

Anabaptism (Then and Now): A More Christlike Christianity

By David Flowers*

*This year marks the five hundredth anniversary of the sixteenth century Anabaptist movement. In this article, I will share about my own journey into Anabaptism, the beginnings of the movement, its core beliefs and theological convictions, its call to radical discipleship, and its potential as a much-needed renewal movement within American Christianity. I conclude with a call for the Brethren in Christ to own Anabaptism—our *original* theological stream—for such a time as this.*

My journey from Southern Baptist to Anabaptist

I grew up a Southern Baptist in the 1980s and 90s in Texas during the rise of the Religious Right and when the evangelical war with secular culture was at full force. I wore the Christian t-shirts, attended Christian concerts and Promise Keepers events, only listened to Christian music, and got a steady flow of rapture theology and hellfire sermons. And I vividly remember pledging to the Bible, the Christian flag, *and* the American flag every morning during Vacation Bible School.

In many ways, I was taught that everything in the world was against us. Stay alert! The devil is in rock music, drinking alcohol is a sin (even in moderation), homosexuals are bringing judgment on America, and God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.

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Oh, and Christians don't dip, dance, chew, or date those who do. And we most certainly don't befriend unbelievers.

I heard many sermons from the Old Testament and Paul's epistles, but Jesus (when he was preached) was largely kept tamed and restrained in the shackles of southern culture and Christian nationalism. And while Jesus may have been *mostly* patient and kind in the gospels, according to the book of Revelation, he is coming back to kill his enemies. Obviously, there was a darker side to God that justified our judgmentalism and the limits we put on our love.

Sure, I heard a lot about God's love, but seldom saw it embodied within my family and the church. And all the talk about God being "Father" only complicated things for me because most of the "fathers" and men in my life were unaffectionate, unaffirming, and unloving. I projected these relationships onto a cosmic screen. If this is what God "the Father" is like—I'm done.

And so, when I was 16, I rebelled against the legalism and hypocrisy that I saw and experienced within my family and American evangelicalism. For the next several years, I lived a life of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. Like the prodigal son, I squandered my inheritance with glee, until it was all gone and I was empty and alone. And after hitting rock bottom, I realized that I was wrong about my heavenly Father. That is where my journey into the God who looks like Jesus began.

I repented of my sins after high school, stopped pursuing an acting career, went off to East Texas Baptist University, and followed a calling into vocational ministry, which I had first begun sensing when I was in middle school. I started ministry at the age of 19 in my first semester at ETBU and went on to serve in three Baptist churches as a student pastor in the early 2000s.

When I first accepted God's call into vocational ministry, I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, where he invites Christians to take the Sermon on the Mount seriously. Because of my experience within the SBC, I resonated with Bonhoeffer's writings, and his courage to challenge a wayward church. As Bonhoeffer wrote,

“When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.” In addition to Bonhoeffer’s writings and sacrifice, I felt drawn to stories of martyrdom throughout church history. The Lord’s invitation to take up my cross and be willing to die for him (which almost felt inevitable) was wrapped up in my ministry calling.

While at ETBU, my professors in the religion department educated me on the growing SBC movement toward Christian nationalism and conservative fundamentalism, both theologically and politically. And these things only increased post-September 11, 2001. I had growing concerns about my tradition as I slowly began to move away from SBC theology and practice. Also, during that time, a Christian ethics professor introduced me to Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon’s book, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong*.¹ This book led to many conversations in his office.

I took my first cross-cultural trip to Italy in March 2003, just a few weeks before the Battle of Baghdad when the US military invaded Iraq to oust Saddam Hussein, hoping to find weapons of mass destruction. Therefore, because of the ensuing war, American tourists were not warmly welcomed in many places we visited. There were peace rallies in the streets and anti-American sentiments spray-painted on the sides of buildings and waterways. I heard the news from a different perspective. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was on another planet. I was there on that trip learning about the Roman empire while asking myself, “Is America an empire too?” I was not yet an Anabaptist, but my experiences in Italy eventually helped me to adopt a more global perspective, and a more Kingdom one as I continued my journey into Anabaptism.

In the last few years leading up to my departure from vocational ministry in the Southern Baptist church, I had been slowly embracing Anabaptism—a vision of a nonviolent, love-doesn’t-stop-

¹ Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong* (Abingdon, 2014).

at-the-border sort of Jesus. By this time, I was heavily influenced by books like Richard Horsley’s *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*, Greg Boyd’s *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Politics is Destroying the Church*, and Donald Kraybill’s *The Upside-Down Kingdom*.² And I had just spent weeks teaching through the Sermon on the Mount to our youth, college students, and adult leaders in our ministry.

And then came the annual Fourth of July service.



A service on the Fourth of July at First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas (not the church David was attending).

While I was a bit more willing to prophetically “clear the temple” in those days, I had decided it was wise to start my vacation the day before this event so as not to disrupt or be a distraction by my refusal to participate in the celebration of America and the worship of the flag—something that, at this point, I couldn’t do in good conscience.

² Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Fortress, 2002); Greg Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Politics is Destroying the Church* (Zondervan, 2009); Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Herald Press, 1978).

I believed it was for the best.

Little did I know that there were others I had been teaching who would go to the service but choose not to participate in what they felt was idolatry. I didn't learn of it until the following Sunday when I was asked by an elderly deacon in the foyer, "What's this we hear about you teaching our youth not to say the pledge." I was dumbfounded. What had happened?

Apparently when the flag was marched down the long center aisle of the church sanctuary, which was full of many elite members and leaders of the community, several students and adults didn't turn to pledge. They didn't sing the patriotic songs, nor did they pray the nationalistic prayers. In addition, there was also a small group meeting outside the church building that was praying against the event, and for God to open the eyes of the church to this idolatry.

What followed over the next couple of months was a series of meetings with parents, deacons, and the senior pastor. As the minister to students and education pastor, I could no longer keep my personal views to myself. It was out in the open and they had questions. What had I been teaching that their students would want to put aside their former pursuits to now go into missions, love all people regardless of nationality, and not waste their life on worldly gain? They were discovering a radical discipleship. And I was becoming an Anabaptist and just didn't know it yet.

The truth is that these folks were drawing conclusions based on a simple reading of the Gospels and seeking to apply it to their lives. We had all come to realize that this was unacceptable for this Baptist church in rural America. Saying no to flag worship dethrones the American Jesus and it exposes our cultural Christianity. There would be no real discussion or debate about it.

We asked, "What if Jesus had physically walked into the building while you were doing those things?" One prominent member said, "Well, we of course would have stopped what we were doing and worshipped him." Say what!? And the one retort I'll never forget: "David, where in love your enemies does it say *not* to kill them." I

couldn't believe it. I still can't.

Parents were angry and confused. Church leaders had run out of patience trying to understand my perspective. For whatever reason, they wouldn't or couldn't hear it or even tolerate it. I was apparently such a threat that I had to sign a document saying I would never set foot on church grounds again. I was so deeply hurt by this that I wept at my desk in front of the newly recruited deacon who had been sent to deliver the news. My church and tradition were divorcing me.

When I resigned in September 2006, I announced that I was leaving to be the lead pastor of a church. But I was hurt and unaware of the wilderness, recovery, and reconstruction that awaited us. I started reading more on the first Anabaptists, had a conversation with my first real Mennonite, and decided to leave vocational ministry. I thought I was leaving for good. I worked odd jobs for a few months, moved to Houston the following summer, started blogging, and joined the house church movement. I taught in a Christian school for five years and went to seminary. I started seminary with intentions to get a PhD and teach at the university level.

One day while teaching a class on the Radical Reformation, a student, who saw my passion for Anabaptism, raised their hand and asked, "Mr. Flowers, are you an Anabaptist?" I thought about it for a few seconds and responded, "Yes. Yes, I am." As I look back, that was my crystallization moment. That was when I owned Anabaptism and knew that I had found my theological tribe.

Shortly after that, and about seven years from the time I left the SBC, God brought my wife and me to a place where we could step back into vocational ministry. But I knew that it meant either planting an Anabaptist church in Texas (no small feat) or finding a tradition that believed and practiced these things, which likely meant moving out of state. God closed the doors on church planting and so I then surveyed the denominational landscape for an Anabaptist tradition.

Immediately, the Brethren in Christ looked like the best fit. The combination of Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism resonated with where I was in my journey. Plus, I had a few friends in the Brethren in

Christ. But since there were no pastoral openings at that time in 2013, I ended up in the Mennonite Church USA for a few years, pastoring a Mennonite church a few miles from Virginia Tech. And then in the fall of 2015, I was asked to consider submitting my application to Bishop Ken Hoke and the search team at Grantham Church, where I was installed as the senior pastor on July 3, 2016.

I've been a part of the Brethren in Christ for almost nine years now. In that time, it's become clear to me that not everyone resonates with or is as passionate about Anabaptism as I am. I know that my journey has shaped that passion, no doubt. But it's still concerning to me that many within the Brethren in Christ are unfamiliar and/or seemingly unaware of its importance in our history and its relevancy to our current socio-political and cultural moment. And as Woody Dalton (retired pastor of Harrisburg Brethren in Christ Church) once said, "There are many among us who are Southern Baptists in BIC drag."³

This article is my attempt to shine a light on the Brethren in Christ Church's historic stream of Anabaptism so that our pastors, churches, and denominational leadership would fully identify with this movement and see its theology and practice as a prophetic guide through the challenges we now face.

Anabaptism: How the movement began

Who were the Anabaptists? And what is Anabaptism?

Anabaptism officially began on January 21, 1525, when Conrad Grebel "re-baptized" George Blaurock, who were both students of the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli. And after these young men baptized one another, just a few years after the sixteenth century Reformation began, the Anabaptists grew to become a scattered and diverse group of separatists. Beginning with the self-identified "Swiss Brethren," these men and women called for a "radical reformation" of the church that went far beyond the reform movements known as Protestantism.⁴

³ Woody Dalton made this statement on the floor of the 2014 General Conference in Lancaster.

The early Anabaptists rejected infant baptism, which was being used as a civil rite. Infant baptism was the way the government made citizens of a Christian state. Therefore, the rejection of infant baptism was the denial of the church's relationship to the state and called for strict adherence to the teachings of Jesus following a "believer's" baptism. And since it appeared they were being baptized a second time, their opponents called them "Anabaptists" (re-baptizers).

These "third way" radicals, who distinguished themselves from both Catholics and Protestants, claimed that Protestants only wanted a half-way reform because they refused to put down the sword and follow Christ in non-violence. They posited that the Reformers did not take Jesus's life, commands, and teachings (Matthew 5-7) seriously. They claimed that Martin Luther and his followers only wanted to rest in grace and weren't interested in walking in resurrection life.

Reformation timeline

- October 31, 1517: Martin Luther nails the "95 Theses" to the Wittenberg church door.
- 1521: Luther stands trial at the Diet of Worms.
- 1522: Ulrich Zwingli leads Swiss reform, but three of his students (Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock) lose confidence in Zwingli's leadership.
- **January 21, 1525:** Conrad Grebel re-baptizes George Blaurock in Zurich, Switzerland; "Anabaptism" and the Swiss Brethren movement begins!
- 1527: the *Schleitheim Confession* is chaired and written by Michael Sattler.

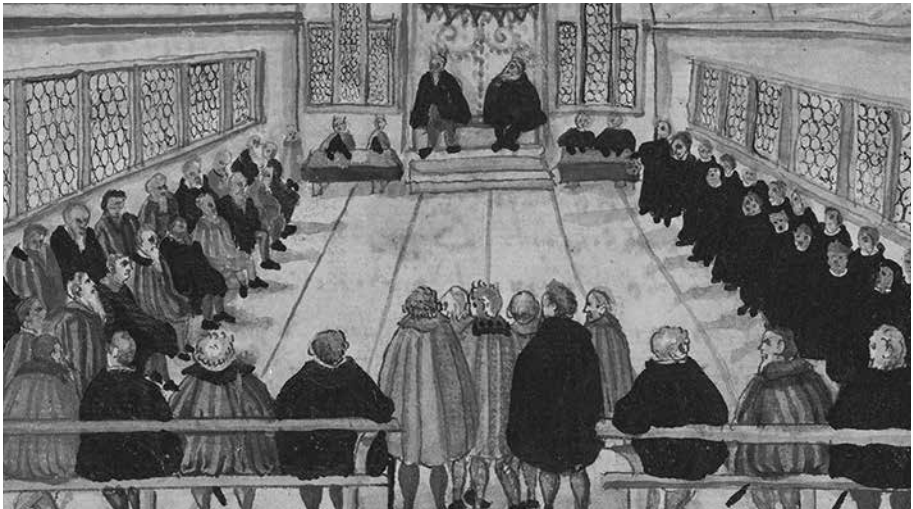
The Anabaptists affirmed the Apostles' Creed, but they recognized that it said absolutely nothing about following Christ's teachings or how Christians should live in the world. Therefore, the *Schleitheim Confession* was an Anabaptist creedal statement for the radical wing of the Reformation that addressed their concerns and elaborated on their

⁴ William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed., rev. and enlarged (Eerdmans, 1996), 13-14.

beliefs and convictions:

- Baptism (reject infant baptism for a “believer’s baptism”)
- The Ban (follow Matthew 18; excommunication for the unrepentant)
- Breaking of bread (only baptized disciples should take communion)
- Separation from evil (withdraw from “Babylon” and don’t join the wicked)
- Pastors in the Church (leaders to be honored but also held accountable)
- The Sword (we are to actively practice peace and nonviolence)
- Oaths (tell the truth and don’t swear/take oaths)

In this confession, the Anabaptists highlighted their commitment to being disciplined to Christ, to believer’s baptism, a believers church, truth-telling, holiness, accountability, the separation of church and state, peace and nonviolence, and the call to make disciples who obey Christ’s teachings. They believed this is the way we follow Jesus in the present evil age.



Early Anabaptists debate the question of baptism with the secular lords (left) and theologians (right) on January 17, 1525, four days before the rebaptism took place. Illustration courtesy of Anabaptist World.

Two kingdoms theology and apocalypticism

The Anabaptists had an apocalyptic worldview; i.e., they believed in an ongoing spiritual battle between spiritual forces of good and evil. Part of understanding this battle is to understand what the Scriptures reveal about the struggle between light and darkness, which involves the Kingdom of God vs. the kingdoms of the world. This concept was at the core of their theology.

The Anabaptists believed that this spiritual battle is manifested through politics and the power of the kingdoms of the world, which are often corrupted and used by Satan to oppose the will of God on the earth. In the Old Testament, it's clear that God does not look favorably on his people trusting in political power and human kings to lead, provide, and protect them (e.g., 1 Samuel 8:1-22, 10:17-19; Psalm 20:7; Isaiah 31:1). And we have examples of demonic forces at work behind the scenes attempting to thwart God's purposes, exploit human beings, and use the nations to oppose God's will and purposes (e.g., 1 Sam. 16:23; Daniel 10:1-21).

In the New Testament, we see an even greater separation and delineation between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. In fact, the entire New Testament is written within the backdrop of apocalypticism. Jesus himself not only affirms but intensifies this worldview, which the early Anabaptists understood and took to heart. For example, in Matthew 4:8-10, the devil claims power over worldly kingdoms and Jesus does not refute it. In this temptation, Jesus is being presented with the path of political power, which he rejects.⁵

Jesus calls Satan the "prince" or "ruler of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Paul calls him the "god of this age/world" (2 Cor. 4:4) and "prince of the power of the air" at work in people (Eph. 2:2). And

⁵ Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, anniversary ed. (Herald Press, 2018). Kraybill's book is an excellent treatment of the temptations of Christ. Kraybill shows how the temptations in Matt. 4: 1-11 are Jesus' response to three major Messianic concerns, i.e., What will Jesus do about people's economic needs, the corruption of religion, and the power of politics? What kind of Messiah will he be? Jesus answers in his resistance to the temptations and then reveals his Messianic character and rule in his ministry.

in Ephesians 6:12, Paul writes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The Anabaptists really believed this stuff.

Therefore, the Anabaptists attested that while human governments are currently a part of the world as we know it, even necessary for the present evil age (e.g., Rom. 13:1-7), they are easily corruptible and used by the enemy to fuel human systems of injustice, greed, war, violence, and to exploit the vulnerable, oppress minorities, and sometimes persecute the church.

At some point in the future, when Christ brings the fullness of his Kingdom upon the earth, these kingdoms will be no more. But until then, the Anabaptists said we must recognize their temporary nature, and their susceptibility to corruption and idolatry, as we seek to navigate the political landscape today as citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). And so, we must recognize that there are Two Kingdoms, and our allegiance is to God’s Kingdom, not to any kingdom of this world. Consider the stark differences in the Two Kingdoms:

The kingdoms of the world

Ruler: Jesus said that Satan is the “ruler (*arche*) of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11); “god of this age” and “prince of the power of the air” (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2); he is the one who “deceives the nations” (Rev 13:14).

Methods: exercises *power-over* people (law), wields “the power of the sword” (war and violence), operates by intimidation and force, seeks to control the behavior of others.

Purpose: originated because of sin and rebellion; despite its corruption, God uses it to keep law and order in a fallen world where sin reigns in human beings (Rom 13:1-5).

The Kingdom of God

Ruler: Jesus Christ is “King” of kings (1 Tim 6:15; Rev 19:16) and “Lord” of all (Acts 10:36); maker of heaven and earth (Col 1:16);

“Judge” over all creation (Rom 2:16; 2 Tim 4:1); Jesus is the full embodiment of the good news and the Kingdom of God.

Methods: exercises power-under people (love), wields the sword of the Spirit, operates in gentleness and grace, seeks to transform hearts by the Spirit; always looks like Jesus!

Purpose: that God would reign and rule the cosmos through Jesus, his Son; he invites all of creation to share in the mysterious Kingdom that is already, but not yet.

Because of this, the Anabaptists denounced the Roman emperor Constantine as “that dragon” for fusing the cross and the sword in the fourth century.⁶ They called for a restoration of the beliefs and practices of early Christianity, before the merging of church and state. Of course, this undermined the very foundations of Christendom (church militant and triumphant) and made them enemies of both Protestants and Catholics who held to the power of the sword.

The Anabaptist view of Scripture and authority

In addition to their Two Kingdoms theology, the Anabaptists had a radical way in which they viewed the Bible and the ultimate telos (aim/end goal) of the Holy Scriptures. The Protestant Reformers challenged the authority of Roman Catholic traditions, Church Councils, and the power of the Pope. They said that “*sola scriptura*” (Scripture alone) is the infallible guide for the faith and practice of Christians. But for Anabaptists, their concern was that disagreements over interpretations and doctrinal differences endlessly fractured churches within Protestantism. They also noticed how the Bible was being read as a flat book to support practices that contradicted the life and teachings of Jesus. In other words, their opponents jumped over Jesus in the Gospels and used the Old Testament to justify their non-

⁶ Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (The Christian Hymnary Publishers, 1991), 60. Verduin gives his readers deep insights into the theological issues and concerns of the Reformers and why they had such disdain for the Anabaptists. He also says that history has proven that the Roman Catholic Church and the magisterial Reformers were wrong about the Anabaptists, especially as we see their lasting impact and influence on other denominations and the governments of the Western world.

Christ-like actions. This was a major problem for the Anabaptists, for Christ was central and supreme over all Scripture.

Peter Hoover writes:

The Protestant reformers failed, for instance, to follow Christ's example in loving his enemies because they looked to David's example in war. They did not follow Christ's example in economics because they looked to Abraham and Job. They did not understand the kingdom of Christ because they looked at the kingdom of Israel.⁷

The Anabaptists essentially said that Christendom was missing the whole point of the Bible. What makes it authoritative and the only infallible guide for faith and practice? It's inspired and authoritative because Jesus was and is the God-man revealed in its pages, and it's our Lord who reframes our understanding of Scripture and calls us to follow him. We must interpret the Old Testament not only by using the New Testament, but, even more specifically, through Christ. Jesus said, "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40).

Again, Hoover writes:

The Anabaptists had infinitely more than *sola scriptura*. They had community with Christ. And they were not "people of the book." They were "people of the Man." The Anabaptists did not read in the Gospels that the Word was made paper and ink. They read that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."⁸

So, for the Anabaptists, Christ is the hermeneutical key. The Anabaptists believed Christ revealed the fullness of God. God is like

⁷ Peter Hoover, *The Secret of the Strength: What Would the Anabaptists Tell This Generation* (Benchmark Press, 1999), 81

⁸ Peter Hoover, *The Secret of the Strength*, 81, <https://www.elcristianismoprimitivo.com/The%20Secret%20of%20the%20Strength.pdf>. Hoover's little-known book on Anabaptism is a non-academic, readable gem.

Jesus—the Word made flesh! The New Testament reveals the new covenant, superseding the old covenant set forth in Old Testament. The life and teachings of Jesus have supremacy over our interpretations of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament and the epistles of Paul. Therefore, we must read and interpret all Scripture through the revelation of Christ.

In 1536, Heinz Kraut, an Anabaptist martyr, said, “The holy writings are valuable for those who use them right. But their misuse is the source of all heresy and unbelief.” And in 1557, Menno Simons, the founder of the Mennonites wrote, “Beware of all innovations and teachings that do not come from the Word of Christ and his apostles. . . . Point to Christ and his Word at all times. Let all those who would introduce anything more than what Christ teaches in his Word be *anathema*. For no other foundation can a man lay than that of Jesus Christ.”⁹

The Anabaptists believed that the highest view of the Scriptures is not the one that seeks to make an idol of the Bible (biblicism), but the one that allows the biblical text to exalt Christ as the living Word over all creation. The Word became flesh and blood, not paper and ink. The Scriptures are inspired and authoritative because they reveal the living Christ, *the Word of God*.

In his book, *The Bible Made Impossible*, Christian Smith writes: God’s truest, highest, most important, most authoritative, and most compelling self-revelation is the God/Man Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ—and not the Bible—who is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). It was in Jesus Christ that “God was pleased to have all of his fullness dwell” (Col. 1:19).¹⁰

⁹ Hoover, *The Secret of the Strength*, 80, 83.

¹⁰ Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Brazos Press, 2012), 117. Smith is a Christian sociologist. I first encountered him years ago when I read his book, *Going to the Root: Nine Proposals for Radical Church Renewal* (Herald Press, 1992). He had clearly been influenced by Anabaptism with his recognition of the two kingdoms and his emphasis on discipleship and community. It’s been interesting to see his journey from being anti-institutional church within the house church movement to becoming a practicing Roman Catholic today. Most people who know his work are seldom (if ever) aware of his book, *Going to the Root*. It does not appear on his Wikipedia page.

We shouldn't mistake their insistence that the Word became flesh to mean that Anabaptists didn't study, memorize, and know how to engage others with their knowledge of the biblical text, which had become increasingly accessible during the Reformation of the 1500s.

Timothy George writes:

Many of those who heard and responded to the Anabaptist message were poor farmers, unskilled workers, and displaced persons. Often they were completely or almost illiterate. Yet, once converted, they began to "hide the Word in their hearts." When hailed before the civil authorities, these unlearned believers would frequently confound their judges by their ability to quote and reason from the Scriptures.¹¹

So, how did the Anabaptists read, listen, and interpret the Scriptures together to know Christ? What were their guiding principles or method for studying and applying the text to their lives?

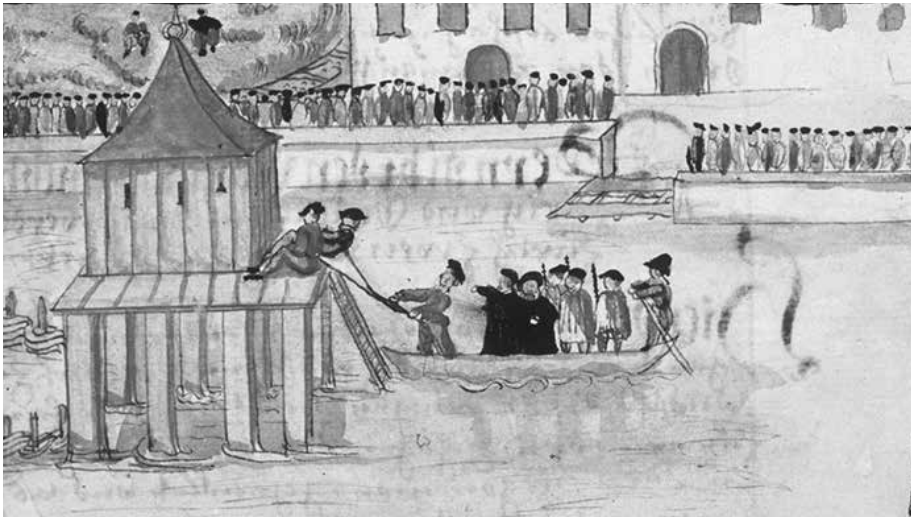
The Anabaptist interpretive method

- Everyone can and should interpret responsibly.
- Biblical interpretation is a community practice.
- Interpretation is for practical application.
- Interpretation happens in light of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- Discipleship and transformation (i.e., becoming like Christ in his character and competencies) is the ultimate goal of all Bible reading and interpretation.

This interpretive method was fleshed out and practiced in house churches and small group settings that were conducive to study and conversation in personal spaces. Also, since the Anabaptists embraced the "priesthood of all believers" and believed that everyone was capable of learning and listening to the Holy Spirit, they did not need the approval of the educated elite. This was a problem for the religious gatekeepers who looked down on these ragamuffins.

¹¹ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Broadman & Holman, 1988), 273.

All of the above ideas, beliefs, and practices challenged and threatened the established order, and so the Anabaptists were persecuted and executed throughout Europe by both Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were seen as seditious rebels who disrupted the peace and deserved to be punished. Many of them were punished, and they paid for their “insubordination” and subversive beliefs and behavior with their very lives.



Drowning, from the Martyr's Mirror.

Baptism by blood and fire: Anabaptist martyrdom

Catholics and Protestants saw the Anabaptist movement made up of “perverted sects” with eccentric individuals, “unbelievably stubborn” and “wildly obstinate” heretics worthy of death.

I can remember, before I identified as an Anabaptist, how sobering it was when I first read what the Magisterial Reformers had to say about the Anabaptists and their movement. John Calvin wrote, “These miserable fanatics have no other goal than to put everything into disorder. . . . They reveal themselves to be the enemies of God and of the human race. . . .” Calvin called them “deluded,” “scatterbrains,”



Troops raid an Anabaptist gathering in 1527. Illustration courtesy of Anabaptist World.

“asses,” and “mad dogs.”¹² Ulrich Zwingli said, “My struggle with the old church [Catholicism] was child’s play compared to my struggle with the Anabaptists.”

The great Martin Luther penned these shocking words in a pamphlet in 1536: “For think what disaster would ensue if children were not baptized? Besides this the Anabaptists separate themselves from the Churches . . . we conclude that the stubborn must be put to death.”¹³

How did the Anabaptists respond to their lives being threatened?

- “Do not worry about the authorities. Just do what God has told you to do” (Conrad Grebel, 1525).
- “They threatened us with bonds, then with fire and the sword. But in all this I surrendered myself completely into the will of the Lord, together with all my brothers and with my wife, and

¹² John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, ed. Benjamin W. Farley (Baker House, 1982), 30.

¹³ Johannes Janssen, *History of the German People From the Close of the Middle Ages*, trans. A.M. Christie, (B. Herder, 1910 [orig. 1891]) 10:222-223.

prepared myself to die for his testimony” (Michael Sattler, 1527).

- “We would rather suffer our bodies to be burned, drowned, racked or tortured, whatever you may wish to do with them, and we would rather be whipped, banished, or driven away, or robbed of our goods, than show any disobedience contrary to the Word of God [Jesus Christ]” (Hans van Overdam, 1551).

Peter Hoover writes:

Following Christ, for the Anabaptists, was much more than obeying his commandments. It was much more than confessing him publicly or being willing to die for him. It was knowing Christ, and living like the first disciples in full community with him. The words of Paul in Philippians 3:10 stated distinctly the goal of the Anabaptists: “I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”¹⁴

A timeline of Anabaptist persecution and martyrdom

January 21, 1525: Conrad Grebel re-baptizes George Blaurock in a house church meeting. The “Swiss Brethren” (Anabaptist) movement begins, and persecution ensues.

May 29, 1525: Eberli Bolt, a “pious and kindhearted” man, is the first to be martyred in Switzerland by Roman Catholic authorities. He was burned at the stake.

1527: Felix Manz is drowned; Michael Sattler chairs the Schleithem Confession and is tortured and burned to death several months later; his wife is drowned in a nearby river.

1528: Balthasar Hubmaier, an educated and influential German theologian, baptizes thousands and is burned at the stake for opposing infant baptism and the state church.

1529: George Blaurock is burned at the stake with other Anabaptists; there were mass executions and hundreds of troops were sent out to kill Anabaptists.

¹⁴ Hoover, *The Secret of the Strength*, 27.

1536: Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest, received believer's baptism, organized the scattered Anabaptists, and spent his life as a fugitive.

1549: Elizabeth Dirks escapes a Catholic convent, encounters Menno Simons, refused to reveal who baptized her, and was tortured before being tied up in a bag and drowned.



Dirk Willems turning back to rescue his pursuer, from the Martyr's Mirror.

A well-known story in Anabaptist circles is that of Dirk Willems. You can read Willems's story in the *Martyrs Mirror*, a book that records graphic accounts of more than four thousand Christians who endured suffering, torture, and ultimately a martyr's death because of their faith in Christ.¹⁵ Willems was re-baptized as an Anabaptist and was arrested and then escaped from prison. As he was fleeing, a guard saw Willems and chased him across a frozen pond. The guard

¹⁵ Thielman Van Braght, *Martyrs Mirror* (Herald Press, 1950). It was only later in my journey into Anabaptism that I became aware of this classic book of martyrs. I read another book of the martyrs when I first began my vocational ministry journey within the SBC: *Jesus Freaks: DC Talk and the Voice of the Martyrs* (Albury, 1999). As a young person, God used *Jesus Freaks* to prepare me for ministry and for the many stories that I would later read about the Anabaptists paying the ultimate price for their belief in Christ and his gospel.

then broke through the ice. When Willems realized this, he turned back and saved him from drowning. And yet, despite this act of love, Willems was rearrested, tortured, and burned at the stake on a windy day in May 1569. His screams could be heard from miles away in neighboring towns.

The violent hostility from their persecutors only increased as the impact of their witness grew. John Longhurst writes, “It is estimated that between 4,000 and 5,000 Anabaptists were executed during the Reformation years, although the true number is uncertain.”¹⁶ These men and women gave their lives for Christ and the gospel, for they did not love their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:11). We must remember and honor their legacy of faith and sacrifice.

Radical discipleship and the Anabaptist vision

We believe that the Christendom era has bequeathed a form of Christianity that has marginalized, spiritualized, domesticated, and emasculated Jesus. The teaching of Jesus is watered down, privatized, and explained away. Jesus is worshipped as a remote kingly figure or a romanticized personal savior. In many churches (especially those emerging from the Reformation), Paul’s writings are prioritized over the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. And in many Christian traditions, ethical guidelines derived from the Old Testament or pagan philosophy trump Jesus’ call to discipleship.¹⁷

Anabaptism seeks to recover a radical discipleship that brings about a Kingdom revolution through the faithful witness of the Body of Christ, as we embody the words and ways of Jesus. As Anabaptists, we want to renew the church’s passion for the centrality and supremacy of Christ. We long for his Kingdom to come and we’re willing to lay our lives down for it. This Kingdom comes not by coercion and force,

¹⁶ John Longhurst, “500 Years Ago: Anabaptists Showed the Meaning of True Evangelical Faith”, *Anabaptist World*, December 27, 2024, <https://anabaptistworld.org/500-years-ago-anabaptists-showed-the-meaning-of-true-evangelical-faith/>.

¹⁷ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*, 5th anniversary ed. (Herald Press, 2015), 62. A summary of my journey into Anabaptism is on pages 33-34.

not by power over others, but instead through humble service and loving obedience to the teachings of Jesus and his gospel.

In his classic essay, *The Anabaptist Vision*, Harold S. Bender writes: The Anabaptist vision included three major points of emphasis; first, a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship; second, a new conception of the church as brotherhood [community]; and third, a new ethic of love and nonresistance.¹⁸

Anabaptists believe what John said: “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). Living like Jesus, while unattainable in the flesh, is the call upon the life of every born again, Spirit-empowered disciple. Baptism is our initiation into the way of Christ and then we begin the long road of being spiritually formed into his image (Rom. 6:2-4; Gal. 2:20, 4:19).

For Anabaptists, Jesus is not an accessory or an add-on to our lives. Jesus becomes the center. To use Palmer Becker’s language in his book, *Anabaptist Essentials*, “Jesus is the center of our faith, community is the center of our life, and reconciliation is the center of our work.”¹⁹ So, we recognize that Jesus is Lord and Savior, not just of our individual lives, but of the entire world. And our Lord and Savior calls us to “love our enemies” and to be “peacemakers” and “ministers of reconciliation” in the world for which he died (Matt. 5:9, 43-44; John 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 5:18-20). This divine identity and calling still fuels the Anabaptist missional impulse today.

The early Anabaptists regularly shared in communion and a “love feast” with other disciples where they reflected on the meaning of Christ’s table and his sacrifice on the cross, and they remembered what Jesus said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34-35 NIV). And then they washed each other’s feet.

¹⁸ Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Herald Press, 1960), 20.

¹⁹ Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (Herald Press, 2017). This is an excellent book for teaching a class on Anabaptism.

The church puts this calling, and our allegiance to it, on display by the way we live. This is not the broad way; it is the narrow way (Matt. 7:13-14). This way of Jesus challenges the zeitgeist, and it goes against the mainstream of surrounding society and culture. Therefore, we can expect suffering and persecution when we decide to follow Christ (2 Tim. 3:12).

The same Christ who says, “All who are heavy laden come to me and I will refresh you,” also says, “Whosoever will not forsake father and mother cannot be my disciple.” Whoever loves truth must accept the one as well as the other. Whoever wants to have Christ must have him also in the way of suffering. It is foolish to say: “We believe that Christ has redeemed us, but we do not want to live like he lived.”²⁰

Like the first Anabaptists, those of us who have been captured by their original vision see that obeying Christ is the evidence of a changed life. Disciples are called to be holy and set apart in their attitude, posture, and behavior (1 Pet. 1:14-15). This requires courage to resist the tidal wave of socio-political opposition to the words and ways of Christ, and divine wisdom and discernment to navigate the idolatrous forces, competing allegiances, and rival liturgies of the world that are vying for our souls. Instead, the world must see Christ in our character, our decision-making, our words, and our actions. Our lives must shine for God’s glory (Matt. 5:16).

“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, straightforwardness in such measure that one would suppose that they had the Holy Spirit of God!” (Franz Agricola (Roman Catholic theologian), *Against the Terrible Errors of the Anabaptists*.)²¹

²⁰ From Hans Haffner, “About the True Soldier of Jesus Christ” ca. 1530s from a castle dungeon in Bavaria.

²¹ Karl Rembert, *Die ”Wiedertäufer“ im Herzogtum Jülich: Studien zur Geschichte der Reformation besonders am Niederrhein* (Heyfelder, 1899), 564.

But let's be clear: Anabaptists are not legalists, nor are we libertines. We seek to be in the world, but not of the world. And in doing so, we set ourselves apart not only from unbelievers, but also from those who claim to be "Christian" yet reveal they don't really belong to Christ: "The Anabaptists have the semblance of outward piety to a far greater degree than we and all the other churches which in union with us confess Christ; and they avoid the offensive sins that are very common among us" (Reformed preachers at Berne, 1532).²²

Unlike Martin Luther, the Anabaptists did not see a conflict between faith and works. The Anabaptists believed that good works was the inevitable fruit of a faith born of the Spirit. And they sought to hold the inner work of discipleship together with outward works of justice.

Menno Simons reflects this in his words about a true "evangelical" faith:

True evangelical faith, cannot lie dormant, it clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all creatures.²³

The Anabaptist commitment to discipleship is for the transformation of our own lives, for the renewal and vibrancy of the church, and for the healing and shalom of the world that Jesus loves. Therefore, we seek to make disciples who make disciples who follow



A 1677 portrait of Menno Simons, by Christoffel van Sichem. Image courtesy of Anabaptist World, January 2025.

²² William Joseph McGlothlin, "Die Berner Taufer bis 1532," (PhD diss. Friedrich Wilhelms Universität, 1902) 36.

²³ Menno Simons on . . . the New Life," *Life, Writings, Doctrine, Images and Links*, accessed March 21, 2025, <http://newlife.htmlmennosimons.net>. The commonly-used quote used above is adapted from this source.

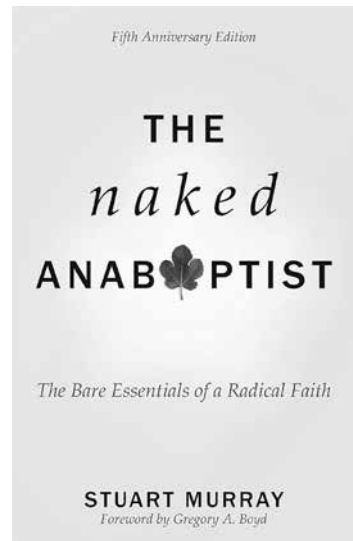
Jesus (Matt. 16:24-27, 28:18-20), until the Lord returns and establishes his Kingdom forever (Daniel 7:13-14; Acts 1:7-8; 1 Thess. 5:23). In the meantime, we call down more of heaven to earth with our lives.

Anabaptism then: The original stream of the Brethren in Christ

In his book, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*, Stuart Murray says there were widely shared convictions held by Anabaptists by the end of the sixteenth century:

- Christians are to follow the example of Jesus and obey his teachings, whatever the consequences.
- The Bible is authoritative on ethical and ecclesial issues as well as theology.
- Church and state are both divinely ordained but are to be kept separate.
- Churches are communities of baptized disciples who are accountable to and for one another.
- Church discipline (including the use of the ban) is crucial to maintain the purity and distinctiveness of the church.
- Followers of Jesus are to share their resources freely with one another.
- Nonviolence and truth telling are essential aspects of discipleship, so Christians should not fight or swear oaths.
- Suffering is normal for faithful disciples and is a mark of the true church.²⁴

Beginning with the leadership and influence of Menno Simons in Europe, Anabaptism first makes its way to the American colonies through those who bear his name in the late 1600s. The story of the Brethren in Christ begins and grows out of the Anabaptist tradition.



²⁴ Murray, 182-183.

A timeline of Anabaptism leading to the founding of the Brethren in Christ

- 1531: Menno Simons embraces Anabaptism
- 1644: The first Anabaptists, specifically Dutch Mennonites, arrive in North America
- 1681: William Penn's colony (Pennsylvania) becomes a refuge for Anabaptists and other religious outcasts and dissidents seeking to freely live out their faith
- 1683: Dutch Mennonites established the first permanent congregation of Anabaptists in North America in the Germantown area near Philadelphia
- 1775-1788 : The "River Brethren" become a denomination; they changed their name to "Brethren in Christ" later in the nineteenth century (1861-65).

The Brethren in Christ were first Anabaptists. Make no mistake, there would be no Brethren in Christ denomination if it had not been for Anabaptism and its core convictions. Of course, it takes two to give birth to something new. The best historical evidence that we have points to our denominational beginnings being between 1776 and 1778, at least a decade before George Washington became the first president of the United States in April 1789.²⁵

Some Mennonites along the Susquehanna River in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, came to believe that their eighteenth-century Anabaptist expression of faith had become stale, spiritually lukewarm, and in need of new life. And this new life in the Spirit came in the form of Pietism, which was at the heart of the First Great Awakening that began in Europe and first swept the colonies in the 1730s-40s. Pietism emphasized the need for a heart-felt conversion-regeneration experience that went beyond giving mere intellectual ascent to biblical truths. And a group of Mennonites responded to the Pietistic revival movement in Lancaster County in a second wave of the Spirit in the

²⁵ D. Ray Hostetter, *The Soul of the Brethren in Christ: Essays on Church Identity* (Evangel Publishing House, 2009), 68. Hostetter's book is less known in the Brethren in Christ Church, but well worth the read.

1770s-80s, just before the start of the Second Great Awakening, as German-speaking Pietists were able to break through to the Anabaptist communities there.

It's worth noting that Anabaptism as a historic tradition is not devoid or lacking in Pietism. Who would have the audacity to claim that the sixteenth century Anabaptists were lacking in piety, passion, and emotion in their faith expression? But as often happens with groups over time, they can lose their spiritual vitality when they become nothing more than a system of theology and belief, and/or an exclusive club lacking the Spirit's life-giving power. That is what had happened to the Anabaptists of Lancaster County before the revivals in the second half of the eighteenth century. Therefore, it's best to understand the birth of the "River Brethren" as God bringing new life to their Anabaptist faith through the power of the Spirit at work in the Pietistic revivals of that era. And since long-standing Anabaptist groups in that area were not prepared or willing to accommodate their Pietism as Anabaptists, a new church was formed.²⁶

In what has become the standard history of the Brethren in Christ Church, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ*, Carlton Wittlinger writes:

The theological roots of the Brethren in Christ, nourished by historic Christianity mediated through the Protestant Reformation, go deeply into both Anabaptism and revivalistic Pietism. Finding themselves at the point of intersection of these two movements, the Brethren founders could neither sacrifice their understanding of the church and the nature of the Christian life derived from the former nor their conception of the new birth gained from the latter. These circumstances prevented them from making common cause with any other religious society and left them no alternative but to go their own way.²⁷

²⁶ Hostetter, 68.

²⁷ Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Evan-gel Press, 1978), 12. For more on the beginnings of the Brethren in Christ, see chapter 2, "How the Brethren Began."

In the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, between the years of 1886-1910, after the “River Brethren” became the “Brethren in Christ” Church, our then one-hundred-year-old pious Anabaptist denomination embraced another movement that was bringing fresh fire to Christianity in America: Wesleyanism. John Wesley (1703-1791), a minister in the Church of England and founder of a church he never intended (the Methodists), who had a remarkable sixty-five-year ministry, emphasized salvation by faith, holiness, and working out your salvation; the need to share the gospel in word and deed; the necessity of doing good works and acts of justice; and personal experiences of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Wesleyanism was another Pietist revival movement, which presented little challenge to our Anabaptist and Pietist streams.

In a letter from Brethren in Christ historian and theologian, Martin H. Schrag, to D. Ray Hostetter (dated March 7, 1974), he wrote that “it is one of my theories that the reason the Brethren in Christ accepted (what was later to be termed) Wesleyan holiness, was due to the fact that they had a Pietistic orientation.”²⁸ This made the merging and synthesis of these three streams possible, without eroding the essence of Anabaptism, the original stream of the Brethren in Christ. As Brethren in Christ historian Luke Keefer Jr. noted:

I maintain that the introduction of the third stream of Wesleyanism neither destroyed the initial synthesis of Anabaptism and Pietism nor won at the expense of either of the first two streams. It found acceptance in the denomination by coming to terms with our Anabaptist heritage.²⁹

It wasn’t until the introduction of Evangelicalism into the life of the church in the middle of the twentieth century that we began to see the eroding of the original stream of the Brethren in Christ. Evangelicalism, a worldwide interdenominational movement within Protestant Christianity, emphasizes evangelism, a personal relationship

²⁸ Hostetter, *The Soul of the Brethren in Christ: Essays on Church Identity*, 15.

²⁹ Luke Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams of Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” *Brethren in Christ History and Life*, 19, no. 1 (April 1996): 26-63.

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C. N. Hostetter Jr. and Arthur Climenhaga with Billy Graham and other leaders in the National Association of Evangelicals.

with Jesus Christ, and the authority of the Bible. And as the neo-Evangelicalism of the 1940s and 1950s was picking up steam and was attractive to our declining denomination, many leaders believed the Brethren in Christ were too rigid, legalistic, and dying from biblical literalism, largely perceived to be born of our Anabaptist heritage.

Concerned about the future of the Brethren in Christ, church leadership fully embraced Evangelicalism and made some sweeping changes. And while the Evangelicalism of Billy Graham, Harold Ockenga, and Charles Fuller certainly offered new life through evangelistic fervor, church growth, ecumenicism, creative engagement with culture, and a refreshing change away from the American Christian fundamentalism of the 1920s, it also brought with it theology and practices that were in flat contradiction to our Anabaptist heritage (e.g., Calvinism, Just War Theory, a “Sinners Prayer” gospel

presentation, its teaching on the “security of the believer” over obedience and discipleship, and an emphasis on the individual over the community, etc.).

It can’t be overstated how much the Calvinism of the Evangelical movement in America negatively impacted the Brethren in Christ, as it eroded our Anabaptist and Wesleyan heritage with its theocratic approach to society, its hunger for power and influence in politics and culture, its belief in “just war” situations, its commitment to Calvin’s penal substitutionary atonement theory, and its emphasis on God’s “control” and sovereignty over human free will.

According to Luke Keefer Jr. in his well-known *Brethren in Christ History and Life* article in 1996, “The Three Streams of Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole,” Evangelicalism has undoubtedly had a negative effect on the Brethren in Christ. Keefer believed that the stream of Evangelicalism has had more of a forceful impact than anticipated, thus the Brethren in Christ have not been able to domesticate it and synthesize it with our other three historic streams. Keefer’s perspective was that there is not enough glue to bind four streams together.

As a result of Evangelicalism, the Brethren in Christ streams of Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism have all eroded to some extent. Keefer wrote, “Without question the new stream of Evangelicalism has muted much of our Anabaptist heritage.”³⁰ Many of us have read Keefer’s article, but I wonder why we’ve seemingly not taken his words to heart when we survey the landscape of the Brethren in Christ U. S.

Owen Alderfer, another respected Brethren in Christ voice, who discerned what had happened and saw where things were going in the last half of the twentieth century, wrote the following:

³⁰ Keefer, “The Three Streams of Our Heritage,” 43. I first read Keefer’s article before I had officially entered the Brethren in Christ and began my post at Grantham Church. Another Brethren in Christ pastor recommended that I read it. It wasn’t long before I discovered the accuracy of Keefer’s assessment of the Brethren in Christ and the slow erosion of our first three streams due to the negative influences of Evangelicalism, the lack of leadership alignment to our streams and values, and the absence of a school or seminary to train leaders who affirm our heritage.

As American life was identified with Main Evangelicalism and the Brethren in Christ became more and more associated with that Evangelicalism, . . . the Brethren drew closer to American political life and American culture and the old lines of separation between the kingdoms became less. Anabaptism was increasingly becoming a burden to the Brethren in Christ.³¹

And just think how much American Evangelicalism has changed within the past several decades. Those of us who are committed to our original stream know that, for many within the Brethren in Christ, Anabaptism is more of a “burden” now than it was when Alderfer penned his words in 1990.

Anabaptism now: Convictions for a church in American exile

The Kingdom vision of Anabaptist leaders such as Balthasar Hubmaier, Hans Denck, Conrad Grebel, Pilgram Marpeck, Jacob Hutter, Felix Manz, Hans Hut, Michael Sattler, and Menno Simons began a movement five hundred years ago that now lives on in several traditions like the Mennonites, Amish, Church of the Brethren, and Brethren in Christ. There is also a growing number of folks that are referred to as “neo-Anabaptists”—people who resonate with Anabaptism but have no historic, cultural, or denominational links to an Anabaptist tradition.³²

In *The Naked Anabaptist*, Stuart Murray sets forth a fresh vision of the core convictions held by those who identify as Anabaptists today. Stuart says that Anabaptism is being (re)discovered by folks from many different traditions who are troubled by the decline and

³¹ Owen Alderfer, “Anabaptism as a ‘Burden’ for the Brethren in Christ” in *Reflections on a Heritage*, 110. First published in *Within the Perfection of Christ: Essays on Peace and the Nature of the Church*, ed. Terry Brensinger and E. Morris Sider (Evangel Press and the Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 1990). Alderfer’s essay should be read as closely and carefully as Keefer’s more well-known article on “The Three Streams of Our Heritage,” which is included in the required Brethren in Christ History and Values core course. Both of these precious saints spoke directly to the growing concerns and impact that the worst of evangelicalism has had, and is having, on the Brethren in Christ in recent decades.

³² Check out the website, “Jesus Collective,” a network of Anabaptist and neo-Anabaptist pastors and leaders. “Jesus Collective,” <https://jesuscollective.com>.

secularization of the church in the West (I would add: American Evangelicalism selling its soul to partisan politics in pursuit of power) and are longing for a more authentic faith—a Christlike Christianity.

The Anabaptist tradition has never been uniform. From the earliest years there were different emphases and divergent practices. Anabaptists today will interpret the Anabaptist vision in ways that make sense in our various cultures and contexts. But there are foundational insights, deep convictions, and enduring values that have shaped this tradition, for which the first Anabaptists were willing to die, and which all who accept the label “Anabaptist” recognize and want to embody.³³

The following is a list of seven core convictions that are shared among many passionate and committed Anabaptists today, which Murray expounds upon in his book:

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-centered 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.
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, marginalized 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.

³³ Murray, 190.

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 nonviolent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society and between nations.³⁴

Do these Anabaptist convictions, as well as the perspectives and theological distinctives expounded upon in this article, not speak directly to the spiritual needs of the church today? What if the way forward for the church in American exile is discerned by looking to the past?

The Anabaptist tradition, then, is flawed and imperfect. Even at its best it needs to receive insights from other traditions to correct imbalances. But many Christians today have found it inspirational and life giving. Some suspect it might be a

³⁴ Murray, 53-54. Each conviction is then explored in subsequent chapters.

tradition whose time has come in post-Christendom Western societies.³⁵

At a time when there were massive shifts and changes in sixteenth century Europe, e.g., unrest, uncertainty, and upheaval in politics, science, religion, technology, human rights, and the economy—when the church was in dire need of a spiritual awakening and repentance from its corruption, complacency, and collusion with the worldly kingdoms—the torch of their testimony and the light of their witness the Anabaptists revealed a more Christ-like Christianity. Their church restoration and renewal efforts led to the West embracing the separation of church and state and global mission endeavors, migrating in massive numbers to America, and eventually founding the Brethren in Christ.

Now it's our time to step up to the plate and seize the opportunity to be faithful followers of Jesus living in an American exile. It's time to see ourselves as aliens and exiles in America (1 Pet. 2:9-12; Heb. 11:13-16), not as insiders or a group that can be pandered to by politicians on the Right or the Left. Now is the time to own Anabaptism and recover a more Christ-like Christianity. I believe that the Brethren in Christ has the heritage to help us lead the way.

Owning our Anabaptist heritage: An invitation to the Brethren in Christ U.S.

As previously mentioned, due to the decline in the Brethren in Christ Church in the 1940s and 50s, there was concern that it was our Anabaptist heritage that was repelling our young people and hindering growth. But I submit that the problem wasn't Anabaptism; it was legalism, strict separatism, and biblical literalism (e.g., head coverings, avoiding jewelry, playing cards, etc.).³⁶ Yes, of course, we can't deny that Anabaptism has had those Pharisaical and bounded-

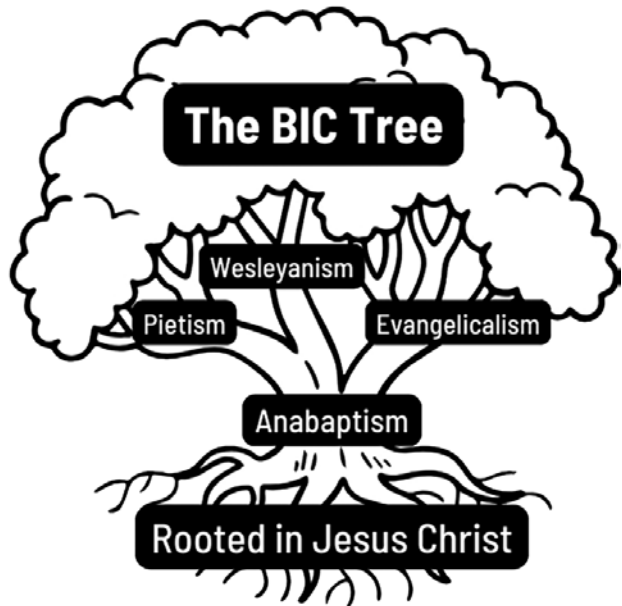
³⁵ Murray, 206.

³⁶ What's interesting is that it's not likely to be the Anabaptists among us who think this way today, it is rather the neo-Calvinists and "Southern Baptists in BIC drag" who want to drop the hammer on dissenters.

set elements in its history, but the best of Anabaptism has sought to take Jesus far more seriously than many “Christians” have within mainstream Evangelicalism.

What we need now is not to turn our backs on our original stream, or to allow American Evangelicalism as it appears in 2025, to mute and erode our Anabaptist heritage. Rather, we need to hold to the core convictions of Anabaptism in “centered-set” community³⁷ that is built on the grace and truth of Jesus, and gives space to folks who are in different places on their journey, while simultaneously safeguarding our heritage, our original theological stream, and the values that make us unique as a denomination. This must happen at all levels of leadership.

We have often used, as I have in this article up to this point, the metaphor of “streams” in a river to think about the merging of our theological influences. But I’d like to propose another illustration to convey in a visual what I’m inviting us to accept about our history and heritage.



Tree image created by David Flowers.

³⁷ See Mark Baker, *Centered-Set Church: Discipleship and Community Without Judgmentalism* (InterVarsity Press, 2021). Baker lays out a way of doing community that can guide us through many of the challenges we now face, e.g., division and differences of opinion on theology and human sexuality.

Our denomination was born from the roots of Christ and his Spirit at work in our ancestors. Anabaptism is not merely one “stream” of thought; rather, it is the “trunk” of the Brethren in Christ tree. The major limbs are Pietism, Wesleyanism, and Evangelicalism. I worked on a tree farm one summer when I was in college. Many of you may be aware that the trunk of a tree needs to be cared for, to be sure, but at other times the limbs need attention. Also, the smaller branches coming off the larger limbs of the tree must be trimmed off for the overall health and vitality of the tree. In other words, I think we’ve got some trimming to do in the Brethren in Christ U.S. (and perhaps elsewhere).

What about Evangelicalism? Should we consider ourselves to be Evangelical today? Should we cut that whole limb off the Brethren in Christ tree? Well, I’d say that if you look at our congregations, the limb of Evangelicalism is very much a part of our tree, whether we like it or not. I’m not proposing that we deny Evangelicalism’s influence and impact on the Brethren in Christ. After all, the limb of Evangelicalism (the best of that tradition) does not compromise the integrity of the tree, and I believe it would be compromising the tree to cut off that limb entirely. I don’t even think it is possible at this point. But there undoubtedly needs to be some trimming of the unhealthy branches (John 15:1-2). For starters, any leader who espouses a Calvinistic theology over our Wesleyan heritage, does not whole-heartedly affirm our Anabaptist peace position, and does not support women in ministry is not in alignment with who we are and compromises the historical identity and overall health of the Brethren in Christ. Keep in mind that some of those branches aren’t going to fall off the tree on their own.

Therefore, we can keep recognizing “historic” Evangelicalism (not the current version), as we see it listed on the denomination’s website.³⁸ That’s fine. But the challenge, as Luke Keefer Jr. said, is to be evangelicals with a difference, just as we have been Anabaptists with a

³⁸ Brethren in Christ Church U.S., “History,” <https://bicus.org/about/history/>.

difference, Pietists with a difference, and Wesleyans with a difference. If this is to happen, Keefer believed, and so do I, it will require leadership and denominational commitment “similar to the magnitude” of the Church Review and Study Committee process of the 1950s. We need the courage to take a long hard look at the loss of our heritage — or the deterioration of our trunk — and the negative effects that white American Evangelicalism, with its idolatrous quest for political power and lack of concern for basic Christian teaching, has had on the pastors, leaders, and congregations of the Brethren in Christ U.S. Are we all—leaders, pastors, and laypeople alike — willing to do this and ensure that our leadership affirms who we are?

I support Project 250 (see <https://bicus.org/project-250/>) and I think it certainly helps us to take aim at some Kingdom goals as a denomination, but we will need to make an intentional effort to own and champion Anabaptism if we’re going to be of any relevance to American society and culture where many evangelicals have fused their faith with partisan politics, and some are proudly Christian nationalists.

Having read Carlton Wittlinger’s history of the Brethren in Christ, and others who’ve written on the subject, I see that the greatest strengths of the Brethren in Christ in the past have been: (1) our commitment to the best of Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism; (2) our willingness to include outsiders (non-cradle BICs) and incorporate new ways of being the church on mission, and (3) our passion for world missions, seeing that the vast majority of the Brethren in Christ exists outside of North America.

Furthermore, I’ve been impressed by how the Brethren in Christ, in the past during times of challenge to our beliefs—have shown a resolve in our convictions and even revitalization of the church when it desperately needed it. Even though Evangelicalism has had a negative impact in various ways, we can still recognize a mighty move of God within the Brethren in Christ during the resurgence in the 1950s.

Even though we’ve never been a very large denomination or influential enough to show up in Google searches of “Anabaptist denominations in the US,” we have a role to play. And even though we’re facing some challenges as we seek to navigate theological and

interpretive differences, especially related to LGBTQ+ and human sexuality matters, I'm hopeful that our best days are ahead. But we must do the hard work and actualize it, and we must be captured by a vision of the Brethren in Christ U.S. that begins by owning our Anabaptist heritage.

With the increasing divisiveness and polarization in our society, and after years of allowing theological erosion and mission drift within the Brethren in Christ U.S., I'd say that we are at a crossroads as a denomination. We must choose which way we will go. Will we be able to affirm our Anabaptist heritage, history, and values, or will we devolve into a bland American Evangelicalism that has lost its witness and prophetic power in our secular age? Where are those who want to reclaim our original stream, safeguard it against the "Southern Baptists in BIC drag," and champion the Anabaptist convictions, beliefs, and practices that made us who we are? We need you. We need you now.

Like many of you, I believe that our Anabaptist heritage, as well as the best of Wesleyanism and Pietism, equips us to be a faithful witness in these troubling times. Our history and values are unique, and they can be used to guide us into a new era of ministry and growth. We desperately need to own our heritage in a post-Christian culture where consumerism, individualism, authoritarianism, racism, bigotry, greed, and violence reign supreme; and in an angry and polarized society that largely associates Evangelicals with certain political parties, fear and hatred of LGBTQ+ people, white nationalism, and propagators of conspiracy theories.

What if we rediscovered a "third way" in this unique cultural moment and opportunity in American history?³⁹ What if we said we're going to stop being pawns of the empire? What if we said we're

³⁹ For almost a decade, I have consistently written, spoken, and preached on our need to embrace a Third Way posture and approach to navigating our current socio-political issues in America. I'm convinced it is most in keeping with the "Jesus Way" to addressing injustice without mixing the gospel with partisan politics. I have written an expanded definition and outline which is linked at Grantham Church's website under "About" and linked in the "Language and Culture" page in response to "What does it mean to be Third Way?" Also, see the sermon series, *Jesus, Justice & the Third Way: Following the Lamb in an Age of Idolatry and Division* that I preached at Grantham in Fall 2024 leading up to the latest polarizing presidential election: <https://grantham-church.org/podcast-category/Jesus-Justice-and-the-Third-Way/>.

going to stop putting our trust in horses and chariots and kings and kingdoms? What if we truly valued all human life (womb to the tomb) and promoted forgiveness, reconciliation, and nonviolent resolution of conflict (our eighth core value)? What if we reached into our past to discover the history, values, and tools that we need to navigate our challenges? What if we saw, as the first Anabaptists did, that Christianity is discipleship? Is there any greater need today than this?

Now is not the time for the Brethren in Christ U.S. to shy away from our Anabaptist heritage, our theological distinctives, and our core values and convictions. Those outside the church, as well as those who've been hurt by the church and have left, don't want to know how we're the same; they want to know how we're different as the Brethren in Christ. Now is the time to rediscover our Anabaptist roots and own the heritage that goes to the heart of who we are.

Therefore, I invite all of our denominational leaders, bishops, pastors, and congregants of the nearly 250 churches within Brethren in Christ U.S. to own our original theological stream with passion and conviction, so that we might believe in and embody a more Christ-like Christianity in America, for the sake of the gospel and for the glory and fame of the God who looks like Jesus.

Finally, brothers and sisters, may the Spirit develop within us a desire to pray for church renewal and a spiritual awakening within the Brethren in Christ U.S. and beyond; to return to the roots of our ancient faith, so that our denomination might be a home for converted Anabaptists like me, and for all who resonate with the best of the Anabaptist vision and desire to be a faithful witness in this present evil age. May the Lord increase our tribe in the days ahead.

RESOURCES ON ANABAPTISM

Books:

History and Theology of Anabaptism

William Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth Century Anabaptism* (Eerdmans, 1995).

Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historic, Constructive* (IVP Academic, 2004).

Peter Hoover and Marc Carrier, *The Secret of the Strength: What Would the Anabaptists Tell this Generation?* (independently published, 2023).

Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers & Their Stepchildren* (Dissent & Non-Conformity) (Baptist Standard Bearer, 2001).

Anabaptism Today

Palmer Becker, *Anabaptist Essentials: Ten Signs of a Unique Christian Faith* (MennoMedia, 2017).

Meghan Larissa Good, *Divine Gravity: Sparking a Movement to Recover a Better Christian Story* (Herald Press, 2023).

Michelle Hershberger, *God's Story, Our Story: Exploring Christian Faith and Life* (Herald Press, 2013).

Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom*, Anniversary Edition (Herald Press, 2018).

James Kraybill and Stanley Green, eds. *Fully Engaged: Missional Church in an Anabaptist Voice* (Herald Press, 2015).

Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Herald Press, 2015).

Stuart Murray, *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* (Herald Press, 2024).

Devotional Resources

Anabaptist Community Bible (Menno Media, 2024).

Arthur Boers, et al., *Take Our Moments and Our Days* (Menno Media, 2007).

Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit* (Herald Press, 1994).

Arnold Snyder and Galen Peters, eds., *Reading the Anabaptist Bible: Reflections for Every Day of the Year* (Pandora Press, 2002).

Neo-Anabaptist Authors and Others with Anabaptist Sympathies

Gregory Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Politics is Destroying the Church* (Zondervan, 2009).

Greg Boyd and Scott Boren, *God Looks Like Jesus: A Renewed Approach to Understanding God* (forthcoming from Herald Press, May 27, 2025).

Lee Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Brazos Press, 2008).

Lee Camp, *Scandalous Witness: A Little Political Manifesto for Christians* (Eerdmans, 2020).

Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, *Jesus for President: Politics for Ordinary Radicals* (Zondervan, 2019).

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, 2014).

Preston Sprinkle, *Exiles: The Church in the Shadow of Empire* (David C. Cook, 2024).

Articles by Brethren in Christ Theologians:

Owen Alderfer, "Anabaptism as a 'Burden' for the Brethren in Christ," *Reflections on a Heritage*, E. Morris Sider, ed. (Brethren in Christ Historical Society, 1999), 101-115.

Luke L. Keefer Jr., "The Three Streams in Our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?" *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 19, no. 1 (April 1996): 26-63.

Websites:

www.anabaptism500.ch

Commemoration of five hundred years of the Anabaptist movement; conference in Zurich, Switzerland on May 29, 2025, and worldwide throughout the year.

www.anabaptismat500.com

Commemorating five hundred years of Anabaptism and announcing the publication of the Anabaptist Community Bible, which is now available for purchase.

www.jesuscollective.com.

The Jesus Collective exists to amplify a new reformation and provide resources and relationship for those who choose to participate in a more hopeful Jesus-centered Christianity.

www.mwc-cmm.org

Mennonite World Conference, A Community of Anabaptist Related Churches.