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**AN ANABAPTIST
ANCESTRY**

by William R. Estep

*Gaskin Lectures
Oklahoma Baptist University
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*Thou hast given a standard to them that fear thee;
that it may be displayed because of the truth*

— ~~1900~~ Psalm 60:4

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AN ANABAPTIST ANCESTRY

INTRODUCTION

The question of the origins of the Baptist movement is a thorny one, since like human ancestry there is doubtless a variety of mixes that defy a superficial analysis, but there are two rather visible lines of antecedents or parents: Anabaptism and Calvinism. Once these are defined, one may readily see they represent two distinct traditions in Christian history with their own claims to biblical authority and inner coherence, but when these two streams converge in the modern Baptist movement, they bring with them certain tensions that must be kept in balance to produce the energy and dynamic of a convicting and converting power of the gospel message. When out of balance, the witness becomes distorted and to certain degree nullified

DEFINING ANABAPTISM

In teaching church history over a period of more than forty years, I have become accustomed to poor grammar and misspelled words, but I am always dismayed to discover that some second or third year seminary students who apparently have not learned the difference between “Anti-baptists” and “Anabaptists.” That which is also baffling is an occasional student who fails to distinguish between the biblical Anabaptists and the Münsterites or other *Spiritualisten*. Admittedly, the era of the Reformation was a confusing one, but today there is no excuse for confusing the Anabaptists with the Münsterites or other violent revolutionaries than there is in confusing Lutherans with Calvinists or English Separatists with Anglicans. The movement which we are identifying as “Anabaptist” began with the Swiss Brethren who initiated believers’ baptism in Zurich in January 1525. and survived with a few deviations and alterations in spite of the loss of courageous leaders who suffered indescribable torture and death rather than deny their faith. These *Wiedertauffer* (rebaptizers), as Zwingli called them, eventually became known as Mennonites, receiving *their* name from Menno Simons, the most prominent sixteenth-century leader among the Dutch Anabaptists.,

Although there were Anabaptists in England by 1528, the question of Anabaptism’s influence upon the English religious scene has been subject to debate.^{fi} But there can be little doubt of the influence of the Mennonites upon the rise of the English Baptists. The General Baptists, who first came into historical focus through the life and ministry of John Smyth (1608-1612) and his refugee congregation after the Gainsborough and Scrooby Separatists had

arrived in Amsterdam. It was Hans de Ries, a leading Mennonite scholar and physician of the Waterlander Mennonites, who became the major source of Mennonite influence upon John Smyth and his church. While the relationship between these English immigrants was primarily personal, that of the Particular Baptists of 1638-1641 was largely literary through the reading of Menno Simons's *Foundation Book* first published in 1539. Therefore, to understand contemporary Baptists, it is imperative that we make the attempt to know something of the Anabaptist-Mennonite heritage that has had such a significant role in shaping the Baptist movement

SIMILARITIES OF BAPTIST FAITH AND ORDER WITH THAT OF THE MENNONITES

The similarities of the early English Baptist beliefs and practices, as revealed in their earliest confessions and those of the Mennonites, are so striking as to defy any other explanation than that of a close relationship between the two movements. In spite of ingenious arguments that attempt to deny any Anabaptist influence upon the rise of English Baptists advanced by some historians, the evidence of such influence appears overwhelming. It is now known through the research of Professor. Mary Sprunger that Mark Leonard Busher, a citizen of London, England, identified as a General Baptist, received financial aid from the Mennonites in Amsterdam on a regular basis while living in Delft, Holland. By 1610, Smyth's church was worshipping in an abandoned "bakehouse" owned by Jan Munter, a Member of the Waterland Mennonite church which met on the Singel Canal. It would be strange indeed if the recipients of such help would not have been influenced by their benefactors. There is little doubt that the General Baptists as well as, the Particular Baptists owed many of their distinguishing insights to the influence of the Mennonites mediated in the case of the General Baptists through personal contact with influential pastors, such as, Hans de Ries and Lubbert Genitsz among the Waterlander Mennonites. In the case of Particular Baptists, it was primarily through the reading of Merino Simons's *Foundation Book*, as Glen Stassen has shown.¹² In both cases; the characteristics that set the Baptists apart from their fellow English Separatist immigrants were apparently due to Mennonite influence.

The English Separatists were Puritans who had come to deny that the Church of England was a true church, therefore, they sought to establish house churches in various counties in England. In their Calvinistic theology, they differed very little from the Puritan conventicler from which they had come, except in their conviction that a congregation joined together under a covenant had the authority to choose its own pastors, teachers, deacons and to administer baptism and observe the Lord's Supper. The first English Baptists

evolved out of just such congregations, but very soon manifested some distinctive doctrines that set them apart from their fellow Separatists. These can be itemized as follows:

- (1) The priority of the New Testament over the Old, interpreted Christologically;
- (2) The necessity of the new birth for salvation and a prerequisite to baptism;
- (3) Believers' baptism with the corresponding rejection of infant baptism;
- (4) Discipleship viewed as the essence of Christianity;
- (5) The church as a fellowship of baptized disciples for the primary purpose of obeying the Great Commission, according to Christ's command in ~~4:1319~~ Matthew 28:19-20;
- (6) The observance of the Lord's Supper as a perpetual memorial of the sacrifice of Christ, and as a communion of brothers and sisters in the bonds of *agape* love;
- (7) Religious freedom, and the separation of church and state

In the beginning of the Baptist movement, the major differences between Separatists and Baptists are as striking as the similarities with the Mennonites. Specifically, the differences between John Robinson's church and that of John Smyth's on the Bible, baptism, separation of church and state, religious liberty, and the Great *Commission* were the major issues separating *Smyth and his followers* from those of Robinson, who became known as the Pilgrim Fathers. This is particularly significant, for back in England both of these congregations were two sections of one Separatist church, joined together on the basis of a covenant, led by John Smyth at Gainsborough and John Robinson at Scrooby. By 1608 both were in the Netherlands — John Smyth's congregation may have preceded that of Robinson by a few months. At the time, the Separatist church of Francis Johnson was involved in a major controversy and John Smyth's church either had already reorganized on the basis of believers' baptism or was seriously considering doing so. In order to escape the influence of both the Smyth and Johnson churches, Robinson led his congregation to relocate in Leyden: Here, they were able to retain the conic lions and a lifestyle characteristic of English Separatism. As such, Robinson and his Leyden congregation provide a control group with which the emerging Baptist movement under the leadership of Smyth and Helwys may be compared.

Even though believers' baptism immediately became the flashpoint in the controversy between the Smyth congregation and the Separatists, there were other issues involved which led Smyth to reorganize his church upon the basis of individual confessions of faith and baptism. Back in England, Smyth had

gathered a Separatist church upon the basis of a mutually agreed upon covenant “after the pattern of the Old Testament saints,” as the London Separatists had done. Within a year after arriving in Amsterdam, he led the church to disband and start over according to an Anabaptist pattern, basing the decision squarely upon the New Testament. In the process, not only did this radical move repudiate the baptism of the Church of England but also infant baptism practiced by both the Church of England and the Separatists as well: Operating upon the assumptions of English Separatism, Smyth felt no necessity to seek authority from anyone to baptize, therefore, he baptized himself. This act added fuel to the fires of controversy that immediately erupted when the news broke.^{f3} Many thought Smyth’s self-baptism was an unprecedented action, but Smyth, who was a teacher for four years at Christ’s College, Cambridge University, knew better. Nevertheless, the furor compelled him to attempt to regularize his baptism by seeking to unite with the Waterlander Mennonites whom he now was convinced constituted a true church and with whom his congregation had such close ties.. At that point, Thomas Helwys, a leader in Smyth’s church, who had studied law at Gray’s Inn, (now the University of London Law School) had serious misgivings about this latest development. Therefore, he and possibly ten others, withdrew from the majority and issued their own confession of faith in 1611.

Helwys was to carry news of the Baptist development back to England where his little church began to meet just outside the walls of London at Spitalfield while Smyth remained in the Netherlands, where he died the last of August in 1612.^{f4} (His body was interned in Amsterdam’s Newe Kerk, where the heroes of the Dutch nation were buried, a token of the esteem in which the city fathers held him.) Before his death, Smyth had drawn tip a new confession of a hundred articles in which he set forth for the first time in English the twin concepts of religious freedom and the separation of church and state. The principle is most eloquently set forth in Article 84, the substance of which had repeatedly appeared in the writings of Menno Simons and in those of Swiss and South German Anabaptists, now became engraved upon the consciences of Helwys and the first English Baptists in Smyth’s own unforgettable words.

That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free, to every man’s conscience, to handle only civil transgressions (Romans 13), injuries, and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery, theft, etc., for Christ only is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience (³⁰¹² James 4:12).

Once back in England, Helwys set forth the principle of religious liberty in his hand-written inscription to King James I of England on the flyleaf of his book, *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity*. He reminded James that

“The king is a mortall *man*, and not God therefore hath no power over ye immortall soules of his subjects, to make lawes and ordinances for them, and to set spirituall Lords over them.”

In order that the king might know that these words were not those of an anarchist, Helwys pledged his and his followers obedience to the king in all things “with body life and goods, or els let their lives be taken from ye earth.” Within this curious but remarkable treatise, Helwys argued that religious freedom should also be the privilege of Roman Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and pagans, but King James was not inclined to listen to “a dissenter,” even if he bothered to read anything beyond the inscription. Helwys’s rash but courageous act cost him his life. He was promptly arrested and sent to Newgate prison where he apparently died sometime before 1616, when his will was probated. But the gospel seed, as Baptists understood it, had been sown and would produce an abundant harvest, but not without great cost in suffering, imprisonment, and death.

The legacy of John Smyth and Thomas Helwys became an integral part of the life and teachings of Leonard Busher and John Murton, Helwys’s successor, and those who became known as General Baptists.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ENGLISH SEPARATISTS AND THE GENERAL BAPTISTS

The differences between these first Baptists and the Separatists soon became evident. Early in the Smyth’s Amsterdam exile, the adoption of believers’ baptism reflected a change in both his understanding of the church and of biblical authority. The New Testament had taken priority over the Old as the highest authority in the Christian life and the faith and order of the church while the Separatists still looked to the Old Testament as equally authoritative, justifying infant baptism as analogous to circumcision. Even though the Separatists had separated from the Church of England, they were no champions of religious freedom. To the contrary, they insisted that it was the responsibility of the “magistrates” (the government) to impose

“the true religion” (as they understood it) upon all citizens and “to suppress and root out by their authoritie all false ministries, voluntarie Religions and Counterfeyt worship of God, to abolish and destroy the idoll Temples, Images, Alteres, Vestments, and all other monuments of Idolatrie and superstition. ...” ^{f5}

On the role of “the magistrate,” Helwys made his most creative contribution to the developing Baptist movement. While his mentor, John Smyth, simply accepted the Mennonite position that separation of church and state and the nature of the magistrate’s office barred such an official from church membership, implying that one could not be a magistrate and a Christian at the same time, Helwys disagreed. He argued that since governments were ordained of God, such officials, if truly “born again,” could be members of the church, but never exercise the office as magistrate in the life of the church. Therefore, legal oaths and military duty in defense of the country were permissible. This set the emerging Baptist movement apart from both the Mennonites and Separatists. With Smyth, the Calvinism that had characterized him as a Separatist had completely evaporated, but with Helwys a residue still remained. While he held that all persons inherit a sinful nature, he refused to hold that children who had not reached an age of accountability were lost. The Anabaptist concept that every person was also born with a will free to choose between right and wrong. The major problem with Calvinism, according to Helwys, was that it

“makes some despair utterly as thinking there is no grace for them and that. God hath decreed their destruction. And it makes others desperately careless, holding that if God hath decreed they shall be saved then they shall be saved, and if God hath decreed they shall be damned they shall be damned?”^{f6}

With Smyth and the Mennonites, Helwys magnified the role of Christ as Savior and Lord at the expense of any competing system of theology.^{f7} There is little documentary evidence that the General Baptists presence in England contributed to the rise of the Particular Baptists, but their indebtedness to the Mennonites appears to have been just as significant as that upon the General Baptists

MENNO SIMONS’S FOUNDATION BOOK AND THE RISE OF THE PARTICULAR BAPTISTS

The term “Particular, Baptists” refers to the Baptists who arose out of a London Independent Puritan-Separatist congregation in 1638-1641. They were called. “Particular” because they held to a “limited atonement,” which meant that Christ died to atone only for the sins of the elect. Hence they were more Calvinistic than the General Baptists, but by the time they had published their first confession of faith in 1644, their Calvinism was considerably modified compared with that of the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1619). That which made these English Separatists essentially Baptists was due to the influence of

the Anabaptists, largely mediated through the writings of Menno Simons, as convincingly demonstrated by Professor Glen Stassen.

For many years, Ernest Payne, an English Baptist historian and a number of other able historians have attributed the similarities of Baptists and Anabaptists to the Mennonite personal contact. This relationship is readily apparent, as we have seen, with the General Baptists, but the evidence for such influence upon the Particular Baptists has been somewhat obscure until recently.

Occasionally, certain bits and pieces of evidence would surface that made such influence a high probability, but in the current issue of the *Baptist History and Heritage* there are two articles by Stassen that clearly demonstrate the dependence of the Particular Baptists upon the writings of Menno Simons.

Menno, whose name became applied to the Dutch Anabaptists, was a popular Roman Catholic priest at Witmarsum in West Friesland, The Netherlands, when he left the church and was baptized as an Anabaptist. He soon became the most prominent leader and theologian among the Dutch Anabaptists — so prominent in fact that Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had placards distributed throughout The Lowlands offering a reward of a hundred gold guilders for anyone who would deliver him into the hands of imperial authorities.

While Menno provided the personal leadership that the faltering and confused Anabaptists desperately needed, his importance for subsequent generations lay in his writings. As important as his early work on *Christian Baptism* (1537) was, it would not have the influence over the years that *The Foundation of Christian Doctrine* (*Foundation Book*) had upon those who became Particular Baptists. Although Menno's *Foundation Book* was first published in a dialect of East Friesland a year after Menno's death, a much enlarged and revised edition appeared from which subsequent Dutch and German editions were published. A new Dutch reprint appeared as late as 1613 and three years later the original 1539 edition was republished anonymously. It was probably a 1613 copy of the *Foundation Book* that became so influential in shaping the Particular Baptist faith and order.

In order to clear Baptists from any taint of an Munster connection, some contemporary Baptist historians have sought to attribute the similarities between Baptists and Anabaptists to other sources, without sufficient evidence. Therefore, Professor Stassen's research constitutes something of a breakthrough in Baptist historical research. His thesis is that the sources of the Particular Baptist confession of 1644 can be identified from internal evidence as derived from "The True Confession" of Francis Johnson's Separatist church in Amsterdam, the writings of Dr. William Ames, and Menno Simons's *Foundation Book*. He has demonstrated that the *Foundation Book* is the source of approximately half of the articles. In addition, Stassen argues that

Mennonite influence led the first Particular Baptists to modify the traditional Calvinism of the Separatists at several points.. He suggests that his analysis of the First and Second London Confessions of Faith is a methodology analogous to source criticism employed in New Testament studies. Stassen summarizes his research process in the following paragraph.

Just as Q appears in two Gospels, Matthew and Luke, so S [source] appears in both the *First* and *Second London Confessions*. It is truly striking that all the ingredients of S that Baptists added to their Congregationalist source to produce the *First London Confession*, they added again when they wrote the *Second London Confession*. Clearly these additions were not haphazard or random; they were a systematic pattern they thought important to add both times. Furthermore, S has its own internal unity, centering on the identification with Jesus Christ as both Lord and Savior in death, burial, and resurrection. S includes the distinctive Baptist doctrines of baptism, the visible church, soteriology and sanctification or discipleship, religious liberty, and separation of church and state. ^{f8}

I am in essential agreement with Stassen's position and find his research method quite appropriate for the purpose he has in mind. However, I would add to his list, the Lord's Supper, and the emphasis upon The Great Commission. Neither does he list in the above paragraph that which is also evident in an careful examination of the First London Confession (1644), i.e., the priority of the New Testament in biblical interpretation, or the use of the term "ordinances" instead of "sacraments" in reference to baptism and the Lord's Supper. All of which were true of Menno and the Particular Baptists, but not the Puritans and the Separatists. ^{f9}

The question doubtless lurks in the minds of many who feel that this discussion may be interesting to historians, but irrelevant for modern Baptists. They are apt to say: "So what?" In answer to these critics, Stassen insists that a correct understanding of Baptist origins will help to give contemporary Baptists an identity. I agree, but I am also convinced that to an accurate knowledge of the historical development of the first identifiable Baptists will help Baptists to understand themselves and the tensions that have frequently characterized Baptist life through the centuries and into the present generation.

The nature of the tensions created by the contemporary resurgence of Calvinism, particularly in relation to Southern Baptists, will become much more evident in the next lecture. Thus, we will examine more closely that which Stassen refers to as "the Calvinist Congregational mother" and the alterations the Calvinist heritage underwent in convergence with the Anabaptist Mennonite influence in the emerging Baptist movement.

AN ANABAPTIST LEGACY OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT MOTIF

The Anabaptist heritage, consisted of much more than a biblical theology and a New Testament ecclesiology, it made central to the whole movement a lifestyle of discipleship based upon the example and teachings of Jesus Christ. The very term used for discipleship *nachfolgi Christi* means literally “following after Christ,” or a Christ-centered discipleship. This meant for thousands that when you became an Anabaptist through believers’ baptism you were signing your own death warrant. Such was the case with Eberli Bolt and his friend, a Catholic priest who had not yet been baptized with believers’, baptism when they were seized and burned to death in Schwyz, a Catholic canton. Bolt became the first Anabaptist to die for his faith less than six months after the birth of the movement.

It was one thing to die at the hands of the Roman Catholic authorities, but quite another to die at the hands of Protestants. It was almost ten years after Luther had nailed the Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg before Protestants borrowed a page from the Inquisition to execute another Christian for his faith. Felix Mantz, one of the first to be baptized in Zurich that fateful night in January 1525, was the victim. He was condemned to death on Saturday afternoon (January 6, 1527) for his Anabaptist beliefs. Just before being drowned in the icy waters of the Limmat River, he sang out in Latin. “Into thy hands, oh Lord, I commit my spirit” Others were to follow in Catholic and Protestant territories as the movement spread. The following May, Michael Sattler, one of the most dedicated early leaders and author of the Schleitheim Confession was burned at the stake in Rottenburg, Germany, and his wife was drowned in the Neckar River a few days later. Wolfgang Ulimann, the first to be baptized by Conrad Grebel in the Rhine River, was burned at the stake along with his brother and seven others. In the same year on, March 10, 1528 Balthasar Hubmaier, the most important theologian among the *early* Anabaptists, was burned at the stake in Vienna, Austria, after torture had failed to produce the desired recantation. Three days later his wife, Elisabeth Hugline Hubmaier, was drowned in the Danube River with a millstone tied around her neck. The execution of so many Anabaptists reminds us of Hubmaier’s motto, *Die Wahrheit ist untodtlich* (Truth is Undying), which appeared *on* all his published works. That truth is still alive in the world today, although apparently only among a minority of those who claim to be Christian.

FOOTNOTES

- ^{ft1} Irvin Buckwalter Horst, *The Radical Brethren: Anabaptism and the English Reformation to 1558*, (Nieuwkoop: B. de Graaf, 1972),. p. 178. After thorough research into the presence of Anabaptism in England, Horst concluded: “It can be said that anabaptism in England was firmly established with some strength about 1535 and included both foreign and native adherents: ... “The suppression of anabaptism in England was pronounced during the reign of Henry VIII but mild compared with that on the Continent: it was evidently enforced as a matter of policy rather than principle.”
- ^{ft2} Glen Harold Stassen, “Opening Memo Simons’s Foundation Book and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins Alongside the Mother-Calvinist Congregationalism,” *Baptist History and Heritage* (Spring 1998) 34-44.
- ^{ft3} Champlin Burrage, *The Early English Dissenters* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1912), I:237.
- ^{ft4} It has been assumed by some Baptist historians that Helwys returned to England in 1611, but no one has verified his presence there until the latter part of the year, 1612. Therefore, I hold, with A.C. Underwood that Helwys did not return until after Smyth’s death in 1612. His book, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, was almost certainly printed in the Netherlands in that year.
- ^{ft5} *A True Confession* reproduced in its entirety in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*. (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1959) Article 39, p. 94.
- ^{ft6} Cited in A. C. Underwood, *A History of English Baptists*. (London The Carey Kingsgate Press Limited, 1947) p. 134.
- ^{ft7} *A Declaration of Faith of English People (Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland 1611)*. Lumpkin, pp. 116-123.
- ^{ft8} Glen Harold Stassen, “Opening Menno Simons ‘s Foundation Book and Finding the Father of Baptist Origins Alongside the Mother — Calvinist Congregationalism,” *Baptist History and Heritage* Spring 1998, pp. 36-37:
- ^{ft9} I use the term “Separatists” in the place of Congregationalists, which Stassen uses, for the term “Congregationalists” becomes more appropriate later as the Independent Puritans and Separatists began to distinguish themselves from the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Quakers.