

# *The Anabaptists*

## I. Who Are the Anabaptists?

### A. Meaning of Name

1. “Anabaptist” = “Re-baptizer”
2. Rejected infant baptism
3. Misc. “catch-all” of the Reformation

### B. The “Radical Reformation”

1. Label popularized by George Williams
2. Thorough, even extreme, reformers
  - a. Seen to go beyond Luther and Reformed
  - b. Labeled “extremists” by society
  - c. Actually “radicalism” depends on point under discussion

### C. Theories of Origin

1. From Pre-Reformation Era
  - a. Part of the Protestant succession from Middle Ages
  - b. From Catholic pietistic reform movements
2. From Reformation Era
  - a. “Polygenesis” (James Stayer): Multiple, almost spontaneous origin from socio-economic causes
  - b. Radicalization of the Reformation of Zwingli in Zurich

### D. Groups

1. Revolutionary Anabaptists
  - a. Professed violence, revolution, millennial extremism
  - b. Example: Münster fanaticism
  - c. Part of extreme fringe—but still part of movement
2. Spiritual (Mystical) Anabaptists
  - a. Mystical teaching
    - 1) Stress inner leading of the Holy Spirit
    - 2) Downplay Scripture for direct communion w/ God
    - 3) Hermeneutical problem: “Excessive experience”
  - b. Examples: Zwickau Prophets, Caspar Schwenkfeld
3. Rationalist Anabaptists
  - a. Ideas
    - 1) Stress role of human reason in interpreting Bible
    - 2) Unitarian: Christ simply a great man
    - 3) Hermeneutical problem: “Excessive reason”
  - b. Leaders (Unitarian)
    - 1) Michael Servetus
    - 2) Lelio and Fausto Socinus (Socinians)
4. Evangelical Anabaptists
  - a. Sought to be regulated by the Bible
  - b. Leaders: Conrad Grebel, Balthasar Hübmaier; Menno Simons
  - c. Several Branches
    - 1) Originally centered in Switzerland and southern Germany
    - 2) Spread throughout Europe but diverse
  - d. Bible/Gospel oriented

- 1) “Evangelical” reflects “gospel” orientation
- 2) Common focus on Sermon on the Mount
- 3) Hermeneutical strength: Reliance on text of Scripture

## II. Theology of the Evangelical Anabaptists

### A. Considerations

1. No single authoritative leader
2. Did theology “on the run”
3. Oriented toward outward, practical church life (e.g., Schleitheim Confession)
4. Tension between “reformation” (Zwingli) and “restoration” (Anabaptists)
  - a. Anabaptists: Restore New Testament church, not reform RCC
  - b. “Primitivist”
5. Major Theme: Nonresistance
  - a. Drawn from the Sermon on the Mount
  - b. Advocated pacifism, opposed capital punishment, said Christians should not vote or hold office
  - c. Reason for being viewed as radical & revolutionary

### B. The Church

1. Thrust: “anti-Constantinian” (Olson)
2. Simple worship (almost no liturgy or church decoration)
3. Gathered Church concept
  - a. Church “gathered out” from society
  - b. Membership/association is voluntary
  - c. Opposed inclusive state churches
4. Government (Polity)
  - a. Practiced congregational polity
  - b. Strong emphasis on community, making the church a society w/in society
5. Church discipline
  - a. “The Ban”: Excluding unworthy members from the congregation according to procedures set down in Scripture
  - b. Shunning: Avoiding almost all social intercourse with those under the ban
6. Separation of church and state
  - a. Principle: State should have no involvement with the church
  - b. Often called “soul liberty”
    - 1) Stresses idea as a religious rather than political
    - 2) Religious belief & practice cannot be coerced; must come from the heart

### C. Ordinances

1. Believer’s Baptism
  - a. Baptism is the entrance to the church
  - b. Did not necessarily immerse (at least at first) but did insist on believer’s baptism
  - c. Baptism a sign of regeneration (& must be preceded by regeneration)
  - d. Reinforced their idea of voluntary association w/ the church
2. Lord’s Supper
  - a. Simple ceremony
  - b. Followed Zwinglian memorial view
  - c. Also stressed unity of church body
3. Some practiced footwashing

#### D. Soteriology

1. Debated point: accusation of “conservative Reformation”
2. Olson defines them as “anti-Augustinian”
  - a. Strong on authority of Bible & priesthood of believers
  - b. Affirmed justification by faith alone but understood it differently (i.e., not forensically)
3. Some denied inherited depravity (man’s utter helplessness apart from grace)
  - a. Arminians before Arminius?
  - b. Questioned Luther’s approach to justification alone as inimical to good works
4. Some questioned justification as imputation of Christ’s righteousness to sinner
  - a. Did not use the Catholic language of infused righteousness
  - b. But refused to talk about salvation w/ no connection to good works
5. Did Anabaptists differ from other reformers on question of justification?
  - a. Certainly used different language on occasion
  - b. But often not discussed (among early writers)

#### E. The Christian and Culture

1. “Christ against culture”
  - a. Church is distinct not only from state but also from society
  - b. Human culture (“the world”) antithetical to Christianity, so that Christians must escape from culture and be “countercultural”
  - c. Viewed as culturally separatist (cf. Amish)
2. Harold Bender’s “Anabaptist Vision”
  - a. A new conception of Christianity as discipleship
  - b. A new conception of the church as a brotherhood
  - c. A new ethic of love and nonresistance

#### F. Leading Theologians

1. Balthasar Hübmaier
  - a. “Greatest intellectual” of the movement
  - b. Major writer on baptism: Threefold baptism
    - 1) Spirit baptism (conversion, “internal baptism”)
    - 2) Water baptism (public confession)
    - 3) Baptism of blood (sanctification, or “mortification of the flesh”)
  - c. More moderate on view of government: Could fight in war w/ just cause, be a Christian magistrate, allowed capital punishment
2. Menno Simons
  - a. Saved the Anabaptists by bringing discipline and order to their movement.
  - b. Viewed the church as a persecuted minority
  - c. Espoused amillennialism & established it as the more standard Anabaptist position
  - d. Clearly established pacifism & nonresistance as Anabaptist distinctives.
  - e. Also known for his doctrine of the “celestial flesh” of Christ
    - 1) His body prepared in heaven, not derived from Mary.
    - 2) Like the Catholic idea of the immaculate conception of Mary, it was to help explain how Christ could be sinless.
    - 3) A controversial teaching & few Anabaptists followed him on this point.

#### G. Anabaptist Descendants

1. Mennonites
  - a. Mainstream groups (often liberal)
  - b. Old Order Mennonites (traditional)
  - c. Amish (late 1600s, strong on shunning)
  - d. Mennonite Brethren: Origin in Russia, most overtly evangelical (D. Edmond Hiebert)
2. Hutterites: Communal group (Russia, Canada, Great Plains)
3. German Brethren (Dunkers)—Parent group of Grace Brethren (Charis Fellowship)
4. Question of Baptist links debated