

## Courses

There are now opportunities to explore Anabaptism and Anabaptist perspectives on various topics through a range of courses offered by different members of the 'Root and Branch' consortium or other groups, including:

**Workshop:** 104 Townend Lane, Deepcar, Sheffield S36 2TS (0114 288 8816)

E-mail: [admin@anvil.org.uk](mailto:admin@anvil.org.uk)

Website: [www.workshop.org.uk](http://www.workshop.org.uk)

A year-long in-depth Christian studies programme operating in several centres across the country.

**Crucible:** PO Box 35238, London E1 0YA

E-mail: [enquiries@urbanexpression.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@urbanexpression.org.uk)

Website: [www.cruciblecourse.net](http://www.cruciblecourse.net)

Three weekends and a placement exploring church planting, urban mission and emerging church issues.

**Peace School:** 4 Park Avenue, Pudsey, Leeds LS28 7TE

E-mail: [info@peaceschool.org.uk](mailto:info@peaceschool.org.uk)

Website: [www.peaceschool.org.uk](http://www.peaceschool.org.uk)

A summer school and three weekends, plus dispersed learning, on issues of peacemaking.

**MTh in Radical Free Church Studies:** Spurgeon's College, 189 South Norwood Hill, London SE25 6DJ (020 8653 0850)

E-mail: [enquiries@spurgeons.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@spurgeons.ac.uk)

Website: [www.spurgeons.ac.uk](http://www.spurgeons.ac.uk)

An opportunity to explore Anabaptism and other movements in the radical free church tradition at postgraduate level.

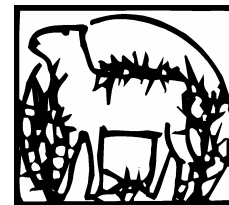
## Anabaptism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Why are many Christians in Britain (and elsewhere across western culture) interested in a nearly 500-year-old renewal movement that flourished briefly in central Europe before being dispersed by persecution? What can the long-neglected and much-maligned Anabaptist tradition offer to Christians at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

The burgeoning interest in Anabaptism during the past 50 years has coincided with the availability of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Anabaptist writings in English translations. Reading their own words, rather than relying on the accusations of their opponents, has changed the way many historians now tell the Anabaptist story.

But this growing interest is not just among historians. It has also coincided with the demise of the Christendom era and the emergence of the strange new world of post-Christendom, in which mainstream Christian traditions are struggling.

Christians on the margins of western culture are beginning to wonder, it seems, whether some of the marginal Christian movements of the past might be helpful in this new context. Anabaptism, which rejected the Christendom system as deeply flawed and explored alternative approaches to discipleship, church and mission, is an obvious candidate for rediscovery.



The Anabaptist Network began in 1991 in response to this growing interest in order to offer resources for Christians (and others) to investigate the Anabaptist tradition. Study groups, conferences, a

journal, newsletters and an extensive website have provided various opportunities for people to encounter and explore Anabaptism. In 2005 the first book in the 'After Christendom' series was published by Paternoster, a developing series written from the perspective of the Anabaptist tradition.

## **Anabaptism: A Brief History**

On the evening of 21 January, 1525, less than eight years after the start of the Protestant Reformation, a group of Christians met in a house in Zurich, Switzerland, to talk and pray together. They had been associates of Ulrich Zwingli, minister of the main city church in Zurich, who was taking steps to reform the Swiss churches. But they were now deeply troubled by his seeming unwillingness to follow through on teachings of the Bible on a number of issues, not least the baptism of believers rather than infants.

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 words, the Hutterian Chronicle reports an incident which was not only the first recorded instance of believers' baptism in the Reformation; it was also the beginning of what became known as the Anabaptist movement and of nonconformist Christianity which separated the church from state coercion.

This movement developed as a broad coalition of groups in various parts of Europe, with different points of origin and some different theological and spiritual emphases, but also with much in common. There were four main groups of Anabaptists, although there were many other smaller groupings.

Members of the 'Root and Branch' consortium include:

***The Anabaptist Network:*** 14 Shepherd's Hill, Highgate, London N6 5AQ (0845 450 0214)

Email: [enquiries@anabaptistnetwork.com](mailto:enquiries@anabaptistnetwork.com)

Website: [www.anabaptistnetwork.com](http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com)

The Anabaptist Network offers free newsletters three times a year by post or email.

***London Mennonite Centre, Metanoia Book Service and Bridge Builders:*** 14 Shepherd's Hill, Highgate, London N6 5AQ (0845 450 0214)

E-mails: [lmc@menno.org.uk](mailto:lmc@menno.org.uk); [metanoia@menno.org.uk](mailto:metanoia@menno.org.uk) and

[bridgebuilders@menno.org.uk](mailto:bridgebuilders@menno.org.uk)

Website: [www.menno.org.uk](http://www.menno.org.uk); [www.metanoiabooks.org.uk](http://www.metanoiabooks.org.uk)

The London Mennonite Centre offers information and news twice a year. Metanoia offers updated catalogues of books on Anabaptist and related subjects. Bridge Builders is concerned with training people in conflict transformation

***Urban Expression:*** PO Box 35238, London E1 0YA

E-mail: [enquiries@urbanexpression.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@urbanexpression.org.uk)

Website: [www.urbanexpression.org.uk](http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk)

Urban Expression, an inner-city church planting agency, offers free newsletters three times a year by post or email.

***Ekklesia:*** 21 Tooting Bec Gardens, London SW16 1QY (020 8769 8163)

Email: [info@ekkleisia.co.uk](mailto:info@ekkleisia.co.uk)

Website: [www.ekkleisia.co.uk](http://www.ekkleisia.co.uk)

Ekklesia, a Christian political think tank, offers a free daily news bulletin by email.

## Exploring the Anabaptist Tradition: Resources

### Books

There is a growing library of books written about the Anabaptist movement and by contemporary Anabaptists. These offer a helpful introduction to Anabaptism and its relevance to a post-Christendom world:

Bartley, Jonathan: *Faith and Politics after Christendom* (Paternoster, 2006)

Estep, William: *The Anabaptist Story* (Eerdmans, 1996)

Klaassen, Walter: *Anabaptism in Outline* (Herald Press, 1981)

Kreider, Eleanor: *Given for You: A Fresh Look at Communion* (IVP, 1998)

Murray, Stuart: *Post-Christendom* (Paternoster, 2004)

Murray, Stuart: *Church after Christendom* (Paternoster, 2005)

Pearse, Meic: *The Great Restoration: The Religious Radicals of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Paternoster, 1998)

Snyder, C Arnold: *Anabaptist History and Theology* (Pandora Press, 1995)

Snyder, C Arnold: *From Anabaptist Seed* (Pandora Press, 1999)

Snyder, C Arnold: *Following in the Footsteps of Christ* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004)

Weaver, J Denny: *Becoming Anabaptist* (Herald Press, 1987)

Williams, George H: *The Radical Reformation* (Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992)

### Organisations

There are several organisations in Britain that have distinctively Anabaptist values, some more explicitly than others. These include various groups working together under the auspices of the 'Root and Branch' consortium, from whom a monthly email is available.

## Switzerland

**George Blaurock** and **Conrad Grebel**, along with **Felix Manz**, were the early leaders of the movement in Zurich.



George Blaurock



Conrad Grebel



Felix Manz

They were opposed by Zwingli and the secular authorities, but spread their convictions with tremendous success in the villages around Zurich. In part this success was due to strong anti-clerical feeling and general discontent among the peasants, who had been challenging economic and clerical abuses.

Revival broke out as people experienced deep repentance and sensed the power of God breaking into their lives. In Zollikon, a village near Zurich, the first free church of the Reformation was formed. In the next few years the movement spread widely, secretly and against a background of persecution, but rapidly as converts travelled widely, preaching, baptising and planting new churches.

Other key leaders in Switzerland were **Michael Sattler**, a former Catholic prior, and **Balthasar Hubmaier**, a Catholic priest who was baptised with over 300 of his congregation. Hubmaier was the most able theologian in the new movement – his writings were banned by the Catholics alongside those of Luther and Calvin. Sattler was the author of the *Schleitheim Confession*, a summary of Anabaptist convictions on seven crucial issues, agreed at a conference in 1527, just two years after the emergence of the movement.



Michael Sattler



Bathasar Hubmaier

### Austria and South Germany

At roughly the same time, in various places in Austria and southern Germany, other groups emerged who shared similar views about the need for a more radical reformation of the Catholic Church than the official Protestant Reformation was achieving.

These groups tended to be both more socially engaged and more consciously reliant on the direction of the Holy Spirit than the Swiss groups – where obedience to the Bible was paramount.

There was tremendous discontent in these areas following the failure of the recent Peasants' Revolt, and the same anti-clerical feeling as in Switzerland.

Leaders who found a ready hearing for their Anabaptist views included **Pilgram Marpeck**, an engineer and one of the clearest teachers in the movement, and two men named Hans: **Hans Hut**, a fiery evangelist under whose ministry thousands were converted, and **Hans Denck**, sometimes known as the 'apostle of love' because of his emphasis on love and his attempt to build bridges between parties in a deeply divided age.

3. Western culture is slowly emerging from the Christendom era when church and state jointly presided over a society in which almost all were assumed to be Christian. Whatever its positive contributions on values and institutions, Christendom seriously distorted the gospel, marginalised Jesus and has left the churches ill-equipped for mission in a post-Christendom culture.

As we reflect on this, we are committed to learning from the experience and perspectives of movements such as Anabaptism that rejected standard Christendom assumptions and pursued alternative ways of thinking and behaving.

4. The frequent association of the church with status, wealth and force is inappropriate for followers of Jesus and damages our witness. We are committed to vulnerability and to exploring ways of being good news to the poor, powerless and persecuted, aware that such discipleship may attract opposition, resulting in suffering and sometimes ultimately martyrdom.

5. Churches are called to be committed communities of discipleship and mission, places of friendship, mutual accountability and multi-voiced worship. As we eat together, sharing bread and wine, we sustain hope as we seek God's kingdom together. We are committed to nurturing and developing such churches, in which young and old are valued, leadership is consultative, roles are related to gifts rather than gender and baptism is for believers.

6. Spirituality and economics are inter-connected. In an individualist and consumerist culture and in a world where economic injustice is rife, we are committed to finding ways of living simply, sharing generously, caring for creation and working for justice.

7. Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to finding non-violent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society and between nations.

their convictions have stood the test of time and seem in many ways more relevant today than some of the ideas of their more illustrious contemporaries.

The Anabaptists provided an alternative to Christendom – a protest centuries-old against the alliance between church and state, church and power, church and coercion, church and wealth. Their challenge was so far-reaching and troubling that it seemed quite justifiable to kill them and to vilify their memory.

But they laid a foundation for the free churches by showing it was possible to take Jesus at his word and to pattern their lives and their churches on the New Testament.

## Anabaptist Network Core Convictions

In light of our understanding of the Anabaptist tradition and of the contemporary challenges Christians face today in western culture, the Anabaptist Network has developed a statement of convictions and commitments, which we offer as a resource for reflection and action.

This has seven sections and (in typical Anabaptist style) is subject to revision as our understanding of Jesus and his kingdom grows:

1. Jesus is our example, teacher, friend, redeemer and Lord. He is the source of our life, the central reference point for our faith and lifestyle, for our understanding of church and our engagement with society. We are committed to following Jesus as well as worshipping him.

2. Jesus is the focal point of God's revelation. We are committed to a Jesus-centred approach to the Bible, and to the community of faith as the primary context in which we read the Bible and discern and apply its implications for discipleship.



Hans Hut



Hans Denck

## The Netherlands

A third area where Anabaptism developed was the Netherlands. The initial thrust was achieved by **Melchior Hoffmann**, a charismatic figure with some views not shared by most other Anabaptists (e.g., on biblical interpretation and the nature of Christ's human body).



Melchior Hoffman

In the Netherlands there was already a major controversy over the nature of communion, and it was into this turmoil that Hoffmann came with teaching that offered an attractive and simpler alternative.

Sadly, there was not always the wise leadership necessary to guide this movement. In 1534-35 a disaster occurred, which convinced the Anabaptists' adversaries that they were right to persecute them as dangerous subversives.

In the north German town of Munster a group of Anabaptists, many of them from the Netherlands, gained control of the city council. They instituted sweeping and violent reforms, using Old Testament laws as their mandate, and introduced both polygamy and capital punishment for minor legal infringements. Following a prolonged siege by troops under the command of the local bishop, the town was captured and the inhabitants massacred.



Photograph copyright [www.reformationhappens.com](http://www.reformationhappens.com)

Iron cages in which the bodies of rebel leaders were displayed still hang from the tower of St Lambert's Church in Munster today as a macabre tourist attraction.

### *Discipleship and service*



### *The priesthood of all believers*



### *Peacemaking*



Many share these convictions without realising the debt they owe to the pioneering Anabaptists. They were persecuted into seeming insignificance and their views were rubbished by their enemies. But

*Evangelism and church planting*



*Believers' churches and believers' baptism*



*The separation of church and state*



Dutch Anabaptism survived largely due to the patient rebuilding and wise leadership of **Menno Simons** (from whom the Mennonites are named) and **Dirk Philips**, who rejected the Munster debacle as a tragic aberration, contrary to the spirit of Christ and inconsistent with true Christianity or Anabaptism.



Menno Simons

**Moravia**

The fourth main branch of the movement was the communitarian Hutterites, who practised a radical community of goods and formed tight-knit village communities.



They sent out hundreds of missionaries across Europe, many of whom were martyred. Their communitarian stance may have begun partly as a necessity to survive under persecution, as the community was forced to uproot and move ever further east from Germany towards Moravia. But it also expressed their concern to carry on the tradition of the recently suppressed peasants' movement of working for justice for poor people. This became a passionate conviction.

Significant early leaders included **Peter Rideman** and **Jacob Hutter**, from whom the community took its name. This remarkable movement has practised a community lifestyle for over 450 years.

### **Growth and Persecution**

The period of rapid growth of Anabaptism extended from 1525 until about 1540. Thousands joined the movement throughout central Europe and their missionaries penetrated into Eastern Europe, Italy and England.

But already by this time sustained persecution was decimating the small congregations, which met in the woods, in isolated houses or even in boats.



- 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.

### *Contributions of the Anabaptists*

On many issues Anabaptists were ahead of their time and unable to persuade their contemporaries to explore alternatives to the way in which the Christian faith was understood and expressed during the Christendom era. Their ideas and practices did have some impact on other churches and on wider society, even if this impact has not been acknowledged until quite recently.

But as this Christendom era comes to an end and western Christians find themselves on the margins of society in the way the Anabaptists were, many Christians from different traditions now share the views of the Anabaptist tradition on a range of issues such as:



### *Weaknesses of the Anabaptists*

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.

### *Challenges from the Anabaptists*

Butt 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.

Leaders received particularly harsh treatment. **Bolt Eberli** was the first Swiss Anabaptist to be martyred by Catholics; Felix Manz was the first to be martyred by Protestants. These men were followed shortly by Hubmaier, Hut and Sattler. Grebel died of the plague before he was apprehended by the authorities.

Few Anabaptist leaders lived for long. Of the main first-generation leaders only Marpeck, Simons and Philips survived to mid-century.

One of the very few things on which most Protestants and Catholics agreed at this time was the persecution of Anabaptists! As a rule, Catholics burned them, but Protestants drowned or beheaded them.



What led to this unusual agreement and such hostility towards the Anabaptists?

Many accusations were brought against them, but what threatened Catholics and Protestants alike was their insistence that church and state should be quite separate and that Europe was not the Christian civilisation that it had been assumed to be for over a thousand years.

This position undermined the sacral society that Europe had become and was widely regarded as seditious as well as heretical.

## Over the Centuries

The subsequent history of Anabaptism over the next four centuries is a story 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.

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, and the communal Hutterites. Baptists are divided as to the extent of the influence of Anabaptists on their origins, 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

their teachings – so much so that the authorities sometimes resorted to tongue-screws to silence Anabaptists on route to their execution. In this picture 15-year-old Adriaen searches through the ashes to find the tongue-screw used on his mother, **Maeyken Wens**.



Hubmaier spoke for all Anabaptists when he said: ‘Truth is immortal. You may burn a man to death for heresy, but if he believes the truth, you have not destroyed it.’

## The Contemporary Significance of Anabaptism

What is the contemporary significance of this Anabaptist tradition? Despite the growing interest in recent years, this remains a minority tradition within the churches in western societies. But we believe it has a distinctive and important contribution to make, especially as post-Christendom advances.

The Anabaptist tradition is far from perfect. It had – and still has – weaknesses. But it has made some significant contributions to the wider church and it continues to challenge us in various ways as we seek to follow Jesus in a changing world.

**Hans Marquart** explained: ‘Christ wanted a pure people who had put off all uncleanness. That is why he gave a clear commandment regarding the oath. The faithful were not to swear at all but yes should be yes and no, no. Thus all who were planted into the body of the church through faith in Christ would not swear as the children of the world do. Rather they would confess and live the truth without additions with a pure heart.’

### *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 such 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

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.

And a wide range of people 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.

The significance of the Anabaptist movement is related not only to its own history but also to its representative nature as the heir of earlier radical groups (such as the Waldensians in southern Europe and the Lollards in England). The advent of printing and the breach made by the Reformation in the monolithic structure of Christendom meant that Anabaptist writings and ideas could not be as effectively suppressed as those of earlier dissidents had been.

### **The Radical Reformers**

The early Anabaptists need to be understood in the context of the Protestant Reformation which was sweeping across Europe in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Although other factors (such as social discontent) played a part in its emergence, Anabaptism grew out of the Protestant Reformation and owed much to it, as its leaders freely acknowledged.

Several things differentiated Anabaptists from the main Protestant Reformers:

#### *Radicalism*

The Anabaptists criticised Luther, Zwingli and the other Reformers for being ‘half-way men’, afraid to follow through what they knew from Scripture to be right. They were convinced that the Bible was

authoritative for ethics and the shape of the church as well as for doctrine, which many Reformers seemed unwilling to admit.

Much to the discomfort of these men, the Anabaptists quoted back to the Reformers their own radical early views, which they had jettisoned once they realised the cost of trying to apply them. The Anabaptists were described as the 'root and branch' party, who championed immediate radical action rather than the Reformers' gradual approach.

### ***Restitution***

The Anabaptists were convinced that the church was 'fallen' and beyond mere reform. A thorough restoration of New Testament Christianity was necessary. This would require the church to be free from state control and from ecclesiastical traditions. Anabaptists urged separation of church and society rather than the confusion of these that had characterised Europe since the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. They asserted that for over a thousand years the church had been in error, not only in certain doctrines, but on the fundamental issue of its identity and its relationship with society.

### ***An Alternative Tradition***

Anabaptists have been described as 'step-children of the Reformers' and they clearly owed much to the Reformers. But there were other influences from earlier movements that had believed similar things and been treated by the official church in a similar way.

The Anabaptists were, in fact, neither Catholic nor Protestant, but the heirs of an alternative tradition that had maintained a witness throughout the centuries since Constantine. Frequently regarded as heretics and persecuted, with few definite links to each other, these 'old evangelical brotherhoods' kept alive many beliefs and practices that the official church ignored or marginalised.

Turks and others of our persecutors, but are to beseech God with earnest prayer to repel and resist them. If warring were right, I would rather take the field against so-called Christians who persecute, capture and kill pious Christians than against the Turks.'

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. Felix Manz concluded that: 'No Christian could be a magistrate, nor could he use the sword to punish or kill anyone.' Anabaptists aimed to build an alternative society, to change society from the bottom up.



One of the iconic Anabaptist images is from Asperen in 1569 as Dirk Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist prisoner, turns back to save his pursuer and subsequently is burned at the stake.

*Truth-telling.* Oaths were important in the 16<sup>th</sup> 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.

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 complete 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. The *Congregational Order* of 1527 instructed: ‘Of all the brothers and sisters of this congregation, none shall have anything of his own, but rather, as the Christians in the time of the apostles held all in common, and especially stored up a common fund, from which aid can be given to the poor, according as each will have need, and as in the apostles’ time permit no brother to be in need.’

*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. Michael Sattler outraged listeners at his trial when he spoke what seemed treasonable words: ‘If the Turks should come, we ought not to resist them. For it is written (Matt. 5:21): Thou shalt not kill. We must not defend ourselves against the

### *A Church of the Poor*

As with most of these earlier groups, the earliest Anabaptists were mostly poor and powerless people. They had few wealthy, academic or influential members. They were often confused with subversives and accused of being revolutionaries, but very few were primarily politically or economically motivated.

It is not wrong, however, to interpret some Anabaptist communities as heirs of the failed Peasants’ Revolt, still pursuing their concerns through the alternative strategy of setting up communities where social justice could be practised.

The Anabaptist movement was a grass-roots revival with disturbing implications for the church/state amalgam that was at the heart of the European social order; and it was vehemently suppressed by those whose vested interests were at stake. Some of the Anabaptists’ views owe much to their powerless position. They were prepared to read and obey the Bible regardless of the social consequences, in a way that the Reformers felt unable to do.

### *Anabaptists*

As with so many labels, this was neither accurate nor chosen by the Anabaptists themselves. They usually referred to themselves simply as Christians or ‘brothers and sisters’, but they were referred to by their opponents as ‘enthusiasts’ (always a terrible accusation!), revolutionaries or ‘Anabaptists’. This last word means ‘re-baptisers’, which not only had a negative connotation but also justified capital punishment under imperial law.

The Anabaptists objected to this label for two reasons: first, they did not regard believers’ baptism as a rebaptism because they denied the validity of infant baptism – they were baptisers, not re-baptisers; and second, baptism was not the key issue, although it was symbolic of their rejection of the state/church mixture and all that went with it.



Anabaptist baptism at Rheinberg, Germany, 17th century

## Anabaptist Distinctives

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. There were variations within this widely spread movement, but certain convictions were shared and promulgated by most Anabaptists.

### *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. This 'Christocentrism' was a hallmark of Anabaptism and radically impacted how they read the

and explosive missionary enterprise to evangelise Europe. They travelled widely, preached in homes and fields, baptised converts and planted churches. Some, such as George Blaurock, even interrupted state church services! Such evangelism, which ignored national and parish boundaries, by untrained men and women (such as **Margaret Hellwart**, who had to be repeatedly chained to her kitchen floor to stop her evangelising, or **Anneken Jans**, pictured below) outraged their opponents. The Reformers relied on pastors; Anabaptists sent out apostles and evangelists.



### *Lifestyle*

The Anabaptists were acknowledged, even by their critics, to live exemplary lives. Franz Agricola, a contemporary Roman Catholic writer, 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,



Anabaptist church meeting in a boat

**Ambrosius Spitelmaier**, a colleague of Hans Hut, asked under interrogation what Anabaptist meetings were like, explained: ‘They have no special gathering places. When there is peace and unity and when none of those who have been baptized are scattered they come together wherever the people are. When they have come together they teach one another the divine Word and one asks the other: how do you understand this saying? Thus there is among them a diligent living according to the divine Word.’

### *Evangelism*

The Reformers did not generally practise evangelism – a fact that is not often realised but can be clearly demonstrated. Where they had secular support, the Reformers relied on state sanctions to coerce attendance (though there are examples of evangelism and church planting by Calvinists in Catholic France where coercion was not possible). 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

Bible. Balthasar Hubmaier explained: ‘All the Scriptures point us to the spirit, gospel, example, ordinance and usage of 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. Swiss Anabaptist **Hans Ptistermeyer** stated: ‘I accept the Old Testament wherever it points to Christ. However, Christ came with a more exalted and perfect teaching.’



Many of the Reformers were inclined to see every part of the Bible as equally applicable, so that Old Testament models were valid for the shape of the church and for ethics. As a result, the Anabaptists disagreed with the Reformers about such issues as baptism, war, tithing, church government and swearing oaths.

Anabaptists often complained that their opponents were using Old Testament passages illegitimately in debates in order to set aside clear New Testament teaching. In his dispute with Zwingli about baptism a frustrated Hubmaier urged Zwingli: ‘For the sake of the last judgment, drop your circuitous argument on circumcision out of the old Testament! We have a clear word for baptizing believers and you have none for baptizing your children, except that you groundlessly drag in several shadows from the Old Testament.’

## *Salvation*

The Reformers emphasised justification by faith and the forgiveness of past sins. The Anabaptists emphasised new birth and the power to live a new life. A statement by **Leonhard Schiemer**, a Tyrolean Anabaptist, is typical: ‘Those who do not feel in themselves a power about which they have to say that things that were once impossible are now possible are not yet born again of water and spirit, even the Holy Spirit.’

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. Balthasar Hubmaier insisted: ‘We must not be merely mouth-Christians, we must live our faith.’

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. He was not only Saviour but Captain, Leader and Lord. Dirk Philips insisted: ‘Jesus with his doctrine, life and example is our teacher, leader and guide. Him we must hear and follow.’

Anabaptists were concerned about the low moral standards in the state churches and believed this was due to an overemphasis on faith without an accompanying summons to discipleship. Michael Sattler complained that whereas the Catholics appeared to be advocating works without faith, the Reformers were teaching faith without works, but he wanted a true faith that expressed itself in works. A famous statement by Hans Denck summed up their conviction that faith and discipleship were inter-connected: ‘No one can truly know Christ unless he follows him in life, and no one may follow him unless he has first known him.’

## *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. They rejected all coercion in matters of faith.

Two other features of state churches they criticised were clericalism and the absence of church discipline. Within their own churches they rejected hierarchical leadership and exercised church discipline.

The gatherings of many of their congregations were based on the principle set out in 1 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.

A *Congregational Order* of 1527 conveys this serious informality: ‘When the brothers and sisters are together, they shall take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it...when a brother sees his brother erring, he shall warn him according to the command of Christ, and shall admonish him in a Christian and brotherly way.’