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Anabaptist Theology

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Anabaptist theology is the expression and communication of theological convictions that have sustained the ordinary life of faith communities within the Anabaptist tradition of Christianity. Alongside this ordinary Anabaptist theology, a more formal, 'academic' version has developed since at least the eighteenth century. In this respect, this article will first address some methodological issues and then present a historical overview of Anabaptist theology, from the emergence of Anabaptism in the Reformation era to recent global developments. The article concludes with an examination of some key theological issues within the Anabaptist theological tradition, namely, the status of confessional documents, biblical interpretation, Christology, discipleship, salvation, and ecclesiology.

Keywords: Anabaptism, Mennonites, Confessions, Christology, Discipleship, Ecclesiology, Christian theology, Baptism, Persecution, Reformation

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1 Methodological issues

1.1 Anabaptist theology: ordinary and academic

Although a few early Anabaptist leaders had formal theological training, academic theology is a relatively recent development in the tradition's history. Persecution and theologies of separation from 'the world' combined to ensure that Anabaptists rarely had access (or took advantage of access) to higher education prior to the twentieth century. The notable exception to this pattern is Mennonites in the Netherlands who were mostly tolerated from the late sixteenth century and founded a seminary in 1735. By the 1800s, this group was engaging in academic theology largely along then-dominant liberal Protestant lines. North American Mennonites began to create institutions of higher education from the late nineteenth century, typically as theologically conservative Bible schools. It was only in the decades after the Second World War that Anabaptist theologians began to be recognized as significant contributors to academic discussions. Today there are also Anabaptist colleges and other educational centres in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Even so, the vast majority of Anabaptist communities – even ones with higher education institutions – remain isolated from mainstream academic theology.

The relatively late blossoming of Anabaptist academic theology, and the fact that most Anabaptists have had little to do with it, creates a methodological conundrum for any attempt to survey 'Anabaptist theology'. Most Anabaptist theology occurs in ordinary faith communities in the form of sermons, Bible studies, and conversations among believers. In terms of written theological materials, there is a wealth of historic devotional and catechetical manuals, hymnals, confessions, and short treatises. The *Martyrs Mirror*, a seventeenth-century collection of Anabaptist and other Christian martyr stories, has served alongside the Bible as the basic theological text for many Anabaptists. Representing 'Anabaptist theology' through a synthesis of key texts by early leaders and modern academics offers only an approximation at best.

There is, however, no easy way to draw together all the disparate sources that comprise the dataset of Anabaptist theology. The most common approach remains that of focusing on canonical sixteenth- and twentieth-century writings. While there are questionable historiographic assumptions underlying this approach, this brief encyclopaedia article is not the place to redress the neglect of Anabaptist theologies developed between, for instance, Menno Simon's death in 1561 and the publication of Harold Bender's 'The Anabaptist Vision' in 1944. Nor is it the place to resolve completely the predominant influence that the latter text – a product of a distinctly US-based, Swiss-German Mennonite perspective – has had in defining Anabaptist theology (though more on this topic below), or to produce a fully revised portrait of the subject that does justice to the contributions of women and people of colour. Scholars will lack an adequate portrait of Anabaptist

theology until these topics are addressed thoroughly. While this introductory text attempts to incorporate a diversity of Anabaptist voices and to honour the 'ordinary' (non-academic) character of most Anabaptist theology, at this point it remains reliant on existing scholarship and all its limitations.

1.2 Locating Anabaptist theology in time and place

The dominant picture of Anabaptism that has persisted since the sixteenth century in Catholic and Protestant polemic portrays Anabaptists as dangerous radicals seeking to overthrow the social order. The term 'Anabaptist', meaning 're-baptizer', was applied to the sixteenth-century believers' baptizing movements in order to label their participants as heretical criminals. (Catholic authorities invoked the prohibition of rebaptism contained in the sixth-century Justinian Code, which identified the act as a violation of the Church's doctrine punishable by death.) Over the course of the sixteenth century, this legal designation morphed into a religious category that was at times accepted by those to whom it was applied (Monge 2008), even if they often used other terms for themselves (Brethren, the Baptism-Minded, etc.). For many Catholic and Protestant authorities, the theological and political character of Anabaptism was most clearly disclosed in Thomas Müntzer's revolutionary preaching during the German Peasants' War of the early 1520s, which they saw as bearing fruit in the disastrous Anabaptist Kingdom of Münster (1534–1535), where prophetic leaders violently enforced polygamy and economic sharing.

Although this older view of Anabaptists as fanatics can still be found in the work of some contemporary Catholic and Protestant theologians (Härle 2015: 434–435), within the academic field of Christian theology and ethics the image has largely been reversed thanks to Harold S. Bender and his student John Howard Yoder, and to their many 'neo-Anabaptist' followers. Bender's influential 'The Anabaptist Vision' draws a 'clear line of demarcation' (1944: 11) between the sixteenth-century apocalyptic, revolutionary movements and the purportedly sober, pacifistic humanists who broke from Ulrich Zwingli's reformation of Zurich in 1525 to remain faithful to their reading of the Bible. Bender, an entrepreneurial leader of US Mennonites, saw his Swiss-German ancestors as the true founders of Anabaptism and articulated their vision in terms of voluntary discipleship, disciplined community, and an ethic of nonresistant love. Yoder accepted Bender's theological and historical claims, but rejected what he regarded as his teacher's tacit equation between them and a nascent Mennonite institutional infrastructure. Rather, Yoder pushed for more radical adherence to 'the politics of Jesus' recovered by the original Anabaptists (1970). Through Yoder and his disciples – above all Stanley Hauerwas – the 'The Anabaptist Vision' version of Anabaptism began to replace the older understanding within the ecumenical academy. The resulting tendency to take Yoder's thought as representative of Anabaptist theology has never been entirely accepted by other Anabaptist theologians (Friesen 2000: 64–88; Reimer 2001), and has come under

increasing scrutiny in light of a 2015 publication detailing Yoder's repeated acts of sexual violence over the course of his career (Goossen 2015; Schmidt Roberts, Martens and Penner 2020; Soto and Stephens 2020).

Around the same time that Yoder's popular *The Politics of Jesus* (1972) was published, social historians were challenging the historiography assumed by both the anti-Anabaptist polemicists and Mennonite apologists like Bender. The 1975 article 'From Monogenesis to Polygenesis' decisively shifted the historiographical terrain towards the recognition of a multiplicity of baptizing groups with distinct, if interconnected, origins and theological commitments (Stayer, Packull and Deppermann 1975). While the historians who advanced the 'polygenesis' thesis subsequently revised their findings to highlight commonalities among the different Anabaptist movements, there was no going back to a 'monogenetic' account that denied, for example, the entanglement of Anabaptism in the German Peasants' War or in the events at Münster.

These historiographic developments have opened Anabaptist theology somewhat to accounts that find a normative centre not in Zurich but in the Netherlands or the later Russian colonies or the present-day global church. Among other things, these accounts may construe as Anabaptist a significant level of political engagement (Reimer 2014); charismatic renewal (Byrd 2019); contextually sensitive, ecumenical mission (Sawatsky 2017); or the inherently hybrid or 'hyphenated' character of Anabaptism (Villegas 2014).

Broadening Anabaptist theology beyond neo-Anabaptism has also encouraged greater attention to theologians such as Grace Jantzen or Gordon Kaufman, who had biographical connections to Mennonite communities but were not theologically Anabaptist according to the Benderian model. Interest in the lessons Anabaptist theologians can learn from such revisionist figures (see Friesen 2000; Kennel 2023) has overlapped with a turn by many neo-Anabaptists towards dialogue with liberation theologies (e.g. Schipani 2019; González 2005; Neufeld Harder 2018; Weaver 2011). If these developments have strained the ecumenical orthodoxy that Bender, at least, took for granted, some theologians have called for a 'return' to orthodoxy (Koop 2020; Reimer 2001) while others suggest that Anabaptist convictions are at odds with orthodoxy (Weaver 2000; Weaver 2020), or may even be better construed as a secular philosophy (Kennel 2022).

This review indicates the contested character of the term 'Anabaptism', and so of Anabaptist theology. An added complexity comes with the recognition that 'Anabaptism' today is often used as an umbrella term for several Christian traditions or denominations including the Amish, Brethren in Christ, Church of the Brethren, Hutterian Brethren, Mennonites, and Mennonite Brethren. Following Bender, some Mennonites began describing themselves as Anabaptist-Mennonites to signal their theological allegiance to 'The Anabaptist Vision', and this term, plus the fame of some Mennonite advocates

of Anabaptist identity, have sometimes led to a terminological conflation. On the other hand, Christians from a wide variety of traditions over the centuries have claimed to be at least semi-Anabaptist theologically, so there can be no simple identification of Anabaptism with a set of historic denominations – the phrase 'neo-Anabaptist' signals just the latest of these developments. The term 'Mennonite' has an equally convoluted history (Bender and Sawatsky 1989). The present entry attempts to learn from this history by drawing on a wide range of Anabaptist sources, even if for reasons of institutional location and theological training it is shaped by the influential 'Anabaptist Mennonite' school.

2 History of Anabaptist theology

2.1 The emergence of Anabaptist theology in the Reformation era

Martin Luther's challenge to the Catholic sacramental system raised hopes throughout Europe for significant theological and social transformation. As that transformation lagged in the face of opposition, and as Luther's own conservativism became more apparent, alternative reforming movements sprang up in the 1520s, especially in the Germanic lands in and around the Holy Roman Empire. Peasant revolutionaries, briefly with Luther's support, attempted to relocate ecclesial and economic power in local communities. Pastors such as Zwingli in Zurich sought a more comprehensively 'biblical' reformation than what they saw from Luther. Apocalyptic preachers, mystics, and spiritualists proclaimed a profusion of messages centred on the immediate presence of the Holy Spirit. Anabaptism was born in this mix.

Sixteenth-century Anabaptism should be understood as a set of loosely connected movements. Historians typically survey these movements regionally, focusing on the development of Anabaptism in the Swiss Federation, south-central German territories and Lower Austria, Moravia, central German territories, and northern German territories and the Lowlands. The Anabaptism that developed in each of these regions has a somewhat distinctive theology, and historians and theologians have expended much effort to judge what, if anything, they shared in common. The following section discusses general theological influences, themes, and means of communication.

2.1.1 Influences

The title of Walter Klaassen's *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (2001 [originally published 1973]) offers the misleading impression that Anabaptism shares little with other forms of European Christianity. In fact, scholars have demonstrated the great extent to which Anabaptism can only be understood against a late medieval backdrop (Brewer 2022). From its apocalyptic currents to its mix of humanist and mystical biblical hermeneutics, from its communitarian voluntarism to its emphasis on the imitation of Christ (*imitatio Christi*) – Anabaptism was deeply shaped by its Catholic context. Since

this context was also formative for other reforming movements, it can be difficult to distinguish between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' influences. But it is true that Anabaptists tended to have some sympathy with Luther's teachings on <u>faith</u>, grace, the Bible, and the priesthood of all believers, as well as with Zwingli's 'Reformed' sacramental theology. Like other reforming movements, Anabaptists generated a new, self-legitimating history of the church. Peasant anticlericalism and economic egalitarianism were also important for Anabaptists.

2.1.2 Themes

Most Anabaptists shared the conviction that salvation was a work of grace initiated by the Holy Spirit and took the material form of participation in discipleship community. Because such participation involved accountability, it did not make sense to include anyone in the community who had not explicitly decided to join it. This decision was to be formalized with water <u>baptism</u> and renewed periodically through the Lord's Supper (communion). More broadly, participation in discipleship community involved sharing goods, fraternal admonition, <u>prayer</u>, and <u>witness</u> – even in the face of persecution. Anabaptists theologized the experience of persecution in various ways familiar to students of the early church.

Apart from this broad agreement, Anabaptists were divided on several key points. The relative authority of scripture vis-à-vis revelation from the Holy Spirit was an initial flashpoint. Sharing a belief that the Spirit's work was immediate and total, they differed as to whether believers should rely on prophecy and 'inner' knowledge or were to trust the Spirit to enable obedience to the New Testament. This disagreement fed into disputes over a variety of topics such as separation from 'the world' and its politics, nonresistance, marriage, women's leadership, apocalypticism, the voluntary character of economic sharing, and above all the strictness of church discipline. By the end of the sixteenth century, the surviving Anabaptist groups were generally patriarchal, nonresistant separatists who had given up on apocalyptic fervour and charismatic phenomena in favour of a strict biblicism. Even so, disagreements over all of these themes persisted.

2.1.3 Communication

Early Anabaptist theology took written form as hymns, theological treatises, confessions, letters, and martyr narratives. Interrogation records are also valuable resources for encountering Anabaptist theology from this period. Recent research suggests that, in at least some areas, Anabaptist texts were well published and well known (Hill 2015). Yet Snyder's older view (1995: 101–114) also has merit: Anabaptists were often prevented from publishing or preaching in public, so much of their communication would have been oral and occurred in small groups. This reality means a reconstruction of early Anabaptist theology from textual sources is necessarily partial.

2.2 Post-Reformation Anabaptist theology and tradition building

2.2.1 Swiss-German Anabaptism

Around the turn of the seventeenth century, multiple Anabaptist traditions were evident. The Swiss Brethren tradition was characterized by its biblicist separatism forged in the face of persecution. Yet persecution also gave friendly outsiders opportunities to extend aid, leading in some cases to enduring friendships. The perception of growing compromise and worldliness led pastor Jakob Amman to start a renewal movement that resulted in the Amish Division in the 1690s.

In the meantime, Swiss Brethren encounters with Pietists led to additional renewal efforts. Some of the most significant theological texts from this era include devotional manuals that attempt to combine an emotional spirituality with a commitment to discipleship in community, especially *Golden Apples in Silver Bowls* from 1702 (Gross 1999), and *Prayer Book for Earnest Christians* from 1708 (Gross 1997). An alternative response cast Pietist experientialism as a dangerous distraction from discipleship (Roossen 1857 [originally published 1702]; Friedmann 1949). The *Ausbund* hymnbook (Beachy and Kline 2006), which includes pieces penned by sixteenth-century martyrs, and the austere Dordrecht Confession (1632) became significant for this tradition and its descendants in the Americas. In the Americas, this tradition split several more times over issues related to nonconformity and separation.

2.2.2 Dutch Anabaptism

The Dordrecht Confession originally emerged out of an attempt to find unity among divided Anabaptist groups in northern Europe. Northern Anabaptism had already divided in the mid-sixteenth century. The Mennonites were conservatives who insisted on maintaining Menno Simons' distinctive theology, including his spiritualist Christology (see section 3.3.1) and harsh approach to church discipline. Mennonite leader Thielman van Braght published what has undoubtedly been the most influential Anabaptist text, the *Martyrs Mirror* (1987 [first edition 1660; second edition with Luyken etchings 1685]). This book was another attempt to forge Mennonite unity – this time by putting Anabaptist martyr stories and confessions together with stories of 'defenceless' Christian martyrs from the first fifteen hundred years of church history, thereby developing the identity of Mennonites as inheritors of the 'true church'.

In contrast to the conservative Mennonites, the Waterlanders or Doopsgezind (Baptism-Minded) adopted a more ecumenical theology focused on life in the Spirit. Both groups, especially the Mennonites, split various times until finally uniting under the Doopsgezind name in the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Doopsgezind have tended to align

theologically with liberal Protestantism and have historic connections with freethinking Collegiants, Remonstrants, and Socinians.

2.2.3 Mennonites in the Russian Empire

Northern Anabaptists spread east to Danzig (Gdansk) and from there to lands that had been recently claimed and cleared by the Russian Empire. Between the 1780s and the 1910s, Mennonite agricultural colonies thrived there thanks to privileges negotiated with the imperial government. Church and colony leadership overlapped considerably, meaning Mennonites in Russia practised a kind of state Anabaptism. In this setting yet another division opened – now between the dominant Mennonite church and a Pietist-influenced renewal movement that came to be called the Mennonite Brethren. This movement from the beginning exhibited strong interest in evangelistic mission. These and other smaller Russian Mennonite groups began to emigrate in large numbers to the Americas in the 1880s.

2.2.4 The Hutterian Brethren

The Hutterian Brethren developed in sixteenth-century Moravia under Jakob Hutter's leadership. This tradition, today located in the North American plains, has insisted on the centrality of sharing all things in common (community of goods) to discipleship and salvation. Second-generation leader Peter Riedemann's *Confession* (1999 [originally published 1565]) continues to serve as the basic Hutterite doctrinal text, with its emphasis on biblical doctrine, nonresistance, nonconformity and separation, and economic sharing as rooted in the Godhead. Many Hutterite and other Anabaptist texts and stories have been preserved in the community's chronicles since the late sixteenth century (Friedmann 1953; Hutterian Brethren 1987). In 1920s Germany, Eberhard Arnold created a Bruderhof community modelled on the Hutterites. Bruderhof communities around the world maintain Hutterite doctrine, though formal unity with the Hutterian Brethren has only been sporadic.

2.3 Anabaptist theology and global modernity

In 1851, the Dutch Mennonites sent Pieter Jansz to begin evangelistic activities in Java. Many Mennonite Brethren from Russia later joined the missionary effort, which eventually allied with an Indigenous Christian community led by Kyai Ibrahim Tunggul Wulung. Thus began Anabaptist participation in the 'Great Century' of Protestant missionary endeavour, facilitated as it was by European imperialism and global capitalism. Today, Anabaptist communities whose origins are in mission work can be found in all inhabited continents. After the United States, the countries with the largest number of Anabaptists are Ethiopia, India, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Mennonite World Conference 2022). Since the nineteenth century, Anabaptist theologians have increasingly reflected on the conditions of Anabaptist witness in global modernity.

2.3.1 Mission and colonialism

As participants in the broader Protestant mission movement, Anabaptists initially did not develop an explicitly Anabaptist theology of mission (Schlabach 1980). They only did so in the mid-twentieth century as part of the general reimagining of mission in the emerging postcolonial context. 'New' Anabaptists and other mission partners critically reshaped Anabaptist witness to connect better with their own spiritual and material aspirations (see Schipani 2019; Fast 2022; Hinojosa 2014). In response, Anabaptists of European descent began to develop a critique of global capitalism (Janzen Longacre 2016; Sider 2015).

At the same time, Bender's 'The Anabaptist Vision' spurred imaginations towards a distinctive form of Anabaptist witness rooted in an idealized version of early Anabaptism. The concept of mission as rooted in the communal embodiment of the gospel became associated with Anabaptist theology (Krabill, Sawatsky and Van Engen 2006). This concept shaped the work of Mennonite Central Committee, a global relief and development organization, as well as the more traditional mission agencies, some of which came to prioritize supporting Indigenous-led Christian movements rather than planting new, denominationally affiliated congregations. The concept also contributed to the Missional Church Movement (Barrett et al. 2004) and Christian social ethics (Hauerwas 1983; Yoder 1972), as Christians in secularizing contexts searched for new ecclesiological models.

2.3.2 Academic Anabaptist theology

By the mid-twentieth century several Anabaptist denominations in North America and Europe had created institutions for higher education that included courses in theological disciplines. Again, the impetus to seek a distinctive historical essence of Anabaptism spurred shifts away from default conservatism (Kauffman 1914; Wenger 1954) and liberalism (Bender, van der Zijpp and Miller 1989). The experiences of the Second World War – in Europe, the complicity and resistance of individuals and institutions in response to Nazism; in North America, conscientious objectors who undertook civilian public service as an alternative to military service – encouraged the innovation of what is sometimes called 'peace theology'. For some North American Mennonites, the old theologies of nonresistance and nonconformity had to be reformulated to promote nonviolent social change and to overcome the deadlocked debate between fundamentalists and modernists. Anabaptist theologians such as James McClendon, Nancey Murphy, Ron Sider, Glen Stassen, and John Howard Yoder helped shape a strand of evangelicalism along these lines in the United States (Swartz 2012; Worthen 2014), while Stanley Hauerwas took this version of Anabaptist theology to mainline Protestant and Catholic circles.

Parallel developments occurred in Latin America, where theologians such as Orlando Costas, Samuel Escobar, and René Padilla drew from Anabaptist thought to construct

misión integral (integral mission) as a socially conscious, theologically evangelical alternative to liberation theology (Kirkpatrick 2019). Other Latin American Anabaptist theologians, including Nancy Bedford, Antonio González, César Moya, and Daniel Schipani, engaged liberation theology more openly.

In Europe, Doopsgezind pastor-theologian Fritz Kuiper similarly urged his community beyond liberalism into a deep engagement with Judaism and political liberation movements (1980). German Mennonite theologian Fernando Enns helped put peace on the agenda of the World Council of Churches (see section 3.6.3).

The entry of women into Anabaptist academic theology since the 1980s reflects larger changes in church and culture. Prior to this period, Anabaptist women often contributed theological essays to ecclesial publications on topics such as mission, peace, and social justice (Penner 2020; Yoder 2017). Anabaptist women today are represented in all areas of theological scholarship, and feminist theologians have reinterpreted core themes such as hermeneutics, peace and nonviolence, and Christology (Soto and Stephens 2020). In the twenty-first century, the first queer articulations of Anabaptist theology began to appear (Chandler Burns 2020).

Academic Anabaptist theology is divided among methodological and disciplinary lines familiar to academic participants in other ecclesial traditions. These divisions have taken shape, for instance, as a debate over whether Anabaptists should critically revise all of theology from the perspective of a minority peace church tradition (Weaver 2000) or rather seek to contribute to an ecumenical Christian theology (Bergen 2020).

3 Key issues in Anabaptist theology

3.1 The status of Anabaptist confessional documents

Although Anabaptist theology has sometimes been construed as largely 'implicit' and 'existential' (Friedmann 1973), a significant body of explicit theological writings has developed over the centuries. One recent study highlights in particular the creation of confessional documents as an integral aspect of the Anabaptist theological tradition (Koop 2004). The fact that most Anabaptist confessions contain theological articles that could be broadly affirmed by Catholics and Protestants complicates the idea that the tradition is simply non-creedal. Some early Anabaptist leaders even articulated their convictions by elaborating on the Apostles' Creed (Hubmaier 1989; Riedemann 1999), though their reasons for doing so can be debated – as can their intent to remain faithful to creedal positions.

Early Anabaptist confessions were arguably not elaborated to establish the content of the Christian faith in a definitive way, but rather to highlight the lived theological elements that some of the Anabaptist groups held in common and to promote discipleship. A classic

confession of faith of this type was the 1527 Schleitheim Confession (or the 'Brotherly Union'; see Koop 2006), which contained seven brief articles on matters such as baptism and the Lord's Supper (communion), leadership, separation from the world, and the use of 'the sword' (that is, violence). Although Riedemann's *Confession* (1999) is considerably lengthier, and includes extended reflections on the Apostle's Creed, it too persistently connects theological topics to practical matters, especially the community of goods.

During the later years of the movement, Anabaptists have produced a large number of confessions of faith for a variety of reasons. Often confessions have been written to provide a platform for unity among different Anabaptist groups. In contexts of tolerance, confessions have tended to be comprehensive and systematic in outline and to have formats that resemble those of the major Protestant creeds. The lengthy *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church 1995), formulated during the merger of two large North American Mennonite denominations, has been taken up by several Mennonite communities around the world. A more minimalist confession was published by Mennonite World Conference as the 'Shared Convictions' (2006). Contemporary debates over gender and sexuality continually raise questions about the status of these and other confessions – to what extent can a church formed on the basis of free decision use confessions to regulate the faith and life of its members?

3.2 Biblical interpretation

3.2.1 Anabaptist hermeneutics: a scholarly consensus and beyond

Since the 1950s, a scholarly consensus has reigned about the nature and shape of Anabaptist hermeneutics. However, this consensus has been recently challenged by the claim that it tends to conceal Anabaptist hermeneutical diversity.

The scholarly consensus identifies a Christ-centred epistemology of obedience as a pervasive hermeneutical principle within Anabaptism. This principle posits willingness to obey Jesus' commands as the only means to a clear understanding of scripture. Since Anabaptists view the church as a community of those committed to obeying Jesus, they regard it as the primary context of biblical interpretation. Due to this emphasis on Jesus and discipleship, the scholarly consensus states that, for Anabaptists, all of scripture culminates in the gospel story, and the Old Testament is preparatory to the New Testament. An early version of this account was offered by Bender in 1953 and has recently been advanced by scholars such as Stuart Murray (1999) and Franklyn Jost (2022). Jost highlights three core Anabaptist hermeneutical distinctives: (1) a Jesus-centred reading of the Bible, (2) a community-centred hermeneutic, (3) an ethically-centred reading of the Bible.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, biblical scholars in the Anabaptist tradition have pursued a variety of themes and methods. Anabaptist <u>feminist biblical scholars</u>, for example, have incorporated the insights of women and other marginalized readers into a community-centred Anabaptist hermeneutic (Gerber Koontz and Swartley 1987; Neufeld Harder 2018). Overall, the centrality of peace and <u>justice</u> in the Bible has been the major emphasis of modern Anabaptist interpreters (Brenneman and Schantz 2014; Marshall 2012; Weaver 2017).

Nevertheless, these new approaches have not challenged the main premises of the scholarly consensus. For historian John Roth, the principles delineated by the consensus have had a legitimate pedagogical function in church settings, but they have also tended to conceal historical diversity in the interest of unity and coherence. Roth claims that the hermeneutical principles underscored since Bender were not explicit in Anabaptists' writings, but rather have been gathered by scholars from eclectic sets of sources. In this respect, Roth affirms the importance of the consensus, but also argues that a more dynamic hermeneutical model is needed (Roth 1994).

3.2.2 Key biblical texts

Although Anabaptist biblical scholarship has focused on the study of the Bible as a whole, including not only both Testaments but also the <u>Apocrypha</u>, it has mainly emphasized key biblical texts from the New Testament to guide Anabaptist discipleship communities. The gospel narratives have had primacy among Anabaptists, together with specific texts from the epistles.

Anabaptists have in general considered the Sermon on the Mount, especially in Matthew's version (Matt 5–7), to be the epitome of Christian faith (Dueck 1989). Historic Anabaptist writings often cite part of the Beatitudes (5:10–12) to address the reality of persecution, and later passages to develop an ethics in relation to oath-making (5:33–37), nonresistance (5:38–48), and wealth (6:24). The major Matthean text on church discipline (18:15–20) has likewise guided Anabaptist views on 'the ban' (excommunication from the church community).

The baptismal orders in Mark 16:15–16 and Matt 28:16–20 have also been very influential for Anabaptists. Anabaptists have typically taken these passages as offering definitive proof of the doctrine of believers' baptism. The book of Acts is regarded as containing similar evidence, alongside conveying the centrality of economic sharing within the church (2:44; 4:32–5:11).

Within the epistles, Romans 13 has been considered especially important for Anabaptist theology due to the complicated relationship between Anabaptist communities and government. Early Anabaptists referred to Romans 13 and its mention of 'the sword' in

discussing the legitimacy of the use of violence by governing authorities. Some interpreted this text as teaching that governmental violence is outside the perfection of Christ and, therefore, not an option. Others saw the passage as opening the possibility of pious Christian rulers with positive and negative functions assigned by God, such as the protection of the good and the punishment of the <u>evil</u>. In the same way, contemporary Anabaptist theology cites Romans 13 in discussions about the relationship between church and state, at times interpreting this text as an affirmation of the role of the state and so of Christian participation in governance, but also as relativizing the state by affirming obedience to God above all. Church leaders and theologians throughout the history of the Anabaptist tradition have developed these arguments by reading Romans 13 in light of Romans 12. From this perspective, Christians are to obey the governing authorities (Rom 13) but are not themselves to seek vengeance or use violence (Rom 12). Epistolary texts such as 2 Cor 6:17 and 1 Pet 2:11 have likewise been read by Anabaptists as supporting geographical, cultural, and/or moral separation from 'the world'. As Alicia Batten (2018) has recently demonstrated, the epistle of James has also been central for Anabaptists, as it can be read as gathering many of the themes discussed here – nonviolent discipleship, enduring persecution, and economic sharing.

3.3 Christology

3.3.1 Anabaptist Christologies

Twentieth-century Anabaptist scholars usually assumed that all sixteenth-century Anabaptist theology was compatible with classic creedal statements, with the caveat that Anabaptists preferred biblical rather than creedal language. Today, however, it is generally acknowledged that early Anabaptist understandings of Jesus' person were fairly diverse. South German leader Hans Denck, for example, taught a logos Christology that focused on the presence of the Word within every person, thereby emphasizing a mystical and possibly even universal salvation. Austrian pastor Pilgram Marpeck developed novel language to defend Christ's humanity and divinity. In part, Marpeck was challenging spiritualist Christologies such as those spread by Anabaptist prophet Melchior Hoffman in the Netherlands and northwest Germany. Hoffman, likely developing the views of the spiritualist Caspar Schwenkfeld, taught that in order for Christ's death to save, he could not have inherited his flesh from his human mother. While Christ was fully human, his human flesh was created from nothing (*ex nihilo*) by God in heaven and placed in Mary's womb. Hoffman's followers in Münster and then post-Münsterite Melchiorites, such as Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips, taught this doctrine of the 'celestial flesh'. The majority of Anabaptists, like Marpeck, rejected this teaching and it largely died out by the nineteenth century. Scholars today debate whether these 'deviations' should be understood as the result of imprecision on the part of mostly lay theologians (Finger 2004), or as positive signs of Anabaptists' creativity in their efforts to develop a theology that understands the body of Christ as a visible, nonresistant church (Weaver 2018). This dispute signals the

range of contemporary views – from defences of Anabaptism's Christological orthodoxy to revisionist proposals motivated by ethical and political concerns. Generally speaking, Anabaptist writings emphasize Jesus' life and teachings as the pattern for disciples (Bedford 2021).

3.3.2 Anabaptist perspectives on atonement

Anabaptist views on the atonement are similarly diverse. Some early Anabaptists, such as the Dutch pastors Menno and Dirk, highlighted the <u>substitutionary</u> character of Christ's death, which they saw as manifesting divine love (Finger 2004). But these and other leaders also interpreted the cross as a transformative model for disciples in terms reminiscent of what is today called the moral influence theory of atonement. Other leaders perceived Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as phases in an ongoing struggle with evil, close to the Christus Victor model. One recent review finds divinization themes in Marpeck and other early Anabaptist accounts of the atonement, whereby the cross makes it possible for disciples to be perfected and enjoy eternal life with God (Finger 2004). Anabaptists linked Jesus' work with the particularities of his human ministry and crucifixion, yet they also employed vivid apocalyptic imagery to describe how, through the Spirit, Jesus initiated a very specific way of life – a <u>new creation</u> – to which he invited participants. The pervasive apocalypticism of early Anabaptism is perhaps best seen in Ursula Jost's popular visions and Anna Jansz's revolutionary hymn 'Trumpet Song' (Snyder and Huebert Hecht 2006).

After the sixteenth century, some Anabaptists arguably developed an atonement theology that emphasized participation in Christ's nonresistant, <u>suffering</u> way of life. The influence of conservative Protestantism, however, led to a growing focus on substitution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Weaver 1997). Since the 1940s, some socially oriented Anabaptists have considered the moral influence theory of atonement to be more congenial to Anabaptist beliefs (Finger 2004). The Christus Victor model began to attract Anabaptists' attention in the early 1980s, resulting in several creative proposals. The best known of these is J. Denny Weaver's 'Narrative Christus Victor', in which participation in Christ's story of nonviolent resistance to socio-political 'powers' is deemed as saving (2011). For evangelical Anabaptist theologian Greg Boyd (2017), the story of God's triumph over evil on the cross is the key to reading all of scripture. Another approach has been to highlight multiple metaphors or images of atonement while giving short shrift to the penal substitution model (in which the sinless Christ takes our place in receiving divine punishment for sin) that is dominant among evangelicals (Baker and Green 2011; Driver 2005; McClendon 2012). Feminists such as Gayle Geber Koontz (1992) and Nancy Bedford (2008) have developed Anabaptist atonement theology in directions responsive to concerns about violence against women. In these and other cases, the stress is on an atonement theology that encourages participation in discipleship.

3.4 Discipleship

The Anabaptist tradition began in part as a criticism of other Christians' insufficient commitment to discipleship. For the early Anabaptists, the Spirit worked with God's word to transform individuals and shape them into communities of disciples. It is therefore possible to see the theological notion of discipleship, which is typically understood as a communal reality, as the primary lens for understanding the motivations of the early Anabaptists (Pilli 2022). This notion, which is embedded in everyday convictions and practices at the grassroots level and derives its energy from the words and the example of Jesus, shapes the concept of *Nachfolge Christi* (following Christ). For early Anabaptists, following Christ meant a process of being initiated into and growing in Christian life, which was defined by reestablishing relationship with God through identification with Christ and renewal by the Spirit. For Anabaptists, faith and behaviour in the likeness of Jesus Christ required repentance, regeneration, and a response to the call to follow the Lord. Connected to the concept of *Nachfolge Christi* was the act of *Gelassenheit* (yielding) to Christ. Discipleship for Anabaptists required submitting oneself to God's <u>sovereignty</u> because no one is able in their own power to live as a true believer. Anabaptists considered that a yielding attitude had to be visible in a person's life, which included obedience to the community and humble openness to the admonishment of fellow church members. For the Hutterites, *Gelassenheit* has a particular connection to the community of goods. While early Anabaptists did not write a formal treatise on the subject, the theology of discipleship permeates their writings.

In addition to discipleship as a general topic, early Anabaptists devoted considerable energy to defending their views on the memorial of the Lord's Supper, believers' baptism, economic sharing, church discipline, nonresistance, and other church practices as core dimensions of discipleship. Because of high standards for discipleship, disciplinary standards could be intense, leading to several divisions – a problem that continues to plague the tradition. Finally, the experience of persecution led Anabaptists to insist that discipleship meant following Christ all the way to the cross, and through the cross to abundant life.

Bender's 'The Anabaptist Vision' (1944) reinforced the centrality of nonresistant, communal discipleship to the tradition. While Bender already pointed to the way discipleship – by inculcating believers into a distinctive way of life – could shape social criticism, his successor John Howard Yoder developed a comprehensively political account of discipleship (1972). Anabaptist discipleship theology after Yoder has been intensely political, with discipleship community offered as a counter to militarism (Hauerwas 1992), racism (Hart 2020), and other socio-political problems. Some Anabaptist theologians have related Yoder's work to the developing field of political theology (Kroeker 2017; Philips 2012). Feminist theologians are leading the way in grappling with Yoder's personal and

theological failures – most notably his pattern of sexual violence; nevertheless, they have sustained his emphasis on political discipleship (Soto and Stephens 2020).

3.5 Salvation, original sin, and free will in Anabaptist perspective

3.5.1 Salvation

Throughout their history, Anabaptists have typically maintained the Protestant emphasis on the priority of divine grace in salvation (Snyder 1995). However, and in no small part due to their late medieval theological inheritance, Anabaptists have stressed a concept of 'enabling grace' (what some traditions call 'sanctification') over the mainstream Protestant emphasis on objective justification (God's consideration of at least some sinners as righteous regardless of their beliefs or practices). For Anabaptists, the Holy Spirit initiates a process of salvation that takes the visible form of repentance, water baptism, and a life of discipleship in a community of witness. While many Anabaptists have seen repentance and faith as effecting an instant and total transformation (with the correlated expectation of near-perfect discipleship) it is fair to characterize the Anabaptist doctrine of salvation in terms of 'being saved' – that is, as an ongoing life process rather than primarily a status before God. Humans participate in and so are responsible for their salvation, but this responsibility takes place within a synergistic dynamic initiated by God through the Spirit. The Anabaptist theology of enabling grace is therefore complemented by an anthropological and metaphysical understanding in which invisible 'inner' realities are ideally congruent with visible 'outer' realities.

Later on, many Anabaptists began to stress the outward, communally verifiable signs of regeneration rather than the process of regeneration as such. The outer marks of the true church came to be defined with increasing precision according to communal norms – and these became the determinative measures of grace and salvation. Hence, in the surviving Anabaptist groups after the sixteenth century, questions of salvation were often determined by questions of church structure. Many Anabaptists can thus affirm the doctrine of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church there is no salvation), with the qualification that 'church' names communities of disciples whose lives visibly conform to communal standards. On the other hand, some Anabaptists over the centuries have been attracted to the Protestant notion of justification as the core or at least the first step of salvation.

3.5.2 Original sin and free will

Although the early Anabaptists shared the general Western Christian narrative of a 'fall' from innocent creation, they avoided any doctrine of human depravity in which the God-given capacity to respond to grace had been completely obliterated by sin. Instead, they developed the medieval mystical insistence that a vestige of the divine image or natural light in human beings had survived the fall (Kennel 2017). God's Spirit utilized this vestige

to call forth repentance and activate faith resulting in discipleship. Anabaptists deployed the language of 'original sin' to designate the enduring and pervasive harm sin has caused to human nature and ability (Kauffman 1989), but not to indicate a total incapacity to respond to and cooperate with divine initiative.

In this respect, the first Anabaptists also developed late medieval theologies of <u>free will</u>. Divine grace enabled human freedom to decide for or against God's invitation to follow Christ (Snyder 1995: 89; Kauffman 1989). This view put the Anabaptists at odds with Luther, who argued that the human will was completely bound by sin. Hans Denck's 1526 treatise, 'Whether God Is the Cause of Evil', made the Anabaptist point about free will in the mode of theodicy: humans, not God, are responsible for evil because humans, not God, are responsible for their reaction to the gospel message (see Bauman 1991: 72–117). Anabaptists accordingly affirm the reality of both sin and free will. In the twenty-first century, Anabaptist philosopher Nancey Murphy has creatively developed these themes in conversation with neuroscience and other scientific disciplines (Murphy 2006; Murphy and Brown 2009).

3.6 Ecclesiology

3.6.1 Anabaptist ecclesiology

Some scholars see ecclesiology as Anabaptism's primary point of distinction from Catholicism and Protestantism (Murray 2022; Snyder 1995). Early Anabaptist ecclesiology highlighted the visibility of the faith community as the body of Christ. As Snyder put it, 'the anchor of Anabaptist theology and spirituality was [the] community, formed first by the spiritual, and then the water baptism of believers, maintained by fraternal admonition, and nurtured by the Supper of the Lord, by communal worship and visible expressions of love among the members of the body' (1995: 155). These ecclesiological convictions led Anabaptists to support the separation of the church from the state and to reject the notion of an encompassing Christian civic community (*corpus Christianum*) in which everyone is a member from birth – at least after attempts to reform local church and government institutions had failed (Stayer 1976). Since Anabaptists viewed uncoerced, freely chosen repentance and faith as necessary conditions for baptism and church membership, they separated from churches that baptized infants and held what they regarded as low standards for discipleship. Anabaptist congregations throughout the centuries have broadly embodied or at least pursued this ecclesiology.

3.6.2 Marks of Anabaptist ecclesiology

It is possible to identify at least four marks of an Anabaptist ecclesiology: baptism, the ban, the Lord's Supper, and mutual aid or the community of goods (Snyder 1995: 83–100). Anabaptists have developed the medieval Catholic theology of a trifold baptism. The Christian life begins with Spirit baptism – an inward, invisible reality resulting from a

positive response to the Holy Spirit's call to repentance and faith in Christ. Water baptism follows from Spirit baptism as the initial outward or visible step of obedient discipleship through which believers confirm and declare their commitment and are initiated into Christ's body, the church. Thirdly, the suffering witness of the community devoted to the way of the cross has been described in terms of a 'baptism of blood'. The sharp distinction in much Anabaptist theology between church and world finds its theological and practical rationale in the belief that, through baptism, believers transition from one sociological-spiritual reality (the world) to another, purportedly very different one (the church).

The ban – or a version of church discipline that includes total exclusion from Christian community – therefore becomes a central feature of Anabaptist congregations, for without rigorous discipline, the community risks compromising its defining discipleship commitment. Ideally the ban is intended not as punishment, but as an invitation for the unrepentant to experience the consequences of their sin and, in doing so, to be led finally to repentance and reintegration into community. Anabaptist theologians have frequently emphasized the egalitarian character of church discipline – describing it as 'mutual accountability' or 'fraternal admonition' – however, in practice, it has often been the instrument of a strong, largely male leadership. The ecclesiological emphasis on discipline has occasioned much division throughout the history of Anabaptism.

Anabaptists share the Lord's Supper as an expression and renewal of their baptismal pledge. Following the example of Zwingli and the Dutch Sacramentarians, Anabaptists have rejected the models of Catholic transubstantiation and Lutheran consubstantiation, which deal with the presence of Christ in the sacrament in different ways. Anabaptists have focused on the remembrance of Christ's saving sacrifice in obedience to his instructions (Mark 14:22–25). Because Anabaptists stressed the communal dimension of salvation, they saw the memorial Supper as reaffirming personal commitments to follow Christ as well as to serve and care for one another. These commitments have sometimes taken the shape of ritualized feet washing ceremonies. Although an early Anabaptist congregational order recommends frequent partaking of the Supper (see Packull 1995: 303–315), as church discipline came to the fore, its observance became less frequent and prefaced with periods of teaching and repentance.

The testimony of mutual love offered in the Supper took concrete form in economic, social, and political allegiance to the body of Christ, especially as seen in economic sharing. Although the latter was initially understood in terms of a community of goods, only the Hutterites maintained this practice, while other groups instead stressed voluntary mutual aid (Stayer 1991; Packull 1995). Some scholars suggest that commitment to mission could also be regarded as an ecclesial mark for Anabaptists, though persecution quickly limited missionary opportunities (Shenk 1984). Later Anabaptist groups that live in isolated rural communities disengaged from missionary activities have sometimes been known as the

'Quiet in the Land'. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Mennonites in first the Netherlands and then the southern regions of the Russian Empire became very active in the Protestant mission movement. North American Anabaptists followed this lead from the late 1800s. This activity gave rise to new Anabaptist communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – many of which now lead their own missionary endeavours.

Other ecclesiological distinctives include a general tendency towards simplicity and informality, in part due to the early need to meet secretly in homes or forests, or to establish unobtrusive meeting spaces (as in the seventeenth-century Netherlands). While most Anabaptist groups have embraced at least a functional clerical hierarchy, there has also been an emphasis on communal participation. For example, many Anabaptist congregations have included time for discussion and debate in response to teaching and preaching. In particular contexts other issues have been regarded as ecclesiologically definitive – for example, intercultural diversity, nonresistance, the use of oaths, baptismal mode, worship styles, and the roles of women and sexual minorities.

When discussing baptism, discipline, the Lord's Supper, mutual aid, feet washing, and other practices, Anabaptists have often opted for the language of 'ordinances' rather than 'sacraments'. They are 'ordinances' in the sense that they have been ordained by Jesus Christ and so are mandatory for disciples. This language testifies to the priority of obedient discipleship in Anabaptist theology – an emphasis which, combined with stringent discipline, has frequently resulted in legalism. In facing this challenge, some Anabaptist theologians have recently underscored the Spirit's role as gracious initiator and director of the entire Christian life (Pitts 2018).

3.6.3 Church, world, and ecumenism

One of the most interesting elements of Anabaptist ecclesiology is its different views of the church-world relation. Although it is likely that some of the first Anabaptists expected their desired reforms to reshape church and society completely, persecution encouraged the development of a radical 'two kingdoms' theology. In this view, the world is perceived as not governed by God but rather under Satan's dominion, and governments, as part of this satanic order, inevitably employ coercive violence (Snyder 1995: 386). Yet there has always been a plurality of Anabaptist perspectives on this topic. Menno Simons, for example, promulgated a softer dualism in which he both spoke to his congregation as true, nonresistant Christians, and implored secular rulers to live up to their Christian confession by limiting rather than abolishing their use of arms for defensive peacekeeping. This 'Dutch' legacy, which maintains the church-world distinction but envisions a positive role for Christian government, can be seen in the Mennonite colonies in first the Russian Empire and then in Canada and South America. The more strictly dualistic 'Swiss-German' legacy has shaped Mennonites and Amish in the United States, though even here there is some variation. African, Asian, and Latin American Anabaptists exhibit similar complexity.

Colombian Mennonites, for example, have leveraged their commitment to the church's embodiment of nonviolence into an important role in their country's peace process. While some Tanzanian Mennonites serve in the military, the church's witness has led to its involvement in national Muslim-Christian peacebuilding efforts.

Because Anabaptists have traditionally understood other Christian communities as belonging to 'the world' (the history of persecution should not be forgotten here) they have historically prioritized ecumenical and interreligious relations less than other Christian denominations. A grassroots ecumenism has nevertheless broken out in certain contexts, such as the relationship between persecuted Swiss Anabaptists and the 'truehearted' Reformed Christians who protected them. In colonial Pennsylvania, Anabaptists often had friendly connections with Quakers and Pietists. More recently, Javanese Mennonites have collaborated with neighbouring Muslims, while at annual Bridgefolk gatherings in the United States, Catholics and Mennonites join together for study and worship. More generally, Anabaptist communities have always been shaped by complex interactions with other Christians, and their responses to those interactions have contributed to both division and renewal.

Recently, Anabaptists have become involved in formal ecumenical and interreligious efforts. During the first half of the twentieth century, Anabaptists and Quakers organized several Historic Peace Church Conferences to coordinate their lobbying efforts for recognition of conscientious objectors and to promote peace witness among their own members. Since 1967, Anabaptists have also participated in a series of Believers' Church Conferences with Baptists, Pentecostals, and churches descended from the Restoration Movement. In the twenty-first century, Mennonite World Conference has engaged in official dialogues with Catholics and Lutherans on baptism. German Mennonite theologian Fernando Enns has been a significant participant in the World Council of Churches and was central to that organization's 'Decade to Overcome Violence' project (2001–2010). Enns's writings on ecumenism urge Anabaptists to grapple with the unity of the church and the trinitarian basis of that unity (Enns 2007). Canadian Mennonites have also engaged in dialogue with Shi'a Muslims from Iran. Recent grappling with Mennonite complicity in the Holocaust has led to a dialogue with Jews, and similar efforts to face Mennonite participation in colonialism spurred the formation of a coalition of Indigenous and other Mennonites to oppose the ongoing legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery (the legal framework that justified European colonization from the late fifteenth century).

These activities suggest that Anabaptists teach and embody no single view of 'church and world', even if the tradition is marked by a strong sense of the church's witness as distinct from the world.

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