

## Review and discussion

### Recent studies on Anabaptist spirituality

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**T**he recent interest in spirituality has resulted in a number of publications that focus on the spirituality of sixteenth-century Anabaptists. This review article looks at three books, produced to serve different purposes, all published in 1994 and 1995.

Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall. *Praying with the Anabaptists, The Secret of Bearing Fruit*. Newton and Winnipeg: Faith & Life, 1994.

Cornelius J. Dyck, trans. and ed. *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism: Classic Devotional Resources*. Scottsdale: Herald Pr., 1995.

Daniel Liechty, trans. and ed. *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*. New York: Paulist Pr., 1994.

*Praying with the Anabaptists*, by Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, was commissioned by a joint Mennonite Church and General Conference Mennonite Church committee. The aim was to produce a book that would promote prayer and spiritual growth. The book “revisits the writings of the sixteenth-century martyrs and leaders of the Anabaptist movement to discover time-honored and yet refreshing ways to deepen our practice of prayer” (5).

The book is divided into three sections: “Abiding in the Vine,” “Joined in Love,” and “Bearing Fruit.” The intent of “Abiding in the Vine” is to help people through personal prayer and devotion come into intimate and personal relationship to God. “Joined in Love” looks at the fruits of prayer, and focuses on aspects of relating to other people in building community, service, and mission. “Bearing Fruit” deals with further fruits of prayer, specifically service, peacemaking, and witness.

In the authors’ view, spirituality, including Anabaptist spirituality, begins with a deeply personal prayer relationship to God, and proceeds into community, service, mission, and ethics.

Though the focus of the book is not on sixteenth-century Anabaptism but rather on helping people further their personal devotion to God, the book does reflect a spirituality that is informed by an immersion in Anabaptist writings.

*Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, translated and edited by C. J. Dyck, has a twofold purpose. One purpose is practical: to foster spiritual life. Dyck writes that the book is intended for “the use, enjoyment, and spiritual growth of students, retreat participants, congregational study groups, individual spiritual exercises, and others” (9). Second, the book is designed to add to the literature of spirituality readings from the Anabaptist tradition.

After a brief chapter introducing the reader to sixteenth-century Anabaptism, the book continues with two longer selections from single writers (with introductions by Dyck): “The Apostles’ Creed: An Interpretation,” by Leonhard Schiemer, and “The Conversion of Menno Simons,” by Menno. Nine chapters

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follow, each consisting of short selections from many sixteenth-century writers. These selections are grouped according to nine themes: “The New Birth—Regeneration,” “Word and Spirit,” “Discipleship,” “Peace and Justice,” “Lifestyle,” “Letters of Faith and Encouragement,” “The Body of Christ, the Church,” “Prayers of the Heart,” and “Meditations for Spiritual Discernment.” The book concludes with a lengthy article, “The Way to the City of Peace,” by Pieter Pietersz. from Alkmaar, The Netherlands, written about 1625.

The Anabaptist writers quoted include Michael Sattler, Felix Manz, Hans Hut, Hans Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Schlaffer, Pilgram Marpeck, Jacob Hutter, Peter Riedemann, Ulrich Stadler, Hans Schnell, Melchior Hoffman, Dirk Philips, David Joris, Hans de Ries, Anna Jansz, Margarete Endris, plus a number of others less well known. Andreas Ehrenpreis, a seventeenth-century Hutterite, is also included.

In the first chapter, Dyck addresses the question, “What is spirituality?” After briefly surveying various understandings of

spirituality in the history of the church, he concludes that it is best not to define spirituality too narrowly or precisely, but to allow the rich tapestry of views of spirituality to stand. At the end of this introductory chapter, Dyck attempts a general, inclusive description of spiritual life as being “nourished through an intimate commitment to Jesus Christ, individually and in community” (26).

What then is Anabaptist spirituality? What are its distinguishing characteristics? Dyck suggests that the sixteenth-century texts indicate several. First, for Anabaptist spirituality community is important. Anabaptist spirituality is not merely medieval monastic spirituality extended to the laity, but is a redefinition of spirituality. In monasticism, the focus of community was on the interior life of the soul. In Anabaptism, community is faith active in love as a life of obedience to God. Second, Anabaptist spirituality includes the restoration of ethics into personal and communal spiritual life. Third, for the Anabaptists of the first and second generation suffering was central. All Anabaptists knew that arrest, imprisonment, and death were possible consequences of their decision to be faithful to God. Dyck sees a fourth characteristic of Anabaptist spirituality as holiness-sanctification, “an indictment of evil in all its forms—personal, social, communal, political,” a living out of the new covenant alone and in community (23).

Dyck’s book is helpful in beginning to develop the outlines of an Anabaptist spirituality. The organization of the book does not allow him to analyse regional differences in the way Anabaptists viewed spirituality. Recent scholarship has pointed out that within Anabaptism there were significant regional differences on other issues. Was this also true of their spirituality?

A third book is *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, translated and edited by Daniel Liechty, with a preface by Hans J. Hillerbrand. The book, published in the series Classics of Western Spirituality, is designed to present sixteenth-century Anabaptist spirituality alongside the spiritualities of other traditions. These other spiritualities are dealt with in other volumes and are not referred to in this volume.

In the introduction, Liechty clarifies that he will limit himself to the first generation of Anabaptist writers, and include

selections from those who “are recognized leaders in Anabaptist groups” (xiii). The only writer not from the first generation is Peter Walpot, who is included because Liechty feels that he reflects the spirituality of the early Hutterites.

Each selection is lengthy, in order “to avoid a feeling of choppiness,” as Liechty explains. The selections are taken from the major regions where Anabaptists were active. The Swiss selections come from Felix Manz, Balthasar Hubmaier, and the *Ausbund*. For South German and Austrian Anabaptism, the selections are taken from Hans Hut, Leonhard Schiemer, Hans Schlaffer, and Hans Denck. Hutterian Anabaptism is represented by a selection from Peter Walpot, and Dutch Anabaptism by selections from Dirk Philips and Menno Simons.

The topics covered in these selections include baptism, grace, suffering, the Lord’s Prayer, the true Christian life, true love, free will and predestination, the Trinity, yieldedness, Christian community of goods, new birth and the new creature, spiritual restitution, and the Twenty-fifth Psalm. In other words, most of the major themes the Anabaptists addressed in their writings are included in the extracts chosen.

Some themes are left out, however. There is no selection about peace, despite the fact that a number of Anabaptist leaders spoke to this issue (e.g., Sattler, Manz, Conrad Grebel, Riedemann, and Menno). On the subject of baptism, Hans Hut’s lengthy article highlights his views, and Schiemer’s “Three Kinds of Baptism” reflects Hut’s influence. Articles on baptism reflecting other perspectives, for example Hubmaier’s and Menno’s, are not included.

In contrast to Dyck, Liechty organizes his articles geographically, and gives the reader a feel for the spiritualities in the various regions. However, since Liechty’s selections are long, the number of writings from a particular area is limited, and the tone and character of the spirituality reflected depends heavily on these few selections. In the end, because of the small number of selections made, one can best gain from this book a general view of Anabaptist spirituality, rather than a view of the spiritualities of the various Anabaptist groups.

The articles in Liechty’s collection present a view of Anabaptist spirituality that in its broad outlines is similar to that

of Dyck's study. Anabaptist spirituality is again seen as embodying community, suffering, ethics, and discipleship. In addition, the articles Liechty chose include the themes of the new birth, yieldedness, and spiritual restitution.

What do these three publications contribute to an understanding of Anabaptist spirituality? First, each writer

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attempts to make the case that Anabaptist spirituality has its own character. The general outline of this spirituality in the three studies, despite their different purposes and outlines, is remarkably similar.

Second, these studies do not make comparisons with either Catholic or Protestant understandings of spirituality. In order to make comparisons further studies will need to be undertaken.

Third, the three studies present only a general description of Anabaptist spirituality or spiritualities. It may be helpful to define Anabaptist spirituality more precisely.

Fourth, developing a more nuanced view of Anabaptist spiritualities would be helpful for understanding present-day spiritualities. As in other areas of research in Anabaptist history, acknowledging the plurality of views present in the sixteenth century is more accurate, and also allows for a plurality of views in the present.

In conclusion, these three studies present a helpful introduction to an understanding of Anabaptist spirituality. They provide a general direction in which other studies can proceed.