

## Becoming Anabaptist Christians

1 Peter 2:21; Matthew 5:38-48

By Ken Bechtel October 14, 2018

The story is told about the pope sitting in his study at the Vatican one day when his secretary buzzed him. When he picked up the phone, he found that the Lord Almighty was on the other end of the line!

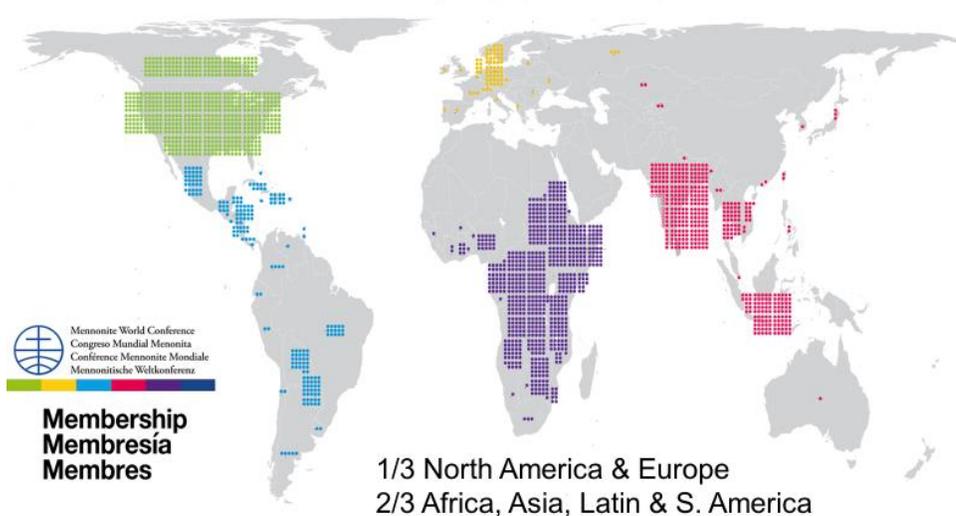
"Benedict, I've got some good news and some bad news. What do you want to hear first?" Benedict replied; "Well, definitely the GOOD news!"

The Lord then said to Benedict: "Well, the time has come Benedict. My plan has been working itself out and now I'm going to bring all history to a close, establishing my earthly kingdom from where I will reign."

Benedict excitedly said: "That's FANTASTIC! WONDERFUL! And...wait a minute...what's the bad news?" Then the Lord said: "I'm calling from Steinbach!"

This morning, I've been asked to speak about our Anabaptist Mennonite Heritage. And, spoiler alert, it doesn't start in Steinbach!

## A Global Family



We at Wildwood Mennonite are part of a global faith family, 1.7 million strong. Less than 1/3 of them are found in North America or Europe, with the other 2/3 living in Africa, Asia, Latin or South America. Our largest conference is the 310,000 member Ethiopian church which continues to grow at a rate of 4 to 5% annually. Even here, Mennonite Church Canada congregations worship in 18 different languages. Theologians of various stripes and denominations have been tapping the Anabaptist story and themes as inspiration for new approaches. Even megachurch leaders like Greg Boyd, Bruxy Cavey and Brian Zahnd have become fervent proponents of Anabaptist themes, especially the peace position and the role of small group mutual discipling. And there are no birthright Anabaptists; whatever our background, this is a faith we must choose ourselves.

## With a History

Our faith family's story begins in Reformation Europe. Luther and Zwingli were seeking to reform the church, and ended up leading breakaway Protestant groups.

In Zurich Switzerland, Bible students Felix Manz, Conrad Grebel, George Blaurock and others were growing frustrated at Zwingli's slow pace of reform, his subjecting biblical church reform to political powers. After a public debate on the biblical validity of infant baptism, the city council decided to uphold this practice, to forbid further meetings of these questioners who must now

conform, leave Zurich or face imprisonment and worse. Three days later, on January 21, 1525, these Bible students gathered at Felix Mantz's house.

As one account puts it, after a time of intense study and prayer, "George ... (Blaurock) stood up and besought Conrad Grebel for God's sake to baptize him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with such a request and desire, Conrad baptized him... After his baptism at the hands of Grebel, Blaurock proceeded to baptize all the others present."

The Swiss Brethren form of Anabaptism had been birthed.

## **Becoming Anabaptist**

Those were tumultuous times. Those considering Luther and Zwingli's reforms too little or too slow were dismissed as Schwärmer (fanatics). Labelling them as Anabaptists, rebaptizers, whether or not they rebaptized, subjected them to Justinian's 529 A.D. imperial law code with its death penalty for rebaptizing.

J. Denny Weaver, professor emeritus at Bluffton College, entitles his history of our heritage Becoming Anabaptist. In February 1527, **Swiss Brethren** Anabaptist leaders met in the border town of Schleithem in northern Switzerland. Their "Brotherly Union" we now call the Schleithem Confession outlined 7 issues where they differed from Zwingli and other radicals. Among these were such issues as baptism, communion, pacifism, selecting of pastors and swearing of oaths, frequent references to the Sermon on the Mount. Rather than the state church sanctioned use of lethal force to procure conformity, they talked about the ban, their interpretation of Matthew 18's way of dealing with "the one who has sinned against you."

In August, 1527 some 60 leaders from **Switzerland, South Germany and Austria** gathered in Augsburg Germany for several days of meeting. By this point some of their fellow leaders had been martyred – baptism host Felix Mantz and Schleithem Confession writer Michael and Margaretha Sattler among them. Since most of these 60 would join their martyr ranks in the next few months, this gathering is dubbed the Martyrs' Synod. One of the issues they needed to deal with was Hans Hut, the evangelist credited with making more converts in southern Europe than all the other leaders combined. Hut put more stock in his bizarre end times prophecies than in Schleithem's focus on the Sermon on the Mount. Before they commissioned one another to go out two by two to evangelize Europe, Hut agreed to restrict his end times speculations to those who specifically asked for them. Some of Hut's earlier converts and writings helped form and inform the Hutterites in Moravia, probably the best educated, creative and fervent evangelists of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. We and modern Hutterites could learn a lot from them.

It took only a few years for Anabaptism to reach the **Netherlands**. Furrier Melchior Hoffman had dabbled in Lutheran and Zwinglian circles, until his end times speculations distanced him from both groups. In 1530 in Strasbourg he was baptized and shortly thereafter began baptizing. The Melchiorite message found fertile soil especially in the Netherlands. Among his followers, however, were some who took his end times fascination to new levels. They saw Muenster as the New Jerusalem, and rejecting Melchior's strong pacifism, took Muenster and held it briefly by force.

Meanwhile in Friesland a priest by the name of Menno Simons was wrestling with his conscience. Certain church teachings didn't seem in accord with the Scriptures he was newly discovering.

We could say that we are called Mennonites, because of a certain drunken drummer! Hadewyck, the close friend and hostess for the Bible teacher Elizabeth Dirks, has given us background for Menno's own account. Elizabeth, by the way, was a later close co-worker with Menno, sometimes even called a "leereresse" (preacher) in early accounts of her 1549 martyrdom. In 1531, Hadewyck's unnamed husband was Leeuwarden's town drummer. He worked with and admired his fellow tailor Sikke Freerks, the Anabaptist sentenced to be executed the next day. Frustrated that whenever they executed an Anabaptist, his or her testimony would make several new ones, the authorities ordered the town drummer to drown out their words. Hadewyck's husband figured that the only way he could do his duty was by imbibing a little, or rather a lot. The upshot was

that he refused to beat the drum, praised Sikke's character and allowed Sikke to speak. The next morning, with a hangover and memories, he fled town, never to be heard from again. But priest Menno thus heard about this rebaptism, went back to the Scriptures, and by 1536 Menno left his priesthood to join and become a leader among the Anabaptists. Despite the high price on his head, this successful escape artist helped gather the peace minded Anabaptists. By 1545, Friesland's Countess Anna was calling these peace minded Anabaptists Mennisten (Mennonites) to distinguish them from Muensterites and other radicals.

These three streams of Anabaptism faced persecutions, over 4000 of them as martyrs, and fled from one land to another. Their biological heirs ended up fleeing to somewhat more tolerant lands like Poland and then Russia, to the German Palatinate and then North America. And in the process they often traded their evangelistic zeal and welcome for newcomers for some measure of limited tolerance.

Becoming Anabaptist Christians – that has remained the challenge from the 16<sup>th</sup> through to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

### **What is an Anabaptist Christian?**

Ten years ago, Palmer Becker published his cryptic summary of the core Anabaptist convictions – Jesus is the centre of our faith, Community the centre of our life and Reconciliation the centre of our work. Allow me to tell a few ancient and modern stories about these themes as we too seek to “become Anabaptist Christians”.

### **Jesus, the Centre of our Faith**

The brilliant scholar and Bible translator Hans Denck was just one of those early leaders at that 1527 Augsburg conference. Soft spoken by nature, Denck would rather have avoided controversies but his restless and inquisitive spirit would not allow that. His life motto, it seems, was his oft repeated declaration that “No one can truly know [Christ] unless [one] follows him in life, and no one may follow him unless [one] has first known him.” As he put it another time “Whoever supposes he (or she) belongs to Christ must walk the way Christ walked.”

That commitment must have been sorely tested in Augsburg as he met with the 60 other Anabaptist leaders, some with very different views, especially Hans Hut whom he himself had baptized. Perhaps in this circumstance his commitment to the Jesus way found its best expression in a wise statement he had earlier written: “...if you hear your brother say something that is strange to you, do not refute it right away, but listen first to determine whether it is right for you to accept it, too.”

As so strongly declared in the Schleitheim Confession and other early Anabaptist writings, we understand all of Scripture and the Christian life through the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus the centre of our faith.

### **Community, the Centre of our Lives**

Several of the seven Schleitheim articles focus on the nature of the Christian community, the church. The state churches of that time, whether Catholic, Lutheran or Reformed, assumed that it was the state's responsibility to help the church root out divergent doing or thinking by means of force, even execution. No, responded these believers. The way to deal with those who “fall into error and sin” is Jesus' Matthew 18 teaching about private and then public address. The ultimate discipline was banning them from the faith community. “This shall be done according to the regulation of the Spirit before the breaking of bread, so that we may break and eat one bread, with one mind and in one love, and may drink of one cup.”

Audrey and I just returned from a 3 week European trip, the last week of which was focused on tracing my Swiss German ancestors. We had known that my ancestor Christian Bechtold had been among the Schleitheim men arrested as Anabaptists in 1641. We also knew that he had been among some escapees and when recaptured, he was singled out for a beating. Imagine our surprise when we discovered a much more detailed description of the May 1642 escape and his later interrogation.

After gathering details on how they escaped, for whatever reason the interrogators seemed most interested in challenging Christian's understanding of the ban. I suspect there may have been some unrecorded scriptural challenging of their use of state force to do the church's bidding. Christian held to his understandings that the Christian community needed to follow Jesus's methods even for mutual correction. The frustrated Reformed interrogators could only conclude that "he persists in his error."

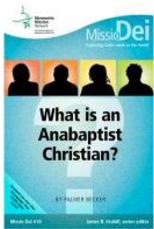
This mutual disciplining is at the core for Bruxy Cavey and Canada's fourth largest church, Oakville's multi site Meetinghouse with its 5000 weekly worshippers. Once or twice a year they hold so called "purge Sundays." A typical purge sermon or series focuses on the importance of "small groups of people committed to meeting in their homes, learning together, praying, caring for one another, and discovering the unique ways God has created us to help in our communities." These gatherings, "home church" rather than the weekly large services, are what Cavey considers "church." People are offered opportunities to sign up for one of these groups, or to seek help in finding a church more to their liking.

Within our Anabaptist vision, Community is the centre of our lives.

### Reconciliation, the Centre of our Work

Five years ago, the president of our Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Sara Wenger Shenk, launched her blog, entitled appropriately "Practicing Reconciliation."

Mennonites have a worldwide reputation for conflict reduction strategies and reconciliation initiatives, groups like Project Ploughshares, Lombard Mennonite Peace Center and graduate level peace building institutes. Individuals like John Paul Lederach are frequently called upon to give input into peace processes in war torn areas like Somalia, Colombia, the Philippines and countries in East and West Africa. We are better known for sending John Paul Lederachs to war torn places, or for helping Presbyterian or Lutheran churches resolve issues, than for fostering reconciliation within our own congregations! We might need to listen more to Hans Denck's advice about first listening carefully to one another.



### 3. Reconciliation the Centre of our Work



Michael J. Sharp  
1982-2017

On March 12, 2017, 34 year old Michael J Sharp, M.J. as he was usually called, and his Swedish UN colleague, Zaida Catalan, were ambushed and killed as they set out to investigate some recent massacres in the Congo. Earlier as Mennonite Central Committee Coordinator for the East Congo, M.J. was determined to engage in dialogue especially with violent people. As National Public Radio's former East Africa

correspondent, Gregory Warner, recounted, "The 34-year-old Kansan with the round face and a penchant for plaid shirts would walk, unarmed, deep into rebel-held territory in the Democratic Republic of Congo, sit in the shade of banana trees with rebels and exchange stories. Inevitably, those stories would turn to the past. "Rebels love talking about the past," Michael once told me. Michael's deep understanding of how these rebels saw their country's past — the mythical version of that past that they used to justify their own violence — allowed him ... to connect with rebels in a way few others managed to do. After every trip, the team of church workers would be followed, days later, by rebels who had been persuaded to surrender and give up the fight. By his count, Michael's team persuaded at least 1,600 rebels to abandon the jungle and come home."

Perhaps Michael was right in believing “his approach could be applied to other violent groups, from ISIS to neo-Nazis, that rely on myths to recruit members and sustain themselves.”

Reconciliation is the centre of our work.

### **Becoming Anabaptist Christians**

This calling to be Anabaptist Christians can be costly, true, as martyrs and emigrants by the thousands can attest. But, as we read and reread our Bibles through the Jesus lens, we hear again the words of the apostle, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:21).

We are called to choose Jesus as the centre of our faith, Community as the centre of our lives and Reconciliation as the centre of our work.