
**Discipleship Ain't Just about Jesus:
or
On the Importance of the Holy Spirit for Pacifists**

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In this paper, my purpose is to contribute to a theological thickening of Mennonite pacifism. I will attempt to justify the negative claim that Jesus alone cannot provide adequate theological grounds for the practice of pacifism with the positive claim that the Holy Spirit has a radically important role in

equipping and leading Christians — individually and collectively — in the imitation of Jesus.¹

The Problematic Christocentrism of *The Anabaptist Vision*

Legend has it that, while on his way to deliver the 1943 presidential address to the American Society of Church History, Harold Bender wrote the now famous *Anabaptist Vision*. In it, Bender outlines a variety of historical appraisals of Anabaptism which then lead up to a summation of Anabaptism's core: 1) Christian discipleship 2) voluntary church membership and 3) an ethic of love and nonresistance. Whether Bender meant merely to sum up his understanding of the Anabaptist tradition or not, these three beliefs became the normative thrust of Anabaptism for many of Bender's students, including John Howard Yoder.

In my reading, Bender's related claims that: 1) discipleship means the transformation of the individual believer's entire way of life should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ;³ and 2) in the practice of an ethic of love, Anabaptists were neither mystics nor pietists "for they laid the weight of their emphasis upon following Christ in life," are defining moments within *The Anabaptist Vision*.⁴ Now, Bender was occasionally the object of the young John Howard Yoder's disdain, but Yoder openly acknowledged that he owed his interest in, and understanding of, Anabaptism to Bender.⁵ Their shared Christocentric emphasis is obvious in Yoder's very influential *The Politics of Jesus*.⁶ *The Politics of Jesus* has in turn deeply influenced a variety of contributors to Anabaptist theology from Stanley Hauerwas to J. Denny Weaver.⁷ Although these heirs of Yoder — and to some extent also of *The Anabaptist Vision* — have significant differences, they share the profound emphasis on a pacifism grounded almost solely in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

In recent years, however, there has been an upheaval of sorts in Anabaptism. Frustrations are surfacing, and the strong Christocentric emphasis, or perhaps the ramifications of that emphasis, are becoming problematic for unforeseen reasons. About ten years ago, Stephen Dintaman wrote a four-page article entitled "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision."⁸ In it, he boldly stated that "the unfortunate result of teaching the Anabaptist vision was that it resulted in generations of students and church leaders learning some of the behavioral aspects of the Christian faith"⁹ without experiencing what it means to have a vital and life-changing relationship with the crucified and risen Jesus. Inevitably, this result "contributed to our spiritual impoverishment."¹⁰ In

the ensuing years, it became obvious that even if Dintaman's assessment was not applicable in all contexts, it had certainly hit a nerve. Evidence can be found in the outpouring of support for his conclusion in a series of articles published in the *Conrad Grebel Review* three years later.¹¹ Dintaman is not alone, and A. James Reimer also speaks for various other Mennonites when he suggests that the *Vision's* trajectory of the strong emphasis on the ethical, as seen in Yoder and his heirs (particularly J. Denny Weaver), seems to have become merely a form of ethical reductionism.¹²

Since Dintaman sounded the alarm nearly ten years ago, small steps have been taken to address the "spiritual impoverishment" of contemporary Anabaptism. Cornelius J. Dyck has gathered a collection of sixteenth-century writings on the spiritual life in Anabaptism.¹³ Arnold Snyder has declared that "the most pressing theological need in our church is the cultivation of a spirituality and worship life that supports nonviolent discipleship."¹⁴ James Reimer has begun articulating what it means to ground the moral claims of Jesus *and* the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit in the very nature and person of God.¹⁵ Duane Friesen has provocatively articulated a theology of culture within a Trinitarian framework. All these efforts address the insufficiencies of Anabaptist theological reflection of the last half-century that have given rise to an "impoverished spirituality."¹⁶ In the remainder of this paper, I too will attempt to contribute to this *ressourcement* and renewal, but I will limit my contribution to the multifaceted relationship between the Holy Spirit and the performance of pacifism.¹⁷

Two Suggestive Resources for Rediscovering the Holy Spirit

I will limit myself to two resources that are least problematic for discussion amongst ourselves: Scripture and the sixteenth-century pioneers of Anabaptism.¹⁸

1. The Bible. Anyone acquainted with Mennonite theology knows that the Sermon on the Mount (preferably Matthew's account) has played the defining role in our self-understanding, especially the parts about turning one's cheek and loving one's enemies.¹⁹ These strong ethical injunctions have also found their place within the rubric of Isaiah's eschatological vision of the time when people will "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks"; when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."²⁰ I have no intentions of rejecting these pillars of Anabaptist theology and practice, yet there is a certain deficiency here. It lies in the neglect of the role that the Holy Spirit has in bringing about

peace — both a life of peace and the final eschatological peace.

Perhaps the easiest place to begin is in the letter to Galatians, where Paul outrightly states that peace is one of the fruits of the Spirit.²¹ And, along with our emphasis on imitating Jesus, we should also consider Paul's assertion to the Corinthians that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.²² It seems logical, then, that attempts to live as if "Jesus is Lord" cannot be accomplished except by the Holy Spirit, which would include turning one's cheek and loving one's enemy. Even further, John's gospel also reports Jesus saying that the Spirit "will guide you into all the truth. . . . He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you."²³ If nothing else, this passage seems to indicate that if we want to live in the truth of Jesus Christ, we can accomplish this only under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We can also examine the role of the Spirit in broader kingdom terms. Paul, in Romans, claims that the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.²⁴ The broader narrative for contextualizing this might again be located in Isaiah, where the peace of God's reign is foretold to Israel:

For the palace will be forsaken, the populous city deserted . . .
until a spirit from on high is poured out on us, and the wilderness becomes a fruitful field, and the fruitful field is deemed a forest. Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. *The effect of righteousness will be peace*, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.²⁵

Apparently the peace in the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, is not limited to either the already or the "not yet," but is vital to the peace of the kingdom at all times.

One might argue that I have merely juxtaposed a variety of biblical texts abstracted from their narrative context, causing nothing but confusion in the process. I acknowledge that much more could and should be done in interpreting these passages individually and in their appropriate narrative and theological contexts. However, it is hard to ignore their combined force and the ramifications they might have for the topic at hand.

2. *The Early Anabaptists.* Turning to the sixteenth century, we should probably not be surprised that the Holy Spirit figures prominently. One aspect of the Christian life in which the Spirit particularly applied was in spiritual

regeneration. C. J. Dyck reminds us that the experience of “new birth” was the dynamic cause of early Anabaptism, with the Scriptures as the formal root cause and the Holy Spirit as the enabling power.²⁶ Perhaps no one articulated this position as clearly as Dirk Philips. Writing on regeneration, Philips claims that “it is clear that the new birth is actually the work of God in a person through which they are born anew out of God through faith in Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.” Invoking familiar biblical motifs, he argues that one must be washed through the bath of the new birth in the Word, and be transformed through the renewal of the Holy Spirit. Summing up in strongly Trinitarian terms, he declares that the children of God are those who are “born-again out of God the heavenly Father through Christ Jesus and are renewed and sanctified through the Holy Spirit, who have become participants of the divine nature, of the being of Jesus Christ, and of the character of the Holy Spirit.”²⁷ In these passages, the Holy Spirit is integral in bringing about inner transformation, in the process of becoming a Christian. Yet is this merely an “inner” transformation?

A second role that the Spirit plays is that of bringing about external works. Pilgram Marpeck sketches the thorny transition, and although there still are latent problems here, his insights are very instructive. In 1545 he wrote that “According to the measure of the internal working of the Holy Spirit, [the Spirit also] leads to the external forgiveness of sin and our external improvement, teaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper showing love to all people.” Advancing his claim even further, he argues that those who are born again in Christ, according to the inner working of the Holy Spirit, are those who are aglow with love.²⁸ Marpeck appears to provide us with a precedent for reconsidering the supportive role of the Holy Spirit in bringing forth external improvement, love, and, in short, all that is required for imitating Christ.

Even this is not all our early theological ancestors have to offer. In *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, C.J. Dyck conveys a profound writing by an anonymous author that is unsurpassed in elaborating the importance of the Holy Spirit. It justifies citing at some length:

[The Holy Spirit] also shows us the Savior Jesus Christ, proclaims the gospel of grace to us, that is repentance and forgiveness of sin in his name. It is he who moves and encourages us to confess our sins, to have sorrow and remorse over them, mourn over them

with tears, that we long for Christ, the healer and forgiver, with all our heart, and teaches us to pray fervently, as he is called the Spirit of grace and the law in the prophets. . . . He kindles the fire of the love of God in a believing heart, enlightens and strengthens what is timid and weak, warms and heats what is cold and frozen before God, and comforts what is sad and troubled because of sin. He gathers the faithful together into holy fellowship, gives them one heart and mind, uniting them through Christ in untarnished brotherly love, accepts them as his children and heirs in the kingdom of God.²⁹

Is this spiritually impoverished Anabaptism? I doubt it. I do not want to idealize the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, but if the substance of these writings could also have been transmitted within *The Anabaptist Vision*, we might not be facing the challenges we are today.³⁰ But, as the saying goes, better late than never.

Moving Forward: Beyond the Inner/Outer Dualism³¹

The “inner/outer” dualism in Anabaptist theology and practice has a wide variety of permutations that can take the form of either spirituality versus ethics, or pietism versus fundamentalism, or Spirit versus Jesus. In all of these, Christianity is divided into an either/or. Either it is about one’s internal transformation or it is about following Jesus; either it is about spirituality or it is about ethics; either it is about experiences or it is about dogmatic correctness.³² Now, perhaps there was, and might still be, a time necessitating extreme emphasis on one end of this dualism, but I do not admit that a choice must be made between either side. There simply is not an either/or.

I have tried to show that the Holy Spirit is active in enabling and guiding a Christian in the so-called external sphere, while noting the corollary: Jesus is just as important in effecting one’s inner transformation. And, as more commonly assumed, the Holy Spirit is active in regeneration and Jesus is important in demonstrating Christian behavior. Yes, we inevitably will continue to speak of inner transformation and external evidences as logically, and perhaps even chronologically, discrete events, but it seems that we should do so only tentatively and provisionally, for these are separated only at our peril. This conclusion is not merely theoretical, for it has strong ethical ramifications that go right to the heart of the problem with *The Anabaptist Vision*.

Essentially, Dintaman’s criticism of *The Anabaptist Vision* is that it

has become merely a form of ethical reductionism, and I think he is right on this. *The Vision* ends up being concerned only with behavioral aspects of discipleship, especially following Jesus' ethic of love and nonresistance. To get beyond this problem it is not enough to limit the discussion to a personal relationship with the crucified and risen Jesus.³³ We must broaden our theological lens to allow the role of the Holy Spirit to come into view. We must see how our own striving is not enough, how the Holy Spirit proclaims the gospel of grace to us, strengthens those who are timid and weak, and is actively working to bring about God's reign of peace. In short, we must see that all our striving to imitate Christ is simply not merely *our* striving, and any success in doing so is not merely *our* success; and that we are now even in a position to acknowledge the task of imitating Christ is not merely a product of *our* collective wisdom or foresight. Is this an internal or an external matter? It seems both internal and external: it is about spirituality but also about ethics. And, as we have seen in the resources, it is about the intricate, indissoluble relationship between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Mennonite discipleship — and its attendant pacifism — is historically and theologically rooted deeply in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. But, Mennonite discipleship is also rooted in a rich polyphonic theological tradition that contextualizes and supplements this foundation. It is my hope that we can begin to rediscover these other elements of our tradition. Who knows, perhaps we might discover we are not so impoverished after all.

Notes

¹ Unfortunately, these claims already exhibit a flawed attempt, for to truly address the issue a full Trinitarian context is necessary. Within this limited context, I will attempt only to provide suggestive comments on the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Note that I include pacifism when I refer to discipleship or imitation of Christ.

² See Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1944).

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ See Albert N. Keim's excellent account of the occasionally tempestuous relationship between Bender and Yoder in his biography of Bender, *Harold S. Bender, 1897-1962* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1998), 450-71.

⁶ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

⁷ See for example Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*

(Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); and J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁸ Stephen F. Dintaman, "The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10.2 (Spring 1992): 205-208.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

¹¹ See Stephen F. Dintaman, "Reading the Reactions to 'The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision,'" *Conrad Grebel Review* 13.1 (Winter 1995): 2-10; and J. Lorne Peachey, "Few Articles Rival This One: Responses to Dintaman in the *Gospel Herald*," *Conrad Grebel Review* 13.1 (Winter 1995): 10-14. Hauerwas criticizes Dintaman for leaning too close to pietism, a direction that will, in Hauerwas's estimation, undermine the practices that are the core of Anabaptism. See "Whose Church? Which Future? Wither the Anabaptist Vision?" in *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 74-75.

¹² See A. James Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2001), 248.

¹³ Cornelius J. Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism: Classic Devotional Resources* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1995).

¹⁴ Arnold Snyder, "Reflections on Mennonite Uses of Anabaptist History," *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types*, ed. J. R. Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Akron, PA: MCC Peace Office, 1991), 85.

¹⁵ Reimer, *Mennonites and Classical Theology*, 271.

¹⁶ Although I will employ this term for now, I find it problematic. Later in this paper I will outline why it has proven problematic.

¹⁷ As indicated by the numerous contributions cited above, there are many ways to address Anabaptist spirituality. By focusing on the role of the Holy Spirit, I do not mean to preclude these other efforts but to supplement them by addressing a disconcerting lacuna in theological reflection.

¹⁸ Although I take the easy path in this context, much is to be gleaned from other more equivocal sources as well. It will just take a bit more work.

¹⁹ Matt. 5:38-48.

²⁰ Isaiah 2:4 (NRSV).

²¹ Gal. 5:22. In the ensuing verses, Paul also states that those who belong to Jesus Christ are the same who live by and are guided by the Spirit (Gal. 5:24-25).

²² 1 Cor. 12:3.

²³ John 16:13-14. Here I would begin to articulate Jesus' own acknowledgement of the importance of the Holy Spirit for discipleship.

²⁴ Romans 14:17.

²⁵ Isaiah 32:14-17 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, 52.

²⁷ Dirk Philips, "The New Birth." Cited in Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, 58-59.

²⁸ Cited in Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, 83. For an excellent summary of Marpeck's contribution to this discussion, see C. Arnold Snyder, "An Anabaptist Vision for Peace: Spirituality and Peace in Pilgram Marpeck," *Conrad Grebel Review* 10.2 (Spring 1992):187-203.

²⁹ Cited in Dyck, *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism*, 75.

³⁰ In this connection, I am surprised that Guy Hersberger's *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* does not receive attention, for he clearly articulates the need for a renewed vitality in the spiritual life of twentieth-century Mennonites, and he instructively points to the early Anabaptists for this reason. Hersberger fleshes out many things that Bender's *Vision* presumes or ignores, and it is too bad that Hersberger's work has fallen out of circulation. See Guy Franklin Hersberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), 255-60.

³¹ Consider also the individual/community and the Church/world dualisms.

³² Even Hauerwas, with his strong emphasis on practice, seems inadvertently to accept this dualism in his response to Dintaman's critique of *The Anabaptist Vision*.

³³ This is not all that Dintaman recommends, but it seems to be the central idea he wishes to elevate. See Dintaman, "Spiritual Poverty," 206.
