

Should we celebrate birthdays?

On the first adult baptisms in Zurich

Arnold Snyder

On January 18, 1525, the Zurich council promulgated a mandate in which it decreed that “all children shall be baptized as soon as they are born” and, further, that all children hitherto unbaptized were to be baptized “within the next eight days.” Those who refused to comply were to be banished. A second decree on January 21, 1525, closed the “special schools” where such matters were discussed and specified that Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz were to be silent in the future.¹ Shortly after that second decree, probably on the evening of January 21, a small group gathered a few blocks from the cathedral, in the house of Felix Mantz’s mother. What happened next is recorded in the Hutterite *Chronicle*:

*Georg Blaurock stood up and asked Conrad Grebel in the name of God to baptize him with true Christian baptism on his faith and recognition of the truth. With this request he knelt down, and Conrad baptized him. . . . Then the others turned to Georg in their turn, asking him to baptize them, which he did.*²

With this first-known act of “adult baptism” in the early modern period, a movement began that led eventually, by various paths, to the Mennonite, Amish, Hutterite—and arguably the Baptist—traditions, now five hundred years later.

1 Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1985), 336. Zwingli had initially encouraged Scripture reading in the vernacular in lay groups, the earliest led by Andreas Castelberger already in 1522, with other groups led later by Grebel and Mantz. These “schools” resulted in divisive ideas. See Andrea Strübind, *Eifriger als Zwingli. Die frühe Täuferbewegung in der Schweiz* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003), 138–47; Arnold Snyder, “The Birth and Evolution of Swiss Anabaptism,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 80 (October 2006), 504–505.

2 *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, NY: Plough, 1987), 45. The date is established by Fritz Blanke, *Brothers in Christ*, trans. J. Nordenhaug (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing, 1966), 20.

Why we should celebrate birthdays

It is worthwhile to celebrate all birthdays, including the five hundredth birthday of this “adult baptizing” tradition. With such a commemoration, we remember the coming into the world of a unique religious movement. The first adult baptisms marked new commitments that would endure going forward. Not for nothing were adherents of this movement known as “baptizers” (*Täufer*) or, pejoratively, “re-baptizers” (*Wiedertäufer*).

The first baptism of adults on confession of faith was at the same time an emphatic rejection of infant baptism and a new way of understanding the church and the Christian rite of entry into the church. About a month before the first baptisms, Felix Mantz had written that baptism should be given to

*one who having been converted through God’s Word and having changed his heart now henceforth desires to live in newness of life, as Paul clearly shows in the epistle to the Romans [6:3–4], dead to the old life, circumcised in his heart, having died to sin with Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and arisen with him again in newness of life, etc. To apply such things as have just been related to children is without any and against all Scriptures.*³

Based on their reading of Scripture, the first adult baptizers were convinced that baptism, properly understood and performed, involved a spiritual conversion or “change of heart” marked by baptism in water, all of which led from an old life of sin to a new life in Christ—a process no infant could undertake, water or no water. The baptism of adults emerged from an interpretation of Scripture that placed authoritative emphasis on the words and actions of Jesus Christ and the apostles—a solid Christocentrism anchored the baptizing movement that survived.⁴

By taking baptism into their own hands, Blaurock, Grebel, Mantz, and the other unnamed participants took the traditional Christian rite of entry into the church into their own hands. These adult baptisms marked entry into a church that did not yet exist. It was not at all clear in January

3 Harder, *Sources*, 313.

4 Mantz wrote: “God wills that we keep his commandments and ceremonies, as he has commanded us.” Harder, *Sources*, 314. Heinrich Bullinger recalled that “they drew on Scripture from the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles and pointed out that the apostles had not baptized infants but only adult discerning people.” Harder, *Sources*, 335.

1525 what this “baptizing church” would look like. Although the first adult baptisms in Zurich were significant and marked a new direction, it is helpful to think of this event precisely as the “birthday” of what would come later, a day when the infant, still plump and unformed, contemplated a journey of diverse development yet to come.

What the “birthday” was not

The baptisms of January 1525 were a direct contravention of Zurich’s legal decrees and placed the practitioners outside the law. Baptizing in this way was an assertion that the church is in the hands of believers, not of



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the state. In retrospect, it might appear that the separation of church and state was being put into action here, but it is a mistake to attribute the pursuit of such a principle to the first baptizers. Their central concern was obedience to the New Testament; the principle being put into action was “we must obey

God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29). The result of this “scriptural obedience” was the creation of a church that followed its own understanding of Scripture and so threatened the political-religious unity of the time. Any church of that time that insisted on running its own affairs was criminalized by the state. But separation from the state was a by-product of the political situation, not a principle followed by the first baptizers. In the short-lived Anabaptist cities of Waldshut and Nikolsburg (1525; 1526), for example, the baptizing church and the local state worked hand in hand.

The separation of church and state that emerged as an Enlightenment principle in seventeenth-century thinkers like John Locke and Thomas Jefferson followed from the attempt to create a secular state; it had nothing to do with obedience to a biblical principle, just as the marginalization of Anabaptist churches had nothing to do with attempting to establish a secular state. It was an accident of history that later secular states made room for Anabaptist-descended churches along with other denominations and religions. It is not the case that sixteenth-century baptizers prepared the way for religiously plural secular states, except in the most accidental way by being a church outside the law. It is misleading to celebrate a democratic achievement when we celebrate our birthday in 2025; the baptizers were looking inward to the church.

The many forms of the baptizing church

The adult-baptizing church that came into being in January 1525 was unformed in fundamental ways, and almost immediately there were varied attempts to live out this new faith commitment. Balthasar Hubmaier,

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writing from Anabaptist Waldshut in July 1525, first articulated the biblical structure supporting a church of baptized adults. As he described it, with their spiritually informed water baptism, adult believers committed themselves to mutual discipline, living a new life informed by their spiritual new birth, and

celebrating a memorial Lord's Supper as a pledge to each other and of their surrender to the will of Christ.⁵ Hubmaier's sound biblical work is essentially repeated to this day, but there was much that he did not address.

Hubmaier worked to establish Anabaptist churches within local state structures—which assumed that taking the sword of the state was allowed—but his attempts failed in short order. An altogether different understanding of adult baptism emerged in southern Germany. The Anabaptist leader Hans Hut baptized adult converts in an end-times context, convinced that he was personally marking the 144,000 elect with a cross in water on their foreheads. Hut expected that baptized believers would soon participate in the extermination of the ungodly, but he died in 1527—well before the second coming, it turned out. Following the collapse of the Peasants' War, and in contrast to both Hubmaier and Hut, Michael Sattler's Schleitheim Articles of 1527 outlined a separated, pacifist baptizing church that would have nothing to do with the state, refusing both sword and oath. In yet another iteration of the adult baptizing movement, some years later in Strasbourg, Melchior Hoffman outlined a baptizing church of the end times that, thanks to his followers in the north, established itself as the notorious Anabaptist kingdom of Münster (1534–35). Still further, in Moravia in 1533, followers of Jakob Hutter understood the baptizing church to be separated from the state in the Schleitheim manner but specified that in the true church all goods must be held in common. Fi-

5 H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder, trans. and eds., *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1989), chapter 9, "Summa of the Entire Christian Life," 81–89.

nally, from among the baptizers also emerged those who concluded that the true church would be purely spiritual, with no visible, physical rites necessary at all.⁶

This sampling of early baptizing interpretations of how to be church in the first *decade* after the first adult baptisms in Zurich demonstrates that there was not just one movement born in January 1525; rather, this birthday marked the first of different adult baptizing movements in different locations that developed in their own ways—some of which did not survive over time.

When looking back over five hundred years of adult baptizing history, the temptation for those of us standing in the line of succession is to paint a rosy, edifying picture. But right remembering can never be purely hagiographical. Recalling the realities of the past must include the bad as well as the saintly; otherwise, the story is mere propaganda—admittedly of the finest sort, but propaganda nonetheless. For example, thousands of baptizers died heroically as martyrs for their faith,⁷ but many more recanted, and some of the recanters were also executed. There were other baptizers who died fighting or were executed for supporting violent revolution. One must agree with Charlie Kraybill that the early baptizing movement included them all, and they should all be remembered.⁸ It is edifying in a more realistic way to remember that some but not all of our baptizing ancestors would qualify as heroes of the faith.

Migration, resettlement, and a global church

A significant part of the five-hundred-year history of the baptizing movements that survived (Mennonites, Amish, Hutterites) is the amazing story of migration and resettlement, first in Europe and then to both North and South America. In the first century or two in Europe, local rulers could be found who overlooked religious peculiarities in return for en-

6 For example, Obbe Philipps, who baptized Menno Simons, eventually left the baptizers and became a spiritualist.

7 Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror*, trans. by Joseph F. Sohm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1972), published originally in Dutch in 1660. The *Martyrs Mirror* did not include persons who recanted prior to execution or any who were executed for being revolutionaries.

8 See the excellent detailed collection: *The Marginal Mennonite Society's Guide to the Anabaptist Martyrs of Europe 1524–1614*, 2nd ed., compiled by Charlie Kraybill (Marginal Mennonite Society, 2018); https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/25737/Anabaptist_Martyrs_Guide_2018.pdf. Kraybill expands on the *Martyrs Mirror* by listing those executed after recantation and those put to death as revolutionary Anabaptists.

ergetic and skilled workers: farmers in the Palatinate and Prussia, swamp drainers in the Vistula delta. Many stories could be told of the efforts made to maintain the principle of nonresistance and independence from local educational and religious institutions, as the baptizers resettled. At the same time, governments anxious to secure marginal lands after displacing indigenous groups were often happy to settle hard-working baptizing groups there. We are only beginning to come to terms with what it meant to be “given” lands formerly inhabited by Cossacks in the Ukraine or by indigenous people in Paraguay, Bolivia, and North America. By occupying and working these lands, often in remarkable ways, our baptizing ancestors unwittingly served the forces of colonization. Reflecting on our history of migration and settlement raises the question: Now that we are aware of the wider significance of how we settled indigenous lands, what should be our constructive response?

As the nineteenth century turned to the twentieth in North America, a significant number of Mennonites became increasingly acculturated via Protestant fundamentalism. A theological tradition that had incorporated ethics into an understanding of salvation was now separated out into a two-track formula that separated ethics from salvation (and emphasized salvation). As Theron Schlabach has described it, “The ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ mentality of quickened Mennonites (of the 1890s) seemed to have more in common with the cultural self-confidence and imperialism of the modern Protestant missionary movement than with Anabaptism.”⁹ Schlabach writes,

*Now salvation became a matter of the Reformers’ preoccupation with guilt of past sin, a revival-style acknowledgment of that sin, and a turning to a Christ who had fulfilled the ritual of sacrifice to a judging God. The call was to that, more than to following the Lord who offered instruction, example, and a new community for a life of suffering love.*¹⁰

The revivalist understanding of conversion and salvation called North American Mennonites to mission, both local and foreign, and changed the discourse around “church” in many Mennonite congregations.

9 Theron Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863–1944* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 48, 52; “quickened Mennonites blurred the Anabaptist insight that church and world, gospel and national culture were radically different” (48).

10 Schlabach, *Gospel versus Gospel*, 51.

An alternative direction appeared in 1944 with the publication of Harold S. Bender's "The Anabaptist Vision."¹¹ The Anabaptists, Bender affirmed, understood "Christian life as discipleship, the church as a fellowship of believers, [and] the way of love and nonresistance in human relationships."¹² In contrast to the Protestant emphasis on faith and atonement, Bender underlined that for the historical Anabaptist parents

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in the faith, belief must result in newness of life. As Hans-Jürgen Goertz notes, for Bender "the picture of the Anabaptists blurred into that of contemporary Mennonites," providing a historical "vision" for the current church while blurring historical sixteenth-century realities.¹³ Albert Keim

observes that nevertheless, by the 1940s "sixteenth-century Anabaptism . . . became the orthodox filter through which Mennonites received their theological orientations."¹⁴ While the historical details of Bender's "Anabaptist Vision" were challenged and superseded by academic historians,¹⁵ the influence of his vision on the Mennonite church's self-understanding was profound and long-lasting.¹⁶ Whatever else it did, "The Anabaptist Vision" replanted historical roots at the heart of Mennonite identity.

In the meantime, the mission-minded North American Mennonites had been hard at work, planting Mennonite churches abroad in a broadly Protestant revivalist mode. Looked at globally, and more than a century after mission plantings began, the results are beyond surprising. The Men-

11 Delivered as the presidential address at the December 28, 1943, meeting of the American Society of Church History in New York City. Published first in *Church History* (March 1944) and reprinted in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (April 1944). For a good historical overview and summary, see Albert N. Keim, *Harold S. Bender* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1998), chapter 14, "The Anabaptist Vision," 306–331.

12 Keim, *Bender*, 331.

13 Cited in Keim, *Bender*, 328. See also Rodney J. Sawatsky, *Mennonite Identity Definition through History* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2004).

14 Keim, *Bender*, 327.

15 See, for example, James Stayer, Klaus Deppermann, and Werner Packull, "From Monogenesis to Polygenesis: The Historical Discussion of Anabaptist Origins," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 49 (April 1975), 83–121.

16 Albert Keim notes, "By the mid-1960s the concept of discipleship had become the common property and the theological meeting place for Mennonites of virtually all theological orientations." Keim, *Bender*, 527.

nonite World Conference currently counts 2.13 million baptized believers in 86 countries. The totals by continental region in 2020 find Africa with the most adult baptized believers in the world, at 36.4 percent (there were zero adult baptized believers in 1900), followed by North America (30.5%), Asia and the Pacific (20.6%), Latin America and the Caribbean (9.5%), with the least in Europe (about 3%).¹⁷ The churches that have grown the fastest, and continue to grow at remarkable rates, are those that came under the energetic leadership of local people: in Ethiopia, Congo, Indonesia, and India, for example. No doubt the most significant story, five hundred years after the first adult baptisms, is the rooting and rapid indigenous growth of Anabaptist-based churches in the two-thirds world.

As we read the historical developments in our baptizing denominations through the eyes of faith, we are attempting to discern the work of the Holy Spirit as the baptizers sought to follow Scripture over centuries, in their different contexts, incarnating the church in their specific ways. There is much to treasure and much to question in this history. We should be open to receiving both encouragement and warning as we ponder five hundred years of growth and change.

About the author

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¹⁷ Information taken from mwc-cmm.org/membership-map-and-statistics.