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The Anabaptist View of the Christian Life

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THIS PAPER could have been entitled "Anabaptist Theology," as it would be natural to entitle a parallel paper on Luther or Zwingli "Luther's Theology" and "Zwingli's Theology." For it is no doubt concerned with theology, though with theology as it affects the life of a Christian, an existential theology if you like, rather than with a systematic presentation in the sense of a *Summa Theologica*, a thoroughly reasoned out, closely knit body of doctrine. Anabaptist theology, if one can use such a phrase, was a theology of the market-place and of the road rather than of the lecture hall and the study. It was a theology that was concerned with living, not with metaphysical sky-larking. The Anabaptists were concerned with living the life of a disciple of Jesus, and not about an abstract theology as such. One could of course go through the plentiful sources, noting their views on the doctrines of God, their anthropology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, and construct a system, but when the search was completed we would already have lost the essence of Anabaptism. The reason for the choice of the title "The Anabaptist View of the Christian Life" is that only by discussing this do we get to the heart of the matter, and only thus can we see the contrast between Anabaptism and other forms of Protestantism, especially Lutheranism.

Now it has to be said that Luther and Zwingli were also concerned about the Christian life. Luther's theology was so closely interwoven with his own shattering experience of an angry God and the ensuing experience of justification by faith, that he could not but be concerned with living the Christian life. The same can be said about Zwingli. Why is it then that this contrast is generally made between the two main branches of the Reformation and Anabaptism? The contrast is drawn by the Reformed and Lutheran theologians and historians as well as by the Mennonite research scholars, the former saying that the Anabaptists were literalistic legalists, and the latter that they had made a more profound rediscovery of the essence of the Christian faith than the Reformers. To answer our question we must recall that Anabaptism emerged when the Reformation was already well under way and, more important, that its source was Lutheran and Zwinglian. This fact is very important, for unless we get it firmly into our minds we shall never really be able to understand Anabaptism.

The original leaders of Anabaptism all spent considerable time within the original reform movements. They had had the evangelical experience of conversion, and had entered upon the new life with all the seriousness and high resolve of young converts. They thought long and deeply about the nature of the Christian life, and all the time they were observing what

they could of the phenomenon which we call the Reformation. They observed that the Reformers had liberated many from the thralldom of the Roman system. They saw also the extent to which social and political factors were involved in the revolt against Rome. They saw how these social and political forces threatened to make the Reformation less than a religious revolt. They saw that, after an initial stage of wavering, the Reformers were determined to make a truce with the culture of the day so that their message would penetrate to all areas of communal life. At the same time these serious and idealistic young men were studying their Bibles, and especially their New Testaments. And because they were well educated and intelligent they did some thinking on their own, and they began to ask questions about the validity of some of the things the Reformers did.

One circumstance, more than any other, caused them to doubt whether the Reformers were being true to their calling. There was much talk abroad about being a Christian; there was much chatter about justification by faith alone; there was much rejoicing at having been relieved from the legalistic shackles of Romanism; there was a great deal of evangelical preaching. All this they saw, but they also saw that there was a conspicuous lack of Christian living. Everyone shouted "Faith! Faith!" and promptly turned to sensual indulgence. Nor were the Anabaptists the only ones who observed this state of affairs. The writings of all the Reformers bear witness to it as well. But the Anabaptists asked themselves: What is wrong? Surely this cannot be God's will, for we are really no better off than we were before. The Reformation has not gone far enough. The people are being comforted by being told that all they need to do to be Christians is to believe. Or else it is said that the wicked and the righteous must remain in the church together for man cannot know whom God has elected for salvation. Everyone wants to be in the church and is allowed to come in. Everyone wants to be a Christian, but no one wants to take on himself the discipline of the Christian life. The Reformers are not emphasizing the need for a thoroughgoing change of life as they ought, or there would surely be more truly Christian living. Are men saved by grace through faith to live to themselves or to God? Is justification by faith a letter of indulgence or is it dying and rising with Christ to a new life? These were the pertinent questions for the Anabaptists.

It must not, of course, be suggested that Luther and Zwingli had no concern for the Christian life. Their writings give abundant testimony that they had this concern. But Luther in particular was so afraid that emphasis on Christian living would lead men back into the legalism from which they had only just been delivered, that this aspect of Christianity tended to be pushed very much into the background. While for him good works were evidence of faith, they could never be proof of faith. Zwingli, although he emphasized the rules of Christian living more than Luther did, believed that the church would always be a community in which both evil and good existed side by side (on the analogy of the Parable of the Wheat and the

Tares). Consequently, although both these Reformers complained bitterly about their failure to bring about thoroughgoing ethical and moral reform among the people, they made their peace with what they considered to be the inevitable. The Anabaptists were not willing to do this. They rejected the notion that man has to be satisfied with such a second-rate state of affairs. To them there appeared to be a complete lack of a positive view of the Christian life. They were convinced that the Reformers were far too pessimistic, that a life of holiness was demanded by God, and that it was possible to live such a life. And so in reaction against a situation which they found unsatisfactory and un-Christian because in their view it was unbiblical, they went on to formulate their views on the nature of the Christian life on what they considered to be the truly biblical lines. We shall now attempt to trace the main lines of this view.

I. THE BEGINNING OF THE NEW LIFE

In attempting to portray with some measure of accuracy the Anabaptist view of the Christian life we must start at the beginning—or, indeed, beyond the beginning, for two questions immediately raise their disturbing heads, and these two questions are of particular significance within the general Reformation context of Anabaptism. The two questions of original sin and free will are much like the twin lions on the way to the City of Zion, and one is tempted to say with Mr. Mistrust, “Yes, just before us lie a couple of lions in the way, whether sleeping or waking we know not, and we could not think, if we came within reach, but they would presently pull us to pieces,” to retreat with Mr. Timorous, and try another route. However, on Anabaptist principles a passage must be attempted.

The doctrine of original sin was taken seriously by the Anabaptists. They did not deny it, but they gave it their own interpretation. Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, and thus sin has been passed down from generation to generation. This original sin is an inclination to evil. All men have this tendency by nature and have pleasure in sin. Original sin is considered to be the cause both of physical death and of eternal death “in that it leadeth, guideth, and bringeth man into all sins,” and the wages of sin is death. This original sin does not become operative in man until the dawn of consciousness.¹ It is possible for man to resist sin, and to decide not to yield to it.² Every man is individually responsible for his sin (Ezek. 18), and can respond to God’s appeal to forsake it and do good. That this is quite different from Luther’s view of sin is clear. For Luther sin, which came upon all men through Adam, rules. There is no individual responsibility in the sense that the second or third man had his own chance of avoiding sin. Sin rules,³

1. Cf. Peter Riedeman, *Account of our Religion, Doctrine and Faith* (tr. Kathleen E. Hasenberg; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1950), p. 69. (This work will be cited below as *Confession*.)

2. *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), IV, 81.

3. Cf. H. H. W. Kramm, *Theology of Martin Luther* (London: James Clarke, 1949), p. 38.

and man is bound under it and completely unable to resist it, for in sinning he lost the freedom to decide.

Anabaptists rejected all predestination and determination because they believed that it is difficult to prevent a doctrine of determination from cutting the nerve of moral responsibility and thus making moral striving irrelevant and impossible. In other words, they believed in the free will. "Daily we hear from the leading preachers and from many persons everywhere: 'We would gladly do the right if we had the grace from God,'" said one Anabaptist from Augsburg (Langenmantel). Hubmaier said: "For as soon as you say to such evangelical people 'It is written brother, "Cease from evil to do good,"' he immediately answers, 'It is written "We cannot do any good." All things take place by destiny of God and of necessity.' They mean by this that it is permitted them to sin."⁴ Then Hubmaier goes on to say positively: "All things do not come to pass of necessity. . . . He who denies the free will of men and calls it an empty claim . . . nicknames God a tyrant, charges Him with injustice, and gives the wicked excuse to remain in their sins."⁵ When a man hears the gospel, he is free to accept or reject it. The Anabaptist solution to the problem of the relation of original sin to man's freedom to accept the work of Christ is stated by one American Mennonite scholar in these terms. Owing to the sin of Adam, men were in inescapable bondage to sin until (1) God's grace through Jesus Christ restored to them the possibility of freely choosing to do the right, and (2) the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit enabled men to follow through this choice with good actions. This grace and power is available to all men and the responsibility for the choice which he makes rests with each individual.⁶

The process of the new birth is described by Peter Riedeman in his famous *Confession* as follows:

Repentance is a real humiliation and abasement before God because of the transgression. . . . [This] shame bringeth a real turning point, so that the man runneth with haste, calleth, crieth, and prayeth to God for forgiveness and grace, and beginneth at the same time to bring the flesh into subjection.

To the true penitent God will draw nigh and will begin to bring to perfection his work in him.⁷ The freedom of the will is a prerequisite for repentance, and without free will there could be no commitment of life to discipleship. Because the Anabaptists believed that man does not need to remain in the grip of sin, original sin did not appear to them as the terrible law under which Luther suffered, and further, because they believed that sin could be rejected and that a good moral life was possible, they became much more concerned than Luther did with the sanctification of life. We come therefore to our second theme.

4. Quoted by Gordon D. Kaufman, "Some Theological Emphases of the Early Swiss Anabaptists," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 25 (1951), 97. (This periodical will be cited below as *MQR*.)

5. *Ibid.*, 98.

6. *Ibid.*, 99.

7. *Confession*, pp. 60f.

II. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS DISCIPLESHIP

For the Anabaptists the new birth was only the beginning of a life in which sin became less and less dominant, and the good, by God's grace, more and more prominent. It is interesting to read what Hans Fischer, a Lutheran minister, says about this Anabaptist insistence that the good life was both commanded and possible. The basic indictment of Lutheranism against Anabaptism, he writes, is that it stood for justification by works over against justification by faith. This charge is founded in the fear of a specious holiness. Luther was convinced that man cannot fight successfully against basic corruption and indwelling sinfulness. Moralism was, to him, works-righteousness.⁸ But the *fides* of *sola fide* was more a theological faith than one by which man can organize life. The result was a practical lack of direction among Lutherans. The Anabaptists criticized Luther for having too little trust in the transfiguring power of the gospel and the renewing power of Jesus, and for his insistence that sin is inescapable. This criticism did not involve a rejection of *sola fide*, but did imply that doing God's will is a practical possibility, though only, of course, as a result of genuine faith. From this standpoint the Anabaptists felt obliged to strive towards a realization of New Testament ethics in their day-to-day living. Their view was not perfectionism, as has often been charged, for they denied this suggestion repeatedly. They knew that man cannot reach sinlessness.⁹ On one occasion an Anabaptist made such a claim, and after repeated warnings to desist from this heresy he was excommunicated.¹⁰

Peter Riedeman expressed the real Anabaptist view clearly, when he wrote:

Now, however, the Lutherans say that Christ is their righteousness and goodness, although they still live in all abomination and lasciviousness, which thing is nought else than to draw near to God with the mouth while the heart is far from him. . . . But *we* confess Christ to be our righteousness and goodness because He Himself worketh in us righteousness and goodness through which we become loved of God and pleasing to Him. For we have no goodness apart from that which He alone worketh in us, although many say of us that we seek to be good through our own works. To this we say no. . . .¹¹

Yet through Christ man does have the grace to overcome and do that which is good. The surest way to achieve this overcoming of sin is the way of discipleship, in which obedience and the fear of God have precedence over the concern for salvation. For Anabaptism, the test of a godfearing life is more important than theological formulae.¹² Christ, the Anabaptists said, must be translated into the life expression of the disciple; Christ is to be formed in him.

8. Cf. Hans Fischer, "Luther and the Vindication of the Anabaptist Way," *MQR*, 28 (1954), 31.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, 32.

10. Cf. *ibid.*, 33.

11. *Confession*, pp. 35f.

12. Cf. Fischer, *art. cit.*, 33.

It may of course be argued that this idea is not unique with the Anabaptists. Christian history can show other examples of similar teaching. There is, to cite just one instance, the *Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis. He too speaks of the disciple's imitation of the character of his Master by the conquest of evil and the production of virtue. He speaks about self-renunciation and resignation to the will of God. In all this the Anabaptists said nothing new. It must be remembered, however, that à Kempis' book was written for the monastery. The imitation of Christ which he portrayed was to take place *apart from society*. The ordinary social dimension was lacking, and criticism of the total social and cultural order was missing. His spirituality was a pietism which evaded conflict with the world.¹³ The Anabaptists, on the contrary, taught that discipleship is the bringing of the whole life under the Lordship of Christ, and the transformation of this life, both personal *and* social, after the image of Christ.¹⁴ Anabaptist discipleship was to be lived in the midst of the world, regardless of consequences. Anabaptists knew no crypto-discipleship. Their discipleship came to grips with the world which is the enemy of God. Belief and practice, faith and life, were for them inseparable. As Dr. H. S. Bender, the dean of Anabaptist researchers, says:

To profess the new birth meant a new life. To take the name of Christ meant to take His Spirit and His nature. To promise obedience to Him meant actually to live out and carry through His principles and do His works. To claim the cleansing and redemption from sin which baptism symbolized, meant to leave off the sins and lusts of the flesh and the spirit and to live a holy life. To take up the cross daily meant to go out into the conflict with the world of sin and evil and fight the good fight of faith, taking gladly the blows and buffetings of the world. To be a disciple meant to teach and to observe all things whatsoever the Master had taught and commanded.¹⁵

It is clear from this summary that these people would find a special significance in the Gospels, and particularly in the words of Christ. Among these the Sermon on the Mount was very important for them. It is remarkable how in the numerous records of the interrogations of the Anabaptists and in their confessional writings these words of Jesus crop up again and again. Because Anabaptists were concerned with obedience to what Jesus commanded they rejected all swearing of oaths. Similarly they believed that all coercion and warfare was wrong. They accepted the difficult love-ethic of Jesus, which calls disciples to love their neighbour and seek his welfare, to bless rather than to curse, to feed the enemy rather than to fight him. Unlike the other Reformation parties, they were unwilling to defend their faith with the power and sword of the civil arm. Consequently Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians—except in the one case of Münster—encountered no resistance when they attacked Anabaptism with the instruments of the torture chamber, with imprisonment and the stake. In the annals of Christianity there is no parallel to the corporate martyrdom which Anabaptists accepted with great fortitude because they took seriously obedience to their Lord.

13. Cf. Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," *MQR*, 24 (1950), 30.

14. Cf. *ibid.*, 29.

15. *Ibid.*, 31.

III. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AND THE CHURCH

Finally, in order to put the concept of discipleship into a proper framework we must look at the Anabaptist view of the church. It was the doctrine of the church with its corollary doctrine of baptism which was the basis of the Anabaptist revolt from the Establishments. It is a *Leitmotiv*, a principal theme in Anabaptism. Anabaptists were not merely concerned to save individuals, but they were concerned with the fellowship of believers, the body of Christ. The pattern for their view of the church, they found, not in an abstract philosophical or theological theory, but in the New Testament, especially the Acts and the Epistles. (In setting forth the Anabaptist view of the church I shall follow a convenient outline provided by the American scholar Cornelius Krahn.¹⁶

1. First, the Anabaptists believed in the possibility of realizing a true church without spot or wrinkle in a sinful world. In their view the New Testament church was such a church. This church is called into being by the preaching of the Word of God. "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." Grebel said: "The church comes into existence through the preaching of the Word, through the voluntary acceptance of the Word of Truth, and through the consequent conversion and renewal of life of individual believers."¹⁷ This conviction made missionaries out of the Anabaptists, and accounts partly for the fantastic growth of the movement. The church is called together out of the world by God himself through his Word and Spirit.

The response to the Word results in regeneration. Genuine repentance must accompany the new birth, and faith thus awakened must issue in obedience, the obedience of the disciple.¹⁸ Such a believer is then baptized. Baptism was for the Anabaptists the sign of the covenant, the important Scripture passage in this connexion being 1 Peter 3:21, which Luther had translated as "the covenant of a good conscience toward God." This is not the rendering of the English Bible where we have "the answer of a good conscience toward God." The difference here rests upon the rendering of the Greek *eperōtēma*, and even today scholars are by no means agreed about what it means. In any case, the Anabaptists took it to be a reference to the covenant which God makes with the believer. It was therefore the door of admission to the covenant people. But baptism was also "a pledge of obedience to Christ, and of the purpose to walk according to Christ."¹⁹ It could be administered only to those "who believe of a truth that their sins have been taken away by Christ," said the earliest Anabaptist confession. Baptism had a symbolic, rather than a sacramental quality.²⁰

16. Cf. Cornelius Krahn, "Prolegomena to an Anabaptist Theology," *MQR*, 24 (1950), 11.

17. Quoted by Erland Waltner, "The Anabaptist Concept of the Church," *MQR* 25 (1951), 9.

18. Cf. *ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. Cf. *ibid.*, 11.

Rightly baptized persons are the members which constitute the fellowship of believers, the body of Christ. This fellowship is a Christian brotherhood, not an intellectual notion; it is the visible community of the redeemed, not a mystical entity known only to God. This view is sharply opposed to that of Luther, who said that the church exists wherever the gospel is preached in purity and the sacraments are properly administered, and who could thus accept the concept of a *Volkskirche*, a church comprising all people in any given geographical area. It is also opposed to Zwingli's idea of the "society of the baptized" or "church of the elect," of which no one knows the limits except God. The church, for Anabaptists, is the visible body of Christ, a fellowship of regenerated believers, living in obedience to the Word of Christ, and banded together voluntarily in Christian love.²¹

This fellowship should find expression in loving concern for each other. Among the early Anabaptists, if one brother lacked anything the rest were expected to help him. Offerings were regularly received for the support of the poor and dispossessed, the latter being numerous among Anabaptists as a result of persecution. Many men and women died rather than betray leaders or other members of the fellowship. But the fellowship was most intimately expressed in the Lord's Supper. This was the remembrance of the death of Christ on behalf of the world, a reminder that the believer depended solely on Christ for his salvation. But it was more than that. Peter Riedeman writes:

Now, in taking the bread and giving it to his disciples, Christ desireth to show and explain the community of his body to his disciples, that they had become one body, one plant, one living organism and one nature with him, . . . cleaving to him in one Spirit. . . . Thus, the meal, or the partaking of the bread and wine of the Lord, is a sign of the community of his body, in that each and every member thereby declareth himself to be of one mind, heart and spirit with Christ.²²

2. The Anabaptists had a problem which Luther and Zwingli did not have to face—namely, the problem of maintaining such a church in a hostile world. How was the church kept free from the taint and corruption of the world? For the Anabaptists the obvious New Testament answer was the application of church discipline. An offending member was, in keeping with Matthew 18:15–17, warned and entreated to repent. If he did not repent he was excluded by the use of the ban. If after exclusion a man repented, he was restored to the fellowship. A very critical attitude to the world, society, and contemporary culture also helped, however, to preserve the purity of the church. The Anabaptists were the arch-nonconformists, believing in the complete separation of church and world. The state they saw as ordained of God to preserve order in an evil society, but operating on a different principle from that of the church, namely, the principle of natural law rather than the Holy Spirit (who is the authority in the church).

21. Cf. *ibid.*, 9.

22. *Confession*, pp. 85–87.

Another aspect of their nonconformity was their intense missionary zeal which sent them out into the world as witnesses for Christ. (Their dynamic theology of missions not only contributed to the expansion of their movement but also saved them from the pitfall of a sterile withdrawal from the world.²³)

To sum up then: The Anabaptist view of the Christian life came into being through the study of the Scriptures, especially the New Testament, and a critical observation of Lutheran and Zwinglian Christianity. Anabaptists insisted on a church composed of members who, having freely responded to the Word of God, had been converted, and who in baptism had promised to renounce their sins and be obedient to Christ, and had them become members of the covenant. These regenerated persons accepted the cross of discipleship, a radical nonconformity, and were committed to follow their Lord, if need be, unto death. There could be no compromise with the world, for God, to whom obedience had been vowed, and the world were opposites. The church they considered to be a visible brotherhood that expressed itself in loving mutual concern and in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

This is a very high ideal of the Christian life, an ideal that is enough to discourage the strongest. But the Anabaptists' unconditional acceptance of the challenge of Christ to discipleship, and their conviction that he himself was always with them to strengthen them, brought many of them very near to fulfilling the ideal. Both friend and foe bore them this testimony. Other Christians may not agree with every aspect of their ideal, but all Christians would do well to follow their example of unconditional surrender to their Lord, regardless of the cost.

23. Cf. Waltner, *art. cit.*, 15.