

Evaluating the Shifting Views of Anabaptism

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The subject before us, evaluating the shifting views of Anabaptism, will only be to stimulate our awareness rather than to be a thorough treatment, I'm not prepared to trace all of the developments or all the expressions but to give us a basic idea of what is happening.

Everyone including groups need to have roots and a sense of belonging, somehow people, groups need to have a sense of support from the past in an effort to secure the present and this underlying demand at times calls people or even groups to set up a false structure, a false view of the past in order to somehow justify the present.

Even nations do this.

Take for example the communists when they took over Russia's one of the first things they did was to rewrite Russia's history.

And presently we have forces, subtle forces rewriting the US history and that is a subject in itself.

And churches do this too at times to somehow justify the present and we want to take a look at this although the subject tonight is somewhat of an overview.

The question could be: Who are shifting?

And I think that we'll become somewhat self evident as we move on.

Now it is important as we look at something that has shifted that we understand first of all where it should be if it had not shifted and that is where I would like to start, the historic view of Anabaptism.

We often think of H S Bender whenever we think of this and some of the things we say will reflect his view and work and I believe that to a large degree his work represents the historic view of Anabaptism and how we view it.

Now maybe just a little history before we actually look at the position.

We remember that how in the 1500s the Roman Catholic Church was the dominant force and Martin Luther challenged this dominance and broke away from the Roman Catholic Church and we have what is known as the Protestant movement.

Zwingli joined the effort shortly or it leased became another phase of it and so Zwingli had few young men who were moving with him who finally decided that he was not going far enough, in fact Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli eventually did not do all that they were saying at the first. And so they left the Protestant movement and start their own, Conrad Grebel being one as well as some others, and so we have the Anabaptist movement.

Now one thing I would like to clarify and that is the view H S Bender would set forth what I said there, except that we do feel that some of the older views would hold, some of the older historians prior to this who wrote in the 1930s and 40s, would have felt that there were Anabaptists or people holding the true faith in Canton Berne and a few of the other cantons in Switzerland and simply the faith was being preserved in somewhat of a quiet way on the part of some of the common people. I believe that is also right and as the leaders, those from Zürich who more or less stepped forward and into the public arena took their place and gave leadership and so there were members in some of those other Cantons who also broke out in a flame.

Well that is what happened in the 1500s and we are direct descendants of that, our background is Swiss Brethren, actually the name Mennonite comes from the Dutch Mennonites, really truly our background is Swiss Brethren and our ancestry came from Switzerland, South Germany and the Palatinates.

And then of course in Holland, the Netherlands, you had a movement which later Menno Simons got involved in and became somewhat the leader, the two groups found each other and then related somewhat, the Dutch Mennonites being especially known for helping the Swiss brethren who were being persecuted to go to America and that gives us our background in a very quick way.

Now the historic view of the Anabaptists in a little broader sense.

I would like to look first of all in to the reformers. The reformers would Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and suchlike.

Now how do we view the Anabaptists in relation to them?

Well I agree with Harold Bender when he says that they were the culmination, the Anabaptist were culmination of the Reformation, they were the fulfilment of the original idea that Martin Luther and Zwingli held, they were the fulfilment of that.

The Protestant reformers were headed in the right direction at the first but they surrendered their original purpose of an earnest Christianity and abandoned their intention.

The Anabaptist in contrast retained the original vision of Luther and Zwingli and enlarged it, gave it body and form and set out to achieve it in actual experience at any cost. At any cost!

Of course the Anabaptist carried the original vision of the reformers all the way back to the new testament, rooted in itself in the scriptures and gave practical expression to it and Martin Luther and Zwingli fell short of that and so the Anabaptists in relation to the reformers well they simply did what the reformers had started out to do, they were the culmination of their interests and efforts.

Another question that would be good to raise at the out start;

How do we view Anabaptists in relation to present-day Mennonites?

I believe there is a historical line from these Anabaptists back in the 1500s down into Switzerland, South Germany, Austria and eventually Holland, throughout the 16th century and that has continued down to the present-day in the Mennonite church here in America and many of our last names can go right back to those connections and it would be interesting to be able to have time to trace that, but that connection can be maintained.

Mennonites stand as the descendants of these early forefathers, Anabaptist forefathers of the Reformation.

Now just another view as relates to Anabaptism is in regard to their central teachings.

Bender of course would say that they believed in discipleship and I have not been able to find any term that better clarifies and sets that forth, I think he is right they believed in discipleship, a transformation of the entire way of life of the individual and of the society of the believers so that it should be fashioned after the teaching and example of Christ.

That is discipleship.

In other words the Anabaptists accepted Jesus as the norm for all behaviour and followed that norm. If you want to know how to behave, look at Jesus and do it. And it was that simple, it really wasn't complicated.

They believed that discipleship and a transformed life produced a new concept of church which had four distinctions.

- 1]. Voluntary membership based on conversion.
- 2]. A church that was separated from the world.
- 3]. A church that would face persecution and suffering.
- 4]. They also believed in practical love and brotherhood.

I suppose when it comes to this thing of brotherhood, that is so much a part of us, that we hardly realise that it is not what most people know church to be.

And it is good for us to just think about that.

I know a young man attended one of our congregations, now a member in our group, maybe 10 or 12 years ago he began attending and he said: The thing that he impresses me is that where I was going to church was a standard Protestant church, it was not something out of the left-field, he said when we go to church on Sunday morning we sit down beside somebody I don't know and as soon as the service is over we leave and we don't get acquainted.

And he said it is such a contrast to what you have, you come, you know everybody in the congregation, you don't only know them, you know what they work at and you likely know if they took a trip this week or

if they didn't and you would know if they were sick not, you know a lot about them - that's brotherhood.

And we take it for granted but it is a foreign thing the most churches, a foreign thing.

They, the Anabaptists, believe in nonresistance applied to all human relationships and that involves a complete abandonment of all warfare, strife, violence and the taking of human life.

Bender summarised it this way and I quote: "Christianity is the transformation of all life through discipleship and the church as the instrument through which the fullness of the Christian life is expressed."

There it is, follow Jesus, just do what He says and it and then you are in His body the Church, that summarises the Anabaptist view and our view.

And again it is in contrast to what we have as a church, it is foreign to most churches.

Now there is a new view of Anabaptism around.

And I must admit that when I got done studying this there is one verse that came to my mind in Proverbs, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction. Proverbs 1:7.

And I think as we move through this you will see how that verse fits, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

There is a new view of Anabaptism and I would say this began to come into focus in the mid 1950s and 60s and it really accelerated in the late 70s and 80s.

Stated very simply historians have completely dismantled a good deal of what I have just said is the historic view, they have just dismantled it and say it isn't that way.

I don't know how many of you are familiar, I'm not sure if I would recommend buying it necessarily but I guess if you enjoy history and you understand what's going on there is a place for it, but of the Mennonite encyclopedia there were four volumes and Harold Bender was one of the editors and that was a valuable piece of work.

Now recently they have come out with Volume 5 and I would say that, and it is we are going to talk about next, I would say that if there is any one book that represents and expresses these ideas it is found in that volume and it is really, I don't know what words to use to describe it, it is pathetic I guess is one word but tragic maybe that is not even heavy enough, but it is a shame that man would do that.

I have actually come to the conclusion that there comes a point in apostasy where God helps it along and I believe that we see presently in some of the things that we are going to talk about a supernatural force that is giving men over to their own delusions as a result of their choosing the wrong.

And I know we had a field man that used to come to our place regularly, he was a Baptist, and he and I got to discussing the larger Mennonite church one day and he in disgust, a Baptist man, he did not claim to be plain at all or part of a group that believes in nonresistance, but he was utterly disgusted with the things that he was reading in the Mennonite church papers.

Now maybe something else, we have a younger group here and I'm constantly aware that some of us that lived through some of those times take for granted some things that maybe we should not but I'm sure we are well aware that there is a large body of Mennonites in our country, up to 300,000, I suppose maybe more by now, and the groups that we relate to and exchange pulpits with would only represents about maybe four or five or six and if you would take some men that are close to us and maybe we don't even work with you could force it to 7000.

So just remember when I say the Mennonite church I'm talking about something that is quite big out there in contrast to us that are quite small, we are representing a mere fraction and what I would consider a remnant and one thing we want to be clear tonight is that we represent what the church once stood for, we do that and we want to keep that clear.

Now getting into this new view, remember they are simply dismantling all I have said here a while ago, but what Harold Bender says is a good view of Anabaptism.

Historians began a study of Anabaptist history more in the 1960s and 70s, historians began to look at the Anabaptist more from a cultural and social platform rather than a theological and confessional standpoint which is what they did earlier.

Now at the moment that they began to look at the Mennonites from a cultural and a social standpoint immediately they had access to other non-Mennonite writings because non-Mennonite writers had studied the Mennonites that way for many, many years but the Mennonites never studied themselves from that vantage point because they were not concerned, they did not look at their practice as a culture or from the standpoint of merely the result of cultural forces, but they saw yes a culture within a culture yes, but a culture that had grown out of Scriptures and so it had a right to exist.

And so they studied the calls from Scriptures.

But now they, the current historians, study from a different viewpoint not so much from the scriptures but what were the social forces going on in the world that would produce a thing like this.

And then of course they had non-Mennonite writers to turn to for help and that also helped to speed the process that we are looking at.

We can summarise the work of historians maybe under two ideas;

One is that the Anabaptists/Anabaptism back in the 1500s and 1600s did not have its source in one common source but rather they had a multiplicity of beginnings and as a result they say, and since that is true, then you are not able to find what is considered a normative Anabaptism.

Now get that, that is saying some other words.

Harold Bender says as we say and other historians of the old school would say that there was a propelling force present that produced a movement.

They say, No, there was no such thing, over here was an Anabaptist with some oddities and over here were some with some oddities and

who is to say this one was really the true? You can't do that, you have to take them all together and mix them in, get them all mixed together and then whatever that averages is the norm.

You cannot take something and say that it is all, here it is.

Well I think you can see immediately what is happening - it becomes impossible to identify a normal movement and so this view simply says you have nothing to write about hardly and of course that leads to pluralism and that is how they viewed it, that there was no common unity in Anabaptism.

The new view says that it was quite a pluralistic movement with a number of different ideas, they say that many of the Anabaptists did not reject, and listen to this; they are saying that you will come to find out that many of the Anabaptists did not reject the idea of a state church.

Is that true? Partly, the halfway Anabaptists didn't but the true Anabaptists never considered them Anabaptists. We have to keep that clear.

They also say that at first the Anabaptist had attempted to persuade the civil authorities to carry out reforms and when they couldn't get governments to budge it is then that they came forward and started to have separation of church and state and all of that.

Well that is not the way I understand history at all!

They also say that the early Anabaptists did not uniformly reject the use of the sword and violence.

Is that true? Is there any group that you can think of, could someone say, is there any group you can think of that went under the name Anabaptist that carried the sword?

Yes, Right, the Munsterites.

But how did the mainline Anabaptists look at the Munsterites?

They had nothing to do with them, in fact it was the destruction of the Munsterites that smote the conscience of Menno Simons so badly that it was the thing that finally caused him to leave the Catholic Church and give leadership to the new movement.

And yet they say, I'm going to read a paragraph here that will make your ears tingle, so while it is true that some who went by the name of

the Anabaptist carried swords the mainline Anabaptists never consented to them

So this is their conclusion, now listen to this:

"Anabaptism was not what we thought, our heroes had clay feet. We can no longer copy or recover the movement from an earlier type. Bender's view was too nice (and this is a quote too) almost too sweet despite its cross theology and bitter Christ, so now the term Anabaptism as used today does not imply uniformity but when we use the term Anabaptism it is plurality."

Now here are some more things that they say and listen to what they say:

"The southern German and the Austrian Anabaptism was a deluded form of the Rhineland mysticism."

Here is another one:

"Social unrest and the ideas of visions of Melchior Hofmann put their stamp on the Netherlands Anabaptism."

There is a measure of truth to that but again Menno Simons and the Phillips brothers distanced themselves from Hoffman and they were the ones that gave leadership to the Netherlands.

"Now Anabaptists must now therefore be seen as an integral part of the larger phenomenon of the religious social dissent in the 16th century."

Isn't that interesting?

Now just noticing a few things here yet, I'm reading out of Volume 5 (Mennonite encyclopedia).

"Scholars have now rehabilitated Melchior Hofmann (I didn't know you could do that to a dead person but they did) and they are now calling him a bona fide Anabaptist."

And that would make men like some of the Phillips brothers roll over in their grave.

"And they say he was the prime influence and the one who gave it cohesion."

The historians always gave that credit to Menno Simons.

"Some have now said that some revisionists have re-examined the Anabaptists of Munster, the Munsterites, viewing it (the movement) as theologically viable...." And so forth

I'm not sure what to leave off and what to read here but it goes on to say that they have restudied Anabaptist nonresistance and they found out in order to be fair you are also going to have to study the ones that followed non-resistance and it goes on but here is one:

"That the Anabaptists have actually grown out of the mediaeval era and are simply part of the total reaction of what was happening in that era and that is all it is."

Now we have traced the shift in the view of history but there also has been a shift that occurred in the theology as well.

Take for example the modern Mennonites, they still talk about nonresistance and they still talk about separation, they still use the terms of Anabaptism but they have a different meaning.

Take for example nonresistance, this is what it means now; "Embodying peace means being respectful and defenceless in our relationships. Nonresistance means allowing others to believe differently than what we do."

Now where this that get you to? A pluralistic society again.

Here is another one, a quote on nonresistance, this person says:

"Now we should not take our peace stance and worship it. He says, Do we use our peace theology as a trump card with others? Does it open us up to others or does it narrow us down?"

You see what love and nonresistance is doing?

It is taking the truth out of it and it is simply saying that to love everybody that is non-resistance and that is not scriptural nonresistance at all.

When it comes to separation one wrote this way:

"We can't always be over against society."

Here is another quote he says: "An idolatry of old and ancient texts in faith is unfaithful to God."

In other words he is saying for us to take what the Anabaptists wrote and say this helps us to understand the Bible as to where we stand, that is worshipping men's writings and that is unfaithful to God.

And it is all part of the corrupting.

And here is one that is maybe the worst of all:

"It is most helpful to focus on what is good rather than what is the truth. Our mandate is to witness not to convert."

And new concepts of separation, this list could go on, the view of church authority, leadership authority, leadership of women, the list could go on and on and adds to their global perspective.

It is something rather new for me to have even bumped into, and I'm not sure that I understand all where it will take that and I don't think they do either, but the idea is that we have to see our place in the total global world and its involvements.

Now in order to keep it simple so that we don't get confused I would like to look next at a few things in evaluating the shift.

Just what is it about, what is happening?

First of all the new view of Anabaptism imbibes the relativism that has permeated society.

Now I just had passed across my desk today the magazine of the Fellowship of Concerned Mennonites of Virginia, where there are even some Liberal Mennonites who are having some concerns about how far things have gone.

And of course one of the things that is happening right now is the Old Mennonite church is trying to join with the New Mennonite church.

Maybe again you need to have to know your history to have that all make sense, but all our roots have been in the Old Mennonite church, like the Lancaster Conference, the Virginia Conference, it is all the various Conferences.

Well the New Mennonite church happened in 1848, that was when John Oberholtzer came out and started a church where you could have life insurance and just do pretty well what you wanted to, and he made this statement back in the 1800s he said that: "The day will come when the Old Mennonite church and the New Mennonite church will unite and it will be on our terms!"

Liberal terms, well that is about to happen, it is just about ready to happen.

They have appointed a committee to form a new Confession of Faith and whoever this writer was in that paper from George Brunk pointed out that this new Confession of Faith is not acknowledging the Bible as the Word of God any more.

So we have now the new view of Anabaptism, the new Mennonites they have absorbed the relativism of society.

In fact one writer put it this way: "When we dialogue with other peoples we should do so without absolutism."

What does he mean?

Well they don't approach each other on the basis that this is right or wrong and therefore I judge you whether you embrace the right and reject the wrong, there is no such thing as right or wrong.

That's the bottom line and of course that is now the kind of people that are now viewing, analyzing and writing this history.

What is the good and what is the truth?

He says and I quoted that here a while ago: "That we should focus on what is the good rather than on what is the truth."

Well I don't know, some people's brain must be made different, I cannot conceive how you can separate the good from the truth, if something is truth it is good and if it is good it is truth and I don't know how you can separate them? But you understand what is happening, they are leaving the person to decide what is good and there is no absolutism, there is nothing final, not even the Bible!

Now something else this new view of Anabaptism fails to reckon with is the Kingdom of God and the grace of God on earth.

They study Anabaptism from a social and cultural standpoint rather than from a Biblicist standpoint.

In other words they come from the viewpoint, just as I read, they say that this certain element of Anabaptism was the result of a mysticism that was in the whole country of that era and that it is simply a product of that mysticism.

Is that what Anabaptism is? Simply the product of a society about them?

Well that is not the view that Bender sets forth and it is not the view that we hold.

We believe that the Anabaptists were a result of a supernatural work of God that was happening here on earth and sure, some things were happening that were hard to explain but they were happening, and you cannot analyse it by looking and studying it as a science because it is a product of truth, it is the product of right, it is the work of God, and so they failed to see that.

They only see the cause and effect of the social and cultural forces that are happening in a given area or even global, that is all they see and that is how they look at Anabaptism.

And we don't look at it like that, we see this as having been something that God has provided, it was a work that God was doing, men were responding to God and there was a work happening that you cannot explain by human studies because of its connection to truth.

It is like a number of years ago some Protestant person was doing a study as to where the Christian Textbook movement began, he was aware of all the fundamental publishers out there, but where did this all begin? In our day this is, and he began studying it and studying it and after a bit he realised that there was something in the hills of Kentucky where this thing all was triggered and so he finally came there to Rod and Staff and he said: Now so here is where it all began!

And the brethren looked at him and said, What do you mean?

He said: I studied the thing and it was the efforts of Mennonites to produce literature that provoked other fundamental groups to provide textbooks.

And one brother said, Well, how could that be when we are just farmers?

He said, Well it is your connection to truth, it is your connection to truth.

And we don't boast in that but the point is that it is the power of God and that is how we view Anabaptism, but they simply looked at it as cultural, they look at us and say we are just the remains of some hangovers of German culture and so forth and that is all that they see, they don't see the connection to truth, they don't see the power of God, they don't see the grace of God that is at work.

The new view of Anabaptism provides a support system for the apostasy of the larger body of the Mennonite church.

It makes one comfortable in what are you doing.

If the Anabaptists were a conglomeration of a lot of ideas so that you could really not identify any thing and if the Anabaptist movement allowed everybody with all his ideas in well then we are right to do it too, as are those people down the street are that are kind of exclusive, they are off the track, they are off in left field.

And so if they could interpret the past to be like they are today it helps them to be comfortable today and so the new view of Anabaptism provides a support system for the apostasy of the larger body of the Mennonite church.

Another thing is that the new view of Anabaptism fails to identify the process of the crystallising of views in the early days and the consequential compelling force that pushed the movement across Europe into America and spanning centuries of time even coming to ourselves, they failed to see that.

It is true that in part that there were some odd people involved in the founding of the Anabaptist movement, like Melchior Hofmann, he had visions and dreams and thought Jesus was going to come I think it was in 1523 I believe was the date, and it is true that he is the one that set the spark that produced the Holland Mennonites (Netherlands) in fact

the Phillips brothers were his students and followers for a while but the day finally came that he made some prophecies that never happened and they said, Well a Prophet is always right.

And they began to think about what he was saying and began to look into the Word of God on their own right and as a result they finally distanced themselves from him. And yes, it is true he can be credited in part in helping to start the movement in Holland, but there was a sifting process, there was a process of crystallising and then finding their way but finally when it is all finished there was a movement that finally had a body and a force that has propelled down to our time.

Now if we have a movement here and a movement there and a movement here and they all carry the same name and then this one died out and this one didn't and this one that burst out and lasted for centuries wouldn't you give credit to the one that lasted?

Would you not say that must have been the normal, that must have been the real thing?

But they failed to do that, they failed to sort, instead they will take this little thing over here, and this little thing over there and try to give it all equal rights and if you're going to say that nonresistance is Anabaptist then you are also going to have to say that fighting is because.....whatever.

And I don't know how some men's minds work but mine can't go down that track, it does not make sense but it will when you consider the delusion that goes along with apostasy and then it makes sense. Then it makes sense

But when I think that there was a movement in Switzerland, there was a movement in Holland and those movements found each other, so much so that eventually we even took the Mennonite name and finally there was a force growing from Switzerland and southern Germany that finally just sprung across Europe and then put itself into America and we stand here today representing that very thing! And then to say that there is nothing normal and that there is nothing that you can identify?

I don't know, I cannot make sense out of that.

But it simply fails to understand what was happening and the supernatural touch of God that was at work.

Another thing is the new view of Anabaptism pursues faulty methods of research.

It fails to identify what survived and what endured.

It fails to measure the fragmented and the fringes in contrast to the core that did endure, it fails to sort that and to discern that difference.

In every case where you have a new movement you're going to have some fragmenting and some fringe elements but you need to understand that what endured is finally what holds.

You know sometimes, I'm just old enough to remember them, the church struggles and I was a young man you know at the time when some things were going on and I often tell my children; When ever there is a tussle somewhere always remember that often the fuss is not really revealing what is happening. Often the real issues are not on the table, often.

And so we heard things like these people don't do mission work, they don't do this, they don't do that.

All right, give it 25 to 30 years now what are we going to believe?

It is what has held out, it is what has borne the right kind of fruit you see.

And there is something that is somewhat startling as I get older, we are now 25 years old as a group (Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite church) 25 years is hardly long enough to prove everything yet, and that is sobering, but if we are going to do research certainly we ought to be able to do some of that kind of sorting and to realise that out here was a fringe, out here was a fragment, here was another group but this thing finally carried the day and this thing did bear fruit in harmony with what they said and the rest did not make it.

Does that not say something?

And I think modern research fails to reckon with that.

Another thing is and possibly the greatest thing is this: They do not start with truth, they don't start there.

You see Bender says that here is Anabaptism and here is the truth, I can identify which is right out here because I take the truth and I'll walk around here and hold this up to it, No that doesn't pass, and come over here and hold this, O, that doesn't fit, but here is one that does.

And he was able to identify the core because he started with truth.

But if you are not going to start with truth, if you are going to start with all the social forces that were over here and all the social forces over here and all the social forces over there and you are going to try and decide what produced each of these and why they exist then they each have equal rights and equal place and they are just equally valid.

And that is exactly what modern researchers are doing!

I told my wife when I finished studying that day: I'm mad, I'm mad that men will distort things like they are distorting them today and printing it as though it is true!

Now I suppose, I hope it is a holy madness but it certainly is not right, it is disgusting!

And I come back to the verse again where it says: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

And I tell you that this thing, if anything that the Lord spoke to me about it is this: If you tamper with refusing truth then God will determine where your delusion is and God will determine the end of your course.

And there is a delusion afloat today and I think the challenge to you as teachers is this;

You are apt to reach for books and you are apt to do this and to do that and just remember some of the books that are coming off Mennonite presses today are filled with the things that we are looking at tonight and so you could read some strange stuff and so always be ready to discern that.

In fact even H A Bender, J C Wenger and some of those were not quite fair, were not quite fair.

I remember as a young man the confusion that it brought to me to pick up a book, I think it was by J C Wenger where he gave Mennonite history and gave it much like we said is the historic view, I remember looking at pictures of Mennonites, and I would look at pictures of Mennonites and say: Well there is one that looks about like us, but here's another one and he is a Mennonite preacher but he don't look like a Mennonite, I don't understand what that kind Mennonite is.

I remember as a young person that was confusing, it did not make sense, but you know as I became more acquainted with history I realised what was happening.

They would show pictures of Dutch Mennonites in the late 1600s and the early 1700s.

All right, who can tell me what was wrong with that?

What's wrong with that? Someone say...

That is right!

They had already departed, that's right. The Holland Mennonites only lasted about 100 years and so they were already liberalised but there they were showing liberal men as though they were Mennonites.

A bit misleading wasn't it?

And so let's be careful when we pick up the writings of men and realise that we have to take the whole picture into consideration.

May the Lord help us to be discerning and to be a people that love the truth and love finally what God is doing in our day

Shall we kneel for prayer.