

Anabaptist Association of Australia and New Zealand

Newsletter

Issue 3

November 1998

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From the Editor's Desk

The feeling of the fragility, the vulnerability of being in a minority tradition within the Christian community, itself heading towards minority status within Australian society often comes to me in the week preceding the fortnightly teleconference that functions as a committee meeting for the Association.

Yet there we are on a Thursday night, six to eight of us trying to find wisdom and build community courtesy of Telstra. The struggle to build a national network and give form and voice to a minority tradition within the Christian community often seems tiring, like slogging through wet cement. What is surprising though is how often I put down the phone at the end of a meeting feeling encouraged and refreshed.

To acknowledge our fragility and vulnerability is to live out of control. It is to acknowledge that life is a gift to be received with open hands, and that our reliance on technical mastery will not save us from having to face the power of evil or the reality of death. To be committed to such an enterprise as this association is to take at least one step away from the illusion that the life of the Christian community is about an ethos of mastery and control.

The connection that I want to draw between my personal struggle and the form of the church to which this Association is committed is that the Anabaptist tradition is not one in which we must use a "secular" form of power

to make things come out right and ensure the survival of the church. Rather we worship a God who meets us and participates in our history, our fragility and our vulnerability. Our form of church life should re-present and embody the story of this God.

This form of church life is not as some critics would argue a withdrawal from the world. We cannot withdraw from the world - the issue is what form of worldliness will we embody in our life within the Christian community. Will it be a worldliness, a practical atheism that accepts the spiral of violence as a realistic account that should guide the way our institutions work or will it be a worldliness which accepts the givenness of creation, framed by a gracious God who stepped in to break the cycle of self justifying violence?

Resources

I want to draw attention to the Resources column in this edition and explain any apparent idiosyncrasies. What is included in the column depends upon the material that I receive from the Hursts in the USA and what lands on my desk out of my own reading and subscriptions to Christian periodicals. If you have access to material that you think may be relevant and that you wish to share please send me details or copies. I try to provide information on where you can obtain copies of the articles mentioned as well as full publication details for the books.

Doug Hynd

President's Page

Thank you for your prayers and support. Since the incorporation of the Association the Committee has been meeting by telephone conference nearly every second Thursday for several months. As many of us have never met face to face it has been a challenging and interesting exercise in building a team and making decisions. Our faith in God and the guidance of God's Spirit has enabled us to build a sense of support and fellowship in our meeting by telephone and decisions have been made.

Plans for 1999 include holding a national gathering on the June Long Weekend in Wollongong or Canberra. We need your response as to which geographic location would be preferred before making a final decision by Christmas 1998. So please email, fax or post your response to our Secretary ASAP. This meeting will also provide the opportunity for us to conduct our first annual general meeting of the Association as required by law.

Diane Coleman has agreed to be the Secretary and Gary Baker the Treasurer and we thank them for taking such important and demanding roles within the Association. We ask that you support them in prayer. Tim Costello is the appointed Public Officer under the Incorporations Law.

Thank you to all who have responded to the appeal for financial support for making the application for Mark & Mary Hurst to be granted permanent resident status so that Mark can accept the appointment as pastoral leader and full time worker with the Association.

The solicitors appointed to prepare the application have indicated to us that the application fees and balance of the legal costs for preparing the application will be in the order of \$5000.00. We have pledges of \$1,500.00 at present and need these to be forwarded urgently. In addition we need to raise the balance of the money by the end of January 1999. Please prayerfully consider how you might be able to assist in meeting these costs.

Agreement has been reached with the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions as to the form of partnership we will enter into with them to advance the ministry of the Association. We praise God for all the answers to prayer and planning that have been provided so far and look forward to this continuing in the future.

We are sponsoring a week long workshop in March 1999 to be conducted by Dr Hizkias Assefa in the Philosophy and Praxis of Reconciliation. He regularly conducts this workshop as part of the Eastern Mennonite University Summer Peace Building program in Virginia. The focus of the workshop will be International, Indigenous and personal reconciliation with the issue of reconciliation with our indigenous people being the praxis issue for the workshop.

This workshop will be our first major program in seeking to give expression to our theology of peace with justice being the foundation for reconciliation with God, ourselves, others and creation. It will be a very stimulating intellectual, spiritual and personal experience. Plan to come.

May God bless each of you and your families as enter the season of Advent.

Shalom
Colin Isaac

Note on Communication

We try to as a committee to use electronic means of communication and the internet as much as possible to kept in touch with each other. I have enclosed our email addresses to enable you to contact any of us by that means.

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**The Meaning of
Anabaptism**
**An occasional column of
personal stories & reflections
on the meaning of the
Anabaptist heritage**

Ian Duckham - On what Anabaptism means to me

To me the Anabaptism tradition means a radical Christ-centred Biblicism that results in a faith community whose boundaries are demarcated by believers' baptism, obedient discipleship, mutual caring and a fellowship of equals bound together by love. Beyond the faith community, the Anabaptist call to discipleship means a rejection of church state alliances and the demonstration of

non-resistance love towards our enemies and a refusal to take up arms against the enemy domestic or foreign.

I am involved in the Anabaptist tradition through a quirk in my personal history that led my family and I to the USA in the late sixties. Living in Virginia I was fortunate enough to make contact with Mennonite Anabaptists and although fellowshipping in a different tradition (Wesleyan) I embarked on my theological studies at a nearby Mennonite seminary that permitted me to maintain my local employment and support my family while studying.

As foreigners in the US we appreciated the non-nationalistic Anabaptist theology at the seminary and soon became convinced Anabaptists. It is my belief that the Anabaptist tradition shows the best way forward in a pluralistic society and that is why I am committed to it.

Ian Duckham is a member of the Committee from Perth.

Anabaptism & Gary Baker; Who, how, why?

I live with my wife Eleanor and two boys Chris (aged 10) and Matthew (aged 7) on a small farm 'Coorong' 10 kms outside Armidale on the northern tablelands in NSW. I have trained as a Physician, and with Eleanor, who has trained as a nursing sister, have a specialist medical practice at 'Owlscot' in Armidale. When growing up in Manly in Sydney, I attended an Anglican Sunday school, but lost interest during my adolescence. When undertaking 2 years of postgraduate studies in the USA, we were led to a small Mennonite congregation in Durham, North Carolina. I was baptised with Eleanor in 1988, before returning to Sydney.

The congregation of the Durham Mennonite Church showed me the 'body of Christ'. I was receptive to the message. At this time we were isolated socially and culturally, and on a low income. The USA has marked contrasts from Australia; greater extremes of wealth and poverty, minimal social welfare, an aggressive culture, and an emphasis on individualism, exaggeration and innovation. We were forced to examine our own values. The Mennonite congregation gave us an answer. The congregation was small. People were trying to live their lives using Jesus as their model. Simplicity in their daily living, stewardship and time for one another were important. Each person we met had his or her own small ministry of outreach. The congregation helped one another at times of need and life events. The congregation interpreted the Word together. Disagreements arose but reconciliation was pursued. Peace and justice issues were discussed. I had glimpses of the Kingdom of God. I was invited and became part of the 'body of Christ'. After returning to Sydney we were fortunate to form a House church (1989-1992) when Mark and Mary Hurst and their family first came to Australia. We were encouraged in the Anabaptist traditions of discipleship, community and peace making.

The gospel message is clear. How to live as part of Christ's kingdom in this secular world is hard. Anabaptism helps my walk with Christ as a pragmatic commitment to discipleship, conflict resolution, and community. Each day I am challenged to apply this approach to my life in Armidale, with the people, and the land. I yearn to be with others who share such a vision, and wish to encourage each other.

The Beatitudes: Attitudes or Actions? Platitudes or Practice?

The feature article for this issue is by Chris Marshall who is Head of New Testament Department, Bible College of New Zealand and one of the initiators of the Association. This is an abbreviated version of part one of a two part article on the beatitudes that appeared in *Faith and Freedom* 4/2 (1995), 5-11

Christian attitudes to the Sermon on the Mount are deeply ambivalent. We extol Jesus as the greatest moral teacher of all time and treasure the Sermon on the Mount as the most searching and powerful utterance we possess on the moral life. In practice however, we dilute, curtail or simply ignore a great many of Jesus' ethical demands. Our professed admiration for the noble sentiments of the Sermon on the Mount is matched only by our determination to minimise its impact on Christian thought and practice.

There are several reasons for this paradoxical state of affairs, but the main one is to do with how rigorous and uncompromising so many of the Sermon's demands are. Jesus allows no half measures. There must be *no* anger, *no* desire to retaliate, *no* hatred, *no* anxiety, *no* divorce, *total* purity of heart, *total* forgiveness of others, *uncalculating* generosity. Worse still, Jesus sets up God as a feasible model for human behaviour. "You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly father

is perfect” (5:48). Jesus appears to demand a perfection of inner attitude and intention that may be possible for God, but is surely unattainable for ordinary human beings. The same lofty ideals and moral absolutism that win our respect leave us reeling in disbelief or despair.

This is even true of the so-called “Beatitudes” that introduce the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:1-12). Not only do these seemingly innocuous assurances of God’s blessing set the tone for all that follows in the Sermon, including the most austere of Jesus’ demands, but individually they give expression to an ethical radicalism that Christians have rarely taken seriously, or even recognised the existence of. To understand how the beatitudes function in this way, and how profoundly challenging they are, I want to identify four realities they focus upon. There are four dimensions we need to keep in mind in order to appreciate to the stunning vision of reality the beatitudes offer.

(i) A Whole of Life Focus

The beatitudes are often regarded as individual spiritual virtues or “be happy” attitudes. They describe an inner posture or mental outlook that attracts God’s blessing. However while the beatitudes undoubtedly include reference to inner attitudes and intentions, they go well beyond this. They demand qualities of conduct as well as designating qualities of the heart.

It is true that grammatically the beatitudes are in the indicative not the imperative mood. That is to say, they are formulated as *descriptions* of certain conditions, not as ethical *demands* calling for obedience. But the indicatives contain *implicit* imperatives. Jesus’ identification of those qualities

of life that God blesses carries with it an indirect summons to corresponding deeds of obedience. This is confirmed by the fact that several of the beatitudes are matched by *explicit* imperatives later in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 5:9 and 5:20; 5:7,9 & 5:43-48).

The beatitudes, then, are both blessings and requirements, gifts of grace and demands for obedience. They commend not just interior sentiments but a concrete style of living and acting in world. To be “meek” is not just to have an inner attitude of humility, but to live a lifestyle of powerless dependence on God. To be a “peacemaker” is not just to *enjoy* peace, but to *work* for peace by acting to resolve conflict.

(ii) A Kingdom Focus

The beatitudes describe the quality of life appropriate for those who have entered the Kingdom of God and live in conscious submission to God’s rule. Jesus began his ministry by announcing that God’s long-awaited kingdom was drawing near in his own person (Matt 4:17). A new saving reality was breaking into the world of suffering and oppression, though it was not yet here in its fullness. Not surprisingly, Jesus found the warmest reception for such a message of liberation and hope amongst the most needy, amongst the sick and the possessed, amongst the victims of human unkindness (Matt 11:2-6). For them, the coming of the kingdom was truly good news.

The beatitudes presuppose Jesus’ announcement of what God has done to change the history of the world. They describe how reality now looks in light of God’s intervention in human affairs in Jesus Christ. And they reflect both the “already” of God’s kingdom, and its “not yet”.

In the beatitudes, true happiness or “blessedness” is defined not by present circumstances and prosperity, but by the sure knowledge of God’s ultimate triumph over evil. The poor and the persecuted, the meek and the mournful, are declared to be blessed not because they are poor and wretched but because they participate in God’s kingdom. They are blessed because they know for certain that when God’s kingdom comes in its fullness, they will find consolation, mercy and justice. The absolute certainty of this future transformation brings blessedness to those who suffer now because they can be sure that present pain will be swallowed up in future victory.

But this hope is more than “pie-in-sky-when-you-die”. Jesus is not telling the oppressed simply to accept their present plight and wait passively for the happiness of heaven. For the good news of the kingdom is that God’s eschatological reign has *already* begun to operate in the present age. A new day has dawned; change has begun; the blessings of the future kingdom are even now the possession of the poor.

This is perhaps why the first and last beatitudes are in the present tense. “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven”. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sakes, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven”. The intervening beatitudes are in the future tense. But the reward of the future kingdom is framed by references to the blessings of the present kingdom. The promise of future blessing for the meek and maltreated on earth is matched by the present blessing of belonging to God’s kingdom, which is already active to bring an end to their suffering.

But how does this work? In what ways does participation in God’s kingdom concretely affect the situation of the

poor and persecuted? It does so because the kingdom of God becomes a *social reality* in the community of Jesus’ disciples, a community committed to God’s new order, a people called to live out the vision and values of the beatitudes here and now.

This is where the beatitudes acquire their disturbing radicalism. They are not simply a source of consolation and hope for future change (though they are that too); they are also a charter for Christian action in the present. One of the primary ways the poor and oppressed will find the blessedness of participation in God’s kingdom is in and through the *community of God’s kingdom*, amongst other recipients of God’s saving grace who are committed to embodying the values of the beatitudes in their common life and working for the agenda of the kingdom in the world around them.

(iii) A Communal Focus

Traditionally the beatitudes have been understood as descriptions of personal virtues, private character traits that every true believer ought to display. But it is worth observing that the beatitudes are addressed to the disciples as a group (5:1), they are all in the plural, and they take the form of descriptions not demands (though demands are implied). This suggests that Jesus is not primarily talking about personal moral qualities but about what the messianic community ought to look like. The beatitudes are Jesus’ attempt to define the ethos of the church as a colony of God’s kingdom, to set forth the values and priorities that the Christian community will incarnate in the world when it is faithful to its commission.

The entire Sermon on the Mount presupposes participation in the community life of a people prepared to be radically different from the world

around it. A community that honours the poor, demonstrates integrity, craves for all that is right, prefers mercy to punishment, makes peace not war, suffers for its commitment to Jesus. This of course requires that each individual member strives to live in conformity with Jesus' demands. But it is impossible to do so without the support and trust of others. It is precisely as isolated individuals that we are most apt to fail as Christians. We will only be inspired and empowered to live "beatitudinally" insofar as we are surrounded by fellow believers who share our commitment and whose collective direction will sustain us when we fail individually.

But where do these values come from? How do we know what "poverty in spirit", "meekness", "righteousness" or "peace-making" mean? Where do we look for guidance on how these qualities work out in practice?

(iv) A Christological Focus

The beatitudes do not commend a set of abstract moral principles that any reasonable person can understand and follow. They are not the ethics of common sense, even sanctified common sense! They are the ethics of the eschatological kingdom. More specifically they are descriptions of the kind of person Jesus—the bearer of God's kingdom—was. Jesus embodied his own teaching. His life gave content to his words; his actions and relationships illustrated his demands. We can therefore learn what the humility, mercy and peacemaking of the beatitudes means by looking at the way Jesus lived.

Jesus pronounces God's blessing upon the "meek" (5:5). The word "meek" occurs only twice elsewhere in Matthew's gospel, and both occurrences refer to Jesus himself (11:29; 21:5). We

learn to be meek by emulating the meekness of Jesus.

Jesus blesses peace-makers (5:9). Jesus himself is God's ultimate instrument for bringing the peace of heaven to earth (Lk 1:79; 2:14; 19:38,42; Acts 10:36). We learn what peace-making entails by looking at how Jesus operated.

Jesus blesses the mournful (5:4). Jesus also mourned (Matt 26:38; Lk 19:41). He blesses those who hunger for righteousness; he himself "fulfilled all righteousness" (3:15; 5:17-18; 27:4,19). He extols the merciful (5:7); he himself showed mercy (9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-1). He comforts the persecuted (5:11f); Jesus too was persecuted and reproached (chs 26-27).

So the content and implications of the beatitudes are defined by considering the practice of Jesus. He actualises his own words and thereby becomes the standard or model to be imitated by his followers. And, for Matthew, imitating Jesus means imitating God (cf. 5:44-48; 3:17). Which brings us full circle: these heartwarming, ennobling beatitudes actually are "verbal grenades" that give expression to that revolutionary rigourism in Jesus' ethical teaching the Christian church has so long struggled with.

Conclusion

I have proposed that the beatitudes are best understood as descriptions of a *whole way of life* that we, as a Christian *community* are called to live, a life modelled on *Jesus* and bearing witness to transforming reality of *the kingdom of God*. They offer us a vision of reality that stands in stark contradiction to the way reality looks to the world around us. The radicalism of the beatitudes only makes sense—and will only seem practical—if we accept Jesus' assertion that the world-as-we-know-it is passing away and God's new creation is being

born. The question we face is whether we accept the truth of God's perspective on reality or the common sense perspective of the existing world order. "Let God be true, and everyone else a liar" (Rom 3:4).

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Coming Events

FOR YOUR DIARY!

Anabaptist Association Gathering

When? 4-6 June 1999

Where?

**Canberra or Wollongong
(Let us know you preference)**

**A time for reflection, study and
worship
A time to build relationships and
renew vision.**

Agenda?

**Suggestions welcome. The
conversation that commenced in
Tasmania in 1995 on how the
Anabaptist tradition can engage the
Christian community and wider
society In Australia and New
Zealand, and the role of the
Association, will undoubtedly
continue.**

**Put this in your diary now.
More details as to venue and
program will follow.**

Reviews

Perspectives on Being Church

Building on the Rock: A Biblical Vision of Being Church Together From An Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective by Walfred Fahrer Herald Press, 1995

In this book, Fahrer who became a Mennonite as an adult, with enthusiasm and clarity describes and expounds "Mennonite identity". Anabaptist Mennonite-Identity, the essence of which he establishes in the preface, is neither an ethnic subculture, nor a denominational affiliation. It is rather "a unique set of beliefs and practices" (p.11). On the other hand, formally Mennonite churches may be out of harmony with these beliefs and practices; on the other, non-Mennonite churches may be quite Mennonite in their beliefs and practices.

Fahrer and his colleagues discovered that "the heart of Mennonite identity is a common biblical understanding of being church." (p.12) and that "an authentic Anabaptist-Mennonite understanding of church is communicated more by experience and modelling than spelling it out" (p.13).

Despite this reality the book succeeds in spelling out Anabaptist-Mennonite identity. Fahrer achieves this by presenting thirteen "keystones" of being church, neatly corresponding to the number of chapters. He supports his words with a series of diagrams which cumulatively build up the picture of the church that he is trying to communicate.

Throughout he contrasts the Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective with the two views in the West which have dominated church history: the Catholic, which centres on sacred rites, and the Protestant, which focuses on the proclamation of scripture. The essence of the Anabaptist- Mennonite view of the church is that it is a “primary alternative community of faith”, keystones one and two, built on the one foundation, rock, Jesus Christ, Matthew 16:13-19 and 1 Corinthians 3:11.

Keystones three, four and five, grouped under the heading ‘A Deliberate Discipleship, speaks of a church as being a community of those who voluntarily, implies believers baptism, give allegiance to Jesus as Lord and relate to one another in loving commitment and loving accountability. A church is thus not merely an “inspiration station”(p.49) but a community of gracious commitment.

Keystones six, seven and eight, headed ‘An Alternative Authority’ are to do with the authority of Scripture and the nature of leadership. Scripture is not so much an inspired source of correct belief, orthodoxy, as the authoritative resource, especially the gospels, for living Christianity in the context of community.

Servanthood characterises leadership: a church is both a community of servant leaders and a community with servant leaders. Fahrer points out that the New Testament model is of leadership teams, the members of which were often called ‘elders’ and whose authority is collective rather than based on individual powers. I note that this contrasts with the present day practice of churches being led by one person often, unbiblically, entitled ‘pastor’ or ‘minister’.

Specific Spirituality’ heads keystones nine, ten and eleven. In so far as Mennonite spirituality is known, these keystones reflect its public face: a commitment to peace and non-violence; the practice of ‘mutual aid’ within the community of faith;

and being a community of service to the world including living simply, giving generously and actively assisting the poor and oppressed.

‘Intentional Invitation’ covers keystones twelve and thirteen which are about evangelism. Fahrer is critical of most traditional evangelistic methods which have reflected rampant Western individualism. As with all things Mennonite, evangelism is based on the corporate life of the community and is integral to it. He asserts that Jesus’ way for the church is not ‘personal evangelism’ but corporate evangelism” (pp.104-105); and says “our life together is our Gospel tract” (p.106). In the Foreword Alan Kreider comments that this sentence “summarises Wally Fahrer’s message.”

The book is written in a lively and evocative style. It is not heavy, though it is solid. The final product is the outcome of several drafts, a presentation in symposium form, input and feedback from a range of Fahrer’s colleagues and a rewriting with

questions included for group study. Anyone seriously seeking to be the church with others, upon reading and digesting this book will be encouraged - and more that likely, challenged.

John Cox, Canberra
(A revised version of a review that initially appeared in *OIKOS Newsletter*).

Resources

Local contributions

From Tim Dyer a member of the Anabaptist Association comes an article with the thought provoking title:

Is your church at the right address?, ie. church@kingdom.come.au

It appears in **Working together: The magazine of the Evangelical Alliance** 1998 - Issue 2A pp1,4-5

Tear Australia's quarterly magazine **Target: Development News and Insight** 1998 No4 issue contains a number of brief articles that are of interest.

- "Embracing Your enemies" by David Andrews pp2-4
- "Blood for blood" Deborah Storie pp.6-8
- People of faith "The race-mixing communist - Clarence Jordan" by David Andrews p.13

Contact: TEAR PO Box 289, Hawthorn, Vic 3122 or tearaust@tear.org.au or www.tear.org.au

Herald Press - Recent publications

A Christian View of Money - Celebrating God's Generosity by Mark Vincent

Communion Shapes Character by Eleanor Kreider

Who Do You Say That I Am? Christians Encounter Other Religions by Calvin E. Shenk

Parents Passing the Torch of Faith by John M Drescher

Against the Death Penalty: Christian and Secular Arguments against Capital Punishment by Gardner C Hanks

Being God's People: Embracing Christian Faith from a Mennonite Perspective by Ervin R. Stutzman
Copies of a Book News sheet with an outline of the contents of each of these titles is available from Doug Hynd. For Further information contact Herald Press 616 Walnut Avenue Scottsdale Pennsylvania PA 15683-1999 USA or www.mph.org

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Making it on the Web - Third Way Cafe

An Internet web site where the menu includes current events from a christian perspective and information on Mennonites. www..thirdway.com

Anabaptists and Postmodernity

An article **theMennonite** October 20, 1998, pp6-7, by Jessica King on 'Anabaptists in a postmodern age: A report from a conference on "Anabaptists and Postmodernity" **The role of the Church**

An article by Lois Barrett in **theMennonite** 20 October 1998,

pp.4-5 "In but not of the world - the church as apostle to the world - part 1" The article is adapted from the book edited by Darrell L **Guder** **Missional church: A vision for the Sending of the Church in North America** (Eerdmans, 1998)

Singing and Worship

"Lift every voice and sing" by Ken Nafziger & Marlene Kropf, pp4-7 **Crossroads: The Magazine of the Eastern Mennonite University**, Summer 1998

Re-imagining the church

"Images of the church" **Canadian Mennonite** 6 July 1998, Vol 2 No.14 contains a couple of short pieces on re-visioning our images of the church. Robert J Suderman on some metaphors for the church emerging from reflections in the course of looking at the integration of church agencies and programs while Wally Kroeker looked at the church as a business.

Connecting Paul and the Jubilee tradition

Ched Myers offers some vigorous and insightful rereading of Paul and his connection with the Jubilee tradition in "Balancing Abundance and Need" in **The Other Side** September & October 1998, pp.14-19.

A world wide perspective

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