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Take-home Test

What Unified and Divided Anabaptism?

Anabaptism was not a unified, coherent movement to the extent that Luther's and even Calvin and Zwingli's were. Because of persecution, regional differences, extreme individualism in biblical interpretation, a lack of ecclesiastical organization, language difference, and other factors, Anabaptists often found themselves different as much as they were the same. We will look at both what united and divided them in this brief essay.

First, what united them. Almost all of the Anabaptists were united in a low view of the sacraments, and really of the means of grace in general, since they also failed to appreciate the Holy Spirit's mediated activity through the Word. Most held that there were two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Hergot is the black sheep of the group for holding three sacraments, none of which were the same as the two mentioned above. He taught that the sacraments were confirmation, extreme unction, and an unspecified third. External means were dead in the Anabaptist's view, and they had no use for them. For many of them, these dead means included Scripture.

The Anabaptists were also united in the opinion that real Christianity will transform not only the individual, but society. How this transformation of society would take place was a matter of disagreement, but that it must take place was almost unquestioned. The Christian community must be pure, wheat without any chaff, unblemished, and cleansed of all pretension. Various methods of determining purity were developed, but were anything but universal. Should we shun those who fall into sin? To what degree should we shun them? How much of a

conversion experience is necessary? How will the community be run and governed? The answers to questions such as these were anything but unanimous, but they were almost always asked.

Another source of unity among the Anabaptists was the need for adult baptism, since baptism was not *Kinderspiel*. Baptism was robbed of its grace and together with the Lord's Supper became a mere ordinance which was instituted to symbolize the sovereign decision of the believer (notice faith always precedes baptism and is never the result of it—whether by creation or strengthening). A new work righteousness was developed. Many held that one must be baptized to be saved, but baptism does nothing to save.

Most Anabaptists were also united in a legalistic approach to Scripture. This most clearly manifests itself in infant baptism, which was rejected on the grounds that no example is given in Scripture. To be fair, this was not the only reason they rejected infant baptism. Their view of it also sprung from a lack of understanding of original sin (hence, children are saved apart from baptism—and even apart from faith if one takes their statements to their logical conclusions—until they reach an age of accountability). Scripture became, as it was for the Roman church, a rule book, and the burdens it brought far outweighed its pages. In their legalism and biblicism, the Anabaptists deprived themselves of the rich worship forms, music, and practices that developed in the church of our Fathers. What was not explicitly commanded or done in Scripture was forbidden and thus the church was robbed of all that flowed from faith as a response to the Word, and even that which was very Scriptural though not explicitly commanded or modeled in Scripture—for example, Scripture does not command us to sing “A Mighty Fortress,” but “A Mighty Fortress” is most certainly Scriptural. Some did hold higher views of the written Word than others; for instance Menno Simmons emphasized the Scriptures and cast doubt upon the reliability and value of the living word (revelation), while Muentzer did the opposite (no “dumb God” for him).

Although there are other areas where the Anabaptists found unity, I promised this essay would be brief, and therefore I will not go into them all. Rather, now is a good time to take a look at what divided the Anabaptists. I will discuss three main areas: apocalyptic views, attitudes concerning rebellion, and their view of baptism.

Early Anabaptists had very clear and very real apocalyptic hopes, often leading to open rebellion against the authorities in hopes of establishing Christ's kingdom on earth for his return. The end was near and they would not only prepare themselves for it, but also the society. Such views quite logically led to the Peasant's Rebellion and the debacle of Muenster. Muentzer never realized the folly of such delusions. Hut did, but only after Germany was flooded with blood and stank of rotting peasant flesh. Hoffman and the heirs of his worldview in Muenster were shown the cost of their miscalculations in a very tangible way. Yet not all of Anabaptism sought to take God's work into their hands. Many were content to leave vengeance to the Lord and displayed indefatigable pacifism. They accepted the punishment their faith brought. They accepted "third baptism" with the same zeal as the second. In fact, this "third baptism" (and suffering in general) almost became a means of grace—which they denied their first had been. We see the heirs of this pacifistic Anabaptism today in the Amish, Mennonite, and Hutterite communities established in America. Much of this peaceful Anabaptism was a reaction to the disastrous wages that more violent forms had reaped—along with the knowledge that Anabaptists can't really catch bullets with their sleeves, just as Lutherans are not impervious to a barber's swords—but some of it existed even before the Peasant's Revolt. This peaceful Anabaptism did much to improve the image of this religious movement.

The third area of difference that I will mention is the Anabaptists' view of baptism, primarily its necessity. To sum it up succinctly, some maintained that the sacraments (ordinances) still had their place, not because they worked or strengthened faith, but because they

were commanded by Christ and were worthwhile symbols. Baptism helped THEM show their commitment to Christ and obedience to his new laws, while the Lord's Supper was a way for THEM to remember Christ and remember they two would suffer. Notice the importance of the ordinances was what they did. Other Anabaptists, however, were content to dispense of the sacraments altogether, since real faith needs no symbols, but rises above them to a higher, more mystical, unmediated level. When controversy arose over baptism or the Lord's Supper, these men and women were content to suspend the administration of them or to dispense of their use altogether (Schwenckfeld). When baptism was maintained, these men and women by no means emphasized its importance or saw much need for the administration of it. It became almost incidental. It is somewhat telling that foot washing became more important and emphasized that the Supper in many of these Anabaptist churches.

This presentation of what united and divided the various Anabaptist leaders and communities has been brief and anything but thorough. Hopefully, however, it has provided a cursory view of the topic. Perhaps the best lesson we can learn from Anabaptism is to flee from presumption. Anabaptism restored the papacy, except it made million of popes instead of one. Each had his own interpretation and flock. Each was a doctor of the church in his own opinion. Many were sincere in their convictions and willing to suffer for what they thought was the truth, which is commendable, but were mistaken in thinking they could be guides on a river they had only sailed once. Luther issues a worthwhile warning to us all:

The world has now become very sure of itself. It relies on books and thinks that if these are read it knows everything. The devil almost succeeded in getting me, too, to become lazy and secure and to think: 'Here you have the books. If you read them you'll have the answers.' So the fanatics and sacramentarians suppose that because they have read only one little book they know everything. Against such security I pray the catechism every day like my little Hans and ask God to keep me in his dear, holy Word, lest I grow weary of it."