

Anabaptism, Extreme or Example

Dear sisters, it is my honour and privilege to address you this morning on a subject taken from church history: the subject of Anabaptism, or the Anabaptist movement of the year 1525 and following two or three decades.

1. Introduction

You may wonder why I have chosen to speak to you about this particular subject. Well, as you know, I and my family have only come to Australia recently, in February 2004. Upon arriving in our new country, we found that many things were the same as in The Netherlands and many other things were very different. This also applies to the church. The liturgy of the worship services for one is largely the same, as are the existence of men's and women's clubs and such. This very Women's League Day has its equivalent in the Vrouwen Bondsdag in The Netherlands.

But there are also differences. Especially in what one may call the church-culture or tradition. In the last 20 or so years the churches in The Netherlands have become more *open* churches, meaning that the awareness of the church's task for the world has grown considerably. In my opinion that is a positive development, however not without serious risk. Be that as it may, in Australia we found that the church is very much (and I'm generalizing of course) a *closed* church. The Australian society and culture is seen as a threat rather than the place where Christians can make a difference.

Now when I talked about this with brs and srs, some of them would agree with me and mention Anabaptism in this context. They said that in some ways our churches in Australia are like the Anabaptists of the early 16th century. Our churches, it is said, shield themselves from the world just like the Anabaptists did. I found that quite a far-reaching statement to make, since the Anabaptists are not people we think of fondly in our circles, to say the least. But it also made

me curious. So, I turned to study Anabaptism to see if this statement was true and if our churches could learn anything from a comparison of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia with the Anabaptist movement.

So, there you have it: the reason why I chose this subject and the goal of our discussion today. Do we dismiss Anabaptism as a remarkable extreme of the Reformation era, or can we learn from their teachings? The answer to that question, that's what we're after today.

Before we begin our investigation there are two preliminary remarks I have to make about Anabaptism and Anabaptist theology: First of all, Anabaptism is a movement that is not restricted to the first few decades of the 16th century. In fact, Anabaptism is still very much alive in our time. A simple search on the Internet shows that the movement lives on in for instance the Mennonites and the Amish communities in North America. Our study today however, is limited to the period of, say, 1525 to 1550, the period of *historical* Anabaptism.

Second, when we set out to describe Anabaptist theology, we must realise that there is hardly such a thing as a unified Anabaptist theology. We will find that the movement was largely one of the simple people. The early days of Anabaptism saw many charismatic leaders but only few of them had enjoyed any proper theological education. The Anabaptist movement was therefore a colourful one. Different teachers taught different teachings. Different communities came into existence, in several different regions of Europe, and most of them had their own rules. There are however some noticeable *common beliefs*. These are the ones we will investigate and evaluate.

2. Anabaptism vs. Reformation¹

It is safe to say that without the Great Reformation there would not have been Anabaptism because the Anabaptist movement is in fact a reaction to the beginning of the Reformation in Switzerland. Ulrich Zwingli was its leader in the

¹ From Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, Illinois 2004, pp. 17vv.

city of Zürich. When Zwingli first began his work in Zürich, he found great support among the common people, so great even that he was called the 'people's priest'. He challenged many practices of the civil authority and of the church with the Biblical testimony in hand.

To begin with, he opposed the system of tithing. The church and city councils had always imposed this system on the people as a divine obligation. But Zwingli said the Bible describes tithes simply as a voluntary contribution. At the so-called First Zürich Disputation on January 29, 1523, the city council gathered to discuss several charges against Zwingli's position. Zwingli treated this assembly as an official assembly of the Zürich church, much to the consternation of the Roman Catholic officials. The council dismissed all the charges and acquitted Zwingli.

In spite of this success Zwingli moderated his tone some time later. But he still found support from some of his young students. They were drawn to him because he still quite clearly wanted to reform the church in Zurich solely on a scriptural basis.

But at the Second Zürich Disputation of October 26-28, 1523, a break occurred between Zwingli and many of his followers. The issue that caused this split was the matter of the use of images and the celebration of the Roman Catholic Mass. Yet, even more fundamental was Zwingli's position on the relation between church and state, which came to the fore in the course of the discussion about the Mass. At the disputation most participants found the Mass idolatrous, including Zwingli and his students. Therefore, Zwingli asked the city council to decide how to go about abolishing it. But then some objected. The radical followers of Zwingli felt that decisions like the one about the Mass should be made on the basis of Scripture alone and by the church itself. But Zwingli felt that the civil government was allowed to regulate such reforms. Zwingli clearly thought in terms of the state-church, while his radical followers

thought in terms of the free church, they wanted state and church to be totally separated.

So, in the opinion of the followers of Zwingli, his Reformation wasn't quite radical enough. These men became the first Anabaptists. Which brings us to the most distinguishing mark of the Anabaptist movement: adult or believers' baptism.

2. Anabaptism and Baptism

"On January 21, 1525, a dozen or so men slowly trudged through the snow. Quietly but resolutely, singly or in pairs they came by night to the home of one Felix Manz. The chill of the winter wind blowing off the lake did not match the chill of disappointment that gripped the little band that fateful night. Once gathered in the house the men prayed together. Then George Blaurock stood up and asked Conrad Grebel to baptise him with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. Grebel did as he was asked and then Blaurock proceeded to baptise all the others present. The newly baptised then pledged themselves as true disciples of Christ to live lives separated from the world and to teach the gospel and hold the faith."² This is the prosaic account of the birth of Anabaptism; the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren was constituted.

There is no doubt that the practice of re-baptizing or ana-baptizing marks the most fundamental difference between Anabaptists and the Reformers. In that respect the name Anabaptism is well chosen. But the Anabaptists themselves did not like this name very much at all. They themselves would rather use the name Baptists³ or something to that effect, for they claimed that infant baptism was not a proper Biblical practice, let alone a holy sacrament. They denied that baptism was a sign of the covenant, which continued and came in the place of the sign of circumcision of the Old Testament. Since

² William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, Nashville 1996, p. 13v, who quotes from *The Large Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren*.

³ Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, Nashville 1995, p. 248.

therefore infant baptism was not a legitimate baptism in their view, no one who was baptised as an infant was essentially baptised again.

The Anabaptists based their teachings of believers' baptism on the text of the New Testament.⁴ Many texts in the New Testament indicate that conversion occurs in a specific order. First comes the preaching and teaching, then comes faith, and then comes baptism. Texts like Rom. 6:3-11 stress that baptism is participating in Jesus' resurrection. Transforming communion with the risen Lord must be conscious and chosen. Therefore, the Anabaptists claimed that baptism should be administered to those who believe, to those who consciously accept the gospel and willingly begin a new life.

John Calvin was the first of many Reformers to argue extensively that baptism was the successor of Old Testament circumcision and could therefore be performed on infants to signify their inclusion in the covenant with God and its promises.⁵ Calvin thought for one that the Anabaptist position was biblicistic. They said that the Bible didn't teach explicitly that infants should be baptised. Calvin responded that the Bible doesn't say explicitly either that women should be baptised. But the Anabaptists don't teach that do they!?⁶ Calvin has more substantive arguments as well.⁷ He shows convincingly that the Old Testament circumcision and the New Testament baptism both indicate the same doctrinal truth: they entail the renewing of life and the promise of the forgiveness of sins. There is of course a connection between baptism and faith, as the Anabaptists said. But inside the covenant of grace that connection is with the faith of the parents, while outside of the covenant it is with the faith of the person who wants to be admitted to the covenant. Such a person needs to be taught first before he is baptised.

⁴ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 160vv.

⁵ Compare article 34 of the *Belgic Confession*, last paragraph, which deals with the Anabaptist heresy regarding the rejection of infant baptism.

⁶ W. Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse Radikalen*, Amsterdam 1973, p. 219vv.

⁷ John Calvin, *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, Grand Rapids 1982, p. 44vv.

The background of the Anabaptist' teachings about believers' baptism is found in their conviction that the true church should always be community of true believers.⁸ Only true believers should be allowed to be members of the church and as such be baptised. In the New Testament they found no alliance between state and church. They found that the apostolic churches were communities of men and women who had freely and personally chosen to follow Jesus.

Zwingli and the Lutherans wanted church and state to coincide. To this the Anabaptists objected. Only those who had experienced personal spiritual regeneration were meant to be baptised. This would keep unbelievers away and it would keep the church separated from the state. And to *keep* the church a true church of true believers, church discipline should be exercised in a very strict manner.

3. Church Discipline and the Ban

To describe the Anabaptist practice of church discipline, we turn our attention to a man who played an important part in Anabaptist history: Jacob Hutter.⁹ He emerges as the Anabaptist's main leader in Tyrol, Austria. The Anabaptists there wanted to live in close communities, which included sharing of goods, an ideal they based on Acts 2. But the persecution was severe in Tyrol which made it impossible to have such communities there. Therefore, Jacob Hutter called his followers to Moravia, where they would practice a truly biblical lifestyle.

This kind of communal life, separated from the world outside, was to be safeguarded by means of strict discipline and strict communal structures. This resulted in church discipline being used improperly and without patience or much compassion. In the years after 1530 there were many splits among the

⁸ Shelley, *a.w.*, p. 248v.

⁹ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 31vv. See also: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hutterites>.

Anabaptist groups, all trying to find the proper biblical way of communal living. These splits were quite often enforced with the ban, i.e. excommunication. For instance, at Auspitz the wife of leader Zaunring was banned for adultery. Then Zaunring himself was banned for treating her sympathetically. One George Schützinger was banned for hoarding money, although he publicly repented. Hutter also banned some other troublemakers. They joined two nearby communities, the Philippites and Gabrielites. Then Hutter's followers banned both entire communities. They in turn issued counter-bans. Eventually the Hutterites are the only community that persisted, even to this day.

Let me give another example of how the ban was used: from 1542 to 1556 the Hutterites were led by Peter Riedemann. He understood salvation in terms of divinisation, a profound transformation through participation in the divine nature. Lust for earthly things was the root of sin, he claimed. This sin led to private possessions. Therefore, he said, all possessions must be shared with the commune, enforced by the ban. This concept of divinisation as true salvation was typical for the Hutterites, but it was also found in other Anabaptist communities. It explains the uncompromising exercise of church discipline. The members of the church were expected to participate in Christ's divine nature if they were to be true believers. They *could* therefore not sin. It was concluded that those who *did* sin, were not true believers and should therefore be excommunicated from the church.

John Calvin passionately opposed such practice of church discipline.¹⁰ For one, he pointed to the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. In that letter Paul admonishes and warns the church of Corinth because of great sin in the congregation. But he still addresses the church of Corinth as the church of God and he writes to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (1 Cor. 1:2)!

The apostle makes clear that there can be no perfect and sinless church on this earth. Yet this was what the Anabaptists wanted. Only the sins committed

¹⁰ Calvin, *a.w.*, p. 56vv.

in ignorance can be forgiven, they said. Any other sin, public or secret, done willingly or knowingly was a sin against the Holy Spirit and cannot be forgiven. Anyone who would commit a public sin, would be excommunicated immediately.

Calvin condemns this practice in the harshest of words. He says that this view is a detestable blasphemy against the grace of God. The Anabaptists said that any other milder practice would benumb their consciences and inspire them to do evil. Calvin responds: "I say, rather, that those who are benumbed are those who think they sin only out of ignorance and who see themselves as being so pure and innocent as never to have had an evil will or evil intention."¹¹

Many Anabaptists believed that true Christians could no longer sin.¹² This sinlessness of the true believers was substantiated doctrinally in the person of Jesus Christ. Many Anabaptists claimed that the Lord Jesus did not really have an earthly body or was not of real human flesh. All earthly flesh was considered sinful, so the Lord Jesus must have taken his body with him from heaven. Thus, the Lord Jesus never really came into contact with the sinful world, not even in his body! Therefore, all who were true believers and consequently like Christ, must be detached from the world and be perfect like Jesus.¹³

This supposed sinlessness culminated in the practice of shunning. One Anabaptist leader, Balthasar Hubmaier, stipulated that no church member should speak, greet, eat or do business with banned persons.¹⁴ Menno Simons, a well-known Dutch Anabaptist, insisted on immediately banning "all offensively carnal sinners such as fornicators, adulterers, drunkards, etc."¹⁵

¹¹ Calvin, *a.w.*, p. 68.

¹² Like Melchior Hoffman "with his lofty expectations of divinisation." Finger, *a.w.*, p. 216.

¹³ Balke, *a.w.*, p. 315vv describes how Calvin refutes the Anabaptist denial of the two natures of Christ. See also Calvin himself, *a.w.*, p. 110: "He is called, they say, the "Son of David", not because He has taken anything from the Virgin Mary or was made man from her substance, but only because she carried Him in her body, as water passes through a tube." Also compare A.D.R. Polman, *Onze Nederlandsche Geloofsbelijdenis*, Franeker (no date), p. 243-254.

¹⁴ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 212.

¹⁵ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 217.

They should be shunned because it would induce shame. Some even went so far as to extend the shunning to marriage, forbidding even spouse and family to live with an excommunicant.¹⁶

This practice however is irreconcilable with Christian love. Sinners should also be approached with love and patience and compassion. Mt. 18:17 says: “If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” Many Anabaptists thought that the Lord Jesus here commanded shunning. But what did Jesus do? He ate with Gentiles and tax collectors and associated with them, he looked them up in love and compassion! This attitude requires humility and patience. Quite often these come hardest to people who overestimate their own sanctification or fear facing their own lack of it.

The practice of banning and shunning draws our attention to the Anabaptist view of the holiness of the church and perfection of God’s kingdom. Let’s focus on that particular issue now.

4. The Perfect Kingdom of God

This subject takes us to what is probably the best-known part of Anabaptist history: the tragedy of Münster.¹⁷ To understand what happened there we must first take a look at the person of Melchior Hoffman. Initially he, being a self-commissioned Lutheran lay evangelist, criticized the Roman Catholic church. He preached justification by faith alone and won the approval of the great Reformer Martin Luther himself. But in 1529 he met a group of prophetic Anabaptists who greatly influenced him. He began to preach about detachment of sinful desires and subsequent divinisation. When he arrived in The Netherlands divinisation began to sound a lot like actually becoming God. The demands for a Christian life, which we spoke about earlier, thus became very

¹⁶ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 218.

¹⁷ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 37-38.

high. If people were to become *like* Christ, they could no longer sin because Jesus could not sin.

Yet when some of his followers were martyred, Hoffman's opinion changed. He was surprised that so many of them were killed. He more or less expected them to be invulnerable since they were after all supposed to be like God himself. But now he began expecting less to happen because of divine intervention and more by human agency. Hoffman was imprisoned in 1533. He was convinced that he was Elijah and would be set free in six months to start gathering God's elect together with 144,000 indestructible apostles. But he died in prison, ten years later.

One of his followers, a baker by the name of Jan Matthijs, decided to begin the earthly reign of the saints that was to precede the coming of Christ. He and his followers travelled to the city of Münster where the Anabaptists had come to power through legal channels. Thousands of Anabaptists, tired of persecutions, followed them to Münster. Jan Matthijs and his apostles took control of the city. No one was allowed any personal possessions anymore. All meals were taken together. Money was abolished and all doors were to remain unlocked. Then the local bishop took up arms to recapture the city. But the city initially held out. Jan Matthijs, however, was killed when he felt divinely led to attack the besiegers almost alone.

His place was taken by Jan van Leijden. He introduced polygamy in the city and cruelly executed those who opposed him. He pronounced himself king and demanded that the citizens worship him. On June 25, 1535, the city finally fell. Nearly all the Anabaptist inhabitants and all the leaders were slaughtered.

This bloody event is of course an extreme of the Anabaptists' attempt at separating from the sinful world all around them. They wanted to have their own communities and communes. In fact, it is for this reason that they were persecuted. They were usually charged with treason rather than heresy!¹⁸ Their

¹⁸ Finger, *a.w.*, p. 290.

separation from the world and society went so far that they felt a Christian cannot be involved in politics and cannot hold a secular office.¹⁹ They were opposed to taking public oaths, which the world would sometimes require.²⁰ Their yes would be yes, their no would be no (Js. 5:12). For the same reason they would not take up arms to fight. A Christian, they said, fights with spiritual weapons. He uses the Christian armour and above all, only fights spiritual fights. He fights the devil, not any other man.

For this reason, this total separation from the world and the institutions and regulations and governments of the world, they were persecuted and executed. The terrible events of Münster seem to contradict the apparent preaching of pacifism in Anabaptists circles. But remember one of our preliminary remarks: not all Anabaptists thought alike. And in this particular case it was felt that the end justified the means. The perfect kingdom of God was to be established one way or another. Since this part of Anabaptist theology about the kingdom of God determines every other aspect of their theology, we will evaluate it in our concluding paragraph.

Our next paragraph will discuss a part of the Anabaptist movement that may not be very well known at all. One would think that the separatism of the Anabaptists would hold them back in every respect from coming into contact with the world. But this is not entirely true. They were very much concerned to be a missionary church. That will be the last item for us to highlight.

5. Anabaptist Mission²¹

The Great Commission (Mt. 28:19-20) was the Anabaptists' greatest incentive in this respect. The task of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ was

¹⁹ Compare article 36 of the *Belgic Confession*, last paragraph, which condemns the Anabaptist position.

²⁰ Compare Lord's Day 37 (101) of the *Heidelberg Catechism* which is formulated in opposition to the Anabaptist teaching regarding oath-taking.

²¹ Material for the larger part taken from Finger, *a.w.*, p.271vv.

not left to ordained missionaries. The bulk of that work was done by the ordinary man, the lay Christian. They would memorise Bible texts and tracts, since most of them couldn't read anyway. They would then approach their family members, their neighbours and colleagues. Guests were invited to join in the Bible Study meetings. Remarkably, a lot of this work was done by the women. They shared the message of the gospel while their husbands were away at work. They talked about it when they went out shopping or working outside the house or in their social contacts with their neighbours.

Missionary teams were also sent out. They usually consisted of a minister of the Word doing most of the preaching, a lay brother and a minister of needs who would address needs and difficulties among the lower classes. Many of the missionaries were killed. But they were prepared to give that sacrifice, some even said that suffering was the unavoidable fate for a true Christian. Hutterite missionaries were especially passionate about their mission. Of the missionaries who called people to come to Moravia to join the Anabaptist community there, eventually 80% were martyred.²²

Why would Anabaptists go so far? Well, they felt that being a New Testament, apostolic church logically implied being a missionary church. They just did what the Lord God told them to do in his Word. Their evangelism was also propelled by eschatological urgency. Jesus would return soon and then his kingdom would be established in all its perfection and many people would be lost. So little time was left, they felt, to preach the gospel to the world.

As in all other aspects of Anabaptism, there were great differences among them about method and content of the work of evangelism and mission. Early Anabaptists claimed that salvation might be possible apart from knowledge of Jesus Christ. One Hans Denck was of the opinion that salvation might be available through other religions as well. The Hutterites again didn't start their communes just to feel safe themselves or to be able to support each other.

²² Finger, *a.w.*, p. 32.

They wanted their communes also to be loving communities so that their light would shine the brighter and so attract more people. The Dutch Anabaptist Menno Simons stressed the eschatological urgency of repentance. God's name must be acknowledged everywhere, he said. The church is to be God's light to the nations!

This great emphasis of the Anabaptists on mission is surprising. It hardly seems to fit the profile. Apparently, the Anabaptist effort to obey the command to be separate from the world didn't make them close themselves in in some safe communal kind of lifestyle. They went out to the world to share the gospel. They did so in words, in proclamation, and in deeds, in having their communities be Christian ones, so many lights on so many hills, to attract people.

6. Evaluation

It's time now to evaluate all the material we have gathered up to now. We will try to answer the question we asked in the beginning. Are our churches in Australia like the Anabaptists of the early 16th century? Or maybe in some respects? Should we dismiss Anabaptism as a remarkable extreme of the Reformation era, or can we actually learn from them? Some evaluating remarks have already been made above. So, we can be brief here and concentrate on the most decisive mark of Anabaptism and consider how the different elements fit this most distinctive feature.

If one were to characterize the teachings of the Anabaptists in one word, it would probably be *separation*. The Anabaptists wanted to separate from the world (2 Cor. 6:17²³), which they regarded as sinful, because the devil holds sway over it. Isn't the world the place where Satan prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour (1 Pt. 5:8)? They believed that they were citizens of the kingdom of heaven, which they quickly identified with the church

²³ 2 Cor. 6:17: "Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you."

of Jesus Christ. Since the kingdom of heaven can have nothing to do with the kingdom of Satan, the church could not in any way be associated with the world and society. The Anabaptists felt that they were holy people, set apart so that they were not allowed any communion with outsiders.

If you take a look at all the elements we discussed, you will see that all of these fit in this worldview. Baptism was to be the seal of the people's faith, not the sign of the covenant (Gen. 17). Once baptised, people were renewed into the image of Christ. To be admitted to the perfect kingdom of Jesus Christ, i.e. his church, one needed to be perfect himself. Baptism was a seal of this perfection and of the conscious and radical break with the world.

The exercise of church discipline also fits in perfectly. If one who was baptised sinned still, he was obviously a liar, a hypocrite. He should be banned from the holy church immediately, without second guessing. The kingdom of God on earth was to be perfect and perfectly shielded from the outside world. Anabaptists were therefore also not to fight in an earthly army, nor hold secular office, nor accept worldly government, nor swear public oaths or pay tithes. They were not of this world. The tragic events of Münster give evidence of the same desire.

One wonders what the motivation of the Anabaptists was to go to such extremes. In my opinion they are two main reasons which are closely related. One is the time when all of this took place. It was the time of the Reformation. John Calvin, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and many others wanted to reform the Roman Catholic Church which had sunk as low as it could go in terms of corruption, materialism and abuse of power. The Reformers as well as the Anabaptists had had enough of that. They found that the Word of God draws another picture of the church than they saw all around them. So, they opposed the deformed church and tried to make the church the church of Christ again, instead of the church of the Pope and his high and mighty clergy.

Closely related to this motive is the desire to consistently live according to the will of the Lord revealed to us in the Bible. The Pope wasn't the one to tell Christians what to do, God only was! If the Lord Jesus said that we should not take an oath (Mt. 5:34), then we shouldn't, not ever.²⁴ If the New Testament shows that only adults are baptised, then we shouldn't start baptizing infants. If the Lord Jesus says that our righteousness should exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees (Mt. 5:20), then we shouldn't be satisfied with anything less than perfection.

Then where did the Anabaptists go wrong? Probably because of their lack of proper theological education and their lack of patience and trust. One should keep in mind that most Anabaptists were common people, poor people, oppressed and depressed by burdens that the church laid on their shoulders. And where there is oppression long enough, there usually follows an explosion.

So that's the end of it? Do we dismiss the Anabaptist movement as a pitiful extreme of the Reformation era? I think not. As always, we can learn from other people's mistakes. I guess that is the use of studying church history in general in the first place! Let me list a few things that I feel we can learn from the Anabaptists:

1. We must never underestimate the value of proper study of the Word of God. This study of the Bible must always be considered in relation to the time and culture that we live in. We must not let the society and culture determine the church's agenda in terms of explanation of God's Word. The Anabaptists explained the Bible from their pre-conceived viewpoint of fleeing a world that oppressed them. They wanted to shake off the chains of the Roman Catholic Church. They let this desire determine their reading of the Bible to such an extent that they could make God's Word say anything they wanted. Therefore, we

²⁴ About the taking of oaths see J. Douma, *De Tien Geboden I*, Kampen 1990, 124vv.

must read and explain the Bible with an open mind so that the Spirit can reveal God's will to us (Jn. 16:13), without us hindering him with what we want him to say.

2. We must learn to separate from the world without isolating ourselves from the world. In their attempt to be different from the sinful world, the Anabaptists made great doctrinal errors and therefore great practical errors. The world is not the kingdom of Satan, the world is the kingdom of God (Ps. 24:1). Satan has great power in this world, for sure, but only because and insofar the almighty Creator allows him. The Anabaptists shielded themselves so much from the sinful world that their separation turned into isolation. The command not to associate with outsiders turned into the practice of hardly communicating with them. The command to shun sinners to bring them to repentance was taken to the world, while it only applies to the church. Then the shunning itself was taken to the extreme of not communicating at all anymore with apparent sinners in the church. This is in obvious contradiction to the actions of the Lord Jesus himself who went out to meet sinners and to proclaim liberty to them (Mt. 9:11; Lk. 5:30).
3. The Anabaptists' emphasis on holiness turned the church into a static instead of a dynamic body of Jesus Christ. That's what happens when you emphasise one aspect of the church at the cost of any other aspect. The church is to be a pillar of truth, a safe haven for the restless, a place where there is love and fellowship. But it is also the place where people are equipped to go out to the world and proclaim the gospel (Eph. 4:11-13). That's where the Anabaptists were very right in their desire to consistently do what God's Word says. God's Word says: proclaim (Mt. 28:19; 1 Pt. 2:9). So, there they went; they put their life on the line to do what God asked of them. This is where

we learn that God has a message for the world. Not just by means of evangelism, but also by means of political involvement and providing a Christian testimony to our local community. If we keep our religion to ourselves, we are doing exactly what the devil wants.²⁵ Religion, the world says, is a personal thing, don't bother me with it. God instead says: Christ died for the world (Jn. 3:16). The Christian faith must therefore influence every part of society and culture (Eph. 6:10ff; 1 Tim. 6:12).

I must stop now. There is so much more that can be said about this subject, but I hope that I have covered the essentials of Anabaptism and what we may learn from them. Are the Free Reformed Churches of Australia like the Anabaptists of the 16th century? They are not. But let us try hard to keep it that way. Perfection cannot be obtained in this world, not for the church as a whole and not for every individual Christian. We must therefore love each other and be patient. Perfection will come at the end of time. Until then God in his mercy gives us time to tell our neighbours close by and far away of the gospel of salvation. Let us make sure that our church, which is Christ's church, is aware of her place and task in God's world and makes good use of her time. Then we can be a blessing to those around us to the honour and glory of God's wonderful name.

Thank you.

²⁵ H. Veldkamp, *Zondagskinderen. Kanttekeningen bij de Heidelbergse Catechismus*, Franeker 1990, deel 2, p. 163.

Rev. Eddy Rupke, Bunbury, 19 October 2005