

**Defending the Defenseless:
A Radical Return to an Honest
Portrayal of Anabaptism**

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Defending the Defenseless: A Radical Return to an Honest Portrayal of Anabaptism

Now It Can be Told—Now It Must be Told

January 21, 1525, should be seared in the conscience of all Christians who hold dear the concept of a free church in a free age. On that day, as it has been well documented, a small group of young men gathered in the home of Felix Manz and, without ever knowing it, changed the course of Christianity, perhaps the course of all history. Here, George Blaurock (1491–1529) demanded his good friend Conrad Grebel (1498–1526) to “baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge.”¹ The believer’s church movement was once again reborn. However, this story, the narrative of faithful men many of whom would pay the ultimate sacrifice for their faith, was set aside for a fictitious story, one reiterated for four centuries while much of the truth lay dormant in the halls of church history. In its stead, Roman Catholics and Magisterial Reformers alike portrayed these men of valor as men of heresy, sedition, and debauchery.

The popularizer of this malicious gossip was none other than Heinrich Bullinger, the successor of Reformed thought in Zurich after his mentor, Ulrich Zwingli, was killed and quartered at the Second Battle of Cappel in 1531. Bullinger, whose town witnessed the ascendance of Swiss Anabaptism and who even had a cousin adopt Anabaptism, nonetheless spewed his bile, claiming Anabaptists were the most unethical of people, “persuading women and honest matrons that it is impossible for them to be partakers of the Kingdom of Heaven unless they do abominably prostitute and make common their own bodies to all men.”² This absurd and unfounded aspersion was actually a not-so-subtle attempt at castigating the real threat of Anabaptism, as Bullinger well knew, the destruction of the state-run church and the rise of New Testament churches. He wrote, “They divide the church, where there is no need.”³ The real threat was the removal of “reformation” and the onslaught of “restoration.” And, this rise was aggravated by the fact that Anabaptism gave a platform to, as Bullinger put it, “every rascal knave minister of God’s Word.”⁴ In essence, the Magisterial Reformers feared or despised a free church—and a free pulpit—that was unfettered by the role of government and Protestant patriarchs.

Thankfully, Anabaptism, as Estep explains well, now “belongs to the category of ‘now it can be told’ stories.”⁵ Primary sources from the formative and influential leaders of sixteenth

¹William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14. This account comes from the *The Large Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*. Hutterian Brethren, *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, New York: Plough, 1987).

²George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1992), 312.

³Ibid., 311.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 1.

century Anabaptism are easily accessible in English to peruse as one wishes. How sad then that so many theologians, historians, and pundits choose to read poor history from poor historians instead of engaging the actual matter at hand. Within Baptist life the scenario is not much better. Most Baptist historians simply dismiss the Anabaptists without much discussion whatsoever, or demonstrate their willful ignorance by perpetuating theories long since disproven. For example, even though Harold Bender has resoundingly disproven the theory that Anabaptists arose from the political and bloody rebellion of the German Peasants War (1524–1525) and has demonstrated that pacifist Conrad Grebel was the originator of Swiss Anabaptism, many historians blindly continue the tradition passed down for centuries, thus enabling a false picture to continue that Anabaptists were born out of violence.⁶

While the origin(s) of Anabaptism is important, the most significant accusations against these Radicals are theological in nature. For example, theologian Timothy George, the founding dean of the Beeson Divinity School, stated on the topic of soteriology, “Menno, and Anabaptists generally, did not accept Luther’s forensic doctrine of justification by faith alone because they saw it as an impediment to the true doctrine of a ‘lively’ faith which issues in holy living.”⁷ Using this exact quote, Phillip R. Johnson, who hosts the popular Reformed internet site spurgeon.org and is closely associated with John MacArthur, anathematizes the Anabaptists, stating: “But in [rejecting forensic justification] they undermined the very foundation of the biblical doctrine of justification. They left people to try to devise a righteousness of their own derived from the law, rather than trusting the perfect righteousness of Christ which God imputes to those who believe (cf. Phil 3:9; Rom 4:5–6).”⁸ Such an ignorant and baseless comment leaves one to wonder whether Johnson even believes the Anabaptists were saved. No wonder, then, why so many Christians today have such a poor view of these Anabaptists.

One has to wonder whether George, a noted Baptists historian, and Johnson, whose Reformed bias is quite conspicuous, have adequately engaged the primary sources from the Anabaptists or if the problem of poor history has infected even Ivy-trained scholars. A superficial look at formative Anabaptists illustrates the obvious: Anabaptists held to a forensic justification:

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| Dirk Philips: | He has justified us out of grace without merit through the redemption that has taken place in him. ⁹ |
| Menno Simons: | Through the merits of Thy blood we receive the remission of our sins according to the riches of Thy grace. ¹⁰ |
| Michael Sattler: | Paul says to the Romans in the third chapter that they are all together sinners and come short of the glory which God |

⁶Harold Bender, *Conrad Grebel: The Founder of the Swiss Brethren Sometimes called Anabaptists* (Goshen, IN: The Mennonite Historical Society, 1958), 108–20.

⁷Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 269.

⁸Phillip R. Johnson, “The Anabaptists,” <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/anabapt.htm> (Accessed 25 January 2010).

⁹Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, and Alvin J. Beachy, trans. and eds., *The Writings of Dirk Philips* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1992), 69. As cited in Frances F. Hiebert, “The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology,” *Direction* 30.2 (Fall 2001): 122–38, <http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1170> (Accessed 25 January 2010).

¹⁰John Christian Wenger, ed., and Leonard Verduin, trans., *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1956), 79. As cited in Hiebert, “The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology,” 122–38.

should have from them, yet apart from merit, they shall be justified by his grace through redemption which Christ accomplished.¹¹

Sadly, Reformed historians are relying on malicious histories from writers within the Magisterial Reformation. These accounts are highly inaccurate and cannot be trusted, for the purpose of the narratives was to defame Anabaptists and prove them as heretics. Indeed, the question for us today is simple: Why honor these men and women called Anabaptists?

The Crucial Issue: The Fulfillment of the Great Commission

Let me state my overall thesis as clearly as possible: In the sixteen century Reformation, there is one—and only one—group that had the theological fidelity to follow the Great Commission in its entirety, the Anabaptists. For, while Magisterial Reformers and Evangelical Anabaptists¹² generally agreed on orthodox positions including the authority of Scripture, the person and work of Christ, and salvation by grace through faith, they vehemently disagreed on the Great Commission, its interpretation, and its importance.

Franklin Littell, in his little-known but highly influential work *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism*, explains clearly the importance of the Great Commission to the Anabaptists:

¹¹Michael Sattler, “Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ: An Anabaptist Tract on True Christianity,” trans. and intro. by John C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 20 (Oct. 1946): 247. As cited in Hiebert, “The Atonement in Anabaptist Theology,” 122–38. On a side note, the reason the Magisterial Reformers did not trust Anabaptist soteriology is because Anabaptists emphasized that one who Christ has imputed with His righteousness would live a life of victory, a life of surrender. As such, a new birth was emphasized in Anabaptism while justification was emphasized in Lutheranism. This is best illustrated in Menno’s “Hymn of Discipleship,” which states:

In the world, ye saints, you’ll be defamed,
Let this be cause for pious glee;
Christ Jesus too was much disdained;
Whereby he wrought to set us free;
He took away of sin the bill
Held by the foe. Now if you will
You too may enter heaven still!

If you in fires are tested, tried,
Begin to walk life’s narrow way,
Then let God’s praise be magnified,
Stand firm on all he has to say;
If you stand strong and constant then,
Confess his Word in the sight of men,
With joy he extends the diadem!

(Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* [Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981], 100.)

¹²The term “Evangelical Anabaptist” is borrowed from George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), 20–35. In this book, the editors assert that there are three streams of Anabaptists: Evangelical, Revolutionary, and Contemplative. One must also remember that revolutionaries were found in Magisterial camps. Thomas Muntzer (1490–1525), the infamous leader of the German Peasants War, was birthed out of Lutheranism and eventually became a revolutionary spiritualist.

No texts appear more frequently [than Matt 28 and Mark 16] in the confessions of faith and court testimonies of the Anabaptists, and none show more clearly the degree to which Anabaptism was different in conviction and type from the intact and stable ways of magisterial Protestantism.¹³

To the Evangelical Anabaptist, the Great Commission was the purpose of life, the ultimate basis of existence. On the other hand, as George Hunston Williams exclaims, “Magisterial Reformers were concerned with institutional reform and doctrinal reformation but not with missionary expansion.”¹⁴ Legendary missiologist Ralph Winters’ analysis was much harsher, stating, “Despite the fact that the Protestants won on the political front, and to a great extent gained the power to formulate anew their own Christian tradition, they did not even talk of mission outreach.”¹⁵ While Winters may be overstating his case, it is clear that men like Calvin and Luther, due to their formulation of a state-run church, were encumbered by political maneuverings. In fact, although Calvin was at least known for planting the Reformed tradition in France, most expansion of the Lutheran and Reformed movements occurred due to political shifts, while Anabaptists freely flowed throughout Europe, willingly giving their lives in order to fulfill the Great Commission.

The difference between the Anabaptists and the Magisterial Reformers was not merely in passion and desire, but in interpreting the two synoptic passages of Matthew 28 and Mark 16 as well. Luther maintained that the true church incorporated the Word rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered. Anabaptists agreed with this statement in principle. Balthasar Hubmaier explained, “The church is understood to mean each separate and outward meeting assembly or parish membership that is under one shepherd or bishop and assembles bodily for instruction, for baptism and the Lord’s Supper.”¹⁶

However, the two groups could not be farther apart in their exegetical analysis of the passage. In his *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, John Calvin spends little time actually expounding either passage but instead polemically castigates Roman Catholics and their belief in apostolic succession and then draws his literary sword on the Anabaptists and their belief in believer’s baptism. Regarding Anabaptists he writes:

On this pretense, the *Anabaptists* have stormed greatly against infant baptism. But the reply is not difficult, if we attend to the reason of the command. . . . Thus we see that they who entered by faith into the Church of God are reckoned, along with their posterity, among the members of Christ, and, at the same time, called to the inheritance of salvation. And yet this does not involve the separation of *baptism* from faith and doctrine; because, though infants are not yet of such an age as to be capable of receiving the grace of God by faith, still God, when addressing their parents, includes them also. I maintain, therefore, that it is not

¹³Cited in Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 98–99.

¹⁴Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 1306.

¹⁵Ralph Winter, “The Kingdom Strikes Back,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, rev. ed., ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1992), B-18.

¹⁶Balthasar Hubmaier, *A Christian Catechism*, in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989), 351–52. Hubmaier also acknowledges a universal church that is comprised of regenerated believers “united in one God, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism . . . wherever they may be on earth” (351).

rash to administer baptism to infants, to which God invites them, when He promises that *He will be their God*.¹⁷

How ironic that a man known for his exegesis of Scripture would speak so out-of-turn on one of the most crucial evangelistic passages of Scripture. Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, would explicitly respond to *On The Christian Baptism of Believers*, a treatise written by the most influential formative Anabaptist theologian, Balthasar Hubmaier (1480–1528). Incredibly, Calvin’s first argument is children not under the covenant of infant baptism are “counted as children of Adam” and are under the curse while those baptized were “previously regenerated by the Lord.”¹⁸ Calvin’s second argument is more convoluted, repudiating the Anabaptist argument that infants cannot understand preaching. He responds, “But these men do not perceive that when the apostle makes hearing the beginning of faith He is describing only the ordinary arrangement . . . which He commonly uses in calling His people. . . . Therefore, if it please him, why may the Lord not shine with a tiny spark at the present time on those whom He will illumine in the future with the full splendor of His light.”¹⁹ Taken aback by the simple exegesis of Hubmaier, Calvin reverts to mysticism and philosophical innuendoes in order to respond to the Anabaptist. Furthermore, if one has an inner illumination without preaching, how much does this doctrine diminish the desire to reach the nations by teaching and preaching the Word?

These two arguments illustrate the grandiose difference between the Magisterial Reformers and the Anabaptists. While the Reformers spent much time on theological formulation, Anabaptists expended an enormous amount of their literary energies on issues relating to their evangelistic zeal. And, thus, topics such as baptism—central to the Great Commission and a believer’s church—consumed their thoughts and lives. To the Anabaptist—as it should be with us—believer’s baptism was not a tertiary doctrine of secondary importance since it was integral to the Great Commission itself. And, as can be seen by Calvin’s own musings, if one misses the mark on baptism, it is expected that one’s view of evangelism will also be skewed. Anabaptists did not apologize for their disagreements with the Magisterial Reformers (or vice versa). Unlike with postmodernism’s loss of conviction, in the polarized age in which they lived, both sides knew that only one side could be right and therefore be rightly dividing the Word of the Lord.

How does a proper view of the Great Commission, emulated by these Anabaptists, change your perspective in life? Noted Anabaptist scholar Abraham Friesen discussed the importance of “Implementing the ‘Great Commission,’” from which I will primarily draw six conclusions:

1. Regardless of who rules the world or a particular territory, the earth is the Lord’s.

Menno: “But after it had all been accomplished according to the Scriptures, and had been made new in Christ, He did not send out the scribes and Pharisees with

¹⁷John Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, volume 3, at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom33.ii.li.html> (Accessed 25 January 2010). (italics original).

¹⁸John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, IV.16.17, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, under the title *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1340.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 4.16.18 (trans. Battles, 1342).

Moses's law, but His disciples with His own doctrine, saying: Go ye into all the world."²⁰

2. Essentials of the faith incorporate all of the Great Commission, including baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Abraham Friesen wrote convincingly, "When [Erasmus and the Anabaptists] spoke of eliminating the 'non-essentials' of the faith, he was referring to Catholic ceremonies, human additions to the gospel."²¹

3. Anabaptists objected to theology that ultimately would not lead to primitive Christianity.

Friesen again says, "They wished to provide the transformation of the institutional church and Christian life in order to complement the new theology—to bring them into conformity with the new 'apostolic theology.'"²²

4. Anabaptists did not waver in their belief that God wrote the Bible to be understood clearly and explicitly.

Unlike Luther, who argued for "Scripture and right reason," which he borrowed from Augustine, Anabaptists were "hesitant, indeed afraid, to stray beyond the apparent biblical meaning into abstract theological positions reached by reason."²³

5. Evangelism without discipleship is not truly evangelism.

Those who flippantly disregard sin as an everyday facet of life, who follow the clichéd phrase, "I'm just a sinner saved by grace," need a strong infusion of true Christian discipleship based on the transformation God gives to the believer. As Conrad Grebel stated forthrightly, "Every man wants to be saved by superficial faith, without fruits of faith, without baptism of testing and trial, without love and hope, without right Christian practices; one wants to persist in all the old ways of one's own vices and in common ritualistic antichristian observance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, in contempt for the divine Word."²⁴ We should never apologize for demanding surrender even while scribal preachers only demand words.

6. "Times might change, but never Christ or his church."²⁵

The primary problem of the Magisterial Reformers was found in their view of culture. They resigned themselves to the culture of the day, which conformed the church to their authority. Reformers from Augustine forward excused or defended

²⁰Cited in Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission*, 99.

²¹*Ibid.*, 100.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, 102.

²⁴Cited in John Allen Moore, *Anabaptist Portraits* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1984), 31.

²⁵Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission*, 110.

the sacralist church system, even reinterpreting clear passages of Scripture to their own ends. Augustine maintained the “field” in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares was the church, even though the parable was explained in detail by our Lord, who Himself defined the “field” as the world. Augustine argued that since the church had become like the world, his interpretation remained true.

Another Date We Should Know: May 29, 1525

On 29 May 1525, an unknown peasant farmer, known as a “pious goodhearted man” was given the privilege of being the first Swiss Anabaptist martyr. Not much is known of this young man—his birth, his life, even his name—whether he was Eberli Bolt or Bolt Eberli. In 1525, he found himself in the midst of a spiritual revolution in his country and he himself was placed in the center of this religious equation. Along with another priest, Eberli was talked into going to St. Gallen where he chose to be baptized and was “pressed into preaching service on behalf of the movement because he could speak well.”²⁶ Johann Kessler, a contemporary of Eberli, spoke of Eberli’s sermon as so “abundantly eloquent” that “hereupon many of the citizens and rural people consented [to baptism].”²⁷ His words were so convincing that many “came to the city daily and asked where the baptism house was and then left as if they had been to the barber’s.”²⁸

When he arrived at home in his canton, Eberli was quickly arrested and sentenced to death as a heretic. As the chronicler described it, “Soon [he] approached the fire stakes with joyful bearing and died willingly and joyfully.”²⁹ Eberli understood what most Christians today completely miss—it is an honor to suffer for Christ’s sake. He was the first martyr in a line of martyrs that, according to Estep, would last for three centuries. He was the first in a line of a number that only the Lord knows and that could only be revealed in heaven. He gladly bore his cross.

Why honor the Anabaptists? Because in addition to their biblical theology, their lives—as well as their deaths—emulated Christ.

²⁶Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 530.

²⁷“The First Two Swiss Anabaptist Martyrs: Bolt Eberli and an Unnamed Priest Lachen,” in Harder, *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism*, 377.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

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