# ‘A Gathered Congregation of People which Is Built on Christ’: Core Ecclesial Principles Anabaptists and Early Baptists Held in Common

**Brian C. Brewer**

Brian C. Brewer is Professor of Historical Theology at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary, Baylor University, Waco, Texas.
brian_brewer@baylor.edu
https://truettseminary.baylor.edu/person/brian-c-brewer-phd-frhists
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7617-2966

**Abstract**
The Anabaptists of the Continental Reformation era and the early English Baptists a century later may have derived from different ecclesial-political and geographic settings, but they shared a number of theological sentiments. While several more theological parallels might be demonstrated, this article will focus on four major areas of overlap: ecclesiology, baptism, covenant, and religious liberty/freedom of conscience. Not only are these four distinctives significant for both traditions but these particular doctrines and practices also coalesce to establish a cohesive ecclesiological model that notably differs from other early Protestant traditions.

**Keywords**
Anabaptists; Baptists; ecclesiology; baptism; covenant; religious liberty

## Introduction

The origins of the Anabaptist tradition in the sixteenth century and the Baptists in the seventeenth century are complicated, and various details of the beginnings of both movements remain disputed by historians. Attempts to analyse the degree to which the two movements connected then also prove complex. Regardless of the question of the historic ties and interactions between Anabaptists and early Baptists, as well as the potential influence of the seventeenth-century Continental Anabaptists on their British Baptist counterparts, a careful reader of both traditions can hardly question the significant parallels of a number of doctrinal convictions and ecclesial practices between the two movements. Anabaptists and Baptists have both been characterised as belonging to the same family of churches sometimes categorised as the ‘free church’ and the ‘believers’ church’ movements, even as both of those umbrella

classifications have sometimes been disparaged by scholars as complicated and contested monikers.[1] Regardless, this article will assume Donald Durnbaugh's definition of a believers' church as both a 'voluntary membership of those confessing Jesus Christ as Lord' and a 'covenanted and disciplined community of those walking in the way of Jesus Christ'.[2] The focus of this article, then, will be to address the similar theological and practical characteristics between Anabaptists and early Baptists connected to this distinctive ecclesiological framework, despite both movements' complex origins, development, and history of sporadic interactions.

## Ecclesiology: A Visible Church

It can be conceded that the most visible similarity between Anabaptists and Baptists pertains to the theology and practice of believer's baptism, for which both groups were long embroiled in controversy with their respective Western Christian opponents, faced significant persecution, and even received their once-considered pejorative epithets which ultimately became their ecclesial names (literally 're-baptisers' and 'baptisers', respectively). Yet, one cannot properly understand their shared rationale for such a notorious church practice without first grasping its ecclesial context. That is to say, both Anabaptists and early Baptists were not simply attentive to what they believed was the proper timing of and candidates for Christian initiation, as important as the practice of baptism was for both traditions. Foundational to believer's baptism for both was a believers' church. Thus, the visible or believers' church ecclesiology — rudimentary to both groups — shall be discussed first.

The metal of the Anabaptist conviction of a believers' church was forged out of the refiner's fire of the tumultuous Protestant

[1] For a fuller discussion of the history of debate about both these terms, see especially Donald F. Durnbaugh's classic work, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (Herald Press, 1985), pp. 3–33.
[2] See Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*, pp. 32–33.

Reformation of the sixteenth century. While the nascent continental magisterial Protestant traditions of Lutheranism and the Reformed churches, centred in Germany and Switzerland respectively, had separated from the Roman Church over significant theological issues such as justification by grace through faith alone and a conviction that the Scriptures were to be observed above the accumulated Western church's canon law, these Protestant traditions maintained the assumptions of the *Volkskirche*, a notion which perceived that inhabitants of Europe belonged to the church by virtue of their baptisms. Magisterial Protestants had politically broken free from Rome by transposing its spiritual authority into the hands of more local governmental jurisdictions. The magisterial Protestant movements in Lutheranism and Reformed Christianity thus maintained the *Volkskirche*. These forms of territorial Protestantism reasoned that, since faith was invisible, and God — and not the Pope and the Roman hierarchy — adjudicated the salvation of each person, the church on earth was comprised of both the 'wheat and the tares' (Matt 13:24–43), that is, genuine Christians along with the uncommitted. At the same time, such classical Protestants contended that a pure church, comprised of only true believers, was unattainable in this world until Christ's return in the *Parousia*. For the present time, they concluded, God alone knew his own.[3]

In contrast, the Anabaptists were more sanguine about the gathering of God's people in this world as separate from the corruptions of the state and the assumed obligations of Western European culture.

[3] E.g. Martin Luther wrote, 'We correctly confess in the Creed that we believe a holy church. For it is invisible, dwelling in the Spirit.' *Luther's Works*, V*ol. 27: Lectures on Galatians 2*, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan (Concordia, 1964), p. 84. Likewise, John Calvin noted that the invisible church can be understood as 'that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children by grace of adoption […] [and comprised of] all the elect from the beginning of the world'. This church is contrasted with the present church on earth where there is 'mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance'. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill and trans. by Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), 4.1.7, p. 1021.

These 'radicals'[4] were concerned with the church's adaptation to the configurations of Western society, with the church's hierarchical structure mirroring the medieval feudal structure and baptism into the state church often serving as a marker of national citizenship.[5] The church did not simply need to be reformed, they reasoned; it required restoration to the simplicity and deep convictions of its New Testament model(s). Thus, new communities comprised of those who voluntarily were convicted of the gospel — and its individual and communal demands to love and be discipled — needed to be formed, separated from what they viewed as equivocally Christian territorial churches. Only then might the church find the fullness of its spiritual renewal. Thus, for example, in the late 1520s, the Austrian Leonhard Schiemer wrote as follows:

> Church or ecclesia is a gathered congregation of people which is built on Christ and not on the pope, emperor, etc. Nor are the stone houses and towers the church. Paul says you are no longer pilgrims and strangers but fellow citizens and members of the household of God built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.[6]

Regardless of how old and established, neither the building nor its hierarchical leadership should be considered the church. As an Anabaptist, Schiemer reasoned that the true church is a 'gathered congregation of people which is built on Christ'. Only those who had wholeheartedly committed themselves by faith to its biblical, ecclesial

---

[4] The term 'radical' or 'Radical Reformation' is derived from George Huntston Williams's 1962 volume, and this article assumes its definition which referred to Anabaptists and other sixteenth-century groups as those who 'believed on principle in the separation of their own churches from the national or territorial state' and who were 'often quite indifferent to the general political and social order'. See Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd edn (Pennsylvania State University, 1995), pp. xxix–xxx.

[5] For further development of the early modern free church critique of the perception of the melding of church and culture, see Gunnar Westin's classic volume, *The Free Church Through the Ages,* trans. by Virgil A. Olson (Broadman, 1958), pp. 40–41; and Ernst Troeltsch's distinction between the early modern free church advocates whom he labelled 'sectarians' in contradistinction to the 'institutional' or 'established' church in his book, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, trans. by Olive Wyon (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), esp. pp. 691–696.

[6] Leonhard Schiemer, 'A Letter to the Church at Rattenberg' (1527–1528), in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. by Walter Klaassen (Herald Press, 1981), pp. 104–105 (p. 104).

obligations could be part of the genuine church. On this point, the Dutch Anabaptist Dirk Philips would write in the early 1560s that the

> erection of the congregation of Jesus Christ has occurred […] through the right teaching of the divine Word, Rom. 10:18, by the faith that comes out of hearing of the divine Word, added to by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. For no one can enter into the kingdom of God, into the heavenly Jerusalem, that is into the congregation of Jesus Christ, except that he be improved in heart, Matt. 3:8; Gal. 4:7, repents truly, and believes the gospel.[7]

Philips's remarks underscored that those who comprise the church are not constituted by geographic area or even familial ties. The proper gathering of God's people is made up of those who have heard, believed, and been transformed by the gospel. For Anabaptists, the church, as the house of God, is then embodied by true and disciplined believers alone.

Philips would later develop this concept against the magisterial Protestant notion — that the church was instead invisible because it is a spiritual and not merely palpable community — by countering,

> The congregation of the Lord, although it is certainly based in Spirit and truth, is nevertheless visible. […] The reasons are as follows: First, the name 'congregation' thus shows that it is not only invisible but also visible, Eccles. 1; I Tim. 3:16. For it [is called] 'ecclesia,' that is, a gathering or meeting, and those who speak to the meeting are called 'Ecclesiastes.' […] Second, Christ Jesus himself chose his apostles and disciples and gathered them as a congregation, John 15:[16]. And he was, after all, not invisible to Jerusalem and Judah. Third, the apostles gathered a congregation according to the command of the Lord out of all the people through the preaching of the gospel in faith and truth, Matt. 28:[19–20]; Mark 16:[15–16], and through the true Christian baptism, power, and unity of the Holy Spirit. […] How is it then possible that it would all be invisible?[8]

The early Anabaptists, then, considered themselves a visibly gathered people, who assembled voluntarily — and uncompelled by the state — as a community of believers, mutually bound by a pledge to love and discipline one another to be the 'nucleus of God's kingdom on earth or

---

[7] Dirk Philips, 'The Congregation of God', in *Enchiridion or Handbook of Christian Doctrine and Religion*, in *The Writings of Dirk Philips, 1504–1568*, ed. and trans. by Cornelius J. Dyck, William E. Keeney, and Alvin J. Beachey (Herald Press, 1992), pp. 350–382 (p. 357).

[8] Philips, 'Answer to the Two Letters of Sebastian Franck', in *Writings*, ed. Dyck et al., 455–466 (pp. 463–464).

its attempted realization'.[9] Persecuted by both Catholic and magisterial Protestant authorities for their distinctive practices, the Anabaptists saw themselves as replicating the New Testament church as a fellowship of genuine believers who endeavoured to live out their distinctive religious convictions.

Nearly a century later, English Baptists began to formulate their own self-understanding as a believers' church initially as a persecuted band of Christians who had separated from the Church of England. Those seventeenth-century English (formerly Puritan) Separatists who removed themselves to the Netherlands under John Smyth, along with the remnant who returned to their homeland under Thomas Helwys, accompanied by those who developed churches later that century in Britain — both in the General and the Particular Baptist streams — all considered themselves as faithful assemblies of genuine believers seeking to restore or re-embody the New Testament church. Beginning with Smyth, who led an assemblage of erstwhile Separatists to Amsterdam, these nascent Baptist groups regarded themselves as a "'gathered church," a body of professing believers which was bound together in a voluntary covenant of faith and obedience. The test of a regenerate church membership was a visible faith.'[10]

Leonard Busher, who accompanied Thomas Helyws from the Netherlands back to Spitalfields, near the stockyards of London, to establish the first British Baptist church, would boldly write against the English king and the monarch's continued maltreatment of any who might dissent from the Anglican church by stating in response,

> I do affirm, through the unlawful weed-hook of persecution, which your predecessors have used, and by your majesty and parliament still continued, there is such a quantity of wheat plucked up, and such a multitude of tares left behind, that the wheat which remains cannot yet appear in any right visible congregation.[11]

---

[9] Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* (Herald Press, 1998), p. 117.
[10] C. Douglas Weaver, 'Early English Baptists: Individual Conscience and Eschatological Ecclesiology', *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 38.2 (Summer 2011), pp. 141–158 (p. 141).
[11] See A. H. Newman, 'Baptists', in *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 1, ed. by Samuel Macauley Jackson (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), pp. 456–480 (p. 460).

Not long after, the initial seven Particular Baptist churches in London formulated what would become one of the most influential Baptist confessions of faith for early Baptists in 1644, *The First London Confession*, a declaration which would inspire numerous subsequent Baptist statements of faith to the present day. In this document, these early Baptists professed

> that Christ hath here on earth a spirituall Kingdome, which is the Church, which he hath purchased and redeemed to himself, as a peculiar inheritance: which Church, as it is visible to us, is a company of visible Saints, called & separated from the world, by the word and Spirit of God, to the visible profession of the faith of the Gospel […].[12]

For Baptists, the necessity of separation from the Anglican Church was predicated on the formation of congregations comprised of sincere believers who both professed with their lips and manifested with their lives their belief in Christ. By definition, such churches could not be merely territorial or ambiguously composed of those both committed and uncommitted to the faith. Therefore, for both Anabaptists and Baptists, the church was to be the visible gathering of God's faithful people. As Theron Price once observed, 'The chief likeness of an early English Baptist to a continental Anabaptist congregation lies in the principle of the gathered and disciplined Church. […] The church is visible, because it is a cohering group of regenerated believers already embodying and manifesting the "Catholick [or universal] Church."'[13]

## Initiation into the Visible Church: The Baptism of Believers

Having established that both Anabaptists and early Baptists held to the conviction of preserving a visible believers' church — a congregation comprised exclusively of genuine and committed Christians — it would follow that both movements would also maintain the practice of believer's baptism as the proper and exclusive initiation into the visible community. This rite, administered only to confessing Christians —

---

[12] 'First London Confession (1644)', section XXXIII, in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. by H. Leon McBeth (Broadman, 1990), section 2.4, p. 49.

[13] Theron D. Price, 'The Anabaptist View of the Church', *Review and Expositor*, 51.2 (April 1954), pp. 187–203 (p. 202).

including those who had previously received infant baptism — became the most distinctive and controversial outward characteristic of both traditions. It was a practice for which both movements ultimately received their initially pejorative appellations, for which they spent much energy and ink defending, and for which they were severely persecuted.

Although modern scholars interpret the Anabaptist branch of the Reformation as originating in disparate locales in Europe in the 1520s, the Swiss Anabaptists notably started in Zürich in January of 1525 amongst a group of former disciples of the Reformed theologian Huldrych Zwingli. Commencing with the administration of believer's baptism to George Blaurock by Conrad Grebel, the practice spread among its adherents and subsequently to various communities especially outside the Swiss city. Both in the canton of Zürich and through much of Europe, those who practised this baptism on its devotees were labelled 'Anabaptists' (literally, re-baptisers) by authorities, reviving the moniker of a fourth-century heresy first applied to North African Donatists, a heterodoxy punishable by death.

For their part, the early Anabaptists saw believer's baptism as essential to restoring the New Testament church. Michael Sattler helped articulate this principle in the early Anabaptist *Schleitheim Confession*:

> Baptism shall be given to all those who have been taught repentance and the amendment of life and [who] believe truly that their sins are taken away through Christ, and to all those who desire to walk with him in death, so that they might rise with him; […] hereby is excluded all infant baptism, the greatest and first abomination of the pope.[14]

Similarly, the South German Anabaptist scholar Balthasar Hubmaier argued that 'whatever baptism we receive, even if we are a hundred years old, it is still not a rebaptism, since infant baptism is no rebaptism, nor is it worthy of the name. Because the child knows neither good nor evil, nor can he promise or pledge anything to God or the church.' Instead, as Hubmaier continued, believer's baptism was foundational to the believers' church:

---

[14] Michael Sattler, 'The Seven Articles [of the Schleitheim Confession] (1527)', in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, ed. by John H. Yoder (Herald Press, 1973), pp. 34–43 (p. 36).

> Therefore, as much as one values the forgiveness of sins and the community of saints outside of which there is no salvation, so much should he value the baptism of water, through which he enters and becomes part of the universal Christian church. […] [But] where baptism of water according to the institution of Christ is not set up and used, there one does not know who his brother and sister is, there is no church, no brotherly discipline or correction, no ban, no Supper, nor anything like a Christian existence and reality.[15]

Thus, without proper baptism, Anabaptists contended, the church cannot be rightly restored. The initiation into the voluntary and visible community must itself be a free acceptance of the grace of God and a volitional submission to the congregation and its ongoing discipline in the faith. Moreover, infant baptism was interpreted by them to be absent in Scripture and as a later invention of the territorial church — a rite antithetical to the apostolic congregations.

A century later, English Baptists were concerned that the Anglican ecclesial practices were hardly closer to those of the ancient church than those found in Rome. In late 1608 or early 1609, John Smyth, pastor of the nascent first Baptist congregation in Amsterdam, felt so deeply about the corruption of paedobaptism in the state church that he initiated what he saw as the restoration of the ancient church practice of believer's baptism by first baptising himself before baptising his congregation.[16] In his fiery treatise primarily against Anglicanism entitled 'The Character of the Beast', Smyth wrote,

> The true constitution of the Church is of a new creature baptized into the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The false constitution is of infants baptized. We profess therefore that all those Churches that baptize infants are of the same false constitution, and all those Churches that baptize the new creature, those that are made disciples by teaching men confessing their faith and their sins, are of one true constitution.[17]

---

[15] Balthasar Hubmaier, 'A Christian Catechism' (1526), in *Three Reformation Catechisms: Catholic, Anabaptist, Lutheran*, ed. and trans. by Denis Janz (Mellen Press, 1982), pp. 147–156 (p. 149).

[16] See Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Mercer, 2003), pp. 71–77.

[17] John Smyth, 'The Character of the Beast', in *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*, ed. by Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon Jr., and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva (Judson, 1999), pp. 75–82 (p. 77).

Although subsequent Baptists did not follow Smyth's practice of self-baptism, an act he himself later regretted,[18] like Continental Anabaptists, early English Baptists demarcated their churches from others through believer's baptism. And like the Anabaptists, Baptists saw the restriction of Christian initiation to confessing adults as fundamental to the church's restoration. The earliest of Baptists also tended to practise a form of affusion for baptism, akin to the custom of most Anabaptists. Interestingly, this was likely the mode of both Smyth's Amsterdam and Helwys's Spitalfields congregations — even as the Anabaptist assembly of Waterlander Mennonites they encountered distinguished themselves by practising full immersion in their own Amsterdam church.

A few decades later, the English Baptist minister Edward Barber may have been the first Baptist to advocate for immersion baptism for believers in his congregation. He would write in 1641 in *A Small Treatise on Baptisme, or Dipping* that

> we are commanded to stand in the way, and aske for the old pathes, which is the good way and walke therein. […] The old and good way under the Gospell is the Institution of Jesus Christ. […] But the dipping of beleevers is that good old way of Christ and Infants is not […]
>
> This is proved […] They onely are to be dipped in whom repentance and faith is manifested by hearing the Word preached. But in persons of yeares onely is repentance and faith wrought by hearing the Word preached. […] Therefore onely persons of years [and not infants] are to be dipped.[19]

Regardless of the mode for either tradition, the baptism of believers as integral to the recovery of the apostolic church was central for both Anabaptists and early Baptists. Baptism served a role both as a declaration of personal faith and as an initiation into the community of saints. The Anabaptist Hubmaier would state plainly, 'Baptism in water […] is nothing other than a public confession and testimony of internal faith and commitment by which the person also testifies outwardly and

---

[18] See Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Broadman, 1987), p. 37; Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth*, p. 86; and John Smyth, *The Works of John Smyth, Fellow of Christ's College, 1594–1598*, 2 vols, ed. by William Thomas Whitley (Cambridge University Press, 1915), 2, p. 757.

[19] Edward Barber, 'A Small Treatise on Baptisme, or Dipping' (1641), in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. by McBeth, pp. 41–43 (p. 43).

declares before everyone that he is a sinner.'[20] And the 1742 Baptist *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* would resound the corollary notion: 'Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in and obedience to our Lord Jesus, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance.'[21]

## Congregational Compacts: Baptismal Pledges and Church Covenants

Along with the strong similarities both traditions have conspicuously carried with their theology and practice of water baptism is the close associations they placed between the rite of baptism and a pledge or covenant made in the midst of the congregation. As baptism served as the door into the visible church, so a baptismal pledge or communal covenant made with or in close proximity to one's baptism served for both groups as the baptisand's and church's mutual commitment to live in conformity to the ways of Christ within the congregation and, often, additionally as the member's voluntary submission to church discipline when he or she might stray from the covenant.

Early in the development of the Anabaptist tradition, various Anabaptists advanced the practice of a baptismal pledge, which was to be articulated by the neophyte during the baptismal rite. In his 'Christian Catechism' Hubmaier detailed this procedure:

> Thereupon one also has himself outwardly enrolled, inscribed, and by water baptism incorporated in the fellowship of the church […] before which church the person also publicly and orally vows to God and agrees in the strength of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that he will henceforth believe and live according to his divine Word. And if he should trespass herein he will accept brotherly admonition, according to Christ's order, Matt.

[20] Balthasar Hubmaier, 'On the Christian Baptism of Believers' (1525), in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, [hereafter *Hubmaier*], ed. and trans. by H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Herald Press, 1989), pp. 96–149 (p. 100).

[21] 'The Philadelphia Confession of Faith' (1742), in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, ed. by John A. Broadus, Timothy George, and Denise George (Broadman & Holman, 1996), pp. 56–93 (p. 89).

> 18:15ff. This precisely is the true baptismal vow, which we have lost for a thousand years.[22]

Here Hubmaier was likely differentiating his view from what he saw as the medieval Catholic replacement of the baptismal vow with 'monastic and priestly vows' and also Zwingli's early Reformed development, which retained infant baptism for the Swiss Protestants by tying it to the divine covenant made in the Old Testament practice of circumcision.[23]

Anabaptists generally saw baptism as a sign of the new covenant, and not the retention of the old. And the promise made in baptism combined the individual's confession of faith to God with his or her *Gelassenheit* (yieldedness to God's will) with brothers and sisters of the church.[24] On this point Hans Denck would write in 1527,

> In the same way that the covenantal sign, circumcision, was given without regard to human desire for it; all descendants of Abraham were duty-bound to the law […] But the new law is a matter of becoming God's children. Therefore, all who are under the new law are not forced to be there by other people. […] Baptism, the sign of the covenant, will only be given to those who by God's power through knowledge of true love are invited to it, who desire it and are willing to follow. They will be uncoerced by other members and relatives to remain in this love — only love itself may constrain them.[25]

Thus, as Hubmaier would further develop, initiates into the church properly seal their inner confessions of faith with a public declaration and promise to live obediently before both Christ and church:

> [W]hen a person now confesses himself to be sinner, believes on the forgiveness of sins, and has committed himself to a new life, then he professes this also outwardly and publicly before the Christian church, into whose fellowship he lets himself be registered and counted according to the order and institution of Christ. […] Then he lets himself be baptized with

---

[22] Hubmaier, 'A Christian Catechism' (1526), in *Hubmaier*, ed. by Pipkin and Yoder, pp. 340–365 (p. 349).

[23] Brian C. Brewer, *A Pledge of Love: The Anabaptist Sacramental Theology of Balthasar Hubmaier* (Paternoster, 2012), pp. 109–110.

[24] For further development of *Gelassenheit*, see both Julia Qiuye Zhao, 'Suffering and Martyrdom', and Toivo Pilli, 'Discipleship', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism*, ed. by Brian C. Brewer (T&T Clark, 2022), pp. 339–354 (esp. pp. 345–350) and pp. 405–421 (pp. 409–416), respectively.

[25] Hans Denck, 'Concerning True Love' (1527), in *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. by Daniel Liechty (Paulist Press, 1994), pp. 112–121 (p. 116).

> outward water […] And if he henceforth blackens or shames the faith and the name of Christ with public or offensive sins, he herewith submits and surrenders to brotherly discipline according to the order of Christ, Matt. 18:15ff. […] This pledge, promise, and public testimony does not happen out of human powers or capacities […] It rather takes place in the name of God.[26]

Hubmaier was by no means alone among Anabaptists in associating a pledge to God and congregation with baptism. His contemporary, Hans Hut, would write as follows:

> Here baptism must be added […] in that a person consents to bear everything that will be imposed upon him by the [F]ather through Christ. And baptism gives him the task of abiding with the Lord and renouncing the world, and of accepting the sign of baptism as covenant of his consent before a Christian community which has received the covenant from God, and in the name of God. […] For this covenant is a consenting to obedience to Christ, with a demonstration of divine love toward all brothers and sisters with body, life, goods, and honor, regardless of the evil that the world may speak about him.[27]

Much of the biblical focus for the concept of a baptismal pledge may be derived from 1 Peter 3:21, where Luther's translation renders the passage, 'Baptism is a covenant [*Bund*] of a good conscience with God.' The baptismal covenant was binding in three directions: 1) a covenant between God and the believer, 2) a pledge between the believer and God, and 3) a promise between believer and the congregation (*Gemeinde*).[28] The covenant made in baptism is subsequently rehearsed at the commencement of each Lord's Supper service, thus necessitating congregational reconciliation before Communion.[29] This ongoing practice provided the mechanism to keep the visible church from corruption in open and public sins. Thus, in summary, Hubmaier would write,

---

[26] Hubmaier, 'Summa of the Entire Christian Life' (1525), in *Hubmaier,* ed. by Pipkin and Yoder, pp. 81–89 (pp. 85–86).

[27] Hans Hut, 'On the Mystery of Baptism', in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. by Michael G. Baylor (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 152–171 (pp. 161–162).

[28] Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism*, pp. 134–135.

[29] *The Schleitheim Confession*, likely under the authorship of Michael Sattler, directed that church discipline, based on Matthew 18, 'shall be done according to the ordering of the Spirit of God before the breaking of bread'. 'Schleitheim Confession', in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, ed. by Yoder, p. 37.

> Where there is no water baptism, there is no church nor minister, neither brother nor sister, no brotherly admonition, excommunication, or reacceptance. […] Now sisters and brothers, before they gather for the Supper, must be registered and have authority over each other. […] Where does this authority come from, if not from the pledge of baptism.[30]

This powerful ecclesial structure linking the sacraments to church discipline was so influential among the Anabaptists it may have even influenced the evolution of the Reformed understanding of covenantal theology and its congregational commitments.[31]

In their own attempt to inaugurate and sustain a believers' church, Early English Baptists made use of church covenants. On the advent of establishing the first Baptist congregation, the Separatist John Smyth wrote *Principles and Inferences* to institute 'the ordinances of Christ for dispensing the covenant since his death'. Observing that the church was not only invisible but also a visible community, he wrote, 'A visible communion of Saincts is of two, three, or more Saincts joined together by covenant with God & themselves, freely to vse al the holy things of God, according to the word, for their mutual edification, & Gods glory.'[32] Smyth, who had come from a Calvinist Puritan background, demonstrates here 'a shift in the meaning of covenant from Calvin's emphases on objective and gracious aspects of the covenant to understanding the covenant as a biblical pact or treaty that depended as much on human obedience to the laws of God as it did to the faithfulness of God in keeping the promises of the covenant'.[33] Scholars have observed, then, a shift in Smyth from an objective theology where God alone moves to a more subjective, experiential, and responsive faith

---

[30] Hubmaier, 'On the Christian Baptism of Believers', p. 127.

[31] See Malcolm Yarnell III, 'The Covenant Theology of Early Anabaptists, 1525–1527', in *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation: The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists and Early General Baptists*, ed. by Paul S. Fiddes (Regent's Park College, 2018), pp. 15–62 (p. 16); and Timothy E. Fulop, 'The Third Mark of the Church? — Church in the Reformed and Anabaptist Reformations', *Journal of Religious History*, 19.1 (June 1995), pp. 26–42.

[32] Smyth, *Works*, 1, p. 252.

[33] Stephen Brachlow, *The Communion of Saints: Radical Puritan and Spiritualist Ecclesiology 1570–1625* (Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 31–32.

in its covenantal ecclesial framework, akin to Anabaptism.[34] Like the Anabaptists, the first Baptists understood covenant to be a binding pledge between God and the believer and between the believer and the others in the congregation. Also similar to the Anabaptists, this notion of covenant has implications for church discipline and excommunication. Said Smyth,

> Nay say we, the power of binding and losing is given to the body of the Church, even to two or three faithful people joined together in covenant, & this we prove evidently in this manner. Vnto whome the covenant is given, vnto them the power of binding & losing is given. The covenant is given to the body of the Church, that is to two or three faithful ones: For God is their God, & they are his people.[35]

Thus, Smyth sought for his emerging Baptist congregation to understand the communal covenant as foundational to maintaining its visible church ecclesiology.

Likewise, the early Particular Baptist *First London Confession* (1644) defined the church as those 'being baptized into that faith, and joined to the Lord, and each other, *by mutuall agreement*, in the practical injoyment of the Ordinances, commanded by Christ their head'.[36] Baptist congregants, then, were frequently bound to one another through mutual submission to a church covenant, a practice which has continued in various and diverse Baptist congregations for centuries. Nascent congregations of Early English Baptists often devised their own church covenants, notably those in Bristol (1640), Leominster, Herefordshire (1656), by Benjamin and Elias Keach (1697), and in Norfolk (1699). Consistent in these covenants was a sentiment of 'giving up [them]selves to the Lord and one another',[37] which inextricably ties their mutual 'self-giving' to edification, church discipline, and the proper

---

[34] See William H. Brackney, 'Baptism and Covenant: A Survey of Early English General Baptist Ecclesiology', in *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation*, ed. by Fiddes, pp. 93–118 (p. 95).
[35] Smyth, *Works*, 2, pp. 388–389.
[36] 'First London Confession (1644)', section XXXIII, in *A Sourcebook for Baptist Heritage*, ed. by McBeth, p. 49; emphasis mine.
[37] 'Covenant of Great Ellingham Baptist Church, Norfolk, England' (1699), in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, ed. by John A. Broadus et al., pp. 181–183 (p. 182).

worship of God. Such a sentiment closely resembled the *Gelassenheit* (yielding) found among early Anabaptists. Thus, what one scholar wrote of the Anabaptists may also apply to the early Baptists: that their 'faith is hardly individualistic, even though it is deeply personal'.[38] Said another scholar regarding the Baptists, 'It is a high churchmanship in its emphasis on the faith which is presupposed by the local covenant and by the rite of baptism.'[39] Anabaptists and Baptists thus both formed believers' churches which maintained their distinctive commitments through voluntary, congregational compacts.

## Religious Voluntarism: The Freedom of Conscience and the Separation of the Church from the State

Anabaptists and Baptists have also stressed the importance of freedom for the individual to confess the faith according to his or her own conscience, rather than being externally compelled to a theological position by another, be it civil authority or ecclesial hierarchy. While differing in their contexts in sixteenth-century Continental Europe and in seventeenth-century England and American colonies respectively, Anabaptists and Baptists arrived at their conclusions out of defiance to significant pressures for religious conformity by those around them.

As the canton of Zürich was undergoing Protestant reform under the nascent Reformed theology of Huldyrich Zwingli, the reformer held a series of disputations to appeal to the Zürich town council to approve instalments of his Protestant reform policies. At the second of these disputations, in 1523, primarily addressing images and the Mass, one of Conrad Grebel's companions, Simon Stumpf, objected to the entire nature of the proceedings:

> Master Huldrych! You have no authority to place the decision [regarding the Mass] in Milords' hands, for the decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides. If therefore Milords were to discern and decide anything that is

[38] Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (IVP, 2004), p. 252.
[39] Ernest A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers: Baptist Thought Yesterday and Today* (Carey Kingsgate, 1952), p. 37.

> contrary to God's decision, I will ask Christ for his Spirit and will teach and act against it.[40]

Grebel, Stumpf, and a band of other erstwhile radical disciples of Zwingli, advocated for carrying out a programme of reform exclusively according to Scripture and by the leadership of the Holy Spirit, independent of the approval of the civil magistery. Yet, Zwingli and other magisterial Protestants were more sensitive to the state's sanction, as such patronage often protected the Reformation from Catholic ecclesial-political reclamation. Moreover, classical reformers persisted in the notion of geographic conformity to uniform religious convictions. A society which allowed for religious toleration invited chaos, not liberty, they reasoned. Yet, in the minds of these nascent Swiss Anabaptists of the Grebel circle, such capitulation merely exchanged one illegitimate regime for another to make claims over a spiritual realm that was not theirs to oversee. Consequently, Anabaptists were severely persecuted by both ecclesial and civic authorities in Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed territories, and many Anabaptists were martyred for refusing to recant their distinctive faith.

The year before he joined with the Anabaptists, Hubmaier penned what was likely the first treatise advocating the freedom of conscience in the modern era. In his 1524 'Concerning Heretics and Those who Burn Them', written while a refugee in Schaffhausen, the South German theologian would thoughtfully posit,

> So it follows that the slayers of heretics are the worst heretics of all, in that they, contrary to Christ's teaching and practice, condemn heretics to the fire. By pulling up the harvest prematurely they destroy the wheat along with the tares. […] A Turk or a heretic cannot be persuaded by us either with sword or with fire, but only with patience and prayer, and so we should wait patiently for the judgment of God.[41]

For Hubmaier, all Christian governments and, indeed, each claimant to the truth must allow room for the dissenter to mend their ways so as

---

[40] 'The Second Zurich Disputation' (26–28 October 1523), in *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism: The Grebel Letters and Related Documents*, ed. by Leland Harder (Herald Press, 1985), pp. 234–250 (p. 242).

[41] Balthasar Hubmaier, 'Concerning Heretics and Those who Burn Them' (1524), in *The Works of Balthasar Hubmaier*, trans. by George Duiguid Davidson and Walter Klaassen (microfilm in the Conrad Grebel College Library), pp. 31–32; cf. *Hubmaier*, ed. by Pipkin and Yoder, p. 64.

not to deny the lost person the opportunity for theological amendment and divine delivery. 'Hence to burn heretics is in appearance to profess Christ,' Hubmaier wrote, 'but in reality to deny him. […] [And] if it is blasphemy to destroy a heretic, how much more is it to burn to ashes a faithful herald of God, unconvicted, not arraigned by truth.'[42]

A decade later, Kilian Aurbacher, an Anabaptist minister from Austerlitz, would write to the notable magisterial reformer, Martin Bucer of Strasbourg:

> It is never right to compel one in matters of faith, whatever he may believe, be he Jew or Turk. Even if one does not believe uprightly or wants to believe so, i.e., if he does not have or want to have the right understanding of salvation, and does not trust God or submit to him, but trusts in the creature and loves it, he shall bear his own guilt, no one will stand for him in the judgment. […] And thus we conduct ourselves according to the example of Christ and the apostles and proclaim the gospel according to the grace that has been entrusted to us; we compel no one. But whoever is willing and ready, let him follow him […] Christ's people are a free, unforced, and uncompelled people, who receive Christ with desire and a willing heart, of this the Scriptures testify.[43]

For the next two centuries, the story of the Anabaptist people would be one of persecution and exile to the corners of Europe in search of a place for religious liberty. Appraising this journey, the twentieth-century Mennonite theologian Harold Bender reflected that 'there can be no question but the great principles of freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and the voluntarism in religion […] ultimately are derived from the Anabaptists of the Reformation period, who […] challenged the Christian world to follow them in practice'.[44]

In the seventeenth century, in the year of his death (1612), John Smyth also articulated an argument for religious liberty, a view which

---

[42] Hubmaier, 'Concerning Heretics and Those Who Burn Them' (1524), in *Balthasar Hubmaier: The Leader of the Anabaptists*, ed. by Henry C. Vedder (New York: AMS, 1971), pp. 84–88 (pp. 87–88).

[43] Killian Aurbacher, 'Hulshof' (1534), in *Anabaptism in Outline,* ed. by Klaassen, p. 293.

[44] Harold S. Bender, 'The Anabaptist Vision', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 18 (1944), pp. 67–88 (p. 68); revised and reprinted as *The Anabaptist Vision* (Herald Press, 1944), pp. 4–5; see also Brian Cooper, 'Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience', in *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism*, ed. by Brewer, pp. 387–403.

likely demonstrated Mennonite influence.[45] However, as one scholar observed, 'Although it is questionable whether it should be called a Baptist or Mennonite confession, in a sense it was both.'[46] Regardless of being Anabaptist or Baptist, Smyth's *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Religion* demonstrated his attempt to draw the boundaries between the role of the civil government and the individual's conscience regarding faith:

> That the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine: but to leave Christian religion free, to every man's conscience, and to handle only civil transgressions (Rom. xiii), injuries and wrongs of man against man, in murder, adultery, theft, etc., for Christ only is the king, and lawgiver of the church and conscience (James vi. 12).[47]

Scholars have called this statement the 'first full claim for full religious liberty ever penned in the English language'[48] and 'one of the most complete statements of religious liberty of that generation'.[49] Yet two years later, Leonard Busher boldly addressed the English King James I in his 1614 *Religion's Peace*. In this work, the first Baptist treatise *entirely* devoted to religious freedom, this early Baptist intrepidly stated,

> May it please your majesty and parliament to understand that, by fire and sword, to constrain princes and peoples to receive that one true religion of the gospel, is wholly against the mind and merciful law of Christ, dangerous both to king and state, a means to decrease the kingdom of Christ, and a means to increase the kingdom of antichrist; […] And no king or bishop can, or is able to command faith; That is the gift of God, who worketh in us both the will and the deed of his own good pleasure.[50]

Under the Stuart kings, British nonconformists were forced to worship in secret. Others ultimately fled to America after the monarchs issued legislation hostile to religious dissent, such as the Conventicle Act

---

45 Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth*, p. 91.
46 W. R. Estep, 'Anabaptists, Baptists, and the Free Church Movement', *Criswell Theological Review*, 6.2 (1993), pp. 303–317 (p. 313).
47 Smyth, 'On Religious Liberty', in *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Christian Religion*, art. 84 in *Sources*, ed. by McBeth, p. 70.
48 A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, 3rd edn (Carey Kingsgate, 1961), p. 42.
49 McBeth, *Sources*, p. 70.
50 Leonard Busher, 'Religion's Peace: Or a Plea for Liberty of Conscience' (1614), in *Sources*, ed. by McBeth, pp. 72–75 (p. 73).

(1664), which outlawed unsanctioned religious gatherings of more than five people. Yet, the colonies themselves often limited the worship of dissenting traditions from the official Christian tradition of each province. In this context, Roger Williams, the erstwhile Puritan turned Baptist minister, established the Providence Plantations, a colony later renamed Rhode Island, where he worked to make the future state a place for religious liberty for all people. Here he founded the first Baptist church in America at Providence. Responding to the persecution of Baptists and other non-establishment traditions in the colonies in his 1644 *Bloudy Tennet of Persecution*, Williams posited, 'An enforced uniformity of religion through a nation or civil state, confound the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.'[51]

Over a century later, as the colonies broke free from Britain to become states within a new, independent nation, several states struggled to shake the religious privilege which had formerly been granted to one Christian tradition over others. As Massachusetts drafted its own state constitution, apparently retaining some privileges for its Congregationalist church, the Massachusetts Baptist pastor Isaac Backus warned in his 1779 'Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty',

> What a dangerous error, yea, what a root of all evil then must it be, for men to imagine that there is anything in the nature of true government that interferes with true and full liberty […] The true liberty of man is to know, obey, and enjoy his Creator and to do all the good unto, and enjoy all the happiness with and in, his fellow creatures that he is capable of.[52]

For the state to interfere, then, with the consciences of the faithful, Backus argued, would be to place them under a 'soul-slavery', claiming the prerogative of divine laws as their own in determining God's worship and his ministers, and how such ministers are supported.[53]

Thus, both the Anabaptists and the Baptists urged civil government — whether controlled by a prince, magistrate, or town

---

[51] Roger Williams, 'The Bloudy Tennet of Persecution' (1644), in *Sources*, ed. by McBeth, pp. 83–90 (p. 84).
[52] Isaac Backus, 'An Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty' (1779), in *Baptist Roots*, ed. by Freeman et al., pp. 157–167 (p. 157).
[53] Backus, 'An Appeal', p. 162.

council — not to interfere in the religious realm. Drawing on the well-established doctrine of the two kingdoms, these believers' church traditions strenuously argued for consigning the magistery to oversee secular laws and affairs, while encouraging religious liberty both for the individual and for gathered congregations who may dissent from the theological outlook of others.

## Conclusion

The four principles developed above constitute an ecclesial framework which distinguishes itself from other major denominational traditions, demonstrating the strong theological ties between the embryonic traditions from their Continental Reformation and Anglican contexts respectively. The principles of Christian liberty and the freedom of conscience necessarily coalesced with the underlying ecclesial structure of these free church movements of the visible church comprised of believers willingly brought together by a free faith. That one would submit to the congregational discipline of others required each person's volition, thus the initiation into such a community must also be exclusively voluntary. 'It was for this same reason,' Theron Price observed, 'that a Christian congregation, as a voluntary fellowship not co-terminous with the civil community, must be free of State control.'[54]

Undoubtedly, there are several additional areas of theological affinity which might be studied or further developed between early Anabaptists and Baptists. Scholars have previously considered the parallels of two movements regarding the Lord's Supper and their general sacramental thought,[55] their understandings of Law and Gospel,[56] and even how both groups originally exercised church discipline.[57] The aggregate of these observations is not to assert that

[54] Price, 'The Anabaptist View of the Church', p. 195.
[55] Brian C. Brewer, 'Free Church Sacramentalism: A Surprising Connection Between Baptists and Anabaptists', in *Interfaces: Baptists and Others*, ed. by David W. Bebbington and Martin Sutherland (Paternoster, 2012), pp. 3–28.
[56] W. R. Estep, 'Law and Gospel in the Anabaptist/Baptist Tradition', *Grace Theological Journal*, 12.2 (1991), pp. 189–214.
[57] Joe L. Coker, '"Cast Out from among the Saints": Church Discipline among Anabaptists and English Separatists in Holland, 1590–1620', *Reformation*, 11 (2006), pp. 1–27.

Anabaptists and Baptists were identical. Their ecclesial-political settings and motives for holding their respective views were far too incongruous to make such a claim. Winthrop Hudson prudently deduced that 'the Baptists and Anabaptists represent two diverse and quite dissimilar Christian traditions'.[58] And when studying the two movements, one should not convey their similarities without context and gradation in what Joseph Ban critiqued as 'an egregious example of the loose assemblage of superficial characteristics',[59] indolently concluding that one movement was essentially a duplication or extension of the other. Anabaptists and early Baptists doubtlessly had areas of nuanced difference and even significant contextual, theological, and practical dissimilarities. Yet on these core ecclesial principles as believers' churches they manifest a substantive measure of theological consistency.

[58] See Winthrop S. Hudson, 'Baptists Were Not Anabaptists', *The Chronicle*, 16.4 (1953), pp. 171–179.

[59] Joseph D. Ban, 'Were the Earliest English Baptists Anabaptists?', in *In the Great Tradition: Essays on Pluralism, Voluntarism, and Revivalism*, ed. by Joseph D. Ban and Paul R. Dekar (Judson Press, 1982), pp. 91–106 (p. 102).