

Bread, not stone

Refocusing an Anabaptist vision

C. Arnold Snyder

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone; or if your child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then . . . know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! (Luke 11:11–13)

My reflections on *The Anabaptist Vision* are grounded in the words of Jesus preserved for us in two slightly different versions in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In Luke 11, in a passage encouraging believers to offer nourishment to those who hunger and thirst, the evangelist concludes by saying, “If you then . . .

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know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

Some months ago I was preparing a graduate seminar on the place of Anabaptism in the wider Reformation. I had assigned Harold S. Bender’s *The Anabaptist Vision* as one of the readings for the class, so I reread it.¹ I was struck immediately by what a brilliant piece of writing it is. It is a classic, delivered on December 28, 1943, as Harold Bender’s presidential address to a meeting of

the American Historical Society in New York City. It was later published in more complete form in *Church History* and the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, and has been reprinted and sold continuously ever since.

Albert Keim, in his massive biography of Harold Bender, sets the context for the writing of Bender’s masterpiece.² World War II was raging, and Bender was heading up the Civilian Public Ser-

vice effort for conscientious objectors—already a full-time job. In addition, in 1943 he was acting president of Goshen (IN) College, and also was teaching two undergraduate courses at the college.³ Harold Bender was a busy man.

Keim tells us that Bender wrote *The Anabaptist Vision* in two or three days, starting around Christmas Eve, less than a week before he was supposed to deliver the address in New York City. The evening before the conference, he boarded a train for New York City, which arrived a bit late on the 28th. He arrived at the meeting twenty minutes late, opened the session with prayer, and eventually read his speech after dinner, at the beginning of the evening session. Immediately following his address, and what was described as a brief but vigorous discussion, he excused himself to catch a flight to Cleveland, where around midnight he boarded a train for Chicago. The next day, December 29, found him in Chicago at a Mennonite Central Committee meeting dealing with Civilian Public Service issues. It is a remarkable snapshot of a remarkable scholar and church leader.

Providing a touchstone for believers

In *The Anabaptist Vision*, Harold Bender did more than challenge old historiographical orthodoxies. He also provided an inspiring historical touchstone for Mennonites and members of believers churches. Harold Bender was seized by the conviction that all Christians of his time would benefit immensely from recalibrating their calling and mission with reference to Anabaptism—or, as he described it, “this consistent evangelical Protestantism” which sought to “recreate without compromise the original New Testament church.”

Reading the document today it is hard to miss a not-so-humble Mennonite triumphalism, particularly in Bender’s claim that the Anabaptists were the *only* sixteenth-century believers who saw the Reformation through to its proper ends. Luther and Zwingli come off as weak and vacillating people who lost their nerve when the road became difficult. Today, in a more ecumenical spirit, we would want to temper these conclusions.

Those of us involved as historians also know firsthand the revisionist storm Harold Bender unleashed by defining “true Anabaptism” as the pure, Swiss version that emerged in Zurich in

1525. The monogenesis/polygenesis debate and revision of the 1970s has since won the day in academic historical circles.

But these things were not what came to my mind when I reread *The Anabaptist Vision*. What struck me much more was an implicit challenge in Bender's historical work. Harold Bender was a committed member of his denomination and the wider church. He

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clearly believed in the importance of doing history, and of doing it as well as one can, but then taking that work and applying meaningful lessons from the past. Harold Bender was certain that Christian history provides insights into truths that can be applied to the living of a committed Christian life.

Harold Bender died in 1962, when I was sixteen, but I am quite certain that he would have approved of the subsequent careful

historical study of Anabaptism, even when it modified his dearly held historical views. But I am also convinced that he would have posed a further, deeper question to those of us who have since become professional academics. When I read *The Anabaptist Vision* today, it challenges me to ask whether our academic work is offering bread or stone to our fellow believers. In our careful studies of Anabaptism and the history of the church, have we been seeking nourishment for our collective faith journeys, or have we been collecting talking points for academic debate?

Three marks of a believers church

Harold Bender clearly was inspired by the Anabaptist vision he had uncovered. He believed that the “consistent evangelical Protestantism” of the Anabaptists was to be the touchstone for a committed church of his time. The vision of the Anabaptists, Bender said, was marked by three key beliefs and practices: (1) that the essence of Christianity is *discipleship*, or following Christ; (2) that the church is to be *fellowship of believers*; and (3) that Christians will be marked by a new *ethic of love and nonresistance*.

These three marks of a believers church may seem self-evident to us today—especially to those of us in the Mennonite church, but this is really just a testimony to the widespread acceptance of Bender's vision in his denomination and outside his denomination.

As Albert Keim says, Bender's vision provided "a new self-definition of who Mennonites were and whence they had come." Harold Bender succeeded in providing a fertile "usable past" for the church of his time.⁴

Missing a mark

But has this usable past been altogether good? Or was *The Anabaptist Vision* actually an "impoverished" vision, as one critic wrote not so many years ago? My own studies in Anabaptist history lead

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me to conclude that *The Anabaptist Vision* has been, in essence, fruitful, true, and good. It offered, and continues to offer, bread, not stone. It continues to challenge and nourish us. All the same, I have become increasingly preoccupied with one element in particular that seems to be conspicuously missing from *The Anabaptist Vision*.

The first mark of Harold Bender's *Anabaptist Vision* is discipleship. But shouldn't discipleship have been point number two? In his speech, Bender left untouched and unexplored the actual Anabaptist point of departure: there should have been a different point

one highlighted in the *Anabaptist Vision*. Discipleship, marked as a beginning point and taken by itself, raises the question of how humans beings are to become disciples in the first place. How are disciples *made*? And once a person has entered on the discipleship way, what will continue to *enable* discipleship? What makes it possible to do such an unnatural thing as to feel and demonstrate love for enemies, for example?

My own years of reading Anabaptist testimonies have led me to the conclusion that while discipleship is the clear second step for Anabaptist witnesses, it is definitely not the first. Let me quote none other than Menno Simons. In one of his first writings he describes the *process* of becoming a disciple in this way: "[Believers] are clothed with power from above, baptized with the Holy Spirit, and so united and mingled with God that they become partakers of the divine nature and are made conformable to the image of His Son."⁵

Dirk Philips said the same thing, as did countless other Anabaptist witnesses. Dirk wrote: "It is clear that the *new birth* is actually the work of God in the person through which that person is born anew, out of God, through faith in Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit."⁶ In both of these testimonies we hear a ringing appeal to

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the baptism and work of the Holy Spirit, a ringing reference to the spiritual new birth that leads the reborn into a new life of discipleship that conforms to the life of Christ.

According to these Anabaptist witnesses, it is the spiritual rebirth that is of the essence. A new life of discipleship is derivative; it follows from, and is empowered by, the living Spirit of God. Without the making and sustaining of a disciple by the living Spirit of God, there can be no discipleship. Disciples are not simply disciplined, strong people who

display a dogged and stern will to keep the rules. Disciples are those who are *enabled* to do the best they can only by God's present and continuing grace and love.

Obedience? Yes! But first and foremost, a connection to the living vine that provides sustenance to the branches, so that they are enabled to bear the fruits of discipleship. Spiritual regeneration and obedient discipleship are bound together in one growing plant: branches engrafted onto the vine, made fruitful by the life-giving sap of the Spirit.

Wary of pietism

How did Harold Bender miss spiritual regeneration in his *Anabaptist Vision*? Why did that stirring speech have only three points of emphasis, instead of four? Albert Keim gives us an historical clue. At the time of writing Bender was strongly influenced by Robert Friedmann's work on Anabaptism and pietism, published in 1940. According to Friedmann, pietism and Anabaptism were antithetical, polar opposites. Pietism, Friedmann said, focuses on an inward experience of new birth, but in Friedmann's view, this pietist new birth leads only to a quietistic joy. Friedmann wrote that the pietistic experience of rebirth "does not call into question the life of this world." By contrast, Friedmann wrote, the

Anabaptists *were* ready to follow the difficult road of discipleship. There was a new birth for the Anabaptists, Friedmann said, but the Anabaptist focus was not on the spiritual birth but rather on following Christ. Friedmann stated, emphatically: “The central word of the Anabaptists is Following Christ.”⁷

Albert Keim notes that Bender borrowed significantly from Friedmann’s work when he wrote *The Anabaptist Vision* speech three years later. Bender himself called Friedmann’s “Anabaptism and Pietism” article “one of the most significant pieces of work in Anabaptist history in recent years.”⁸ This may explain why mention of rebirth and the work of the Holy Spirit is so notably absent in *The Anabaptist Vision*. Following Friedmann, it must have seemed that emphasizing a spiritual rebirth might be taken as pointing to an inward, quietist Pietism. Pointing emphatically to discipleship, on the other hand, called for a robust activism. The Anabaptist disciple was a strong and active follower of Jesus, not a spiritually focused, navel-gazing pietist.

Not Anabaptist enough

On this point, I believe *The Anabaptist Vision* needs to be substantially refocused, simply because it did not manage to be Anabap-

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tist enough. The original Anabaptists could not conceive of a new life of following Christ without the empowerment of the living Spirit. And neither should we. A life of discipleship, committed to a life of fellowship with other believers, and guided by an ethic of love and nonresistance calls, above all, for the continued gift of God’s grace and enabling power. The first Anabaptists knew this very well, and said so, again and again. What they said was fundamentally sound and true, and we should learn from them.

But I am by no means the first one to notice the Anabaptist insistence on the living Spirit of God creating disciples. In fact,

Harold Bender himself came to the same realization some years later. The last article Harold Bender published in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* is dated 1961, a year before his death. It is titled

“Walking in the Resurrection’: The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship.”⁹ This article provides the spiritual corrective to the earlier, ethically focused *Anabaptist Vision*. You will have noted the inclusion of the significant word *regeneration* in this title—a word that played no significant role in *The Anabaptist Vision* speech.

In his last published writing, Harold Bender describes a life of discipleship as one “in which the Holy Spirit works with power.”¹⁰ Here the voice of Menno and Dirk comes through. The life of

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discipleship, Bender now emphasizes, “is not one of moral self-endeavor and legalism, but one in which grace, faith, and the Spirit’s power unite with the human will to produce a life of holiness. . . .”¹¹

At the end of his life, Harold Bender recognized that it is the working of the Holy Spirit, and the human response to the Spirit, that results in a new fellowship and a renewed church. It is the Spirit of God who produces disciples empowered to live lives of nonresistant love. To this one can only say Amen! and again, Amen!

The Anabaptist Vision has been immensely influential in shaping a church that takes seriously a life of following in the footsteps of our Lord. And this has been a good thing. I only wish that Harold Bender’s “Walking in the Resurrection” would have been equally influential. Perhaps, in its many subsequent reprintings, *The Anabaptist Vision* could have included the much less well-known “Walking in the Resurrection” as an appendix. I believe the spiritual corrective would have added important and profound dimensions to an Anabaptist-inspired ecclesiology.

If the essence of the Anabaptist understanding of the Christian life is the presence of God’s enabling grace and Spirit, and a life of discipleship which follows also depends on the living power of God, then clearly, a central focus of an Anabaptist-inspired church will be—must be—the cultivation of a deep spiritual life.

Fed by the living Word

A focus on the spiritual life of abiding in the vine does not mean,

as some in our church today seem to fear, that one no longer cares about the fruit. It is a false logic that makes it an either/or issue. And it was a false dichotomy that labeled a spiritual birth as entailing a quietist pietism, and opposed it to an active life of discipleship as a polar opposite. In fact, the two must exist together, and this leads to a re-visioning of the concept of discipleship beyond what *The Anabaptist Vision* speech described.

If we take the case of what Bender called earlier “the ethic of love and nonresistance,” for example, we can refocus the phrase with his later spiritual insight in view. The truly profound point is spiritual, not ethical: we are called, in Christ, to become loving and nonresistant **persons**, transformed by the power of the living

I commend to you the profound and nourishing truth expressed by our Anabaptist faith parents—a truth they shared with medieval Catholic reformers and activist pietists alike—that at the centre of a disciple’s life is a heart open to the word of the living God.

Spirit of God, in all of our relationships—not just in times of war, but at all times, places, and circumstances. Becoming truly just and loving persons involves a continuing process of spiritual growth and renewal. One does not become transformed into a loving, nonresistant person by dint of human will; the transformation cannot be accomplished without prayer, without meditation on scripture, without worship and encouragement from the fellowship of believers, without the cultivation of a vital relationship to the living vine.

We need not be so worried about pietistic quietism. Loving, nonresistant people act in loving, nonresistant ways. In fact, a blinkered emphasis on ethical absolutes is simply a

mistake on the opposite side of the spectrum from quietism, as Bender himself noted. The commands of Jesus cannot take the place of the Spirit of God. More profoundly, the nonresistant love, truth telling, and generosity to which we have been called need to become a part of our daily spiritual disciplines. The deep truth, as the Anabaptists knew, was not in keeping rules but in becoming *transformed persons* intent on growing into the nature of Christ. Such people, they noted correctly, act in Christ-like ways because their natures have been changed.

I know that in saying these things I am preaching to the converted. Nevertheless, just because something has been said before

does not mean that it shouldn't be repeated. If this were so, we historians would have precious little to say. Allow me then to

Our God is ready to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it. Let us ask for this gift with heartfelt sincerity, confident in the knowledge that being thus empowered, we can indeed mix the flour, water, and leaven; knead the dough; and bake the loaves that will nourish the hungry.

commend to you this refocusing of *The Anabaptist Vision*, not as something original or new, but simply as a reminder of something you undoubtedly already know.

I commend to you the profound and nourishing truth expressed by our Anabaptist faith parents—a truth they shared with medieval Catholic reformers and activist pietists alike—that at the centre of a disciple's life is a heart open to the word of the living God.

With such open hearts and minds, fed by the living Word, we can go forth in the confidence of offering bread, not stone, to those who hunger for both spiritual and material food. As the gospel assures us, our

God is willing, able, and ready to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask for it. Let us ask for this gift with heartfelt sincerity, confident in the knowledge that being thus empowered, we can indeed mix the flour, water, and leaven; knead the dough; and bake the loaves that will nourish the hungry—both spiritually and physically.

This is a vision of the Christian life that can and will endure, for it points first and foremost to the bread of life come among us, in its historical reality of Jesus, in its spiritual reality of the Holy Spirit among us, and in countless life-giving manifestations in the lives of those who sincerely ask, receive, and have been inspired to follow. May it be so, in abundance!

Notes

¹ Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944); also published in *Church History* 13 (March 1944): 3–24; and in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18 (April 1944): 67–88.

² Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender, 1897–1962* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998). Details on the writing of *The Anabaptist Vision* are found beginning on page 310.

³ A year later Bender became dean of Goshen College Bible School, which a few years later became Goshen College Biblical Seminary—and eventually merged with the Mennonite Biblical Seminary to become Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries.

⁴ Keim, *Bender*, 327.

⁵ *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. L. Verduin, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 58.

⁶ *The Writings of Dirk Philips*, ed. and trans. C. J. Dyck, W. Keeney and A. Beachy (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1992), 296.

⁷ See Keim, *Bender*, 322–24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁹ Harold S. Bender, “*Walking in the Resurrection: the Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35 (1961): 96–110.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

About the author

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