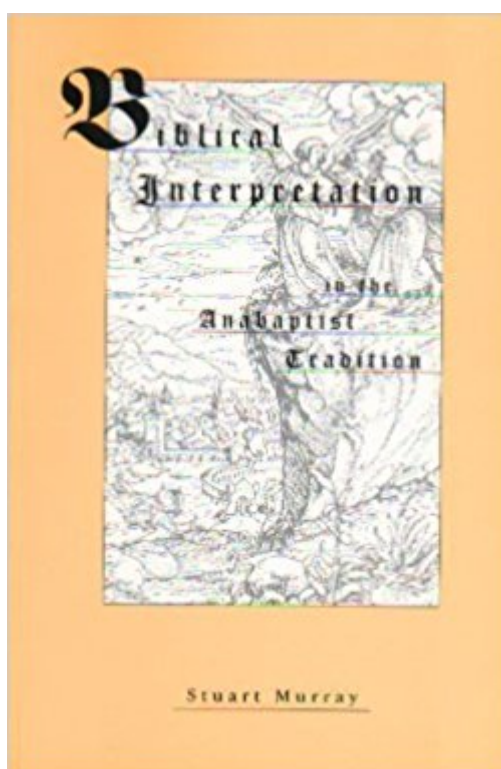


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Biblical Interpretation In The Anabaptist Tradition (Studies In The Believers Church Tradition)



Synopsis

"What Stuart Murray has brought to light in his study of Anabaptist hermeneutics is of enormous theological and practical relevance, both for our understanding of the spectrum of Christian biblical interpretation and its contemporary appropriation. For too long we have neglected voices on the margins of the Christian churches which offer a perspective on biblical interpretation that picks up methods of reading deeply rooted in Scripture itself. Stuart Murray's book does much to illuminate one of the most challenging movements in Christianity. It will be of benefit to historians, theologians and all of us who are seeking ways of being faithful to Jesus Christ at the beginning of a new millennium." - Christopher Rowland, Dean Ireland Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, Oxford University

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Introduction *Journal of Anabaptist Studies* 15 (2013) 1-10. Stuart Murray has a PhD in Anabaptist Hermeneutics and is chair of the Anabaptist Network in the United Kingdom. With these credentials, and his knowledge of the various, wide-ranging Anabaptists of the 16th century, he possesses the potential to thoroughly lay out what made these radical Reformers distinct—especially when it comes to their approach to biblical interpretation, or hermeneutics. There is much that can and has been said concerning the Anabaptists and what made them particularly radical (both in good ways, and bad), and Murray attempts in *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* to systematize their presuppositions and convictions concerning the Word of God. Their approach had deep implications for their ecclesiology and application. Murray is aware also of their drawbacks (and some may say there are many) concerning their hermeneutic, and he does take some time to analyze critically these shortcomings with an attempted lack of bias. Summary *Journal of Anabaptist Studies* 15 (2013) 1-10. Murray systematizes the Anabaptist hermeneutic according to six “distinctives,” as he sees them: the Bible as self-interpreting, Christocentrism, the two testaments, the Spirit and Word, and congregational hermeneutics, and their application to obedience. His book opens and concludes with two chapters each. The first chapter sets the stage, so to speak, with the historical context of the Reformers and radicals, as well as his explanation for writing the book. Early on, Murray sets up a dichotomy between the two groups of Protestants; this dichotomy can be summarized as the Reformers were mere intellectuals and seminarians, while the Anabaptists were simple Bible readers and church-goers. Throughout the book, Murray offers a myriad of quotes from the radicals which give the idea they perceived this dichotomy as well; and so perhaps, Murray is merely carrying on the tradition. Several principles certainly drove the Anabaptists, which Murray lists in the second chapter: the plain sense of Scripture (a radical understanding of sola scriptura), the right of private interpretation (a radical over-emphasis of the priesthood of all believers), freedom from ecclesiastical traditions (indeed, many rejected nearly all Church historical teachings; except perhaps for a few who made use of the first early creeds), and their “commitment to the literal sense of Scripture” (p. 27). The hermeneutical distinctives of the radicals correlated which reveals a consistency in their “system” (though they would reject the term). The first distinctive, “the Bible as self-interpreting,” was held due to the belief that the Bible is “Simple, Plain, [and] Clear.” They therefore felt free to reject

any need for reason or scholarship in hermeneutics. They also rejected any influence of doctrine or church traditions. By contrast, the Reformers understood how to make use of all of these; in what eventually became systematized as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Murray himself notes in his evaluate, *“the Anabaptist approach by itself is inadequate”* (p. 59). The next chapter examines how the radicals used a *“Christocentric”* lens for interpreting the Bible, as opposed to what they perceived the Reformers as using a mere Christological approach. This meant they interpreted the whole of Scripture through the words and deeds of Christ, during His earthly ministry; all other commands and teachings of the Bible were compared to His commands and teachings as recorded in the Gospels. The fifth chapter explores the Anabaptist hermeneutical theology of covenants, essentially explaining that they were early progressive dispensationalists. Again, even Murray noted how the Anabaptists’ understanding in this distinctive was not adequately handled (p. 120). Chapter six covers the spectrum of Anabaptists in their understanding of literalism versus spiritualism. Murray examines how there were many who fell throughout this spectrum, with a healthy group within the middle. Chapter seven examines perhaps the most unique distinctive of the Anabaptists; that is, their ecclesiological application of their hermeneutic. Their strict understanding of congregationalism and their interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 not only allowed or encouraged all members to participate in their weekly gatherings, it was nearly required for continual membership. The next chapter, puts forth how the radicals took to applying Scripture as best they could in their everyday lives—it was apparent that they took application very seriously. Concluding, the last two chapters serve as a good summary and exploration for ways to best make use of the aforementioned Anabaptist theology of hermeneutics. The latter examines two growing movements in the global Church: the charismatics and proponents of liberation theology.

Critical Evaluation Though there is some merit to be gained from this work, it is overshadowed by the overwhelming weaknesses. Many adjustments and further research should go into this study if a following edition were to be released. Perhaps the most blatant for any person who has read even a small amount of theology from the Reformers will recognize straw man mischaracterizations of them. Though the radical Reformers it seems held these straw man views, it also seems that Murray holds them as well. This is apparent as he never wastes a page to explain how the Anabaptist understand, even if in the end he criticizes it, was a necessary alternative to the Reformers. It also seems he has never read any primary sources of the Reformers, and if this is so, it is quite telling by the lack of any citations in any of his footnotes. His worst mischaracterization is perhaps that the Reformers were only theologians, seemingly unconcerned with the edification of

Christian believers. However, as Nancey Murphy notes, John Calvin was mainly pastoral in his theological approach. Her book *Reasoning & Rhetoric in Religion* observes how theologians throughout church history developed their logical arguments; for Calvin (as representative of Reformation theologians) she says, "Calvin's work] begins with a pastoral concern and sets out to provide a solid theological answer. Second, Calvin generally makes more use of scripture in his arguments than did Thomas Aquinas." She even goes on to say "that Calvin [attempted] to find a middle position between two extremes but more often between the views he attributed to his opponents: the Catholics and the more radical Anabaptist wing of the Reformation." Earlier, she also states, "it is not possible to make arguments grounded in scripture without warrants of some sort, so sola Scriptura can never be followed in an absolute way, like the Anabaptists. Concerning the method of Anabaptists, one can begin critiquing their 'christocentrism,' which in fact is centric on the gospels as a genre. Because they do not follow the *analogia/regula fidei*, they seem to ignore clear passages of scripture, including 2 Timothy 3:16, in how to use the Bible as a whole (in contrast to the Reformers) for instruction. As noted before, similar to how they were proto-dispensationalists, due to their habits of private interpretation and charismatic views, they were also more similar to modern-day Holiness/Pentacostals. This is perhaps why Murray finds identity with the charismatic movement, and offers advice rather than theological critique in his conclusion. When considering the ecclesiology of the radicals, it also seems apparent they over-emphasized 1 Corinthians 14 (and so and over-emphasis on congregationalism), rather than balancing it with other passages on church gifts and offices. Of course, due to ignoring church history and doctrines, they also missed how the early church itself was organized. Similar to the aforementioned mischaracterization, Murray unfortunately makes it appear as if the Reformers did not equally care about moral application and obedience to Christ; although the radicals more than likely felt this way, it is telling again that he has not read primary sources if he thinks this way as well. The doctrinal content notwithstanding, the book does contain historical insight, particularly the Anabaptists (arguably, only the Anabaptists). However, formatting arrangements could be improved for overall readability. His opening chapter appropriately set up the historical context, and this is appreciated. However, the summary chapter prior to the "Conversations" would perhaps be better suited as second in order to lay out what each of the distinctives means (the second chapter as it is would then be third, it does not need to move). If this were done, it would also be possible to completely change the book

structure; rather than each chapter being focused on the distinctive, they could be examinations of five to six Anabaptists who represent a position on the literalist/spiritualist spectrum. In each chapter then, the representative and those he represents could contain a brief biography, and how they fit into the distinctives and what they contributed. Due to the wide variety of location and interpretation, the book can be somewhat confusing as it examines each person in the next to one another, as is. This re-structuring would improve overall understanding, and make the author's point more clear. Conclusion Despite the possible historical insights, this book does a disservice to academics who wish to study historical hermeneutical methods, even those they disagree with. It does not consult primary sources and appears intellectually dishonest to anyone who has read opposing theologians. There are better sources for historical theology and hermeneutics, which may even give the Anabaptists a more appealing chance. Stuart Murray's Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition gives a promising study due to its title, and could excite even Reformed readers who have open minds for additional insights. However, due to his large shortcomings, this book does not deserve recommendation except for critique.

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