

# Anabaptists and the Bible

by John Christian Wenger

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*The Anabaptists emphasized the importance of Scripture, rejected the state church, and saw the Old Testament as a preparation for the New Testament.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:10, John 13:1, Romans 15:4, 1 Corinthians 5:11, Ephesians 6:17, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 3:15, 2 Peter 1:20

**Topics:** "Anabaptist Theology", "Biblical Doctrine"

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## Description

John Christian Wenger delves into the foundational Christian doctrines upheld by the original Anabaptists of Switzerland, emphasizing their unwavering commitment to the Apostles' Creed and core beliefs such as the deity of Jesus Christ, the new birth, and the return of Christ. The doctrinal differences between the Swiss Brethren and Zwingli revolved around issues like infant baptism, liberty of conscience, and the role of Christians in society, leading to persecution and martyrdom for the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists' devotion to the Scriptures is highlighted through their meticulous study, memorization, and unwavering commitment to the Word of God, even in the face of persecution and death.

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## Transcript

### Basic Christian Doctrines

The original Anabaptists of Switzerland were evangelical believers on Christ who subscribed wholeheartedly to the Apostles' Creed. There was no doctrinal difference between them and Zwingli on such fundamental matters as the doctrine of God, the deity of Jesus Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the sinful depravity of human nature, the doctrine of the new birth, or the personal return of Christ to raise the dead and judge the world. In the debate between the Swiss Brethren and the Reformed clergy, held at the Swiss town of Zofingen, some thirty miles west of Zurich, in 1532, the Reformed stated: "We are of one mind in the leading articles of faith, and our controversy has to do only with external things . . ." Zwingli himself commented: "But that no one may suppose that the dissension is in regard to doctrines which concern the inner man, let it be said that they make us difficulty only because of questions such as these: whether infants or adults should be baptized, and whether a Christian may be a magistrate." We may quote again the Strasbourg reformer, Wolfgang Capito, who stated: "As concerns the principal articles and vital points of faith, they do not err at all." Of course these sober and truthful evaluations were frequently denied in the heat of sixteenth-century polemics. A few generations later (1615), Johann Jacob Breitinger, head of the Zurich state church, asserted: "The Anabaptists have their peculiar ideas, but teach

nevertheless faith in God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They do not hold errors which would cause a man to be lost, but such as have been taught by some of the old church fathers."

Hymn Number 2 in the sixteenth-century Swiss Brethren hymnbook, the *Ausbund*, is entitled, "The Christian Faith in Metrical Form" (*Der Christliche Glaube, Gesangweise Gemacht*), and consists of a poetical arrangement of the Apostles' Creed with doctrinal comments. The hymn confesses faith in God and love for him who dwells in heaven, he who sees all our pains, who created all things, who is the Father of the pious, and who looks into the secrets of the heart. The hymn continues with faith in Christ the Saviour, "who is truly God's Son . . . , born but not created, identical with the Father in being," born of a virgin, crucified under Pontius Pilate, buried, descended into Hades, resurrected on the third day, ascended to the Father's right hand, and will soon return (*Bald wird er wieder kommen*) to judge the wicked and the good, and to establish his eternal Kingdom. The hymn confesses faith in the Holy Spirit, God's secret power, who knows the thoughts of all hearts, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, and works life in us, the One whom we worship and to whom we render divine honor, who spoke through the prophets of the salvation which is now realized on earth through Christ who died. Finally the hymn turns to the fourth section of the creed and confesses faith in one holy, Apostolic church, which stands in the power of the Holy Spirit and allows him to work; one faith; one baptism by which we are washed from sin and united to God in a good conscience; one body; one Spirit; one Lord and God . . . who has called us to one hope, we who are now waiting for the promised salvation, when death shall be eternally captured and bound; all the dead who now are lying in the earth shall arise and precede us: the Lord knows their names. Finally, we believe in eternal life. The entire hymn is a ringing confession of the faith reflected in the Apostles' Creed. The Swiss Brethren would have been astonished and offended if they had been accused of not holding to a faith which is evangelical.

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### Some Doctrinal Issues

The main issues between Zwingli and the Anabaptists were these: (1) Ought the state church be maintained, or should a free church be set up? (2) Does the state have the right to maintain by law and force an established faith, or should liberty of conscience prevail? (3) Is the oath legitimate for Christians, or is it no longer permitted the people of God since the New Covenant was made by Christ? (4) Ought the infant baptism of the Roman Church be maintained, or should converts first be instructed, like the catechumens of the ancient church, and then baptized? (5) Are the principles of love and nonresistant suffering taught by Christ and the New Testament Apostles merely beautiful ideals which cannot always be followed literally, or are they basic and fundamental expressions of the new nature implanted in believers at their regeneration? (6) Does the Christian fulfill fundamentally dual roles in society, that of a solid citizen and that of a Christian disciple, so that as a Christian he may also serve in the magistracy and the military, or is society divided into two basically different groups: the church and the state, each with its own purpose, membership, function, method, ethic, and sanction? In each of these questions Zwingli chose the former alternative, while the Swiss Brethren felt that the latter was the proper Christian position. Since on each issue the Zurich Council agreed with Zwingli, nothing but persecution and continuous difficulty awaited the Anabaptists-in the sixteenth century this meant imprisonment and martyrdom-and continuing abuse through imprisonments, fines, confiscations, and even galley slavery as recently as a century or two later. Forcible baptisms of Mennonite children, as well as occasional imprisonment, continued in Bern until the nineteenth century.

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## Centrality of the Scriptures

The Anabaptists were devoted students of the Bible. From the moment of their conversion they became avid readers of Scripture, memorizing favorite passages and preparing themselves to give biblical reasons for their faith. "I hope to be able to learn one hundred chapters of the Testament by heart," declared a sixteenth-century Anabaptist. The reason for this high evaluation of Scripture was of course the confidence that it was inspired by the Holy Spirit. In a sixteenth-century confession by the Anabaptists of Hesse, Article I declares:

We believe, recognize, and confess that the Holy Scriptures both of the Old and New Testaments are to be described as commanded of God and written through holy persons who were moved thereto by the Spirit of God. For this reason the believing, born again Christians are to employ them for teaching and admonishing, for reproof and reformation, to exhibit the foundation of their faith that it is in conformity with the Holy Scripture.

In the debate of 1532 at Zofingen the Swiss Brethren stated succinctly: "We hold that all things should be proved to ascertain what is founded on the Holy Word of God, for this will stand when heaven and earth pass away, as Christ Himself said." To his beloved friends and followers the imprisoned Swiss Brethren preacher, Michael Sattler, wrote in 1527: "And let no man remove you from the foundation which is laid through the letter of the holy Scriptures, and is sealed with the blood of Christ and of many witnesses of Jesus."

In the year 1544 a Dutch Anabaptist named John Claess was imprisoned at Amsterdam. To his wife and children he penned a number of memorial letters or "testaments." "Know, my dearly beloved wife," wrote John, "that it is my will and testament to you in no wise to depart from the word of the Lord . . . And to his children he wrote: "My children, how you are to love God the Lord, how you must honor and love your mother, and love your neighbor, and fulfill all other commandments required of you by the Lord, the New Testament will teach you. . . . Whatever is not contained therein, believe not; but obey everything that is embraced in it." And again to his wife: "My dear wife, I request you to bring up my children in all good instruction, to have my testament read to them, and to bring them up in the Lord, according to your ability, as long as you remain with them." As he left the courtroom, following his death sentence, he cried out to the people present, "You citizens bear witness that we die for no other reason than for the true Word of God."<sup>[1]</sup> In 1550 a martyr named Hans Keeskooper wrote from a Ghent prison:

"Therefore, search the Scriptures, which the Lord commands you to do, and to act according to them, on pain of the damnation of your souls, and of being cast into everlasting fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth forever." In the same letter Keeskooper recorded the testimony of a boy who wished to join the Anabaptists but who had not yet been baptized. "How came it," asked the civil lords, "that he did not baptize you?" The boy, "a mere lad yet, and a dear child," replied, "My lords, when the teacher presented the faith to me, and had interrogated me, he well perceived that I was still young in understanding, and bade me search the Scriptures still more; but I desired that it be done. He then asked me whether I knew that the world puts to death and burns such people. I replied, 'I know it well.' He then said to me, 'Hence, I pray you, that you have patience for this time, until I come another time. Search the Scriptures, and ask the Lord for wisdom, for you are yet a youth.'"

Keeskooper remarked, after writing this brief testimony, "See, dear friends, these are beautiful signs and miracles; open your eyes, and behold when such young persons give themselves for the truth, delivering their bodies into prison, and even unto death." [2]

Even a cursory reading of a few dozen interviews between the Roman clergy and Anabaptist prisoners will reveal the centrality of the Scriptures for the Brethren. The Anabaptists did not know much about the teachings of Augustine or Ambrose or Jerome, and were not at all impressed by citations from the ancient church fathers. Rather, they demanded definite statements from Scripture if they were to allow themselves to be "instructed." A French Anabaptist named Jacques D'Auchy was captured through the betrayal of a man of Harlingen in 1558 and imprisoned for many months at Leeuwarden in Friesland before being executed. He had long sessions with an inquisitor who hoped to return Jacques to the Roman faith. The inquisitor attacked as heretics and villains such Anabaptist leaders as Menno Simons, Leenaert Bouwens, and Gillis of Aachen. Jacques replied that he did not build his faith on men but on the Word of God. The inquisitor had with him a Latin Testament printed by Stephanus at Paris, as well as a Zurich German Testament. At first he would not allow Jacques the use of either, but finally he did permit Jacques to show him certain passages in the German Testament. The inquisitor insisted, however, that Jacques should not be guided by his own understandings but by those of Saints Augustine and Ambrose. Jacques, however, insisted on his right and his competence to read the Scriptures for himself. Jacques refused even to pay attention to the views of Menno Simons, although he probably agreed almost to a letter with him. It was the principle of sola Scriptura upon which he was clear; he would hearken to no human being so far as doctrinal truth was concerned; he had to see it in the Scriptures! The argument of the inquisitor that he was holding to a faith which was over 1,400 years old did not impress Jacques.

Jacques replied, "My lord, should I believe because of the long time? There were many heretics . . . who erred much longer yet. Turn to the Scriptures alone, according to the example of the good king Josiah." Jacques denied with vigor the right of the state to execute a man for wrong belief. The inquisitor cited Deuteronomy 13 as biblical proof that this was legitimate. Jacques replied that the law of Moses was not our guide, but the teaching of Christ: "What was commanded in the law is not commanded in the Gospel of Christ." Jacques then took the offensive by asking the inquisitor the meaning of Christ's proscription not to pull up the tares before the end of the world lest the wheat be pulled up also. The inquisitor replied that it is easy to see which is wheat and which is tares. "Yes, for Him that knows the seed," replied Jacques. To this the inquisitor assented. Jacques then asked him point-blank whether he had the Spirit of God so as to know the things of the Spirit. He replied, "No, I will not answer this." Numerous examinations did not enhance the rapport of the two men, and the final chapter was written when Jacques was secretly put to death at night; he was found lying in his own blood, still wearing his leather clothes.<sup>8</sup> The ancient martyrologist added, "He now rests under the altar of Jesus, awaiting, with God's chosen, a blessed resurrection and eternal life."

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### Footwashing Observed Literally

It was because of their emphasis on recognizing no other authority at all that the Swiss Brethren and the Dutch Obbenites (later known as Mennists, Mennonists, Mennonites) did not build on dreams and visions, or any sort of private revelations. The Word of God alone, they declared, was sufficient for them. On the other hand, the principle of following the Bible strictly led some of the Dutch Anabaptists to adopt the practice of foot-washing as a religious rite. Did not the Lord command the washing of one another's feet

just as definitely as he instituted the ordinances of baptism and the communion of the Lord's Supper? Did not Christ say that he had given them an example, that they should do to one another as he had done to them? (John 13:1-17.) In his little book, *A Kind Admonition on Church Discipline*, 1541, Menno Simons wrote:

Do wash the feet of your beloved brethren and sisters who are come to you from a distance, tired. Be not ashamed to do the work of the Lord, but humble yourselves with Christ, before your brethren, so that all humility of godly quality may be found in you.[14]

In a Dutch Mennonite Confession of Faith, drawn up at Amsterdam in 1627, we read:

Feet washing we confess to be an ordinance of Christ which He Himself performed on His disciples, and after His example commended to true believers . . . The purpose for which the Lord has instituted this ordinance is principally this: That we may remember in true humiliation that by grace we are washed from sin through the blood of Christ, and that He, our Lord and Master, by His lowly example binds us to true humility towards one another.<sup>5</sup>

Menno's colleague, Bishop Dirk Philips (c. 1504-1568), declared in his book, *The Church of God*, that Christ had two purposes in mind when he instituted the ordinance of foot-washing:

First, he would have us know that he himself must cleanse us after the inner man, and that we must allow him to wash away the sins which beset us . . . The second reason . . . is that we shall humble ourselves among one another . . . and that we hold our fellow-believers in the highest respect for the reason that they are the saints of God and members of the body of Jesus Christ, and that the Holy Ghost dwells in them.[6]

The Swiss Brethren, however, did not observe this command of Christ literally. In the year 1693 a major division occurred in the congregations of the Swiss Brethren. The division began in the canton of Bern and spread to the congregations in Alsace and in the Rhenish Palatinate. The occasion for the tension was the attempt of a young bishop named Jacob Ammann to introduce the Dutch practice of shunning excommunicated members (which Obbe Philips had inaugurated to protect his Brotherhood from the dangerous fanaticism of the Münsterites). Ammann felt that shunning was a biblical command (I Corinthians 5:11). An older Swiss bishop, Hans Reist, vigorously opposed Ammann, insisting that the verses cited on not eating with an impenitent church member applied primarily to the Lord's Supper. The outcome of the controversy, in which personal attitudes certainly played a role, was the only major division in the history of the congregations of Anabaptist background in Switzerland. Following this rupture in fellowship in 1693 the followers of Ammann, who are even today called "Amish" in America, began to keep footwashing as a religious rite. But the Reist congregations maintained the earlier Swiss Brethren attitude of seeing in John 13:1-17 an object lesson in love and brotherhood among Christians, rather than the institution of a ceremony for the church to observe literally.

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[Attitude Toward the Old Testament](#)

Finally we must look carefully at the most distinctive theological emphasis of the Anabaptists. It concerns their view of the relation of the Old Testament to the New. Actually, Christendom as a whole has never been entirely clear on this question. One of the best Protestant expositions is that of John Calvin in his

Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book II, Chapter xi, where he shows how the Christian is delivered from the ceremonial law of Moses, and how Christ has brought deeper inward spiritual blessings than the Old Covenant saints enjoyed. But the Anabaptists went further. They thought it was not legitimate to argue, as did the leading Reformers of the sixteenth century, that because oaths and warfare were commanded or permitted in the Old Covenant, that Christians may therefore employ them today. The Reformers emphasized the unity of the two covenants, thought the Anabaptists, in order to justify infant baptism by a comparison with circumcision, to plead the legitimacy of the magistracy and the oath, and perhaps even to justify the persecution of religious dissenters from the Old Testament! By contrast, the Anabaptists stressed the preparatory role of the Old Testament; it was, they declared, one of shadows and types, while the reality is in Christ. God tolerated such things as divorce, the oath, and the like, because of the "hardness of heart" of Israel, but such concessions no longer apply. (No Anabaptist could have signed a statement that it was permissible for Philip of Hesse to have two wives because Abraham did! In fairness to the Reformers who did sign such a statement, it should be added that they did so with hesitation and regret, feeling almost compelled to do so because of the crucial necessity of maintaining the good will of Philip, Landgrave of Hesse. This crisis would have been one more consideration militating against the whole state church system, so far as the Anabaptists were concerned.) The teachings of Christ and the Apostles, declared the Anabaptists, fulfilled the Old Testament. That is, the New Testament seizes upon those elements which were permanent and valid in the Old Testament, and builds upon them, while it sloughs off (by silence, generally) those things in the Old Testament which are not a part of God's final and perfect revelation in Christ.

In a brief treatise entitled, The Tabernacle of Moses, Dirk Philips wrote:

So then the gospel and the law are divided, so far as the figures, shadows and the letter of the law are concerned, which are all done away by the gospel. But it is essential that we take heed to the spirit of the law, (for the law is spiritual), as Paul says . . . We will then find that the signification, purport and real meaning of the law accords and agrees in every way with the gospel, yea, that it is one and the same truth. . . Thus the literal command of the Lord regarding circumcision of the flesh has come to an end, but the command regarding the spiritual circumcision of the heart remains.[7]

And in his book, Spiritual Restitution, Dirk declared:

The false prophets . . . embellish and disguise their deceptive doctrine with the old leaven of the letter as shadows and figures; for whatever of the new testament they cannot defend they try to prove with the old testament . . . From this fallacy many sects have come, [and] many false forms of worship have been established. . . [8]

In a sharp blast against the "corrupt sects" of the sixteenth century (Davidians, Münsterites, and Batenburgers), Menno wrote in his Foundation of Christian Doctrine:

If you want to appeal to the literal understanding and transactions of Moses and the prophets, then must you also become Jews, accept circumcision, possess the land of Canaan literally, erect the Jewish kingdom again, build the city and temple, and offer sacrifices and perform the ritual as required in the law. And you must declare that Christ the promised Saviour has not yet come, He who has changed the literal and sensual ceremonies into new, spiritual, and abiding realities.[9]

In reference to the notion that Elijah must yet come, Menno continued:

Even though Elijah himself were to come he would not have anything to teach contrary to the foundation and doctrine of Christ and the apostles. But he must teach and preach in harmony with them if he would execute the office of the true preacher, for by the Spirit, Word, actions, and example of Christ, all must be judged until the last judgment . . . For Christ is the man who sits upon David's throne and shall reign forever in the kingdom, house, and congregation of Jacob.[10]

In *The True Christian Faith* (about 1541), Menno wrote in the same vein: "The true evangelical faith sees and considers only the doctrine, ceremonies, commands, prohibitions, and the perfect example of Christ, and strives to conform thereto with all its power.[11]

Pilgram Marpeck (d. 1556), the "Menno Simons of the South," an Anabaptist elder who labored in South Germany and Switzer land, wrote an entire book contrasting the Old Covenant with the New; it was called the *Testament Explanation*. Only two copies are known today, one in the Zentralbibliothek of Zurich, the other in Marburg, Germany.

It would not be correct to say that the Anabaptists had a low view of the Old Testament. On the contrary, they held that the entire Bible was inspired and profitable for doctrine. It was rather that they rejected the concept of a "flat Bible." They took the principle of progressive revelation seriously, holding that the New Testament is God's perfect and final revelation, and that the Old Testament was in God's intention preparatory in character. They believed that in this view they were true both to the letter and to the spirit of the New Testament.

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