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The spiritual poverty of the Anabaptist vision

This article is not about the Anabaptists of the 16th century. It is about "the Anabaptist vision" that is the orienting principle of many Mennonite theologians and leaders today. It is about the effect that vision has had on many of us in the church.

Christianity as defined in the Anabaptist vision is essentially about behaviour. Harold S. Bender, who first framed the Anabaptist vision in 1942, stated that the essence of the Anabaptist approach to Christianity consisted of 1) the Christian life as discipleship; 2) the church as community; and 3) the practice of nonresistant love.

What is too seldom noted is that for Bender himself, Christianity was never reducible to behaviour. He stated his Anabaptist vision against a horizon of assumed beliefs that were not explicitly stated.

Two unstated assumptions lie behind Bender's vision: 1) he held firmly to basic evangelical doctrines about the being and work of God in Christ; and 2) he believed and taught that the living out of the vision was only possible through the indwelling presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The next generation of "Anabaptist vision" theologians taught passionately about Christian behaviour and deepened the concept of discipleship. But they gave only passing attention to the work of Christ and the Spirit in the inner transformation of the person.

They did this to counterbalance the kind of Christianity that says that Christian faith is merely assent to doctrine (supposedly the case in Protestantism) or the kind that says that Christianity is primarily an inner spiritual experience (supposedly the case in pietism and revivalism).

This approach to the Anabaptist vision resulted in generations of Mennonite students and church leaders learning behavioural aspects of the Christian faith without learning equally well that discipleship is only meaningful and possible because it is an answer to who God is and what God is doing, and without necessarily experiencing what it means to have a life-changing personal friendship with the crucified and risen Jesus. Our teaching of the Anabaptist vision, whatever its benefits, has [thus] also contributed to our spiritual impoverishment.

I write as one thoroughly schooled in the Anabaptist vision, both in college and seminary, and as one who has attempted to teach others out of that vision. I write with gratitude for the many fine teachers with whom I have studied in our Mennonite schools.

But out of my own study, out of my attempts to teach college students, and through painful personal experiences, I have come to see the impoverishment of the Anabaptist vision in at least three areas.

1. The vision gave us little insight into human behaviour. It taught us almost nothing about sin and the dynamics of inner bondage to death and violence. As a consequence, we tended to think that changing basic behaviour regarding wealth, violence and personal relationships was simply a matter of changing one's mind and then exerting one's will.

We were to be like the disciples of old who heard the call of Jesus and left everything. This approach to behavioural change in a sense continued the Arminianism, embraced by many of our Mennonite forebears, which regarded the will as fundamentally free. Therefore, change is a matter of seeing a better way and deciding to do it.

We have had little patience with human weakness and the insecurity which drives people to hold tenaciously to false gods. We have often scorned people who weren't ready to give up their nationalistic and materialistic attitudes. We have shown little sensitivity to wounded people who are trapped in deep holes of bondage and addiction.

That is, I believe, why Anabaptist vision churches have tended not to grow. The Anabaptist vision only taught us how to minister to strong people who are in fundamental control of their lives. It left us frustrated and impotent when we met deeply troubled people who seemed incapable of change.

2. We were left with an inadequate awareness of the liberating work of God through the death and resurrection of Je-
Foremost and fundamentally, faith is not about us and our discipleship. Faith is about God and the work of redemption that only God can and has done for us.

At the heart of the Christian faith—even the Anabaptist understanding of the faith—is the message of the gospel. If you want to see why the Anabaptist vision has impoverished us at this point, simply ask what gospel it proclaims.

I find that many people who are schooled in the vision find it difficult to give a clear answer. And that is quite understandable, since nowhere does the Anabaptist vision state the gospel that Anabaptists believed and proclaimed.

We are increasingly answering the question of what the gospel is by talking about the good news of the message of peace. One way we have been impoverished is to see the good news as Jesus' teaching about the way of peace, and Christianity as the practice of the way of peace. That concept falls short of a New Testament understanding of God bringing peace through the blood and in the body of Christ.

Peace and justice activism and engagement in conflict mediation can be authentic expressions of faith in Jesus Christ, but for many they have become more of a substitute for faith.

Mennonite academics, especially, are embracing a program of peace and justice activism that puts them in the mainstream of liberal, socially-aware academia. It does not require them to proclaim a specifically biblical, scandalous message of which the academic world in general knows almost nothing.

I am not calling for us to forsake work for social change, but just reminding us that all this is not the gospel! The good news is not that Jesus has given us peace ideals and we are called to implement them nonviolently. That would make God passive and us the central actors in the drama of redemption.

While a gracious, loving God does empower us to be ministers of life, there can be no confusion about the fact that the Scriptures proclaim a redemption that is God's work from beginning to end.

3. We have also been impoverished in our sense of the spiritual presence and power of the risen Christ. Perhaps the major fallacy of the modern Anabaptist vision is that it has taught prepentecostal discipleship. Jesus' attempt to create a new community in His followers, we should remind ourselves, was a failure. It was only when Christ's redeeming death and resurrection had taken place, and His empowering presence had been poured out through the Holy Spirit, that fruitful apostolic ministry began to happen.

In his own ministry, Jesus pointed to a quality of relationship that would bring unheard-of personal transformation and a liberating joy and thus make it possible for us to be true disciples. Joyous, healing, empowering fellowship always precedes fruitful discipleship.

What I covet is a fresh realization that to be a disciple is not to do but to be in a new way. We are called to be Jesus' friends, not merely His servants (John 15:15). We are given the privilege of being children of God (I John 3:1-3). We are called to receive the spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1-17).

Until we can think and talk as passionately about receiving and being as we do about strategizing and doing, until we get as passionate about praise and prayer as we do about social-political analysis, we will remain spiritually impoverished.

To do the works of a disciple-peace-maker in the strength of our own will, and with the illusion that our work brings peace, is actually to live in unbelief and without faith. We will miss out altogether on what God has for us if we skip lightly over Jesus' reminder that abiding in Him is the precondition for bearing fruit (John 14:1-7).

I am not suggesting that Anabaptist vision theologians give no attention to these topics. They kept the language of behavioural discipleship fresh and growing, but invested little passion or creativity in instruction about sin, the work of Christ and the present reality of the Spirit. Perhaps they assumed the truth of these things or felt it was not their task to repeat the obvious. I sense that throughout our behaviour-oriented emphasis of the past few decades we have been sustained by deep reserves of theological and spiritual capital drawn from past generations. But we haven't replenished them for the next.

Part of the problem in speaking about God's work of redemption and inner transformation is that many of us can talk about these realities only with stale revivalist rhetoric. We carry an aversion to that language, which grows out of our anger at the theology and manipulative methods of some revivalist preachers encountered in our early years.

But reaction against the past can never provide a solid foundation for the future. The challenge before us now is to experience and name these transcendent works of grace in ways that are authentic and empowering for our times.

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