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van Hoogstraten, Marius

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# **The Anabaptist Moment: Improper Beginnings, Ecclesiopolitical Decisions, and a Nonviolent Sovereignty**

MARIUS VAN HOOGSTRATEN\*

## INTRODUCTION

On a winter night in 1525, several people gathered in a home in Zurich, prayed, and then baptized each other. The event solidified their breach with the reformer Ulrich Zwingli and, in an important sense, marked the beginning of the Swiss Anabaptist movement. No similar events of mutual baptism are reported in the sixteenth century, making this a singular story. Though it is contested to what extent this event, and Swiss Anabaptism more broadly, can be considered the origin of all of today's Anabaptist churches, the gathering in Zurich continues to speak to the imagination in Anabaptist and Mennonite communities. It occasions the date of Mennonite World Conference's World Fellowship Sunday, yearly around January 21, and the current Anabaptist 500-year commemorations likewise orient themselves to this event as a unique point of crystallization for the nascent Anabaptist movement.

Yet despite its prominence, a theoretical reading of this "Anabaptist moment," as I will call it, is far from straightforward. On the one hand, it reads as a founding event. The participants are not merely reforming or splitting off from an existing church community; they are, in this moment, starting over. In so doing they are not just founding the Anabaptist movement but in a deeper sense "re-beginning" the church after centuries of interruption. Yet on the other hand, how could anyone ever do such a thing—*begin the church again*? In addition to the more practical historical and ecumenical difficulties entailed by such a reading, the idea of an ecclesial re-founding or re-beginning raises profound questions—not least, it appears to represent a theological impossibility, as the church is not something we make ourselves but something we receive. At the very least, it will be necessary to discern some kind of divine action in the

\*Marius van Hoogstraten is a postdoctoral research associate at the Amsterdam Mennonite Seminary and one of two pastors to the Mennonite congregation of Hamburg, Germany.

(re)founder moment, if it is to be more than a merely human event yielding a merely human association. Yet the textual record of the Anabaptist moment is silent on this.

In the space of that textual silence, how are we to discern God's action and initiative as it intertwines with human action and initiative? If the Anabaptist moment on January 21, 1525, yielded a community that can be called a *church*, how was this ecclesial or ecclesiopolitical community constituted, and what particular way of being church might we discern in it? What might it suggest about who and what makes the church? How can Christ be said to be sovereign if He appears to place so much of His church in human hands?

This essay undertakes a reading of the Anabaptist moment as depicted in the *Hutterite Chronicle*. It is important at this point that I stress that this is not intended to be a historical investigation. Rather, it is a more philosophical interpretation, perhaps a "poetics" of the event, seeking to tease out the ambiguities and possibilities presented by the words and the silences of the available text.<sup>1</sup> In general, I will suggest that the immanent logic of the Anabaptist moment reads first of all as that of the *founding moment* of an ecclesial community, the church beginning again. Yet there is trouble everywhere: Its beginnings are improper, beset by contradiction; the community thus founded is de-centered from the start. Within the framework of orthodox theology, the Anabaptist moment represents an impossible, even absurd, action. But in this, it may also signal the possibility of Christ's uniquely *nonviolent sovereignty*, constituting the church not by unilateral decree but by provocation and invitation, placing much in human hands, calling forth community from the murky conditions of this world. In the textual silence around any divine fiat, we might recognize the particular way God operates in calling the church: by demanding and encouraging, but ultimately leaving the hard work of making the church real up to the faithful. Certainly, we cannot "make the church." But, on the other hand, we also *must* make the church, and the ambiguities of that statement can never be decisively dispelled.

Amid these contradictions, the Anabaptist moment fails to rise to the proud, unassailable confidence of an origin, of a true founding event for Anabaptist traditions. Yet the constructed and shaky character of all this may, paradoxically, be the conditions for divine in(ter)vention of an especially improper, destabilizing, and promising kind—a continuing

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1. Although this is not a historical article, it does take a historical text about a historical event as its focal point, and I must thank Dennis Slabaugh, Hanspeter Jecker, and Jamie Pitts for their comments on earlier versions of this project. If mischaracterizations and factual errors remain in this text, these are, of course, my own. I am also grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, whose comments have further helped focus this paper.

tradition, receiving a church that we are also making ourselves. With this, we might say that the Anabaptist moment, while thus far analyzed as an exceptional occurrence, also seems to illustrate the most common and everyday experience of being church. Beginning again, together, as we commit to receive and participate in a church that is still becoming, with little to go on but Scripture and the faith in our hearts and a divine invitation easily unheard or denied, that places itself into our hands as a fragile, insistent possibility.

### A NOCTURNAL VENTURE

The main text available for what we are here calling the “Anabaptist moment” is Caspar Braitmichel’s *Hutterite Chronicle*. In a poignant passage Braitmichel describes how a group of reformers, including Conrad Grebel and Georg Blaurock, gathered in the house of Felix Mantz. Though Braitmichel does not mention this, they gathered at a moment of crisis. Their effort to convince Zwingli and the Zurich City Council of certain reforms, notably the institution of believer’s baptism, appear to have definitively failed.<sup>2</sup>

And it came to pass that they were together until fear ... began to come over them, yea, they were pressed ... in their hearts [*sie in ihren Herzen bedrängte*]. Thereupon, they began to bow their knees to the Most High God in heaven and called upon him as the Knower of hearts, implored him to enable them to do his divine will [*daß er ihnen geben möge, seinen göttlichen Willen zu tun*] and to manifest his mercy toward them. For flesh and blood and human forwardness [*Fleisch und Blut oder menschlicher Fürwitz*] did not drive them, since they well knew what they would have to bear and suffer on account of it. After the prayer, George Cajacob [Blaurock] arose and asked Conrad to baptize him, for the sake of God, with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with that request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained minister [*kein verordneter Diener*] to perform such work. After that was done the others similarly desired George to baptize them, which he also did upon their request. Thus, they together gave themselves to the name of the Lord [*ergaben sich miteinander ... dem Namen des Herrn*] in the high fear of God. Each confirmed [*bestätigte*] the other in the service of the gospel, and they began to teach and

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2. *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation: Glaubenszeugnisse der Täufer, Spiritualisten, Schwärmer, und Antitrinitarier*, ed. Heinold Fast (Bremen: Schönemann, 1962), xv; C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1995), 54; Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 20.

keep the faith. Therewith began the separation [*Absonderung*] from the world and its evil works.<sup>3</sup>

The passage is sober and brief. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit or any other kind of miraculous or revelatory intervention. It is simply this: a number of frightened believers came together in a home on a cold winter night, with nothing to go on but their fellowship, Scripture, and the faith in their hearts, where they made the momentous decision to begin again, hoping, praying, trusting, that this was the path God had called them to walk.

Anabaptist theologians and historians have noted the significance of this nocturnal conspiracy. Heinold Fast calls it the institution of believer's baptism (*Einführung der Glaubenstaufe*), the moment of birth of the Anabaptist movement (*Geburtsstunde der Täuferbewegung*<sup>4</sup>), and the formation of a new congregation (*neue Gemeindebildung*<sup>5</sup>). Thomas Finger states succinctly that a "new church has just originated,"<sup>6</sup> and Arnold Snyder comments with more understatement that "in this way the first 'rebaptisms' took place," constituting in any case a "definitive break with the Zwinglian reform."<sup>7</sup> For Snyder, the event appears to mark the point at which Anabaptism, hitherto a "reform" movement, "became a 'church' movement" — that is, the point at which the Anabaptist insistence "that the properly biblical way of forming the church was, through the freely chosen baptism of adult believers . . . in full conscience and choice," practically enacted.<sup>8</sup>

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3. Caspar Braitmichel, "The Beginnings of the Anabaptist Reformation: Reminiscences of George Blaurock. An Excerpt from the Hutterite *Chronicle*. 1525," in: *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation and Evangelical Catholicism as represented by Juan de Valdés*, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 39-46, 43-44. Remarks in brackets from the (modern) German as included in Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*, 1-9, esp. 6-7. The account in Braitmichel appears to come primarily from Blaurock's testimony. Another account of Anabaptist beginnings is found in the Zurich archives.—Cf. *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz*. Bd. 1, ed. Leonard von Muralt and W. Schmid (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), nos. 29-33. The baptism of Blaurock and Mantz is not related there, but in each of the files Blaurock and Mantz appear to already be baptized. See also No. 42b, where Blaurock maintains he was indeed the first to be baptized.

4. Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*, xvi.

5. *Ibid.*, 2

6. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 20.

7. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 54.

8. *Ibid.*, 1. As far as I can tell, the event does not appear to play a significant role in early Anabaptist writing or correspondence, outside of Braitmichel's brief text. Instead, Anabaptists soon begin to stress continuity with the broader Christian tradition—e.g., in the *Martyr's Mirror* and other parts of the *Hutterite Chronicle*—over discontinuity. Yet neither does the event appear to be considered an unremarkable possibility. No other similar events of mutual baptism are recounted, and every known further baptism within the Anabaptist

There thus appears to be some degree of consensus among historians that this moment was significant for the Anabaptist movement and churches. This is the point at which they transition from a set of ideas and aspirations into a community and ecclesiological reality. Moreover, the participants were not simply branching off from or reforming an existing ecclesial community, as is the case for most other Reformation movements. As they received baptism, properly for the first time, the Anabaptists were in an important sense starting over, beginning again—not just founding the Anabaptist movement but in a deeper sense re-starting the church. Even if our ecumenical sensibilities today may keep us from suggesting that the Anabaptist movement is the only true church, and even if it may be far from certain that the historical genesis of Anabaptism was indeed so singular,<sup>9</sup> we may at least maintain that the moment certainly marked a beginning of the Anabaptist movement, a moment where an ecclesiological community, a way of being church, was called into the world.

Yet theologically, it is far from self-evident that it is at all possible for the church to begin again in this way, apparently on the faithful's own initiative, without appealing to an institutional continuity with a preceding tradition, or to a supplementary revelation or to the intervention of the Holy Spirit. In the words of the Roman Catholic theologian Josef Ratzinger, for example, "no one can make a Church by himself. A group cannot simply get together, read the New Testament and declare: 'At present we are the Church because the Lord is present wherever two or three are gathered in His name.'"<sup>10</sup> Ecclesiality, for Ratzinger, is mediated through loyalty to an already existing tradition guaranteeing continuity with the original "event that founded the Church,"<sup>11</sup> which is the Last Supper. The church can only be said to have Christ as her foundation (1 Cor. 3:11) if it accepts that it is also instituted by Christ—explicitly, concretely, and historically—and that continuity with this founding event is guaranteed through the continuing institution and hierarchy of the church as overseen by the bishops (and especially the

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movement was performed by a person who was already baptized and, in some way, ordained.

9. This question has been debated for some time in Anabaptist-Mennonite historiography.—Cf. James Stayer, Werner Packull, and Klaus Deppermann, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (April 1975), 83-121; Arnold Snyder, "Beyond Polygenesis: Recovering the Unity and Diversity of Anabaptist Theology," in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), 1-33.

10. Josef Ratzinger, "Reinterpreting the Ecclesiology of Vatican II: The Ontological Priority of the Universal Church," in *The Ratzinger Reader*, ed. Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 100-108, 104.

11. *Ibid.*, 102.

bishop of Rome). The church thus does not need any supplementary founding or restituting events. Indeed, such events have the opposite effect: They do not bring an ecclesial community into the world, Ratzinger suggests, but place the participants outside the one existing ecclesial community. The church cannot—and need not—be founded or founded again, because it is already there. “One cannot make the Church,” Ratzinger argues, “but only receive her; one receives her from where she already is, where she is really present: the sacramental community of Christ’s Body moving through history.”<sup>12</sup>

If Ratzinger is right, then the Anabaptist moment is simply impossible, and the community that springs from it can never truly be a church, nor indeed could any Free Church exist. In response, Miroslav Volf has argued that Free Church ecclesiology views the church as constituted “from below,”<sup>13</sup> through the public confession of faith of its members, in addition to being constituted “from above” through episcopacy and succession. However, for Volf, this does not mean the faithful *make* the church. If this were so, a Free Church would be nothing more than “a free association of independent individuals . . . a product of believers themselves,” which “could not be a work of God.”<sup>14</sup> This accusation is thus “explicitly rejected by Free Church ecclesiology.”<sup>15</sup> Instead, the Holy Spirit acts in tandem with the faithful as the ultimate constitutive force and guarantee of continuity and unity of the church. While “public confession of faith in Christ . . . is the central constitutive mark of the church,”<sup>16</sup> this does not imply congregants “church” themselves, as they are “constituted into the church by the Holy Spirit.” While “people gathering in the name of Christ to profess faith in Christ” is a “necessary . . . condition of the constitutive presence of Christ,” the church is nevertheless “constituted by the Spirit of Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

So Volf’s “from below” appears to be a site of divine-human cooperation. When I join a church, “in this, my own act, *the Lord* ‘adds’ me

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12. *Ibid.*, 104. It is perhaps no wonder that Ratzinger regards the *Confessio Augustana*, which explicitly condemns the Anabaptists, as the most promising document for Lutheran-Catholic rapprochement. See Josef Ratzinger, “Discerning the ‘Ecumenical Dispute’ between Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism,” in Boeve and Mannion, *The Ratzinger Reader*, 160-167, 164ff.

13. Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 152.

14. *Ibid.*, 176. See also 176, fn91 for such critiques, also from Lutheran perspectives.

15. *Ibid.*, 44.

16. *Ibid.*, 150.

17. *Ibid.*, 152. For Volf it is important that this confession is the same one throughout the various churches, otherwise one would be confessing “‘a different Christ’ . . . [or] denying in practice the *common* Jesus Christ to whom it professes faith, the Christ who is, after all, the Savior and Lord of *all* churches.”—*Ibid.*, 157.

to the church. . . . In this sense, every local church is God's work."<sup>18</sup> This must ring true with any clear-eyed observer: There is no church that is not, in some way, the result of human action. After all, everything in the church, from the benches to the hymnal and the catechism, is made by human hands. Nevertheless, what church means also transcends this creaturely action and initiative. In the midst of those human initiatives we also become the addressees of an invitation, a call, and a promise.

So if Ratzinger argues that the church is not self-made but historically and concretely made by Christ, Volf seems to argue that the church is not self-made but continually and cooperatively made by the Spirit. If Ratzinger argues that the role of the faithful is to remain loyal and pass on what they receive, Volf seems to argue that the faithful confess and participate in this constant work of God. Yet Volf does not go into great detail on precisely how this divine-human cooperation should be envisioned. Though the faithful do all manner of things that constitute the church "from below," it ultimately appears that for Volf the most real and substantive actor is still God, who responds to the gathering faithful to transform their community into church.

A closer reading of the Anabaptist moment, however, may allow us to say more about the nature of this divine-human cooperation in ecclesial constitution. For if Volf suggests that it is up to the Spirit whether a mere human gathering becomes church, the Anabaptist moment might supplement the inverse suggestion—namely, that it is up to the faithful whether the mere divine invitation to gather as church becomes reality as an existent community. Believers may respond to God's call "in full conscience and choice" (Snyder), but this means God has placed much of the life of the church in fragile human hands. And perhaps it is precisely in the fear and trembling of this momentous decision to give one's life to God, together—an act not premised on the solidity of a church hierarchy that would "guarantee" anything, as Ratzinger argues, but on a dark January night in a small Zurich living room—that the nature of faith in discipleship becomes eminently clear.

### AN IMPROPER BEGINNING

So let us return to Braitmichel's brief text. In light of this discussion between Volf and Ratzinger, one remark especially seems to stand out: Braitmichel himself appears to notice something that is not, strictly speaking, "proper" about Grebel baptizing Blaurock, since Grebel was not ordained (*verordnet*) to do this. With his Hutterite sensibilities,<sup>19</sup>

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18. *Ibid.*, 177

19. At least that is Fast's take.—Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*, 2.



Braitmichel draws attention to the fact that no one in the room was ordained—that is to say, was *permitted*—to perform Blaurock’s baptism. When Braitmichel writes this, it must of course be clear that he does not simply mean that there just happened to be no ordained person around. Braitmichel is getting at a more fundamental problem: With the church about to be reinstated after a centuries-long absence—which, as we must assume, was the immanent logic of the Anabaptist moment—there was no “ordained minister” *in existence*. Permission and ordination could only come through the election and affirmation (or at the very least baptism<sup>20</sup>) by a congregation. But such a congregation would only come into existence some minutes later, when Blaurock baptized everyone else.

With this little remark—for *there was no ordained minister present*—Braitmichel ultimately names a recursive problem of beginning. If only a congregation can baptize, but only the baptized can make up a congregation, where does one begin? It is almost as if Braitmichel is a little embarrassed. A congregation that does not yet exist ordains, without apparent rule or procedure, a man who is himself not yet baptized to welcome to their community a man who would, in turn, subsequently welcome them. Braitmichel seems to be admitting this was an improvised solution in an exceptional situation, perhaps not quite “proper.” But how could it have been otherwise since those rules presupposed the functioning of a community that was only now coming into existence?

Neither is this recursive problem of beginnings strictly limited to the question of permission and ordination to baptize. For at least one aspect of any interpretation of baptism must be that it joins the baptizand to the church and to a congregation. So to what congregation is Blaurock here joined—indeed, to what church? The answer must be that Blaurock was joined here to a congregation that *did not exist*, at least not until he himself baptized the others. We might thus say that Grebel (in his “ordination”) and Blaurock (in his baptism) were joined to and received a church that did not (yet) exist, that they are bound to and authorized by a church that was still coming to be, that they themselves indeed are participating in bringing that church into existence. Ordination and baptism have meaning as the acts of a community. Yet here, they are the acts through which such a community is brought into the world in the first place. They

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20. According to Williams, “Rebaptism in the first days of the movement was almost equivalent to ordination or commission. . . . The apostolic succession in Anabaptism was originally a baptismal succession in water and the Spirit. Only gradually were such usages as election or recognition (*Bestätigung*) . . . developed in a distinctive act of ordination. Significantly, . . . the clerical status of recruits from the older order was never recognized; and the new commission or reordination was, in effect, the baptismal rite.” —Williams and Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, 44, fn12.

thus, we might say, receive the church not from the past, as Ratzinger thinks, but from the future as they participate in its becoming.

Regardless of what one might think of Braitmichel's apparent understanding of office and ordination, his remark names a fundamental issue with the Anabaptist moment. Here, a church begins, comes into existence, and therefore cannot fall back onto an existing church order to justify or regulate that beginning. It must regulate its own beginning. But it can only do so in an unregulated fashion. It must begin *improperly* before it can begin *properly*—which is, in its beginning, already not properly the beginning.

The Anabaptist moment is thus, on the one hand, the founding moment of a (and for those involved certainly *the*) church, as a group of believers give themselves up together to Christ's sovereignty. In grounding (*gründen*) themselves in Christ as a community, in congregating and mutually confirming each other, in giving themselves up to Christ as a fellowship, in baptizing one another and confirming one another in service to the Gospel without appeal to revelation, miracle, or other divine intervention, in—in some sense at least—*self*-constituting or self-organizing as a community of believers, the group comes to participate in the founding (*gründen*) of the church. Perhaps this is already in some sense a divine intervention, or a divine invention. Yet this ecclesial (re)beginning does so, *necessarily and improperly*, in an improvised fashion, receiving a church that is not yet there—a church that is in the process of becoming, a process in which they are themselves participating.

Can something truly worthy of the name "church" emerge from such murky conditions? Perhaps eminently so. Perhaps, we might say, the church is most at home with an improper, improvised, and paradoxical faith, with little to go on but fellowship, Scripture, and a divine invitation that barely registers to the writers of history.

### A SILENT PROVOCATION

After this interpretation of Braitmichel's telling remark, we should not overlook what his text omits. For a moment of ecclesial (re)beginning, one of the more curious aspects of Braitmichel's account is that it is both strikingly sober and devoid of divine intervention. Braitmichel remains strangely silent precisely on what most theologians have deemed crucial: divine cooperation or presence. There is no account of a miracle or revelation, no speaking in tongues or prophetic visions, indeed no mention of the Spirit at all. Grebel, Blaurock, and the others are said to experience "fear," but it remains unclear if this is to be read as the fear of God (rather than simply the fear of the city council or a more general fear in a difficult situation), let alone whether it was precipitated by any kind

of specific spiritual presence. Within Braitmichel's text, the closest thing to a positive description of what drove their decision is their initial prayer that God would allow them to do God's will. Whatever presence and driving force there might have been, Braitmichel only names negatively: "For flesh and blood and human forwardness did not drive them."<sup>21</sup> What *does* drive them is not explicitly named; it needs to be inferred. If, as with Volf, we want to discern a presence of the Spirit in this event, we indeed need to *discern* it; it does not immediately present itself to us in the text but appears in the first instance as absence.

Possible interpretations of this negative space point in at least two directions. On the one hand, it seems like the text is suggesting this was not a merely human event—Blaurock, Grebel, and the others are not simply enacting some contingency plan or acting on some whim. This is not *their* decision, at least not according to their flesh and blood or human forwardness. That is to say, this was not a decision driven according to their body ("flesh and blood"), as a factor of some material desire or emotional whim. Nor was it driven according to their mind, as the result of interest or a desire for knowledge of some kind ("human forwardness"). Although the text does not explicitly name it, it seems to suggest the necessity to discern some other motivating factor, some spirit-driven provocation, some divine action that set these humans off on this course. Only such action would make this into a church worthy of that name, at least into more than a merely human association (Volf).

Yet, on the other hand, this should not obscure the momentous decision related in the text. In its very sobriety, the text suggests the existential choice these (mere) humans are making to begin something, to step onto a path decisively. This decision—the decision to follow Christ, to accept the Cross, to face their own deaths—must be authentically *theirs*. They are not simply following a divine order that would obviate such decision and choice on the part of the humans. So, we might say, their decision must simultaneously be read as rooted in a divine call, explicitly *not* a human decision (for otherwise the Anabaptists cannot be a church), *and* as authentically and existentially belonging to the participants, an explicitly human decision.

So the decision by Blaurock, Grebel, and the others to submit to Christ's sovereignty seems to take place in a nexus of divine and human will, in a space where divine and human will become indistinguishable. This brings us into the vicinity of what the philosopher Jacques Derrida calls *the*

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21. Braitmichel, "The Beginnings of the Anabaptist Reformation," 44; "Denn Fleisch und Blut oder menschlicher Fürwitz haben sie gar nicht getrieben."—Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Refomation*, 7. *Fürwitz* also means inquisitiveness or curiosity, as in the nosiness or cheekiness of children.

*decision of the other in myself*, the decision of “the absolute other in me, the other as the absolute that decides on me in me.”<sup>22</sup> Derrida argues this is the condition of any decision. It can only be truly called a decision if it is neither simply my own plan or whim (in which case I would simply be executing what I already want, not “deciding”), nor simply obedience to something external (in which case I would also not be deciding). It must be both mine *and* not mine, responding to an Other—in our reading, the *divine* Other—and authentically my own.

Perhaps these few words of Derrida’s are already too much twentieth-century philosophy for a sixteenth-century text. But they might also lead us to see more clearly what sort of event is stirring in this moment Braitmichel is relating. For, taken by itself, there is something unreadable about this moment, something mad perhaps. The description by Braitmichel seems *too* sober; it is as if something is missing. The one thing that would make this moment into more than a human gathering seems to remain Other to the text—to escape, slip away into silence. In a sense it is both present *and* absent, and this absence/presence could be said to be especially theologically or philosophically telling, as if it *could* not be directly named since its nature escapes the order of chronicles and texts entirely. As if it could not be written down without betraying its peculiar way of interacting with the human will; as if the only way to be faithful to its alterity would be silence. Derrida again:

this name, which must always be singular, is here none other than the name of God as completely other, the nameless name of God, the unpronounceable name of God as other to which I am bound by an absolute, unconditional obligation, by an incomparable, nonnegotiable duty. The other as absolute other, namely, God, must remain transcendent, hidden, secret, jealous of the love, requests, and commands that he gives and that he asks to be kept secret. Secrecy is essential to the exercise of this absolute responsibility as sacrificial responsibility.<sup>23</sup>

This is what Braitmichel’s description might be said to hide by describing—to show by omitting. To all the world, Grebel, Blaurock, and the others are mad at best, heretics at worst. In any case, they are dangerous. Derrida cites Søren Kierkegaard: *the instant of a decision is madness*.<sup>24</sup> This “madness” is deeply related to secrecy and silence. In

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22. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 68.

23. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1995), 67.

24. E.g., Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law,” *Acts of Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 230-298, 255. Geoffrey Bennington traces this citation—which appears to be a misreading of the particular passage it is from but illuminating of Kierkegaard’s wider

Kierkegaard's reading of the Binding of Isaac, Abraham's silence around his decision to murder his son is essential. He will never be able to explain, and indeed he *must not* explain, to Isaac, or indeed to Sara, what he must do or why he is doing what he must.<sup>25</sup>

In this sense, the absence of obvious divine intervention in Braitmichel's text is crucial if the decision by Grebel, Blaurock, and the others is to be one of *faith*.<sup>26</sup> It would be too easy to simply say that Grebel and the others are privy to some mystery, some divine reality none of us will ever grasp. If they would have simply been faced with the pure presence of Christ himself, or by an undeniable revelation, their decision to submit would not have been a *decision* in fear and trembling. It would have simply been the obvious conclusion to an undeniable truth. There is thus a sense of what we might call "epistemic nonviolence" in Braitmichel's silence. The Spirit's invitation to begin again is not a compelling reason; it is but a still, small voice, a call without backup, an invitation that can easily go unheard or be denied, that places itself into our hands, where it may be "freely chosen . . . in full conscience and choice."<sup>27</sup>

On this reading, the Anabaptist moment thus suggests the possibility that *this is how* the Spirit constitutes the church—through enabling, provoking, and invoking human action. This is how the Spirit operates. It can only ever invite and demand and encourage; but the hard work of making the church real is up to us. Indeed, it has always been up to us. So if Ratzinger argued that one cannot make the church, but only receive it, here instead is the suggestion that we *must* make the church, and that what we receive is a call precisely to do so. This mode of divine action is perhaps more lowercase—more "from below"—still than Volz's suggestion that the Spirit constantly and cooperatively makes merely human gatherings into church. If, for Volz, the one acting in the most real and substantive sense is God, here the most real and substantive work of church-making is gently given over to the faithful, who are free to respond to the divine invitation—or not. As the theologian John D. Caputo puts it: "God does not exist; God insists, and it is our responsibility to bring about something

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concerns nonetheless—in Bennington, "A Moment of Madness: Derrida's Kierkegaard," *Oxford Literary Review* 33/1 (2011), 103-127.

25. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

26. This is related to the reason Abraham is considered the father of faith. If he had known all along that he would receive his son back, thus allowing him to calculate whether the pretend-sacrifice was worth the journey and the effort, he would, in the words of John D. Caputo, "not be the father of faith but of good investments and estate planning."—John D. Caputo. "God and Anonymity: Prolegomena to an Ankhoral Religion," in *Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 1-20, 14.

27. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 1.

that exists.”<sup>28</sup> For Caputo, this relationship between the faithful and a “weak” divine call is especially embodied when we pray: “In prayer, we are made strong by the insistence (or weakness) of God, and the insistence of God is made strong by our existence.”<sup>29</sup>

Seen in this way, perhaps Braitmichel’s silence on the Spirit is a necessary silence. Perhaps there must always be silence around so momentous a decision. Perhaps, as Kierkegaard and Derrida suggest, a decision that is truly a decision, taken in fear and trembling, not only has nothing to go on but the divine solicitation but also can never offer justifications for itself. Perhaps Braitmichel intuits that what drives Grebel and the others may never be adequately explained to his readers. And not only because the event relies for its intelligibility and effectuality on an order it is itself creating. Any explanation would need to translate the divine provocation into a more general textual order, which would betray it—its gentle, insistent provocation would dissipate into justifications and reasons that would elude the possibility for this to be a decision of faith. The way God “insists,” here, provoking and inviting the faithful to make a church, escapes the order of chronicles and texts. To anyone in their right mind, the event reads as either simply possible—the logical conclusion of events already unfolding, but in any case nothing special—or simply impossible, as Ratzinger believes it to be. In any case, likewise nothing special. Certainly nothing to risk one’s life for.

### A SHARED DECISION

Yet there *is* intelligibility here. There is asking and receiving baptism; there is discernment of motives. While Grebel, Blaurock, and the others remain schismatics and heretics to the “outside” worldly and ecclesial order, their “mad” decision does not take place for the sake of the absolute singularity of the Other (as it does for Derrida and Kierkegaard), but for the sake of a *new* ecclesial community, one that is becoming, unfinished. They received this community from a future still in the making, but apparently also already strong enough to bind these faithful together in a capacity to decide *together*. So the secrecy and silence of this momentous decision become the common language of a community. In this exceptional moment of the decision of the Other-in-me a line is drawn between this community and the outside world, a “separation

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28. John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 49.

29. *Ibid.*, 31.

[*Absonderung*] from the world” that begins here.<sup>30</sup> In this, the Anabaptist moment is an ecclesiological moment: the founding of a community.<sup>31</sup>

This momentous decision in a state of exception—founding a community distinct from the outside world—brings us into the vicinity of the infamous legal theorist Carl Schmitt. According to Schmitt, the distinction between the political community and the outside world – or in his terms, the distinction between “friend” and “enemy” – is the beginning of the political.<sup>32</sup> If Braitmichel speaks about the founding of this community as the beginning of a dissociation from the world, for Schmitt political community is essentially dissociative: “a collectivity is established through an external antagonism vis-a-vis an enemy or constitutive outside, that is, by way of *dissociation*.”<sup>33</sup> If a political community fails to take this seriously—as, Schmitt thinks, liberal democracy fails to do—it will inevitably crumble. This becomes especially manifest in a state of exception, a moment in which the existing established order and rules of procedure cannot offer rules for the adjudication of what is happening, no longer (in a crisis) or not yet (in a founding moment). Lacking procedures or laws by which such a state of exception can be governed, it requires a decision, indeed the decision whether such a state of exception is at hand. This is the essence of sovereignty, Schmitt argues: the ability to decide on the exception.<sup>34</sup> Sovereignty and the friend-enemy distinction must, in a state of exception, take precedence over all other loyalties. For Schmitt, one conclusion of his thought was his skepticism of constitutional limitations on sovereign power, and his concomitant prominent support of the totalitarian Nazi regime in Germany after 1933.

Already it is not hard to see how a Schmittian reading of the Anabaptist moment is entirely, perhaps disturbingly, plausible. A founding act such as the Anabaptist moment, we might thus say with Schmitt, is a moment

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30. Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*, 7.

31. Understanding the Anabaptist moment in this way also helps clarify why “rebaptism” for the constituted churches must be a capital offense. It is not simply doing something forbidden; it is declaring one’s rebellion at a fundamental level.

32. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 26ff. In *The Nomos of the Earth*, Schmitt further distinguishes between enemies, such as other European states, and absolute enemies, who he identifies with groups like barbarians and Turks. Conflict with the former can be governed by rules of engagement, but with the latter this is not possible. In this light, Michael Sattler’s reversal of the distinction between his Christian opponents and the Turks—he would sooner fight with the latter against the former, as the Christian governments are Turks “according to the Spirit”—might supplement this reading.—Fast, *Der Linke Flügel der Reformation*, 74f.

33. Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 41.

34. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

of *exception* (there was no adequate response within the Zurich ecclesio-political system; it was in crisis) requiring a *decision* (which was duly taken by Blaurock, Grebel, and the others) constituting (through its distinction or dissociation between church and world) a new collectivity and a new sovereignty, demanding utmost loyalty, unto worldly death, from its followers (“since they well knew what they would have to bear and suffer on account of it”). If we read the Anabaptist moment as a founding event in this strong Schmittian sense,<sup>35</sup> devoid of ambiguities, we might view a violent or totalitarian tendency at its heart, quite in contrast to my interpretation up to this point. The Anabaptist moment might be seen as the origination of a singular collective body that decides as one, demanding loyalty unto death, its church-world distinction hardening into a friend-foe distinction.

This reading will always be possible. Any church that is to some extent made by the faithful—that is to say, every church—harbors this ambiguity, this possibility for a violent or totalitarian tendency as the faithful dream of a community without spot or wrinkle. It is this dream of the repression of contradictions that harbors the lethal threat of a homogenous community, sharply bounded, acting with singular will, and demanding absolute loyalty. Indeed, in the few generations that followed the development of Anabaptist congregations into bodies exacting total control over, and demanding absolute obedience from, their congregants might point in a similar direction. If God only acts to provoke and invite human action, there are no guarantees against this tendency—it can only be resisted by the faithful themselves.

This is why it is important to stress that a Schmittian reading is only feasible if the above readings on improper beginnings and contradictive decision are disregarded. For Schmitt would, on a closer look, be markedly unsatisfied with this particular founding event, which is complicated from the start and has already begun improperly before it can begin properly. The moment’s paradoxical referentiality, as the baptizands receive a church in the becoming of which they are themselves participating, means the moment also harbors the seed of resistance to its compression into a singular act of sovereign Schmittian decision—without however collapsing into the mere sovereignty of the congregation itself, what Schmitt would call popular sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> Understanding the baptizands’ decision—while certainly taken in a state of exception and

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35. In a sense, this is the question whether the Anabaptist moment is a founding event *ex nihilo*, as a singular origin from sheer will-power, or *ex profundis*, a gentler, more cooperative, but therefore also messier and more ambiguous beginning. My reading of the Anabaptist moment is more in line with the latter. See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

36. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 48.



unregulated by existing church order—as a decision of the other-in-me, a decision to not enact sovereignty but rather to submit to Christ’s ultimate sovereignty, further confuses a Schmittian reading, and thus perhaps may be especially illuminating in counteracting a potential totalitarian tendency.

### AN ABDICATING SOVEREIGNTY

Ultimately, a Schmittian reading is frustrated by the way the decision of the Anabaptist moment takes place—not in the dramatic willpower of a sovereign but in this peculiar nexus of divine and human will that I described as the decision of the Other in oneself. The decision here is deeply complicated, consisting of an invitation by the Spirit that remains a secret, and a response consisting of further deferrals, as one person asks another, who discerns the motives of the first. Yet if Grebel and the others cannot take the place of the “sovereign” in this schema, neither can Christ, the one whose sovereignty is really proclaimed here. It would be nearly meaningless to say that Christ decided to start the Anabaptist movement on January 21, 1525, after a failed disputation with Zwingli and the City Council.

Looked at through a Schmittian lens, we can see how in the Anabaptist moment, sovereignty becomes undecidable in the moment of its enactment. Blaurock, Grebel, and the others make a momentous decision, yet it is not *their* decision. They found a community in a moment that cannot be regulated by existing church order, yet in this decision they do not proclaim their own sovereignty but abdicate it and proclaim Christ’s sovereignty. Yet Christ has also, it appears, abdicated that sovereignty and is not actively deciding anything or intervening—Christ merely extends an invitation shrouded in silence. It appears that the Anabaptist moment exists precisely in this tensive contradiction. The tensive, indeed aporetic, character of the Anabaptist moment makes for the madness, difficulty, and trouble it represents, not least to the established church order. This is dangerous, or at least not *safe*, in the sense that it cannot fall back on structures or certainties that would guarantee its way. But perhaps a greater danger stirs in the repression of these contradictions—in collapsing the Anabaptist moment into a mere collective decision not answerable to an Other, or into a mere obedience to a perceived divine revelation.

So if for Ratzinger the Anabaptist moment is *simply* impossible—it is ineffectual; it does not do what it purports to do; it cannot yield a church—we might now say that the Anabaptist moment, if it is not to collapse into mere decision or mere obedience, must be *structurally* impossible. It is only possible when it is impossible. In the Anabaptist moment, I must decide

what I cannot decide, ground what I cannot ground, begin and found what I cannot possibly begin or found. I must take into my own hands by abdicating, make what I can only receive, proclaim Christ's sovereignty by making a momentous decision that He does not take in my stead, a decision that is only *mine*—yet not ever mine. This—the silence, that is, the *openness*, of Braitmichel's description—is what keeps the Anabaptist moment, and perhaps the Anabaptist churches, too, open: open to their own contradictions and to their own future, to the constant and cooperative reinvention of what it means to be church.

It thus appears to me that the Anabaptist moment can at most be a *beginning*, not an *origin*. As Edward Said makes this distinction, “an origin *centrally* dominates what derives from it,”<sup>37</sup> but a beginning “ultimately implies return and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment”; it is always “beginning-again.”<sup>38</sup> The Anabaptist moment thus grounds precisely by *not* founding in an original, definite manner but by instilling creative repetition, by itself being a repetition, which is always and inevitably creative *Entstehung*: it “authorizes”<sup>39</sup> an Anabaptist *tradition*, in all of its unbridled possibility.

## CONCLUSION

Troubled from the start by various tensions and aporias—an improper beginning, a decision not one's own, an abdicating sovereignty—the Anabaptist moment fails to rise to the proud, unassailable confidence of an origin, of a true founding event to our Anabaptist traditions. Yet this improper murkiness—that is, this openness—may be especially good news: In it, we might see the conditions for resisting an immanent totalitarian tendency, and indeed, the conditions for a beginning *again*, an opening up again to the Other, and indeed, to the other. The constructed and shaky character of all this may, paradoxically, be the conditions for divine in(ter)vention of an especially improper, destabilizing, and promising kind—a continuing tradition, receiving a church that is *still* becoming.

With this, we might say that the Anabaptist moment, while thus far analyzed as an exceptional occurrence, also seems to illustrate the most common and everyday experience of being church. Beginning again,

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37. Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 373.

38. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

39. *Ibid.*, 34; According to Said, “any beginning that involves reversal, change of direction, the institution of a durable movement . . . *authorizes*; it constitutes an authorization for what follows from it. With regard to what precedes it, a beginning represents, as I have said, a discontinuity (whether or not decisively enforced).”

together, as we commit to, receive, and participate in a church that is still becoming, with little to go on but Scripture and the faith in our hearts and a divine invitation easily overheard or denied, that places itself into our hands as a fragile, insistent possibility.<sup>40</sup>

To be sure, these are but first considerations. More could certainly be said about the profoundly relational character of the Anabaptist moment. Each baptism consists of a request, discernment, and a granting—a granting, certainly, of something no human can possibly truly confer. More, likewise, could be said about the philosophical relationship of *gründen* to *Gründe*, of founding and *grounding*, and where this places the Anabaptist moment as a *grounding* moment in which the grounds of a fellowship are disputed and (re)established, especially also in relation to the more ultimate Ground that is Christ.

And more, certainly, must be said about that other, perhaps more ominous, silence, that other omitted “other” in Braitmichel’s passage: the absence of women. It does not matter much whether women are absent only from the text or were also absent at the historical event. Either way, it is an absence. Less interesting than the question *why* this is so appears to me to be the question of what possibilities are obscured by this absence. Does, perhaps, the exclusive masculinity of the Anabaptist moment make it too easy to deny that the *Absonderung* of a believer’s church is always already troubled through a more creaturely relationality—a web of familial, political, economic, societal, and indeed animal relations, connections, and responsibilities of which we are always already part, and of which we will inevitably fail to absolve ourselves? Though we should be wary of essentialisms, the presence of women might also have meant the presence of children, that is, of generation, of our indelible relationality which inevitably complicates the neat all-or-nothingness of a Schmittian or indeed Kierkegaardian decision. The *Absonderung* of the Anabaptist moment thus appears troubled, again, from the start, again perhaps illuminating the most everyday experience that the church-world border is, at least in its concrete form, not eternally given but made, produced and reproduced in concrete historical circumstances.<sup>41</sup>

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40. A more in-depth analysis of this kind would need to take into account the conversation between some postmodern thinkers and John Howard Yoder’s work begun by Peter Blum, unfortunately without much critique of Yoder, in Peter Blum, *For a Church to Come: Experiments in Postmodern Theory and Anabaptist Thought* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Herald Press, 2013).

41. In another context, this is the argument made in Marius van Hoogstraten, *Theopoetics and Religious Difference: The Unruliness of the Interreligious. A Dialogue with Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020).