

Testimony in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice

Lois Y. Barrett

You'd think testimony would be second nature to Mennonites, given the witness of our Anabaptist forebears in sixteenth-century Europe. Not only does the language of the New Testament connect *witness* with *martyr*, but the key document for Mennonite understanding of our sixteenth-century heritage (usually referred to in English as the *Martyrs' Mirror*) also links the two ideas. In accounts of martyrdom, the deaths of the

faithful are often said to be “for the sake of the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹

In authentic faith, words and deeds match. If we confess Jesus Christ with our mouths, we must follow him with our lives—and if we follow him, we will speak of him to others.

But what of the testimony of Mennonites in subsequent centuries? Even when martyrdom has not threatened, Mennonite theology has picked up four polarities related to testimony.

Word and deed

Mennonite theology has usually insisted on testimony both with our words and with our

lives. In fact, a major complaint of sixteenth-century Anabaptists was that the followers of the magisterial reformers (those who aligned themselves with the state) were all talk and no action. The Anabaptists insisted that conversion results not only in an inner change but in an outer change. People should act differently as a result of the new birth. In fact, some Anabaptists were arrested because of their public behavior: singing hymns in public or living an upright life and not carousing.

One of the Thirty-Three Articles, an Old Frisian confession of faith from 1617, says concerning the distinguishing signs of the church: “And lastly, the church of God is known by her character [*veltttecken*], namely, sincere brotherly and common love (John 13:54; 2 Pet. 1:7), which is shown to God and all people

in words and works, which has been established by Christ himself as a mark of recognition.”

Like Christ, the confession says, the members of the church are to serve one another out of love, to love even enemies who persecute and kill them, to avoid use of physical sword and force, and to suffer in the name of the Lord. “In this way they proclaim and show the nature and love of Christ in every way.” Others will know their faith through their godly walk and their fruits.² This early Mennonite confession places importance on proclaiming and showing, on words and works.

Likewise, the Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse (1578) emphasizes both confessing faith and demonstrating faith, so that both enemies and friends may be saved: “It is our desire to exercise Christian virtue in confessing our faith in humility, patience and brotherly love, and to demonstrate this faith in common love so that we may with all the believers rejoice eternally for the sake of the Christian faith, with unspeakable glorious joy, and inherit the end of our faith, that is the salvation of our soul. And this we wish all our enemies and friends and all who desire it in their heart.”³ In authentic faith, words and deeds match. If we confess Jesus Christ with our mouths, we must follow him with our lives—and if we follow him, we will speak of him to others.

New birth and discipleship

A corollary to this understanding of testimony by word and deed is the Anabaptist-Mennonite conviction about the new birth, which Menno Simons also calls “the spiritual resurrection.”⁴ In a booklet by this title in about 1536, Menno emphasizes that the spiritual resurrection genuinely transforms the whole person, the mind and the inner disposition as well as the outer behavior.

All those who are born and regenerated from above out of God, through the living Word, are also of the mind and disposition, and have the same aptitude for good that He has of whom they are born and begotten. For what the nature of God or Christ is, we may readily learn from the Scriptures. For Christ has expressly portrayed Himself in His Word, that is, as to the nature which He would have us understand, grasp and follow and emulate . . . according to His life and conversation here on earth,

shown forth among men in words and deeds as an example set before us to follow so that we thereby might become partakers of His nature in the spirit, to become like unto Him. So Christ is everywhere represented to us as humble, meek, merciful, just, holy, wise, spiritual, long-suffering, patient, peaceable, lovely, obedient, and good, as the perfection of all things; for in Him there is an upright nature. Behold this is the image of God, of Christ as to the Spirit which we have as an example until we become like it in nature and reveal it by our walk.⁵

The faith to which we testify involves both inner and outer change, becoming like Christ, even partakers of the divine nature, both inwardly and outwardly. This integral connection of the new birth and discipleship implies that Christians are in an ongoing process of becoming more like Jesus. Taking on his nature necessarily implies having the same walk. As Menno says, all regenerate—born again—children of God take after the one who has begotten them.⁶ Conversion is not just an initial experience but ongoing transformative experiences along the way of discipleship.

This understanding of conversion makes a difference in how we give testimony to our faith. Often Mennonites have been suspicious of those giving testimony only about initial conversion experiences, or of churches that emphasize conversion and ignore discipleship, encouraging faith a mile wide and an inch deep. Our testimony should be to continuing growth in faith and faithfulness in breadth and depth.

Individuals and community

Who gives testimony? Do individuals testify to their private experience? Or does the church community as a whole testify? Or do both happen? The Pietist and revivalist traditions have emphasized testimony about individual experience. While not denying individual experience, those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have sometimes wondered whether individuals giving testimony were exhibiting proper humility. Mennonite congregations have split over the issue of public testimony by individuals. Sometimes testimony happened in Sunday evening services but not in Sunday morning worship.

The issue arose in the eighteenth century with the development of the philosophical and political worldview usually called the Enlightenment. Both North America and Europe have been deeply influenced by the Enlightenment and its understanding of the basic unit of society as the autonomous individual. Whereas previous centuries assumed that people were always individuals in community—capable of voluntary choice, yet shaped by community—modernity sees the individual as prior to the community, both in importance and chronologically. Modernity assumed that societies and nations—and by extension, Christian congregations—are formed by the social contract of autonomous individuals. Thus a church steeped in an Enlightenment worldview would assume that true spiritual experience, the subject of testimony, belongs to the individual.

In contrast, many Amish congregations had the tradition of “the bench.” It consisted of church leaders designated to respond to the sermon with their affirmations or with their additions and corrections to the sermon. Testimony is not about one person; testimony is a communal practice.

Often ignored in the practice of individual testimony has been an understanding that the whole life of the Christian community is a witness “before the watching world.”⁷ By word and by deed, the faithful Christian church gives testimony to the life of the reign of God. Contemporary author Darrell Guder has noted: “The ethics of Christian community are the primary context of kingdom witness, and within that context, the spoken witness, the proclamation of the gospel can take place.” In Paul’s writings, “the concern is for the integrity of Christian witness on the part of the entire community. In their praxis of Christian witness, the missional communities demonstrate that Jesus Christ is truly Lord, and that the kingdom is breaking in.”⁸ The church is called to be a preview of God’s reign, to come to fulfillment at the turning of the ages. By its words, by the practices of its life together, and by its practices of witness in the world, it gives testimony to Christ’s work.

Word and Spirit

A fourth polarity for Mennonites regarding testimony has been the function of scripture in relation to the role of experience. Is

testimony to be an elaboration of what is found in the Bible? Or is testimony to be about spiritual experience that may go beyond the biblical text?⁹

Having lived in the shadow of the apocalyptic visions of Anabaptists in Münster in the sixteenth century, most later Anabaptists and Mennonites bent over backward to avoid ecstatic spiritual experience that might lead them astray. The content of testimony was to be accepted doctrine.

But authentic theologizing happens at the intersection of the gospel as we know it through scripture, the contexts in which the church finds itself, and the experience of the church, now and in the past. If we close ourselves off to spiritual experience, we may be avoiding God's present word to us, within and beyond scripture. Most sixteenth-century Anabaptist writers, from the literalists to the spiritualists, insisted that any interpretation of scripture is valid only if it is done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I ask people, "What is God doing in your congregation?" and their answers speak not of God but about the church's projects. We need to become more adept at identifying God's present word and action.

Not all spiritual experience is of God. That is why the Apostle Paul's writings advise the testing of spirits to see if they are aligned with what we know of God through Jesus.

Our testimony becomes more genuine when it is based on our own experience of God in the world. Such testimony requires first being able to identify what God is doing in our lives and in the world. In my work with congregations from a number of denominations in the United States and Canada, I have found that people in many congregations

have trouble using God as the subject of an active verb in a sentence. I ask people, "What is God doing in your congregation?" and their answers speak not of God but about their church's projects. We need to become more adept at identifying God's present word and action.

We don't get a lot of practice doing that. A number of years ago, I wrote a series of lessons for Mennonite women's groups on women in church history. I organized it around the various gifts of the Spirit particular women had demonstrated. A friend from a distant congregation later told me about her women's group's experience with the study. She said that when they came to the

session on the gift of prophecy, some women wondered whether they should skip that lesson because it seemed too extreme. What would they have to discuss about prophecy? But they decided, the conference wants us to do this, so we will study that session.

That session turned out to be the most remarkable of the sessions that year. When the women were asked about their personal experiences with God, they started telling amazing stories they had never before told one another—mountaintop experiences, experiences of God’s guidance, of healing, of knowing God’s presence. Why hadn’t they ever talked about these experiences before? They said, “We didn’t know it was okay to talk about these things in church!”

Testimony begins with God’s self-disclosure. Before we can testify to what we have witnessed, we need to become aware of God’s testimony to us. Then we need to talk about these things, first in church, then to our neighbors—and in public.

Notes

¹ Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians . . .*, trans. Joseph Sohm, 5th English ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950). As example, see the testament of Lenaert Plovier, 642.

² Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 217–19.

³ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁴ See “The Spiritual Resurrection,” in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 51–62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷ The subtitle of John Howard Yoder’s book *Body Politics* is *Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992).

⁸ Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 67.

⁹ A helpful discussion of Spirit and letter in sixteenth-century Anabaptism is found in chapter 11 of C. Arnold Snyder’s *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 159–76.

About the author

Lois Y. Barrett is associate professor of theology and Anabaptist studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and director of its Great Plains Extension in North Newton, Kansas. She is co-author of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), and *Treasure in Clay Jars: Patterns in Missional Faithfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).