

**Title** Early Anabaptist View of the Church  
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Good morning and Christian greetings to each one of you. This is the first ministers' meeting I've ever attended. It's a blessing however to be with a bunch of Anabaptists. I'm not sure what you think of when you think of the word "Anabaptist." Some people think, "Oh, no, another bunch of dates and places that we know nothing about and those times that aren't relevant for today." That's not how I feel about it. There's something alive for us in this study.

I'd like to express my thanks to the hosting committee; the hospitality is warm; it's rich.

I'd like to read this morning from I Peter 2. "The Early Anabaptist View of the Church," we don't find much of that in a chapter and verse in the Scripture. This is probably more of a Scriptural history lesson. I'd like to read from I Peter 2, breaking into verse 4. "...day of visitation. *Read verse.* into verse 21. *Read verse.* "...follow His steps." There are several key points that the Anabaptists majored in. Their view of the church is a chosen generation, a royal priesthood. They exalted the church of Jesus Christ on a plane that is above human organization--something greater than, and better than any human organization. They talk about following Christ--walking in His steps. Verse 21 also talks about suffering. Also, a sanctified life seen in verse 11. As we bridge the gap from last night--the Apostolic church--many things happened up to about the third century A.D. Many things happened between then and when the Reformation took place in the sixteenth century. I will describe it to you, let me just say this first: In establishing who the Anabaptists were--(perhaps we should take a look at that lest we have the idea as a lady who attended our church had. You've been a Mennonite for awhile if you understand that when they talk about Anabaptists, they're not talking about John the Baptist's wife). The Anabaptists were a people who came to a realization that the established church is not what God really has designed. The Anabaptists were basically a movement in three different areas: The Swiss Reformation in Zurich, headed by Zwingli, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and a few of those people. A little later, Menno Simons comes onto the scene, having been ordained a Catholic priest. He was in the Netherlands, and he did not become an Anabaptist until about ten years later. Also, in Germany, there was another group arising at the same time. There was widespread reformation. Some would call the Anabaptists the Radical Reformation; some called it the left-wing of the Reformation. The Anabaptists viewed the changes as the place where God really wanted to bring the church back to. The other group was in Germany, and most of the Hutterites have their roots here. All these things were taking place at the same time in different

areas. You can't say one man started it, but it was an effort by different people digging into the Scripture rather than taking for granted what was handed to them was right. They went back to the original. They became fundamental in their beliefs--back to the Word of God. Zwingli was the one who called these people Anabaptists. It was a term that was used as a derogative. They didn't want to be called that. They preferred to be called "the brethren" because of their view of the church as brotherhood.

I'd like to use a diagram. *Overhead projector*. This [triangle] being God. One thing never breaking the gap between the early church and the Anabaptist was that they continued to believe in the triune God: I'm talking about the church as a whole. They believed in a triune God. They recognized a need for an external aid on their behalf--they are lost. It developed into something that looked like this: God spoke down through the Pope, the first being Peter. The Pope was infallible as he spoke in the office. It was the pure Word of God. God's message flowed on down to Priests, including the cardinals and bishops. Then down to the common people. One of the earliest problems came when the idea that the bread in communion and the wine of communion was actually the body and blood of Christ. Somehow or another, that was transformed as someone received it. That is the idea of how we get the life from God; they come through the sacraments. However, problems existed. This idea first came in the third century. Constantine became a Christian in 312. He saw a vision of a flaming cross. He had that emblem imprinted on his soldiers. This vision told him to go forth and conquer. Up to this point, Christianity was illegal by the Roman Empire. He made Christianity legal. He chaired the Council of Nicea himself, and in AD 378 under Theodosius, Christianity became the state religion. Then in 407, infant baptism was made compulsory. What we have here, as Constantine became a Christian, is a high up government official being a Christian. Other people became Christians and brought things into the church and heathen people came into the church, yet they remained heathens—but all within the church. It was a problem. To receive the spiritual life of God, you took the sacraments. You took the body and blood of Christ. You received the life of God from those emblems.

Things developed and grew. The Anabaptist view of the church in the 1500s had fallen. I don't think anybody knew when it fell and how coldly it fell. Did everybody in it fall? It seems like there are varying opinions, even among the Anabaptists. When it became the official state religion, that's when some of the Anabaptists thought it was the completion of the fall of the church, there were people throughout history who saw this coming on, and they wanted to reverse the trend. There were the monotheists, the Demotists/Donatists [*spelling?*]. Later around 1100, the Waldensian church started: an underground and persecuted church. These churches had some serious errors, but they had a vision to return to the basic Scripture and build their lives thereupon. In about the 1400s, there was a John Huss, a leader of the Bohemian Brethren. They never broke from the church, but wanted to revitalize the church and bring it back to where it should be. John Wycliffe in England, the leader of the Lollards.

There were some major problems. When Christianity was made the state religion (the official religion), there were Christians who went to war against others who called themselves Christians as well. It can't be! Carrying the sword was against Christ's teaching, taking the oath of allegiance in government a position was also against Christ's teachings. Something had to give. Furthermore, not only were these heathens brought into the church and remained heathen, but

generation after generation was baptized into the church. The easiest way to come in was to be baptized as babies. The numbers grew. You had to be baptized. That was the call to grow the church.

At that time there is the doctrine of transubstantiation. Some of the reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, maintained what it was true. Zwingli said that it was not true; it was just an emblem of the sacrificial atonement of Christ. Other things happened. People began to look at the church as a building. Of course, everyone went to church, so they had to be big. This was viewed as a church. In about 15 years before the initial Swiss Brethren break, they called Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel. It was amazing, ornate. How about the saints? Where were the saints? They normally hung the saints on the walls of the church, in statue and picture form. They were people who had passed on. They could not be installed as a saint until after they had died. They would put them as a statue, as they did of St. Peter. Being the first Pope, he was in a place where people could walk by and kiss his feet. His feet had to be resurfaced because his feet were kissed off by the congregation. No specific change of life came to these church people. These people continued in their heathen ways. In all this, they were a people driven by a hunger and thirst, aware of the emptiness in their hearts; so they filled it with form, and it made them feel better. There were outward forms of religion, but there was no inner life. Hierarchy developed over time. It was evidence that this church had fallen. The warring and fighting, the formalism, the hierarchy. Over time, the professional people who were the highly educated people, became believers, and they were the ones who knew how to do it and could read the Latin Vulgate. So the whole hierarchy and clergy developed and there also developed a difference between the clergy and the people who were the laity. Furthermore, if people did not agree with the hierarchy, they would be persecuted by the sword.

Another issue was that there was no brotherhood accountability--people lived as sinners, and nobody cared. Greed and self-centeredness was evident in the clergy. It was also evident among the people. The Anabaptists tried to get Zwingli to see that we need to go further than what he was trying to do. Zwingli was trying to correct problems in the church, but the Anabaptists thought the church had to be more basic. They've got to go back to the Bible and look at it as the authority of our lives. They developed another idea--It looks like this. *Overhead*.

God reveals himself through His Word. If it were not for the revelation of God to mankind, there would be no way for man to attain to God. But God reveals Himself through His Word to mankind and through His Son Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God was revealed in human form. From this, then, if we think of this as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, God likens this unto a building. We are members one to another. We talk about the communion of the Saints. The flow of life from here comes from God revealing Himself through His Word. The Holy Spirit calling, inviting, directing, illuminating our minds of understanding, as a person recognizes and learns who God is, who man is in relation, God's love for mankind, as a man would respond to that in faith believing, a man was born again. The life came from God through His Word and Jesus Christ into a person, and that person becomes a Christian; he was born again. He became a member of the Church of Jesus Christ. In the church there is a relationship with each other. Mr. Luther had more of the idea that here's God, by faith each person believes, and he's not necessarily connected to another person. But the Anabaptist view is that there is a connection to each other. We are members one of another. Hutterites carry this to the extent that they wanted all

things in common, as the early church had done. They gently criticized the Swiss Brethren for not taking this example. There was a connection between each other: communion between each other remembering the suffering and death of Jesus Christ, showing appreciation to God, as it called to their remembrance the price that it cost. Where was the church? They didn't look at a building. They looked at each other. YE are the bride of Christ: YOU are the church. The saints weren't hanging on the walls. The people were the saints. They were the sanctified ones, emphasizing this above their contemporaries. Luther gave up: "You can't get these people to live holy lives." He despaired of people trying to change their lives. The Anabaptists however spoke and believed in the sanctification of the new life, that comes through God's Word and into the believer. It was a sanctifying power that kept people from sinning. It caused them to follow Christ. Faith seems to be the key word--the buzz word of some of the reformers. Following Christ, discipleship, obedience, appears again and again in the Anabaptist writings. That's the buzz word: that's the key--following Christ; living like Christ.

There was another major difference, the two kingdom concept. In this idea and mentality, they were one and the same: a hybrid [Catholic church]. However, Anabaptists said secular leaders have no interference if Christ is the head of the church. They saw that the Christian people should not live after the standards of the world, and you can't expect the world to live after the standards of Christ. Don't superimpose one upon the other. "My kingdom is not of this world." Another key word that comes forth repeatedly is *Gelassenheit*. It means joyfully giving and yielding, resigning myself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. With anticipation, I'm looking for an opportunity to serve my God because He has done so much for me. Their people believed that baptism was not for infants. The break was made when twenty men in Zurich decided one night that this is all we can do. They've tried their best. There is no chance to bring Zwingli as a leader to a true understanding of a Scripture. If it is going to be done, they needed to do it. They were rebaptized that night, and they established the true church of Jesus Christ in Zurich in 1525.

They also believe in a priesthood of believers. No longer did they have to have a hierarchy to get to God (ye are a royal priesthood). Every believer can offer a prayer. They also had a zeal for mission service. They took the Great Commission seriously. They even got together and mapped out Europe as to who goes where and evangelizes what areas. They were serious. They did not feel they had to do it, but they wanted to do it. The love of Christ constrained them to do so.

We can be challenged in several ways. One of the ways is in their commitment. As they submitted themselves to the will of God and were baptized, they were signing their own doom, signing an OK to be martyred. They were willing to do it. Their commitment was amazing. We need that today.

What does all this mean today in 2011? What are our challenges? How can we maintain what we have been handed? Maintain our heritage? A few things:

Something I see as very important: Never fit your understanding of Scripture around your experience. Commit your life to the obedience of Scripture, wherever it takes you. Don't start with you; start with the Bible. Submit to the Bible, and your experience will follow. As ministers, I would encourage you to preach from the Gospels more. The Gospels were a big part of Anabaptist teaching. That's what they majored in. Back to the first challenge of fitting your

experience to Scripture, we can't say as some of evangelical Christians that Jesus said (on the Sermon on the Mount) that basically, this way of peace: don't take up the sword and pray for your enemies. And that it can't be because our rights have to be defended. Some of the footnotes in these good King James Bibles edited by certain publishing companies you'll find it said that, "No, the Sermon on the Mount is not for us today." They found a way of dispensationalizing Scripture, and saying the Sermon on the Mount will be in the Kingdom of God. But the Kingdom of God is now: believe it! This two-kingdom concept is still foreign to most Christians. Maybe they've got a little better handle on it than in the 1500s, but not much. Come visit us, see some of the early churches in Williamsburg. The Puritans did not have the two-kingdom concept. If you didn't go to church or pay your taxes, the same people would come after you. Most of the Christian bookstores and the literature you buy, you need to be careful, and be firmly grounded in your two-kingdom concept, lest you also are influenced. Most children we have are not firmly grounded Anabaptists, and we need to make sure we're not throwing them non-two-kingdom concept material. Be missionary minded. The call for us today is we as Anabaptist people, with a wonderful heritage, commit our life, commit our love, commit our living to our Father and to the obedience to the Word of God as those people did. God will be honored by that. We will not be famous most likely, but God will be honored. God bless you and thanks for your attention. *Stand to pray.*