Seeking the headwaters of Mennonite spirituality

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Early this year my wife, Ellen, and I made a two-week journey in search of our spiritual headwaters. No, we did not go to Puerto Rico, Pennsylvania, or Switzerland (though part of our spiritual heritage springs from those places). Our trip was to Italy and Tunisia, and we were looking for a spiritual fountainhead in the life and witness of the early church. We were not disappointed.

Like a giant labyrinth, hundreds of miles of largely Christian catacombs spread out under the city of Rome. There we found abundant visual evidence for what we had already learned from early Christian literature: the men and women who first lived and spoke the gospel across the ancient Mediterranean world were people of fervent prayer and utter reliance on God. In scores of examples from third- and fourth-century catacomb art, we saw depictions of people praying with both arms raised in a posture of blessing and supplication. These were people steeped in the Scriptures, and their favorite passages were stories of divine deliverance: Jonah and the great fish, the three lads in the fiery furnace, Lazarus being raised from the dead.

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In Tunisia, we saw fourth- and fifth-century baptisteries, Jacuzzi-like structures with steps leading down one side and up the other. People who passed through the waters of baptism in that era had gone through extensive instruction, including exorcism from the powers of sin and death that pervaded pagan society. Candidates received baptism in a small room, and entered the water with no clothes at all, symbolizing their commitment to leave entirely the old life of sin and enter a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Try introducing that method of baptism in your home church!

The symbolism and liturgy of the early church stirred our imaginations. At Christian tombs and early church museums, we found dozens of Christian images, including the anchor, dove, fish, vine, lighthouse, lamb, and shepherd. In early Christian writings we learned about the use of liturgy and symbol in worship, such as offering newly-baptized members milk and honey as a foretaste of the reign of God, and reciting a special prayer as the evening lamp was lit.

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Something quickened in my Anabaptist heart as ancient symbols and liturgies seeped into my soul. Along with countless others in the Western world, I hunger for spirituality. But not just any spirituality. As a Mennonite Christian, my identity and frame of reference are centered in Jesus Christ and the Scriptures that witness to him. Early Christians understood that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus threw open spiritual doors for mortals to know God in an unprecedented way.

Mennonites have embraced this incarnational understanding of God. Like the early Anabaptists, we have immersed ourselves in the Scriptures. Sometimes we have parted ways with our Anabaptist forebears, though, by failing to appreciate the insights of the early church (and later eras of church renewal). For spiritual disciplines and liturgical inspiration, we either try to go straight from the New Testament to our own application, or we borrow from popular Western Christian culture. Before we simply reinvent or borrow spirituality, we would do well to mine our own tradition.

Sixteenth-century Anabaptism was spiritually diverse. Nevertheless, at least three elements were prominent in the strains that proved to have staying power. These parts of the movement (1) were Jesus-centered and therefore rooted in the Scriptures; (2) vigorously connected inner spiritual disciplines with holy living, justice, truth-telling, and nonviolence; and (3) were committed to communal life and discernment with the people of God.

For guidance in these three areas, sixteenth-century Anabaptists drew from spiritual resources that few twenty-first-century Mennonites know much about. Many early Anabaptists

drew inspiration from the early church, especially from the era before church and state became so intertwined. Although early church writings could never have the authority of the Scriptures, Anabaptists valued the insights on ethics, worship, baptism, and discipleship they found there. So should we.

Although they reacted against Catholic spiritualities that sometimes had turned mechanical or exploitative, early Anabaptists were deeply influenced by medieval monastic movements and other radical renewal efforts (e.g., the Waldensians). In the words of Mennonite historian Arnold Snyder, the "deepest, strongest, and richest taproot of Anabaptism found its nourishment in the subsoil of ascetic, Christian spirituality, even though it was fertilized by Luther's Bible revolution."[1] Anabaptist spirituality relied on the direct movement of the Holy Spirit, informed by the Bible and the example of Jesus. "The negative side of this radical spiritualization of the Christian life," Snyder says, "was that a millennium of liturgy, ceremony, symbolic language, prayer, and ritual [was] thrown away as 'human inventions,' not truly biblical, and not necessary for a truly spiritual life."

By reclaiming classic spiritual disciplines and modalities—including spiritual direction, meditation, liturgy, symbol, pilgrimage, and even exorcism—twenty-first-century Mennonites are recovering some of what was lost. We are celebrating seasons of the church year (I didn't even know what Lent was when I was a child!). From the catacombs to the modern lectionary, we have much to learn from other centuries and other streams of the Christian church.

Let us learn spiritual disciplines from Mennonite sisters and brothers in the two-thirds world—some of whom live in circumstances of suffering that rival the deep waters through which the Anabaptists passed.

Let us be discriminating, though, and retain the best of Anabaptist spirituality: Christ-centered discipleship; communal worship and biblical interpretation; and set-apart lives of mission, service, and peacemaking. Let us learn spiritual disciplines from Mennonite sisters and brothers in the two-thirds world—some of whom live in circumstances of suffering that rival the deep waters through which sixteenth-century Anabaptists passed. We not only have

much to drink in from other Christian traditions, our own Anabaptist tributary has something precious to contribute to spiritual renewal in the wider river of a global Christian church.

Notes

[1] C. Arnold Snyder, "Spiritual Empowerment toward Discipleship," *Mennonite Life* 55, no. 3 (Sept. 2000), on line at http://www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2000sept/snyder%5Fmanifesto.html.