

# Anabaptism is Neither Catholic nor Protestant

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**his short article will begin with a simple statement: Each person is unique. It is well known that no two identical people exist in the world. A human is a highly organized and psychologically complicated being. Therefore, any union of people is also unique. Throughout all human history there have never existed two identical unions, societies, or churches. Of course, many similar organizations have existed, but none are identical. Each movement is not only different from every other, but is also not completely uniform internally. For example, the Roman Catholic Church was united nominally before the Reformation, but in practice contained widely differing orders (such as the Augustinians, Dominicans, and Franciscans), the opposing theological premises of scholasticism and mysticism, and a variety of cultural traditions (such as the distinctions of the Renaissance in the northern and southern Alps). In this sense, Anabaptism was, of course, a unique phenomenon, being neither Catholic nor Protestant, and even each local Anabaptist congregation—just as each congregation of Catholics, Lutherans, or Zwinglians—was without parallel.

On the other hand, people are social beings, and so they usually sacrifice (voluntarily or involuntarily) some important features of their individuality for the sake of the collective body. Only because of this process can we generalize and talk today about Catholicism, Protestantism, or Anabaptism as a whole. The majority of people are influenced by the most creative and charismatic religious or political leaders who are able to dominate the powerful competition in the marketplace of ideas in their country

(province, town, company, or family). Luther, Zwingli, Simons, Calvin, and others were such leaders during the Reformation. Strong personalities influence the weak, but inasmuch as people usually cannot understand or agree with each other absolutely, there is room for differences among even like-minded persons. Thus, people are unique and similar at the same time. In the same way, human societies are unique and similar in any century.

In order to define Anabaptism in comparison to Catholicism and classical (magisterial) Protestantism, the latter two should first be defined. This is not so easy. If we imagine them as proper fractions with a common denominator (that is, the common Christian faith in the Holy Trinity and the ancient creeds), what are the "numerators" of Catholicism, Protestantism (in the form of Lutheranism and the Reformed Church) and, finally, Anabaptism in the sixteenth century? How great is the deviation between the numerators? Is the numerator of Anabaptism nearer to Catholicism or to Protestantism? Is the former comparable to the latter? Is Anabaptism a variety of Protestantism? This article will try to answer these questions.

#### DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF CATHOLICISM AND PROTESTANTISM

Apparently the deepest cause of all the fundamental differences between Catholicism and classical Protestantism in the sixteenth century was the Reformed teaching of election, with its strong emphasis on God's sover-

eighty and the rejection of human free will. Officially, the Roman Catholic Church held the Augustinian doctrine of salvation by grace, but in practice it drifted in the direction of semi-Pelagianism.<sup>1</sup> When Luther, early Melancthon, Zwingli, and Calvin revived the concept of double predestination,<sup>2</sup> they acquired a powerful weapon in their spiritual fight against all the institutions of Rome. Indeed, what is the sense of magnificent masses and sacraments, subordination to the pope and all the church hierarchy, monastic asceticism, the veneration of icons and relics, and so on, if absolutely nothing could be changed in the eternally predetermined question of a person's destination as paradise or hell? Here is the real root of all the subsequent doctrinal distinctives between Catholics and Protestants. Apparently even the famous slogans of *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura* are derived from this idea (*sola gratia*) and are therefore secondary, because faith (*fides*) was usually understood by the Protestant theologians as a divine gift and necessary consequence of the operation of grace (*gratia*).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Scripture (*Scriptura*) was not an exclusively "Protestant resource," but was often used successfully by the Catholics

<sup>1</sup> L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 138-9.

<sup>2</sup> This teaching is reflected in Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525), Melancthon's *Loci Communes* (1521), Zwingli's *On Providence* (1519) and *Commentary on True and False Religion* (1525), and Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536-1559). During this period a great number of Protestant theologians followed this approach to soteriology.

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, "Faith," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991.

to criticize Protestant teachings and to prove the importance of church traditions and good works. The proof of any idea with the use of some skillfully selected biblical texts is nothing new. *Biblia est mater hereticorum*,<sup>4</sup> as the old Latin proverb goes. Scripture has a lot to say about human free will. It is well known that the fathers of the Reformation often disregarded such biblical texts, or interpreted them artificially (such as the apostle James' "faith without works is dead"). Therefore, it was not *sola Scriptura* as much as favorite biblical themes, such as God's sovereignty and election, that became the foundation of the theology of the new Protestant churches.

On that basis the first Protestants rejected the Roman Catholic Church, proclaiming their wish to return to the apostolic faith as they understood it. It was only then that the Protestants took the next logical steps, founding their own churches of the "believing people of God" with the "priesthood of all believers" and denying the papal hierarchy, masses, monasticism, pilgrimages, prayers to the saints, fasting, holy water, and so on.<sup>5</sup> Thus, in practice, new national churches were established, closely linked to the power of kings and dukes. It is well known that the Protestants could pressure the Catholics

in many countries of Europe by using the so-called "king factor," and the voluntary submission of their churches to kings as "defenders of the faith" to counterbalance the pope. The situation flattered the kings, of course. The pope could no longer command them what to do from Rome, or put political pressure on their countries with his interdicts<sup>6</sup> and irate papal bulls. The authority of the pope was undermined by the spread of Protestant views. The basis of Protestant daring was the teaching on God's eternal election, which, in some sense, shifted Rome's powerful influence to the periphery of religious life in sixteenth-century Europe.

#### SIMILAR AND DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF ANABAPTISM AND PROTESTANTISM (CATHOLICISM)

The weakness of the position of modern Mennonite scholars who maintain that Anabaptism was a variety of Protestantism ("radical," "sectarian," "third Reformation," "left wing," "stepchildren of the Reformation," etc.) is that the majority of the Anabaptists shared only one of the three fundamental principles of classical Protestantism: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura*.<sup>7</sup> As a corollary, there were many theoretical

<sup>4</sup> Latin: The Bible is the mother of heretics.

<sup>5</sup> D. F. Wright, "Protestantism," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Interdicts (or temporary prohibitions of masses and sacraments) were a terrible weapon of the popes in medieval Europe. People were frightened by locked churches, silenced bells, unburied dead bodies, and infants left unbaptized (the latter two punishments were not always used), and they pressed their kings

to obey any demand of the pope. For instance, Pope Innocent III laid interdicts on the whole of France (in 1200) and England (in 1208), and forced their kings to obey him absolutely. (*Hristianstvo: Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar*, 1995; Earl Cairns, *Dorogami hristianstva* [Moscow: Protestant, 1992], 169-70).

<sup>7</sup> It is entirely possible that Mennonite scholars would not agree with this appraisal. However, Robert Friedmann asserts, "to talk about the

(theological) and practical differences between Protestants and Anabaptists. Even the common principle *sola Scriptura* could not draw their positions closer<sup>8</sup> because of the above-mentioned problem, when the followers of every theological opinion traditionally go fishing in the boundless sea of Scripture for only one special sort of "fish," not much concerned with seeing all the abundance of its treasure. Finally, the Anabaptists involuntarily retained some of the most important components of Roman Catholic Church principles (though they condemned "papisty" with the most terrible quasi-biblical expressions) and adopted some external Protestant features (such as the rejection of icons, monasticism, pilgrimages, prayers to the saints, fasting, and so on), without penetrating the heart of Protestant ideas. For example, the Anabaptists remained faithful to the Catholic teaching of "perfectionism" with its emphasis on good works and rejected the Protestant understand-

ing of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.<sup>9</sup>

Besides this, there were other characteristic similarities between the Anabaptists and Catholics. For instance, they had a similar understanding of the leading role of the church in salvation, although they had different definitions of what constitutes the church. A classical Catholic maxim by Cyprian says, *Extra ecclesiam non sit salus*.<sup>10</sup> This assertion could also be applied to Anabaptist communities. "Everything was subordinate to the service of the community: time, money, labor, gifts," writes J. A. Brandsma, "For the sake of the community they were ready to suffer everything: indigence, disdain, prison, death. For them, devotion to the community was equal to the devoted service of God."<sup>11</sup> Cornelius Krahn pointed to Menno Simons' "ecclesiocentric theology."<sup>12</sup> Harold S. Bender noted the centrality of the church (community) concept among the Anabaptists, in contrast to the in-

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theology of Anabaptism seems like talking about squaring the circle." (*The Theology of Anabaptism* [Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, Publishers, 1998], 17). The Anabaptists rejected eternal election, and neither *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* nor *Mennonitisches Lexikon* even has an article on the subject of grace. "...A view of grace, in which the sinner is forgiven and undeservedly justified, is simply unacceptable to... the Anabaptists" (Ibid., 91-98). After that admission, the author is forced to add so many provisos to keep the Anabaptists in the Protestant camp that it would be more honest to agree that, though the Protestant principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* were used by some important Anabaptist leaders, such ideas were never a significant part of Anabaptist theology and practice.

<sup>8</sup> Protestants and Anabaptists alike formed their own approaches to interpreting Scripture, which speedily replaced Catholic traditions. On the whole, one gets the impression that the motto,

*sola Scriptura*, was an idealistic dream of the Reformation, inasmuch as the writings of the great fathers of the church upon which church tradition was based, were crowded out by new writings of the Reformers, sometimes of doubtful quality, particularly in the case of the Anabaptists.

<sup>9</sup> "With Erasmus of Rotterdam, they [the Anabaptists] also embraced the conviction of the freedom of the will and they completely rejected predestination and the bondage of the will" (Ibid., 17). Hubmaier, Hoffman, and Denck even wrote entire treatises against Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will*. (C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* [Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1995], 305).

<sup>10</sup> Latin: Outside the church there is no salvation.

<sup>11</sup> J.A. Brandsma, *Menno Simons iz Witmarsuma* (Karaganda: Istochnik, 1997), 67. My translation.

<sup>12</sup> Friedmann, 116.

dividual understanding of salvation in classical Protestantism.<sup>13</sup> Robert Friedmann says, "In Anabaptism... man cannot come to God except together with his brother in the faith. In other words, the brother, the neighbor, constitutes an essential element of one's personal redemption."<sup>14</sup> The Anabaptist communities, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, struggled against state control. The difference between them is that the Anabaptists, because of their weakness, usually "held the line" (with the exception of a few incidents, such as in Münster in 1534-5), while the papacy, using its power, was on the offensive against the secular authorities in medieval Europe. Nevertheless, the religious position of both sides looks similar, not to say identical. And so it is doubtful that the Anabaptists were the first "free church" (as they are sometimes called) in Christian history, in the political sense anyway. Even such an essential Anabaptist teaching as *Nachfolge Christi* (discipleship), which Bender used for his classical definition of Anabaptism,<sup>15</sup> has many parallels with the medieval Catholic ascetic and monastic tradition,<sup>16</sup> wonderfully expressed, for instance, by

Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) in *The Imitation of Christ*.

I think that many of the Anabaptist leaders could put their signature to the following words (note the characteristic tendency to glorify martyrdom, including even the terminology of the "royal way of suffering," in common with the future Anabaptists):

On the Small Number of Lovers of the Cross: "There are many lovers of Jesus' kingdom of heaven, but few bearers of His cross. There are many seekers of His comfort, but few seekers of His suffering..."

On the Royal Way of the Holy Cross: "Take up your cross and follow Jesus and you will come to eternal life. He went before you and bore His cross and died on the cross for you, that you might bear also your cross and wish to die on the cross... And how may you seek another way besides this royal way of the holy cross!"

On Our Duty to Deny Ourselves and to Imitate Christ on the Cross: "If you want to be My disciple, deny yourself ... If you want to reign with Me, bear the cross with Me... May Your servant be well versed in Your life, because this is my salvation and the true holiness. Besides this, noth-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>15</sup> In this definition he followed Johannes Kuhn who first named discipleship as the unique feature of early Anabaptism in 1923. (Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *Spiritual Life in Anabaptism* [Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1995], 16).

<sup>16</sup> Any prayer contains a significant mystical element, so there does not seem to be any reason to sharply distinguish between the inclination to spiritual introspection of monastic life and the somewhat more practical Anabaptist way

of living. Walter Klaassen writes, "Anabaptism is an example of the renewed concern in the church for taking seriously the Sermon on the Mount in everyday living. Monasticism was an earlier example of the same concern. Like the original monastic movement, Anabaptism was a lay movement. Both were committed to nonviolence; both were critical of private property; both made a great deal of obedience..." (*Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* [Waterloo, Ont.: Conrad Press, 1973], 78).

ing delights me and gives me perfect joy..."<sup>17</sup>

Let us recall the points that are usually mentioned to show the common characteristics of the Anabaptists and Protestants. There is the Anabaptists' emotional renunciation of the Roman Catholic Church (however, deeds are more important than words); their wish to live according to the New Testament (which was no crime for Catholics, either); the rejection of Catholic traditions, such as the use of icons, monasticism, pilgrimages, prayers to the saints, and fasting (but even those scarcely comprise the main idea of Catholicism). What else? Anabaptists rejected the power of the pope, the Roman hierarchy, and the mystical understanding of Christian sacraments. Without doubt that is the more weighty reason why the Anabaptists ceased, so to speak, to be Catholic. However, although these are all serious indications of a break with Rome, nevertheless they do not represent any essential change in the Anabaptists' traditionally Catholic mentality. Even as the future separatists, the Old Catholics, would exist without the pope and the Roman hierarchy and still remain Catholic,<sup>18</sup> so we can see something similar with the Anabaptists. The place of the pope and the Roman

hierarchy in the Anabaptist communities was immediately occupied by their new ministers, who sometimes had even more power among the brethren than the pope had among the Catholics. For instance, the Wismar conference of Mennonite leaders (1554) ordered a spouse to avoid all physical contact with an excommunicated mate, and even "not to eat with such a one" (1 Co 5:11).<sup>19</sup> The strict ban of the Anabaptist pastors resembles, in a sense, the medieval papal policy.<sup>20</sup> Just as in times past the Orthodox and Catholic Churches mutually accused one another of heresy, but in practice were actually only in schism from one another (referring to the Great Schism, of course), so the Anabaptists, who, because of the similarity of their main doctrines could possibly be called "Very Old Catholics," were probably closer to a kind of schism from Catholicism.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it could be said that the Anabaptists were neither Catholic nor Protestant, but the "numerator" of the Anabaptist "fraction" was much nearer to Catholicism than to Protestantism. Without seriously stretching the point, Anabaptism cannot be considered a kind of Protestantism; rather, it was a rare kind of monasticism without a vow of celibacy.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *O podrazhanii Hristu* (Moscow: Istina i zhizn, 1999), 74.76.78.174. My translation.

<sup>18</sup> The Old Catholic Church, headed by Johnannes von Dellinger, separated from Rome in 1871 (Cairns, 332).

<sup>19</sup> G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 599.

<sup>20</sup> Even if communities approved similar disciplinary extremes, it shows more a "triumph of

dictators" and the strength of propaganda than real freedom in Christ.

<sup>21</sup> The usual understanding of the word "schism" is a formal separation of a group of believers from the base church without the creation of new dogmatics. In that sense, the Anabaptists look like schismatics with respect to Roman Catholicism, while the Protestants (the followers of the classical Reformation) were much more than a schism; they really created a new kind of church.

## THE SPECIFIC CHARACTER OF EARLY ANABAPTISM

All that was said about Anabaptism before does not mean that this movement was something bad or foolish. Rather, it means that the Anabaptists and their successors, such as the Mennonites, need not humbly request to be admitted into the classical Protestant camp. And they need not rejoice when a few Protestant authors sympathetically comply with the request.<sup>22</sup> Many features of the Anabaptist "primitive" theology and worship seem much nearer to the practice and experience of the Apostolic Church than any Protestant innovations, and a return to the "apostolic faith" in the light of the Bible, as is well known, was the most important goal of the Reformation. Were, for instance, the Christians of the ancient church followers of the teaching of double predestination? Absolutely not! On the contrary, they struggled against the very similar pagan idea of fate.<sup>23</sup> John Chrysostom, for example, expressing early church opinion, wrote: "God said: 'if you want' and 'if you do not want'... But what...does the devil say? That the things determined by fate are impossible to avoid, whether we want a thing or not... Fate says: 'If we do not want it, but were nevertheless

given it, we shall be saved ...'"<sup>24</sup> In fact, this approach was very similar to the extreme views of Luther and Zwingli, and was strongly criticized by the Anabaptists.

In spite of their deep Roman Catholic roots, the Anabaptists persistently sought their own way. In 1569 a Franciscan inquisitor in Flanders, Friar Cornelis, said to the Anabaptist Pastor de Roore, before the latter's execution, "...[I want to] bring you back to the Catholic faith of our mother, the holy Roman Church, from which you have apostatized to this damnable Anabaptism." The answer of the "heretic" was remarkable: "I have apostatized from your Babylonian mother, the Roman church, to the... true Church of Christ..."<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the Anabaptists usually held a similar opinion of the Protestant churches. Leonard Schiemer, in his *Interpretation of the Apostles' Creed* (1527), wrote: "The Church or *ecclesia* is a body of people built on Christ, not on the pope, Luther, or a ruler."<sup>26</sup> At best, the Anabaptists considered the Protestants "halfway reformers."<sup>27</sup> At worst, they considered Protestant churches, along with the Roman Catholic Church, "large sects." For instance, that was Menno Simons' understanding.<sup>28</sup> His contemporary, spiritualist Sebastian Franck, was more flexible

<sup>22</sup> *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, for instance, solemnly informs its readers that the Mennonites were finally "recognized as an integral part of Protestantism." (v. III [1957, ed.], 582).

<sup>23</sup> None of the fathers and teachers of the church before Augustine supported the teaching of strict predestination; all of them defended the free will of man. (*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> John Chrysostom, *Polnoe sobranie tvorenii v 12 tomah* (Moscow: Pravoslavnaia Kniga, 1994),

vol. II, part 2, 804-5. My translation.

<sup>25</sup> I.J.Kauffman, "Mennonite-Catholic Conversations in North America," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. LXXIII (1999), 35.

<sup>26</sup> Dyck, 38.

<sup>27</sup> William R. Estep, Jr., *The Anabaptist Story* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 242.

<sup>28</sup> W. E. Keeney, *The Development of Dutch Anabaptist Thought and Practice from 1539-1564* (Nieuwkoop: B. De Graaf, 1968), 147.

in his estimation, classifying the four kinds of Christian churches known to him (Catholic, Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Anabaptist), and noting the shortcomings of each. One of Franck's wonderful hymns was significantly entitled, "On the Divisive Churches, Each of Which Hates and Damns the Others."<sup>29</sup> Alas, besides the general Christian teachings uniting all the churches, such unchristian sentiments were also an inevitable part of the aforementioned "common denominator" of their various "fractions."

Nevertheless, if early Anabaptism truly differed significantly from Catholicism and Protestantism, at once combining significant features of both, what was its specific character? Besides traditional Catholic and Protestant descriptions of the Anabaptists as primitive "heretics" and "fanatics," today at least four favorable approaches to the question of Anabaptism exist.

First, John Horsch sees the peaceful and Bible-centered branch of Anabaptism as a kind of "proto-fundamentalism."<sup>30</sup> Second, Harold Bender considers "true" Anabaptism as the church of discipleship, voluntary membership, and nonresistance.<sup>31</sup> Third, C. Henry Smith characterizes the first Anabaptist leaders as the pioneers of such popular political ideas of modern civilization as hu-

man rights, religious toleration, and separation of church and state.<sup>32</sup> Fourth, John H. Yoder writes about the Anabaptists as a community of prophetic nonconformists opposing the contemporary social order in Europe.<sup>33</sup>

Doubtless, sixteenth century Anabaptism was very diverse, frequently containing contradictory elements such as biblicism and spiritualism, nonresistance and aggression, highly intellectual and very ignorant leaders, private and common economics, and monogamy and polygamy. Therefore, a scholar today can find any idea that he wants among the Anabaptists. Even the history of Anabaptist origins looks unpredictable now. In any case, its emphases have been drastically reexamined during the twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> But for all that, what are some of the main features of Anabaptism? The understanding of the special significance of the church, adult baptism, political indifference, relative pacifism, and legalistic perfectionism should all be noted. Each of these points itself was not an original Anabaptist invention; however, all of the points collected together at the same time became the unique theological position of the Anabaptists. The following section will briefly outline each of the aforementioned points.

<sup>29</sup> D. F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985), 22.

<sup>30</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *Becoming Anabaptist* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987), 115; Snyder, *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>31</sup> H. S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. by G. Hershberger, (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1957), 52-3.

<sup>32</sup> Weaver, 116.

<sup>33</sup> J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 61.

<sup>34</sup> The historiographic revolution took place, first of all, thanks to the writings of H. S. Bender, R. Friedmann, H. J. Hillerbrand, J. Oyer, W. Klassen, and others, who defended the idea that the nonresistant type of Anabaptism was "Protestantism taken to its proper ends" (Snyder, 400-1).



## THE "FIVE POINTS" OF ANABAPTISM

**ECCLESIOLOGY:** According to the Anabaptist view, the first three centuries of church history were a "heroic" or "golden" age, after which came the "fall of the church" starting with the reign of Constantine the Great. This unfortunate event included such issues as the concordance of church and state; the use of state force in matters of faith; the wide acceptance of pagans into the church; and compulsory infant baptism. During the "middle period," between the time of the ancient "true" church and its "restitution" by the Anabaptists, the church was in dispersion among the medieval "heretics."<sup>35</sup> The Anabaptists tried to restore a pre-Constantinian primitive organization of the church, emphasizing voluntary membership, following Jesus Christ "until death on the cross" (the idea of the "suffering brotherhood"), separation from the world (the concept of the "two kingdoms"), frequent worship, and strict church discipline. While Catholics defined the church as the sacramental-sacerdotal institution, and the Protestants distinguished the "visible" and "invisible" church,<sup>36</sup> the Anabaptists were more practical and concerned themselves mainly with the visible, local churches (communities).<sup>37</sup>

Balthasar Hubmaier defined the Church in 1526 as "a community of saints, a brotherhood of many pious

and believing men... They are called together, regulated and ruled here on earth through the only and living Word of God. This church is beautiful, without spot, unerring, pure, without wrinkle, unblamable."<sup>38</sup> Menno Simons continued this tradition of interpreting the church, and in his Reply to Gellius Faber (1554) mentioned the six "true signs by which we can know Christ's Church." They are: pure biblical teaching, biblical baptism and the Lord's Supper, obedience to the Scriptures, sincere Christian love, open confession of Christ, and suffering for the faith.

In addition to Luther's classical Protestant emphasis on the preaching of the gospel and the two sacraments (baptism and communion) as the signs of the church of Christ, Menno Simons pointed to four other important features: obedience, love, nonresistance, and suffering.<sup>39</sup> This demonstrates the practical aspect of his understanding of the point of one's Christian convictions. Many of Menno's opponents considered this a continuation of the Catholic teaching on salvation by merit.<sup>40</sup> All the ecclesiology of the Anabaptists, just as their theology as a whole, was always balanced between these (Protestant and Catholic) poles.

**BAPTISM:** Even such a distinctive teaching as believers' (adult) baptism does not define Anabaptism clearly. Besides the similar wide-

<sup>35</sup> F. H. Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 55.76.

<sup>36</sup> Only those elected to salvation have part in the latter. See R. L. Omandson, "The Church," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991.

<sup>37</sup> Estep, 240.

<sup>38</sup> Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1981), 102.

<sup>39</sup> F. H. Littell, *A Tribute to Menno Simons* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1961), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Brandsma, Menno Simons 70.

spread practice of the apostolic age, there is evidence of numerous rebaptisms of those converted to the Christian faith from various heretical groups in Asia Minor in the second century.<sup>41</sup> The Donatists in North Africa in the fourth century, in their turn, rebaptized Christians converted to their movement from the Catholic Church.<sup>42</sup> However, in contrast to the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, the focus of the Donatists was not the lack of faith of infants, but the lack of holiness of the Catholic clergy who had baptized the infants.

The Anabaptists argued that the Protestant's defense of infant baptism destroyed the logic of their favorite teaching of justification by faith: inasmuch as infants cannot have faith, only believing adults should be baptized.<sup>43</sup> Also, since salvation is a pure gift of God's grace, as the Protestants teach, water baptism could not, contrary to Catholic teaching, save anybody, and so, again, infant baptism makes no sense. The "Confession of Endres Keller" (1536) proclaimed once again the Anabaptist position—neither Catholic nor Protestant—"Infant baptism cannot be defended from Scripture even if Luther and the pope say so."<sup>44</sup>

**CHURCH AND STATE:** The Schleithem Confession (1527) declared, the

government's magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians' is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christians' citizenship is in heaven.<sup>45</sup> The Anabaptist understanding of the old Christian idea of the "two kingdoms" placed the state in the kingdom of this world, which is evil. True disciples of Christ cannot be government officials, and, even as citizens of the state do not have the right to take up the sword. The Anabaptists always considered themselves under God's authority, and never under state control alone. Here are the roots of traditional Anabaptist political indifference and their serious conflicts with both the Catholic and Protestant authorities in Europe. However, if the state authorities really completely belong to the kingdom of evil, and the "true church" will always be persecuted as the Anabaptists taught, it is not so easy to understand the logic of their endless emotional appeals to those authorities for tolerance.<sup>46</sup>

However, probably that very inconsistency of the cruelly persecuted brethren had a remarkable continuation in modern history. The dialectics of the Anabaptist collective life—indifferent to any politics, as a rule—gave birth to its unexpected opposite: the political idea of human rights.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> E.F. Harrison, "Rebaptism," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991.

<sup>42</sup> V. L. Walter, "Donatism," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991.

<sup>43</sup> R.B. Hays, "Embodying the Gospel in Community," in *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations With a Radical Tradition*, ed. by J. D. Roth (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>44</sup> Klassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 178.

<sup>45</sup> William R. Estep, Jr., ed., "The Schleithem

Confession" in *Anabaptist Beginnings: A Source Book* (Nieukoop: B. De Graaf, 1976), 103.

<sup>46</sup> For instance, both Menno Simons' tracts, *Christian Baptism* (1539) and *Foundation Book* (1540), contain in their conclusions touching appeals to the powers that be.

<sup>47</sup> Nobody can absolutely know what kind of church on earth is true (or "best"). Only God knows that. Therefore, to use force in matters of faith means to risk displeasing the Lord.

Ernst Troeltsch, for instance, considered the Anabaptists, especially the spiritualists, as the pioneers of religious freedom:

The father of human rights is not really Protestantism but Baptism, which Protestantism hated and drove out to the New World... Independence, the great religious movement of the English Revolution... was strongly influenced by continental Anabaptists who had fled from Holland...

Out of this episode have come the great ideas of the separation of church and state, religious tolerance, the principle of voluntarism in church membership, and freedom of conscience.<sup>48</sup>

PACIFISM: The teaching on non-resistance and peacemaking is one of the oldest and deepest parts of Christian teaching throughout all church history. It was an essential part of ancient Christianity. The idea of non-resistance was known in both Western and Eastern monasticism, and was shared by many Christian theologians and humanist thinkers who opposed the "just war theory" that has prevailed in European mentality since the fourth century.<sup>49</sup> The pacifism of the Anabaptists was more biblical than political, based first of all on the Sermon on the Mount. It showed their striving to follow Christ's example more than a civic position, as seen in

these words from the Schleithem Confession: "The sword is ordained of God outside the perfection of Christ."<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the pacifism of the Anabaptists was also relative, taking into account not only the well-known non-resistant suffering of the moderate wing of the brethren, but also the terrible violence of the radical Anabaptist wing in the 1530s (Münster, the monastery of Oldeklooster, etc.). But even the genuine pacifism of many Anabaptist congregations was a strong irritant for both Catholic and Protestant governments in the face of threat of the Moslem (Turkish) invasion of Europe, which was present during the entire sixteenth century and even later.<sup>51</sup> Michael Sattler, for example, stated:

If warring were right, I would rather take the field against so-called Christians... than against the Turks... The Turk is a true Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith, and is a Turk after the flesh. But you who would be Christians and who make your boast of Christ persecute the pious witnesses of Christ and are Turks after the spirit!<sup>52</sup>

It is easy to understand the concern of the authorities in Europe who watched the spread of such ideas in their territories.

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No one should be persecuted, and God will know His own... Such simple themes of Anabaptist appeals to the authorities ("Please leave us be!") probably became the first expressions of the future idea of human rights. The reason for it was mere political indifference, a passive position, rather than active political practice.<sup>48</sup> Quoted by S. Riddoch, "Stepchildren of the Reformation or Heralds of Modernity: Ernst Troeltsch on Sixteenth-century Anabaptists, Sectarians and Spiritualists," in *Radical*

*Reformation Studies*, ed. by W. O. Packull and G. L. Dipple (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 145.

<sup>49</sup> J. D. Weaver, "Pacifism," in *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1991

<sup>50</sup> Estep, *Anabaptist Beginnings*, 103.

<sup>51</sup> Walter Klaassen, "The Life and Times of Menno Simons," in *No Other Foundation*, (North Newton, Kasn.: Bethel College, 1962), 9-10.

<sup>52</sup> G.H. Williams, ed., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (London: SCM Press, n.d.), 141.

**PERFECTIONISM:** A pious wish to live a holy life according to the Lord's commandments, in its extreme manifestations, moved the ancient church to monastic self-improvement and the canonization of the saints. The Anabaptist emphasis was on the imitation of Christ, suffering, and holiness, which was undoubtedly based on the gospel. However, it was not simply an idealistic striving for personal holiness or the building of a church "without spot or wrinkle: the strict discipline of the community was called on to help reach the unattainable ideal. Separation from the world and a righteous life were considered the only way to faithfully follow Jesus. Such was the main theme of the Schleithem Articles and numerous other Anabaptist writings. It is noteworthy that both Catholics and Protestants spoke caustically about that teaching of the Anabaptists, calling their holiness "counterfeit," "legalistic," and so on.<sup>53</sup> The Catholics did not recognize any good outside the Roman Church, while the Protestants reproached the Anabaptists for their intention to be saved by their own poor merits rather than by the incomparable riches of grace.

## CONCLUSION

Church history has known many attempts to restore the "true" apostolic church. In fact, the Anabaptist movement demonstrates another such, more or less successful, attempt. However, the very idea of "restoration" or "restitution" may not have been such a good one. Any call

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<sup>53</sup> W.E. Keeney, *Dutch Anabaptist Thought* 116-7.

to imitate the way of life of the Jerusalem Church is like the infantile wish of an adult to return to childhood. Using biblical examples, one could imagine asking what would happen if the Lord gave the apostles as long a life as Methuselah, who lived 969 years according to Genesis 5:27? Would the apostolic church be the same in the first and the tenth centuries, for instance? It is doubtful, because each living organism is developing. Many Catholic and Orthodox "deviations from the purity of the apostolic church" were probably unavoidable in their historical and political circumstances. Not all, of course. (The author of this paper is still a Baptist.) But even modern Baptist experience shows clearly that our communities, at least in the former Soviet Union, are moving in the same direction as the ancient church since the fourth century. Making use of a time of relative political freedom, first of all, huge church buildings are being built, sometimes bigger than Orthodox and Catholic churches. Then a natural question arises about what should be done with such big bare walls and ceilings? Thus, necessarily, more and more wall paintings appear in our churches. The pastors and choir gladly start wearing robes, and clever Baptist heads invent more and more terms for the swiftly growing hierarchy of senior presbyters. Indeed, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9). One must be blind not to see that this is the old wide road along which the medieval church processed. And who is traveling that road today? Unbelievers? Nominal Christians? Malefactors? "Catholics?" If only it

were so! But it is the contemporary "enlightened" brethren, the successors of the "zealous" Anabaptists and old "pure" Baptists, who are doing all these things voluntarily and even with a curious kind of joy. Although the level of Catholic and Orthodox "deviations" has not been reached yet, it seems to be only because the Russian evangelical movement is still relatively young.

Thus, to define Anabaptism in its connection with Catholicism and Protestantism is not an easy task. Actual life and history are complicated. Erasmus of Rotterdam was a famous forerunner of the Reformation, but remained a Catholic. He was a Catholic, but a pacifist. Jan Matthijs could not be called a pacifist, but he was an Anabaptist. Menno Simons was also an Anabaptist, but he was a pacifist. St. Francis of Assisi remained in the bosom of the Roman Catholic Church, but loved the communal holding of goods. The Hutterites also practiced the communal use of goods, but they were Anabaptists. The Catholics persecuted the Hutterites, in part because of their revolutionary views on property. Some Hutterites left their congregations because they were not satisfied by "Christian communism," but they often remained Anabaptists, with other views on private property only. Ordinary Catholics killed ordinary Protestants because the latter did not honor the Mother of God and the saints. But the majority of the Catholics themselves were not that careful in their veneration of the Virgin Mary

and the holy fathers. On the other hand, any verisimilitude demands the assumption that among the first Protestants and Anabaptists were many common people who secretly prayed to the Mother of God and their favorite saints (because of their Catholic roots), but did not discuss it openly for fear of their pastors.<sup>54</sup> And finally, whom shall we call the "true" Catholics, Protestants, and Anabaptists of the sixteenth century? There are a great many stereotypes of the "classical followers" of each of the aforementioned churches, but little is known about actual people and their communities.

Fortunately, there is some firm ground in this theme, too. The Anabaptists were not Catholics because they outwardly resembled the Protestants, proclaiming the Reformed principle of *sola Scriptura*, and denying all the complicated Roman Catholic rites, hierarchy, and sacred things. But the Anabaptists were not Protestants, either, because they inwardly retained a Catholic mentality, defending things such as freedom of will and rejecting double predestination; emphasizing the importance of the community in salvation; maintaining the main monastic values; using the strict ban; and struggling against state control. Anabaptism was a unique phenomenon, however, having deep roots in ancient Christian tradition, in the same way that each person and society is unique under the sun, necessarily basing their activity on the experience of their forefathers.

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<sup>54</sup> The author is aware of similar incidents among Russian Baptists who were converted from Orthodoxy and hid away their icons "until better days."

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