RE-DIGGING ANCIENT WELLS: The Evangelical Reformation; A Resource for Today's Church

by R. Gerald Hobbs[1]

I count it a great privilege to stand before you in this chapel, a place hallowed by so many memories during my 31 years here, by the prayers, the preaching, the teaching, the singing and dancing before the Lord, of students, staff and faculty. I am honoured to have been professor of church history in this institution, and thus heir to an unusually distinguished lineage. My predecessors include the great John T. McNeill, John Webster Grant, Ed Furcha, and Gerald Cragg. Let me say how indebted I am to the administrators who tolerated my sometimes confusing style, to the colleagues, staff and students with whom I learned to teach, and share what gifts I have been given, and learning I have acquired. I never found it less than exhilarating to stand before a class, adventuring along what one of my students, in a blissful spelling error, described as "the anals of history"!

Finally, it was certainly not always easy living with me, and the passion I have had for my calling. My grateful affection to Helen with whom I have shared these years, to my daughters Kaz and Heather who are here tonight, as is my granddaughter Morgan, and to my son Rob, on the other side of the continent.

Re-digging Wells in the Inherited Terrain of our Evangelical Ancestors

The image in the title of this lecture is drawn from the 26th chapter of Genesis. For those whose reading has not taken you there recently, I summarize: the patriarch Isaac has moved with his

[1]This is a somewhat abbreviated version of the lecture Gerald Hobbs delivered on May 13, 2008, in the Chapel of the Epiphany, Vancouver School of Theology, on the occasion of his retirement as professor of church history. In addition to his teaching role at VST, he has been minister of music at the University Hill Congregation of the United Church, whose home building is the Chapel of The Epiphany.

vast herds into territory once occupied by his father, Abraham. But he has encountered unexpected difficulty: there is insufficient water, "for the inhabitants of the land had filled with earth and stopped up the wells that his father's servants had dug.... So Isaac dug again those wells...and gave them the names his father had given" (26:12-22).

A literal application of this text might see it as a demonstration of filial affection, irenic personality, and dogged persistence. I propose instead a reading that sees Isaac's re-excavation project as an image for what I am about to do this evening: the removal of some detritus accumulated over the centuries from the sources of our evangelical tradition, in the belief there are still springs there that can nourish Christian life in the 21st century.

Let me affirm again what my students have heard me say so often: "evangelical" is a good word, of noble lineage. It means "according to the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ". It was "evangelical" monastics — women and men — who worked in the 4th century against conversion to the values of the Roman empire. In the 13th century Francis and Clare in Assisi resisted the materialism of Italian culture, embracing as good news for the poor an "evangelical" poverty. Luther was a 16th century "evangelical" who brought the church away from a domineering institutionalism, and to a rediscovery of its source in the Gospel of God in Christ.

Re-digging and clearing out old wells — the image is a particularly apt one when applied to the era of the Reformation. For this movement was inspired by the recovery of close biblical studies, a rediscovery of the Scriptures in their original languages and with more accurate texts. *Ad fontes*: "to the sources", to the original springs from which the faith tradition has always flowed; this was the slogan of Erasmus and the other 16th century biblical humanists.

The close association of the Bible and the Protestant movement is underlined in a light-hearted incident that took place in Geneva when I was teaching there. Geneva has a massive concrete wall on the edge of the city's central park, built just over a hundred years

ago, which contains statues of four Protestant reformers, each figure over three meters tall. Tour buses regularly roll up for a ten-minute presentation. One day a bus contained a group of seniors. After the guide did his spiel and invited questions, an elderly woman said: "I know three of these men. M. Farel was the reformer of Neuchatel. M. Jean Calvin was the great hero in Geneva. M. De Bèze I think was his successor. But who is this fourth man, M. K-nox?" The guide gulped for an instant; "K-nox, K-nox": he had no idea either. But being a good tour guide he was never lost for words. "Ah, madame", he smiled condescendingly, "you don't know your *Bible*."

Part of what makes this story funny is that the guide's confusion of the Bible and the Reformation is all too understandable. For nearly 500 years Protestants have celebrated the triumph of the Bible over the church as the glory of the Reformation. *Sola Scriptura*: the Bible in the people's language, everyone reading his or her own copy, and developing a personal understanding of the text.

And herein lies the origin of "Whig" historiography, that vision so long dominating our intellectual horizon, that saw popular democracy, liberal capitalism and western imperialism as a divinely mandated, ever-broadening, stream of world history that has carried us triumphantly to this day! Alas, a reading that was intended to be *personal* became *individualist*. And the fragmentation of biblical truth which began as Luther disagreed with Erasmus, Zwingli with both, and so on, became a tidal wave of denominationalism: at last estimate, perhaps 10,000 autonomous Protestant denominations in the USA alone! And if sectarian Protestantism is a large accumulation of rubble in one of our wells, the emergence of fundamentalism in 19th century North America and Great Britain is another vast heap. Claiming itself to be the only true source of the water of life, it has engendered a series of obstacles on the cultural, social, political — even the geopolitical — as well as religious level that have brought the entire Christian world-view into disrepute, and cut off access to the original springs.

Taking on this issue of Scripture is the topic for another day.

A second retirement lecture, perhaps? I want this evening to take you into a different, though not unrelated place. To do so, I will begin with the story of an encounter.

In the weeks before Christmas, 1526, Margaretha and Michael Sattler slipped through the gates into the upper Rhine city of Strasbourg. Unnoticed amongst a flood of refugees, they came with a purpose greater than personal survival in a world increasingly hostile to religious dissent. They were there to engage the city's leading pastor, Martin Bucer, in serious conversation around the future direction of evangelical reform. Who were these people?

Bucer was thirty-five-years old, university-educated, a former Dominican converted to the evangelical cause, first by reading Erasmus, then by hearing Luther in Heidelberg. He married a former nun, Elisabeth Silbereisen, and barely escaped with young family and library, both growing, into the imperial free city of Strasbourg in 1523. There he rapidly rose from penniless refugee to prominent pastor, assuming increasingly religious leadership of this early modern city state. The printers were churning out reprints of Luther's writings. A pocket-sized copy of Luther's recent (1522) translation of the New Testament into German could be purchased in the market square for the price of the traditional Sunday chicken. By Christmas 1526 public worship had been translated into German, and an evangelical eucharist, accompanied by preaching, was celebrated each Sunday in all the city parishes, including even the stately Gothic cathedral with its 445-foot stone spire, the highest in Christendom and the city's pride. Bucer was moreover becoming known even in distant places as a leading evangelical thinker and reformer, thanks to his published works.

Michael Sattler was perhaps a year or two older, a native of neighbouring south-west Germany. Although he never attended university, he was literate in Latin, having been for some years a Benedictine, first as monk at the Black Forest monastery of St. Peter, then for a few years as prior. When the regional band of peasants in revolt brought their grievances to his abbey, Sattler negotiated with them on behalf of the abbey, then left to join their

company! After the bloody massacres that ended the Peasants' War, Sattler moved on, marrying, and learning the weaver's trade. Expelled from evangelical Zurich when he identified with the Anabaptist movement and sought re-baptism, Michael and Margaretha headed down the Rhine to Strasbourg.

The meetings with Bucer those mid-winter weeks have been discussed at some length by Mennonite historians, who have generally concluded that the atmosphere was a hostile one. I disagree. However, my study of the handful of documents that relate directly to these weeks has convinced me that this was one of those turning points in church history, albeit one whose significance has not been adequately recognized.[2]

You Must Be Perfect

In the 5th chapter of Matthew, following the Beatitudes, Jesus affirms, "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them"(5:17). He then unpacks what this means in five parallel illustrations, that follow this pattern: "You have heard it said..." — a commandment is then quoted from the Torah, followed by a midrash — "But I say to you...." The sequence, dealing with murder, sexual relations, the swearing of oaths, the *lex talionis* [an eye for an eye], and the distinction between Jewish neighbour and non-Jewish outsider, concludes with the statement: "You must be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect". It was around the reading of these teachings that the conversation between the Sattlers and Bucer turned. Were Christians called to a literal obedience of these counsels? Is this what to "be perfect" means? The debate was not new; it echoes down through the Christian story. The most commonly accepted reading had been that these words of Jesus were standards for those few who took an ascetic path in the monastic life, in order to practise a standard that was not compatible with life in the every-day world.

[2]The fine recent biography by Martin Grescat gives it a sympathetic paragraph: *Martin Bucer: a Reformer and his Times* (Louisville-London 2004) p. 69.

But new conditions prevailed in1526 that forced a re-examination. Evangelicals like Bucer and Sattler considered the monastic way of life a failure, because it too rarely delivered this kind of discipleship, and yet it encouraged those who took monastic vows to believe they could merit their salvation. So how to proceed in this new attempt at being evangelical? Sattler argued that Christ's followers are *all* called to pursue what he called "the perfection of the Gospel". He was under no illusions that this was easy; had not Christ himself called it the way of the cross, the narrow way found only by a few (Mt 7:13)? The matter of swearing of oaths will illustrate. Sattler argued that the forbidding of oaths by Jesus was to underline the fundamental truthfulness of all disciples. Bucer countered that while truth-speaking was indeed the will of God, Jesus uses exaggeration here to make a point. He no more intended to outlaw all oaths in civil society, than he intended that his disciples should nurture hatred for their parents and spouse (Luke 14:26). As evidence that his reading was the correct one, he pointed out that in both Old and New Testaments, the saints, and even God, made affirmations with an oath, as for example God did to Abraham (e.g. Genesis 22:15).

The two sides of the debate can be read between the lines of the Sattler-authored *Schleitheim Confession*, and Bucer's *Gospels* commentary, both written in the months that followed their meetings. Sometime in early January, the Sattlers left Strasbourg, despite the pleas of Bucer and colleagues that they stay and continue the dialogue. Sattler wrote a letter to those whom he still called "his beloved brothers in Christ", explaining that their differences were irreconcilable, and obliged him with great reluctance to separate from what he discerned to be a wrong path. Returning to his home territory, the *dreieckerland* of today's Swiss-French-German border, he presided over the gathering of Brethren on February 24th which produced the justly-famed *Schleitheim Confession*, the charter-document of the Anabaptist tradition. Setting out to evangelize communities in the region, he was arrested after a few weeks, horribly tortured, and burned at the stake on May 20th, 1527. Margaretha was executed by drowning in the Neckar two days later.

I want to draw three observations about the encounter between Bucer and the Sattlers.

1. In the first place, we note the atmosphere of mutual respect within which the discussions took place. Sattler saluted Bucer as "a dear brother in Christ"; he referred to the climate of the talks as "in brotherly moderation and friendliness", and asked that God's Spirit lead all of them into the truth When word came to Strasbourg of the Sattlers' arrest and torture, Bucer and his colleague Capito wrote letters, pleading for their lives. Later that spring, Bucer stated in a work where he addressed the issue of various dissidents within the evangelical community, that "we doubt not that he, Sattler, was a dear friend of God", and likened him to the early North African confessors and martyrs. Though he thought Sattler to be wrong on important details, Bucer believed that he held to the heart of the Gospel, faith in Christ. Two years later Bucer would plead for the doing of theology in an irenical spirit: for he said, "God does not grant that all of us see the same thing at the same time."

2. Secondly, at stake was the issue of how Scripture is to be read and interpreted. Like all evangelicals, Sattler wished everything to be judged by Scripture, but by this he meant only the New Testament. Bucer, on the other hand, argued for the authority of both testaments; the same God speaks in both, and cannot therefore be contradictory. The interpretation of the text was also a difference between them. For Sattler, the words of Christ were to be taken in their most literal sense. Over against this, Bucer found himself setting a hermeneutical test that he derived from the first letter to Timothy, "The end, or purpose, of the Law is love, that comes from a pure heart, a sincere conscience and genuine faith" (1:5).

Sattler found this an evasion of the plain sense of the text, while as we have already noted, Bucer argued that one needed to understand Jesus' use of rhetoric.

3. At stake in these intense discussions around the reading of Scripture are two related questions. What should be the nature of a truly evangelical Christian community? And secondly, how is it connected with the world around it?

Sattler and Bucer represent two distinct visions in their response to these questions. Before I elaborate, however, we should note that a third option had presented itself. I refer to the millenarian vision proclaimed by the evangelicals, clergy and lay, who led the bands in the Peasants' War two years previously. Thomas Müntzer, and other chiefs, were in pursuit of God's reign of justice and peace. In their judgement, however, that long-desired peaceable kingdom would first require a cataclysm of fire and sword to overcome its enemies, one that would assure that only the righteous were its inhabitants, that the entire world would be the one church and people of God, and that all those opposed would be dead. For a time Sattler was a participant in this movement; but Bucer also went as Strasbourg's city delegate to encounter the rebels directly in the field. Both saw the outcome, the thousands of deaths in battle, and the many more in the subsequent white terror. And they each turned away to different visions.

In Sattler's case, he saw the world as a fundamentally inimical place. His was a cosmology shaped by Johannine texts like these: *If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. The world loves darkness rather than light. Its prince is the enemy of God.* In such a place, true disciples must always constitute a tiny, persecuted community, the "little flock" who must not fear, for they will one day inherit God's kingdom. In the interval, the path of evangelical discipleship is hard: the disciple will always have to bear the cross, drink the cup of suffering and be baptized into the death of the Lord. This engagement indicates why baptism had to be for adults, i.e. a responsible decision made by the person, not by surrogates. Obedience would take the community out of the civil order: the Matthaean injunctions about the sword and the oath meant no participation in the new urban Christianity, which depended upon citizen engagement in the civic processes, grounded in the annual *Schwörtag* in the cathedral square, when all citizens took a public oath to be loyal, participatory, and defenders of the city.

Bucer was by birth, circumstance, and above all temperament, a citizen of the early modern city. He shared the conviction that

evangelical faith was a communal identity. He was a friend of several persons prominent in the city government. In the functioning of the civic order of a place like Strasbourg he saw the working out, at a profoundly human level, of neighbour-love. Like Sattler, he was passionate for discipleship, and scornful of those who bore the name but did not walk the walk. But his understanding of human nature held sinfulness and grace in tension. In Christ God has redeemed human nature, and made possible a restoration of the divine image in us. From his first sermon on, he emphasized the mutual accountability of all creation — note, not just the human race. We find our destiny in helping others to find theirs. So, for example, he would agree with Sattler that a true evangelical faith would make one a speaker of simple truth, whose character would be so transparent as to require no binding of oaths. But Bucer recognized that not all persons live in this maturity of faith; some are more timorous and require assurance. Therefore to swear a public oath is to engage in an act of neighbour-love, of respect for a humanly responsible order in a world where all do not live evangelically. The evangelical community that is the city — a world of a few thousand people, typically — is a nursery of godly living. In the classical form of Christendom, the Christian empire, baptism had been a mark of belonging. Precisely here Bucer hesitated, and for some years was considered "soft" on infant baptism. He appreciated the Sattler insistence on responsible individual commitment; and in effect, after adopting infant baptism, he became the creator of an evangelical rite of confirmation, as a means of bringing the baptized to a moment of adolescent self-engagement in the evangelical way. We can see, then, why Bucer urged Sattler to remain and work with the Strasbourgers to build up the evangelical house of faith and love in their city, even as we can see why Sattler found this impossible. So the two reluctantly parted ways.

Which brings me to my title, and the thesis of this lecture. Out of the 1520s there emerged two incompatible visions, two radically separated ways of being evangelical. Each has accumulated detritus over the intervening years. Sattler's world

became the path of the Hutterites, Amish, and Mennonites. After another brief flirtation with revolutionary millenarianism in Münster (1534), the Anabaptists moved into a separation from the outside world. Ultimately their attempt to be the evangelical people of God would have to struggle with a sectarian and exclusionary spirit. Attempts to raise questions from within, let alone to dissent, were too often silenced by the ban.

On the other side, Bucer's optimism for the healthy advance of the reign of God through the beneficent influence of evangelical church communities, found itself throttled almost from birth by the persistence of the old Christendom model, a state-sponsored and sanctioned uniformity, that effectively celebrated mediocrity — read tepid discipleship — while stifling all forms of dissent from the religious establishment. When in discouragement Bucer later tried to introduce discipleship groups within the large geographical parishes, the City stepped in and forbade them as potential sources of socio-political as well as religious dissent. The church became the key buttress of an intensely conservative if not reactionary social order. So Bucer, like the Sattlers, became a refugee out of religious conviction. He accepted an invitation from Archbishop Cranmer in 1549 to come to Cambridge and teach at the university, as well as advise on the emerging Protestant Church of England. There he died after eighteen months. A few years later, during the attempted re-establishment in England of the Roman Church by the devoutly Catholic Queen Mary, his corpse would be exhumed and burned publicly atop a pile of his books. Today a plaque by the altar in Great St. Mary's Church, Cambridge, honours his name in recounting this story.

What this lecture wishes to argue, using the Sattlers and Bucer as one illustration among many that could be drawn, is that even though the human process results in the accumulation of rubble in the wellsprings of our faith tradition, it is no reason to conclude, as some have done, and many are tempted to, that there is nothing to be gained from those sources. On the contrary, as we struggle in the first decade of the 21st century with issues of ecclesial community — if you like with the question of how we shall be

healthy communities of the people of God in this effervescent, polyvalent and yet troubled planet Earth — we can be helped in revisiting our evangelical past. I am not advocating that we seek to replicate what they discerned then to be God's calling. That is a sort of confessionalism that still attracts

some, but it is ultimately a sterile historicism. Rather we approach our ancestors seeking to understand what were the particular conditions under which they wrestled with the questions posed them by their context.

Could Sattler's vision teach us something about the need to build communities of disciples today, where our members are prepared, week by week in public worship and internet musings, seriously to wrestle with the cost of discipleship? Could Bucer's vision teach us to avoid the trap of parochialism, to keep our communities of disciples always open and eager to engage non-believers in the wider issues of the common good, of our cities, of our planet?

To believe in a Christian vision of history is to understand the story of our world as a dynamic spiral energized by God's Spirit. It is then to accept the gift and the responsibility of discerning decision-making, that the eternal Word may take flesh anew in ourselves and our institutions. As we wrestle with the interpretation of the Scriptures appropriate to *our* time, so we engage conversation with the ancestors, trying to appreciate their struggles to be faithful to the Gospel in *their* time, that we may receive insights and cautions. The liberal is likely to consider this romantic nonsense, for only the future matters. The fundamentalist quests for historical certitudes out of which formulae can be derived that are determinative of our decisions. I suggest that you and I, the folk I want to call **radical, catholic evangelicals**, engage in this calling finally, because we have been captured by a God who is committed to all the messiness of the human story, including our own, and we know by experience that glimpses of the glory of life in the Spirit will be caught in the struggles of our ancestors and ourselves to live out the Gospel.