

The Anabaptist Vision

by Dean Taylor

The Anabaptist vision is a radical, literal, simple, and Christ-following manifesto that emphasizes the importance of personal conversion, regeneration, and a changed life.

Duration: 1:00:25

Scripture: Matthew 5:39

Topics: "Anabaptist Theology", "Church Discipleship"

Description

Harold S. Bender's sermon on The Anabaptist Vision delves into the essence of Anabaptism during the Reformation, emphasizing salvation as Christ-like followers, separation of church and state, and church life as a brotherhood. Anabaptists rejected faith without a transformed life, practiced radical separation from the world, and viewed the church as a community of born-again saints. The sermon highlights discipleship as key in Anabaptist theology, their opposition to scribes and Pharisees-like faith, and their commitment to a church established on faith and lived out in reality.

Transcript

The Anabaptist Vision by Harold S. Spender. In this sermon, Harold S. Spender focuses on the essence of the Anabaptist vision as it came to life during the latter part of the Reformation. Starting around the year 1525, historians have frequently named this latter part of the Reformation as the Radical Reformation because of its emphasis of wanting to return to the roots of ancient Christianity.

In this message, Spender identifies the Anabaptist view of salvation, the radical idea of separation of church and state, and also the revolutionary new view of church life as a brotherhood. Speaking of their view of salvation, Spender says that, in short, the Anabaptist vision could simply be summed up as followers of Christ. He notably states that while the Anabaptists fully recognized that their salvation was obtained and maintained by grace through faith, they were nevertheless convinced that a real salvation must produce real, Christ-like followers.

The idea of claiming a faith that exists only in creeds, professions, proclamations, or even sacraments without a changed life was seen to the early Anabaptists as deficient, heretical, even scandalous. And speaking of the church and the world, Spender states that the early Anabaptists practiced a radical sense of separation from the world. And while they went on living within the general population, nevertheless, their idea of separation affected every part of their lives.

Particularly, the idea of being called out of the world and into an assembly of believers drastically affected the way they viewed the nature of the church. The Reformers were teaching that the church was established by the state, based on a population area, and that the true church was an invisible number known only to God. The Anabaptists challenged this, and said that the church was made up only of truly born-again saints, and even welcomed constructive church discipline to maintain this dynamic.

In both these concepts of salvation and church fellowship, Spender utilizes the word discipleship. By this, Spender does not mean the modern-day empty practice of trying to drag unregenerated men through empty prayers, baptisms, and endless teaching as we struggle with them all of their life. Not at all.

Such empty discipleship the Anabaptists saw as a waste of time. As a matter of fact, one prominent early Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons, put it this way. He said, No, the word discipleship for the early Anabaptists was not an empty word.

They took it as Jesus used it when he said, Bender tells us that this concept of discipleship, as following Christ, was the key note in Anabaptist theology. Bender clearly documents that as the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation grew, they found that they were more and more at odds with both the original Reformers and the Catholics. Making a point about their differences, recently I found a letter from an early Anabaptist leader, Michael Sattler.

Pointedly, he cautioned his readers that they must beware of the scribes and the Pharisees. He labeled the evangelicals of his day, who held a faith only visible in books, creeds, and empty professions, as being equivalent to the Old Testament scribes. Contrary, he said that those who seek salvation by performing empty works without faith, as equivalent to the Old Testament Pharisees.

The early Anabaptists endeavored to traverse the narrow path between these two diversions, both the scribes and the Pharisees. By doing this, the early Anabaptists found enemies in two camps, and ultimately many lost their lives in both. Finally, Bender convincingly argues that the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation were actually the fulfillment of the visions and dreams of the early Reformers, those such as Luther and Zwingli.

He demonstrates that the original vision of the Reformers came to fruition in a church established not by the state, not by force, but on faith and lived out in reality. Bender offered this radical, literal, simple, and Christ-following manifesto to a church of his day at a time when the alternatives were becoming conspicuously deficient. Radical Reformation books offers his message to the church today, over 50 years later, at a time that we believe to be no better.

Our prayer is that we will get it this time. The message which you are about to hear was given as a presidential address before the American Society of Church History at Columbia University in 1943. Bender was just made their president, and this was his inaugural address.

He began his sermon somewhat academically. Just keep in mind who his audience was. Some of his most significant points are near the latter part of the message.

The Anabaptist Vision by Harold S. Bender, copyright by Church History 1944, used by permission. Starting with a quote from the historian Rufus M. Jones about the Anabaptists, Bender begins, Judged by the reception it met at the hands of those in power, both in church and state, equally in Roman Catholic and in Protestant countries, the Anabaptist movement was one of the most tragic in the history of

Christianity. But, judged by the principles which were put into play by the man who bore this reproachful nickname, it must be pronounced one of the most momentous and significant undertakings in man's eventful religious struggle after the truth.

It gathered up the gains of earlier movements. It is the spiritual soil out of which all nonconformist sects have sprung, and it is the first plain announcement in modern history of a program for a new type of Christian society, which the modern world, especially in America and England, has been slowly realizing, an absolutely free and independent religious society and a state in which every man counts as a man, and has a share in shaping both church and state." These words of Rufus M. Jones constitute one of the best characterizations of Anabaptism and its contribution to our modern Christian culture to be found in the English language. They were brave words when they were written 35 years ago, but they have been abundantly verified by a generation of Anabaptist research since that time.

There can be no question but that the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and voluntarism in religion, so basic in American Protestantism and so essential to democracy, ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who for the first time clearly enunciated them, and challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice. The line of descent through the centuries since that time may not always be clear, and may have passed through other intermediate movements and groups, but the debt to original Anabaptism is unquestioned. The 16th century reformers understood the Anabaptist position on this point all too well, and deliberately rejected it.

The best witness is Heinrich Bollinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich, whose active lifespan covers the first 50 years of the history of the Swiss Anabaptists, and who knew them so well that he published two extensive treatises against them in 1531 and 1561. According to Bollinger, the Swiss Brethren taught this, quoting from his source, One cannot and should not use force to compel anyone to accept the faith, for faith is a free gift of God. It is wrong to compel anyone by force or coercion to embrace the faith, or to put to death anyone for the sake of his erring faith.

It is an error that in the church any sword other than that of the divine word should be used. The secular kingdom should be separated from the church, and no secular ruler should exercise authority in the church. The Lord has commanded simply to preach the gospel, not to compel anyone by force to accept it.

The true church of Christ has a characteristic that suffers and endures persecution, but does not inflict persecution upon anyone." But great as is the Anabaptist contribution to the development of religious liberty, this concept not only does not exhaust, but actually fails to define the true essence of Anabaptism. In the last analysis, freedom of religion is a purely formal concept, barren of its content. It says nothing about the faith or the way of life of those who advocate it, nor does it reveal their goals or program of action.

And Anabaptism had not only clearly defined goals, but also an action program of definiteness and power. In fact, the more intimately one becomes acquainted with this group, the more one becomes conscious of the great vision that shaped their course in history, and for which they gladly gave their lives. Before describing this vision, it is well to note its attractiveness to the masses of Christians of the 16th century.

Sebastian Frank himself, an opponent, wrote in 1531, scarcely seven years after the rise of this movement in Zurich. This is his quote. The Anabaptists spread so rapidly that their teachings soon covered the land as it were.

They soon gained a large following and baptized thousands, drawing to themselves many sincere souls who had a zeal for God. They increased so rapidly that the world feared an uprising by them. Though I have learned that this fear had no justification whatsoever.

End quote. In the same year, Bullinger wrote that, quote, the people were running after them as though they were living saints. End quote.

Another contemporary writer asserts that, quote, Anabaptism spread with such speed that there were reasons to fear that the majority of the common people would unite with this sect. End quote. Zwingli was so frightened by the power of the movement that he complained that the struggle with the Catholic party was but child's play compared to the conflict with the Anabaptists.

The dreadful severity of the persecution of the Anabaptist movement in the years 1527 to 1560, not only in Switzerland, South Germany, and Syringia, but in all the Austrian lands as well as the Low Countries testifies to the power of the movement and the desperate haste with which Catholic, Lutheran, and Zwingli authorities alike strove to throttle it before it should be too late. The notorious decree issued in 1529 by the Diet of Speers, the same Diet which protested the restriction of evangelical liberties, summarily passed the sentence of death upon all Anabaptists ordering that, quote, every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex should be put to death by fire, sword, or some other way. End quote.

Repeatedly, in subsequent sessions of the Imperial Diet, this decree was re-invoked and intensified. And as late as 1551, the Diet of Augsburg issued a decree ordering that judges and jurors who had scruples against pronouncing the death sentence on Anabaptists be removed from office and punished by heavy fines and imprisonment. The authorities had great difficulties in executing their program of suppression.

For they soon discovered that the Anabaptists feared neither torture nor death and gladly sealed their faith with their blood. In fact, the joyful testimony of the Anabaptist martyrs was a great stimulus to new recruits for it stirred the imagination of the populace as nothing else could have done. Finding, therefore, that the customary method of individual trials and sentences was proving totally inadequate to stem the tide, the authorities resorted to the desperate expedient of sending out through the land companies of armed executioners and mounted soldiers to hunt down the Anabaptists and kill them on the spot, singly or en masse, without trial or sentence.

The most atrocious application of this policy was made in Swabia where the original 400 special police of 1528 sent against the Anabaptists proved too small a force and had to be increased to 1,000. An imperial provost marshal, Bertolt Eikele, served as chief administrator of this bloody program in Swabia and other regions until he finally broke down in terror and dismay and after an execution at Brixen, lifted his hand to heaven and swore a solemn oath never again to put to death an Anabaptist, which vow he kept. The Count of Alci and the Palatinate, after 350 Anabaptists had been executed there, was heard to exclaim, What shall I do? The more I kill, the greater becomes their number.

The extensive persecution and martyrdom of the Anabaptists testify not only of the great extent of the movement but also of the power of the vision that burned within them. This is most effectively presented in a moving account written in 1542 and taken from the ancient Vitarian chronicles where it is found at the close of a report of 2,173 brethren and sisters who gave their lives for their faith. And here's that report quoting straight from that document.

No human being was able to take away out of their heart what they had experienced. Such zealous lovers of God were they. The fire of God burned within them.

They would die the bitterest death, yea, they would die ten deaths, rather than forsake the divine truth which they had espoused. They had drunk of the waters which had flowed from God's sanctuary, yea, the water of life. They realized that God helped them to bear the cross and to overcome the bitterness of death.

The fire of God burned within them. Their tent they had pitched, not here upon earth, but in eternity. And of their faith they had a foundation and assurance.

Their faith blossomed as a lily, their loyalty as a rose, their piety and sincerity as the flower of the garden of God. The angel of the Lord battled for them that they could not be deprived of the helmet of salvation. Therefore they bore all torture and agony without fear.

The things of this world they counted in their holy minds only as shadows, having the assurance of greater things. They were so drawn unto God that they knew nothing, sought nothing, desired nothing, loved nothing but God alone. Therefore they had more patience in their suffering than their enemies in tormenting them.

Continuing with the quote, the persecutors thought they could dampen and extinguish the fire of God. But the prisoners sang in their prisons and rejoiced so that the enemies outside became much more fearful than the prisoners and did not know what to do with them. Many were talked to in wonderful ways, often day and night.

They were argued with, with great cunning and cleverness, with many sleek and smooth words by monks and priests, by doctors of theology with much false testimony, with threats and scoldings and mockery and yaying, with lies and grievous slander against the brotherhood. But none of these things moved them or made them falter. From the shedding of such innocent blood arose Christians everywhere, brothers all, for all these persecutions did not take place without fruit.

Perhaps this interpretation of the Anabaptist spirit should be discounted as too glowing, coming as it does from the group itself. But certainly it is nearer to the truth than the typical harsh 19th century interpretation of the movement, which is well represented by the opening sentence of Ursula, the notable historical novel on the Anabaptist, published in 1878 by the Swiss Gottfried Keller, next to Goethe, perhaps the greatest of all writers in the German language. And here's the quote from the beginning of that book.

Quote, Times of religious change are like times when the mountains open up. For then, not only do all the marvelous creatures of the human spirit come forth, the great golden dragons, magic beings and crystal spirits, but there also comes to light all the hateful vermin of humanity, the host of rats and mice and pestiferous creations. And so it was at the time of the Reformation in the northeast part of Switzerland.

End quote. Before defining the Anabaptist vision, it is essential to state clearly what is meant by the term Anabaptist. Since the name has come to be used in modern historiography to cover a wide variety of Reformation groups, sometimes thought of as the whole, quote, left wing of the Reformation, as Roland Baten said, or the Bolsheviks of the Reformation, as Preserve Smith said.

Although the definitive history of Anabaptism has not yet been written, we know enough today to draw a clear line of demarcation between original, evangelical and constructive Anabaptism on the one hand,

which was born in the bosom of Zwinglianism in Zurich, Switzerland in 1525 and established in the Low Countries in 1533, and the various mystical, spiritual, revolutionary or even antinomian related and unrelated groups on the other hand, which came and went like the flowers of the field in those days of great renovation. The former Anabaptism proper maintained an unbroken course in Switzerland, South Germany, Austria and Holland throughout the 16th century and has continued until the present day in the Mennonite movement now in 1944, almost 500,000 baptized members strong in Europe and America. There is no longer any excuse for permitting our understanding of the distinct character of this genuine Anabaptism to be obscured by Thomas Muenzer, by the peasant wars, the Munsterites or any other aberration of Protestantism in the 16th century.

There may be some excuse however for a failure on the part of the uninformed student to see clearly what the Anabaptist vision was, because of the varying interpretation placed upon the movement even by those who mean to appreciate and approve it. There is for instance a socialist writer led by Kalski who would make Anabaptism either quote the forerunner of the modern socialism end quote or the culminating effort of medieval communism and who in reality see it only as an external religious shell of a class movement. There are the sociologists with their partial socio-economic determinism as reflected in Richard Niebuhr's approach to the social origin of religious denominations.

There is Albrecht Reichel who sees the Anabaptist as an aesthetic semi-monastic continuation of the medieval Franciscan tertiaries and locates the 17th century pietists with the same line. And Ludwig Keller who finds Anabaptists throughout the pre-reformation period in the guise of Waldensys and other similar groups whom he chooses to call quote the old evangelical brotherhoods and for whom he posits a continuity from earliest times. Related to Keller are the early Baptist historians and certain Mennonites who rejoice to find in the Anabaptists the missing link which keeps them in the apostolic succession of the true church back through the Waldensians, the Bogomils, the Catharites, the Poliscians, the Donatists, the Pentecosts.

But more recently there is Rufus M. Jones who is inclined to class the Anabaptists with the mystics and Walter Kohler who finds an Erasmian humanist origin for them. However, there is another line of interpretation now almost 100 years old which is being increasingly accepted and which is probably destined to dominate the field. It is the one which holds that Anabaptism is the culminating of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Lutheran's wingling and thus makes it a consistent evangelical Protestantism seeking to recreate without compromise the original New Testament church, the vision of Christ and the apostles.

This line of interpretation begins in 1848 with Max Gible's work on the church in the Rhine there. It also goes on to C. A. Cornelius in his work following in his work of men like Johann Loserth, Karl Rembrandt and John Horst and is represented by such contemporaries as Ernest Corral of Washington and Fritz Blank of Zurich. A quotation from Gible may serve to illustrate this interpretation.

Here is his quote. The essential and distinguishing characteristic of this church is its great emphasis on the actual personal conversion and regeneration of every Christian through the Holy Spirit. They aim with special emphasis at carrying out and realizing the Christian doctrine and faith in the heart and life of every Christian in the whole Christian church.

Their aim was the bringing together of all the true believers out of the great degenerated national churches into a true Christian church. That which the Reformation originally intended to accomplish, they aim to

bring into full immediate realization. And Johann Loserth says, More radically than any other party for church reformation, the Anabaptists strove to follow the footsteps of the church of the first century and to renew unadulterated original Christianity.

The evidence in support of this interpretation is overwhelming and can be taken from the statements of the contemporary opponents of the Anabaptists as well as from the Anabaptists themselves. Conrad Grebel, the founder of the Swiss Brethren Movement, states clearly this point of view in his letter to Thomas Muenzer of 1524. In words written on behalf of the entire group, which constitute in effect the original Anabaptist pronunciamento.

And here's his quote. And expected to attain salvation therein, yet fell far short of it, as the evangelical preachers, such as Luther and Zwingli, etc., have declared, and to some extent are still declaring. So today, too, every man wants to be saved by superficial faith, without fruits of faith, without the baptism of test and probation, without love and hope, without right Christian practices, and wants to persist in all the old fashions of personal vices and in common ritualistic and anti-Christian customs of baptism and the Lord's Supper, in disrespect for the divine word and in respect for the word of the Pope and the anti-papal preachers, which yet is not equal to the divine word nor in harmony with it, in respecting persons and in manifold seductions there is grosser and more pernicious error now than ever has been since the beginning of the world.

In the same error, too, we lingered as long as we heard and read only the evangelical preachers who are to blame for all this and punishment for our sins. But after we took the Scriptures in hand, too, we consulted it on many points, we have been instructed somewhat and have discovered the great and hurtful error of the shepherds, of ours, too, namely that we do not daily beseech God earnestly with constant groanings to be brought out of this destruction of all godly life and of human abominations and to attain to true faith and divine instruction." A similar statement was made in 1538 after 14 years of persecution by the Anabaptist leader who spoke on behalf of his group in the great colloquy of Bern with the leaders of the Reformed Church. Here's his quote.

"...while yet in the national church we obtain much instruction from the writings of Luther, Zwingli, and others concerning the mass and other papal ceremonies, that they are vain. Yet we recognize a great lack as regard repentance, conversion, and the true Christian life. Upon these things my mind was bent.

I waited and hoped for a year or two since the ministers had much to say of amendment of life, of giving to the poor, loving one another, and abstaining from evil. But I could not close my eyes to the fact that the doctrine which was preached and which was based on the word of God was not carried out. No beginning was made toward true Christian living and there was no unison in the teaching concerning the things that were necessary.

And although the mass and the images were finally abolished, true repentance and Christian love were not in evidence. Changes were made only as concern external things. This gave me occasion to inquire further into these matters.

Then God sent his messengers, Conrad Grebel and others, whom which I conferred about the fundamental teachings of the apostles and the Christian life and practice. I found them men who had surrendered themselves to the doctrine of Christ by bousfistigate, repentance evidenced by fruits. With their assistance we established a congregation in which repentance was in evidence by newness of life in Christ.

It is evident from these statements that the Anabaptists were concerned most of all about a true Christian life. That is, a life patterned after the teaching and examples of Christ. The Reformers, they believed, whatever their profession may have been, did not secure among the people true repentance, regeneration, and Christian living as a result of their preaching.

The Reformation's emphasis on faith was good, but inadequate, for without newness of life, they held faith is hypocritical. This Anabaptist critique of the Reformation was a sharp one, but it was nothing fair. There is abundant evidence that although the original goal sought by Luther and Zwingli was, quote, an earnest Christianity for all, the actual outcome was far less, for the level of Christian living among the Protestant population was frequently lower than it had been before under Catholicism.

Luther himself was keenly conscious of this deficiency. In April 1522, he expressed the hope that, quote, we who, at the present, are well nigh heathen under a Christian name may yet organize a Christian assembly, end quote. In December of 1525, he had an important conversation with Caspar Schwenkfeld concerning the establishment of the New Testament church.

Schwenkfeld pointed out that the establishment of the new church had failed to result in spiritual and moral betterment of the people, a fact which Luther admitted. For Schwenkfeld states that, quote, Luther regretted very much that no amendment of life was in evidence, end quote. Between 1522 and 1527, Luther repeatedly mentioned his concern to establish a true Christian church and his desire to provide for earnest Christians, die mit ernst Christians die wollen, who would confess the gospel with their lives as well as with their tongues.

He thought of ending the names of these earnest Christians in a special book and having them meet separately from the mass of nominal Christians, but concluding that he would not have sufficient of such people, he dropped the plan. Schwenkfeld faced the same problem. He was, in fact, specifically challenged by the Swiss brother to set up such a church, but he refused and followed Luther's course.

Both reformers decided that it was better to include the masses within the fold of the church than to form a fellowship of true Christians only. Both certainly expected the preaching of the word and the ministration of the sacraments to bear fruit in an earnest Christian life, at least among some, but they reckoned with a permanent and largely indifferent mass. And taking this course, said the Anabaptists, the reformers surrendered their original purpose and abandoned the divine intention.

Others may say that they were wise and statesmanlike leaders. The Anabaptists, however, retained the original vision of Luther and Zwingli, enlarged it, gave it body and form, and set out to achieve it in actual experience. They proceeded to organize a church composed solely of earnest Christians and actually found the people for it.

They did not believe in any case that the size of their response should determine whether or not the truth of God should be applied. And they refused to compromise. They preferred to make a radical break with the 1500 years of history and culture if necessary rather than to break with the New Testament.

May it not be said that the decision of Luther and Zwingli to surrender their original vision was the tragic turning point of the Reformation? Professor Carl Mueller, one of the keenest and fairest interpreters of the Reformation, evidently thinks so, for he says, That is to say, when Luther's mass church concept was put into practice. Luther, in his latter years, expressed disappointment at the final outcome of the Reformation, stating that the people had become more and more indifferent towards religion and the moral outlook was

more deplorable than ever. His last years were embittered by the consciousness of partial failure and his expression of dejection are well known.

Contrast this sense of defeat at the end of Luther's outward successful career with a sense of victory in the hearts of the Anabaptist martyrs who laid down their lives in what the world would call defeat, conscious of having kept faith with their vision to the end. Having defined genuine Anabaptism in its Reformation setting, we are ready to examine its central teachings. The Anabaptist vision included three major points of emphasis.

First, a new conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. Secondly, a new conception of the Church as a brotherhood. And third, a new ethic of love and non-resistance.

We turn now to an exposition of these three points. First, and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship. It was a concept which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and the society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ.

The Anabaptists could not understand the Christianity which made regeneration, holiness and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief or of subjective experience rather than one of the transformation of life. They demanded an outward expression of the inward experience. Repentance must be evidenced by newness of behavior.

In evidence is the keynote which rings to the testimonies and challenges of the early Swiss brethren when they are called to give an account of themselves. The whole life was to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ in a covenant of discipleship. A covenant which the Anabaptist writers delighted to emphasize.

The focus of the Christian life was to be not so much an inward experience of the grace of God as it was for Luther but the outward application of that grace to all human conduct and the consequent Christianization of all human relationship. The true test of the Christian they held is discipleship. The great word of the Anabaptist was not faith as it was for the reformers but following, *nachvoller Christi*, following of Christ.

And baptism, the greatest of the Christian symbol, was accordingly to be for them the covenant of a good conscience towards God. The pledge of a complete commitment to obey Christ and not primarily the symbol of a past experience. The Anabaptists had faith indeed but they used it to produce a life.

Theology was for them a means not an end. The Anabaptists not only proclaimed the idea of full Christian discipleship but achieved in the eyes of their contemporaries and even of their opponents a measurably higher level of performance than the average is fully witnessed by the sources. The early Swiss and German reformers were keenly aware of this achievement and its attractive power.

Zwingli knew it best of all but Bullinger, Capito, Vadian and many other confirmed his judgment that the Anabaptist brethren were unusually sincere, devoted and effective Christians. However, since the brethren refused to accept the state church system which the reformers were building, in addition made radical demands which might have changed the entire social order, the leaders of the Reformation were completely baffled in their understanding of the movement and professed to believe that the Anabaptists were hypocrites of the darkest dye. Bullinger, for instance, calls them, quote, devilish enemies and

destroyer of the church of God, end quote.

Nevertheless, they had to admit the apparent superiority of their life. In Zwingli's last book against the Swiss brethren in 1527, for instance, the following is found, quoting from Zwingli, If you investigate their life and conduct, it seems at first contact irreproachable, pious, unassuming, attractive, yea, above this world. Even those who are inclined to be critical will say that their lives are excellent.

End quote. Bullinger himself, who wrote bitter diatribes against them, was compelled to admit of the early Swiss brethren that, quoting from Bullinger, Those who unite with them will by their ministers be received into their church by rebaptism and repentance and newness of life. They henceforth lead their life under the semblance of a quite spiritual conduct.

They denounce covetousness, pride, profanity, the lewd conversations and immorality of the world, drinking in gluttony. In short, their hypocrisy is great and manifold. End quote.

Bullinger's lament that, quote, the people are running after them as though they were living saints, end quote, had been reported earlier. Vadian, the reformer of St. Gaul, testifies, None were more favorably inclined towards anabaptism and more easily entangled with it than those who were of pious and honorable disposition. End quote.

Capitale, the reformer of Strasbourg, wrote in 1527 concerning the Swiss brethren, quoting from him, I frankly confess that in most anabaptists there is in evidence piety and consecration and indeed a zeal which is beyond any suspicion of insincerity. For what earthly advantage could they have to win by enduring exile, torture and unspeakable punishment of the flesh? I testify before God that I cannot say that on account of a lack of wisdom they are somewhat indifferent towards earthly things, but rather from divine motives. End quote.

The preachers of the canton of Bern admitted in a letter to the council of Bern in 1532 that, quoting, the anabaptists have the semblance of outward piety to a far greater degree than we and all the churches which unitedly with us confess Christ. And they avoid offensive sins which are very common among us. End quote.

Walter Klaerer, the reform chronicler of Appleton, Switzerland wrote this. Most of the anabaptists are people who at first had been the best with us, and proclaiming the word of God. End quote.

And the Roman Catholic theologian Franz Agricola in his book of 1582 Against the Terrible Errors of the Anabaptists says this. Among the existing heretical sects, there is none which in appearance leads a more modest and pious life than the anabaptists. As concerns their outward public life, they are irreproachable.

No lying, deception, swearing, strife, harsh language, no intemperate eating and drinking, no outward personal displays found among them. But humility, patience, uprightness, neatness, honesty, temperance, straightforwardness in such measure that one would suppose that they have the Holy Spirit of God. End quote.

A mandate against the Swiss Brethren published in 1585 by the Council of Bern states that offensive sins and vices were common among the preachers and the members of the Reformed Church, adding quote, and this is the greatest reason that many pious, God fearing people who seek Christ from their heart are offended and forsake our church to unite with the Brethren. End quote. One of the finest contemporary characterizations of the Anabaptists is given in 1531 by Sebastian Frank, an objective and sympathetic

witness, though an opponent of the Anabaptists, who wrote the following.

The Anabaptists soon gained a large following, drawing many sincere souls who had a zeal for God, for they taught nothing but love, faith, and the cross. They showed themselves humble, patient, under much suffering. They break bread with one another as an evidence of unity and love.

They helped each other faithfully and called each other brothers. They died as martyrs, patiently and humbly, enduring all persecution. End quote.

A further confirmation of the above evaluation of the achievement of the Anabaptists is found in the fact that in many places, those who lived a consistent Christian life were in danger of falling under the suspicion of being guilty of Anabaptist heresy. Casper Schweinfeld for instance declares, quote, I am being maligned by both preachers and others with the charge of being an Anabaptist, even as all others who lead a true, pious Christian life are now almost everywhere given this name. End quote.

Bullinger himself complained that, quote, there are those who in reality are not Anabaptists but have a pronounced averseness to the sensuality and frivolity of the world, and therefore reprove sin and vice and are consequently called or misnamed Anabaptists by petulant persons. End quote. The great collection of Anabaptist sources materials, commonly called the Charterfiles, now in the third volume contains a number of specific illustrations of this.

In 1562, a certain Casper Zecher of Württemberg was accused of being an Anabaptist, but the court records report that since he was an envious man who could not get along with others and who often started quarrels as well as being guilty of swearing and cursing and carrying a weapon, he was not considered to be an Anabaptist. On the other hand, in 1570, a certain Hans Jaeger in Württemberg was brought before the court on suspicion of being an Anabaptist primarily because he did not curse but lived an irreproachable life. As a second major element in the Anabaptist vision, a new concept of the church was created by the central principle of newness of life and applied Christianity.

Voluntary church membership based upon true conversion and involving a commitment to holy living and discipleship was the absolutely essential heart of this concept. This vision stands in sharp contrast to the church concept of the reformers who retained the medieval idea of a mass church with memberships of the entire population from birth to the grave compulsory by law and force. It is from the standpoint of this new conception of the church that the Anabaptist opposition to infant baptism must be interpreted.

Infant baptism was not the cause of their disavow of the state church. It was only a symbol of the cause. How could infants give their commitment based upon a knowledge of what true Christianity means? They might conceivably, passively experience the grace of God, though Anabaptists would question this, but they could not respond in pledging their lives to Christ.

Such infant baptism would not only be meaningless, but would in fact become a serious obstacle to a true understanding of the nature of Christianity and membership in the church. Only adult baptism could signify an intelligent life commitment. An inevitable corollary of the concept of the church as a body of committed and practicing Christians pledged to the highest standards of New Testament living was the insistence of the separation of the church from the world.

That is, non-conformity of the Christian to the worldly way of life. The world would not tolerate the practice of true Christian principles in society, and the church could not tolerate the practice of worldly ways among

its membership. Hence the only way out was separation.

Absonderung. The gathering of true Christians into their own Christian society where Christ's way could and would be practiced. On this principle of separation, Menno Simon says this, All the evangelical scriptures teach us that the church of Christ was and is in doctrine, life, and worship of people separated from the world.

In the great debate of 1528 at Zobergen, spokesman of the Swiss brethren said this, The true church is separated from the world and is conformed to the nature of Christ. If a church is yet at one with the world, we cannot recognize it as a true church. In a sense, this principle of non-conformity to the world is merely a negative expression of the positive requirement of discipleship.

But it goes further in a sense that it represents a judgment on the contemporary social order which the Anabaptists called the world as non-Christian and sets up a line of demarcation between the Christian community and worldly societies. A logical outcome of the concept of non-conformity to the world was the concept of a suffering church. Conflicts with the world was inevitable for those who endeavored to live an earnest Christian life.

The Anabaptists expected opposition. They took literally the words of Jesus when he said, In this world ye shall have tribulation. But they also took literally his words of encouragement.

But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. Conrad Grebel said in 1524, True Christian believers are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. They must be baptized in anguish and affliction, tribulation, persecution, suffering and death.

They must be tried with fire and must reap the fatherland of eternal rest, not by killing their bodily enemy, but by mortifying their spiritual enemies. Professor Ernest Steilen of Basel, Switzerland says this, Anabaptism by its earnest determination to follow in life and practice the primitive Christian church has kept alive the conviction that he who is in Christ is a new creature and that those who are identified with his cause will necessarily encounter the opposition of the world. Perhaps it was persecution that made the Anabaptists so acutely aware of the conflict between the church and the world, but this persecution was due to the fact that they refused to accept what they considered the sub-Christian way of life practiced in European Christendom.

They could have avoided the persecution had they but conformed or they could have suspended the practice of their faith to a more convenient time and sailed into the false colors as did David Joris, but they chose with dauntless courage and simple honesty to live their faith, to defy the existing world order and to suffer the consequences. Basic to the Anabaptist vision of the church was the insistence on the practice of true brotherhood and love among the members of the church. This principle was understood to mean not merely the expression of pious sentiment but the actual practice of sharing possessions to meet the needs of others in the spirit of true mutual aid.

Hans Leopold, a Swiss brother and martyr of 1528, said of the brethren, If they know of anyone who is in need, whether or not he is a member of their church, they believe it is their duty, out of love to God, to render help and aid. Heinrich Seeler, a Swiss brother and martyr of 1535, said, I do not believe it wrong that a Christian has property of his own, but yet he is nothing more than a steward. An early Lutheran book states that one of the questions addressed by the Swiss brethren to applicants for baptism was, whether they would consecrate themselves with all their temporal possessions to the service of God and his

people.

A Protestant of Strasbourg, a visitor at a Swiss brethren baptism service in the city in 1557, reports that a question addressed to all applicants for baptism was this, whether they, if necessary required, would devote all their possessions to the service of the brotherhood, and would not sell any member that is in need, if they were able to render it. Heinrich Bullinger, the bitter enemy of the brethren, states, This principle of full brotherhood and stewardship was actually practiced and not merely spectatorily considered. In its absolute form, with the complete repudiation of private property, it became the way of life of the Hutterian brotherhood in 1528, and has remained so to this day.

For the Hutterites held that private property is the greatest enemy of Christian love. One of the inspiring stories of the 16th and 17th centuries is the successful practice of the full communal way of life by this group. The third great element of the Anabaptist vision was the ethic of love and non-resistance as applied to all human relationships.

The brethren understood this to mean complete abandonment of all warfare, strife, and violence, and of the taking of human life. Conrad Grebel, a Swiss, said in 1524, True Christians use neither worldly sword nor engage in war, since among them taking human life has ceased entirely, for we are no longer under the Old Covenant. The Gospel and those who accept it are not to be protected with the sword, neither should they thus protect themselves.

Pilgrim Marpeck, the South German leader in 1544, speaking of Matthew 5, said, All bodily, worldly, carnal, earthly fightings, conflicts, and wars are annulled and abolished among them through such law, which law of love Christ himself observed, and thereby gave his followers a pattern to follow after. Peter Edelman, the Hutterian leader, wrote in 1545, Christ, the prince of peace, has established his kingdom, that is, his church, and has purchased it by his blood. In this kingdom all worldly warfare has ended.

Therefore a Christian has no part in war, nor does he wield the sword to execute vengeance. Menno Simons of Holland wrote in 1550, The regenerated do not go to war, nor engage in strife. They are the children of peace, who have beaten their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.

And of no war, spears and swords of iron, we leave to those who, alas, consider human blood and swine's blood of well nigh equal value. In this principle of non-resistance, or biblical pacifism, which was thoroughly believed and resolutely practiced by all the original Anabaptist brethren and their descendants throughout Europe from the beginning until this last century, the Anabaptists were again creative leaders, far ahead of their times in this antedating the Quakers by over a century and a quarter. It should also be remembered that they held this principle in a day when both Catholic and Protestant churches not only endorsed war as an instrument of state policy, but employed it in religious conflict.

It is true, of course, that occasional earlier prophets like Peter Kalczewski had advocated similar views, but they left no continuing practice of the principle behind them. As we review the vision of the Anabaptists, it becomes clear that there are two foci in this vision. The first focus relates to the essential nature of Christianity.

Is Christianity primarily a matter of the reception of divine grace through a sacramental, sacerdotal institution as we see in Roman Catholicism? Is it chiefly enjoyment of the inner experience of the grace of God through faith in Christ as in Lutheranism? Or is it most of all the transformation of life through discipleship as in Anabaptism? The Anabaptists were neither institutionalists, mystics, nor pietists, for they

laid the weight of their emphasis upon following Christ in life. To them, it was unthinkable for one truly to be a Christian without creating a new life on divine principles both for himself and for all men who commit themselves to the Christian way. The second focus relates to the church.

For the Anabaptists, the church was neither an institution, again as Catholicism, nor the instrument of God for the proclamation of the divine word, as in Lutheranism, nor a resource group for individual piety as in Pietism. It was a brotherhood of love in which the fullness of the Christian life ideal was expressed. The Anabaptist vision may be further clarified by comparison of the social ethics of the four main Christian groups of the Reformation period.

Catholic, Calvinist, Lutheran, and Anabaptist. Catholic and Calvinist alike were optimistic about the world, agreeing that the world can be redeemed. They held that the entire social order can be brought under the sovereignty of God and Christianized, and although they used different means to attain this goal.

Lutheran and Anabaptist were pessimistic about the world, denying the possibility of Christianizing the entire social order. But the consequent attitudes of these two groups toward the social order were diametrically opposed. Lutheranism said that since the Christian must live in a world order that remains sinful, he must make a compromise with it.

As a citizen, he cannot avoid participation in the evils of the world, for instance, in making war. And for this, his only recourse is to seek forgiveness. By the grace of God, only within his personal, private experience can the Christian truly Christianize his life.

The Anabaptists rejected this view completely. Since for him, no compromise dare be made with evil, the Christian may in no circumstance participate in any conduct in the existing social order which is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ and the apostolic practice. He must consequently withdraw from the worldly system and create a Christian social order within the fellowship of the church brotherhood.

Extension of this Christian order by the conversion of individuals and their transfer out of the world into the church is the only way by which progress can be made in Christianizing the social order. However, the Anabaptists were realistic. Down the long perspective of the future, he saw little chance that the mass of humankind would enter such a brotherhood with its high ideals.

Hence, he anticipated a long and grievous conflict between the church and the world. Neither did he anticipate the time when the church would rule the world. The church would always be a suffering church.

He agreed with the words of Jesus when he said that those who would be his disciples must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow him and that there would be few who would enter the straight gate and travel the narrow way of life. If this prospect should seem too discouraging, the Anabaptists reply that the life within the Christian brotherhood is satisfyingly full of love and joy. The Anabaptist vision was not a detailed blueprint for the reconstruction of human society, but the brethren did believe that Jesus intended that the kingdom of God should be set in the midst of earth, here and now, and this they proposed to do forthwith.

We shall not believe, they said, that the servant on the mount or any other vision that he had is only a heavenly vision meant but to keep his followers in tension until the last great day, but we shall practice what he taught, believing that where he walked we can, by his grace, follow in his steps. This concludes the Anabaptist vision by Harold S. Bender. But allow me, if I may, to lift this old message out of the vaults

of history and lay the question to our current experience.

What is your faith like? Is your faith that which exists merely as a receptacle of sacramental or mechanical rites that you have participated in in the past? Or is it, like so many today, a mere profession, a fleeting prayer or a creed spoken with no repentance or no real change in your life? Or are you, as the Anabaptists in this message have challenged, a genuine follower of Christ? Jesus said, repent. And he said, follow me. If you believe him, you can, by his grace, do just that.

And what about your view of the church? Is your church an institution that exists merely to keep the structure going? Or is your view of the church, like most today, and you see it more as a collection of individuals? Do you see the church as, Bender challenged, a resource of individual piety? Allow me to invite you to dare to experience church life, even in this day and age, as a covenanted group of brethren, called out of the world and called into a joyful society of commitment, sharing, and discipleship. Well, if you choose such a faith, with such a practice, be careful. Like the early Anabaptists, it could cost you everything, even your life.

Well, thank you for listening, and may God bless and guide your way.

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