in a way began the development that we are examining.

The position that ethics, or Nachfolge (discipleship), was the core doctrine of Mennonitism was put forward by Harold S. Bender in his speech of 1943: “The Anabaptist Vision.” That was a programmatic and theological statement, destined to celebrate Mennonite particularity in the face of the fundamentalist seduction. In his lecture Bender stressed a variety of emphases: the ethic of love and nonresistance along with the ecclesiological view of nonconformity to the world, especially in matters of violence and rejection of state authority. But it seemed as if Mennonitism was an ethically revised Lutheranism, apart from differences in ecclesiology that were not portrayed as decisive, with the exception of the issue of adult baptism. But can it be shown that Mennonite Anabaptism is irreconcilable with mainstream evangelical Christianity, especially because its biblicism is not the flat-Bible literalism of the inerrantists, and its doctrine of justification is not centered around justification of the ungodly by faith as purely
extrinsic, and it does not accept the Puritan emphasis on the inner struggles of conversion.\textsuperscript{90}

Bender emphasized these three key issues:

Having defined genuine Anabaptism in its Reformation setting, we are ready to examine its central teachings. The Anabaptist vision included three major points of emphasis: first, a new conception of the essence of Christianity as \textit{discipleship}; second, a new conception of the Church as a \textit{brotherhood}; and third, a new \textit{ethic of love and nonresistance}.

Bender explained this first emphasis in this manner:

First and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as \textit{discipleship}. It was a concept which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ.\textsuperscript{[26]} 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.

That leaves open the issue of what it was that had to be “evidenced” by newness of behavior. Repentance is a change of attitude towards one’s actions and a resolve to mend one’s ways, congruous with an exercise of the will. The word implies a certain distance from Lutheran insistence on the primacy of faith. Bender dealt with that issue:

The great word of the Anabaptists was not “faith” as it was with the reformers, but “following” (Nachfolge Christi). And baptism, the greatest of Christian symbols, was accordingly to be for them the “covenant of a good conscience toward God” (1 Peter 3:21), the pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ, and not primarily the symbol of a past experience. The Anabaptists had faith, indeed, but they used it to produce a life. Theology was for them a means, not an end.

Bender could then summarize his view by differentiating between the three strands of Reformation theology:

As we review the vision of the Anabaptists, it becomes clear that there are two foci in this vision. The first focus relates to the essential nature of Christianity. Is Christianity primarily a matter of the reception of divine grace through a sacramental-sacerdotal institution (Roman Catholicism), is it chiefly enjoyment of the inner experience of the grace of God through faith in Christ (Lutheranism), or is it most of all the transformation of life through discipleship (Anabaptism)? The Anabaptists were neither institutionalists, mystics, nor pietists, for they laid the weight of their emphasis upon following Christ in life. To them it was unthinkable for one truly to be a Christian without creating a new life on divine principles both for himself and for all men who commit themselves to the Christian way.

The problem is that Bender’s emphasis on discipleship seems to give so much importance to the Church as a means for growth in sanctity that it completely obscured the Lutheran insistence on the personal nature of faith as an inner experience. Was Anabaptism only a (works-) ethic? In reviewing Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision,” Stephen Dintaman spoke about its “essentially behavioral” definition of Christianity.\textsuperscript{91} Christian behavior was stressed among theologians who adhered to Bender’s vision, and while discipleship was stressed, they gave only “passing, non-passionate attention to the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit in the inner transformation of the person.” “The Anabaptist Vision,” according to Dintaman, gave us (1) “little insight into human behavior.” Its Arminian emphasis on free will tended to obscure the bondage of the will and weakened compassion for human frailty, as exemplified in addiction and other forms of bondage under sin. It led (2) to an “inadequate awareness of the liberating work of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.” The gospel should not be reduced to Jesus’ teachings about peace, leading to “peace and justice social activism.” The gospel is not about peace ideals, but about the work of God that has brought peace through the
blood and in the body of Christ. Finally, (3) our “sense of the spiritual presence and power of the risen Christ” has been impoverished. A “pre-Pentecostal” discipleship refers to a failure that was corrected only by Jesus’ spiritual presence after His resurrection.

Dintaman evoked both positive and negative responses. Richard Showalter responded in the fall of 1994 by explaining that Dintaman had merely emphasized the inner experience that Bender had presumed to be the heart and the backbone of his behavioral vision. Bender had insisted that the Anabaptists gave outward expression of the inner experience. His Anabaptist vision was undergirded by “a vision of the spiritual presence and power of the risen Christ.” Dintaman was right that this element in Bender’s vision was not heavily emphasized and had been overlooked by subsequent theologians.

Still, it was there as an integral part of “The Anabaptist Vision.” In the same issue of The Conrad Grebel Review, a radical new approach was opposed to Dintaman’s call in the desert. Pastor Mitchell Brown argued for a new radical theology that returned to the biblical image of Jesus and would not allow dogmatic faith to gain supremacy over discipleship. Dintaman’s plea for affirmation of the basic truths of Pietism must be denied. Pietism, in Friedmann’s view as quoted by Brown, is characterized “by the subjective experience of the fact that the sinner, though incapable of doing any good, is yet saved through the atoning death of Christ and the subsequent joy which goes with such experience.” Anabaptism, on the contrary, is radically different, and understands rebirth to be about the “resolution to a new way of obedience to the “law of Christ.” The emphases on justification through faith alone, in Lutheranism, and the enjoyment of its fruit, in Pietism, were foreign to the early Anabaptists. Anabaptist faith was more about the fear of God, a reverential trust and obedience that indeed chooses for a “spiritual poverty,” as Dintaman called it. Anabaptism has to choose: either spiritual fullness along the lines of Pietism and Lutheranism, or the fear of God, “existential” Christianity.

The question that concerns us now is whether the 16th-century Anabaptist view of justification makes it at all necessary to turn to the Lutheran and Pietist perspectives to complement the Anabaptist Vision. If there can be such a thing as a “spirituality of obedience” (C. Norman Kraus), there would be no need to resort to Pietist inwardness. If Anabaptists understood Christ’s work of atonement as including “enlightenment and enablement,” then they did not return to a works spirituality. They rather took out the elements of mysticism and returned to a sober look at Christian praxis. Against Luther, they maintained that the Christian did not only live by faith, but lives his faith.

As a matter of fact, historic research after Bender’s speech came up with part of the answer. After historians had developed a more “polygenetic” view of the origins of Anabaptism, rejecting Bender’s implicit thesis that Anabaptism was in its authentic form only a Swiss movement, it became obvious that 16th-century Mennonites in general did not share the doctrine of justification by faith alone that was developed by Luther and Calvin. Their concept of the “Besserung des Lebens” comprised both justification and sanctification. Justification meant becoming righteous through a process of learning and experience under the guidance of God’s Spirit. Faith was understood as intrinsically connected to obedience, conversion, contrition, and penance, leading to a saintly life (Menno Simons), based on the cooperation of grace and human will in the innermost soul (Hans Denck), the recovery of “innocence” which leads to “works of faith” (Hubmaier); justification and sanctification therefore were seen as one (experiential) process. But most importantly, this process of regeneration was not developed purely as an individual’s experience. It is in the ecclesiological dimension of justification that the Mennonite movement developed its peculiar characteristics. Justification was a process involving a redeemed community that was set aside from this world as the bride of Christ, trying to remain pure and sanctified to the day of His return.
§ 9.1 Menno Simons: sanctification as basic pattern of justification

Let us turn now to the writings of the Dutch reformer Menno Simons to see how the Anabaptist position on justification connects justification and sanctification. Hans-Georg Tanneberger has shown in his 1997 dissertation on the “Anabaptist perceptions of the justification of man” that Menno Simons and Dirk Philips had stressed the following theological keypoints:

- Grace as an universal offer to all people
- The liberty of the human will, as a result of the redemptive work of Christ
- The structure of justification in two parts, the acceptance of the gospel in faith and the moral labor that followed it
- The impossibility that sins, committed in full awareness of their injustice, could be forgiven.

The notion that man could be reborn, and could live outside the domain of sin, was ultimately based on a Christology of a monophysite nature. According to Menno, who followed Melchior Hoffman in this respect, Christ was not of Mary’s flesh, he was God made flesh, or having become flesh, but that “flesh” was of a heavenly nature. Hoffman claims that “even as the dewdrop falls into the oystershell and therein is changed into the pearl”, so the eternal Word came into Mary’s womb through the Holy Spirit and became flesh and blood without partaking of the flesh and blood from Mary’s body. In the words of Auke de Jong: “The Word of God did not unite with the flesh of Mary, but it became flesh itself. The unity of Christ as a Person can be guaranteed in that way, but also the complete newness of the person of Christ. He does not participate in the human and sinful nature of Mary. Christ, true God and true Man, is only of God, and not of Mary. ... Fallen man has to be reborn from Jesus and become equal in form to Him.” To participate in Christ as a member of his Body, the Church, meant to share a new life-principle beyond the clutches of death and sin. So how did man gain such a grace?

Of course man needed a Redeemer to gain the new life. And the Redeemer could only redeem others if He himself was sinless, as Anselm had demonstrated. If Jesus however had the same nature as humanity, how could Jesus be sinless? But if Jesus was not conceived from Mary, but in Mary through the Holy Spirit and born out of Mary and not from Mary, then it could be asserted that Jesus was completely human and yet without the corruption of Adam. The human nature that Jesus had was therefore pre-lapsarian, and untainted with sin! Underlying this was the physiological theory, also held by Thomists, that in human generation the woman was passive and contributed no substance to the child. If the Holy Spirit was the active principle in Jesus’ generation, then Mary did not contribute her substance to His human nature. While this theory still allowed for the acceptence of the justification-doctrine – because a sinless Christ could be the substitutionary sacrifice – it also prepared the way for a doctrine of sanctification. Participation in Christ meant having a restored nature, a breaking down of all natural bondage, to begin with the bondage under the nature of Adam after the corruption of his nature. Just how this intrinsic link between justification and sanctification was worked out we will have to show now on the basis of Menno’s own wording of the issue.

In the first chapter of his Foundation of Christian Doctrine, Menno begins with the assertion that “now is the time of grace”, referring to the age in which the gospel is offered to people who have received the full freedom of accepting that gospel, being restored by God’s grace sufficiently to make a responsible decision. The margin shows Rom. 3:24 to be the likely source for that contention. Now Rom. 3:26 is one of the classic loci of the doctrine of justification, since that verse states that all will be “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ.” Vs. 26 speaks of “this [present] time” in which God’s righteousness is declared, and it is probably this notion of the present that prompted Menno to write of
the "time of grace." The "time of grace" then, is linked to Menno's own understanding of jus-
tification.

But in his own text, Menno apparently speaks outside of the context of this quotation. The
time of grace is a time
to awaken from the sleep of our ugly sins, to have an upright, renewed, broken and con-
trite heart, to indite our souls before God with our previous reckless, impertinent way of
life, that we crucify in the fear of God our sinful and evil flesh, character and nature and die
unto it and rise with Christ to a righteous, repentant and new being, as He said: the time is
fulfilled and the kingdom of God is near: better your life [KJV: repent ye] and believe the
gospel (Mk. 1:15). 98

It is obvious, then, that to Menno "being justified" means something like "being righte-
oused" (Sanders), since the process he speaks of is called "awakening," "renewal," "repen-
tance," that together lead to a righteous life of a repentant and new being. Whereas we would
expect Menno to take Rom. 3:24, 26, together with vs. 28 (man is justified by faith without
works of the law), as referring to the doctrine of justification in a Lutheran sense, the entire
passage in Paul (including also Eph. 4:22 and Gal. 5:23 in the margin) is taken as an intro-
duction to Christ's own gospel of repentance, summarized in Mark 1:15. That verse however
speaks about the nearness of the kingdom of God and the acceptance of God's sovereignty in
all aspects of life. Faith is here the active following of Christ and obedience to the divinely
appointed King. The reference to Mark 1:15 is also relevant, because it provides the basic
structure of repentance → faith → obedience that is so characteristic of Menno's position.

The term repentance that KJV uses there is transformed, or rather elucidated, by Menno's
saying: "improve, make better your life." 99 It is clear, from such a treatment of the locus clas-
sicus of the justification doctrine, that Menno sees "justification" as equal to "becoming a
righteous person," as being "righteoused" and not as being (extrinsically and legally) par-
doned. It requires repentance and contrition and in that sense it is an active answer to a call
and not the passive reception of a gift. 100 It is obvious also that such an interpretation of Paul
was used to bring it into harmony with the implications of Christ's call for repentance in Mark
1, which is accepted as the more important, so Paul is read from the gospel's perspective.

That can be shown especially by seeing how the concept of faith came to include a whole
series of human responses to the gospel. The necessity for repentance as a condition of faith is
stressed, e.g., in chapter 2, "On true repentance," where Menno states that those who maintain
that they have been given amnesty for their sins cannot glorify in that gift unless they have
true repentance. Luther was wrong to reverse the biblical order of repentance which leads to
faith. It was wrong also to hold that repentance was merely a response to God's law, after
which faith as a response to grace took over. Repentance was the continuing condition for the
continuing renewal of faith. It is not enough, Menno states, that we say that we are Abraham's
children, but we should live like one of them. Repentance in that sense is distinguished from
contrition, insofar as it indicates a deliberate and constant change in one's way of life, which
is not the same as contrition as committed reflection on the past life in the light of God's
judgment. 101

Trust and obedience and endurance in trials are also part of the life of faith and are integral
components of the appropriation of redemption. 102 Nonetheless, redemption in the sense of
acquittal is also highlighted by Menno, and in that sense the doctrine seems for a moment
close to Luther's again, but after what has been said before it can be no surprise that the
meaning of this amnesty is changed: it is present not so much in a legal as in a practical and
exhortatory sense, as shown, e.g., in 1 John 1:2: if we "do" the truth, then the blood of Christ
washes away our sins. Acquittal therefore comes to mean: being cured of an ailment so as to
be able to live a new life. It is the starting point of a new life, not its quintessence.

Having said that, however, in the third chapter of the Fundamentboek we find many sen-
tences that are in apparent conformity with classical Reformed doctrine, e.g., where Menno states that faith is a gift of God and no "work" to boast of (fol. 9b), or when he speaks about those who are justified by faith and have peace with God and then again quotes Rom 3:24 to emphasize this point. This verse apparently contributed to his understanding of "justification" in a real sense of transformation and renewal of man, as well as in the sense of Christ's work of redemption as a forensic justification appropriated solely by an acknowledging faith. The Beteringe des Lebens therefore cannot be described as anything but a combination of justification and sanctification. To conceive of it like this implies that the combined elements were understood in a different manner, as immediately implying one another. And so we find, again and again, that the same gift of faith that is the cause of salvation is thought to have a threefold fruit by which the tree is known: forgiveness or pardon for one's sins, a renewed inner man, and eternal life.

Because of the context, it is doubtful whether this "pardon" Menno refers to, means to the same concept that in the Reformation was called justification. A pardon can be interpreted as an amnesty for past sins alone, clearing the way for new obedience. Sin after conversion would then of course need a new pardon, which was obtained by boete (contrition), confession, and repentance. So justification by faith implied obtaining amnesty at the beginning of the new life in faith, but did not necessarily entail a once-and-for-all pardon, stretching to future sins as well. So here again, though the language seems close to Reformed doctrine, which seems to imply that Menno only added a peculiar emphasis on one concept, or chose to combine the two concepts but maintained their Lutheran meaning, it is doubtful whether the substance really is in harmony with it. It seems more appropriate to state that to Menno the concept of justification became an integral part of his concept of sanctification, and that he in making this connection changed the meaning of both.

The same goes for other concepts involved: their integration into the logical pattern of the concept of sanctification changed their intrinsic meaning. Faith, e.g., is always understood in an experiential and "ethical" context. In the same passage Menno immediately uses the Jamessian pattern of "true and living faith" (James 2:14-26) that works through love (Gal. 5:6), brings forth fruit, and proves its nature. Faith itself "steps into the path of justice in freedom." Such true faith can be called a gift of God, and such faith is the source of life for the just. It is clear that though Menno affirms that justification is a work of God based solely on the sacrifice and merits of Christ and that faith is not a "work" but a gift of God, the faith he is talking about is connected to repentance, renewal, the power of the new life, working through love, and showing itself in obedience to Christ. The New Testament did in fact become for Menno a nova lex evangelica because Christ's commandment is life, Christ alone is the lawgiver and Teacher of the New Covenant. We must take note however that this also means to Menno, that Moses and the law of Israel have served their purpose and have no direct relevance for the Christian Church. Nevertheless the law can aid us in understanding our sins, and help us keep ourselves dead for the flesh and the impulse to sin.

Menno obviously meant to say that justification means becoming righteous, and faith was the gift of enablement that made it possible for man to be righteous, to be someone who is just and lives by faith. The elements of active trust and endurance then completely overshadow the element of acknowledgment (assensus) that was present in some traditions of the Reformation. The basic question of the Reformation, how can I be sure of salvation, was replaced by another: on what basis can I act in conformity with God's demands? To the Anabaptists it was the certainty of the moral life and not the certainty of the moral conscience that was the real goal. Certainty of faith was not a result of an inner struggle with God's grace, nor a deduction from the fruits of faith, but self-experience through hardship and persecution in an effort to live the life of obedience through faith.

Menno Simons, though seemingly affirming the doctrine of grace as held by the Reformers
in some of his statements, does so with a different logic, in a different context, and with a different reason. His motivation is not opposition against Catholic teaching on the necessity of the cooperation of man through works, since that is how he understands the meaning of faith (as obedience and trust) and being justified (becoming intrinsically righteous) in the first place, though his language may be different. It is not the restoration of what was perceived as Pauline doctrine on the antithesis of grace and works, or of gospel and law, that drove his thinking in the way it did for Luther. Faith is a gift of God, surely, but one that transforms man if it is really present and sincere; though to Menno it is also certain that the cleansing of sin is done by God on the basis of Christ’s work without any use of sacraments and is not earned by meritorious works. Still, there can be no real faith without the cooperation of man’s will, so being justified is one of the consequences of a life of faith and not an extrinsic condition for it.106

Menno’s reason for opposing Catholic teaching lies elsewhere: in the definition of those works that are required as an essential feature of the faith that justifies, not in the idea that man cannot cooperate with God or should not perform good works. In his “Of the Correct Christian faith” (78a, b) Menno states that Catholic teaching makes redemption dependent upon obedience to the Pope and the use of the sacraments. The falsity of that doctrine to Menno is in the contents, not in the formal definition of obedience and its relationship to salvation. His quarrel with Rome is about the sacramental context of obedience, not about the principle that faith and obedience cannot be separated and that only a faith that expresses itself in charity and good work is the right one.107 Of course Luther agreed on the principle that faith leads to good works. But he would have denied that faith is an act of obedience.108 In conformity with this, Menno’s, Denck’s, and Hubmaier’s doctrines are determined by what Goertz calls the “anticlerical situation.” In that perspective, Menno sees Rome as demanding works that are extraneous to the faith and obedience that are demanded in scripture. The quarrel is therefore not about the principle, but about the contents.

As for the doctrine itself, we are not convinced that Anabaptist thinking really amounts to a denial of justification by faith and should be read as a straightforward Catholic position of “justification-by-works-helped-by-grace.” It seems more appropriate to think of Menno’s position as acceptance of the core essence of Lutheranism, but denying the specific anthropological presupposition that went along with it and rejecting the division between the forensic and the experiential side of justification, all of which led to a change in what was seen as the core essence of the gospel, a shift from justification to sanctification, sanctification thereby becoming the main paradigm of all other concepts. Four major differences arise between Anabaptists and the magisterial Reformation: the anthropology of sin, the issue of inner conscience, the meaning of justification as renewal, and the matter of what constitutes the condition of salvation.

**(1) The difference in presupposed anthropology**

It seems obvious with regard to anthropology, e.g., that the 16th-century Anabaptists did not agree with the magisterial Reformation’s view that man’s nature was to be identified with his alienated and fallen state. Such a presupposition is alien to their minds, and if they had accepted some such doctrine they would have used the notion of Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice to neutralize it by arguing that Christ changed that condition for all mankind by defeating the power of sin, releasing all of mankind from its bonds and setting them free to obey again.109 On the basis of the bleak anthropology of man’s utter depravity, however, sovereign election had to be the answer; making God’s election necessarily an act outside of human history (before creation, as some of the Biblical texts do state), with the ethical consequence that any righteousness that man could hope to achieve within history is then completely useless and condemned from the start, merely by being part of man’s effort. Man in his fallen state can do no good whatsoever, granted, but what about man in his transformation by the grace of God?
If God must be shown to be sovereign in His election, can He not also be sovereign in His enabling mankind to obedience? In the diagnosis that mankind is unable to do God's command, even to a Christian there is perhaps both an abstract exaggeration of what constitutes sin as well as an acquiescence in the apparent lack of evangelical virtues in those who became members of a state-Church by baptism in infancy and subsequent confirmation.

The Anabaptists differed profoundly on this issue. They saw Christ's propitiatory work as effective in that it restored humanity's freedom to choose to obey God. In this respect they disagreed with Augustine, who thought this part of Christ's work was effective only for the elect and not for all of mankind. It would have made no sense, however, for God to condemn mankind on the basis of its inability to do any good since the Fall. Then we would have indeed the mere declarative situation that all are condemned because of the sin of Adam which is imputed to all his descendants, and they are not condemned because of their own sin.110 (This will prove, however, to be an incorrect reading of Romans 5.) For how can anyone be condemned for the failure to do the good if that failure is not part of his own choosing?

This difference in anthropology was pervasive amongst Anabaptists. To cite just one other 16th-century example, we could refer to Caspar Schwenckfeld. He had converted to Lutheranism as early as 1518, but, according to G.H. Williams (1993, 202), his interpretation of justification was different from that of Luther. He thought he had learned from Luther: “that the sons of Adam, after they have by faith been incorporated into the Second Adam, are capable of exercising their free will to do good” which essentially reiterates Augustine’s notion of grace restoring man’s defective freedom to its intended condition. In that way, the doctrine moved away from its Lutheran emphasis on forensic justification of individual man to a progressive and experiential sanctification of the believer as part of the Church. The logical pattern that correlated a pessimist anthropology with a doctrine of election and/or predestination thereby stopped short. On the Cross, Christ restored man’s freedom of will and effected the removal of all sins in the world. On the basis of this “Christological anthropology” the emphasis again could shift from reception of faith to response to revealed grace.

Mennon was not the only defender of this position. Most 16th-century Anabaptist soteriology, according to G.H. Williams111 presupposed the expiatory removal of original guilt for all mankind. Its anthropology was therefore not a natural theology based on essential misgivings about human nature, but a part of Christology. The result was a different view both of human responsibility and of the ability of humanity to serve God. So man was able to do good works and could be taken to account if he did not. Here Anabaptism moved away from Augustine. In opposition to the father of Catholicism, this expiation was not merely for the elect, and it was not sufficient to know this, which contradicted Augustine’s more intellectual notion of faith. His formula for this doctrine: “Justification derives from the knowledge of Christ through faith” separates knowledge from the life of faith. It clearly shows that justification, though resting on a divine initiative, received its full meaning only in the experience of regeneration and discipleship that followed suit.

Such a doctrine of justification as restoration of creation, in this case, free will, was directed against the doctrine of the complete corruption of man’s free will, developed as a battle cry against forms of (semi-)Pelagianism, which required the Reformation to add predestination of the elect to the doctrine of justification. Anabaptism therefore could base its concept of faith as obedience on the notion that if man was able to seek God, it could be enough that God prompted him to do so. The human response could be a free conversion of man to God, accepting the offer of God’s grace in Christ in an act of the will that was in all respects of his own doing. After conversion, this basic freedom remained intact, so man could live out his life of faith in obedience and accountability. Anabaptist theology, by stressing Christ’s intervention as objectively effective for all of mankind, could go for the maximum of human freedom and responsibility. The pattern of ethics was not the inner reception of outward justifica-
tion but the outward act of inner obedience in conversion and baptism.

(2) The emphasis on the real versus the inner man

A related bone of contention is the anthropological emphasis on the inner man, the guilty conscience as well as the certitude of redemption which is so characteristic of 17th-century theology in the wake of conditions that simultaneously produced Cartesian rationalism. Any righteousness that can be attributed to man, which the Reformers actually allowed and called justitia inhaerens objective (righteousness that is inherent in man objectively), is not then the inherent righteousness of his works, but only a subjective certitude about the sincerity of faith and the reality of his state of grace, through the testimony of his works and walk in life. This is called justificatio iusti (the justification of the righteous), and this is what Menno seems to stress, with the exception that it was not correct to speak of the testimony of good works, or the fruit of (i.e., attitudes flowing from) faith, but of the fruits (i.e., concrete and distinct acts) of obedience. But more important, to Menno the issue is not about certitude at all, but about external visibility; not about a subjectively experienced reality with primary reference to the status of faith, but about the objective way of life that is visible to all. So here Menno does not side with the interiorization of faith that resulted from disagreement with what was perceived as a Catholic stress on outwardness. Menno rejected the sweeping anthropological statement concerning man's sinfulness and modified the equally abstract confirmation of the internal experience of shame and guilt, which in combination had produced such a bleak picture of human inability.

(3) The justification of the sinner

A third difference is apparent when we look at the justificatio peccatoris (justification of the sinner, cf. Rom. 4:5), which is at the heart of the Reformation. In Reformed doctrine there is no infusion of righteousness (actus physicus, i.e., a real transformation) but only a forensic act, a declaration. It is a change of outer man (mutatio hominis exterior), not of inner man.

The effective cause of that declarative righteousness is the righteousness of Christ, or rather His objective work on the cross as substitutionary atonement. The righteousness of Christ atones for our lack of it, insofar as righteousness is demanded of us. So His righteousness takes the place of ours, and He stands in our place in God's judgment. This righteousness is nothing but that demanded under law. The result is not the removal (remissio) of sin, but its forgiveness, (i.e., taking away the punishment), which makes adoption by God possible. So justification is achieved by imputation, forensic declaration, with Christ's righteousness as its real basis. Here we might have only a distinction within the terminology. Justification does originally mean both: the declaration of man-being-righteoused before the day of judgment frees man from the fear of that judgment and makes possible his position as adopted child of God in the present.

That this cannot be separated from the renewal of man through the spirit, so that God's judgment has also a basis in man's righteousness, expresses the other and real consequence of the fact that Christ's Spirit dwells in us. Menno emphasizes the result of the imputation: if we cannot call the imputed righteousness our own in any sense, it does not help us at all to know of Christ's righteousness. It needs to become our own, and it must be attributed as well as imputed to us. Anabaptist logic would have it thus: if Christ's righteousness is "my own" (because Christ is called "our" righteousness), then this must be visible in my life, and not merely in my inner conscience, else we take Christ's righteousness to be effective only in God's court of law and not in real life. We thereby make our inner resistance to God's grace a real obstacle to God's Spirit.
(4) The condition of salvation

Now there is the final matter of the condition: faith in the work of Christ is in some sense the condition for being justified. It is of course not the effective cause, as if faith could force God to justify, but it can be called the instrumental cause of redemption. An effective cause could only be righteousness under law or good works. So it is not faith that justifies, but Christ’s righteousness justifies through faith as its means of accomplishing it. If that is so, it is improper to speak of faith as the effective cause (“by faith”) or effective cause of being justified. The phrase “justification by faith” suggests that faith is the effective cause, even if faith is understood as a gift. (Living) faith that is not seen as the cause of redemption can then only be understood as the sign and inner experience of being justified by God, part of that process which is in itself the result of its declaration by God. We then take “by faith” to refer to the material cause. As soon as we emphasize that justification is by faith, we set up faith as a condition and material cause (even if we rightfully do not understand this faith as a work that acts as effective cause of justification). Menno would have agreed with Luther that faith in Luther’s sense cannot be the effective or material cause of redemption, so both would contend that “by faith” refers at the most to the instrumental cause. But to Menno this instrumental cause would not be the sufficient condition of redemption.

It is different if we define faith not as a belief, or even as trust in God’s promise that is there in single moments of persuasion, but widen the concept to include also the works of faith, the life of hope, endurance, and perseverance; if we speak about faith not as assent or certitude of the mind but as a life of submission of the will in concrete acts. In that sense, faith could perhaps be called, from an Anabaptist perspective, the condition of salvation and the instrumental cause of it. It is not as if salvation can be earned, but because salvation is “worked out” – becomes effective, in such a life. Faith can be that condition in two ways: as the condition of our knowledge of salvation in ourselves or others, and as a condition already met, because the life of faith is identical to the life of salvation. That left Anabaptism with a dual strategy: they could say, with Luther, that faith was the sign of grace received (cognitive condition), and they could argue that this was not enough, that faith was also the shape of the saintly life (material condition). The former looked at faith as the acknowledgment of God’s action in Christ, which was the primary gift of God, and the latter took faith to be the life of faith that originated in the acknowledgment of God’s act but was experienced fully only through repentance, renewal and perseverance.

On the basis of the above, the general Anabaptist position in the 16th century can be described as the outcome of these three factors working together:

- Because Man is not considered to be totally depraved and corrupt as a result of the fall, because only body and soul but not the spirit was corrupted (Hubmaier), or because he is considered to be freed from those consequences by the propitiatory work of Christ for all of mankind (Hoffmann), he is able to be free and active in his decision for Christ (hence adult baptism). Faith is then understood actively as a response of submission to God’s revelation in Christ. It is made possible by the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ for all mankind but is only effectively realized in those who obey and accept it. To them, Christ’s work can be said to be a substitutionary sacrifice as well.

- Because Anabaptists agreed that faith as defined by belief and assent is not the instrumental (nor the effective) cause of being justified, but merely a sign of being made righteous by God, they could further argue that it is not an effective condition of justification (so the slogan justification by faith cannot be used to describe it). Against that they stated first of all that faith and living justly must go hand-in-hand, which was the Calvinist solution. On the other hand, if faith is defined within the Anabaptist perspective as the real experience of the life of faith, in-
volving contrition, repentance, endurance, obedience, and the like, it can be properly called a condition of salvation, because then it is taken to be identical to repentance (cf. Mark 1:15), which is a condition of salvation or of spiritual rebirth, in which God's grace enables man to make a new life, "industrious in good works."

- What the Reformation approached as an issue of certitude, speaking about the testimony of works with regard to the reality of faith, is then taken to mean: the reality of works and faith working together, which is not that different from Calvin's understanding of the relationship between justification by a living faith, working through love. The works were acts of faith, not so much the fruits of faith; put differently: faith was the power of "good works," not its inner motivation or its pattern. It is this anthropological presupposition of the relation between inner and outer man and the emphasis on faith as certitude within inner man that is taken differently.

What of course is also denied is the further consequence of the Reformed logic of justification that we mentioned earlier: that if faith must be maintained as a condition and instrumental cause of justification, it cannot be the work of man at all, therefore faith itself is nothing but a gift, which can then, within the doctrine of predestination, be taken as the sign under which the elect are called within history. In opposition to that, the Anabaptists held that the subjective factor had dignity as both an active and a passive response to God's side: acting outside and inside man (Christ's work and the Spirit's renewal). To take faith as a gift only, and not as a response, overemphasizes that faith can only be an inner reality in the sense of Calvin's empty jar, in which grace is received from the outside. Though it can be argued simply that while God gives us the gift of faith, this gift implies that we believe. It then becomes a question of how we view this fact that "we" believe, i.e., what degree of relative independence we give to this fact. It has to be stressed that this acceptance of the role of man's liberty was nowhere leading to the view that redemption was based on man's activity in itself. But obedience was emphasized to a degree unknown to other reformers, because God's grace was seen to be effective in the transformation of human life, and not only presented as declarative formula. We will analyze here one typical example to show how faith and obedience were connected in Menno's thinking. Menno stated, in his "Reasons for Teaching and Writing":

1. Behold, most beloved reader, thus true faith or true knowledge begets love, and love begets obedience to the commandments of God.

   Therefore Christ Jesus says, "He that believeth on him is not condemned." Again at another place, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death into life," John 5:24.

2. For true evangelical faith is of such a nature that it cannot lie dormant; but manifests itself in all righteousness and works of love;

   it dies unto flesh and blood; destroys all forbidden lusts and desires; cordially seeks, serves and fears God; clothes the naked; feeds the hungry; consoles the afflicted; shelters the miserable; aids and consoles all the oppressed; returns good for evil; serves those that injure it; prays for those that persecute it; teaches, admonishes and reproves with the Word of the Lord; seeks that which is lost; binds up that which is wounded; heals that which is diseased and saves that which is sound. The persecution, suffering and anxiety which befalls it for the sake of the truth of the Lord, is to it a glorious joy and consolation.

3. All those who have a faith as is here mentioned, namely, a faith that makes desirous to walk in the commandments of the Lord?
To do the will of the Lord, and which shows itself in all righteousness, love and obedience, also acknowledge that the word and will of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ is true wisdom, truth and life, yea, unchangeable and immutable unto Christ Jesus shall reappear in the clouds of heaven at the judgment day; they do not scoff at God's word as if it were a vapor, as do the ignorant world, saying, "What can water avail me?" but they will diligently try to obey the word of Jesus Christ in every particular, even at the risk of death according to the flesh.  

In this arrangement of the text we see something of the characteristic style of Menno's work. Every statement is followed by a series of biblical quotations which are then used to develop the argument further. Let's look at the first instance. The thesis is:

Behold, most beloved reader, thus true faith or true knowledge begets love, and love begets obedience to the commandments of God.

Faith leads to love, love leads to obedience. What is the biblical source?
Therefore Christ Jesus says, "He that believeth on him is not condemned."

So what is the implicit reasoning here? That obedience equals "not being condemned"? A statement like that would need some support! It is given, again implicitly, in the next quotation, where the "hearing of the word" is mentioned as a prerequisite of salvation. So we have this train of equations: faith begets love which begets obedience to the commandments which begets salvation (as implied in the quotation). The text quoted mentions two components: believing on him (the first in Menno's train), which leads to salvation, the implied conclusion of the series. If someone who believes is not condemned, then to Menno this situation of being saved implies the presence of a faith that (1) is active in love and (2) is active in obedience, and only then can it indeed lead to "no condemnation." Behind the quoted text that mentions belief as the condition of salvation, Menno discerns a train of concrete conditions that are implied in this full and complex concept of faith that now emerges in the commentary.

The same comes to the fore in the next verse where a similar train is assembled: hearing His words = obedience (hear the word, believe in Him, implying obedience, hath everlasting life). In the passage as a whole is the same equation: (1) obedience to commandments equals (2) works of love, equals (3) righteousness, love and obedience and these are the major steps in the argument. The basic argument is simply this: evangelical faith is faith practiced as concrete obedience, sealed by baptism on the risk even of death. The common element of all of these steps is the word obedience that occurs in all three paragraphs. Though there is an apparent lack of structural words, the implicit threading of quotations and equations of terms is in itself a coherent way of making an argument. It is typical of a mind that is constantly commenting on texts and formulating the result of readings, not a mind that forms concepts or complex syllogisms which may move beyond the confines of the text. This mode of biblical exegesis, producing glosses on scriptural texts by which concepts were given logical coherence, involving all kinds of logical connections, was of course typical of the age.

All of the above explains why Menno, through his synthetic way of reading Scripture, cannot conform to Lutheran doctrine, which emphasizes "by faith alone" to such an extent that not only does it negate the necessity of the specific works that Rome demanded, but it seems to imply that faith is something in itself, completely apart from works. Works are then rightly understood as works of obedience, as the compliance of the free will of man with the will of his Creator, not as works that flow from faith as an inner power, working mysteriously within man's soul. Menno Simons could only agree with Luther insofar as these "works" that are not necessary for and are even hurtful to faith are the works prescribed by unevangelical obedience to the Roman Church. Arguing, however, that works of obedience are not necessary is to him similar to arguing that a dead faith can also save. The contention that faith is an inner source of works of gratitude means positing obedience as a state of mind in the inner man.
That would mean blurring the difference between submission and obedience, instead of emphasizing actions in the outer world, where obedience and suffering count and are visible to others. The analytical distinction between obedience and faith is therefore countered with the synthetic reading of faith and obedience into one composite concept, closer to biblical thought-categories and providing a synthetic framework in which various texts can be harmonized, and most importantly, providing a conceptuality that can be correlated with a way of life as a whole.

So, moving beyond Luther, it is not merely the case that Menno wanted to see works as proof of a living faith. He disapproves of the notion that obedience can be an inner assent or motivation without an obedient concrete act, that is, one that conforms to an “ordinance.” What Menno therefore takes aim at is a potential exaggeration of Luther’s position that would hold not only that no works are necessary for salvation, not even those that rightfully belong to the new life of faith, but even that all attention paid to works is harmful, that they cannot be part of our life in faith as such, i.e., as ordinances with some specific and individual status as precisely this concrete demand. For the works that are thereby denied, and the shape of obedience that is relegated to a “Jewish” works-holiness, are to Menno precisely the heart of Christian ethics as it appears under the New Covenant as obedience to the ordinances of Christ. How can a believer not obey Christ’s commandment to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, which is a clear ordinance in the New Testament? If there is disobedience to this outward commandment, how can there be real and living faith? Ultimately Menno’s position can be described in this one sentence: if we do not accept in faith Christ as our Lord, how can He be our Saviour?

§ 9.2 Ambiguities in the Anabaptist Confessions of Faith

Menno’s solution of combining justification and sanctification into one concept of obedience in faith, stressing that God sanctifies the believer (i.e., through inner, transforming grace shown in outward behaviour), was not followed consistently, which contributed perhaps to some ambiguity in the formulation of the Mennonite position in later centuries. To be sure, the basic understanding of what Menno would have called “true and living faith,” that is, an active faith, experienced in contrition, repentance, and renewal, and in a justification that is a real transformation from being wicked into being righteous, has been reaffirmed many times in confessional statements of the Anabaptist movement. But there is nearly always the presence of an added Lutheran emphasis on forensic justification, as if Mennonite doctrine could never fully accept the inner connection between justification and sanctification out of which the movement as a whole was born.

E.g., according to article 6 of the 1963 Brief statement of Mennonite Doctrine, issued by the Mennonite General Conference: “We believe that Salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, a free gift bestowed by God on those who repent and believe.” Salvation by grace through faith could certainly be part of any formulation of a justification by faith doctrine, as is the notion of salvation as a free gift. Possibly the expression “through faith” avoids the problematic elements of “by faith” which might refer to faith as effective cause. But the recipients of this gift are characterized as “those who repent and believe,” bringing into play all the elements of renewal and regeneration that are connected with the notion of repentance and obedience. So here we do not have Menno’s insistence that justification only makes sense as an element of sanctification, but a kind of return to Lutheranism, which deems sanctification to be an independent consequence of extrinsic justification. Menno’s synthetic way of thinking was here subjected to analytic modes of thought.

And so it is with other statements of faith. The Mennonite Confession of Faith, adopted in the same year by the Mennonite General Conference, first states less ambiguously that “salvation is appropriated (italics mine) by faith in Christ,” which is on the surface a derivative of the “by faith alone” position. Yet again, the term appropriated puts an emphasis on the experi-
ential side of faith. The article (6) even returns to the language of repentance where it later says, "those who repent and believe in Christ as Savior, are born again and are adopted into the family of God." Nevertheless, these modern confessions of faith clearly have tried to incorporate the language of justification by faith into the former Anabaptist emphasis on the "improvement of life," which shines through so clearly in the Schleitheim Confession of 1527: "Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and the amendment of life." But then, of course, the Schleitheim Confession had no need to argue the Anabaptist position to outsiders, but was meant to be a statement of unity amongst diverging Anabaptist congregations. One gets the impression that the separate emphasis on justification was the answer to a question put to Anabaptists by believers who were concerned about Anabaptist loyalty to the justification doctrine.

The Brethren in Christ "Statement of Doctrine" of 1961 even uses the analytic distinction of judicially and experientially to separate God's accounting us as guiltless and "as recipients of the imputed righteousness in Christ" from "spiritual birth and the new life." It is the Evangelical Mennonite Church that went the farthest in its effort to remain within mainstream Protestant thinking, and in 1936 it adopted a separate article on justification that equates justification with pardon of sins, righteousness being "reckoned" through faith. But even here repentance is placed next to faith as a sacred duty (art. VII), and regeneration (i.e., being born again not as a synonym for conversion but more akin to amendment of life) is called a prerequisite of salvation (art. VIII), which in a sense counteracts the original thrust of the justification by faith alone doctrine.

So we must doubt very much, precisely because of the way Mennonites have reasoned about their faith since Menno through their various statements of doctrine, whether this appearance of the language of justification by faith in Mennonite work and confessions, which Walter Klaassen has found, does indeed represent a shared doctrine of the Magisterial and the Radical Reformation. We found in our brief survey of Menno's Fundamentboek that some of the language seems to refer to the Lutheran doctrine of salvation without works, but that that impression is misleading if the key concepts of faith and righteousness are used differently. The same goes for the various Confessional statements that either by juxtaposition or in separate articles both affirm and restrict the doctrine of justification by faith, in a sense, try to avoid the stress on "by faith alone" that was so characteristic of Luther while at the same time adopting its basic assumption.

This duality sometimes breaks out in minor controversies among Mennonite scholars today. One illustrative example might be worth mentioning here. In 1962, J. C. Wenger of Goshen Biblical Seminary presented his "Grace in Anabaptist Theology" at the 7th Mennonite World Conference (held in Ontario with the theme the "Lordship of Christ"). Quoting Menno Simons, Wenger argued that the Anabaptists knew about the sufficiency of grace and did not teach a justification by works, or a synergism at all. Menno had said:

"You see, kind reader, we do not seek salvation in works, words, or sacraments, as do the learned ones, although they accuse us of that very thing; but we seek them only in Christ Jesus and in no other means in heaven or on earth. We rejoice exclusively in this only means. We trust by the grace of God to continue thus unto death."

A response was written by Alvin Beachy, at that time a minister for the General Conference Mennonite Church in Souderton, Penna. He argued that he agreed with Wenger that Anabaptist sources do not in general teach synergism. Nonetheless, this does not mean, as Wenger implied, that the Anabaptist doctrine of grace fits in without problems with mainstream Protestant thought. Beachy goes on to show that it was the anthropology of Anabaptism that made them reject the bondage of the will, and as a consequence the doctrine of double predestination. (The election of the believers was also taught by Menno, e.g., in his meditation on the 25th psalm, but not as a consequence of anthropology.) A doctrine of justifica-
tion that starts from the freedom and not from the bondage of the will leads to a totally different result, much closer to Thomas Aquinas’s position. Dutch Anabaptist thought, especially, emphasized the demand for repentance and contrition as a condition of regeneration. But if this capacity for repentance is in itself a consequence of God’s initial grace, it prevents the accusation of legalism. To Menno, the initial grace effects a restoration of freedom, making repentance possible; for Marpeck, the initial grace only makes man aware of his guilt and depravity and in need of Christ. Marpeck therefore stands closer to Luther in the end, than does Menno.

Another Anabaptist emphasis that seems to vitiate the need for grace is that on Nachfolge, or discipleship. According to Beachy, the Anabaptists could stress this because their concept of regeneration involved “a concept of salvation which is predominantly the divinization of man, combined with a Church-Christ mysticism which was intently strong in both Menno and Dirk (Philips).” Present holiness and justification, therefore, went hand in hand, and the presence of the Holy Spirit as the source of the “victorious life in Christ” made all the difference. Both the Catholic doctrine of the fragmented presence of Christ in the Church’s sacraments and the Protestant one-sided doctrine of justification were challenged by this return to the New Testament’s dual perspective of justification and sanctification.

The faith-alone position moved in another direction, much different from Mennonite theology. Luther’s emphasis on justification by grace, received in but not grounded on the experience of faith, gave way to a more scholastic position, defining faith as assent to a rationally understood doctrine. With Augustine, the relative intellectualizing of his concept of faith was partly negated by his insistence that faith needed the other theological virtues of love and hope to become perfect in man. To Reformation doctrine, no such refuge was open. If man was unable to cooperate with God then God’s sovereign initiative was all-important even in this matter of understanding and believing doctrine. If salvation is dependent on the correct understanding of doctrine, then of course God’s sovereignty must be seen to achieve the certainty required here that man could not. There must be an infallible basis for the understanding of doctrine, and faith itself must be proven to be authentic by its conformity to the confession. The Westminster Confession speaks about this saving and authoritative doctrine as “expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences [...] deduced from Scripture.” And then it was not far to the conclusion that only God could have produced such a book of perfect doctrine.

In a way, this approach to the infallibility of scripture both promoted and hindered the development of the doctrine of justification by grace. For on the one hand it seemed to finally state the grounds that made Paul’s gospel authoritative and central in Protestant theology. Paul’s gospel was not a part of a developing self-understanding of the early Church, but a textbook of perfect statements that we needed to understand and affirm in order to be saved. But on the other hand it changed the meaning of faith in Christ into assent to doctrine, which deepened the gap between faith as mental attitude and faith as a way of life. In that sense, Lutheran orthodoxy returned precisely to the conception of faith that it had discovered in Catholic scholasticism, and which needed “love” as an addition to signify the whole status of sanctity in man.

We have found, so far, that the Anabaptist doctrine of justification implied the transformation of man (as in Catholic doctrine and particularly in Augustine) but denied the anthropological presupposition connected to the fall as implying the total degeneracy of man, and thereby also gave a higher status to man’s free will. It resisted Augustine’s notion that human liberty was restored only in the elect. From then on, justification and sanctification have remained in a tense relationship, as we have seen by studying the shape of the doctrine in Menno and the more recent confessions of faith. We have found, on the other hand, a Reformation consensus on justification by faith alone that stresses God’s initiative and denies the
cooperation of man in the work of his salvation. It sees works as part of the effect of the gift of faith, as a sign of its existence, but not as an accomplishment of man. Grace does not help man help himself, grace does it all. Anabaptism, on the other hand, while not refuting the sufficiency of grace, saw it work in different ways. Their doctrine made them vulnerable to the accusation of legalism, and even amongst Mennonite scholars the Dutch variant of Anabaptism is sometimes referred to as such.

§ 10. The shape of obedience: evangelical duty versus external legality

So what did the Anabaptist movement do with the issue of commandment and law? Having established that the experiential life of faith as obedience was the core issue in Anabaptism (expressed in the concept of discipleship), we turn now to the question of what sources Anabaptists recognized as formally defining Christian ethics. In general, the early Anabaptists, and especially Marpeck and Menno, were in agreement with Luther and Calvin that sinners must be “broken” by the law, led to contrition, as a part of receiving faith. The sinful human will was in rebellion against God, even though the Anabaptists in principle accepted the notion that the human will is capable of responding positively to God. Repentance and contrition were given emphasis in the Dutch Anabaptist movement at least equal to that of Luther and Calvin. The difference emerged, however, when the question at issue became what happened after a person had responded to grace. Luther maintained that the prosecuting, condemning role of the law continued to be important in the life of a Christian. The openness and need for grace had to be reaffirmed over and over again through the condemning judgment of scripture. The pedagogical use of the law was thereby emphasized to have a leading role in the Christian life.

Anabaptists, however, were not content to speak only about faith that saved, but added the notions of regeneration and obedience. We have already made this clear from our study of the Fundamentboek by Menno Simons. The law to them, therefore, could function in the sense of a very real demand that was replaced by evangelical obedience, to be sure, but not invalidated on principle. At the same time, the Mosaic law not only condemned the sinner, but also drove him to Christ and made him worthy of forgiveness. For Dirk Philips, the law teaches knowledge of sin, the fear of God, and from this follows the broken and contrite heart that is acceptable to God. The beginning of faith was therefore not the confession of being a sinner, but repentance emerging in a changed way of life.

On that basis, Anabaptists could have gone into the direction of Calvin’s third sense of the law, his “usus in renatis.” Though the Spirit of Christ in the believer replaced obedience to the law, it did make the believer fulfill the Mosaic law as seen in its moral aspect. Knowledge of the written law was therefore indispensable as an aid to understanding what God wants from us. “Could,” we said, but in actual fact they hardly ever did. Much to our surprise, the law had almost no direct pedagogical function, and most often a preparatory and condemning one. Illustrative of this negative appraisal of the Mosaic law is this quotation from Pilgram Marpeck:

This Jesus Christ is the free Son of God and man, and He is without commandment or prohibition against His own, the faithful. For the rebels and transgressors of the commandments, however, the commandments of God are only the commandments of man, and the whole law only the law for damnation. For, where there is no sin or wickedness, no command or prohibition is needed; there is freedom from all law. Where commandment or prohibition rule conscience, heart, and even God’s law, one is not free, but is in bondage to sin and wickedness. There no free grace, peace, or joy in the Holy Spirit but, rather, the threat of punishment, fear, sorrowing, and anxiety about the vengeance on sin through the coming wrath of God. Because of this fear, external works and fruits of sin are at times neglected. Such fear of God is the beginning of true repentance, the hope to become free of the law of sin and to become free, through faith in Jesus Christ, in the word of grace. Such fear is the beginning of wisdom and the knowledge of God in His Son, who is the wisdom
of His Father. In this manner, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, sets one free. He alone, through His Holy Spirit makes godly the heart and the entire disposition of man. He erases the handwriting of the devil so that it is no longer the law that reigns, but grace and freedom in Jesus Christ, according to the nature of the true love of God and neighbor. This love in God is the real freedom. Without any coercion, this love truly fulfills all commands and prohibitions of the whole pleasure of God. That is the true freedom in Christ Jesus. Whomever He thus sets free is truly free, for whoever remains in His words is His true disciple.122

So for the regenerate the law has no function at all; for the unregenerate, the law is there to instill in them repentance that leads to the fear of God, which in turn leads to the acceptance of the gospel in faith. Evangelical obedience does not follow the pattern of the law in so far as it does not result in compliance with ‘mitzvoth’ as rules of behavior, but nevertheless obedience and submission to the moral standard and ordinances contained in the written record of Jesus’ teachings are part and parcel of the life of the Christian. That is why in the 6th ordinance of the Church of God, according to Dieter (Dirk) Philips, the “keeping of all of Christ’s commandments” has no reference to the Mosaic law at all, but instead to the maximum moral requirements of “godly life,” confession, forsaking all things, meekness, fasting and praying without cessation, and other similar virtues, all of which could be summarized by the “Rule of Christianity” (Gal. 6:16) that Christians are to follow the Example of Christ.123

So it is clear that it was not the Mosaic law as a collection of requirements, but the life and teachings of Christ that took primary place in exhortation. Luther’s decision to have a Christian follow the public law and obey the same statutes and legal practices as the rest of society was thus denied by the Anabaptists. Calvin’s reinstatement of the Mosaic law as the written record of the the divine will that was now inscribed into the hearts of the faithful under the New Covenant was discarded as well. Only the shape of obedience under the New Testament was seen as the complete and sufficient description of Christian morality. Marpeck and Philips in particular seem to agree that the law as external obedience had no place in a Christian life, not as the model of evangelical obedience or as the pattern of societal rule of law. In that sense they radicalized Luther’s position. An obedience to the “law” (a Mosaic law applied only externally within society’s understanding) in that sense would even be tantamount to disobedience to Christ.

Nevertheless, the pattern of obedience is still there. The concept of discipleship (Nachfolge) that is at the heart of Anabaptist ethics is not directed at achieving ethical transformation (in other words it is not a variation of Pelagianism), but it does presuppose an ability to comply with an external will by demanding obedience. Such an obedience is real, but distinct from what was seen as compliance with outward rules of behavior and at the same time different from the mystique of inner regeneration. Yoder put it like this:

Because the Messiah came and poured out God’s Spirit, obedience is possible [emphasis mine]. The obedience which was a potentiality became a reality in him. Pelagius affirmed (if the biased sources we have can be trusted) that there is something good left in human nature; an affirmation about Man. The “possibilists” [referring to Anabaptists, Jews, and Wesleyans to name a few, RAV] on the other hand are making an affirmation about God. The affirmation that obedience is possible is a statement not about me nor about human nature, but about the Spirit of God.124

So a true obedience is possible on the basis of God’s activity in man, not on the basis of a “neutral” anthropology; but what is its shape? Nachfolge is not about spontaneous good works flowing from faith or works of gratitude, nor is it obedience out of fear to a specific set of rules. It is neither inner spontaneous submission nor external legal compliance. “Evangelical” deeds of gratitude may be motivated by faith, but they are neither exclusively defined by faith nor only possible on the basis of the motivation of faith, so therein does not lie the distinctive pattern we are seeking. Their contents remain to some extent linked to those of the
social environment, can be understood as response to prevailing morality. But Anabaptist obedience as Nachfolge Christi is about non-conformity to that environment. The source for the specific contents of Christian ethics in the Anabaptist perspective is not the contents of the law, nor the inner structure of faith, but the shape of the new community that is headed by a crucified Son of God. We will try to show that part of the answer lies in the ecclesiological emphasis of Mennonite christology. Its emphasis stems in my understanding exactly from where it will prove to be in Paul’s theology: in the distinctive shape and goals of the community that is defined by the obedience to Christ. It is the ecclesiological dimension that sets the Anabaptist ethics apart from all others.

Yoder put this difference in the following manner:

What I propose to call “the nomic element” is therefore epistemologically more important than in the other traditions, since for them the need is only to motivate an ethic of social conformity whereas the Anabaptists’ ethic must both motivate and inform a costly counter-cultural life style.

The “nomic” element is what we have been describing as the specific shape of non-conformist radical obedience. Yoder insists rightly upon the fact that the understanding of the gospel as to be obeyed is connected to the different life-style of Christians, and we would dare to add here that this life-style is realized in the distinct and separate community. The basic elements of this nonconformist community were exemplified for the 16th century in specific do’s and don’ts, such as not swearing oaths, adult baptism, repentance, and the amendment of life, all grounded in the commitment to follow biblical teachings as the highest authority in life. The basic pattern of evangelical obedience in Anabaptism was the corporate identity of a nonconforming community, committed to follow the example and the teachings of Christ as their mission in the world.

We have expressed some surprise that Anabaptists, despite their emphasis on obedience to Christ, have not accepted Calvin’s usus in renatis of the Mosaic law for the faithful. Nevertheless, their concept of Nachfolge does imply obedience to an external will, expressed in commandments, and not an inner spontaneity in following the covenant ordinances of the New Testament. Their use of the “law of Christ” still has a “nomist” shape. That this ‘nomic’ element was not expressed as a form of affirmation of the law (in the sense we now have learned to take it as “Torah,” instruction) can on closer investigation really be no surprise.

First of all, they shared the perspective of their era on what Jewish law could possibly mean. That Torah as “instruction” also comprised grace was not fully understood. That is something Christian theologians have learned very slowly over the centuries, as anti-Jewish bias gradually broke down.

Second, Mennonite tradition must have been influenced strongly by the prevailing Lutheran antithesis between Grace and law, and it had to contend with an interpretation of the law that made it a valid source or functional equivalent of state-controlled public law. Against that use of the law it supported the Lutheran insistence that the law was a preparation for the gospel, but they differed on the way it functioned. With Luther they agreed the law condemned, showed our guilt, and led us into accepting God’s forgiving grace, to which Anabaptists added: and led to a renewal of life or repentance as a prerequisite of faith. Nevertheless, Mennonites came to emphasize obedience in faith to such an extent that the gospel in fact came to function as the law of the redeemed community. In the Mennonite experience, the Church was a visible community of people, a brotherhood consisting of people that did not belong to the pagan society in which they lived. In fact, the Church was defined by separation from this world, identified by baptism, discipline, morality and martyrdom. The state belonged, together with all other forms of secular power, to the old order that was on the verge of disappearing. Separation from the world was the basis of all its institutions. The Church must be visible in this separation from the world as a City on a Hill, and its members could not reside in the valley of worldly society. Let us show this more directly from a peculiar document in Men-
The Schleitheim Confession of 1527, more than any other document of Mennonite faith, exemplifies the basic tendencies of its peculiar ethics and its ecclesiological dimension. The meaning given to baptism showed the primary insistence on morality and separation. Baptism should be given to those who had been taught repentance and the amendment of life and who desired to walk "in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." That this was not a mere moral rigor was expressed by demanding a true faith in the atonement, which after all defined the ethical situation of the believer. Rejecting infant baptism was vital to the Anabaptist understanding of the nature of the Church. Baptism was not entrance into civilized Christian society; it was rejection of the believer’s natural status as citizen of the state, because it signified his death with Christ and his resurrection unto a new life. The only biblical way to deal with sin and evil in this world was to separate or flee from it. No fellowship with unbelievers was possible and allowed. Furthermore, entry into the community of the faithful was to be voluntary. Only an adult can enter a covenant with a doctrinal and moral commitment.

Rejection of the state implied also rejection of the violence that the state had in its employ to sanction and force people into submission. The rule of Christ as explained in Matthew 18 was seen as the paradigm of resolving differences and maintaining a biblical standard of behavior. To be part of the Church meant to be a brother or sister, not a citizen. Inadvertent error and sin must somehow be dealt with. It implied that the behavior of anyone had influence upon the entire community, which was devoted to holiness and purity. Celebration of the Lord’s Supper had to be postponed until such time as these differences were resolved by the disciplinary process of Matthew 18. That meant that the ‘sword’, i.e., the entire system of punishment, sanctions, rewards, and other means of force and persuasion by which society organizes itself, was rejected without compromise, as an “ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ.” Instead, “mercy and forgiveness” are seen as the better way to deal with sin and sinners, and for Christians the only way. Christians were not allowed to seek punishment or to settle strife and disputes between people by judicial process. Because the sword was an instrument of society to regulate its affairs, all those with any political power had to use it or affirm its use. No Christian, therefore, could be a magistrate, if he was to follow a King in exile. After all, “the rule of government was according to the flesh.” Christians, however, had a citizenship in heaven. Besides that, the rejection of violence led to the position of non-violent resistance that was based on Christ’s commandment to love the enemy. The decision not to engage in any kind of violence, that violence that was deemed necessary to preserve the integrity of the national state, brought Anabaptists in continuous conflict with the governments of western Europe.

The process of truth within society was rejected as well, in conformity with that principle. The oath was said to be “a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises.” It meant that truth could only be found where the sword was used as threat, and in the understanding that it was normal within society for individual interests and liberties to clash with one another. It also referred to the system of mutual services that an ordered society produced by contracts and enforced by state power or by social sanction, as in the case of promises per se. The oath, therefore, stood for the way truth and trust were enforced within societies and thereby transformed into a matter of outward behavior. Against that, Mennonites maintained that all swearing is forbidden, because “we are not able to change the smallest part of ourselves.” A promise or an oath implies society’s fiction of total self-control and the universal necessity of truthfulness, which is contradicted by the very fact of a system of sanctions. Human beings who are not able to control themselves or the conditions in which they live and act are unable to affirm the future act of their own volition. But they are able to speak truthfully according to what they are, their yes should be yes, their no should be no. Truthfulness is demanded as a matter of personal integrity, but not as a public matter of social duty.
The visible community of the Church is dependent on this practice of truthfulness without force and risk. More important, the system of oaths implies unconditional affirmation of the authority of the state to demand public truth, even if that affirmation would then be used to exercise violence, making the swearer of the oath into the accomplice of state violence. To swear to the truth making God a witness and guarantor of one’s utterance means implicating God in the performance of human (in)justice.

John Calvin attacked Anabaptists for making a division in this regard between Christ and the Old Testament:

The Anabaptists, not content with this moderate use of oaths, condemn all, without exception, on the ground of our Savior’s general prohibition, “I say unto you, Swear not at all: Let your speech be Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil” (Matthew 5:34; James 5:12.). In this way, they inconsiderately make a stumbling-stone of Christ, setting him in opposition to the Father, as if he had descended into the world to annul his decrees. In the law, the Almighty not only permits an oath as a thing that is lawful, (this were amply sufficient,) but, in a case of necessity, actually commands it (Exodus 22:11).

It is true that Mennonites presupposed a direct authority of the New Testament in distinction to the Old Testament. Submission (not obedience) to the official state as a form of love for the enemy, accepting the secondary status of human government in this world while we await the return of Christ as the rightful King and accepting the official state’s moral intention to do good, is not the same as the duty to obey the state as if it were a God-given instrument to produce righteousness in this world. To be a part of the economic system without making that into the foundation of human solidarity (Matthew 22:21), and to accept the authority of the emperor without accepting the status he claims for himself (1 Tim. 2:2; Titus 3:1), is not identical to affirmation of and obedience to the state. Even in the form of passive refusal to obey, whenever the government demands something that contradicts biblical commandments, the state is still affirmed as the basis of our citizenship in this world. The alternative that is to be rejected here is insurrection against the state, because to use violence against a state that is rejected precisely because she uses violence against people would not only directly oppose biblical precepts, but would be self-contradictory. It is this view on the distinct natures of Church and state that drove Anabaptists, more than anything else, to move away from affirmation of the Old Testament as a direct source for morality.

The breaking of bread, the most powerful symbol of the unity that is sought for within the Church, also implies a break with the old order. Unity in society at the level of the state expresses the delegated power of a plurality of independent liberties. The unity of the state is the symbol, and also the reality, of our common interest in an ordered state of things, in which each of us can exercise the maximum of individual freedom. Morality and legality are means to an end. So the state starts with individual freedom and has its final goal in it. The Church, however, is considered to be a collective of people “who must beforehand be united in the one body of Christ, that is the congregation of God, whose head is Christ, and that by (adult) baptism.”

This unity is in itself of a moral nature. Believers share one bread because they are united into the one fellowship with Christ and follow His ways. They show explicitly in their lives that they are committed to obedience to Christ’s commandments, and they do so within the Church as their primary place of allegiance. To be a part of Christ’s body is a condition of the morality that we exercise over against the powers of the world.

§ 11. John Howard Yoder: the social ethics of salvation

Let us turn now to a contemporary Mennonite theologian to elaborate on the ecclesiological dimension of the Anabaptist concept of justification. The question we take with us from the previous paragraphs is this: how can one understand the new ethical situation from an Anab-
baptist perspective, in which justification is about obedience in faith as well as extrinsic amnesty, and where the evangelical law does not signal a return to (mere external) legalism? As we will see, Yoder is concerned with the constitution of the community that has the obligation to fulfill the ethical demand and the radical different and concrete nature of Christian ethics, in contrast with and opposition to general cultural demands, because here lies the possibility for Christian ethics to retain its particular character.

In chapter 11 ("Justification by Grace through Faith") of his Politics of Jesus, published four years before Keck's article on justification in 1972, Yoder affirmed the centrality of the doctrine of justification and the distinctiveness of the Mennonite emphasis on regeneration and sanctification. He agrees with what he holds to be the consensus within Anabaptist tradition as a whole, that there is a "personal character of the righteousness God imputes to those who believe," apparently agreeing here with Klaassen's statement that this Reformed doctrine was shared by the Anabaptist movement, in conformity with other contemporary statements which seemed close to the evangelical-reformed doctrine. But now the Reformation doctrine is again challenged on the issue of the relationship between imputed righteousness and ethics, faith and works. What went wrong?

"The act of justification or the status of being just or righteous before God is therefore radically disconnected from any objective or empirical achievement of goodness by the believer."

This statement is laden with implications. As we will see, (1) it is precisely this disconnection between the evangelical good and the moral order that is the primary focus of Leander Keck, who took this to be the core message of the entire New Testament. At stake here is one of the consequences of the adoption of justification as the foundational message of the gospel, i.e., the setting aside of Christ's ethical teachings as in a way preparatory for Paul's gospel. Yoder expressly negates the dissolution of the moral aspect of the gospel, emphasizing instead its character as social ethos of the redeemed community. And furthermore, (2) we find here again the argument against that Lutheran retreat into inwardness which made faith into a state of mind rather than a way of life, and a criterion of good works instead of a prerequisite. The personal character of the imputation is not to be understood in 16th-century concepts. So here the notion of contrition and repentance is reevaluated to signify primarily a rational awareness of the righteousness of (social) action, especially in connection with issues of peace and violence. The gospel ethics is aiming at achieving peace along the path of mediation, nonviolent resistance and sacrificing love, not the inner peace of conscience.

As Yoder argues, insistence on justification by grace alone and by faith alone, "apart from any correlation with works of any kind," implies the loss of a radical ethical and social concern. The ethical tradition that Paul acquired from his contemporaries is then nothing but a vestige of the old world, destined to fade away into oblivion. If the real basis of Christian ethics is the Christian community in which the possibility of acting under God's commands is being shown, then there is a 'moral order' in this world that defines the context of Christian acts: the Church. In such a Church, the old order of power politics is reversed, but it is still a moral order. By reading Paul's statements in Galatians and Romans to be primarily about the "new moral order, i.e., the reality of the Church of Jews and gentiles, Yoder can retain the concrete meaning and force of the Christian way of life as separate and distinct.

All of the above statements about what Paul had in mind by justification of the ungodly have come under fire with the advent of new scholarship, some of it already available in the early seventies, but apparently its results were evaluated differently by Keck and Yoder. Yoder's remake of classical Anabaptist polemics is enhanced and deepened by his use of new exegetical insights into the social dimension of the concept of righteousness in the New Testament and a new appreciation of the ecclesiological or political dimension of the gospel, and, in Yoder's specific case, very much deepened both by the doctrine and the experience of the
peace witness or non-violent resistance. Still, even Yoder tries to establish a moderate position, which, like the majority of Mennonite creeds, does not stray too far from the central emphasis of mainstream Protestant (evangelical) Christianity. The gospel is first interpreted as a social ethics for the present, and only then as a proclamation of individual salvation as well. The latter, however, must be taken without the normal stress on individualism that has become characteristic of the modern age which is so deeply determined by the "Introspective Conscience of the West," to quote Yoder’s main source: K. Stendahl.

Yoder then asks the question as to whether the righteousness of God and man is better conceived of as having primarily social or cosmic dimensions. Righteousness is then not first and foremost a matter of individual morality, and the moral order is not the cosmic causal order, ruled over by God, who rewards every individual good act and punishes every bad act, over against which Keck sought for a transformation of the ethical situation of the doer. Yoder is asking here, first of all, whether the question: Who is doing the good? cannot be answered better by a reference to a community instead of man in his individuality. Second, Yoder affirms the general outcome of studies in Paul by Davies, Sanders, and Dunn, that Paul did not see the law as a system of duties, or as an instance that made people know their guilt, but "The law was rather a gracious arrangement made by God for ordering the life of his people while they were awaiting the arrival of the Messiah." Law makes its opposite more visible, but it is an exaggeration to say that this was its primary purpose. Knowledge of sin was not the purpose of the law (as Keck emphasized), but the ordering of the life of a community in order to realize the good.

In the same line of reasoning that moves away from individualism, faith can now be understood to be basically the affirmation of the coming of the Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth. It is not about a sense of sinfulness and trust in God’s promise to justify the ungodly, at least not primarily. The subjective meaning of faith is built upon this core affirmation of the present Kingdom. Paul did not debate with those who viewed the law as the means of salvation, since Jewish Christians, and non-Christian Jews, for that matter, did not believe that in the first place. Paul did not want to use the law as the schoolmaster that showed us the judging impact of the righteousness of God before allowing man to enter into the new covenant, because the law did not function like that. Paul’s polemics with regard to the law was solely about the social form of the Church, and the law was opposed when it was used to form a barrier between Jews and gentiles.

So what then does justification mean, and how does it relate to ethics? Following Markus Barth and Hans Werner Bartsch, Yoder concludes that justification means "setting things right," between God and man, between Jews and gentiles, bringing peace to a divided humanity. Justification is aimed at establishing a new kind of community "where the brokenness of humankind is set right and where persons who were not born under the law obey it from the heart." In that perspective the law continues to have a function in the live of the believers, as Keck also argued, but with a completely different function in mind.

Both argued that the relationship to the law was changed. But Keck sees this difference in the removal of the "moral order" in which knowledge of the law would lead to doing the good, implying the right to pass judgment on others and the necessity of being self-aware in the doing of the law. It is still the individual in his moral situation who is addressed by justification. Yoder concentrates on the transformation of the moral order, i.e., in the breaking down of social barriers and a new obedience to the law that is of a voluntary nature. We could conclude that where Keck argues that justification abrogates the law as a moral system of obedience, Yoder argues that justification allows us to view the law (God’s righteousness) as moral demand and ordering of life for the new community in which the social barriers between Jew and gentile are torn down. Keck argues for the annihilation of any moral order, and Yoder argues for a radical transformation in the moral order. The justification that gives us this dif-
ferent way to view the moral demand is not the abollishment of that demand, but first and foremost the changed social situation in which the Torah functions as guide: the collective nature of the community’s obedience, the inner preparation for it through celebration and prayer, the institutions of social solidarity and sharing, and the key commandment to endure under suffering and love for the enemy.

The differences and the continuity between Yoder’s approach and that of his 16th-century forebears are obvious. The rise of 20th-century Biblical scholarship has indeed shed a different light on Paul’s teachings, far less influenced by the polemics of the Reformation against medieval Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. Krister Stendahl is quoted by Yoder as one example of a modern approach to Paul that liberates him from what he considers the greatest prejudice of the 16th century: the preoccupation with personal guilt and the axiom that such a problem must find its solution in the “introspective conscience of the west.” According to Stendahl, Paul did not share this preoccupation, and neither did the Anabaptists. The anguish of personal guilt is conspicuously absent from his thought. Neither did Paul share Luther’s conception of the Torah as law and the origin of outward legalism. The law was intended to make life possible, not to lead into condemnation. Law and gospel are not diametrically opposed in the way that Luther had found and experienced in his own life.

Furthermore, faith to Paul was not the triad of knowledge (notitia), assent (assensus), and trust (fiducia) that Protestant Scholastics made it out to be, but the affirmation and practical acceptance of a specific content: that Jesus was the Messiah sent by the God of Israel to open the covenant to gentiles. This affirmation of Christ’s messianity and Lordship, as expressed so concisely in Peter’s confession in Matthew 16, provided the basis of the subjective meaning of faith that was its consequence. So faith was first of all a matter of obedience, insofar as it meant accepting the One whom God had sent as His final self-disclosure, which had as its first consequence the emergence of a community of faith that transcended the boundaries between Jew and gentile (Yoder, 1994, 216).

The main issue now in Paul’s rendition of the gospel was his insight that with the coming of the Messiah the covenant with Israel was expanded to include gentiles as well. The Church was to be the social community that embraced both Jew and gentile. Though their relationship to Israel’s Torah was to remain different, the basis of their respective relationship to God was to be the same: Christ’s person and work. Redemption was a reality within the believing community, and not an inward state of mind in the individual believer. This believing community was not a universal sum of individual believers, but a particular community that was determined by a specific salvation history and historic mission. Its historic basis was the reconciliation of Jew and gentile, the breaking down of their social barriers and the institution of peace between them. There was now only one humanity, created after the pattern of Christ as the New Adam. Social distinctions such as those between master and slave, man and woman, Jew and gentile, and holy and profane had lost their ordering function. According to Eph. 2:11-26, one might argue that this meaning of reconciliation is interlocked with reconciliation to God. So also can the “justification by faith” in Gal. 2:14f and the notion of the “new creature” in 2 Cor. 5:17 be read as referring to a change in the social structure of mankind as well as to a transformation of individual men and women. Justification in Galatians, then, means essentially the same as the “making of peace” in Ephesians. The “new creature” of 2 Corinthians then refers primarily to a renewed humanity, not a reborn individual.

From such a redefinition of the social dimension of the concept of justification we can more easily make the step towards the problem of (social) ethics. Yoder stresses that Paul means by that concept: the coming into being of a “new community where the brokenness of humankind is set right.” And this “setting right” is the better understanding of the biblical concept of justification. The result of it is “that persons who are not born under the law obey it from the heart.” That means that Jesus’ gospel is not preparatory, is not meant to radicalize the demand
of the law to such an extent that man is convinced he is unable to obey it. On the contrary: Jesus’ ethics is precisely the way of life of such a redeemed community that is able to show through its works that “reconciliation is a real experience.” Paul’s position and that of Christ are then perfectly in harmony, and thus we avoid one of the first consequences of the doctrine of justification, that we need to separate between Jesus’ radicalized teachings on the law and Paul’s preaching of Grace beyond the law.

If justification is in principle about God "setting things right", primarily social, but also individual, then the center of the gospel is the Church itself, as a community that realizes the unity of mankind under the sovereignty of God. This “unity of mankind” has an important ethical consequence, which Yoder states as follows:

But it is par excellence with reference to enmity between peoples, the extension of neighbor-love to the enemy and the renunciation of violence even in the most righteous cause, that this promise takes on flesh in the most original, the most authentic, the most frightening and scandalous, and therefore in the most evangelical way.

The Church’s position and way of life with regard to this vital element of social ethics, i.e., love for the enemy, then becomes the visible consequence of the reality of justification by faith. Here righteousness, acquired by faith, worked out in faith, lived in faith, becomes a practical experience. What we have is discipleship, Nachfolge, not a metaphysical drama felt in our inner being. Paul’s theology, if read like this, actually becomes a cornerstone of the ethics of Jesus, supporting it, instead of relegating it to a preparatory stage. It is Jesus’ ethics, whether it be applied to marriage, labor, or the prohibitions of falsehood and slavery, that is seen at work in an unbroken and undivided humanity, is part of the “promise of a new humanity enabled and created by God.”

With regard to ethics, Yoder’s insistence on the ecclesiological dimension of justification not only brings in an emphasis on social virtues, but it also gives him a basis for changing the shape of ethics itself. That can be seen from a brief inventory of themes in one of Yoder’s major lectures: “Why Ecclesiology is Social Ethics.” Jesus’ ethics is now not received as part of secular ethics, involving a standard that can only be met up to a certain level. The realism that permeates Christian ethics in our times, in which we tend to negotiate about the level of obedience which can still be considered practical, now falls away. If it is the community that the demand addresses, its radical nature can be maintained. The Church must be the place that celebrates the victory of God over the powers of sin and death, and in doing so it prepares its members to act in conformity with the gospel of nonresistance and love for the enemy.

If that is so, the Church’s praxis is a school for a changed type of humanity. The absolute demands of the Sermon on the Mount become a feasible option as soon as we discard the severity that would confront a lonely individual trying to abide by it. Only if the Church can be such a place of learning and celebration of the new spirituality can it help individuals to dispense with the utilitarianism and realism that most often obstructs their practical obedience to the gospel. To accept nonresistance without the help of a community, to practice sharing of bread and money without the implicit solidarity of a community that aids me when I am in financial distress, weakens the practical possibilities of compliance. The community of Christians that celebrates the victory of Christ not only removes the social barriers between Jew and gentile, friend and foe, but it reaches out toward humanity as the firstfruits of the kingdom of God. It is in itself the beginning of what is to come, it is the redeemed community. Justification, as a part of that, expresses the condition of this ecclesiological reality, defining the basic situation in which Christian ethics is strictly defined as Discipleship, in opposition both to the realist and the utopian of this world.

Yoder makes it clear that he intended to correct the one-sidedness with which justification was understood only as a subjective experience based on Christ’s sacrificial death, and not
also as a social ethic based on the institution of a justified, redeemed community. In other words, the model of atonement that he favors is not that of Anselm’s satisfaction theory, nor Abelard’s moral influence theory, but more that of the Christus Victor motif in a new version. If Christ is already King, this world will fade away, and acting in conformity with Christ’s life and self-surrender and in obedience to his word is the expression of that victory on the stage of world history. Christian ethics is the social ethics of the Church as the one specific and separate community amongst the families of humanity that already shows the signs of the coming Kingdom.

Not only does Yoder confront the individualistic nature of the classic interpretation of justification; he also denies the liberal assertion that the doctrine is a religious way of stating that man is good. In the eyes of Lutherans, Yoder’s view that it is possible, though in a fragmented and imperfect manner, to do the will of God, must seem Pelagianist. But Pelagius affirmed the possibility of doing good as something innate in man, untouched by the fall. Yoder is arguing that the experience of the outpouring of the Spirit makes obedience possible. This claim can be made based on the Christological statement that the Spirit of Christ dwells in the Church (and not the inner self, as we discussed above). And only on the basis of a faith that breaks away with all trust in the humanly possible is Christian ethics also an obedience to the Christ of scripture. In Yoder’s words:

The ethical content, the concrete decisions which obedience calls for, were different [between Anabaptists and the magisterial Reformers – RAV]. The good works which testify spontaneously to the faith of the Lutherans, of the ethic of gratitude of the Calvinist, found their content in the orders of creation and preservation, with socially conservative implications, supporting the existing governments, economic institutions, the patriarchal family, etc. While the faith to which Sattler calls his readers finds its criteria in the example and the instructions of Jesus, with effects that if not directly revolutionary (because they are nonviolent) had to be nonconformist. He rejected the Sword, the Oath and the state Church. What I propose to call “the nomic element” is therefore epistemologically more important than in the other traditions, since for them the need is only to motivate an ethic of social conformity, whereas the Anabaptists’ ethic must both motivate and inform a costly counter-cultural lifestyle.  

Sattler’s solution is not a form of legalism that makes obedience the precondition of salvation, but it is a way of thinking that finds “biblical prescriptiveness” to be in conformity with the nature of redemption. No freedom that was merely expressed in the form of a general commandment to love one’s neighbor could suffice in finding the exact will of God to be obeyed by the community of the faithful.

In various ways justification and sanctification have been connected throughout the history of Protestant theology. There is a sanctification that follows extrinsic justification according to the Reformed pattern. There is a justification that enables man to sanctify himself in the Catholic pattern of thought. And there is finally a Mennonite pattern: justification and sanctification are both combined into one experience of faith that is effective in the concrete obedience of a community to the divine commandments. We must now take a step back from our discourse on the history of theology. Any Christian ethics is ultimately based on an understanding of the applicable Scriptural basis. We have in our day and age a new understanding of the pattern and contents of the theology of the New Testament that allows us to redefine the doctrine of justification and to derive the foundation of Christian ethics that is interlinked with it.