

EDITORIAL

Anabaptism in Historical Perspective

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Perhaps one of the most glaring injustices in ecclesiastical historiography has been the frequent failure to see the responsible and worthwhile elements in the dissenting movements within Protestantism. The prevalent attitude toward Anabaptists may be regarded as a classic illustration of this phenomenon. For centuries the Anabaptists have been lumped together with the irresponsible "spiritualists" of the Reformation, the radical Anti-Trinitarians, and other fringe movements. Many church historians have seen only evil in any movement which has not been consistent with Wittenberg, Zurich or Geneva. The Anabaptists have frequently been regarded as only a negation of the gains of the Reformation.

This attitude has tended to persist in a widespread way because of the paucity of writing on the Anabaptists by sympathetic scholars.¹ However, since the mid-nineteenth century, this traditionally negative view has been greatly modified. (This changing mood is often seen as beginning with Max Göbel in his *Geschichte des christlichen Lebens in der rheinisch-westfälischen . . . Kirche*.) This leads one to a basic question as to the meaning of the term "Anabaptist." The late Harold S. Bender, a distinguished Anabaptist scholar, points out the difference between the original, evangelical and constructive Anabaptist movement and the various mystical, spiritualistic, revolutionary, or even antinomian groups which have been concurrent.² The former is represented by the Mennonite and the latter may be represented by such as the *Schwärmer*, Thomas

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1. See John Christian Wenger, *Even Unto Death* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961), pp. 7, 8.
2. "The Anabaptist Vision," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, Guy F. Hershberger, ed. (Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1957), p. 35.

Müntzer, and those connected with the Peasants War.

More and more the tenets of responsible Anabaptists are being recognized along with Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Anglicanism as one of the major expressions of the Protestant Reformation. Some have styled Anabaptism as the "Fourth Reformation."³ As one begins to assess the contributions of the Anabaptist movement, one thinks of such impressive aspects as voluntarism. Perhaps Rufus M. Jones characterizes Anabaptism as well as anyone:

Judged by the reception it met at the hands of those in power, both in Church and State, equally in Roman Catholic and in Protestant countries, the Anabaptist movement was one of the most tragic in the history of Christianity; but, judged by the principles. . . it must be pronounced as one of the most momentous and significant undertakings in man's eventful religious struggle after truth.⁴

Perhaps the most salient emphasis of the Anabaptists has been that *the essence of Christianity is discipleship*. Lutheranism has emphasized faith and trust in the merits of Christ alone, Calvinism has stressed right belief and sound doctrine, Anglicanism has majored on the continuity of historic Christianity. The Anabaptists have been primarily interested in the quality of life which issues out of a right relationship to Jesus Christ. Hans Denck's statement is typical of the Anabaptist stress. "No one may truly know Christ except he follows Him in life." Discussing the Reformation in relation to the Anabaptist movement, one Anabaptist scholar remarks, "Most could think of Jesus as a dying Saviour, or as a future judge, but not as someone to follow earnestly in life."⁵

Anabaptists have sought to relate all of individual and corporate life to the transforming teachings of Jesus Christ as they understood them. Christianity is to be more than a matter of the intellect, doctrine or experience. Rather, the transformed daily life is basic. Christianity must be evidenced by an outward expression of life. While the Reformers emphasized faith, the Anabaptists emphasized following Christ (*Nachfolge Christi*).

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3. George Huntston Williams, ed., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957). From the *Library of Christian Classics*, XXV, 19.
 4. Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Religion* (London: Macmillan and Company, Ltd., 1909), p. 369.
 5. Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1967), p. 105.

This concept of discipleship has extremely far-reaching implications. For example, it has led to voluntarism, adult baptism, non-violence, and separation from the world and its pursuits. Separation (*Absonderung*) is taken seriously. This devotion to Christ even to the point of misunderstanding and martyrdom is commendable. In an age characterized by religious wars and the church's (Protestant and Catholic) use of the sword to promote "God's work," this other-worldly stance seems almost ideal. But it is precisely at this point that a question must be raised. The concept of separation must be regarded as biblical. But the concept of involvement is also biblical. These two must both be taken into account. The "come ye" of the Gospel must be harmonized with the "go ye" of the Gospel. The position of the Anabaptists regarding the total separation from some areas of life has been questioned by many. For example, perhaps one of the most disputed areas of Anabaptist teaching concerns relationship to the government. Anabaptists believe that the state is ordained of God for the maintenance of the order of the sub-Christian society. Because the government from time to time is called upon to engage in coercive functions (which must be regarded as sub-Christian), Anabaptists do not feel that a Christian can conscientiously engage in such affairs. This position is specifically seen as a major issue as it relates to the Anabaptist doctrine of "nonresistance."⁶ That God did not approve of Christians serving in the army is a profound Anabaptist conviction. It is felt that it is not Christian to return evil for evil, and Anabaptist history reveals that they have borne for their convictions the most incredible persecution from Protestants and Roman Catholics alike.

There have been (and are) some Anabaptists like Hans Denck, who feel that a Christian should not be a magistrate.⁷ Some have even felt that believers should abstain from voting in civil affairs because this involves one in a participation in a sub-Christian institution. Doubtless, the most frequently recurring problem in this area is the refusal of Anabaptists to bear arms. As Franklin Littell states, this "is a very practical problem to a government which at-

6. "Nonresistance is the term which in Anabaptist-Mennonite history has come to denote the faith and life of those who believe the will of God requires the renunciation of warfare and other compulsive means for furtherance of personal or social ends." *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1957), Harold S. Bender and C. Henry Smith, eds., III, 897.

7. See Thomas M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), II, 438.

tempts to wage total war and still tries to respect conscientious objection."⁸ This issue is recognized by Anabaptists as a "stumbling block." A Mennonite historian writes, "Among the fundamental Anabaptist doctrines few led to more trouble with the government authorities than that of nonresistance."⁹

To be sure, Anabaptists have been willing to give a positive expression of nonresistance in the form of Christian service in love. Therefore allowance is made for an alternative to military service. A typical expression may be seen in *The Minutes and Reports of the 29th [triennial] Session of the General Conference of the Mennonite Church of North America, 1941*. "We. . . express our willingness at all times to aid in the relief of those who are in need, distress or suffering, regardless of the danger in which we may be placed in bringing such relief. . . ." The Mennonite Central Committee (organized in 1920) has done a magnificent work in relief and service programs.

Anabaptist theologians have spoken to the question of whether we would not have a better government if Christians were to penetrate it instead of withdrawing from it. They have left no room for understanding the will of God regarding force in any other way than an absolute repudiation of force. One has written,

Our decisions and choices would always be wiser if they were determined by the will of God as revealed in the Scriptures, rather than what *seems* socially to be the most useful for the time being. . . . Ultimately the Christian will render society a greater service by remaining politically aloof and living a life of genuine nonresistance, than by being politically active where sooner or later he must sacrifice or compromise this position.¹⁰

Government is necessary because there are two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. The worldly kingdom is essentially evil, and government is therefore necessary in order to punish the evil and to protect the good. It is at this point that one must raise a basic question. The government is for the purpose of protecting the Christian, and yet the Christian may not become in-

8. *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1964), p. 101.

9. Cornelius Krahn, *The Story of the Mennonites* (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Publication Office), 4th ed., revised and enlarged, p. 22.

10. Guy F. Herschberger, *Mennonites and Their Heritage* (Akron, Pennsylvania: The Mennonite Central Committee, 1945), pp. 58, 59.

volved in the government. He must remain "politically aloof." This is because if a Christian should assume the position of magistrate he might be called upon to act contrary to conscience. Anabaptists insist, however, that "those Christians who hold the doctrine of biblical nonresistance do not so believe because they wish to be parasites upon society, but because they recognize the ethic of nonresistance to be an absolute command in the New Testament."¹¹ This is an inflexible stand which admits of no compromise. Anabaptists believe it is not Christian to allow participation in a "sinful task." Seeking to escape personal responsibility by allowing the government to bear the ultimate responsibility is not seen as a valid position.

Rather than diminishing in more recent times, the problem has increased. This is because countries which have democracy and self-government face certain implications of this problem of nonresistance which are more complicated than those which the early Anabaptists faced. Contrary to former times, the government now includes every Christian citizen. If one remembers the era when being a magistrate meant that one must enforce the established union of church and state, and use the sword to enforce religious uniformity, one can more easily understand the Anabaptist position. But in the contemporary situation matters are different. This is especially true when one remembers the biblical injunction to obedience to civil authority. The political philosophy of Anabaptism was in many ways logical in the era of intolerance and the union of state and church.

One must ask the question now if this Anabaptist position is on as solid ground as it once may have been. Many are asking the question as to whether it is right to accept the protection and benefits of a government and at the same time to refuse to become actively involved in that government. The question is also being asked as to whether there are some areas of history in which one may not be a Christian. Evidently we live in a sinful world—one that in the nature of the case requires "compromise." We must be prepared to look deeper into the matter of the Christian's responsibility to penetrate all of life.

11. John Christian Wenger, *Separated Unto God* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1955), p. 253.