

Anabaptism: A Brief History

Reformations

Sixteenth-century Europe was in the throes of major cultural changes that were disrupting the political, economic, social and religious arrangements that had persisted for several centuries. In particular:

- Medieval feudalism was giving way to capitalism and a new urban middle class was growing in influence and threatening traditional social power structures.
- Nationalism was becoming an unstoppable force, as hundreds of principalities and several free cities vied for authority with the old Holy Roman Empire.
- These economic and political changes were causing serious hardship among the peasants, provoking a widespread but short-lived revolt in the mid-1520s.
- Attempts to reform the massively wealthy, bureaucratic and corrupt institutional church had been unsuccessful, but demands for reform were insistent.

The Anabaptist movement emerged on the back of two very different attempts to bring transformation to church and society:

- The Protestant Reformation – calling for reform in the church
- The Peasants' Movement – calling for reform in society.

Some early Anabaptist leaders were involved in the reform movement that Luther started, especially several colleagues of Ulrich Zwingli in Zürich. They became frustrated with the slow progress there and withdrew their support in order to pursue a more radical vision.

Others were caught up in the peasants' movement, but gradually realised that there was no prospect of implementing the political and economic changes they had fought for and decided to pursue their vision of a just and harmonious community in other ways.

Anabaptism emerged as scattered communities seeking alternative strategies for reform coalesced, offering fresh hope to those who had been disappointed by other attempts to reform church and society.

Anabaptists in Switzerland

On the evening of 21st January, 1525, less than eight years after the start of the Protestant Reformation, a small group of Christians were meeting secretly in a house in Zürich to talk and pray together. They had been enthusiastic followers of Ulrich Zwingli, minister of the Grossmünster, who was attempting to reform both the church and the city of Zürich. But they were now deeply troubled by his apparent reluctance to follow through on what he had been preaching and to implement what they

regarded as clear biblical teaching on a number of issues – including the baptism of believers rather than infants.

The meeting on 21st January was considering a very radical step. The Bible, they believed, taught that believers should be baptised. They had all been baptised as infants, but they now regarded this as unbiblical and ineffectual. So they wanted to be baptised as believers, as men and women who were freely choosing to become followers of Jesus and had counted the cost of discipleship. This would be very costly indeed. *They* might discount their baptism as infants, but in the eyes of the authorities what they were considering was ‘rebaptism’ – an offence punishable by death.

Nevertheless, after a time of heart-searching and fervent prayer,

George [Blaurock] stood up and besought Conrad Grebel for God’s sake to baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with such a request and desire, Conrad baptized him.

In these famous words, *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* reports the first recorded instance of believers’ baptism in the Reformation era and the start of what became known as the Anabaptist (‘rebaptising’) movement.

George Blaurock and Conrad Grebel were two early leaders of the Swiss Brethren (as the Anabaptists who originated in Zürich are often known). Another significant figure was Felix Manz, a biblical scholar, the first Anabaptist to be executed by the city authorities, drowned in the Limmat River. This execution was intended to demonstrate that the authorities would not tolerate Anabaptism.

Persecution followed the Anabaptists wherever they went. But the movement was already spreading beyond the city and taking root in the countryside – partly because the Zürich group were determined to evangelise elsewhere, and partly because Anabaptists deported from the city found themselves in the neighbouring towns and villages.

Within months the movement had spread east, west and north; then (across the border into Catholic territory) to Waldshut. This town was moving in the direction of reform under the leadership of Balthasar Hubmaier, who would become the foremost Anabaptist theologian. There was popular support also in Hallau. Here, and elsewhere, the Anabaptist movement intersected with the peasants’ movement, recognising shared concerns and offering mutual support.

But, by the end of 1525, the peasants’ movement had been destroyed and the authorities were determined to snuff out any further threats, including Anabaptism. Most Anabaptists realised that, if they were to survive, their only course was to pursue their vision within separatist, underground communities.

In February 1527, representatives of the scattered Anabaptist communities gathered in the village of Schleithem. Out of their conversation emerged the *Schleithem Confession*, seven articles setting out the distinctive convictions of the Swiss Brethren. Not surprisingly, these articles are separatist and uncompromising in tone.

They are also thoroughly pacifist. This confession would be the rallying point for most Swiss Anabaptists.

If it was dangerous being an Anabaptist, it was even more perilous being an Anabaptist leader. The authorities targeted the leaders and few survived for long. There were no safe places. Catholic and Protestant authorities alike imprisoned, fined, tortured and executed Anabaptists – Catholics usually burned them, Protestants beheaded or drowned them.

Some Swiss Anabaptists survived by going underground, especially in remote rural and mountainous regions. But most eventually emigrated in search of refuge. Many fled east into Moravia, where they joined Anabaptists fleeing from other parts of Europe; some travelled north or west into Germany and the Netherlands, evangelising as they went. But these territories offered no more than temporary respite.

Anabaptists in South Germany and Austria

Anabaptist communities began to emerge in South Germany and Austria very soon after the first baptisms in Zürich and before the movement was widespread in Swiss towns and villages.

Three founding figures were:

- Hans Denck, a school-teacher with an emphasis on love and unity.
- Hans Hut, a passionate evangelist. A bookseller by profession, he travelled widely, baptising thousands and planting Anabaptist churches in major cities, towns and villages across South Germany and Austria.
- Melchior Rinck, a classical scholar who travelled around Hesse and Saxony, preaching and baptising, until he was arrested and imprisoned.

South German and Austrian Anabaptists were different from Swiss Anabaptism. They displayed a passionate concern for social justice, mystical spirituality, and a deep conviction that the end of history was near. They lacked the cohesion of the Swiss Brethren. Like the Swiss, they suffered the loss of key leaders very early, but unlike the Swiss they did not coalesce around a confession of any kind. Four groups evolved: one was apocalyptic; another embraced mystical spirituality; a third combined these emphases; and a fourth turned in a more separatist direction.

The other main figure in this branch of the Anabaptist movement was Pilgram Marpeck, a former mayor and mining magistrate of Rattenberg. Marpeck was disappointed by the lack of discipleship in most churches and became an Anabaptist. Moving to Strasbourg, where he worked as an engineer, Marpeck assumed leadership of an Anabaptist community in the city until exiled in 1532. After a period on the move, he settled again in Augsburg and led an Anabaptist community there until his death in 1556 (one of very few Anabaptist leaders to survive so long unmolested). Marpeck's social position meant that he needed to wrestle seriously with the question of how far to engage with the power structures of his day without compromising his Anabaptist principles

Anabaptists in North Germany and the Netherlands

The origins of Anabaptism in North Germany and the Netherlands can be traced to a single charismatic and enigmatic leader – Melchior Hoffman. A furrier from Schwäbisch-Hall, his journey illustrates how those yearning for reformation might gradually become more and more radical in their views and activities.

Hoffman initially identified with the Lutheran movement and by 1523 was working as a lay preacher in Livonia, until he was expelled. After a meeting with Luther in Wittenberg in 1525, he moved to Dorpat, where his anti-clericalism and message of social justice made him popular with the poor, but caused him to fall out with his Lutheran colleagues. He went to Stockholm as a Lutheran missionary and again stirred up controversy before moving to Schleswig-Holstein in 1527. Here he turned decisively away from Luther and branded his former colleagues false prophets. In 1529, his property was confiscated and he was expelled once more.

Moving to Strasbourg, he interacted with reformers, spiritualists and several varieties of Anabaptists, blending different elements into his own theology. He was baptised there but formed his own group rather than joining an existing congregation. But his revolutionary and anticlerical views alarmed the authorities and he fled to escape arrest. During the next three years he travelled widely, evangelising and baptising hundreds of people, especially in the Netherlands.

Hoffman was imprisoned in 1533, apparently allowing himself to be arrested in the belief this was necessary for the New Jerusalem to be established in Strasbourg. He spent the remainder of his life in prison, dying perhaps ten years later, still awaiting the events he had prophesied. His movement grew and spread across the Netherlands and in parts of North Germany, but Hoffman's imprisonment left it without adequate leadership.

In the next two years a disaster would occur, which authorities across Europe would seize on as demonstrating that Anabaptists were indeed dangerous subversives. Jan Matthys, a Haarlem baker, assumed leadership of the movement and sent out twelve apostles to evangelise and baptise. Among the places they visited was the German town of Münster, where their reception convinced Matthys that Hoffman had been *right* that the New Jerusalem was imminent, but *wrong* about its location: Münster, not Strasbourg, was the chosen site. A group of Anabaptists won the support of the local electorate and issued a call to Anabaptists everywhere to make their way to Münster and become citizens of the New Jerusalem. Thousands attempted to reach the city, although most were turned back by the authorities.

Münster was quickly surrounded by troops under the command of the local bishop. Two failed assaults were followed by a blockade to starve the town into submission. Matthys led a desperate breakout, believing that God would deliver him, but was killed. He was succeeded by Jan van Leiden, a young tailor, who instituted sweeping and violent reforms, using Old Testament legislation as his mandate, introduced polygamy, mandated capital punishment for minor offences, and awaited the descent of the New Jerusalem. After a prolonged siege, Münster was finally captured and its inhabitants massacred.

Münster was the greatest catastrophe of early Anabaptist history, resulting in increasing persecution across Europe, even in previously tolerant areas. Anabaptism in North Germany and the Netherlands survived the fall of Münster but the movement lost coherence. Most renounced violence. The most significant leader during the next few years was David Joris, who urged pacifism and emphasised interior spirituality to the extent that external marks of Anabaptism were regarded as unimportant. Communities of his followers persisted for several decades, but Joris failed in his attempts to reunite the movement under his leadership and he eventually left the area.

The future of Anabaptism in the Netherlands rested with those who had rejected Münster all along and maintained a pacifist position. The key leaders were Obbe and Dirk Philips, and an ex-Catholic priest, Menno Simons, from whom the Mennonites take their name. Menno joined the movement in 1536. The following year he was ordained as an elder. He spent the rest of his life travelling among scattered Anabaptist communities, teaching and pastoring them, and gradually welding them into a coherent movement. His extensive writings and patient ministry enabled Dutch Anabaptism to survive and thrive. Despite being a wanted man, he repeatedly escaped capture and eventually died peacefully.

An evolving movement

The Swiss, South German/Austrian and North German/Dutch branches of Anabaptism, as we have seen, were not isolated from each other. There were significant theological and cultural differences between these communities. But letters, visits and conversations enabled the exchange of ideas and provoked passionate debates.

Whatever diversity there may have been among early Anabaptists, the authorities were in no doubt that they were facing a single movement that represented a serious threat to both church and state. The number of people actively involved in this movement is difficult to ascertain, but it certainly ran into tens of thousands within the first generation. And many more people were attracted to Anabaptism but were not baptised as members, aware of what this step might cost them. Thousands of Anabaptists were martyred in the sixteenth century.

The flight of Anabaptists in various directions in search of refuge from persecution mixed up the different groups even further. In the 1550s, another round of discussions took place in Strasbourg. Although these discussions did not bring about immediate uniformity, a single movement began to emerge. And the gradual disappearance of the more mystical, apocalyptic and revolutionary groups meant that those elements were marginalised within the emerging tradition.

The story of Anabaptism over the next four centuries is of sporadic persecution, flight and relocation. From North Germany and Holland they fled east into Poland, Moravia, Russia and the Ukraine, then across the seas to Canada and the USA; from Switzerland and Austria/South Germany they fled west to the new American colonies.

The Anabaptists left in Western Europe survived either by retreating into quietness and avoiding further confrontation, or, in the more tolerant Netherlands, by becoming respectable and mildly nonconformist.

Their modern descendants include the Mennonites (who are now spread worldwide and are especially active in areas of conflict resolution, mission and social ministry), the Church of the Brethren, the Brethren in Christ, the Amish and the communal Hutterites. Baptists are divided as to the extent of the influence of Anabaptists, but there is persuasive evidence that English Baptists (especially the General Baptists) are indebted to their influence.

Until about seventy years ago almost all church historians regarded the Anabaptists as heretical, marginal or revolutionary. Assessments of them were based, not on their own writings, but on the hostile accounts produced by their opponents. But in recent years scholars, spurred on by the advocacy of Harold Bender's landmark speech in 1944, 'The Anabaptist Vision', have rediscovered the Anabaptists.

Today the movement has become a global community with its greatest strength in places like Ethiopia, India, Indonesia and parts of sub-Saharan Africa. And a wide range of people in western societies have welcomed the 'Anabaptist Vision' as an authentic Christian vision – and a vision with relevance to the contemporary church and its mission in a post-Christendom society.

Anabaptist Distinctives

The Anabaptists need to be understood in the context of the Protestant Reformation which was sweeping across Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century. Although other factors (such as social discontent) played a part in its emergence, Anabaptism grew out of the Reformation and owed much to it, as its leaders freely acknowledged.

On many issues Anabaptists agreed with the Reformers. They too were committed to the final authority of Scripture above tradition, justification by faith rather than by works, and the priesthood of all believers.

But the Anabaptists were concerned that the Reformers either did not go far enough with these commitments or that they were emphasising them at the expense of other things which were just as important. Several things differentiated Anabaptists from the main Protestant Reformers:

The Bible. Anabaptists agreed with the Reformers about the authority of the Bible but disagreed strongly about how it should be interpreted and applied. They gave priority to the New Testament and particularly to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Anabaptists started from Jesus and interpreted everything else in the light of him – unlike the Reformers whom Anabaptists suspected of starting from doctrinal passages and trying to fit Jesus into these. They refused to see the Bible as a 'flat' book; they regarded it as an unfolding of God's purposes, with the New Testament setting the standard for Christian behaviour and the shape of the church.

Salvation. The Reformers emphasised justification by faith and the forgiveness of past sins. Anabaptists emphasised new birth and the power to live a new life. The Reformers feared that Anabaptists were reverting to salvation by works, because of their stress on repentance and the importance of discipleship. The Anabaptists feared that the Reformers were preaching 'cheap grace' and accused them of failing to address moral issues and tolerating unchristian behaviour in their churches. The Anabaptists gave a much larger role in practice to the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer, and they emphasised that Jesus was to be followed as well as trusted, obeyed as well as relied upon.

The Church. The Anabaptists were committed to forming churches of committed disciples rather than accepting the parish system where everyone was regarded automatically as church members. They insisted on drawing a very clear line between believers and unbelievers, so that church membership was voluntary and meaningful. They acknowledged the role of the state in government but they rejected state control of their churches. They firmly rejected infant baptism as unbiblical, forcibly imposed on children and a hindrance to the development of genuine believers' churches. Two other features of state churches they criticised were clericalism and the absence of church discipline. The gatherings of many of their congregations were based on the principle set out in I Corinthians 14 – a favourite chapter – that every member has a contribution to make. Their meetings were sometimes charismatic and quite unstructured, but with an emphasis on Bible study. Women were encouraged to play a significant part in at least some of their churches.

Evangelism. The Reformers did not generally practise evangelism. Where they had secular support, the Reformers relied on state sanctions to coerce attendance. They assumed within Protestant territories that church and society were not distinct, and so their policy was to pastor people through the parish system, rather than to evangelise them as if they were unbelievers. Anabaptists rejected this interpretation of church and society and refused to use coercion. Instead, they embarked on a spontaneous and explosive missionary enterprise to evangelise Europe. They travelled widely, preached in homes and fields, baptized converts and planted churches.

Lifestyle. The Anabaptists were acknowledged, even by their critics, to live exemplary lives. Franz Agricola, a contemporary Roman Catholic, expressed confusion about how these 'heretics' behaved: 'As concerns their outward public life they are irreproachable. No lying, deception, swearing, strife, harsh language, no intemperate eating and drinking, no outward personal display, is found among them, but humility, patience, uprightness, neatness, honesty, temperance, straightforwardness in such measure that one would suppose that they had the Holy Spirit of God!' This witness by lifestyle attracted many converts but exasperated the authorities. Non-Anabaptists who lived upright lives were sometimes arrested on suspicion! The Reformers were embarrassed by the obvious differences between the moral standards of the Anabaptists and members of their own churches.

Nonconformity. Anabaptists aimed to be a deviant group within society, challenging contemporary norms and living under the authority of the Bible, in anticipation of the Kingdom of God. They questioned the validity of private property, violence and the swearing of oaths and taught the importance of:

- Sharing resources. Some groups practised community of goods. Most retained personal ownership, but all were clear that their possessions were not their own and should be readily available to help those in need. Each time they shared in communion they confirmed this commitment to each other. They practised mutual aid and challenged wealth, greed and injustice.
- Non-violence. Many Anabaptists refused to carry weapons, to go to war or to defend themselves by force. They urged love for enemies and respect for human life. Anabaptists accepted that the state would use force to govern, but they regarded this as inappropriate for Christians. Thus many taught that there was no role for Christians within government. Anabaptists aimed to build an alternative society, to change society from the bottom up.
- Truth-telling. Oaths were important in the sixteenth century to ensure truth-telling in the courts and to coerce loyalty from citizens to the state. Anabaptists frequently refused to take such oaths, on the basis of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5 and on the grounds that they should always be truthful, not just when under oath. Nor were they prepared to swear loyalty to any secular authority.

Suffering. Anabaptists were not surprised by the outbreak of persecution. They realised that they would be seen as revolutionaries, in spite of their commitment to non-violence; as heretics, despite their commitment to the Bible; and as upsetters of the status quo. They regarded suffering for the sake of obedience to Christ as both unavoidable and biblical: suffering was a mark of the true church, as Jesus had made clear in the Sermon on the Mount. If the Reformers resorted to persecuting them, this was a clear sign that the Reformers were not building a biblical church. The Anabaptist movement was drowned in blood in many parts of Europe, but their courageous martyrdoms attracted many people to their teachings – so much so that the authorities sometimes resorted to tongue-screws to silence Anabaptist on route to their execution.

Weaknesses and Challenges

There were significant weaknesses in the Anabaptist tradition, more apparent in some groups than others:

- Some groups tended towards legalism in their efforts to obey Christ's teaching.
- Some risked devaluing the Old Testament because of their determination to be Christ-centred.
- Some split into competing groups in the endless search for a truly pure church.
- Some pushed separation from society rather too far and had little vision for changing society for the better.
- Some of their convictions were not carefully worked out, as their leaders were often martyred before they had time to do this adequately.

But the Anabaptist tradition still provokes, inspires and challenges Christians to:

- Take Jesus seriously and refuse to dilute his teachings or shy away from his 'hard sayings'. We need to rediscover the uncomfortable and provocative Jesus of the Gospels rather than taking refuge in the doctrinal sections of the Epistles. Truly Christ-centred Christianity remains elusive in many churches today.
- Build churches which are really nonconformist and truly free; which encourage discipleship, mutual caring and economic radicalism; which embody different values from the society around; which welcome the poor and powerless; and which practise multi-voiced leadership and decision-making.
- Look carefully at issues of power, violence and warfare and how the churches should respond to these issues. Traditional teaching on these topics has been infected and distorted by the alliance of church and state that the Anabaptists rejected. It is time to look again at the biblical teaching on peace and peacemaking and the implications of this teaching for ways in which the church contributes to the search for justice.
- Identify, and work for the removal of, the many unhelpful vestiges of Christendom that remain in church and society. An Anabaptist perspective helps us identify and challenge the attitudes in our churches that are still governed by the ideal of a 'Christian society' rather than the idea of a free church in a plural society.
- Develop a coherent approach to the issues of persecution and suffering. In contemporary western society, privatised forms of faith are tolerated and persecution seems remote, whereas in many other places Christians are under extreme pressure. Anabaptism offers theological and pastoral insights, earthed in experience, on ways churches and Christians can respond to opposition.