

# The Anabaptists and Holy Scripture

There is something appealing about the Anabaptists. Their ideals of Christian discipleship, liberty, love of the brethren, discipline, and holiness of life, not to mention their cruel sufferings, attract our attention. Theirs was an uncomplicated Christianity unencumbered by what they saw as the abstract theological reasoning that occupied the minds of their Reformed and Roman Catholic contemporaries, the ‘learned ones’ as Menno Simons often called them. To an Anabaptist, truth lay not so much in doctrine as in the experience of taking up the cross of Christ and following Him, even to death.

As the history of Anabaptism has become better known, interest and support has increased. This has taken on different forms. Some look to the Anabaptists as an important link in a succession of Baptist groups stretching back to the apostles themselves. In other, more radical minds, nothing short of a full recovery of the liberal Anabaptist principles of love and peace is the great need of the hour. A network of neo-Anabaptist fellowships is currently emerging in the United Kingdom, drawing support from individuals across the theological spectrum, from Roman Catholic to Quaker. And the very fact that the sixteenth-century Anabaptists were neither Protestant nor Catholic is being used in the service of ecumenism.<sup>1</sup>

## **Biblicism**

To an evangelical, one of the main attractions of the Anabaptists and their movement is what is generally regarded as their high view of Scripture. The Bible was their sole authority. In debates with their opponents it was the Bible alone on which Anabaptists were prepared to defend their case, without any reference to creeds, church fathers or other human authority. This set them apart not only from their Roman Catholic adversaries but from their Protestant ones too. It was the cause of much frustration on the part of the Anabaptists that their opponents kept on referring back to creeds and councils rather than simply to Scripture. At his trial in 1527 Michael Sattler stated to the court in typical fashion, ‘send for the most learned men and for the sacred books of the Bible in whatsoever language they may be and let them confer with us in the Word of God. If they prove to us with the Holy Scriptures that we err and are in the wrong, we will gladly desist and recant...’<sup>2</sup> Very few Anabaptist leaders recanted.

When Anabaptists entered into debates with the Reformed clergy, as the Swiss Brethren did at Zofingen in 1532 and Bern in 1538, they recognized only one standard: ‘We hold that all things should be proven to ascertain what is founded on the Holy Word of God,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Klaassen. *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant*, (Kitchener, OR: Pandora Press, 2001 [3rd ed.])

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Trial and Martyrdom of Michael Sattler’ in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*; ed. G. H. Williams and Angel M. Mergel, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 141-2.

for this will stand when heaven and earth pass away, as Christ Himself said.’<sup>3</sup> The Anabaptists regularly confounded their critics by their deep knowledge of the Scriptures and the ease with which they were able to quote them. No doubt this was because Anabaptist leaders encouraged their people to read and study the Bible. Pilgram Marpeck, a leader of the Southern German Anabaptists, wrote in 1542,

‘We would certainly admonish every Christian to be on the alert and personally to study the Scriptures, and have a care lest he permit himself to be easily moved and led away from Scripture and apostolic doctrine by strange teaching and understanding. But let every one, according to Scripture and apostolic teaching, strive with great diligence to do God’s will, seeing that the Word of Truth could not fail us nor mislead us.’<sup>4</sup>

Would that we all took heed to this admonition today, not reading the Scriptures in a superficial manner and without understanding, but taking time to search out their meaning and applying that meaning to our daily life and walk, both as individuals and as churches. How better equipped we would be to counter the ‘strange teachings’ of our own day.

### **The Anabaptist’s Bible**

The translation used by German speaking Anabaptists would at first have been early but incomplete editions of Luther’s Bible, published by one of the most talented printers in Switzerland, Christoph Froschauer of Zurich. Froschauer was a Bavarian by birth, but having arrived in Zurich and making it his adopted home in 1519 he gave his support to the reforming labours of Ulrich Zwingli. Froschauer was something of a radical and in 1522 he protested against the Catholic Church’s Lenten fast by cooking sausages in his printing works!

In 1529 Luther’s Bible was still lacking a translation of the Prophets so Froschauer inserted a separate rendering of these books, based on the work of two Anabaptists, Hans Denck and Ludwig Haetzer, which they had published in Worms a couple of years earlier. Thus the complete ‘Froschauer Bible’ was published in 1529, several years before Luther’s translation would be ready, and it became the favoured version of Anabaptists and their successors for many generations.

Even earlier, in 1526, a complete Dutch Bible had been published by Jacob van Liesveldt, a printer in Antwerp. He based his translation partly on the Latin Vulgate and for

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted by John C. Wenger in ‘The Biblicism of the Anabaptists’. *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*; ed. Guy F. Hershberger, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1957) p. 169.

<sup>4</sup>*The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, p. 168.

the rest relied on what was available of Luther's German Bible. In 1560 a Mennonite called Nicholas Biestkens published the whole of Luther's Bible in Dutch, 'with certain words reflecting Mennonite usage and experience'.<sup>5</sup> No doubt for this reason the Biestkens translation became very popular amongst the Mennonites and quickly ran to a hundred or so editions.

We need to bear in mind that virtually all Anabaptist groups recognised the Apocrypha as belonging to the inspired Scriptures. One will find quotes from apocryphal books dotted throughout Anabaptist writings, even those of Menno Simons and others considered to be the more orthodox. This immediately put them at variance with the Reformers and all their evangelical successors, but at one with the Roman Catholic Church.

### **The authority of Scripture**

Menno Simons called the Scriptures 'the true witness of the Holy Ghost and criterion of our consciences'.<sup>6</sup> Concerning their authority he declared,

'We certainly hope no one of a rational mind will be so foolish a man as to deny that the whole Scriptures, both the Old and New Testament, were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction, and that they are the true sceptre and rule by which the Lord's kingdom, house, church, and congregation must be ruled and governed. Everything contrary to Scripture, therefore, whether it be in doctrines, beliefs, sacraments, worship, or life, should be measured by this infallible rule and demolished by this just and divine sceptre, and destroyed without any respect of persons.'<sup>7</sup>

Menno's friend and colleague Dirk Phillips was of the same mind:

'...it is evident that what ever God has not commanded and has not instituted with express words of Scripture, He does not want observed, nor does He want to be served therewith, nor will He have His Word set aside nor made to suit the pleasure of men....'<sup>8</sup>

All this looks perfectly acceptable, much like what is today called 'the regulative principle', and we would have little difficulty in agreeing with it. Indeed, we wish that many

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<sup>5</sup> G H Williams. *The Radical Reformation*, (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Truman State University Press, 2000 [3rd ed.]) p. 1244.

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1956) p. 89

<sup>7</sup> *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, p. 160.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, p. 168.

more would say these things, but all is not what it might seem. One must not forget, first, that the Anabaptists gave the Apocrypha equal authority to the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments, and, secondly, that there existed within the wider Anabaptist movement a mystical strand of thought.

*The outer and the inner word*

This strand, found especially among the South German Anabaptists, stemmed from their underlying dualism and the application of that dualism to the doctrine of Scripture. According to this group the written word is merely physical and material and therefore has no spiritual power; it has no power to save. Hans Denck wrote in his *Recantation* of 1527,

‘I value the Holy Scripture above all human treasures but not as high as the Word of God, which is living, powerful and eternal, and which is free and unencumbered by all the elements of this world. For insofar as it is God Himself it is spirit and not letter, written without pen and paper that it may never be expunged. Therefore also salvation cannot be tied to the Scriptures, however important and good they may be with respect to it.’<sup>9</sup>

This paragraph illustrates a difficulty in trying to get to grips with Anabaptist doctrine. While they used Scriptural and familiar evangelical terms, what they meant by them was often quite different from what we mean by them. Notice that Denck makes a distinction between Holy Scripture and the Word of God. By the Word he appears to have in mind a spiritual power that he does not even identify as the Son of God but as ‘spirit’. Does he mean the Holy Spirit? If so, by referring to the third person of the glorious Trinity as ‘it’ Denck is expressing a view widely held among the more mystical of the Anabaptists, that the Holy Spirit is only a power, not a person. Whatever or whoever Denck meant by this ‘spirit’, he clearly sees it as a ‘spirit’ that works independently of Holy Scripture.

Furthermore, Denck’s attitude toward the Scriptures is so derogatory as to be offensive to any true lover of God’s Word. One cannot imagine him expressing himself in the terms of the psalmist, ‘Thy word is very pure; therefore thy servant loveth it’ (Ps. 119:140), or the prophet, ‘Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart’ (Jer. 15:16).

Some Anabaptist historians, embarrassed by Denck’s views, attempt to put him on the fringes of the movement, but his influence was far too widespread. Banished from one city he would move on to the next so that first Nuremberg, briefly St. Gall, then Augsburg, Strasbourg, Worms, and finally Basle came under his influence. Henry Vedder, in his *Short History of the Baptists*, says of Denck, ‘He was one of the most influential thinkers in

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<sup>9</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1981) p. 142.

Germany, and probably had in the South and West a greater following than Luther, in recognition of which fact his opponents not infrequently called him “the Anabaptist pope”.<sup>10</sup> Others variously called him the ‘head’ and ‘the Apollo’ of the Anabaptists. Denck was hardly a fringe figure.

In June 1527 Jacob Kautz, one of Denck’s disciples and the one-time Lutheran pastor in Worms, nailed a set of seven theses onto the door of Worms Cathedral, just as Luther had fixed his to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral ten years earlier. It was the customary method for calling a debate. In Kautz’ first two statements the influence of Denck is clear:

‘1. The word which we speak with our mouths, hear with our ears, write with our hands and print onto paper is not the living, true, eternal Word of God. It is only a witness, pointing to the inner Word.

‘2. Nothing external, neither Word, sign, sacrament or promise, has the power to assure the inner man, comfort him, or make him sure that he is doing what is right.’<sup>11</sup>

Here again it is unclear who or what this ‘inner word’ is supposed to be. One can only conclude that it is the voice of God, the Holy Spirit, spoken directly into the heart of the believer independently of Scripture.

Reference is sometimes made to the ‘strict Biblicism’ of the Hutterites but even the Hutterite leader Ulrich Stadler, in his essay *The Living and the Written Word*, follows precisely the same line of thought as that of Denck and Kautz, putting him much closer to the company of modern Charismatics than Biblical evangelicals. In fact, what we have here is a none too subtle denial of the ‘means of grace’. All three men taught that the outer word is simply a sign or witness to the inner word. ‘It is like a sign on an inn which witnesses to the wine in the cellar. But the sign is not the wine.’<sup>12</sup> ‘The true inner Word’, Stadler goes on to say, ‘is the eternal almighty power of God’,<sup>13</sup> and this power is not given by means of the outer Word, i.e., the Scriptures, whether read or preached, but through personal experience and especially suffering.

## **Preaching**

Not surprisingly, teaching like this had a profound effect on the Anabaptist view of preaching. Stadler wrote:

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Vedder. *A Short History of the Baptists*, ([www.reformedreader.org/history/vedder.ch11.htm](http://www.reformedreader.org/history/vedder.ch11.htm))

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Peter Hoover. *The Secret of The Strength*, ([www.gw.org/Sos/Sos07.htm](http://www.gw.org/Sos/Sos07.htm))

<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Stadler. ‘Concerning the Living and the Written Word’ in *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 143. More of Stadler’s writings can be found at <http://www.anabaptistchurch.org/Stadler.htm>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

‘the preached word is only the witness or sign of the true Word. This eternal Word is not written on paper or tablet. Nor is it spoken or preached. God Himself assures man of it in the abyss of the soul.’<sup>14</sup>

He applies this idea to Romans 10:17, creating an unwarranted distinction between the preached word and the Word of God:

‘Thus Paul says that faith comes through hearing the preaching, but hearing through the word of God.’<sup>15</sup>

What we have here in the writings of these men is a denial of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the preaching of the Scriptures. To them preaching is not a means of grace but is merely the speaking of words that go no further than the ears and can never be a savour of life unto life in those who are saved, nor yet a savour of death unto death in those who perish (*cf.* 2 Cor. 2:14-16). Whether one has the Scriptures or not, whether one can read them or not, and whether one has a preacher or not, matters not. That which saves is the inner word, the voice of God in the soul, and one can hear it without having the Scriptures. Thus Denck is able to assert,

‘a person, who has been chosen by God, may be saved without preaching and Scriptures, but that if salvation were tied to preaching and Scripture all those who are unlearned would not be able to attain salvation because they cannot read and the consequences would be that many cities and lands would be lost because they had no preacher sent from God.’<sup>16</sup>

While it is true that there must be an inner call of God, a work of effectual grace in the soul, as well as the preaching of the gospel, it is also true that God performs these saving works using the means of His objective written Word and His servants who preach it. Denck believed that even the heathen who has never seen a Bible with his eyes and never heard the gospel with his ears may still be saved by the inner word of God spoken directly into his soul. If that were the case, one wonders, why did Peter preach the gospel on the day of Pentecost? And what was the need for a gift of tongues, enabling men ‘out of every nation under heaven’ to understand the preaching (Acts 2:5)?

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Denck. ‘Recantation’, *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 142

Luther understood this and argued his case effectively. The reason why the Word goes no further than the eyes and ears of men lies not in the Word itself but in the one who is reading it and listening to it. It is not because the Word read or preached is a dead letter, mere ink and paper, that it has no effect in a great many cases, but because man without the Holy Spirit is unable to understand it and believe it. Luther saw clearly that since the Word of God is spiritual, ‘understanding of these words that I hear must be wrought in me by the Holy Spirit. He makes me spiritual too. The Word is spiritual and I also become spiritual: for He inscribes it in my heart, and then, in brief, all is spirit.’<sup>17</sup>

To Luther Word and Spirit were inseparable. He insisted correctly that the Holy Spirit works only through the Word: ‘The Spirit is given to no one without and outside the Word; He is given only through the Word.’<sup>18</sup> Thus, ‘faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom 10:17).

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### *The interpretation of Scripture*

One will find it hard to discover in the writings of the early Anabaptists any systematic teaching on the interpretation of Scripture, though both Reformer and Anabaptist agreed on the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. The *sola scriptura* of the Reformation the Anabaptists took closely to heart and they sought to apply it with vigour, so much so that it opened up an important difference between the two parties.

The Anabaptists held that every believer is able to interpret the Scriptures ‘afresh, independently from other teachers’.<sup>19</sup> They disdained education and scholarship and, as we have noted already, they rejected the church councils and creeds. One Anabaptist, Leonard Schiemer, said of the Reformers or ‘Scripture experts’ as he called them, ‘They do not have their skill from God nor are they taught by God. They have all their knowledge from other Christians and have stolen it out of their books.’<sup>20</sup>

Some Anabaptists went so far as to destroy books. In 1534 Bernard Rothman, the Reformer of Münster turned Anabaptist, declared,

‘Since the apostasy first began through human writing and teaching by means of which the divine Scriptures were darkened, the Almighty has among us provided that all writings both new and old which are not biblical should be destroyed, so that we cling only to the Holy

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted by A. Skevington Wood in *Captive to the Word*, (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1969) p. 161.

<sup>18</sup> *Captive to the Word*, p. 161.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Friedmann. *The Theology of Anabaptism*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998) p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard Schiemer. ‘Letter to the Church of God at Rattenberg’, *Sources of South German/Austrian Anabaptism*, (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2001) p. 67

Scriptures.... For he who holds only to the Scriptures needs no other writings.’<sup>21</sup>

This book burning incident took place in Münster on 15th March 1534.

The perceived virtue of interpreting Scripture ‘afresh’ and ‘independently from other teachers’ lay at the heart of Anabaptism and its errors. It was a dangerous development that led them into false doctrines and novel, individualistic interpretations that separated them from not only the Reformers but from all sound theological moorings in the church of the past. At heart this kind of theological independence is a form of spiritual pride and self-assurance that, whenever it rears its head, leads to sectarianism. Indeed, it was this characteristic that, irrespective of anything else they may have stood for, marked out the Anabaptists as sectarian. Quite how far it took them from biblical Christianity only a careful study of their doctrinal beliefs will reveal, but it was a rejection of fifteen hundred years of the Holy Spirit’s presence and work in the church and goes a long way to explain how the Anabaptist Movement became so diverse.

#### *The Old and New Testaments*

One subject that deeply exercised the hearts and minds of both Anabaptist and Reformer was the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. In the late 1540s Pilgram Marpeck and some of his co-workers wrote an 800-page treatise on the subject called *Explanation of the Testaments*, of which only the preface has so far been translated into English. This document reveals that within Anabaptism there existed a primitive form of what we would now call Dispensationalism. Marpeck objected strongly to calling Old Testament believers ‘Christians’,<sup>22</sup> and it was generally understood among the Anabaptists that the Old Testament was given solely to the Jews and was not authoritative for New Testament saints.

In a statement made by one of the founders of the Strasbourg Anabaptist community, Hans Pfistermeyer, we can detect this Dispensationalist emphasis. Pfistermeyer was called in 1531 to defend himself before the Reformed clergy of Bern and, although he soon recanted of his errors, his comments illustrate the point:

‘The New Testament is better than the Old. The Old was fulfilled and interpreted by Christ. Christ taught a higher and better way and made with his people a new covenant. I make a great difference between the Old and New Testament and believe that the New Covenant which

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<sup>21</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1978) pp. 555-566.

was made with us is much better than the old that was made with the Jews.’<sup>23</sup>

On the same occasion Pfistermeyer said,

‘I accept the Old Testament wherever it points to Christ. However, Christ came with a more exalted and perfect teaching. He showed his people a new covenant which they would need if their righteousness were to exceed that of the scribes and hypocrites.’<sup>24</sup>

But where does the Old Testament *not* point to Christ? That was the very purpose of the old covenant writings as Menno Simons, to his credit, was ready to admit: ‘All the Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, on every hand, point us to Christ Jesus’.<sup>25</sup> He says too, ‘...the whole Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction’.<sup>26</sup> But still he calls the Old Testament ‘the dispensation of imperfectness’ so that when Christ gives us instruction on how to live He does not point us to that former imperfect period, the Law, but teaches us His own doctrine in the ‘dispensation of perfectness’. So, for example, while the old allowed the swearing of oaths, the new does not.<sup>27</sup>

Anabaptists attacked the underlying spiritual character of the Old Covenant, viewing it only as earthly, physical and carnal, much as Dispensationalists do today. Marpeck, for example, rejected the fundamental identity of the Old and New Covenants and denied that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and their like were actually saved by faith in the promises and that such faith was reckoned to them for righteousness.<sup>28</sup> According to his *Explanation*, old testament souls had no experience of salvation, no grace, and no hope of heaven but were destined to suffer the torments of hell until Christ came to preach the gospel to them after his death. Balthazar Hubmaier, the only university-trained theologian amongst the Anabaptists, taught the same medieval error.<sup>29</sup> Marpeck contested that ‘Before Christ, no one ascended into heaven’,<sup>30</sup> even though the Word of God is quite specific that Elijah went up ‘into heaven’ (2 Kings 2:11). Jesus, in His parable of the rich man and Lazarus, describes

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Peter Hoover. *The Secret of The Strength*, ([www.gw.org/Sos/Sos09.htm](http://www.gw.org/Sos/Sos09.htm))

<sup>24</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup> *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, p. 749.

<sup>26</sup> *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, p. 159.

<sup>27</sup> *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, pp. 518-521.

<sup>28</sup> *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, p. 123-4.

<sup>29</sup> *Balthazar Hubmaier*, (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1989) p. 347-8.

<sup>30</sup> *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, p. 125.

Abraham's bosom as a place of comfort while the place of torments was afar off, separated by a gulf so great that none could cross (Luke 16:19-31).

Surely the beautiful opening of Psalm 32 alone makes it quite clear that in old testament times too forgiveness was a present and glorious reality: 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.' (Ps. 32:1,2) Or Psalm 85:2: 'Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin.' While it is true that the Passover and the Levitical sacrifices were mere shadows that could not in themselves accomplish any spiritual good, they were, even so, gospel pointing forward to the one sacrifice for sin at Calvary, the Lamb 'slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev. 13:8).

### *The Scriptures in Worship*

In 1527 Michael Sattler compiled the first Anabaptist 'Confession of Faith', the *Scheitheim Confession*, in which the office of 'shepherd' was formally recognized. Sattler defines the shepherd's role as being 'to read and exhort and teach, warn, admonish, or ban in the congregation, and properly to preside among the sisters and brothers in prayer, and in the breaking of bread, and in all things to take care of the body of Christ'.<sup>31</sup> This certainly has its merits but Anabaptists in general rejected the preaching 'monologue'.

The desire for believers to interpret the Scriptures 'afresh' had a profound influence on the conduct of Anabaptist worship. The earliest known Anabaptist *Congregational Order*, published in 1527, states:

'1. The brothers and sisters should meet at least three or four times a week, to exercise themselves in the teaching of Christ and his apostles and heartily to exhort one another to remain faithful to the Lord as they have pledged.

'2. When the brothers and sisters are together, they should take up something to read together. The one to whom God has given the best understanding shall explain it, the others should be still and listen, so that there are not two or three carrying on a private conversation, bothering the others.'<sup>32</sup>

This says nothing of a designated pastor or teacher and, by leaving the exposition of Scripture open to 'the one to whom God has given the best understanding', it raises the possibility that it may have been a different brother on different occasions. This is the

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<sup>31</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 121.

<sup>32</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 120.

practice in some evangelical fellowships today and, apart from its intrinsic disorderliness, hardly lends itself to a consistent expository ministry of the Word.

Ambrosius Spitelmaier, a South German Anabaptist, described their meetings in these terms: ‘When they come together they teach one another the divine Word and one asks the other: how do you understand this saying?’<sup>33</sup> A more sure way of sowing confusion and error can hardly be imagined.

A Swiss Brethren tract, published during the years 1532-1540, states that in a congregational assembly ‘the gifts of inner operation of the spirit in each one serve the common good (1 Cor. 12. Eph. 4).’ Notice again the stress laid on the ‘inner operation of the spirit’ rather than the objective, written Scriptures of God. The tract then goes on to commend the situation described in 1 Corinthians 14 and draws the following conclusion,

‘When someone comes to church and constantly hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent, neither speaking nor prophesying, who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation, or confess according to 1 Cor. 14 that God is dwelling and operating in them through his Holy Spirit with his gifts, impelling them one after the other in the above mentioned order of speaking and prophesying?’<sup>34</sup>

One final example of this kind of thing can be found in Leopold Scharnschlager’s *Mutual Order* of 1540. The author was an Anabaptist elder and associate of Pilgram Marpeck. He wrote:

‘When they come together and they have no appointed leader, they should admonish one another among them whom they regard as capable in a friendly and pleasant manner to read or speak to them according to his God-given gift. Or else someone may personally offer himself for service out of love. One after another should be allowed to speak - depending upon whether something has been given to him as Paul teaches (1 Cor. 14) - and offer his gifts for the improvement of the members in order that our congregation be not like those falsely claiming to be such where only one and no one else may speak.’<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 124.

<sup>34</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 126.

<sup>35</sup> *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 127.

While open worship has long been a characteristic of some fellowships, siren voices that mock the centrality of preaching are now being heard within much more traditional evangelical and Reformed circles. Christians are growing weary of the preacher's monologue, so-called. Pulpits are being dismantled and the cry is going up for everyone to have their say.

The Scriptural basis often given for this approach is the same one that the Anabaptists used, 1 Corinthians 14:26, 'How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying.' What these people tend to overlook is the opening words of the verse, 'How is it then, brethren?'. Paul is recounting to the Corinthians what he has seen, the state of worship as he finds it among them and, as with so much else at Corinth, he is not pleased. Their worship is not 'unto edifying'.

Far from commending the Corinthians for their worship practices and setting them up as an example for others to follow, he is correcting them. Corinthian worship was marked by chaos, not only in the general disorder and noise that ensues when many people speak at once, but in doctrinal confusion: 'every one of you hath a doctrine'.

This was also the time of apostolic gifts and direct revelation. Paul was concerned because everyone in the church was claiming a revelation or an interpretation for themselves, perhaps even contradicting each other. Many different languages were being spoken too. One can only imagine the babble and confusion that must have reigned before Paul intervened. Today we do not have direct revelation, and we do not have congregations of people speaking a diversity of languages. We have Scripture and, usually, we have one language spoken and understood by all. If the practices of Corinth were wrong then, they are much more so now.

### *Conclusion*

Yes, the attractiveness of Anabaptism is superficial. Scratch beneath the surface and a wide range of serious errors on even the basics of the gospel comes to light. This very brief survey of Anabaptist views of Scripture has thrown up a number of idiosyncrasies that the Reformers recognised as false doctrine and sought to refute. Hopefully their modern evangelical counterparts will exercise similar discernment as Anabaptism once again finds favour.

John Hooper