

Anabaptism: The Basic Beliefs

Identity & Doctrine Series



7. Belief in the church as a covenant community.

Corporate worship, mutual aid, fellowship, and mutual accountability characterize this community. An individualistic or self-centred Anabaptism is a contradiction in terms.

8. Separation from the world.

The community of the transformed belongs to the kingdom of God. It functions in the world but is radically separate from the world. The faithful pilgrim church sees the sinful world as an alien environment with thoroughly different ethics and goals. This principle includes separation of church and state. Therefore, Anabaptists reject all forms of civil religion, be it the traditional Corpus Christianum or more recently developed forms of Christian nationalism.

9. The church as a visible counterculture.

As a united fellowship of believers, every Anabaptist congregation models an alternative community. Such a covenant community functions as an authentic counterculture.

10. Belief that the gospel includes a commitment to the way of peace modelled by the Prince of Peace.

Here, Anabaptists differ from many other Christians. Anabaptists believe that the peace position is neither optional, marginal, nor related mainly to the military. On the basis of Scripture, Anabaptists renounce violence in human relationships. We see peace and reconciliation—the way of love—as being at the heart of the Christian gospel. God gave his followers this ethic not as a point to ponder, but as a command to obey. It was costly for Jesus and it may also be

costly for his followers. The way of peace is a way of life.

11. Commitment to servanthood.

Just as Christ came to be a servant to all, so Christians should also serve one another and others in the name of Christ. Thus, separation from a sinful world is balanced by a witness of practical assistance to a needy and hurting society.

12. Insistence on the church as a missionary church.

Anabaptists believe that Christ has commissioned the church to go into all the world and all of society and to make disciples of all people, baptizing them and teaching them to observe his commandments. The evangelistic imperative is given to all believers.

These principles constitute the essence of Anabaptism. While each emphasis can be found elsewhere, the combination of all 12 comprises the uniqueness of Anabaptism.

The Protestant Reformation had not gone far enough. The early Anabaptists, while diverse and far from perfect, committed themselves to nothing less than the restoration of the New Testament church. We, their heirs, have the privilege of re-emphasizing these 12 principles, in word and deed, here and now. ■

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Faith and Life

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What has made Anabaptists distinctive? What have Anabaptists believed? As heirs of the Anabaptist tradition, we need to understand this historical movement. We need to hear its biblical essence—the emphasis that we’ve sought to incorporate into our confession of faith.

The first Anabaptists of the early 16th century played a distinctive role; they were neither Catholic nor Protestant but a separate third force. That reality, now widely forgotten, must be emphasized.

Certainly, the Anabaptist founders owed much to Luther and the other Protestant reformers. In particular, Luther’s emphasis on salvation—through personal faith, in Christ alone, by grace, as revealed in Scripture—prepared the way. But on many other crucial issues, the Anabaptists differed as much from Luther as Luther did from Roman Catholicism.

While giving Luther his due, we do well to remember some historical realities. Luther, as well as Calvin and Zwingli, came to harshly oppose the Anabaptists. In fact, of the 20,000 to 40,000 Anabaptists martyred in the early decades, likely more were massacred by Protestants than by Catholics.

The differences between Anabaptists and the Reformers ran deep. Luther, Calvin, and their associates wanted reformation of the medieval church. The Anabaptists wanted restoration of the New Testament church.

The reformers looked to the state to defend the establishment of an official religion. The

Anabaptists, on the other hand, sought no government endorsement.

The reformers asserted that all people in the realm should conform to the official state religion. The Anabaptists, however, long before philosophers promoted the idea, proclaimed religious and civil liberty for all.

The reformers retained much of the Catholic church-state fusion of that day. The Anabaptists, who saw themselves as strangers and pilgrims in this world, rejected any fusion of faith and citizenship. The church of which they testified and for which they died was based on Jesus Christ alone and knew no state boundaries.

The reformers specifically endorsed military slaughter by Christian soldiers. The Anabaptists, on the other hand, expressed love for their persecutors and prayed for them.

The reformers fragmented and compartmentalized Christian living. Luther wrote, “As a Christian, man has to suffer everything and not resist anybody. As a member of the State, the same man has to fight with joy, as long as he lives.” The Anabaptists rejected such ethical dualism.

The point has been made. The Anabaptists were not part of the great Protestant Reformation but established a third option. They upheld distinct values.

Today, of course, many other groups have accepted much of what the Anabaptists rediscovered, and the differences between Protestantism and Anabaptism have decreased. But the total set of Anabaptist beliefs and practices remains distinctive. Even though the privileged heirs of Anabaptism have often not practised and preached it consistently, Anabaptism remains a unique blend of basic biblical principles.

We do well to call ourselves back to the basics, even as we acknowledge that Anabaptists do not possess a corner on the truth. Clearly, on certain emphases, others can teach us much. We, in turn, present our Anabaptist understanding, which encompasses 12 key principles.

1. A high view of the Bible.

While not worshipping the Bible itself, which would be bibliolatry, Anabaptists accept “the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God, and through the Holy Spirit... the infallible guide to lead men to faith in Christ and to guide them in the life of Christian discipleship.” Anabaptists insist that Christians must be guided by the Word, inspired by the Spirit within the community illumined by the Spirit.

In Christ, salvation and ethics come together.

2. Emphasis on the New Testament.

Since Christ is God’s supreme revelation, Anabaptists make a clear functional distinction between the equally inspired Old and New Testaments. We see both an old and new covenant. We read the Old from the perspective of the New and see the New as the fulfillment of the Old. The Old Testament should be interpreted in light of God’s final revelation in Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament. Anabaptist ethics are learned first from Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, then the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and the entire Bible.

3. Emphasis on Jesus as central to all else.

Anabaptists derive their Christology directly from the Word and emphasize a deep commitment to take Jesus seriously in all matters of life. Such a view runs counter to notions that the commands of Jesus are too difficult for ordinary believers

or that Jesus’ significance lies almost entirely in providing heavenly salvation. Rather, salvation of the soul is part of a larger transformation.

4. The necessity of a believer’s church.

Anabaptists believe that Christian conversion, while not necessarily sudden and traumatic, always involves a conscious decision. “Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Believing that an infant can have no conscious, intelligent faith in Christ, Anabaptists baptize only those who have come to a personal, living faith. Voluntary baptism, together with a commitment to walk in the full newness of life and to strive for purity in the church, constitutes the basis of church membership.

5. The importance of discipleship.

Becoming a Christian involves belief in not only Christ but also discipleship. Faith is expressed in holy living. In Christ, salvation and ethics come together. Not only are we to be saved through Christ, but we are also to follow him daily in obedient living. Thus, for example, Anabaptists from the beginning renounced the oath. They determined to speak truth. “For them there could be no gradations of truth-telling.” Anabaptists continue to teach that salvation makes us followers of Jesus Christ and that he is the model for the way we are to live.

6. Insistence on a church without classes or divisions.

The church—the body of Christ—has only one head. While acknowledging functional diversity, Anabaptist believers set aside all racial, ethnic, class, and sex distinctions because these are subsumed in the unity and equality of the body.

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