

ANABAPTIST SEED, WORLDWIDE GROWTH

The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Mennonite Identity

by
C. Arnold Snyder

The Faith and Life Council in Calcutta began a process for member churches to give and receive counsel to one another on matters related to what they believe and how they live. At Calcutta we received a report on and discussed a study of our confessions of faith. (See the articles in Courier v.12 # 4, 1997) At its most recent meeting, the Executive Committee decided that a next step in the discussion should include exchange between member churches on the question: "What does it mean to be Anabaptist Christians today?" This series is meant to provide a common point of reference for that discussion, not to serve as a normative or exhaustive statement for MWC member churches' faith and life today. (Larry Miller, MWC Executive Secretary)



Courier/Correo invites readers to respond to this series on the common core (the "seed") of sixteenth century Anabaptist doctrine, and also to point to characteristics of the seed visible in twentieth century Anabaptism, even though cultivation and different climates may have changed the plants grown from that seed. Selected responses will be published.

PART II

ANABAPTIST CHURCH ORDINANCES

(See Part I in Courier v.13, nr.1, 1998)

Anabaptist doctrines, as we have seen, were not particularly new or distinctive. Almost all Anabaptists held orthodox

Description of the first adult baptisms in Zurich: "After fear lay greatly upon them, they called upon God in heaven, that he should show mercy to them. Then George [Blaurock] arose and asked Conrad [Grebel] for God's sake to baptize him; and this he did. After that he baptized the others also."

Trinitarian beliefs, and they also agreed with the basic principles of the Protestant Reformation. But there were also significant differences. The Anabaptist church reform movement began when some believers instituted church practices that differed from Catholic and Protestant

(transubstantiation). According to Roman Catholic teaching, there was no salvation outside the church and its seven sacraments. And of course, only ordained clergy had the power to dispense the sacraments.

The Protestant reformers argued that salvation was by faith alone, and was achieved through sacraments or the priests of the church. Many people were ready to agree that grace was not mediated by sacraments, but in the 1520s it was not clear what the biblical view of sacraments should be, or what should take the place of the older view.

The Anabaptists, like other evangelical church reformers, wanted to base their reforms entirely on the Word of God. On the basis of their study of Scripture, the Anabaptists came to believe that a church that was reformed according to the scriptural pattern would practice at least three basic church ordinances: baptism of believers, church discipline, and the Lord's Supper. These church ordinances formed the core of early Anabaptist church practice. A fourth ordinance, footwashing, was added later in the sixteenth century.

A. Baptism

Baptism of Believers

Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

practices. The ordinance that sealed a separate reforming direction was adult baptism.

Sacraments

Martin Luther posed a direct challenge to Roman Catholic Church practices. The Roman Catholic Church taught that there were seven Christian "sacraments." A sacrament was a visible sign that conferred divine grace. For example, in the sacrament of baptism, the visible sign was the water. When an ordained priest baptized an infant in water, there was said to be a corresponding internal action of grace that removed the stain of original sin from the soul of the infant.

Likewise in the Mass, after the visible elements of bread and wine had been blessed by the priest, the substance of the bread and wine became the actual body and blood of Christ

The baptism of believing adults was the most visible identifying and none of it, they insisted, could possibly apply to newborn infants. Infants and small children cannot understand teaching about salvation, nor can they believe it, repent, and promise to live lives of obedience after their baptisms. For the Anabaptists the scriptural meaning of baptism was clear: Baptism was not a sacrament to be used by priests, it was an external sign of interior faith.

The early Anabaptists very often spoke of a “three-fold baptism,” by which they meant that one was first baptized by the Holy Spirit, then in water, and finally, in blood.

Baptism of the Spirit

The Anabaptists rejected the idea that water could become a sacrament that conveyed grace. They maintained that “the water is just water.” Strictly speaking, then, the water of baptism itself was not holy or really very important. It was the *inner baptism of the Spirit* that was primary and essential. It was this spiritual baptism that led believers to repentance, faith, and commitment. It was this baptism of the Spirit that regenerated believers, and granted them the spiritual power to become obedient disciples.

“Baptism in the Spirit and fire is to make alive and whole again the confessing sinner with the fire of the divine Word by the Spirit of God.”
(Balthasar Hubmaier, d. 1528)

Baptism in Water

Water baptism was secondary. It was an outward “confession” or a “testimony” to what had happened inwardly. Nevertheless, just because water baptism was a second step, this did not mean that water baptism was optional or unimportant to the Anabaptists. Baptism in water had a crucial role to play in establishing the visible Body of Christ on earth. Water baptism was a necessary outer witness to the inner spiritual change.

“Baptism in water in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit ... is nothing other than a public confession and testimony of internal faith and commitment.”
(Balthasar Hubmaier, d. 1528)

When believers accepted water baptism, this was their public seal, promise, and *commitment to the church*. Besides being a response of obedience to a scriptural command, the water was a “covenant of a good conscience” before God and the congregation (1 Peter 3:21). Water baptism could not to be ignored or lightly set aside.

Baptism of Blood

The phrase “baptism of blood” rightly brings to mind martyrdom, which was a terrible reality for more than 4,000 Anabaptists in the sixteenth century. But the phrase had a less fatal meaning as well.

The Anabaptists believed that after the baptisms of Spirit and water,



“Adult Baptism,” anonymous engraving from L. Hortensius, Van den Oproer der Weder-Dooperen (Enkhuizen, 1624). University Library, Amsterdam.

“The flesh must daily be killed since it wants only to live and reign according to its own lusts. Here the Spirit of Christ prevails and gains the victory. Then the person brings forth good fruits which give testimony of a good tree. Day and night he practices all those things which concern the praise of God and brotherly love. By this the old Adam is martyred, killed, and carried to the grave.” (Balthasar Hubmaier, d. 1528)

they would still face a constant struggle against “the flesh” and “the world.” There were human failings that had to be resisted

constantly, and the power of the Spirit had to be invoked with the same constancy. This “killing of the old Adam” was a third, painful, and continuing “baptism.” There was an ascetic, otherworldly tone to Anabaptist spirituality that is captured by the phrase “baptism of blood.” The Anabaptists expected the life of faith to be a continual — but successful — struggle against temptation.

But in the sixteenth century, the “baptism of blood” often meant much more than just mortification of the flesh. It could mean a call to accept the fact that one’s own blood would be shed. If believers were called to witness to the truth by accepting death, they had already prepared because of practice in the third baptism, the “burying of the old Adam” that was supposed to occur daily.

B. Church Discipline

The Three-fold Admonition

Matthew 18:15-18: "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

The public ordinance of baptism was important because it was a sign to the congregation that new believers bound themselves to church discipline. The Scriptural basis for church discipline was found in Matthew 18:15-18. Those verses, said the Anabaptists, provided the proper, biblical order to be followed for the maintenance of a true church.

Confession and Absolution

One of the functions of church discipline, which the Anabaptists called "the ban," replaced the old sacrament of penance (confession and absolution). The aim was to provide a way to confess sin, forgive it, and re-admit the sinner back into the congregation.

In practice, however, a loving exercise of the ban proved to be difficult. Although "fraternal admonition" was biblical in its foundation, and could be described as an ideal way of re-admitting the fallen into the congregation, in actual practice the ban soon became more an instrument of division than an instrument of forgiveness and union.

The Pure Church

Christians are members of Christ, and their body the temple of the Holy Spirit . . . Jesus Christ has no unclean members, and the temple of the Holy Spirit is holy.
(Dirk Phillips, d. 1568)

by the Holy Spirit, and had become spiritual sons and daughters of God. Such "members of the Body of Christ" would live visibly new lives. Just as Christ was pure and holy, so also his members were to be pure and holy. The ban provided a way to maintain holiness and purity in the church.

Of course, this high calling was not always attained. Nevertheless, the Anabaptists soon gained a reputation for being sober, upright, and honest people. There were actually several cases of people arrested on suspicion of being Anabaptist, simply because they had stopped cursing, gambling, and getting drunk. They were not released from jail until they had proven that their turn for the better had nothing to do with adult baptism.

"A second function of the ban was to maintain a vital and reformed church. The Anabaptists were convinced the true church would be made up of those who had been regenerated

C. The Lord's Supper

A Memorial

1 Corinthians 11:23-24: ". . . the Lord Jesus on the night when

"The Lord's Supper is a sign of the obligation to brotherly love just as water baptism is a symbol of the vow of faith. The water concerns God, the Supper our neighbor."
(Balthasar Hubmaier, d. 1528)

he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' "

All Anabaptists rejected the idea that there was a real, bodily presence of Christ in the elements of bread and wine. The bread, they said, was just bread, and the wine was just wine. The Lord's Supper was a memorial to be celebrated by baptized and disciplined believers, not a re-creation of Christ's sacrifice to be done by priests on behalf of sinners.

The key words of Scripture supporting this memorialist understanding of the Supper are found in 1 Cor. 11:23-26. For

"The bread and wine are nothing but memorial symbols of Christ's suffering and death.."
(Balthasar Hubmaier, d. 1528)

the Anabaptists, Jesus' words "Do this in **remembrance** of me" indicated what the celebration of the Supper was supposed to signify: It was a

remembering of Jesus' death and sacrifice and a "showing forth" of his death until His return.

Celebrated Worthily

1 Corinthians 11:28-29: "Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves."

Believers' baptism and submission to church discipline were prerequisites for partaking in the Lord's Supper. Since the Lord's Supper was a celebration of unity in the Body of Christ, each member was to do a careful self-examination to ensure that the Supper was being celebrated "worthily." In this way the ban prepared the way for the Lord's Supper, since unworthy members were disciplined and called to repentance before celebrating together. Fraternal admonition was part of "discerning the body." The Supper, the Anabaptists said, was meant to be celebrated by those who had a living faith, and who demonstrated their faith in their daily living.

"[The Supper is] a public sign . . . of the love in which one brother obligates himself to another before the congregation that just as they now break and eat the bread with each other and share and drink the cup, likewise they wish now to sacrifice and shed their body and blood for one another.."
(Balthasar Hubmaier, d. 1528)

Recommitment to Brothers and Sisters

In Anabaptist congregations in the sixteenth century, celebrating the Lord's Supper was a powerful sign of renewed commitment to the fellowship. By sharing the loaf and the cup of the Lord,

members were signifying their willingness to give their lives for one another. In the sixteenth century this was not taken lightly. Anabaptist prisoners were almost always tortured in prison, and asked to give the names of their fellow church members. In this context of persecution, celebrating the Lord's Supper together was a powerful symbol of common commitment and purpose.

D. Footwashing

John 13:5: "Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him."

"We also confess a washing of the feet of the saints ... as a sign of true humiliation; but yet more particularly as a sign to remind us of the true washing—the washing and purification of the soul in the blood of Christ." (Dordrecht Confession, article XI, 1632)

The ordinance of footwashing was not practiced in all the early Anabaptist congregations. The South German Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck (d. 1556) spoke of footwashing as a church ordinance, but the practice

became most widespread in The Netherlands, where it entered the confessions that were produced in late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The practice of footwashing was considered to be an "ordinance" primarily because Jesus "instituted and commanded" the practice. Its symbolic meaning relating to humility and continued purification was explained best by Dirk Philips, bishop and co-worker in the Netherlands with Menno Simons. Late in the seventeenth century, the adoption of the Dordrecht Confession by the Swiss Brethren included also the adoption of footwashing as an ordinance, and the practice became accepted in the South as well.

E. Consequences of Anabaptist Church Ordinances

Church ordinances can be thought of as doctrines made visible in ritual practice. Anabaptist church ordinances provide a sketch or outline of Anabaptist doctrinal emphases.

A Church of Born Again Believers

The ordinance of baptism lay close to the heart of Anabaptist belief, and it gave shape to a particular kind of church. It was a church that would be made up of persons who had answered God's call in a conscious and visible way. Believers' baptism was meant to insure that the "Body of Christ" would be composed of re-born members. The ban was to keep the Body united in belief and action. The Supper and footwashing were to strengthen commitment between the brothers and sisters of the church.


A Visible Church

A church composed of people who agreed to the Anabaptist understanding of baptism would not be a church of a whole territory, or an "invisible" church, known to God alone. This church would be visibly composed of those who were prepared to make a public commitment to follow Jesus on the way to the cross. It was a church whose visible holiness was maintained by an attentive discipline and strengthened by the Lord's Supper and footwashing.

A Church Relying on the Holy Spirit

The Anabaptist church ordinances make it clear how much the Anabaptists emphasized the spiritual dimension of the Christian life. The authority for adult baptism in water was granted by the scriptural command of the Lord, but the actual inward baptism was granted by the living Spirit of God.

Likewise, the power to become disciples and to persevere on the narrow way was a power granted by the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit that made it possible for believers to resist temptation and to live new lives. It was the same Holy Spirit that enabled thousands of Anabaptists to persevere even unto death.

Additionally, the baptisms of Spirit, water, and blood fell to women and men alike, and called for their free-willed obedience to the commands of the Lord and faithfulness to the community. When disciples were being called, the Holy Spirit did not recognize gender. Anabaptist churches were noted for the high participation of women and men from every rank of society. Approximately a third of all Anabaptist martyrs were women. 

(To be continued)