Harold Who? A Twenty-something Glimpse of the Anabaptist Vision

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On a chilled Saturday afternoon in early December, my father and ninety-one-year-old grandmother and I drive over the coiling roads of the Welsh Mountain in eastern Pennsylvania. It was here, 103 years ago, that Mennonites began mission work among the "mountain people," as they were called. The mountain people earned notoriety in the surrounding valley towns as drunks, inbreeders, and chicken thieves. It was here that my grandparents brought their seven children to church when they joined the mission efforts on the Mountain.

We drive past crumbling shacks and weedy lots while my grandmother tells us the names of the people who used to live here: Ike Boots, one of the first converts; Ben and Liza Green, whom my grandpa would take home from church in his '37 Ford; Harry Millisock, who killed a schoolteacher and walked past the church with a shotgun. Some of their descendants still live here, but most have moved to nearby cities for work. On the mountain they've been replaced by prosperous families at the cusp of the American Dream: yuppies too young to be scared off by the Mountain's reputation, who take cruise vacations and decorate new houses in country themes. Some of them are Mennonites.

We wind down toward Honey Brook, where my grandmother was born. There we will see her battered old elementary school that now sinks into

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the ground, and the spot where the Rutt homestead stood, now marked only by a large maple tree.

On an afternoon drive this heavy with history, I can't resist asking the question that keeps coming to my mind on this day, a couple months before a conference where I must speak about "The Anabaptist Vision" by Harold S. Bender.[1] "Grandma, what do you know about H.S. Bender?" I ask, leaning up from the back seat toward her hearing aid. There is silence. I continue: "He gave a speech called 'The Anabaptist Vision' in 1943 that talked about discipleship, community, and nonresistance." She still says nothing. I offer again, "Harold S. Bender?"

"Well," she says tentatively, "the name sounds a little familiar."

Her response is not much different from that of several friends of mine – all in their twenties, all raised in Mennonite homes, all schooled at Mennonite colleges – when I asked them what they know of H.S. Bender. As with my grandmother, the name rings a faint bell – a very faint one. "Harold Bender? The name is very familiar but I don't know specifics," said one friend. "I know that Al Keim just wrote a book about him, and I know that his middle initial is 'S'," another wrote. Yet another emailed: "An important Mennonite dude . . . Elkhart? There's a book he wrote, I think!"

"The Anabaptist Vision" became a sacred text for many Mennonites in the second half of the twentieth century. By fashioning Anabaptism into a triadic tradition of discipleship, community, and nonresistance, Bender offered a generation of upwardly mobile Mennonites a story of which they could be proud, an "anchor and a locus of self-identification" as they moved into professions and suburbs.[2] Yet the responses of Mennonites at both ends of life – my grandmother and my twenty-something friends – make me wonder whether H.S. Bender and his almost mythical speech have become irrelevant.

My grandma and my twenty-something friends and I peer at the fog that is H.S. Bender from different directions: she, from a life lived mostly before the Anabaptist Vision took hold; we, from our alma maters of Mennonite Church institutions that Bender championed. She, from a nest of farmers, harness-makers, and bookbinders; we, from the land of Starbucks, Microsoft, and Wal-Mart. She, from the country of preachers named John Martin and their wives, Mrs. John Martin; we, from the republic of hyphenated last names. She, nurtured by doctrines of salvation for the lost on the Welsh Mountain,

the inerrancy of the Bible, the distinctives of plain suit and covering; we, clutching still amorphous ideas about inter-faith dialogue, the Bible as a narrative of God's healing, and the sense that we need somehow both to *separate* ourselves from the world *and* to engage it.

In an author's note at the beginning of *The Poisonwood Bible*, Barbara Kingsolver writes this tribute to her mother and father: "They set me early on a path of exploring the great, shifting terrain between righteousness and what's right."[3] Righteousness and what's right: these phrases capture the friction we as Mennonites sense these days. This is not just the rub of generations: it's the chafing of purity against relevancy, separateness against engagement, personal faithfulness against social responsibility. This shifting terrain is what makes us feel so unsteady on our denominational feet, poised as we are on the verge of both merging and dividing, coupling and divorcing.

For church people, righteousness means acting in accord with divine or moral law – it is the *Ordnung* that my grandmother lived with daily. It is what migratory and then settled North American Mennonites are skilled at doing: keeping ourselves from evil, following the Bible as we understand it, building families and churches that reproduce themselves. Righteousness is the obvious good, the noble act, the habits of holiness.

Righteousness can, however, warp into collective hubris and sectarianism. It can cause us to cast out people from our midst who may not rise to our standard of divine or moral law. Or it may simply limit us from widening our definitions of morality beyond "not gambling, not smoking, not drinking." Righteousness, as theologian Juan Mackay puts it, is proffered from "the security of the theological balcony."[4] It is most often formulated by educated white churchmen like Harold S. Bender. Bender's speech and its subsequent hallowing among his followers are attempts, albeit noble ones, to preserve on paper a theology of righteousness that transcends time and place.

Kingsolver's second shifting plate, "what's right," is harder to define than the first. In fact, doing what's right defies the very act of definition. A theology of what's right is a "theology of the road, temporary in character, done in the dusty and dangerous path of life," writes Mario Higueros, academic dean of the Latin American seminary SEMILLA.[5] Because the early Anabaptists rarely wrote down their theology but rather lived it, writes Higueros, "we Anabaptists must notice that the insistence on dogmatic, non-contextualized

theological formulations is placing us in complete contradiction to the heritage received from many of our predecessors."[6]

The drive toward "what's right," then, is a drive toward a faith that changes when to change is more faithful than to conserve, a faith that engages the social order when to engage is more life-giving than to withdraw. It's what drove mediator John Paul Lederach to agree to lead a workshop on humanitarian crises at the United States War College – an institution, he writes, "that I hope my work will eventually help transform and eliminate."[7] Righteousness would have dictated that he refuse altogether, so as not to sully his hands. Such a negotiation with the world leads to suspended ideals, perhaps, but also to transfusions of peacemaking blood into the heart of our violence-enamored society. This is just one example of a Mennonite trying to do "what's right" – there are, of course, many more.

I'm sure we have yet to discover all the dangers that may come with doing what's right. While seeking after righteousness can make one insular or intolerant, searching for what's right can perhaps make one engaged to the point of exhaustion, relevant to the point of extinction.

Where do we draw the line? is the way the question is most often asked: an important question, granted, in this day of cyber-dislocation, the hallowing of individual liberties, and our own love affair with a consuming culture. But boundary questions such as Where do we draw the line? are questions that Mario Higueros might say are of secondary importance. I wonder if Higueros, who writes that Anabaptist theology "seeks unity in the constant presence of divisions,"[8] would say that questions of where to draw lines are less pressing than questions of how to reach across them to the people on the other side.

Both Kingsolver's notions of righteousness and what's right, as well as Bender's triune points of the Anabaptist Vision, seem slanted toward ethics, lived faith, and outward acts, and away from inner conversion, relationship to God, and grace-filled salvation. Though Kingsolver can evade our scrutiny because she's not Mennonite, Bender and his followers are coming under fire from Anabaptist scholars today for their emphasis on a works-oriented and rationalist theology at the expense of grace, forgiveness, and evangelical faith. I agree with those who call for an increased emphasis on the inner life of the Spirit and on God's sustaining grace. But while some fear that my generation

and those following will wander lost in a postmodern morass of unbiblical living, I fear something else for us. I fear instead that unless we are infused with a new conviction of the Anabaptist distinctives of discipleship, community, and an ethic of love – unless these pervade our very Gen-X selves – we will drift in a sea of denominations and "non-denominations" without discernment or pause. I fear that we will become like the students in my husband's theology class, who responded in the following numbers when asked, What did Jesus do that was so important?: twenty-eight of them said he "died on the cross," twenty-seven that he "atoned for our sins." Only two students responded that Jesus "set an example for us to follow." Indeed, without these very Anabaptist resources of discipleship, community, and nonviolence, I fear that my generation and those following won't be able to resist the leveling of our faith to a least common denominator of divinely-sanctioned upward mobility, tradition-less megachurches, and civil religion.

As I said before, I do believe that notions of righteousness – held by my grandmother's generation and codified by Bender – and notions of "what's right" – desperately sought after by my generation – do often overlap: the fruits of the Spirit, simplicity, resistance to the machine of war, commitment to family and church, prayerful reflection. And I do believe, along with Higueros, that Bender's three concepts, despite their entrapment in space and time, are helpful maps for our trek across the shifting plates of righteousness and what's right.

Listen to these thoughts, then, from twenty-something Mennonites: admittedly, college-educated, white North American Mennonites. I want to acknowledge that this is a narrow sampling and apologize for it. But my friends' words do speak of an Anabaptist theology existing, as Higueros writes, "in action lived out in a specific historical moment."[9]

Discipleship To my grandma and grandpa, the definition was fairly close to an observer's description of early Anabaptists, which Bender cited in 1943: "No lying, deception, swearing, strife, harsh language . . . is found among them, but humility . . . neatness, honesty, temperance, straightforwardness."[10] In the words of one of my friends, discipleship is "a never-ending dialogue between God, the community of believers, and me. It is a struggle of using my life to serve God's purpose, as well as offering it as a

witness to draw others to the healing love of Christ." Another's definition: "[Discipleship] is trying to make life choices based on faithfulness to principles of love and respect for people, to the earth, and to what I know of God . . . being present with people, listening to their stories, sharing tortillas, sharing of my own life and experiences."

Community To my grandparents, community meant *Absonderung*, "separation," attempts at creation of a Christian social order there on the Welsh Mountain. It meant casseroles to the sick, living near your parents, pre-Communion accountability sessions. Today, a friend of mine describes it like this: "Having [our neighbor] plow our driveway, discussing with neighbors what approach to take with the local KKK . . . . [Community] is dreaming and planning with friends about how to live more healthfully, how to be true to our heritage, Christian, Mennonite, in today's world," this friend says. "I think community offers a realm where we can feel connected, purposeful, and courageous in a way that disjointed, separate living cannot give us." And another says: "Community . . . means accepting others as people created by God to whom I am inherently connected. For example, in the issue of Matthew Shepard's death [the gay college student murdered in Wyoming in 1997] – some Christians picketed at his funeral with signs that said, 'Matthew is in hell,' and 'Fags burn in hell.' I am embarassed by those persons," this friend writes. "I would want no part of them – but in reality, because I say that I am committed to Christ, as they say – I am connected. For their actions, I must apologize and somewhat be held responsible. That part of community is always humbling."

Nonresistance To my grandparents, nonresistance meant teaching their children the way of peace, directing them toward alternative service during the war. In the words of a twenty-something Mennonite, "Nonresistance may be fine in times of war, as a response to the draft system. But in our times, we must be actively calling attention to violence in our world – to the violence of racism, to domestic violence, to economic violence . . . to environmental destruction that violently destroys God's creation."

So even though they might not know exactly who H.S. Bender was, my friends do not find his trilogy of words foreign in the least. Were he alive today, Bender might not be happy with these re-definitions of his words, with this movement away from "righteousness" and toward "what's right." But

whether he'd like it or not, his words from 1943 are being laundered and re-worn today. I like to think that Bender's concepts have been altered gently by both the critique of post-Concern Movement scholars and the re-defining of young adult Mennonites: altered, that is, not eradicated or weakened.

I also like to think that as we work toward merging two denominations, we will escape the danger that overtook Bender himself. The danger is that in the laying down of programmatic frameworks, we begin to believe that control over our denominational destiny is possible. We begin to believe that with enough collective planning for our church's future, we will be able to mold ourselves into the vibrant, missional, and peacemaking denomination that we really should be. Yet we must accept that even well-built schoolhouses will sag into the ground, even once-stately homesteads will be replaced by maple trees and air, and even carefully-constructed churchly initiatives will be forgotten, replaced, or redefined.

Perhaps the best we can do is to try to set our own feet – and the feet of our children – "on a path of exploring the shifting terrain between righteousness and what's right," as Barbara Kingsolver's parents so wisely did for her. Perhaps the best we can do is take our children and grandchildren for drives through the spaces we have inhabited, the Welsh Mountains of our right intentions, successful projects, and failed ambitions. Perhaps the best we can do is to lend them the maps we've used, and wish them Godspeed on their way.

Notes

[1] "The Anabaptist Vision" was Mennonite historian Harold S. Bender's presidential address before the American Society of Church History in 1943. See Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944).

[2] [John D. Roth], "In This Issue," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (July 1995): 277.

[3] Barbara Kingsolver, "Author's Note," *The Poisonwood Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

[4] Quoted in Mario Higueros, "The Anabaptist Vision in the Church of Central America," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (July 1995): 389.

[5] *Ibid.*, 389.

[6] *Ibid.*, 396.

[7] John Paul Lederach, *The Journey Toward Reconciliation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press,

1999), 91.

[8] Higueros, "The Anabaptist Vision in the Church of Central America": 397.

[9] *Ibid.*, 396.

[10] Quoted in Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision*, 24.