

The Anabaptist Vision*

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Each of the major branches of the sixteenth century Reformation—Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican—argued jealously the independence of their own origins as if the claim to have been directed by the Word of God would have been weakened by acknowledgment of dependence on one another. The Zurich Anabaptists were the only ones who made no bones about their indebtedness to others. Only when they became convinced that Zwingli was no longer willing to pay the price of obedience to his own best insights, did they let themselves be led into the creation of an independent movement. Therefore, as we try to identify and summarize those convictions which formed the center of what Harold S. Bender called “The Anabaptist Vision,”¹ we need to remember that it was not the intention of the Anabaptists to provide a full system of truth or an independent organization; they wanted only to correct the inadequacies of the other Reformation attempts which they saw around them.

SCRIPTURE ALONE

Every branch of Protestantism was committed to letting the Bible be the final rule for faith and practice. For the “official” Reformation, however, it was still the responsibility of political authorities to determine what was to be done about the truth found in the Bible. Thus Zwingli accepted a delay of eighteen months in the abolition of the mass because the government was not ready to move. This was the issue on the afternoon of October 27, 1523. *Zwingli*: “Milords [the city council] will decide how to proceed henceforth with the mass.” *Simon Stumpf*: “Master Ulrich, you have

* From a book entitled *Mennonite History*, edited by C. J. Dyck (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967), pp. 103 ff. Used by permission.

1. Harold S. Bender, *Church History*, XIII (March, 1944), 3-24.

no authority to place the decision in the hands of Milords, for the decision is already made; the Spirit of God decides.”

This exchange does not, as some scholars have thought, mark the clear and final break between Zwingli and his more radical disciples. It does, however, still symbolize the insistence of the Anabaptists that the authority of Scripture takes precedence even over the authority of government. This conviction, as we shall see later, has implications for the government itself—it will lead to the rejection of persecution, war, the oath, and the death penalty—but its first importance is for the church. The organization, the worship, and the doctrine of the church are not the prerogative of government. Although this position is widely accepted today, it was then held only by the Anabaptists.

BY THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

If the Scriptures are to be the final guide for faith and practice, it is logical to ask *how they are to be read* since every preacher and every scholar has his own interpretation. The early answer of Luther and of Zwingli, an answer which they later abandoned but which the Anabaptists retained, was clear: *in the gathered congregation*. They believed that when Christians gather, the Word is preached, some listen, some prophesy, others weigh what is said (I Cor. 14:29), and then the Holy Spirit, who is promised to those who gather in the name of Christ, will lead them to be of one mind. It was this conviction about the way in which the Holy Spirit leads in the congregation which led the Anabaptists to reject any final authority of theologians or princes in the church. Nor was this simply a confidence in the democratic processes of majority rule; the Spirit would overrule human weakness and allow the will of God to become known in the situation in which they met.

This same vision of how the Spirit worked was also applied to problems and discussions in the larger brotherhood....Whether the Dutch Mennonites were seeking agreement with the Reformed, or Pilgram Marpeck with the Moravians, the same method was used and the same goal sought after. Unity in the knowledge of the will of God was not to be reached by political or intellectual authorities, nor by religiously gifted leaders enforcing a correct creed, but by the working of the Holy Spirit among the brethren as they gathered to study the Scriptures.

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN LIFE

Article six of the Schleithem agreement states, “As Christ, our Head over us, is minded, so should we as members of His body be minded, that there may be no division in the body, by which it

would be destroyed." Thus to follow Christ was not childish mimicry but necessary obedience in order that His body the Church might be a unity in the world. It was the central argument of the Schleithem agreement on the sword and the oath. This too had been learned from Zwingli who had said, "To be a Christian is not to talk about Christ, but to walk as He walked."² Better known is Hans Denck's motto, "No one may truly know Christ except he follows Him in life."

To see why "following Jesus" was a unique position we must be reminded of what the other churches were saying. The question of the sword is a good example. Whereas Jesus refused to bear the sword and so taught His disciples, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike were agreed that that was not a standard for the sixteenth century. Some appealed to the Old Testament warriors or to the example of honored Christian emperors like Theodosius or Justinian; some argued that reason or even natural behavior and instinct in a Christian society shows that someone must guarantee peace and order and have the physical power to enforce it. Some again felt that the existing social order was instituted by God and in such a way that if one were born a peasant, God wanted him to remain a peasant, if he were born a prince, God wanted him to be a good prince, and so on. The "vocation" or "station" in life has its own standards and, since it is established by God, must not be changed. Thus when the Anabaptists insisted on following strictly the words and example of Jesus, this was not easily understood nor accepted. Most could think of Jesus as a dying Saviour, or as a future judge, but not as someone to follow earnestly in life. Such an attempt seemed not only impossible to begin with since Christ was the Son of God, but seemed also to lead back to the Roman Catholic system of saving works by which salvation could be earned.

The call to "follow Christ in life" may seem self-evident today, but for the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century it was a rare and daring claim, and a costly one, for the path of Christ led to the cross.

LOVE

In the letter which Conrad Grebel and his friends wrote to Thomas Müntzer, they said:

2. Ulrich Zwingli, *Works*, III, 407.

The Gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor are they thus to protect themselves. . . . True Christian believers are sheep among wolves. . . they must reach the fatherland of eternal rest, not by killing their bodily, but by mortifying their spiritual enemies. Neither do they use worldly sword or war, since all killing has ceased with them.

To follow Jesus meant especially to bear the cross with Him, to love one's fellowmen absolutely, even at the cost of one's own life. This position has sometimes been called pacifism, but the term is inadequate because it places the focus on the political goals of peace rather than on the loving concern for persons and the refusal to harm them intentionally. Recently Mennonites in North America have spoken of nonresistance, a term which is also inadequate because it sounds passive and uninvolved instead of actively opposing evil. The traditional German Mennonite term *Wehrlosigkeit* (defenselessness) is a little better. The earliest Anabaptists seem to have had no term specifically for it; they spoke of surrenderedness (*Gelassenheit*), or of the cross, of "the faith and patience of the saints" (Rev. 13:10), or simply of discipleship. Today we might best speak of the Way of the Cross, of Agape (self-giving love), or of Suffering Servanthood. Jesus called it perfect (i.e., un-discriminating) love. Conscientious objection to military service and to war taxes, and the rejection of litigation (I Cor. 6) have been its most obvious expressions in the past. A rejection of national, racial and class selfishness and an active promotion of international and interracial reconciliation is the obvious modern extension of the disciple's love.

BELIEVERS ONLY

Baptism was not the first difference to emerge between the Anabaptists and the reformer Zwingli, nor the logically most basic one, but it somehow became the most offensive issue. It was the first issue to call down governmental persecution and the one which was to give the young movement its name. In the above-mentioned letter which Grebel and his friends wrote to Müntzer, they said:

We have learned that even an adult should not be baptized without Christ's rule of binding and loosing. Scripture tells us concerning baptism, that it signifies that through faith and the blood of Christ (as the one baptized changes his attitude and believes therein before and after the baptism) his sins are washed away; that it signifies that one is and should be dead to sin and should walk in newness of life and the Spirit.

The accent does not lie on the emotions involved in the conversion

experience, nor on a discussion of what kinds of sentiments a child can or cannot have. The accent is positive; baptism has a clear, positive meaning. It points to forgiveness but also to a change of attitude, a determination to lead a new kind of life, and a commitment to the brotherhood....The church which is faithful cannot expect to be a large or powerful group. By no means could the true church be, like those churches supported by the state and practicing compulsory infant baptism, identical with the nation in membership. From this it follows further that the church must have its own distinct standards for organization, leadership, and membership; it must be *free* in two meanings of the term—membership must be voluntary, and its organization must be independent. This was precisely what all the reformers, like the Catholics, feared; they felt this would make the state pagan, and the church would be in danger of collapse if the alliance between the two were broken.

Thus the unique and fundamental meaning of believer's baptism is not just what it says about the individual believer—that his faith must be his own; it says something about the church—that membership is free and voluntary and that her only loyalty is to Christ.

THE RULE OF CHRIST—ADMONITION

Article six of the Schleithem agreement states that "In the law the sword is ordained over the wicked . . . and the secular governments are ordained to use the same . . . but in the perfection of Christ only the ban is used for the correction and exclusion of the one who has sinned." What the sword is to the compulsory community of the state, that the discipline of brotherly admonition is to the voluntary community of the church. The earliest Anabaptists referred to this practice of taking moral responsibility one for another as "The Rule of Christ," referring to Jesus' words (Matt. 18:15-18):

If your brother sins, go to him alone . . .

If he listens to you, you have won your brother . . .

If he refuses to listen to you, take with you two or three . . .

If he refuses to listen to them, tell the congregation

The normal outcome of this approach to the brother is repentance and reconciliation; only in extreme cases will the ban (exclusion from the fellowship) result. The Anabaptists believed that this person-to-person and case-by-case means of restoration and education was the major tool for reformation of the church: "Discipline with the Word and establish a Christian church with the help of Christ and His rule, as we find it instituted in Matthew 18 and applied in

the epistles.”³ The reason for not baptizing infants was that they cannot voluntarily submit themselves to the “Rule of Christ.” Since this practice of voluntary submission provides the *method* by which all other principles are applied, it is the key to the reformation of the church and its continuing faithfulness.

Membership is made meaningful to the individual by the fact that his brethren share with him in the responsibility for his discipleship. Only in this way does membership become important. For the state church reformers, *church* meant that organization which, led by princes and scholars, provided for correct preaching. It needed no membership of its own since all men were its responsibility, whether they agreed or not. For the Anabaptists the church was a visible fellowship, separate from the state and other powers in society because its membership is voluntary and because the gathering of such a distinct, visible, caring, and sharing brotherhood is God’s saving purpose in the world. . . .

NEVER ALONE

From the very beginning the Anabaptists spoke of community of goods as a necessary part of the Christian life. By this they did not mean, at first, a common treasury for the whole congregation and its needs; nor did they ever mean what some feared, a revolution to abolish private property as a pattern for a whole society. They were clear, however, that no Christian can call his property his own. He is responsible for his stewardship, not only in some vague way to God, but also concretely to his brethren and to anyone in need. Where there is need he will give without hope of return. Thus when the common treasury was established in 1528, . . . this was no radical innovation but only a further step in the direction already established. The reasoning behind this general Anabaptist teaching on property followed several lines. Love for the brethren demands a willingness to share with them (I John 3:17); the Lord’s Supper itself expresses this sharing of worldly goods. Jesus’ teaching on Mammon (Matt. 6) and on the conditions of discipleship (Mark 10:21-31) makes it clear that our property is a major focus of our self-centeredness, search for security, and idolatry. If Christ is truly our Lord, our hold on our possessions (or their hold on us) must be loosened. They also studied carefully the example of the early church

3. Grebel’s Letter to Müntzer, September, 1524.

as recorded in Acts 2:44 ff. and 4:34 ff., and, while not taking it as a legal command in every detail, came to see it as a powerful demonstration of the truth that economic sharing and vital apostolic obedience belong together.

ONLY A BEGINNING

. . . . On many points, such as the deity of Christ, the authority of the Scriptures, atonement by the death of Christ, and others, the Anabaptists agreed with other Protestants. They wished only to complete the process of reformation and purification which the others had begun and failed to finish. In the mid 1520's they still hoped to win others to this vision, and there was no desire to create a separate denomination. When the pressure of developments forced them unavoidably to the forming of a separate movement, other kinds of growth naturally followed. The scattering of the brethren, the small groups which were inevitable and necessary, the different geographic and hence cultural environments added new insights to the movement and broadened the vision.

Any listing of how the original vision was filled out and tested in concrete experience over all Europe would include the pre-Reformation mysticism of Hans Denck with his stress on the importance of the living Word. It would include the arguments on such issues as freedom of the will and original sin in which he, together with Balthasar Hubmaier, furthered theological understanding. Such a listing would include the missionary zeal of Hans Hut, together with his deepening of the meaning of suffering; it would include the concerns of Pilgram Marpeck, Menno Simons, and a host of others for the wholeness of the brotherhood and the fullness of its witness.

At other points the passing of time helped to clarify the boundaries of the Anabaptist movement, showing what belonged in and what did not. The stiffened practice of the ban in the Netherlands, as also the overrigorous legalism among some of the Swiss Brethren, muddied the waters for a time, but these were, nevertheless, signs of the love they had for the church. The peaceful and revolutionary Anabaptists were clearly and finally distinguished from one another with the collapse of Melchior Hoffman's separate movement and the tragedy of Münster, though their opponents seemed unable to distinguish between them. Similarly the claims of David Joris helped the main body to reject the temptations of "new revelation" in favor of careful biblical interpretation, while the straying of Adam Pastor into Unitarianism warned of the dangers of rationalism. Pilgram Marpeck's successful identification of the issues separating Anabaptism from Spiritualism and the way in which he pointed up the consequences of the doctrine that the true church must remain in-

visible strengthened the Anabaptist sense of purpose and mission in the world.

At still other points local adaptations were made without really changing the essence of the movement. This may be said of Hoffman's view of the incarnation, of the institution of formal community of goods in Moravia, and later of the use of confessions among the congregations in the Netherlands in which beliefs held in common with other Protestants were included.

It is significant, however, that through all of this broadening and deepening, the essentials of the original vision were retained and clarified, standing the test of adaptation and of persecution without basically changing in nature. The central understanding of the church's way in the world, which was first hammered out in the mid 1520's, survived.