

Learning to trust the Spirit

Lessons in mutual transformation

David B. Miller

Luke's narrative of the early church reveals this significant dynamic of missional engagement: the bearer of the gospel is as likely to become a convert to the wisdom and purpose of God as is the "object" of the missionary encounter (see Acts 10:34). This dynamic is a significant sign and reminder that we are witnesses

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to—not managers of—the work of God. For a church that is trying to get over the habits and legacy of Christendom, this dynamic is critical for reforming our attitudes and forming us for witness and ministry that are Spirit empowered.

In the pages that follow, I will examine this dynamic in three scenes from my work as a pastor. In each instance, mutual transformation has been one of the most profound lessons I have experienced. It has been the source of significant and frequently humbling reflection on the (in)adequacy of my understanding of and attentiveness to the person and work of the Holy Spirit in human transformation and regeneration.

Little did I know, when I first came among Mennonites as a college student in the mid-1970's, that I was coming into a faith community undergoing significant changes, not the least of which were the lessons, healing, and empowerment of charismatic renewal, and the tensions resulting from its impact. I was a liberal "dispensationalist," raised in mainline Protestantism. Our conservative and fundamentalist counterparts put strict limits on the possible valid manifestations and actions of God's Spirit according to the historical periods or "dispensations" of God's covenant as construed and constructed by J. N. Darby. In contrast, liberal dispensationalists literally dispensed with manifestations of the

activity of God's Spirit (other than through human progress!) attested in scripture; these were explained away by means of rational and largely psychologized explanations of what we considered premodern descriptions of phenomena. The work of the Spirit was largely supplanted by rational explanation and managerial technique.

This preempting of the Spirit's work (save in categories that could be rationally controlled and managed) that was a prior part of my heritage had a certain resonance in a Mennonite Church formed by H. S. Bender's story of Anabaptist origins and vision. The spiritualists had been rather neatly excluded from the denominational narrative, in part in order to redeem Anabaptist history from its association with the Münster debacle. However, the suspicion and relative silencing of the spiritualists was a potentially costly act, making space for legalism to displace the fruit of regeneration.

In his commencement address to the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary class of 2010, historian Arnold Snyder named this tendency, calling his listeners to refocus the Anabaptist

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vision, "simply because it did not manage to be Anabaptist enough. The original Anabaptists could not conceive of a new life of following Christ without the empowerment of the living Spirit. And," he said, "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."¹

In his address Snyder pointed toward a far more nuanced perspective from Bender, communicated in Bender's last article published in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*. In that

essay, "Walking in the Resurrection: The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship,"² Bender noted the fact that Menno himself made a large space for the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. Snyder in calling for a refocusing of the Anabaptist vision, declared: "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.”³

I was drawn to the Mennonite Church in large measure by Anabaptist ethics—particularly nonviolence—and by a tidy rendition of Anabaptist history, so it has taken me some time to understand the danger inherent in this ethical reductionism.

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into the church. But in time I began to see the effects of inattention to and even suspicion of the work of the Holy Spirit in transformation and regeneration. Sans the Spirit, discipleship too easily becomes the expression of sheer will and determination, and sometimes a club wielded against the most vulnerable.

Scene 1: Did I trust the Spirit’s sufficiency?

I had not long been in ministry in the Mennonite Church when I was invited into an unsettling and reorienting pastoral involvement with survivors of abuse. Over a period of several years, a significant amount of my energy and time as a pastor was dedicated to ministry with survivors of abuse.

These survivors, most of them women who had grown up in Christian homes, both entrusted and challenged me with their experience and stories. In faith they hoped against hope that their experience would be acknowledged and named, while in wisdom they learned to deconstruct the stories of ethical righteousness that kept hidden the abusive use of power over their bodies and minds. Their experience threatened the narrative of a pure church I had so easily adopted, while the tenacity of their faith in the face of such damnable contradictions instructed and reformed my own reliance on the power of God’s Spirit to effect God’s purposes in the world.

These survivors raised for me a host of questions of faith. Some of these questions revolved around forgiveness, and especially

forgiving one's abuser. I struggled with these questions. On the one hand, I could not at the same time claim the Christian gospel and jettison forgiveness. Arriving at a place of forgiveness seemed crucial to ultimately breaking the captivity fashioned by abusers to continue to enter and control the body, mind, and spirit of

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their victims. Yet it was clear in the experience of survivors of abuse that calls to extend forgiveness—especially those voiced by the church and its predominantly male pastors—only served to reviolate the victims. I was entrusted with more and more unsettling and disorienting stories about pastors who had enjoined these survivors to forgive, in what seemed to be a desperate search for a quick solution to “the problem.” Sadly, the problem they wanted to solve appeared to be the anger of the survivors rather than the reality of the abuse and the conditions that permitted it.

I fell into silence, albeit an uneasy silence, on the matter of forgiveness. I had run out of satisfactory answers. I was caught within the limits of what could be humanly effected. I would soon learn that I lacked an adequate pneumatology, and I needed a teacher and mentor to tune my ear and open my eyes to the work of the Holy Spirit. Sarah⁴ was to become such a teacher.

We had walked together for some time in the face of the agony, mistrust, and rage that were the fruits of her abuse. As her anger became more directed at her abuser, she simultaneously became freer and more trusting in her other relationships. The fear and woundedness that had been generalized became focused, and less an impediment to her other relationships. In this journey we would often pray together. Then came the day when Sarah exclaimed in the midst of prayer, “I am not to pray anymore.” When I asked what this meant, she said that God had told her that she needed to forgive her abuser, and she was not ready to do so. I accepted her words and said nothing more.

The next time we were together, Sarah opened our conversation by declaring, “It is time. I am ready to forgive him.” She

prayed, “God, do not hold this against [my abuser], but deliver him from his captivity and let him harm no one else.” With this movement, her recurrent nightmares ended, as did myriad other manifestations of the way the past abuse had continued to impinge on her present experience.

Sarah became my teacher and mentor in understanding and trusting the work of the Holy Spirit to accomplish what God desires in the life of another person. The Spirit of the Lord was bringing release to a captive (Luke 4:18). In my underdeveloped trust and understanding of the work of God’s Spirit, my liberal dispensationalism kept kicking in and seeking ways to manage Sarah’s healing. It was not my place to demand—or even urge—forgiveness, but it was my place to be present in the anger and wounds of the abuse, validating that Sarah had been sinned against and reminding her that the violations of her body and mind were also violations against God. These uncomfortable things I could do, but I was incapable of effecting or forcing forgiveness, and to try to do so would have been to presume to stipulate conditions for God’s presence with her.

In less dramatic but no less significant ways, I witnessed this cycle repeated in other survivors. They taught me again and again that God’s Spirit was already present and working, and that my place was simply to embody, patiently and persistently, what the abusers had systematically denied: that God was indeed present

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with them in the face of the evil they had experienced. The unspoken questions these survivors posed for me were: Did I extend the same trust in the wisdom and sufficiency of the Holy Spirit in their lives as I did in my own? Or did I feel compelled to orchestrate—or worse, mandate—the timing and nature of forgiveness?

Scene 2: “Go to your neighbor.”

I am not given to experiences of auditory revelation, so even now it is with some

trepidation that I write that on September 11, 2001, as I prayed about the horrors that were unfolding at the twin towers in Manhattan, I heard a persistent voice that said, “Go to your neighbor.”

Whether this was an audible voice or an inner one, the effect was the same. I knew immediately who the neighbor was: the president of the Islamic Society of Central Pennsylvania. We lived on the same street, our children walked to school together, and we had worked together on interfaith dialogue. The nature of that

Ibrahim said, “I have told our family, ‘The Christians have come to us and extended hospitality and offered safe sanctuary, and now are holding a picnic for us.’ I want you to know that rumors of this picnic gathering are spreading through family networks in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.”

dialogue, prior to 9-11, was the kind of polite conversation that sought some common principle to which we could both give assent from our faith traditions without daring to risk offense. But the desperate realities of 9-11 served to strip away such superficiality.

Late in the afternoon of 9-11, I found myself on my neighbor’s doorstep, uncertain about what I would say when someone answered my knock. Ibrahim came to the door, and I asked how he and his family were doing. Then I added, “I want you to know that if in the days and weeks ahead your children or any member of your family is taunted or threatened, our home is a safe place to come to.” He responded, “David,

come in.” For the next two hours we discussed the events of the day and plumbed the depths of our faith. He quoted from the Quran, I from the Gospels, not to argue or debate but to seek direction in this terrible moment.

At the close of our conversation, he said, “David, you know that we are taught that when the prophet Mohammed was fleeing for his life, the Abyssinian Christian kingdom provided him sanctuary. Therefore we are to always treat Christians with respect.” I had never heard such words before. In the weeks that followed, our congregation, University Mennonite Church in State College, Pennsylvania, prayed, discussed, and discerned what our testimony that Jesus is Lord meant in such a time as this. One of the outcomes of our discernment was to invite the Islamic society to a picnic at one of the city parks in the community. The society graciously received and accepted our invitation.

Ibrahim, as president of the Islamic society, opened our time together with these words: “Over the last weeks, I have had repeated calls from family members in Egypt and Saudi Arabia

concerned about our welfare as Muslims in America. I have told them that while I cannot speak for all Muslims across America, in our community the Christians have come to us and extended hospitality, offered safe sanctuary if that is needed, and now are holding a picnic for us. I want you to know that rumors of this gathering are spreading through family networks in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.”

When we began this journey, we had no idea what we were doing. We started with two premises: because of the incarnation we cannot turn our backs on the world, and the means of our engagement with the world are determined by the teaching and example of Jesus. Into this realm of conviction, the Spirit of God opened us to new encounters and engagement. What did our relationships with our Muslim neighbors mean? How were we to think about them? These questions were no longer abstract and hypothetical. We asked them in the face of genuine relationships and a common crisis. As we pondered the categories into which Christians frequently place Muslims—brothers and sisters (for the more liberal end of the spectrum of Christian response), neighbors, strangers and aliens, enemies—we mused that the Bible has

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significant things to say about each of these categories of persons, the distillation of which is the instruction to love. God hems us in on every side, allowing us no categorical excuses for indifferent or hostile behavior but rather giving the categorical command to love.

We came to see that the search for categories into which to place “the other” is largely a vestige of Christendom-shaped thinking. Categories are necessary if one is called on to manage and order the world. But if our principal calling is to live as the first fruits of a new order inaugurated by Jesus—it is the transcending rather than the reification of categories that is our vocation (see Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11).

Scene 3: “Become more assertive in your witness.”

Some months after our picnic, I delivered a loaf of homemade bread to another Muslim neighbor. He greeted me at the door of

his home, invited me in, and put on water for tea. We spoke for some time about the events that had been unfolding since 9-11 and the concerns we shared for what appeared to be a widening war. After some time, he leaned forward in his chair, placed a

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hand on my knee, and declared, “David, you Mennonites must become more assertive in your witness.” I have over the years been challenged by missionaries and evangelists to a more assertive witness, but their calls have always ultimately rolled off my back to little effect. This charge caught my attention in a whole new way.

Not long before this encounter, a member of our congregation told me about being cornered in a hardware store by several Christian brothers from another congregation. They wanted to know about this picnic we had had for the “the Muslims.” Thinking they wanted to hear the story of the event, George was effusive in his recounting of the evening. Finally one of them put up his hand to interrupt the narrative. “Yeah, but did you

witness to them?” George paused, “Let me see. We have offered safe sanctuary, and we have extended hospitality.” “No,” another brother interrupted. “Did you witness to them—that they are sinners.” George smiled as he recounted his reply: “It is interesting that you should ask that question. Yes, we found that on that score we had much in common.”

A Spirit-directed ministry and missional engagement almost by definition will take us outside our comfort zones and beyond the scope of our readily formulated answers. In my experience it has resulted in as much transformation and continuing conversion in the bearer of the gospel as in the “other”—whether that person be an insider or an outsider to the church as we know it. I find the epistle to the church in Ephesus to be a vital instructor and guide to such mission and ministry.

The writer of the letter to the Ephesians makes the bold claim that God’s purpose is to “unite all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10; RSV.) This was a bold counterclaim to the Roman imperial claim

that it was the genius of Caesar that held all things together. Both the empire and the church saw the cross as the instrument of unification. For Rome it was the threat of the cross as an instrument of humiliation and death that kept the peace (Pax Romana), while for the epistle writer the cross was (and is!) the instrument of reconciliation, breaking down the “wall of hostility” and creating one new humanity (Pax Christi). The church of Christendom in large measure adopted the imperial version of the narrative of unification as the necessary means of ordering society.

But the illegal church of the first centuries saw a different purpose, a different way of being in the world. This vulnerable existence would require the same power that “raised Christ from

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the dead” (see Eph. 1:20; Rom. 8:11). The appropriation of this power and perspective is the aim of the apostle’s prayers for the church (Eph. 1:17–23; 3:18–21), for it will take such empowerment to break through the imagination, vision, and ethically limiting totalitarian claims of the empire to reimagine the church’s vocation to “make known the manifold wisdom of God to the powers and principalities” (3:10).

Such a view of ministry requires a robust understanding and embrace of the Holy Spirit as the power of God and the continuing witness to the way of Jesus in our midst. This Spirit rarely leaves well enough alone but

continues to shape, convert, and remake us. It is a source not of power over but of empowerment for the means that we are taught by our Lord. Hence, even our obedience is not our claim, but the fruit of the Spirit at work within us to “to bring good news to the poor. ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19).

Notes

¹ Snyder’s address is published in this issue of *Vision*; see C. Arnold Snyder, “Bread, not Stone: Refocusing an Anabaptist vision,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 64–73; the quotation is on page 69. A link to the podcast of

Snyder's address can be found at <http://www.ambs.edu/news-and-publications/iTunesU/Public-Presentations> (AMBS Commencement 2010 Address).

² Harold S. Bender, "Walking in the Resurrection": The Anabaptist Doctrine of Regeneration and Discipleship," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 35, no. 2 (April 1961): 96–110.

³ Snyder, "Bread, not Stone," 71.

⁴ Not her real name.

About the author

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