

ANABAPTIST THEOLOGIES OF CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

(1) THE REPUDIATION OF INFANT BAPTISM

Introduction

Modern western ideas about childhood and education have been influenced in no small measure by the churches. Amongst the churches are a variety of expressions of the Christian faith, and as a consequence different attitudes to childhood and education. The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century were a distinctive group whose particular stance, symbolised by the repudiation of infant baptism and replacement of it by the baptism of believers only, and separation from the state church, had serious consequences for their understanding of childhood and the upbringing of children. The practice of infant baptism had provided answers to important questions concerning the status of children in respect of the church, the gospel, sin and salvation. It had placed children firmly within the officially constituted life of the nation. The Anabaptists were part of a movement whose values were rooted in liberty of conscience, freedom of the spirit, priesthood of all believers, the sole authority of the Bible in all matters of life and faith and a theocracy in matters corporate. Repudiation of infant baptism amounted not only to a separation from the state church but also from society in its officially constituted form. Issues of the status of children in respect of the gospel and the church had to be answered. Refusal to renounce their views led to the persecution and exile of many Anabaptists. They took their children with them, and as a consequence had to define goals and aims for child rearing and education and establish schools. Yet, it was not long before they were concerned, as a minority, to preserve a way of life, already defined in the formative period. They turned in upon themselves. Many formed colonies and communalisation became the outward mark of their identity. However, they and their descendants, the Mennonites, Amish and Hutterites, have always cared for their children, and been most diligent in setting goals and aims for bringing them up. This study examines the distinctiveness of the Anabaptist view of childhood and education, consequent upon a radical view of the Christian Faith. The Anabaptists' views and practices make a unique contribution to the theology of childhood and the application of that theology in child nurture, schooling and education.

The study is in three sections:

Section 1: The repudiation of infant baptism

Section 2: Child Rearing

Section 3: Schooling, Education and Socialisation.

(1) THE REPUDIATION OF INFANT BAPTISM1. The Situation

In 1523 Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, expelled from Wittenberg, set up house in Orlamnude and began to advocate the postponement of baptism until children were able to understand its implications. In the spring of the next year, a number of parents in Wytikon and Zollikon refused to allow their newborn children to be baptized preferring to delay baptism until the time "that they had come of age and for themselves desired godmothers and godfathers".¹ It was the rejection of the common practice of infant baptism and the plea for baptism to be given to believers only, that led to the later nickname of "Anabaptists" or "twice baptisers". This outward sign was the obvious mark of the so-called Radical Reformation. However, it is interesting to note that concerning the conflicts and debates of that particular time "baptism was not the primary matter in the testimony of the radical movement".² It was the stress on the lead and call to a more consciously Christian life, with the willingness to suffer, to separate from the world, and to be responsible for the affairs of the church, that was the main stress and the main attraction.

Indeed many did not take baptism too seriously, the reason being that they were waiting for the millenium and therefore did not consider baptism even as believers very important. However, what they did have in common was the repudiation of infant baptism. This was a major stance to take. They thus separated themselves from the church of the day, in the established form of Roman Catholicism, and also the reformed variety in Lutheranism, Zwinglianism and Calvinism.

In his introduction to *Letters to Thomas Muntzer by Conrad Grebel and Friends*, G. H. Williams writes of the five acts "in which on a diminutive scale the whole drama of the radical reformation was enacted in the circle of Conrad Grebel in and around Zurich"³ He goes on to speak of the first act as the "disillusion of Conrad Grebel".⁴ Conflict started, Grebel and the other radicals wanting a complete break with all practices that differed from the practices of the New Testament. The matter was carried to public debate in the city hall on 17th January 1525 and the next day the City Council decided against believers' baptism, decreed that all children were to be baptised within eight days of birth and that non-compliers were to be banished. Opponents were forbidden to meet. That evening a group met in the home of Felix Manz, and Conrad Grebel baptised George Blaurock, a former priest, who then baptised others. During the following week meetings were held in Zollikon and 35 persons were baptised on confession of faith.⁵

The repudiation of infant baptism thus separated these people from a system both secular and religious which answered many questions about salvation, the church and the fate of infants who died in infancy. The implications of their separation were theological, ecclesiastical and indeed

political. They rejected the whole notion of a *corpus christianum* or the *communitas christiana* and in so doing set themselves against the tradition of a thousand year order. To be fair both Luther and Zwingli had difficulties with infant baptism but both retained it as the one link between church and state. "Zwingli made the baptism of infants a civic obligation, and Luther appears to have regarded the opposition to infant baptism as seditious".⁶ Clearly the protest was a plea for a pluralist society, and was bound to be resisted. "The authorities, civil and ecclesiastical, saw in Anabaptism a conspiracy against the social order".⁷

In the first Anabaptist Confession of Faith which was adopted at a synod in Canton Schaffhausen on 24th February 1527, Michael Sattler wrote:

Baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and wish to be resurrected with Him, and to all those who with this significance request it (baptism) of us and demand it for themselves...⁸ (The Schleithem Confession).

There were two main reasons for the abandonment of infant baptism and the introduction of believers' baptism. The first had to do with the Reformation principle of *solā scriptura* - infant baptism was not scriptural. The other was in the nature of baptism itself. From this came a radical view of the church, which differed from the view of the other reformers. Underneath this was the deeper issue of a theology of grace and salvation. Our concern is with the Anabaptist view of childhood implied in the rejection of infant baptism. Certain issues call for examination:

1. Whether baptism confers grace *ex opere operato* (as with the mediaeval doctrine of the Roman church) and whether it is therefore to be administered (to all) irrespective of faith or personal commitment.
2. Whether the *ex opere operato* action is the only antidote for original sin and must therefore be administered to infants soon after birth lest they die in infancy and be lost.
3. The place of man's response to the action of God in Christ - is the act of atonement by Christ on the Cross an objective act with automatic effect, *appropriated* by a person's response in faith, or is its effect *dependent* upon that personal response? The Anabaptists were accused of Pelagianism precisely on this account, because they held the latter view.
4. The issue of the fate and destiny of infants who die in infancy. The officially constituted practices of the Roman Church had provided a security and a consolation to sad and despairing parents whose infants had died.
5. The distinction between original sin and actual sin and

whether infants and children were capable of sinning.

6. The Anabaptist stress on personal responsibility and their view of the innocence of children raised the issue: at what point does a person move from a solidarity of grace as an innocent child to responsibility in and for faith, to baptism and so to adulthood?
7. What is baptism and how ought it to be administered?
8. The pattern of child rearing that followed, especially in the closed communities of the Hutterites, Mennonites and Amish consequent upon their separation from the State.

However, a word of caution is necessary. Because of the way the movement began, and because there was no one great leader, there is no one systematic treatise on baptism, nor one systematic theology, providing the one source of "an Anabaptist view of...". This examination looks at the various theologies, of which George H. Williams notes six variants, implicit or explicit to the Radical Reformation.⁹ The six are:

1. The baptismal theology of the two dispensations (Grebel, Marpeck, Hubmaier)
2. The baptismal theology of the three levels of intensity (Denck, Hut, Schiemer)
3. The covenantal betrothal concept (Campus, Hofmann)
4. The deificatory theory of believers' baptism (Servetus)
5. The humane magical defence of baptism for infants and the insane (Paracelsus)
6. The interiorisation or spiritualisation of baptism to the point where it is replaced by an all embracing Eucharistic theology or predestinarian regeneration (Schwenckfeld, Renato, Faustus Socinus).

2. The Reasons

a) Not Scriptural

The first reason had to do with the assertion that infant baptism was not scriptural. Harold Bender speaks about Conrad Grebel as "he adopted as his own the so called formal principle of the Reformation, the *sola scriptura* and to this principle he remained true throughout his life".¹⁰ And "everything must be tested by the New Testament and what is not found therein as the teaching of Christ and the apostles or as an apostolic practice must be abandoned".¹¹ Grebel discovered that in the New Testament baptism is always for believers; there is no commandment of Christ nor apostolic example for the baptism of infants. The issue of biblical authority is raised very sharply here: Grebel looked for a positive example, or command,

in the New Testament to practice infant baptism. His opponents challenged him to find passages in the New Testament where it is specifically forbidden. An important distinction in biblical usage is evident here. In answer to the challenge to find passages where baptism was specifically forbidden Grebel replied "If one should proceed on such a basis one would soon get far from the scriptures".¹²

In the spring of 1526 a booklet on baptism was published. The authorship was anonymous but believed by Harold Bender to be Grebel.¹³ The booklet contained arguments for refuting the case for infant baptism as propounded by Zwingli against the Anabaptists. Zwingli's argument was: the apostles baptised whole families and it is assumed that there were children included in these families therefore the apostles baptised children. The three references cited by Zwingli were the households of Stephanas, Lydia and the unnamed person.

This was refuted by Grebel on four counts: first, this line of reasoning should not be used because even Zwingli himself had said that what the apostles did was not regulative for us. Secondly, in the passages of scriptures referred to, there is no explicit mention of children. Thirdly, "Human cogitation and rationalisation should not be determinative here for there can be families with or without children, what is needed is positive proof from the scriptures".¹⁴ His fourth argument was to make clear that the family of Stephanas, as well as the other families, had first heard the Word of God, for they served the church afterwards. "That would have been impossible for children".¹⁵ Thus infant baptism is not scriptural.

b) Meaning of Baptism

However, there was another line of reasoning in the repudiation of infant baptism, and that was the meaning of baptism itself. Grebel wrote of baptism: "(it) signifies for him who has come to Christ through repentance and a change of heart, that his sins have been washed away through his faith and the blood of Christ, that he has died to sin, and that he must now live in newness of life and spirit and he will surely be saved if he had the inner baptism of faith and lives according to its meaning".¹⁶

Baptism is clearly a symbol, not a sacrament; it has no meaning where Christ is absent. It is a sign of what has already taken place in the life of the believer. Yet it is a powerful symbol at that, linking regeneration, that work of God in the life of the believer which brings him to repentance and faith, and new life in Christ which is then beginning. Grebel does not mention any specific age for baptism and presumably a child could be baptised if he could show repentance and faith and make the resolve to lead the new life. However, the implications of Grebel's argument are "only responsible personalities can have the experience of belief and change of life which baptism signifies".¹⁷

not yet been infected with "serpentine knowledge" though they are implicated in the Fall. They therefore do not need Christ's redemptive baptism until the time when the serpent "is fully uncoiled within them...".²⁷

Servetus, after listing some twenty-five reasons against paedobaptism, concludes:

Baptism is having heard the Word of the gospel in the unity of the faith, to be cleansed by the laver of water into the unity and fellowship of the spotless heavenly Church (Eph. 4.41 ff, 5.26 ff). In infant baptism no spiritual church is assembled but a Babylonian chaos.²⁸

The implication of this rejection of infant baptism is that infants are not ready, have not reached the age of understanding good and evil, (seen by Servetus as the "deity of the serpent"), and in any case Christ's example suggests that the age is around 30 years. Obviously, this is more radical than many other Anabaptists, ruling out not only the baptism of infants, but also adolescents and those in early adulthood too.

d) The Nature of the Church

Underlying such arguments about faith and baptism *lies a view of the church*. For the Anabaptists, the discovery of baptism as being for believers only as an act of personal obedience and the consequent emphasis on the Christian life as one of discipleship, led to a radical view of the church. They attempted to found a "pure" church:

not necessarily a church composed of men and women who were sinless, but rather sin-conscious; adult men and women, not children; men and women who knew right from wrong, and who of their own volition as a result of deep-seated religious conviction had formed themselves into a voluntary band of worshippers after the example of apostolic times.²⁹

It is the view of Harold Bender that the stress on discipleship is the distinctive mark of the Anabaptists: "First and fundamental in the Anabaptist vision was the conception of the essence of Christianity as discipleship".³⁰ "The true test of the Christian they held is discipleship. The great word for the Anabaptists was not Faith as it was with the Reformers, but "following" (*Nachfolge Christi*)".³¹ The church is therefore a new church of truly committed and practising believers in contradistinction to the prevailing concept of the *Volkskirche*, or inclusive church of the Reformation generally.

For the Anabaptists voluntary membership, upon true conversion and commitment to holy living and discipleship, was the heart of the Christian life and therefore constituted the church. Infant baptism becomes for the Anabaptists the symbol of the cause of the fall of the church.

The Anabaptists regarded the fusion of church and state under civil authority of which infant baptism was the sign as the fall of the church. It was a religious and political union which they could not accept. This fall had been a gradual decline since the time of Constantine and had continued to their day. Authority within the church could not be exercised by the secular authorities. As the Spirit gathers the church, and forms a community of saints, so he is the authority within the church and those who do not live up to the calling should be banned from membership. The new church was to be the true church (*rechte Kirche*): "The reformers aimed to reform the old Church by the Bible; the radicals attempted to build a new Church from the Bible".³² It seemed clear to the radicals that membership of the church was a matter of personal faith, because of the serious demands made by Jesus upon his followers.

So infant baptism, the sign of the old church, is now further repudiated on the grounds of the nature of the new (free) church and the call to personal discipleship. Although infants may well receive the grace of God passively, they could not respond in obedient discipleship, therefore could not be baptised and could not be members of the church. Furthermore, infant baptism was not only therefore meaningless, but might well be a positive obstacle to children ever coming to faith and commitment and so to true church membership.

So the movement of thought is clear: baptism is the act of discipleship, requiring prior faith and willingness to submit to the Lord. This is a sign of commitment to others who are brothers and sisters in Christ. It involves the disciplined life, exclusion always a possibility, if transgression is found. This is the church, it is not for infants and children. The regenerate nature of the church presupposes maturity, personal faith, personal volition. Thus the nature of the church negates any infant baptism, discounts its practice and empties it of any meaning for Anabaptists.

One further word: so insistent were the Anabaptists on the church as a gathered community, committed in personal and corporate discipleship that there was virtually no doctrine of the invisible church. This is significant. For some (like Calvin), infants dying in infancy were assured of their destiny because of the doctrine of the invisible church. The Anabaptist movement appears to have rejected the notion of the invisible church altogether. In view of this their solution to the question of the destiny of infants dying in infancy is agnosticism. (Perhaps really no solution at all?) The church then is a "brotherhood of love in which the fulness of Christian life ideal is expressed".³³ In the first instance this excludes children and infants, though in the Hutterite and Mennonite communities the socialisation and education of children were most serious. The aim was to bring the children to personal discipleship, voluntary membership of the church on baptism as believers, and therefore to active and serious Christian living in the community. In this believers' baptism is "the final acknowledgement of the need for perfect obedience".³⁴

3. Children and Baptism

There is a lengthy and detailed discussion of the relation of children to baptism in Peter Ridemann.³⁵ His document contains a major section entitled "Now that followeth the reasons of those that baptise children".³⁶ It is the judgment of Gerhard J. Newmann that these arguments "... are much more complicated and have nothing at all to do with baptism; in fact they suggest subterfuge".³⁷ But briefly six reasons are given: first based on the great commission of Matthew 28 where the paedo-baptists include children in the command to baptise "all nations". Peter Ridemann is quick to note the order of events in the Lord's command: teach first, then baptise. Children were to be taught and led to the day when they could distinguish good and evil and could understand the claims of God, and then be baptised. But it was teaching first, baptism second.

Of greater significance, however, is this: the impetus to missionary endeavour, with the practice of believers' baptism, led to a change in the traditional doctrines of justification, sanctification and especially the meaning of atonement. George H. Williams says:

At the same time their virtual conversion of Christ's baptism into innumerable re-enactments of John's baptism at once penitential and regenerative and epiphanal (or testimonial) brought about both a displacement in emphasis in the interpretation of the gospel and of discipleship and therewith also an alteration in the doctrines of justification, sanctification and especially the atonement.³⁸

The implications of the Anabaptists' views of Grace and Sin and Atonement will be examined later.

The second reason for paedo-baptism examined by Peter Ridemann takes the first to a logical and absurd conclusion, that if we are not to baptise children then we are not to feed them either, for Paul says "If any worketh not neither should he eat", therefore we must let children die of hunger. The answer of Peter Ridemann is that "these are contrived words" and do not apply to children. The other four reasons are of this type and really have nothing at all to do with baptism. It is perhaps worth commenting a little on the fourth reason given in this account. The popular justification for infant baptism was based on the example of Jesus in receiving the children for blessing.

Peter Ridemann accepts the action of Jesus but rejects the idea that what Jesus did was in fact to baptise the children or to sanction it amongst his disciples. "He wisheth them (the children) what is good, taketh them in his arms, layeth his hands upon them. At that let us leave it and not invent anything ourselves".³⁹ The appeal to the incident of Jesus with the children and his welcome to them with hands laid upon them has been a source of controversy for generations. Exactly

what Jesus was doing, and what he meant to signify is not clear from a mere reading of the story. Theology and interpretation are needed. The fact remains, however, that from the Middle Ages onwards this incident and story were used in baptismal liturgies, and paedo-baptisers saw the incident as a biblical basis for welcoming babies into the church with baptism. Is it a baptismal text? Hans-Reudi Weber, in his examination of the biblical material on Jesus and the children, believes that it was the Anabaptists who first challenged the use of Mark 10.13/16 in relation to infant baptism.⁴⁰ The Anabaptists were quick to see that whatever was signified by the reception of the children by Jesus and whatever was understood by the laying on of hands in blessing, the incident was not a justification of, or a command to, baptise infants.

The Anabaptists saw baptism as a confession of faith before men rather than an *ex opere operato* means of grace from God. It was a symbol of the gift of new life and voluntary embracing of that gift by the believer. Infants could not have faith, therefore infants should not be baptised and infant baptism was no baptism.

To baptise before the thing which is represented in baptism, namely faith is found in us... is as logical as to place the cart before the horse, to sow before we have plowed, to build before we have lumber at hand, or to seal a letter before it is written.⁴¹

Thus so far the arguments for the repudiation of infant baptism have led to certain views of childhood:

1. That because faith must precede baptism and faith is presupposed in baptism, and faith must be accompanied by repentance and desire to follow Christ, infants were not capable of faith. This is made quite clear by Menno Simons, the Anabaptist elder (bishop):

The new birth consists in nothing in that which the miserable world hitherto had thought that it consist in namely to be plunged into the water, or in the saying I baptise thee in the name of the Father, and the Son and of the Holy Ghost? No dear Brother, no. The new birth consist, verily, not in water nor in words; but it is the heavenly, living, quickening power of God in our hearts.⁴²

Conrad Grebel sums it up: "Baptism means nothing else than a dying of the old man, and putting on of the new and that Christ commanded to baptize those who had been taught".⁴³

2. Because the new birth is to be preceded by teaching (Matt.28) and since the aim of such teaching is to lead to an understanding of what God has done, then only those who have reason and understanding developed by careful teaching should be baptised. Children have not yet reached this point, do not know the difference between good and evil,

and are therefore in a state of innocence. They cannot experience the new life and should not therefore be baptised.

3. Since the nature of the church was dependent on the significance of "following", and is therefore a church of truly committed and practising believers, who have voluntarily entered upon membership consequent upon their conversion, children were not "in the church" and were therefore not members. "Following" was a matter of personal discipleship, freely chosen, and children were not capable of this.

The stress on maturity and understanding in particular, which have been evident in the discussion on baptism and its consequences for theology of childhood, are quite clearly implied in the modern "Hutterites' Baptismal Vow". The Hutterites, stressing a communal existence and settled now in parts of Moravia and Transylvania, are a direct descendant of the 16th century Anabaptists,⁴⁴ e.g.:

Baptismal Vow

1. Do you now acknowledge the doctrines, which have hitherto been taught to you, as being the truth and right foundation to salvation?
2. Do you also believe in and agree with the twelve articles of our Christian faith which comprise: "We believe in God the Almighty..." (Each repeats the Apostles' Creed).
3. Do you also desire the prayer of intercession of the pious that God may forgive and remit the sins committed by you in ignorance?
4. Do you desire to consecrate, give and sacrifice yourself to the Lord God in the covenant of Christian baptism?

Here follows the prayer. (After this prayer, while kneeling, the candidates are asked these six questions):

1. Do you now sufficiently understand the Word of God and acknowledge it as the only path to life eternal?
2. Do you also truly and heartily repent of the sins which you have in ignorance committed against God and do you desire henceforth to fear God, nevermore to sin against God, and rather to suffer death than ever to sin wilfully against God?
3. Do you also believe that your sins have been forgiven and remitted through Christ and the prayer of intercession of His people?
4. Is it also your desire to accept brotherly punishment and admonition and also to apply the same to others when it is needful?

5. Do you desire thus to consecrate, give and sacrifice yourself with soul and body and all your possessions to the Lord in heaven, and to be obedient unto Christ and His church?
6. Do you desire thus to establish a covenant with God and all his people to be baptized upon your confessed belief?

Note: All of these questions must be answered with a "yes". The minister, laying on his hands and sprinkling with water, speaks the following words:

On thy confessed belief I baptize thee, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. God Almighty in heaven who has given you grace and mercy through the death of Christ and the prayer of His Saints, may clothe you with fortitude from on high and inscribe your name into the book of eternal life, to preserve thee in piety and faith until death. This is my wish to thee through Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

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8. H. J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation in its Own Words* (SCM Press, 1964), p.236.
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11. *ibid.*, p.175.
12. *ibid.*, p.184.
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- 22 *ibid.*, p.311.
- 23 *ibid.*, p.311.
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- 30 Guy Hershberger (Ed), *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Harold Press, 1957), p.42.
- 31 *ibid.*, p.43.
- 32 Franklin M. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (McMillan, 1964), p.xviii "A Quotation of Philip Schaff".
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- 35 Ridemann, *op.cit.*, p.70 ff.
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- 29 Ridemann, *op.cit.*, p.73.
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- 41 J. C. Wenger (Ed), *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. by Leonard Verduin (Scotdale Press, 1956), p.259.
- 42 *ibid.*, p.265.
- 43 Bender, *op.cit.*, p.184.
- 44 John A. Hostetler, *Hutterite Society* (The John Hopkins University Press, 1974), appendix 7, Source Peter Hoffer, "The Hutterian Brethren and Their Beliefs" (Starbuck Press, 1955), p.26 ff.

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[Section (1) will be concluded in the next issue. - Editor]

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