Following the Holy Spirit

Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Mission in Postmodern Britain

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Introduction

The early Anabaptists of the sixteenth century focused on living as disciples. This meant aiming to be salt and light and sharing their faith, while avoiding capture by persecutors. Most of their leaders were martyred, yet the movement grew dramatically. Their approach has much to say to twenty-first-century disciples seeking to go where the Spirit leads, and thus it is helpful to discern the key elements of the theology implicit in their actions. In particular, their approach emphasized discipleship and humility, both of which are very appropriate for demonstrating and communicating the gospel authentically in a postmodern and post-Christendom culture.

At the opening of the twenty-first century, there is a continuing need to re-conceptualize mission in changing circumstances. While the experience of the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century may seem remote from the pressures of postmodernism, pluralism, globalization, and reactions against the traditional alliance of church and state in the West, this study seeks to identify some elements of an Anabaptist perspective that are of great assistance for Christians today.

After reviewing some key questions regarding mission for the contemporary British church—which is my own context—I propose examining a limited but, I believe, representative range of Anabaptist writings, to identify three inspirational features from Anabaptism. Each of the three is dependent on the Holy Spirit's work both in individual believers and in the congregation, the corporate embodiment of the Spirit in the world. First is the motivation for mission, which is relevant but not unique to an Anabaptist understanding.

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Second, we can apply today the Anabaptists' relational evangelism among their social networks. Third and most significant, however, are the theological implications of Anabaptist discipleship. Their emphasis on separation from the world and their approach to truth provide a philosophical and theological foundation for Christian proclamation in a postmodern environment that is generally hostile to Christianity. For considerations of space, this study is limited to the contemporary twenty-first-century British church and the theology of the Anabaptists in the early years—1525 to 1575.

The Contemporary British Context

I begin with a brief survey of the contemporary British context, where the dominant approach is postmodern and is influenced by the number and variety of other religions as well as society's rejection of Christendom. Though spirituality runs through much of it, British contemporary society is a context where making truth claims in words alone fails to communicate truth.

There is no such thing as *the* contemporary British culture; rather, there are many overlapping cultures. Among them, certain key themes—challenges for Christian mission—can be identified. It is often said (sometimes with some wistfulness or lament) that we live in a postmodern culture where the guiding principle is that there are no guiding principles, all truth claims are suspect, and the only absolute is that all things are relative. Postmodernity is more than a philosophical approach: Derrida's deconstruction of all motives, and the philosophies of existentialists and other twentieth-century schools, provided a theoretical justification for extraordinary innovations in the arts and other fields. Postmodernity is often characterized as a reaction to modernity, the intellectual framework resulting from the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, based on a scientific worldview and an assumption that reason will lead to such truth as can be found.[1]

Whatever its precise meaning, "postmodern" describes the approach of most younger people in our mission field—the neighbors, colleagues, and family members on our doorstep—to life and truth. In avoiding giving a definition of "postmodern," I am conscious that, in Kraus's words, "each analyst has his or

1 J. Andrew Kirk argues, after a careful analysis of the inadequacy of the postmodern theory, that all beliefs are equally valid, that "the unpalatable truth is that postmodernity, if consistent to its own ideals, is pure escapism. Its deconstruction is reaction (and reactionary), for it has no grounds for reconstruction." "Christian Mission and the Epistemological Crisis of the West," in *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, eds. J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 171.

her own definition."[2] The challenge to the church's mission can be summed up in the words of art critic John Berger: "Never again will a single story be told as though it is the only one."[3] The church's voice is only one amid a cacophony, and continuing to address the old rationalist arguments with the same modernist proclamation will not cross the boundary or frontier.[4]

Linked with this challenge is the inescapable fact of pluralism: the church is one of many religions and philosophies. In my home town of Wolverhampton, Hindu and Sikh temples stand near mosques and Buddhist centers as well as church buildings. So we cannot avoid the need for theological understanding of the nature of divine revelation in the context of other religions. The pioneering missionaries in India were surprised there was no speedy response to proclamation of the gospel and that elements of it were received in very different ways than the verbal transmission (e.g., the resurrection was unremarkable when understood as reincarnation by Hindus).[5] Similar responses are experienced in Britain, where many neighbors follow other religions or may seem "a-religious" because they do not practice any particular, easily recognized religion but nevertheless have a postmodernist approach that is spiritual and able to encompass any form of spirituality or belief. Sometimes even the consumerism that dominates so many has a driving spiritual imperative that Christians might condemn as "idolatrous" but should still be recognized as spiritual.[6] Though David Smith has many valuable insights in his book *Mission after Christendom*, he seems to minimize the spirituality inherent in postmodernism, even as expressed by academics and philosophers. Increasingly, British Christians find devoted and "spiritual" people among their neighbors and contacts, and so proclaiming truth in words alone will not suffice.

As a consequence of "Christendom"—the mutual reliance of church and state—the church promoted the gospel with ungodly state power and lost its

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2 C. Norman Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel? Christian Mission in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 22.

3 Quoted in David Smith, *Mission after Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002), 63.

4 Anabaptist missiologist Wilbert Shenk uses the phrase "crossing frontiers" to describe mission. See Wilbert Shenk, "Crossing Frontiers," in *Anabaptism and Mission*, eds. Wilbert R. Shenk and Peter F. Penner (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2007), 41.

5 Smith, *Mission after Christendom*, 54–56.

6 This is a huge field worthy of detailed study, as is the related question of businesses increasingly using Eastern meditation techniques or other apparently neutral, but essentially spiritual, practices to help well-being and productivity among the workforce.

focus on mission, devoting most of its energies to maintenance.[7] As a modern-day Anabaptist, I am disappointed that it was the general public rather than the church that rejected Christendom, but in any event, the collapse of Christendom in Britain since the Second World War has provided the opportunity to rely on the Holy Spirit rather than on human power. It has also presented the challenge of redefining a role in society. This is all the more difficult as many Christians regard the loss of "influence"—a polite way of describing power or control while avoiding the negative connotations—as a cause for regret rather than relief. Many neighbors or onlookers either identify the church with its past use of human power or scorn it as a pale shadow of its former strength. Now that Christendom is unacceptable to the vast majority in Britain and numerical decline threatens the very existence of some churches and denominations, uncertainty about the church's role in society, and its past association with worldly power, adds to the difficulties of crossing the boundary at the mission frontier.

Contemporary Mission Thinking

How has missiology responded to this context? I will briefly trace a renewed concept of mission as discipleship, which I believe is the most fruitful understanding of Holy Spirit-inspired mission.

During the twentieth century, much debate ensued from a reduction of mission—by the more "conservative" elements of the church—to evangelism (with a limited view of the content of the gospel), while many "liberals" focused on improving the condition of society. David Bosch argued persuasively for a more holistic view of mission, pointing out that "there is, in Jesus' ministry, no tension between saving from sin and saving from physical ailment, between the spiritual and the social."[8] This wider understanding of mission is attractive to those who identify with Anabaptism. It also resonates with many others, particularly those who look to Wesley for inspiration. He wrote, "The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness. 'Faith working by love' is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection."[9]

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7 Alan Kreider, "Beyond Bosch," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 29, no. 2 (April 2005): 66.

8 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 33.

9 John Wesley, *Preface to 1739 Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868), xxii.

By focusing on discipleship rather than a narrow understanding of the gospel, the apparently alternative emphases on conversion or societal change can be held together in a coherent understanding of mission. Conversion is far more than an intellectual agreement with certain basic doctrines. Neal Blough, a modern Anabaptist missiologist, argues that "a messianic ethic of discipleship can provide a holistic framework which avoids many of the false dichotomies that have been set up in relation to word and deed."[10]

Mission implies movement and change, crossing a frontier. It is often movement out of a Christian church environment into contact with communities that are geographically close rather than to another country in the traditional mission fields (e.g., in Africa, Asia, or Latin America). Andrew Kirk writes that the Good News—a message of reconciliation that overcomes cultural divides—"can only be expressed in terms of culture, and therefore has to be transposed from one culture to another in a rich variety of ways."[11] We have to cross barriers that are cultural, mental, philosophical, or psychological—rather than merely geographical—with the Good News of reconciliation, the news that each individual or distinct group can be reconciled to God and to one another.

Any definition of mission must encompass the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated, and it must relate back to the nature and mission of God. Kirk summarizes mission *as discipleship* as

> communicating the good news of Jesus and the kingdom (Acts 28:30) (evangelism), insisting on the full participation of all people in God's gifts of life and well-being (justice), providing the resources to meet people's needs (compassion) and never using lethal violence as a means of doing God's will (the practice of non-violence as a means of change).
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> The church's mission "in the way of Jesus Christ" is thus to be an instrument of God's righteousness and compassionate governance in the world.[12]

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10 Neal Blough, "Messianic Mission and Ethics: Discipleship and the Good News," in *The Transfiguration of Mission: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Foundations*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 179.

11 J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999), 75.

12 Ibid., 53. An expanded definition can be derived from Bosch's work, of course, but Kirk deals with elements missing from *Transforming Mission* and approaches the task of definition in the sort of holistic way that can be characterized as "Anabaptist," though he would not describe himself as such.

I suggest this as a working definition of mission today, with the caveat that mission theology itself is shaped by the dominant cultural forces in each historical period.[13] However, there is yet another distinctive element in mission as discipleship that is seen in Anabaptism (as well as in early Methodism and many other movements characterized by a revivalist emphasis on the Holy Spirit, though these are beyond the scope of this study). The corporate life of the church is the place where discipleship is learned and practiced. Holiness matters, and there is "no holiness but social holiness." Mission as the outflow of *corporate* discipleship has the potential to cross frontiers and transform communities in a way that individual discipleship cannot.

Inspiration from the Sixteenth Century: The Spirit's Work

As we look ahead to consider how the church should address these barriers to the communication of the gospel, it is helpful to look back and analyze how the Anabaptists faced the challenge of fulfilling the Great Commission. I will first consider how they evangelized successfully—typically with revivalist enthusiasm—in a nominally Christian society. The Spirit's work of transforming the lifestyle of a disciple was internal, but its external visibility was crucially enabled by the activity of the church. The succeeding three sections will then explore three inspirational features of the Anabaptists' missional lifestyles.

The context of the early Anabaptists was very different from our present-day context. Most people born in Western Europe considered themselves to be Christians, and there was a certain understanding of the biblical narratives among them. A Christian narrative, however superficially it may have been comprehended in some cases, provided the framework for self-understanding, whereas in the current fragmented, postmodern context there are many alternative narratives. However, the Anabaptists were conscious of being a minority, like Christians in contemporary Britain. Unless converts experienced the grace of God and were baptized, they were still part of the "world" and at risk of eternal damnation. Menno Simons wrote in 1537 a typically passionate appeal to conversion: "He will not save you nor forgive your sins nor show you His mercy and grace except according to His Word; namely, if you repent and if you believe, if you are born of Him, if you do what He has commanded and walk as He walks."[14] The Anabaptists' point of departure was "evangelical," though

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13 Wilbert Shenk, "Transforming Mission," in *Anabaptism and Mission*, eds. Wilbert R. Shenk and Peter F. Penner (Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2007), 10.

14 Simons, "The New Birth," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973), 92.

there was much in their soteriology that differed greatly from the Protestant mainstream.[15]

They met with surprising success given the fierce persecution and the general suspicion of sedition. Claus-Peter Clasen estimates that three thousand new Anabaptists arose in south and central Germany, Switzerland, and Austria every ten years from 1525 to 1618. Though this was significant growth, it was only a modest proportion of the total population of several million—less than 0.5 percent in most places where Anabaptism can be traced. Even in Augsburg, where there was a particular concentration, only 1.2 percent were Anabaptists between 1526 and 1528.[16] During those same years, Anabaptists appeared in 1,821 towns, which Clasen, generally a skeptical if not unsympathetic social historian, describes as "an enormous number indeed." Yet the significance of the movement is not measured simply in numerical advance— particularly as the call to a radical and genuine commitment is never likely to be popular—but in the example of revivalist "enthusiasm" through the activity of the Holy Spirit. Prayer was fervent and often emotional.[17] There was an eschatological excitement, though this was certainly not limited to the Anabaptists. Clasen describes somewhat critically the ecstatic experiences of some Anabaptists who "placed a stronger emphasis on the workings of the spirit than either the Lutherans or the Zwinglians did."[18] His criticism is perhaps due to his drawing on the examples of strange excesses among Spiritualists, who were not typical of all early Anabaptists: there was a wide spectrum of belief and practice.

Pilgram Marpeck's key argument with the magisterial reformers was that "in His command to baptize (Mt. 28), Jesus had in mind not only His present disciples but also all future disciples throughout the time until the end of the world, a fact which is evident when He says: 'I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"[19]

This is taken from Marpeck's "A Clear Refutation," the main target of which is the Spiritualists rather than Reformers, though it is a key to Marpeck's thought generally. The Spiritualists opposed evangelism, saying it was unneces-

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15 C. Arnold Synder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 1995), 87. Snyder makes this claim about Balthasar Hubmaier's confession of faith but says that it is typical of most Anabaptists.

16 Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525–1618* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), 26–27.

17 Ibid., 92.

18 Ibid., 121.

19 William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, eds., *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Kitchener, ON: Herald, 1978), 47.

sary because the inner light is available to all. Marpeck countered that scripture also requires an external witness to the truth.[20]

The relation of the inner and outer has been identified as a key contribution of Anabaptist-implied theology.[21] There can be no true discipleship without both the inner and outer aspects, nor true evangelism without external witness to the truth linking with an internal work of the Holy Spirit. In his 1545 letter "On the Inner Church," Marpeck explains:

> Those who are born anew in Christ, according to the inner working of the Holy Spirit, are those who are baptized with fire, who are aglow with love. Moreover, these children, born of the Spirit, see what the Father, working through Christ, does for the inner man; they, too, by co-witnessing in the Holy Spirit, immediately do likewise for the external man. Thus, the body of Christ is also built inwardly through the Holy Spirit, and externally through the co-witness of works. . . . But this church is separated from the world, for it is a witness over it. Similarly through word and work, the gospel must be preached before the coming of the Son of Man.[22]

In "Five Fruits of Repentance," a letter written five years later, Marpeck proclaims the gospel of forgiveness in terms broadly similar to that of Lutherans and Calvinists but with a crucial Anabaptist distinctive.[23] He locates salvation in the church: "Such forgiveness, however, takes place only in the fellowship of saints, which alone received such power from Christ." The church, Christ's body filled with the Spirit, is the expression of Christ's humanity in a way that an individual disciple's life cannot be.[24] Marpeck continues to expound his gospel, outlining the need to recognize one's guilt and need of grace, to be sorrowful for one's sin (not merely for the consequences), and then to determine to cease from sin and finally accept full responsibility.[25]

Conversion is both individual and in the context of the body of Christ—the true church made up of voluntary believers, not the state church of nominal Christians. Marpeck explains the work of the Holy Spirit in "Concerning the Lowliness of Christ" as follows: "Therefore, all external service of Christ . . . serves and prepares the way for the Holy Spirit. [This external service consists]

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20 Ibid., 56–57, 60.

21 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 384.

22 Klassen and Klaassen, eds., *Pilgram Marpeck*, 423.

23 Ibid., 486.

24 Blough, "Messianic Mission and Ethics," 189.

25 Klassen and Klaassen, eds., *Pilgram Marpeck*, 486–97.

of the external preaching, teaching, miracles, baptism, foot washing, the Lord's Supper, discipline, chastisement, and admonition."[26]

So the church in doing what can be seen and touched—the externals—enables the Spirit to work. However, Marpeck emphasizes that it is the Spirit's work, and "even if all service is done according to the commands of Christ, the earthly Man, the Spirit still moves in glorious liberty wherever he will."[27] He refutes both the Spiritualists who claimed the Spirit would move apart from the church and the traditionalists who argued that the Spirit is at work wherever the proper forms of "apostolic service" are observed. The inner and outer are brought together when believers follow the Spirit in faith, and "if the inner, through the Holy Spirit, does not witness to the external, through faith, everything is in vain." He then adds that Christ is "living on earth, as in heaven, in the power and clarity of the Spirit in the heart of each faithful believer."[28] This kind of holism is a helpful way of resolving the unnecessary distinction noted above between evangelism and social action.

On this foundation of dependence on the Holy Spirit's work in individual believers and in congregations, I will now consider each of the three inspirational features of the Anabaptists' perspective: (1) the motivation for mission, (2) their relational style of evangelism among their social networks, and (3) the implications of discipleship.

Inspiration from the Sixteenth Century: Motivation for Mission

I will review in this section some of the early Anabaptists' stated motivations for mission, from which two key elements emerge. First is the emphasis on the Great Commission as having continuing importance, providing a framework for mission, and second is the "enthusiasm" or inspiration of the Spirit.

In his letter "Concerning the Humanity of Christ," Marpeck cites the examples of some of the apostles of New Testament times and then applies the same to contemporary apostles:

> So also they are driven even today through the Holy Spirit as children and not as servants, who with good and true knowledge, know what their Father and Lord has in mind, viz. in such a way that they always know and are certain of the basic reason of their compulsion through the Holy Spirit.[29]

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26 Excerpted in *Anabaptism in Outline*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Waterloo, ON: Herald, 1981), 78.

27 Ibid., 79.

28 Ibid., 80.

29 Klassen and Klaassen, eds., *Pilgram Marpeck*, 512–13.

He then explains the four aspects of compulsion by the Spirit: (1) love for God; (2) giving oneself up to suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel; (3) realizing when God opens the door so that one may go in with the teaching of the gospel only where God has opened the way; and (4) speaking only as Christ did, working through the Holy Spirit.

Though there is a spiritual compulsion driving apostles, in his "Confession" Marpeck emphasizes that there must be no human compulsion in the gospel: "Here there is no coercion, but rather a voluntary spirit in Christ Jesus our Lord. Whoever does not desire this spirit let him remain outside; whoever desires it let him come and drink freely, without price."[30] The good news is so good that it needs no compulsion. This is linked to the Anabaptist insistence that obedience to Christ includes abandoning any thought of using force or compulsion. The Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed teachers could allow no such liberty. They enjoyed Christendom's symbiotic relationship with the state for mutual support: the church would validate the governing power, and the government would enforce religious orthodoxy.

The Anabaptists were also motivated by obedience to Jesus's command. There were a number of scripture books or concordances in circulation among them that set out key passages in a thematic way so the texts could be memorized for use in exhortation or perhaps as an encouragement under interrogation. One of the most quoted scriptures was the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel.[31] While many other Christians have understood it to have been relevant only to the initial audience—Jesus's twelve disciples—the Anabaptists read this as the mandate and guiding instruction to all Christians, a command they had to obey. Hubmaier quotes Mark 16:15–16 and Matthew 28:19–20 and argues,

> From these words one understands clearly and certainly that this sending of the apostles consists of three points or commands: first, preaching; second, faith; and third, outward baptism. . . . Christ sent out his disciples as God his father had sent him. . . . Likewise his disciples should now represent him henceforth during the time of his bodily absence and guarantee to all believers a sure and certain remission of their sin through him.[32]

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30 Ibid., 112–13.

31 Hans Kasdorf, "Anabaptists and the Great Commission," *Direction* 4, no. 2 (1975): 305.

32 Hubmaier, "On the Christian Baptism of Believers," *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, eds. and trans. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1989), 115–16.

Hubmaier presents the Commission as a continuing task of disciples. By contrast, "even Calvin, who did not deny the validity of the Great Commission, maintained that the propagation of the Christian faith was not under the jurisdiction of the Church, but was the duty of the 'Christian' government."[33] Littell also points to the evidence of the court records, particularly the series of questions prepared for interrogations, as evidence of the significance to the Anabaptists of the Great Commission. He summarizes the basic Anabaptist perspective: "*The Master meant it to apply to all believers at all times*."[34]

Their motivation, however, was not purely intellectual, a matter of obedience to this text. Without a sense of empowering by the Spirit, it is unlikely they would have pursued the very dangerous task of evangelism as they did. Schaufele notes that Anabaptists were commonly encouraged to "confess the Lord" but that "in many cases such an appeal was not necessary since the religious dynamic dominating the Anabaptist revival movement, which pressed for expression, automatically led the individual believers to lay missionary activity."[35] The Anabaptists on the whole were passionate in their efforts to explain the truth and experiential peace and joy of their discipleship. When prevented by imprisonment from preaching, Sattler wrote to the church at Horb, "Pray that reapers may be driven out into the harvest."[36] The Hutterite Peter Riedemann similarly wrote,

> Since, however, Christ would not send out his disciples before they had received the grace of the Holy Spirit, it is clear and manifest that he will not have this order, that is his word and signs, treated lightly and carelessly, but that they should be observed as the Spirit of Christ inspireth, and not simply as the human spirit thinketh.[37]

So it seems that two elements of their spirituality motivated the Anabaptists' sacrificial efforts in mission. First, the Great Commission was a key biblical text that was "imbibed" by frequent repetition and reference,[38] providing a

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33 Kasdorf, "Anabaptists and the Great Commission," 304.

34 Franklin H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Theology of Missions," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21, no. 1 (January 1947): 12. Emphasis original.

35 Wolfgang Schaufele, "The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36, no. 2 (April 1962): 101.

36 Sattler, "Letter to Horb," in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, ed. John H. Yoder (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973), 61. Yoder's footnote points out that "the verb 'drive' is a striking statement of the Anabaptist sense of mission" (65n30).

37 Peter Riedemann, *Confession of our Faith* (Rifton, NY: Plough, 1970), 41.

38 "When asked what compelled them to go, they answered without hesitation: the Great Commission." Hans Kasdorf, "The Anabaptist Approach to Mission," in

justification and theological framework. Second, the enthusiasm common to revival or renewal movements came from a vital personal experience of God the Holy Spirit.

Both aspects of their motivation are relevant to the contemporary church, and the Anabaptists' example is undoubtedly stirring, though the importance of baptism as part of the believer's response in the Great Commission is uncomfortable to some. However, we must recognize that neither aspect is unique to the Anabaptists.

Inspiration from the Sixteenth Century: Network Evangelism

Among the practical methods employed in mission, network or friendship evangelism has a very contemporary resonance. John Finney, for example, emphasizes the importance of friendships as the context for genuine evangelism as well as a successful method.[39] As Kraus comments, "Communication of truth is impossible apart from mutually respectful and deferential relationships."[40]

Informal evangelism seemed radically new in the sixteenth century. Unable to use the official channels of communication through the pulpit and press to any great degree, the Anabaptists relied on informal, oral communication, starting with family, colleagues, and friends.[41] Those who carried on a trade were able to contact potential converts in the normal course of business among customers, suppliers, or colleagues. Hans Hut, for example, was a bookseller who had many opportunities for travel and conversation without undue suspicion. Hans Nadler was even more typical as an illiterate evangelist, and his technique of using the Lord's Prayer as a basis for expounding the gospel was both a helpful way of communicating at the mission frontier—because of his audience's familiarity with it—and a useful mnemonic. His court testimony sets out the usual pattern of his teaching.[42] Snyder-Penner comments, "The most consistent theme running through Nadler's instruction of the Lord's Prayer is that in the past the student had prayed the prayer insincerely and

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Anabaptism and Mission, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 62.

39 John Finney, *Finding Faith Today: How Does It Happen?* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992), 36–49.

40 Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel?*, 28.

41 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 104–7.

42 Hans Nadler, "Declaration of the Needle Merchant Hans at Erlangen and the Refutation of the Articles of the Needle Merchant Hans (1529)," in *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism*, ed. C. Arnold Snyder (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2001), 139–49.

without an understanding of the demands the prayer makes on the daily life of the Christian."[43]

This emphasis continued in the Hutterite missions also: the communities that might at first have seemed to be the most closed were in fact the most organized in sending teams to work among family, trade, and friendship networks back in the localities from which they had fled to Moravia.[44]

Of particular note is the role of Anabaptist women in evangelism, which has often been overlooked by historians.[45] It is natural that the gospel, the most important good news, should be shared with those with whom we have close family or friendship bonds, and equally natural that the women (whose role was historically as homemakers) should play a significant role in such sharing. It is also easier and truer to the nature of the gospel as new creation—rather than intellectual assent to certain doctrines—to use natural day-to-day contact as the context for informal conversations, rather than trying to use formal techniques such as special evangelistic events at which the gospel is "explained." Sharing meals and gathering communities around the table were of vital importance to the Anabaptists. These communal activities remain of great significance to outreach and evangelistic activity as well as caring for practical needs (as noted above, it is best to see mission comprising both evangelism and social action). However, the Anabaptists emphasized the sharing among a separated, gathered community of believers rather than a more open, "gather*ing* community." This phrase is used by Michael Frost to emphasize his conception of church as dynamic not static if it is to be genuinely missional. He draws on Emerging Church writers to argue that developing community through shared experience does not have be static and inward looking as traditional concepts of "building" community imply.[46]

Though Anabaptists did not articulate the theology of network evangelism, it is clear from the evidence of interrogations that they were motivated by the Spirit in this activity and felt their work was effective only because of the Spirit within.

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43 Russell Snyder-Penner, "Hans Nadler's Oral Exposition of the Lord's Prayer," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 65, no. 4 (October 1991): 398.

44 Leonard Gross, "Sixteenth-Century Hutterian Mission," in *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1984), 100–104.

45 Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *The Anabaptists* (London: Routledge, 1996), 115–16.

46 Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 111.

Inspiration from the Sixteenth Century: Discipleship

The aspect of the Anabaptists' approach that is of most significance for the twenty-first-century church is discipleship. In this section, I trace briefly some understandings of Anabaptist discipleship and suggest that separation from the world through inclusion in the new creation in Christ was the core of sixteenth-century Anabaptist teaching. My conclusion is that this teaching provides a foundation for attractive holy living among postmoderns, which in turn enables the communication of unchanging biblical truths.

Whether considered a pragmatic method or a theological underpinning of their activities, discipleship was the essence of Anabaptist life.[47] If the gospel of new creation is meaningful, it will be evidenced by changed lives rather than theoretical explanation. As Menno Simons wrote,

> We do not seek salvation by works . . . for the power of faith quickens and changes them into newness of life, and they walk by the gift of grace in the Holy Spirit in the power of their new faith, according to the measure of their faith, in obedience to their God who has shown such great love.[48]

In a seminal essay, Bender identified the emphasis on discipleship as the first distinctive element of the Anabaptists' vision, followed by the nature of church as a voluntary brotherhood and an ethic of love and nonviolence.[49] There have been alternative characterizations of the defining themes of the implicit theology of Anabaptism, however, that may fit the historical evidence better. Bender's associate Robert Friedmann considered the eschatological presence of God's kingdom as an existential reality to be the underlying influence that led to their emphasis on discipleship and separation of the church from the world.[50] The so-called "Polygenesis school" identified a number of sources and diverse expressions of Anabaptism. Snyder has identified soteriology as a distinctive and defining theme.[51] Thomas Finger, in setting out his contemporary Anabaptist theology, considers discipleship inadequate because it is in danger of reducing the contribution of Anabaptism to social ethics alone. Instead, he organizes

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47 Schaufele, "Missionary Vision," 109.

48 Simons, "Confession of the Distressed Christians," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973), 504–5.

49 Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 18, no. 2 (April 1944): 67.

50 Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973), 41.

51 Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 384.

"historic and contemporary Anabaptist thought around an interpretative center: the coming of the new creation in three inseparable dimensions—personal, communal and missional."[52] My own preference is to view Anabaptist theology similarly but more simply. Anabaptism was directed by a strong sense of the new birth as part of the new creation begun in Jesus's resurrection. This is arguably closer to recorded sixteenth-century Anabaptist thought. But whichever orientation is preferred, it is clear that discipleship and separation from the world are essential to the faith of the Anabaptists and implicit in teaching and baptizing disciples so they become part of a gathered church.

Even at the height of modernism, religious lectures or evangelistic crusades were only a part of the reason individuals came to faith. In a more skeptical and relativist age, the practical outworking of a faith or philosophy is far more important. "Does it work?" is a significant pointer to whether it is true, and to many postmoderns, is a more important question than whether it is true. Sixteenth-century Anabaptists believed it was important to live as new people, part of the new creation. In the Holy Spirit, they had a different life-source from the world's, demonstrating the same holiness of life seen in Jesus. As well as individual piety and acts of charity, holiness encompassed a commitment to peacemaking and a nonviolent response to the worldly powers. Thus they emulated Jesus, restoring to mission a holistic witness to the coming kingdom. The Anabaptists emphasized not words but actions demonstrating the truth of the words, and criticized the Reformers for the gulf between their words and deeds.

It is misleading, however, to understand the Anabaptists' example merely on a pragmatic level. Behind their emphasis on actions and on obedience to the literal teaching of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels (i.e., discipleship) was an implied (and sometimes expressed) theology of separation from the world through incorporation into Christ and his new creation. This can usefully direct a contemporary mission theology into engaging with postmodern neighbors on the contemporary mission frontier, using not words alone but also actions explained in words.

Increasingly in a postmodern environment, words can be used only after the context has been established by discipleship. Andrew Lord describes Christians as "people of attractive holiness" and points out that "as people transformed by the Spirit, we cannot but be part of the mission of the Spirit."[53] The holy life

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52 Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 105–6.

53 Andrew Lord, *Spirit-Shaped Mission: A Holistic Charismatic Missiology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005; quotation from the 2012 self-published revision), 130.

needs to be visible of course, and much contemporary writing on missionary engagement urges Christians to be visible in the places where people meet and interact. Frost refers to these contexts as "third places" (first and second places being home and work).[54] It is a small further step to explore the possibilities of developing "Fresh Expressions" of church in such places.[55] Stuart Murray Williams notes that social activities in such third places were, in the past, "seen as bridges into 'proper church,' but increasingly in post-Christendom the cultural gap cannot be bridged. Groups are emerging in various places that cannot be perceived as bridges into inherited church: they are becoming church in diverse contexts."[56] In this context of attractive holy living in third places, there is either a requirement for explanation or at least a sympathetic hearing because of the Spirit's work made visible in a life of discipleship.

Christians may be misled, however, into accommodation or syncretism by this emphasis on actions for connecting with postmodern neighbors skeptical of all absolute truth claims. Worship may be so "seeker-friendly" as to be lacking in substance or passion, lest the seeker be offended. The Anabaptist corrective is twofold: first, Christocentric theology and spirituality, and second, the theological theme underlying discipleship—that new birth in Christ implies separation from the world.[57] Blough summarizes the Anabaptist approach as "missionary confrontation," or living as Jesus lived:

> Mission can and should be seen as a continuation of that which God began in the incarnation. Disciples are sent as Jesus was sent. In the power of the Holy Spirit and in the context of the new community of the church, they are sent into the world to follow the Messiah in the way of the cross.[58]

Calling for disciples to be baptized voluntarily as adults challenged the concept of the state church. Identified as dangerous rebels, the Anabaptists learned to suffer and even to embrace persecution as an inevitable consequence of godly

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54 Frost, *Exiles*, 56–63.

55 "Fresh Expressions" is a phrase developed by the Church of England and Methodist churches in the UK to describe their creative missional initiative launched in 2004: please see www.freshexpressions.org.uk. The concept of a fresh expression is a helpful shorthand for finding new ways of being church.

56 Stuart Murray, *Changing Mission: Learning from the Newer Churches* (London: Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, 2006), 67.

57 Separation from the world is identified by Goertz (*The Anabaptists*, 13) as giving the Schleitheim Articles—the first Anabaptist confession of faith—their "profound meaning and inner strength."

58 Blough, "Messianic Mission and Ethics," 180.

living (2 Tim 3:12). If the issue of separation from the world is settled in the heart of the believer, then it is possible to engage with skeptics as fellow pilgrims or learners without feeling the need to persuade them purely with words as a modernist Evangelical might. But there will be a prophetic challenge to the skeptics' lifestyle and beliefs. Above all, there will be a challenge to the dogmatic belief that there can be no absolute truth.

Anabaptists bore the pressures of persecution and often martyrdom because they believed they embodied the truth of the gospel. They considered themselves to be returning to the practice and beliefs of the early church. Yet there was humility in their approach, resulting from their spirituality and the experience of the Holy Spirit. They spoke not of "mission" but of "bearing witness" to the truth and to their own experience of Christ.[59] This work of bearing witness contrasts with the strident and confident way that the truth of Christianity has often been proclaimed at the mission frontier when Christianity was the dominant religion in the West. The contemporary context is one where "at the same time that the religious options have increased dramatically, the climate has become more hostile than ever to giving reasons for one's particular set of beliefs."[60] However, if mission is to have any meaning, the church cannot abdicate all responsibilities to proclaim truth as such.

Postmodernists may be reacting to the excesses of scientism and its consequences, but postmodernism's philosophical underpinning lies in exposing the inherent contradictions of whatever statement or work of art is considered. This in itself demonstrates that consistency of thinking seems to be a universal methodological goal. Even postmodernists "act on the basis of fundamental beliefs. . . .Of course, such knowledge may be accepted as a working hypothesis and, therefore, be corrigible; but, at the point of action, it is decisive."[61] Further, there is an implicit fundamental or universal truth in postmodernism: that there is no such thing as universal truth. Deconstruction is reactive and applied to everything except its basic premise.

How then can truth be proclaimed in the contemporary context? In the period dominated by Enlightenment rationality, Christian missions proceeded

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59 Michael Sattler set a common approach during his interrogation: "I am not sent to judge the Word of God; we are sent to bear witness of it." Quoted in John A. Wagner, *Voices of the Reformation: Contemporary Accounts of Daily Life* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2015), 117.

60 Philip Clayton, "Missiology between Monologue and Cacophany," in *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*, eds. J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 79.

61 Kirk, "Christian Mission and the Epistemological Crisis of the West," 168.

on the positivist basis that truth could be definitively known and expressed in words. The experience of missions soon demonstrated the need for cultural sensitivity and translation from one culture to another. Working in an alien culture can help us see the essence of the gospel in sharper relief. Mission theory later advocated contextualization—that the gospel needs to be expressed in forms arising from the cultural context; this is a helpful development though risks losing the essential challenge of the gospel to each and every human culture, a challenge that results from understanding the church as separate from the world—a major distinctive of Anabaptism. The contemporary church now faces a culture that disparages absolute truth claims and presents all alternative belief systems as equally valid (or invalid). Its own missionary experience also suggests that its former reliance on words to express absolute truth is inadequate to communicate across cultures. A viable alternative to positivism and relativism as a basis for understanding truth is critical realism, which acknowledges both an objective truth and the inadequacies of one's subjective perceptions or expressions of it.

Paul Hiebert argues that "critical realism is a biblical approach to knowledge," quoting 1 Corinthians 13:12.[62] He identifies the Anabaptists as critical realists:

> They affirmed that there is objective reality and objective truth (reality as God sees it—as it really is). They recognized, however, that all truth as perceived by humans is partial and has a subjective element within it. Human knowledge exists in people. Therefore it must be understood in terms of the social, cultural and historical contexts in which people live.[63]

Although they did not formulate systematic theologies, the Anabaptists had strong convictions, which they saw as applying unchanging, biblical truth to everyday situations. Their faith was not mere intellectual assent to a series of propositions but discipleship based on their experience of the Spirit of truth, who enabled them to understand and apply scripture. This made it possible to adopt a humble attitude in bearing witness to their experience of the new creation, in which "they readily admitted that their understanding of truth was partial, biased and possibly wrong."[64]

As a corrective to the danger of individualistic or even wild interpretations of scripture, Anabaptists read scripture in a Christocentric way and submitted

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62 Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), 51.

63 Ibid., 98.

64 Ibid., 100.

their individual interpretations to the congregation, a hermeneutical community.[65] This was not merely for pragmatic reasons; rather, it reflected their implied theology, which emphasized the corporate dimension of discipleship. As a result, many an Anabaptist interrogated under torture would refer constantly to scripture, often to the texts made familiar by repetition in the worshipping community and set out in the thematic concordances that circulated, with an invitation to the interrogator to prove a better understanding from scripture.[66]

Absolute truth can be known, therefore, but the expressions of it are experimental and experiential. The ultimate truth is not a proposition but a Person who stated, "I am the Way, *the Truth* and the Life . . ." (Jn 14:6, NLV, emphasis added). So truth can only be known in relationship with Christ and can only be communicated through discipleship, which in turn is to be experienced corporately, not solely on an individual basis.

Conclusion

Thus, there are three aspects of Anabaptism, arising from dependence on the Holy Spirit's work in individual believers and in congregations, that provide a basis for confidence in communicating at the contemporary mission frontier. First is the example of the Anabaptists' motivation. Second, certain of their methods are of great contemporary relevance. Third is their discipleship, embodying truth.

In twenty-first-century Britain, expounding the gospel in lectures or preaching is less valid as well as less welcome and effective than sharing stories as equals. Many contemporary writers advocate the latter approach on the basis of effectiveness or of Jesus's example.[67] Perhaps it would be more helpful for them to go further and to see, as the Anabaptists did, that dialogue is not only effective but also more faithful to a biblical understanding of the nature of mission.

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65 Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2000), 166–69.

66 Michael Sattler is one of the earliest and best-known examples: see *Legacy of Michael Sattler*, 73.

67 For example, Mike Booker and Mark Ireland, *Evangelism: Which Way Now? An Evaluation of Alpha, Emmaus, Cell Church and Other Contemporary Strategies for Evangelism* (London: Church House, 2003), 171–84.