

Comparative Christianity
by
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via
Zoom 5:30 – 6:30 pm



**Amish / Mennonite
Anabaptist Roots**

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Anabaptists

Anabaptist, (from Greek *ana*, “again”) member of a fringe, or radical, movement of the Protestant Reformation and spiritual ancestor of modern **Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers**. The movement’s most distinctive tenet was adult baptism. In its first generation, converts submitted to a second baptism, which was a crime punishable by death under the legal codes of the time. Members rejected the label Anabaptist, or Rebaptizer, for they repudiated their own baptism as infants as a blasphemous formality. They considered the public confession of sin and faith, sealed by adult baptism, to be the only proper baptism. Following the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, they held that infants and young children are not accountable for sin until they become aware of good and evil and can exercise their own free will, repent, and accept baptism.

The Anabaptists also believed that the church, the community of those who have made a public commitment of faith, should be separated from the state, which they believed existed only for the punishment of sinners. Most Anabaptists were pacifists who opposed war and the use of coercive measures to maintain the social order; they also refused to swear oaths, including those to civil authorities. For their teachings regarding baptism and for the apparent danger they posed to the political order, they were ubiquitously persecuted.

The Anabaptists, like most Protestant reformers, were determined to restore the institutions and spirit of the primitive church and often identified their suffering with that of the martyrs of the first three Christian centuries. Quite confident that they were living at the end of time, they expected the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

The vehemence and intransigence of the Anabaptist leaders and the revolutionary implications of their teaching led to their expulsion from one city after another. This simply increased the momentum of an essentially missionary movement. Soon civil magistrates took sterner measures, and most of the early Anabaptist leaders died in prison or were executed.

Despite increasing persecution, new Anabaptist communities and teachings emerged under new leaders. Balthasar Hubmaier (executed in Vienna in 1528) introduced Anabaptism to Moravia, whose ruling elite welcomed colonies of Anabaptists and other settlers. A unique type of Anabaptism, developed later in Moravia under the leadership of Jakob Hutter, stressed the common ownership of goods modeled on the primitive church in Jerusalem. The Hutterite colonies first established in Moravia survived the Reformation and are now located primarily in the western United States and Canada. Another important leader, Melchior Hofmann, established a large following in the Netherlands and inspired a number of disciples. He taught that the world would soon end and that the new age would begin in Strasbourg. He was imprisoned in that city in 1533 and died about 10 years later.

Some of Hofmann's followers, such as the Dutchman Jan Mathijs (died 1534) and John of Leiden (Jan Beuckelson; died 1536), and many persecuted Anabaptists settled in Münster, Westphalia. Hofmann's disciples were attracted to the city by dramatic changes that occurred there in the early 1530s. Under the influence of the reformer Bernhard Rothman, Anabaptist sentiment was strong enough there to elect an Anabaptist majority to the city council in 1533. This was followed, under the direction of Mathijs and John of Leiden, by the expulsion and persecution of all non-Anabaptists and the creation of a messianic kingdom under John of Leiden. The city was surrounded in 1534 by an army of Catholics and Protestants, which perhaps encouraged further reforms, including the common ownership of goods and polygamy, both with the declaration of biblical precedent. The city was captured in 1535, and the Anabaptist leaders were tortured and killed and their bodies hung in steel cages from the steeple of St. Lambert's church.

Historians regard the episode at Münster as an aberration of the Anabaptist movement. In the years following it, however, mainline Protestants and Catholics increased their persecution of Anabaptists throughout Europe without discriminating between the belligerent minority and the pacifist majority. The pacifist Anabaptists in the Netherlands and northern Germany rallied under the leadership of the former priest Menno Simons and his associate Dirk Philips. Their followers survived and were eventually accepted as the Mennonite church.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anabaptists>

Modern Anabaptist Fellowship

There are roughly four million Anabaptists in the world today with followers spread across all populated continents. In addition to many smaller Anabaptist groups, the largest include the **Mennonites** with 2.1 million, the German **Baptists** with 1.5 million, the **Amish** with 300 thousand and the **Hutterites** with 50 thousand.

In the modern day, there are significant cultural variations between conformed Anabaptists, who are not much different much from evangelicals or mainline Protestants, and traditional denominations like the Amish, the Old Colony **Mennonites**, the Hutterites, and the German Baptist Brethren.

The first Anabaptists of the early 16th century played a distinctive role; they were neither Catholic nor Protestant but a separate third force. That reality, now widely forgotten, must be emphasized.

Certainly, the Anabaptist founders owed much to Luther and the other Protestant reformers. In particular, Luther's emphasis on salvation— through personal faith, in

Christ alone, by grace, as revealed in Scripture—prepared the way. But on many other crucial issues, the Anabaptists differed as much from Luther as Luther did from Roman Catholicism.

While giving Luther his due, we do well to remember some historical realities. Luther, as well as Calvin and Zwingli, came to harshly oppose the Anabaptists. In fact, of the 20,000 to 40,000 Anabaptists martyred in the early decades, likely more were massacred by Protestants than by Catholics.

The differences between Anabaptists and the Reformers ran deep. Luther, Calvin, and their associates wanted reformation of the medieval church. The Anabaptists wanted restoration of the New Testament church.

The reformers looked to the state to defend the establishment of an official religion. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, sought no government endorsement.

The reformers asserted that all people in the realm should conform to the official state religion. The Anabaptists, however, long before philosophers promoted the idea, proclaimed religious and civil liberty for all.

The reformers retained much of the Catholic church-state fusion of that day. The Anabaptists, who saw themselves as strangers and pilgrims in this world, rejected any fusion of faith and citizenship. The church of which they testified and for which they died was based on Jesus Christ alone and knew no state boundaries.

The reformers specifically endorsed military slaughter by Christian soldiers. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, expressed love for their persecutors and prayed for them.

The reformers fragmented and compartmentalized Christian living. Luther wrote, “As a Christian, man has to suffer everything and not resist anybody. As a member of the State, the same man has to fight with joy, as long as he lives.” The Anabaptists rejected such ethical dualism.

The point has been made. The Anabaptists were not part of the great Protestant Reformation but established a third option. They upheld distinct values.

Today, of course, many other groups have accepted much of what the Anabaptists rediscovered, and the differences between Protestantism and Anabaptism have decreased. But the total set of Anabaptist beliefs and practices remains distinctive. Even though the privileged heirs of Anabaptism have often not practised and preached it consistently, Anabaptism remains a unique blend of basic biblical principles.

Twelve Key Principles

We do well to call ourselves back to the basics, even as we acknowledge that Anabaptists do not possess a corner on the truth. Clearly, on certain emphases, others can teach us much. We, in turn, present our Anabaptist understanding, which encompasses 12 key principles.

1. A high view of the Bible.

While not worshipping the Bible itself, which would be bibliolatry, Anabaptists accept “the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God, and through the Holy Spirit...the infallible guide to lead men to faith in Christ and to guide them in the life of Christian discipleship.” Anabaptists insist that Christians must be guided by the Word, inspired by the Spirit within the community illumined by the Spirit.

2. Emphasis on the New Testament.

Since Christ is God’s supreme revelation, Anabaptists make a clear functional distinction between the equally inspired Old and New Testaments. We see both an old and new covenant. We read the Old from the perspective of the New and see the New as the fulfillment of the Old. The Old Testament should be interpreted in light of God’s final revelation in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. Anabaptist ethics are learned first from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, then the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and the entire Bible.

3. Emphasis on Jesus as central to all else.

Anabaptists derive their Christology directly from the Word and emphasize a deep commitment to take Jesus seriously in all matters of life. Such a view runs counter to notions that the commands of Jesus are too difficult for ordinary believers or that Jesus' significance lies almost entirely in providing heavenly salvation. Rather, salvation of the soul is part of a larger transformation.

4. The necessity of a believer's church.

Anabaptists believe that Christian conversion, while not necessarily sudden and traumatic, always involves a conscious decision. "Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Believing that an infant can have no conscious, intelligent faith in Christ, Anabaptists baptize only those who have come to a personal, living faith. Voluntary baptism, together with a commitment to walk in the full newness of life and to strive for purity in the church, constitutes the basis of church membership.

5. The importance of discipleship.

Becoming a Christian involves belief in not only Christ but also discipleship. Faith is expressed in holy living. In Christ, salvation and ethics come together. Not only are we to be saved through Christ, but we are also to follow him daily in obedient living. Thus, for example, Anabaptists from the beginning renounced the oath. They determined to speak truth. "For them there could be no gradations of truth-telling." Anabaptists continue to teach that salvation makes us followers of Jesus Christ and that he is the model for the way we are to live.

6. Insistence on a church without classes or divisions.

The church—the body of Christ—has only one head. While acknowledging functional diversity, Anabaptist believers set aside all racial, ethnic, class, and sex distinctions because these are subsumed in the unity and equality of the body.

7. Belief in the church as a covenant community.

Corporate worship, mutual aid, fellowship, and mutual accountability characterize this community. An individualistic or self-centred Anabaptism is a contradiction in terms.

8. Separation from the world.

The community of the transformed belongs to the kingdom of God. It functions in the world but is radically separate from the world. The faithful pilgrim church sees the sinful world as an alien environment with thoroughly different ethics and goals. This principle includes separation of church and state. Therefore, Anabaptists reject all forms of civil religion, be it the traditional *Corpus Christianum* or more recently developed forms of Christian nationalism.

9. The church as a visible counterculture.

As a united fellowship of believers, every Anabaptist congregation models an alternative community. Such a covenant community functions as an authentic counterculture.

10. Belief that the gospel includes a commitment to the way of peace modelled by the Prince of Peace.

Here, Anabaptists differ from many other Christians. Anabaptists believe that the peace position is neither optional, marginal, nor related mainly to the military. On the basis of Scripture, Anabaptists renounce violence in human relationships. We see peace and reconciliation—the way of love—as being at the heart of the Christian gospel. God gave his followers this ethic not as a point to ponder, but as a command to obey. It was costly for Jesus and it may also be costly for his followers. The way of peace is a way of life.

11. Commitment to servanthood.

Just as Christ came to be a servant to all, so Christians should also serve one another and others in the name of Christ. Thus, separation from a sinful world is balanced by a witness of practical assistance to a needy and hurting society.

12. Insistence on the church as a missionary church.

Anabaptists believe that Christ has commissioned the church to go into all the world and all of society and to make disciples of all people, baptizing them and teaching them to observe his commandments. The evangelistic imperative is given to all believers.

These principles constitute the essence of Anabaptism. While each emphasis can be found elsewhere, the combination of all 12 comprises the uniqueness of Anabaptism.

<https://www.christianity.com/church/denominations/who-are-anabaptists-learn-the-origins-and-history-of-anabaptism.html>