

# **Anabaptism – re-monking the church after Christendom**

## **A. Introduction**

1. The purpose of this session is to introduce the Anabaptist tradition to those who may be unfamiliar with it and then to ask what relevance this tradition has to today's subject – 'new habits for a new era' – the rediscovery of monastic resources to sustain discipleship and Christian community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
2. Members of the Northumbria Community find inspiration in the example and writings of the desert fathers and mothers and also in the Celtic churches and their distinctive form of missionary monasticism. The link with older forms of monasticism is explicit. But the Anabaptist Network is less obviously linked with the monastic tradition.
3. However, many emerging churches and other groups exploring 'new monasticism' are drawing today on both Celtic Christianity and the Anabaptist tradition.<sup>1</sup>
4. So who were the Anabaptists and what has Anabaptism got to do with monasticism – old or new? The story begins in the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

## **B. The Anabaptist Movement**

1. By the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Western Europe had been officially Christian for over 1000 years, dominated by a powerful alliance between the Catholic Church and the state. This was the system known as Christendom – imperial Christianity.
2. Although there had been occasional protest movements over the centuries, these had been persecuted and silenced. Christendom was a historical era, a geographical area, a political arrangement, an ideology and mindset.
3. But in the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe was shaken by social and religious upheaval. In 1517 an Augustinian monk, Martin Luther, outraged by corruption in the church, published his *95 Theses*, a set of demands for reform, nailing these to a church door in Wittenburg. A reform movement grew and, unlike previous protest movements, it gained political support and several states officially adopted it, breaking their ties with the Catholic Church. Christendom was divided into competing religious states.
4. A few years later, encouraged by this impetus for reform, peasant leaders in several German-speaking areas issued their demands for economic and social justice. During 1523 and 1524, the peasants campaigned to dismantle centuries of feudalism and bring long overdue social and economic reforms – until they were disowned by Martin Luther and crushed by massive military action.

5. It was in this fraught context that the Anabaptist movement emerged. In cities, towns and villages across Europe new churches were planted, free from state control, and new expressions of Christian discipleship and community began to take root.

(a) Some early Anabaptists were hoping for the transformation of society and increasing social justice, despite the failure of the peasants' movement.

(b) Others were becoming frustrated with Luther and the other Reformers and pushed for faster and more radical reform.

6. Between 1525 and 1535 this movement spread like wildfire throughout Switzerland, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands. What were its distinctive practices and beliefs?

- The need for conversion – challenging the notion of a Christian culture
- Baptism is for believers and implies accountability to the community
- Multi-voiced church life – challenging the dependence on the clergy
- Economic sharing – simple living and responsibility for others
- Non-violence and an active commitment to peaceful living
- Truth-telling and a rejection of oath-swearing
- The centrality of Jesus and his call to serious discipleship
- Acceptance that suffering and persecution were normal for Christians
- The freedom of churches from state control or interference
- A wholehearted rejection of the Christendom system

7. *Do you hear any echoes here of the monastic tradition?*

8. Their Protestant contemporaries certainly did, accusing them frequently of being monkish or even 'new monastics'! Luther accused them of having a 'monkish' life and doctrine<sup>2</sup>, and Zwingli claimed Anabaptists were 'restoring a full monkish system.'<sup>3</sup> The Reformers:

(a) Were concerned at their emphasis upon discipleship that sounded like a return to salvation by works.

(b) Noted the influence of medieval monasticism and asceticism

(c) Recognised the typically monastic emphasis on integration between the inner life and the outer life.

9. The Anabaptists were profoundly threatening to Catholics and Protestants alike. Their theology, ethical commitments, convictions about church and practice of mission were distinctive and undermined social and religious norms. Persecution broke out and forced the movement to migrate or go underground; thousands were imprisoned, tortured and executed.

10. Anabaptism has never flourished in Britain. Some refugees reached London but were arrested, imprisoned and executed or deported. But the fear of Anabaptism ensured that the movement is named in the foundational document of the Anglican Church. The 38<sup>th</sup> Article reads:

‘The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast; notwithstanding every man ought of such things as he possesseth liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.’

11. But in the past 30 years growing numbers of Christians from various traditions have rediscovered Anabaptism and have found its insights inspiring and challenging.

12. Maybe this is because the Christendom system is disintegrating and a tradition that has critiqued this for nearly 500 years and has developed alternative models of mission, church, discipleship and spirituality has much to offer.

13. The title of this session is ‘re-monking the church after Christendom’. The emerging culture of post-Christendom is characterised by seven transitions:

- *From the centre to margins*: in Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- *From majority to minority*: in Christendom Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
- *From settlers to sojourners*: in Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
- *From privilege to plurality*: in Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
- *From control to witness*: in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.
- *From maintenance to mission*: in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
- *From institution to movement*: in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must become again a Christian movement.

14. This is a context in which as Christians we will need to dig deep and find resources to be followers of Jesus in a culture that offers little support and plenty of disincentives. The new monasticism movement is a search for such resources.

### **C. Anabaptism and Monasticism**

1. What links are there, then, between Anabaptism and monasticism?

2. There were some personal links. Some founding Anabaptists were former monks (e.g. Michael Sattler, Leonard Schiemer) who were influenced by late medieval monastic reform movements and wanted to work these principles out in voluntary communities.

3. But more significant are shared convictions and practices:

- Conversion. Joining a monastery was called ‘conversion’, because it connoted a choice of costly discipleship, rather than culture-Christianity. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after many centuries of culture-Christianity, Anabaptists recovered the notion of conversion.
- Anabaptists practised believers’ baptism to mark conversion. Monastic vows were sometimes referred to as a ‘second baptism’.
- The monastic movement began as a protest against the growing worldliness of the church in the early years of Christendom. It formed separate communities of those who wanted to take seriously the teachings of Jesus. Centuries later, Anabaptists formed communities of would-be disciples, captivated by the teachings of Jesus.
- Like the monastic tradition, Anabaptists were committed to economic radicalism. As the 38<sup>th</sup> Article testifies, they relativised private property and practised either mutual aid or holding all things in common.
- Like the early monastic communities, Anabaptists preached and practised non-violence.
- Just as the Celtic monasteries sent out their missionary monks on journeys across Europe, so the Anabaptist communities in Moravia sent out missionaries to preach and baptise across Europe, knowing many would never return.

4. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Protestant Reformers rejected the two-tier Christianity that had developed during the Christendom era – dissolving the monasteries to remove the top tier. Anabaptists also rejected two-tier Christianity but abolished the lower tier, calling all Christians to radical discipleship – a lay monastic movement.

5. What encouragements or resources can the Anabaptist tradition offer to those who are exploring new monasticism today? What might re-monking the church after Christendom mean?

- Hundreds of stories – Anabaptism is a story-rich tradition – of Christians who have attempted to follow Jesus as serious disciples, despite the cost of this, and whose lives impressed their persecutors.
- An in-depth critique of the Christendom mindset that continues to pervade the churches and insights on various issues that we will need to renegotiate in post-Christendom.
- An insistent focus on Jesus as the one we follow and whose life and teaching is our example and guide. The monastic tradition is not always focused on Jesus in this way – sometimes Jesus is marginalised or the object of pietistic devotion.
- Integration of spirituality and discipleship. Arnold Snyder, Anabaptist historian, writes: ‘It is because Anabaptism echoed many elements of the monastic understanding of the “holy life” that was supposed to follow true faith that they related social, economic and ethical issues directly to the “spiritual life”...The living of a life of discipleship became paramount, just as it had been in the monastic traditions.’

- Ethical non-conformity. In a violent, image-driven and consumerist culture, the Anabaptist practices of non-violence, truth-telling and generous simplicity are distinctive, winsome and powerful. Re-monking the church after Christendom is about counter-cultural living.
- A commitment to accountability in community, which is counter-cultural in our individualistic culture. If new monasticism only imports liturgical practices from monasticism and ignores accountability, this will not amount to re-monking. In fact, within emerging churches there are real danger of irresponsible pillaging of ancient practices without appreciating their significance and dangers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Mark Husbands & Jeffrey Greenman: *Ancient Faith for the Church's Future* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008) and Paul Dekar: *Community of the Transfiguration* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In the Preface to his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount.

<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Zwingli: *Of Baptism* in G W Bromiley (Ed.): *Zwingli and Bullinger* (London: SCM Press, 1953), 148.