

ARTICLES

The Nature of the Christian Community In the Teaching of the Anabaptists

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Harold S. Bender, in his presidential address, "The Anabaptist Vision," presented before the American Society of Church History in 1944, stated that there is a

line of interpretation, now almost a hundred years old, which is being increasingly accepted and which is probably destined to dominate the field. It is the one which holds that Anabaptism is the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfilment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, and thus makes it a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the Apostles.¹

Seen in this light the Anabaptist view of the Christian community takes on clarity and significance. With this view in mind, this study proposes to examine the principles underlying the Anabaptist conception of the Christian Community.

I

PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THE CONCEPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The centrality of the idea of the Christian community in the Anabaptist system. Each of the branches of the Reformation has its unique emphasis. If Lutheranism focused on justification by faith alone and

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1. Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *Church History* (March, 1944), XIII, 9-11.

Calvin, the sovereignty of God, the Anabaptist has his central theological concern as well. Cornelius Krahn states it this way:

It centers around the *ecclesia*—the church or the body of believers. . . . An Anabaptist theology is ecclesio-centric. It is true, Anabaptism had individualists. . . . But those were exceptions. Anabaptism as a whole placed a definite and strong emphasis on the closely knit brotherhood united in one spirit, one mind, and one way of life and doctrines.²

Franklin Littell, in his definitive work, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, states, "The doctrine of the church affords a classifying principle of first importance."³ The Anabaptist view of the Christian community with its implications was the point of conflict with the Reformers. Erland Waltner writes in this connection:

The Anabaptists were not pleased with reformers' distinction between a visible church which is earthly and impure and an invisible church which is heavenly and pure. Their practical concern was the actualization of a visible and true body of Christ on earth, which would be in accord with the New Testament pattern.⁴

Around the view of the church the system developed; about this center as well, tension grew.

The significance of essence above form. Underlying the Anabaptist idea of the Christian community was the principle that essence is above form. A significant study by Paul Peachey develops this hypothesis conform. In his study he writes:

This study does lead to the hypothesis. . . that the genius of Anabaptism—and of the first-century Christendom—lay not in the achievement of a perfect form, which can be regarded as externally normative or reproducible, but in the high degree of

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2. Cornelius Krahn, "Prolegomena to an Anabaptist Theology" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (Hereafter *MQR*), (January, 1950), XXIV, 10-11.
 3. Franklin H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church*, Vol. VIII of *Studies in Church History*, ed., James H. Nichols and Wilhelm Pauck, (N.L.: The American Society of Church History, 1952), p. xi.
 4. Erland Waltner, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church," *MQR*, (January, 1941), XXV, 8,9.

realization that *the church is the perpetual creation of the Holy Spirit, who perpetually creates and recreates appropriate forms*. . . . All division of labor in the church must be Spirit-based. . . .⁵

In the choice of leadership, in the receipt and use of the “gifts of the Spirit,” in the fulfillment of the Great Commission, in the ordering of the church—in all of these there is evidence of dependence upon divine initiative. Peachey asserts that “The problem of disunity became acute, particularly at those points where the more pneumatic quality of the brotherhood receded, and men sought to define the church in concrete cultural forms and patterns; . . .”⁶

This is not to imply that the Anabaptists had no idea of what the nature of the church ought to be. Menno Simons listed the following six earmarks

by which the “true church of Christ” was to be distinguished: “By an unadulterated pure doctrine. . . . (2) By a Scriptural use of the sacramental signs. . . . (3) By obedience to the Word. . . . (4) By unfeigned brotherly love. . . . (5) By an unreserved confession of God and Christ. . . . (6) By oppression and tribulation for the sake of the Lord’s word.” (Menno *Complete Works*, Vol. II, p. 83).⁷

The ways of the Community must always be the “razor’s edge” between individualistic enthusiasm and institutionalized forms.

The view of the Fall and Restitution of the Church. It is evident that both the Reformers and the Anabaptists were concerned with the recovery of the characteristics of the Early Church. Their approach to the problem differed. Frank Wray indicates the difference as follows:

The key concept of the Reformers was *reformatio*. From their point of view the remnant remained within the Great Church. The task at hand was to free the Great Church from the control of the papal Antichrist and to remove the abominations which had been introduced. The fundamental

5. Peachey, “Anabaptism and Church Organization,” *MQR*, (July, 1965), XXX, 213.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-228

7. Waltner, *loc. cit.*

concept among Anabaptists was *restitutio*. The medieval church was beyond hope. The children of God must be recalled from exile. They must rebuild the true church upon apostolic foundations. They must separate themselves from the fallen church, which was not the church of Antichrist.⁸

The Reformers felt that their authority for their work had come from the Great Church; the Anabaptists maintained that theirs was a spiritual authority given by Christ. The Old Church had no authority to give this. All of this implies the fact that a "Second Fall" had taken place: the Church had sinned and fallen even as Adam had done. Littell points up several important relationships which flow from this view:

When we break down the various ideational associations into their constituent parts we find several different themes customarily linked together: glorification of the first three centuries (the 'Golden Age' of the faith), a lamentation for the decline in association with the Empire (the 'Fall' of the Church), a vigorous sense of new beginnings (the 'Restitution').⁹

Most of the radical groups related the time of the "Fall" to the period of Constantine the Great.

Littell further notes that associated with the idea of a fall of the Christian Church was the idea that the first three centuries were the "Golden Age" of the Church. These were the days of vigorous simplicity, of pacificism, and of communism.¹⁰ But this emphasis had been lost and needed to be restored. The Restitution was now coming about through the Anabaptists. Littell quotes Fritz Heyer on the point: "The Reformation hopes for a coming heavenly revelation of victory. But the *Schwärmer* believe that there is yet only little stride to make in order to be *ecclesia triumphans* on earth.' ('Der Kirchenbegriff der Schwärmer')"¹¹

The doctrine of two worlds. It is inevitable that a strong eschatological note be found in Anabaptism both as cause and as effect. As effect, the eschatological consciousness would have been stimulated by the experiences of the community. As cause, the eschatological concern is

8. Frank J. Wray, "The Anabaptist Doctrine of the Restitution of the Church," *MQR*, (July, 1954), XXVIII 186-188.

9. Littell, *op. cit.* pp. 58-59.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-61.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

readily seen in the Anabaptist views of church and ethics. It was the doctrine of the two worlds which gave their eschatology meaning. John H. Yoder analyzes this view effectively:

The Anabaptists revived the two-aeon doctrine of the New Testament through their discovery that the 'world' is not simply an amorphous conglomerate of evil impulses but a structured reality taking concrete form in the demonic dimensions of economic and political life. They could have such a realistic view of the world because the church was, in their view, an equally concrete historical reality already incarnating the coming aeon. Thus they were able to grasp the tension between the 'already' and the 'not yet' and between church and world in a way which maintained the priority of the coming aeon.¹²

With such a view the Christian community could carry on with a sense of meaning in spite of all that was befalling it.

II

PRACTICAL ELEMENTS IN THE CONCEPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

Having noted some principles underlying the conception of the Christian community for the Anabaptists, it is in order to consider some of the practical elements which follow. Harold Bender, in the work mentioned above has presented a usable analysis of the practical elements within the Anabaptist conception of the Christian community. He sees the significant elements of the "Anabaptist Vision" as discipleship, brotherhood and the ethic of love and nonresistance.¹³

Discipleship in the concept of the Christian community. As implied above, the focus of attention of the Anabaptists was both backward and forward. J. Lawrence Burkholder defines the concept of discipleship in this way:

The disciple is one who follows Christ. The term which the Anabaptists used repeatedly was *Nachfolge Christi*. This

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12. John H. Yoder, "The Prophetic Dissent of the Anabaptists," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed., Guy F. Hersherberger (Scottsdale, Penna.: Herald Press, 1957), p. 101.
13. Bender, *op. cit.*, p. 13 ff.

refers not simply to a life which is connected with the church . . . but one which is externally patterned after the New Testament. The Anabaptist conception of discipleship involves a return to what is considered the earliest and therefore the normative form of Christianity. It is the form implied by Christ's own person and work. . . .

Negatively, the Anabaptist conception of discipleship stands for the rejection of all historical relativities. Anabaptism tried to cast aside all historical adaptations to the institutions of society which were regarded as a compromise of the pure gospel.¹⁴

The view of the Christian community is all of a piece with the view of discipleship; the concern is to recreate and live the life of the early days of Christianity.

Discipleship was based on transformation of life. It was a new life lived after the teachings and example of Jesus within the Christian community. It was built upon a complete literalistic understanding of the New Testament. It was a life of piety—under mutual discipline—which affected all of life all of the time in what was understood as holy living.

Brotherhood is the concept of the Christian community. It is apparent that discipleship and brotherhood are interrelated in the life of the Christian community. The ideal of the brotherhood had its earliest rise in dissent as the Anabaptist groups ran into constant collision with the established churches of the time. Van der Zijpp points out that out of this tension

the brotherhood is negatively set apart, differentiated from the church. All . . . were unanimous. . . that the brotherhood could never be maintained by the prevalent state church tradition. . . because, subjectively considered, it is based on the principle that membership is personal and voluntary. . . . At this point the negative begins to become positive: The church is a brotherhood into which one comes upon a thorough conversion in faith. . . morality in life. . . .

14. J. Lawrence Burkholder, "The Anabaptist Vision of Discipleship," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, pp. 136-137.

The Anabaptists detached themselves from the churches because they had their own idea of the nature of the Christian brotherhood.¹⁵

Robert Kreider sees the idea of brotherhood as crucial in the view of the church. He writes:

All Anabaptist theology and ethics has its nucleus in this conception of the church as the brotherhood of Christ. . . . It is a dynamic conception of the church which demands that each individual and every generation of believers confront the claims of the Cross. It is a dynamic conception in the sense that the church is the brotherhood of the Great Commission, a fellowship of evangelists.¹⁶

In terms of practical life within the community brotherhood involved the principles of membership based on a personal acceptance of Christ—a conscious decision. It implied voluntary fellowship of believers in an ethical community of brotherly love. This brotherhood requires exclusion from the fellowship of those who lapse from the standards. The authority within the community is centered in the Scriptures and the example of the apostolic church with wide dissemination of leadership-responsibility among the members of the community. Every leader is a servant of the brotherhood. There is emphasis upon lay participation by the entire brotherhood in church life and evangelistic and missionary outreach.¹⁷ The brethren live together a life of separation from and non-conformity to the world in terms of their conception of following Christ.

A new ethic in the concept of the Christian community. Rising out of the practical elements of discipleship and brotherhood is a new ethic which weaves itself in and through the lives of the members of the Christian community. It is the ethic of love in application. It expresses in "love and nonresistance as applied to all human relationships.

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15. N. Van der Zijpp, "The Conception of Our Fathers Regarding the Church," *MQR*, (April, 1953), XXVII, 91-93.
 16. Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptist Conception of the Church in the Russian Mennonite Environment, 1789-1870." *MQR*, (January, 1951), XXV, 17.
 17. Kreider, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20. The preceding ideas on the ideal of brotherhood were taken from an analysis by Kreider of "an attempted synthesis of the descriptions of such men as Troeltsch, Wach, Bainton, Pope, Meyer, Walton, and Richard Niebuhr." They apply here.

The Brethren understood this to mean complete abandonment of all warfare, strife, and violence, and of the taking of human life.”¹⁸

Flowing out of the underlying principles upon which the idea of the Christian community was built, Anabaptism attempted to express itself in discipleship, brotherhood and a new ethic. As Bender observes:

For the Anabaptist, the church was neither an institution (Catholicism), nor the instrument of God for the proclamation of the divine Word (Lutheranism), nor a resource group for for individual piety (Pietism). It was a brotherhood of love in which the fullness of the Christian life ideal is to be expressed.¹⁹

18. Bender, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

19. *Ibid.*, p.22.