Baptists and Anabaptists after Christendom: Opportunities for Mutual Learning

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Abstract
Although early Baptists differentiated and distanced themselves from Anabaptism for a number of understandable reasons, these traditions have much in common as a recent Baptist/Mennonite dialogue demonstrates. But there are also divergencies and opportunities for mutual learning, especially in the emerging post-Christendom context in western societies. This article reflects on examples in the areas of ethics, missiology, and ecclesiology. Contemporary Baptists and Anabaptists can learn from each other in relation to issues of war and peace, different approaches to evangelism and interpretations of the atonement, participative communities and mutual accountability. An acknowledged limitation of this article is its western focus. It concludes by recognising that both traditions have much to learn from Baptists and Anabaptists in and from the Majority World.

Keywords
Post-Christendom; ethics; ecclesiology; missiology

Introduction

Although early Baptists differentiated and distanced themselves from Anabaptism for a number of understandable reasons, these traditions have much in common as a recent Baptist/Mennonite dialogue demonstrates. But there are also divergencies and opportunities for mutual learning, especially in the emerging post-Christendom context in western societies. This article reflects on examples in the areas of ethics, missiology, and ecclesiology. Contemporary Baptists and Anabaptists can learn from each other in relation to issues of war and peace, different approaches to evangelism and interpretations of the atonement, participative communities and mutual accountability.

English Baptists and Anabaptists: Early History

Although church historians continue to debate the extent to which the continental Anabaptist movements[1] influenced the emergence and development of the early English Baptists, many early Baptist leaders insisted that they were certainly *not* Anabaptists. There were understandable reasons for their persistent attempts to differentiate and distance themselves from Anabaptism.

First, for some decades before the formation of the first Baptist congregations, the term 'Anabaptist' had appeared in official documents that attempted to suppress what was initially perceived as a foreign intrusion into England and then, rather more worryingly to the authorities, a small but growing presence of English Anabaptists. As early as 1538, Henry VIII received from two Protestant German princes, Philipp of Hesse and John Frederick of Saxony, a letter written by the Lutheran reformer Philip Melanchthon, warning him that continental Anabaptists were infiltrating his kingdom. Henry issued two proclamations prohibiting Anabaptist literature and banishing from his kingdom anyone who had been rebaptised. In the following year, he excluded foreigners from a proclamation of pardon to all 'heretics' in his realm, indicating that he regarded Anabaptism (and perhaps other supposed heresies) as an unwelcome external influence. However, in 1540, a further proclamation of pardon to 'heretics' within his realm explicitly excluded 'Anabaptists' from this provision, perhaps indicating an awareness that there were now some English Anabaptists.

Throughout the rest of the sixteenth century, government and ecclesiastical documents continued to express concern about the presence and influence of 'Anabaptists' in England. A number of individuals can be identified — Joan Bocher, Henry Hart, Robert Cooche, Humphrey Middleton, Nicholas Sheterden, George Brodbridge, and others — and there may have been informal gatherings, but it seems unlikely that there were any congregational expressions of Anabaptism in England in this period. There were some Anabaptist martyrs, though relatively few by comparison with those executed

[1] It is now generally accepted that continental Anabaptism consisted of several movements with a common core of beliefs and practices but also significant differences.

elsewhere in Europe. But concern about the influence of Anabaptist ideas persisted and there were further proclamations intended to suppress these.

Despite the very limited number of English Anabaptists, it is clear from official church documents that Anabaptist ideas were regarded as sufficiently threatening to be identified and denounced. Anabaptists were named in the *Ten Articles* (1536), *The Bishop's Book* (1537), *The King's Book* (1543), and the *Forty-Two Articles* (1553). In the better-known *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1562), Article 38 stated that 'the riches and goods of Christians are not common […] as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast', and other articles were worded in such a way as to exclude Anabaptist beliefs. The Presbyterian Confessions of 1560 and 1647 both excoriated Anabaptist convictions. There were also thousands of polemical treatises and pamphlets that presented the Anabaptists in the worst possible light.

Unsurprisingly, when Baptist churches emerged from the dissenting maelstrom of the early seventeenth century, they (like the Congregationalists) denied vehemently that they were Anabaptists. This term continued to appear frequently in lists of those the government or the state church were trying to suppress.[2] Despite their links with the Dutch Mennonites and even an abortive attempt in 1626 to unite with the Amsterdam Waterlanders, Baptists rejected the application of this term to their movement.

Second, the shadow of events in Münster in the mid-1530s continued to hover over perceptions of Anabaptism. Insurrection, violence, polygamy, and enforced sharing of possessions had alarmed earlier generations, convincing many that this was the true nature of Anabaptism. This malign legacy helps to explain the fear and hostility that characterised responses to Anabaptism nearly a century later. Although Anabaptists did advocate mutual aid in ways that were threatening to English notions of private property, including the

[2] For examples, see Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 87, 98, 100, 223.

'common purse' practices of the Hutterites, it is more likely the enforced sharing of possessions practised in Münster that lies behind Article 38 of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. English Baptists, very understandably, distanced themselves from these associations.[3]

Third, they were also aware that some of the anti-Anabaptist propaganda focused on the heterodox Christology associated with Melchior Hofmann and endorsed by some Mennonites. Known as the 'celestial flesh' heresy, this taught that Jesus brought his human flesh with him from heaven and did not derive this from his mother, Mary. It seems that this idea originated among the German Spiritualists and was an attempt to protect the perfection of Christ from contamination, but it was widely and rightly regarded as contrary to biblical teaching and theological orthodoxy. Today it would also be regarded as based on false physiological assumptions. Although this Christology was rejected by most other Anabaptists, just as the events at Münster were rejected by most other Anabaptists, their Catholic and Protestant opponents had little interest in differentiating between the various Anabaptist movements and positions. English Baptists did not subscribe to this approach to Christology and rejected any association with those who did.[4]

The early English Baptists may, then, have had legitimate theological, as well as political, reasons for rejecting identification as 'Anabaptists', including their rejection of Anabaptist prohibitions on bearing arms, swearing oaths, and becoming magistrates.[5] But this does not mean that the earlier continental movements had no influence on their development. This influence was rather less significant among those who became known as Particular Baptists and drew much of their

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[3] See F. J. Powicke, *Henry Barrow, Separatist (1550?–1593) and the Exiled Church of Amsterdam (1593–1662)* (Cambridge: J. Clarke & Company, 1900), pp. 112–114. See further, Thomas Crosby, *The History of the English Baptists* (London: privately printed, 1738), I, p. lvii.

[4] In 1673 Thomas Monck published *A Cure for the Cankering Error of the New Eutychians*, warning Baptists against this Melchiorite heresy. See Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 299. See also, Crosby, *History*, I, pp. 267–268.

[5] See Watts, *The Dissenters*, p. 50.

inspiration from the Puritans and Calvinism, but those who became known as General Baptists not only had strong personal and institutional links with Anabaptists in the Netherlands but also shared many of their convictions and practices.[6]

English Baptists and Anabaptists: More Recent History

During the next three centuries, Anabaptism was variously relegated to a footnote in Reformation studies, interpreted through the writings of its opponents, or associated almost exclusively with the atypical events in Münster. Most Baptists, if they were aware of Anabaptism at all, accepted these evaluations of its significance. But this was not true of all Baptists. Some became convinced that Anabaptism was more important than a historical footnote and that Münster was an aberration. Ian Randall has traced the varying assessments of Anabaptism made by leading Baptist historians between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.[7] He gives examples of historians who wrote positively about the Anabaptists and were insistent that they were forebears of the English Baptists. However, these historians tended to focus on Anabaptist figures they found more congenial, especially Menno Simons and Balthasar Hubmaier, the latter espousing views on the sword and the magistracy that were more acceptable to Baptists. During the early decades of the twentieth century, assessments of Anabaptism and its influence on the early Baptists were mostly less positive, with some historians vehemently denying significant influence and choosing to highlight the more mystical and apocalyptic branches of Anabaptism.

From the mid-twentieth century, however, especially through the efforts of Mennonite historians, the writings of several early

[6] See further, James Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence and the Elect Nation* (Herald Press, 1993) and Paul Fiddes, *The Fourth Strand of the Reformation: The Covenant Ecclesiology of Anabaptists, English Separatists and Early General Baptists* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018).

[7] Ian Randall, 'A Believing Church: Baptist Perspectives on Anabaptism', *Baptistic Theologies*, 5.1 (2013), pp. 17–34.

Anabaptist leaders were recovered, translated, and made available, encouraging a reassessment of Anabaptist convictions and practices.[8] Mennonite leaders became convinced that their Anabaptist heritage offered an attractive vision for their denominations and congregations, albeit choosing to emphasise certain aspects of this heritage more than others.[9] And some English Baptist leaders came to believe that the Anabaptist vision might also prove to be a source of renewal for their communities. Influential among these was Ernest Payne, general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain from 1951 to 1967.[10] Not all agreed, notably Barry White, the leading Baptist historian in the 1970s, who insisted that the Baptists had roots in English Puritanism, not Anabaptism.[11]

During the 1980s and 1990s, through the influence of the London Mennonite Centre and later the Anabaptist Network (now renamed the Anabaptist Mennonite Network following a merger with the London Mennonite Trust),[12] British Christians from many traditions became interested in Anabaptism and its potential to offer fresh perspectives on discipleship, mission, and church life. This coincided with a growing awareness of the accelerating demise of Christendom and the need to grapple with the challenges and opportunities of post-Christendom. No longer concerned to distance themselves from accusations of being 'Anabaptists', as their forebears had been, Baptists have been at the forefront of this rediscovery of a marginalised tradition. Centuries earlier, Anabaptists had rejected the ideology of Christendom, insisted that Europe was not a truly Christian society, and critiqued the

[8] See especially the 'Classics of the Radical Reformation' series, containing documents translated and annotated under the direction of the Institute of Mennonite Studies and now published by Plough Publishing House.

[9] The seminal document was Harold Bender's *The Anabaptist Vision*, first published in 1944 by Herald Press.

[10] See Ernest Payne, *The Baptist Movement in the Reformation and Onwards* (Kingsgate Press, 1947) and *The Anabaptists of the 16th Century and Their Influence in the Modern World* (Carey Kingsgate Press, 1949).

[11] B. R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

[12] See Anabaptist Mennonite Network <https://amnetwork.uk> [accessed 2 April 2025].

collusion of the church with wealth, power, status, and violence. Baptists and others suspected that this tradition might be unusually well-equipped to offer insights and resources for an emerging post-Christendom culture.

Although some Baptists who identified more strongly with Reformed theology were suspicious of this interest in Anabaptism, influential Baptist theologians, historians, and church leaders encouraged the integration of Baptist and Anabaptist approaches to ecclesial and missional issues. Among these were Nigel Wright, Ian Randall, Keith Jones, Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anne Wilkinson-Hayes. During the 1990s, there were faculty members in all the English Baptist colleges who identified with or were deeply sympathetic to Anabaptism. Spurgeon's College introduced a master's programme on Baptist and Anabaptist theology. Baptist ministers were disproportionately represented within the emerging Anabaptist Network and in its theology forum. Some of these wholeheartedly embraced an Anabaptist identity; others preferred to describe themselves as 'hyphenated Anabaptists'. In 1997, Urban Expression was founded as a mission agency with Anabaptist values committed to working in marginalised urban neighbourhoods.[13] The founders were Baptists and many of the coordinators, team leaders, and mission partners in the past twenty-eight years have been Baptist ministers.

The interaction of Baptist and Anabaptist perspectives has continued in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. When the London Mennonite Centre ran out of money and was forced to close in 2011, the library was gifted to Bristol Baptist College. Steve Finamore, then the principal, suggested that this resource might enable the establishment of a Centre for Anabaptist Studies. Since 2014, this has offered taught master's modules and supervision for doctoral students exploring a range of Anabaptist topics. The Centre has had more Baptist students than from any other tradition. In February 2025, to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism, a conference was held in Oxford,

[13] See the Urban Expression website <http://www.urbanexpression.org.uk> [accessed 2 April 2025].

'Beyond 500', jointly sponsored by the Centre for Anabaptist Studies, the Centre for Baptist Studies, and the Baptist Historical Society.[14]

In 2023, the Incarnate Network, which had for over twenty years provided a support network for mainly Baptist church planters and pioneers, came under the auspices of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network, which provided funding for two Baptist ministers to offer coaching to emerging pioneers.[15] After some decades in which no attempts had been made to plant Anabaptist or Mennonite churches in Britain, the Incarnate Network represents a strategic change of direction, prompted in part by the many opportunities for church planting in post-Christendom Britain and in part by the need to embody Anabaptist convictions and practices in communities that wholeheartedly embrace this tradition. The Network also continues to resource existing churches (Baptists and others) that are interested in incorporating Anabaptist practices. A book published in 2024 to support this initiative, *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities*, had contributions from three Baptist ministers.[16] Two other major projects of the Network, Peaceful Borders and Soulspace, are led by Baptist ministers.[17]

Interest in Anabaptism has not been limited to English Baptists. The two main staff members of the Scottish Baptist College until this year were strongly influenced by Anabaptism, and the college hosted a public lecture in March 2025 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Anabaptism. Ruth Gouldbourne addressed the question 'What did the

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[14] Two of the presentations can be accessed through YouTube: Joshua Searle, 'Discipleship without Borders' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrkyNOoLlCI> [accessed 16 May 2025], and Sally Nelson, 'Porous Church' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxAPJcVuwUk> [accessed 16 May 2025].

[15] See 'incarnate', Anabaptist Mennonite Network <https://amnetwork.uk/incarnate/> [accessed 2 April 2025]. The Anabaptist Mennonite Network developed from a merger between the London Mennonite Trust and the Anabaptist Network. The trustees of the Network are the custodians of the funds released by the sale of the London Mennonite Centre.

[16] Stuart Murray, *The New Anabaptists: Practices for Emerging Communities* (Herald Press, 2024). The contributors were Alexandra Ellish, Juliet Kilpin, and Karen Sethuraman.

[17] See 'Peaceful Borders' <https://amnetwork.uk/peacefulborders/> and 'Soulspace' <https://amnetwork.uk/soulspace/> [accessed 2 April 2025], both on the Anabaptist Mennonite Network website.

Anabaptists ever do for us?'.[18] Faculty members of South Wales Baptist College have also been influenced by Anabaptism. In Northern Ireland, although most Baptists are Reformed in their theology and ecclesiology, Irish Baptist Networks, which encourages connections between Irish Baptists and the global Baptist community, has Anabaptist leanings.[19] There has long been a focus on Anabaptism at the International Baptist Theological Seminary (formerly based in Prague and now in Amsterdam, renamed as the International Baptist Theological Study Centre) under the influence of Keith Jones, Ian Randall, Toivo Pilli, and others. And some American Baptists have produced influential publications advocating the continuing engagement of Baptists with Anabaptist resources.[20] In light of this, it is perhaps not surprising that the editor of a recent very substantial handbook on Anabaptism is a Baptist.[21]

Commonalities and Differences

This level of interest in and identification with Anabaptism among contemporary English Baptists is not surprising. The early Baptists might have focused on their differences and disagreements with the continental Anabaptists and any of their English followers, but their reasons for doing so are of little relevance today. No longer is 'Anabaptist' used widely as a term of abuse; Melchiorite Christology has been repudiated by Anabaptists; and, at least by responsible historians, Anabaptism is no longer associated primarily with the appalling events in Münster. Divorced from that polemical context, the commonalities between Baptist and Anabaptist theology and practice are very apparent.

Contemporary Baptists and Mennonites have affirmed many commonalities in their traditions. Although somewhat dated now, there

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[18] The lecture can be accessed on YouTube: Ruth Gouldbourne, 'What Did the Anabaptists ever Do for Us?' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pafSqR9EMp4> [accessed 16 May 2025].

[19] See the website, IBN <https://www.ibnetworks.org/> [accessed 2 April 2025].

[20] See, for example, Malcolm Yarnell, *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists: Restoring New Testament Christianity* (B&H Academic, 2013).

[21] *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism*, ed. by Brian Brewer (T&T Clark, 2021). Some of the contributors are also Baptists.

is a summary of shared convictions in 'Baptists and Mennonites in Dialogue: Report on Conversations Between the Baptist World Alliance and the Mennonite World Conference 1989–1992'.[22] The dialogue focused on three subject areas — authority, ecclesiology, and missiology. Among the 'convergences' they identified were the ultimate authority of the Christ of the Scriptures; the Scriptures as God's written word; the church as a voluntary community of baptised believers; the congregation as the main locus of discernment and decision making; the interdependence of congregations; separation of church and state; Jesus as the sole means of salvation; and witness to Jesus Christ in word and deed. Discussions of these and other subjects have continued in the nineteen Believers Church conferences that, since 1967, have been held in various locations in the USA and Canada. The twentieth conference will be held in Europe for the first time, in Amsterdam in June 2025, to mark the 500th anniversary of the Anabaptist movement.[23] Mennonites and Baptists are strongly represented on the planning committee and the panel of presenters.

The report of the Dialogue also listed various 'divergencies' between Mennonite and Baptist perspectives on authority, ecclesiology, and missiology. These included the Mennonite emphases on suffering and simplicity as marks of faithfulness; the Baptist affirmation of participation in politics; and the tendency of Mennonites to prioritise the synoptic Gospels and of Baptists to prioritise John and Paul. It is worth noting that other Anabaptist groups were not involved in these conversations, within some of which — the Mennonite Brethren, for example — these divergencies are less marked. Furthermore, this largely North American dialogue did not adequately recognise the global diversity of both Anabaptist and Baptist communities, some of which in the Majority World exhibit different convictions and priorities. Nevertheless, many of the differences between the participants

[22] This document was published by the Baptist World Alliance in 2013. However, no British Baptists were involved in this dialogue (only Americans and one Australian).

[23] See the conference website <https://believerschurchconference.com/> [accessed 2 April 2025]. See further, Teun van der Leer, *Looking in the Other Direction: The Story of the Believers Church Conferences* (Pickwick Publications, 2023).

summarised in the report are familiar to those with experience of both traditions.

Although the report made some reference to cultural and philosophical changes that were impacting the beliefs and practices of Baptist and Mennonite churches (designated as 'modern scientific and intellectual developments'), there is no mention of the transition from Christendom to post-Christendom that was already apparent in Europe at that time, although perhaps less obviously so in America. But this ongoing transition has very significant implications for churches in the dissenting or 'free church' tradition and is the emerging context in which it is helpful to explore some of the differences between the Anabaptist and Baptist traditions and what each might learn from the other. Both traditions have insisted on the separation of church and state, contrary to the arrangement that sustained the Christendom system, so a post-Christendom culture should be congenial to both. Past and present Anabaptists have trenchantly critiqued many features of the Christendom era, generally failing to appreciate its positive contributions, whereas some Baptist writers have offered a more nuanced assessment.[24] Listening to the perspectives of each tradition might enable mutual learning about the mixed legacy of the Christendom era and some of the challenges and opportunities of post-Christendom.

Space precludes any attempt to be comprehensive, so the remainder of this article offers representative examples from the areas of ethics, missiology, and ecclesiology.

War and Peace

A significant difference between the two traditions is their approach to issues of war and peace. Although there was some diversity among first-generation Anabaptists, some of whom had been participants in the

[24] For example, Nigel Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church, and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann* (Paternoster, 2007), and Brian Haymes and Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, *God after Christendom?* (Cascade, 2017).

German Peasants' War,[25] very soon Anabaptists adopted a settled position of commitment to non-violence. Anabaptists and Quakers are primary representatives of the historic Peace Church tradition. Not all members of Anabaptist congregations have remained true to this position, especially in times of war, but confessional statements through the centuries have consistently endorsed a principled commitment to peace. In recent decades, this commitment to non-violence has been reinterpreted to embrace forms of active and creative peace-making, some of these very costly. A well-known example is the accompaniment and advocacy ministry of Christian Peacemaker Teams.[26] The Peaceful Borders project of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network is another.

Such a commitment to peace — whether non-violence or active peace-making — has not featured as strongly in the Baptist tradition. The report of the Baptist/Mennonite dialogue asserted that Baptists 'generally identify with the just war tradition' and that Baptists 'are often sympathetic to national patriotic concerns', although this latter point might reflect the influence of American Baptists in the dialogue. Since the late 1920s, the Baptist Peace Fellowship has represented a different perspective,[27] which undoubtedly has been embraced by many individual Baptists, but this is not a topic that is often addressed at congregational, regional, or denominational gatherings. It is not that most Baptists are unconcerned about outbreaks of local or global violence or uninterested in practices of peace-making, but a commitment to peace-making is not generally perceived as a central gospel issue, whereas for most Anabaptists it is a primary mark of faithful discipleship. As one of the core convictions of the Anabaptist Mennonite Network states, 'Peace is at the heart of the gospel. As followers of Jesus in a divided and violent world, we are committed to

[25] See James Stayer, *The German Peasants' War and Anabaptist Community of Goods* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

[26] See their website <https://cpt.org/> [accessed 2 April 2025]. This organisation has recently renamed itself as Community Peacemaker Teams and embraced a multi-faith approach.

[27] See Baptist Peace Fellowship <http://www.baptist-peace.org.uk/pdfs/OldDocuments/membership_old_1.pdf> [accessed 2 April 2025]. The BPF covenant dates from 1931 but the Fellowship was formed in the 1920s.

finding non-violent alternatives and to learning how to make peace between individuals, within and among churches, in society and between nations.'[28]

Perhaps our emerging post-Christendom context offers an opportunity to review these positions. During the Christendom era, state churches operating territorially frequently endorsed or even encouraged the use of violent means to achieve the aims of the state. The just war position was adapted from its classical antecedent in the early Christendom era as an attempt to limit such violence without precluding it. But this rarely succeeded and was often paid only lip-service by political and church leaders, including leaders of most dissenting groups. Warfare in the twenty-first century is radically different in nature and scope from the context in which the just war approach was developed. Despite efforts by Catholic and Protestant theologians and ethicists to reinterpret just war theory,[29] there is a growing consensus that it is unrealistic to attempt to apply its remarkably stringent criteria to conflict scenarios today. When the Roman Catholic Church is in the process of dissociating itself from the long-held just war position,[30] surely Baptists and other dissenting traditions should do the same. Might this open up fresh opportunities to reflect theologically and biblically on war and violence and explore ways of integrating creative peace witness into our mission strategies?

It is encouraging that some Baptists have been engaging in such reflection. One example is the development of an approach known as 'just peace-making' that is an attempt to move beyond arguments about just war and pacifism. Developed in the 1990s by twenty-three scholars from various denominations, it advocates ten peace-making practices that might help to prevent wars. One of the leading figures was a Baptist, Glen Stassen, whose book, *Just Peacemaking,* introduces some of these

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[28] See 'Core Convictions', Anabaptist Mennonite Network <https://amnetwork.uk/convictions/> [accessed 2 April 2025].

[29] See, for example, *The Price of Peace: Just War in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Charles Reed and David Ryall (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[30] See Monica Miller, 'Pope Francis and the Scrapping of the Just War Theory', *Crisis Magazine*, 24 March 2022 <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/pope-francis-and-the-scrapping-of-the-just-war-doctrine> [accessed 16 May 2025].

practices and gives examples of their implementation.[31] Some Anabaptists contributed to a later book edited by Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*,[32] but others have objected to the apparent polarisation of peace and justice in this initiative and to the readiness to consider violence as a last resort; nevertheless, this approach has attracted considerable support. Another example is the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, based at Bristol Baptist College and founded in 2018 by Helen Paynter, which has done ground-breaking work on issues of violence, justice, peace-making, and biblical interpretation.[33] Fresh thinking by Baptists on these issues might challenge Anabaptists to resist the temptations of passivity and withdrawal and to continue to reflect on the relationship between peace and justice and on ways of engaging non-violently but responsibly in a violent and conflicted world.

Evangelism

The early Anabaptists were passionate and courageous evangelists, rejecting the Christendom assumption that most Europeans were already Christians, travelling widely to share the gospel despite fierce and sustained persecution, proclaiming the gospel to all who would listen despite outraging those who objected to this unauthorised preaching, baptising those who responded, and planting new churches.[34] Evangelistic activity was not limited to outstanding leaders like Hans Hut or George Blaurock. The classic story of Margaret Hellwart[35] introduces us to a zealous female evangelist whom the authorities chained to her kitchen floor to stop her sharing her faith with her neighbours. Some evangelistic activity was organised, especially among the Moravian Anabaptists; much of it was spontaneous. However, as

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31 Glen Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Transforming Initiatives for Justice and Peace* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1992). Revised and updated versions are available.

32 *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, ed. by Glen Stassen (Pilgrim Press, 1998).

33 See 'Centre For The Study Of Bible And Violence', Bristol Baptist College <https://www.bristol-baptist.ac.uk/study-centres/csbv/> [accessed 2 April 2025].

34 See Alan Kreider, *Tongue Screws and Testimony* (Elkhart: Mennonite Mission Network, 2008).

35 Her story appears in *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*, ed. by C. Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), pp. 64–67.

time went by and persecution took its toll, this evangelistic fervour waned and eventually Anabaptists became known as 'the quiet in the land' as they refrained from verbal evangelism and concentrated on living faithful lives and passing on their faith to subsequent generations. Some Mennonites negotiated tolerance in exchange for refraining from sharing their faith with others. Many contemporary Anabaptists, at least in western societies, have adopted a quietist approach, hoping that distinctive lifestyles will be an effective witness and draw others into their communities. This has also been the approach of many Anabaptist mission agencies, which have focused on relief and development, peace-making, working for justice, education, and other activities that do not prioritise (and sometimes avoid) sharing faith in these contexts.[36]

While lifestyle witness is undoubtedly important and authenticates any other form of witness, and while this quietist approach may be occasionally effective by itself, the divorce between verbal evangelism and lifestyle witness is inappropriate and unhelpful in post-Christendom. Arthur McPhee, former professor at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, rejects the idea that 'our acts of mercy, work for justice, efforts at peacemaking, advocacy of the poor, care for creation, and other expressions of our new life in Christ are, by themselves, testimony enough'. He insists that 'by deeds alone we only point to ourselves'.[37] In a post-Christendom context, most people have no way of interpreting lifestyle witness or connecting this with the good news of Jesus Christ. Verbal evangelism is needed.

Evangelism has been important for Baptists throughout their history. Although their critique of Christendom assumptions has been less trenchant, Baptists have mostly assumed that a primary component in their participation in God's mission is sharing the gospel with others who are not yet Christians. This has involved organised strategies,

[36] See, for example, Mennonite Central Committee <https://mcc.org/> [accessed 2 April 2025].

[37] Arthur McPhee, 'Authentic Witness, Authentic Evangelism, Authentic Church', in *Evangelical, Ecumenical and Anabaptist Missiologies in Conversation: Essays in Honor of Wilbert R. Shenk,* ed. by James Krabill, Walter Sawatsky, and Charles van Engen (Orbis, 2006), pp. 130–139 (p. 133).

campaigns and programmes, and persistent encouragement of church members to share their faith with family members, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and others. In recent years, evangelists have been accredited alongside pastor-teachers as Baptist ministers and support has been offered to church planters. And Baptists have also been at the forefront of world mission. The Baptist Missionary Society, formed in 1792, pioneered an approach to mission across the globe that many other denominations adopted.

Baptists, like Anabaptists, generally acknowledge that mission is much broader than evangelism. Churches and missionaries have engaged in a wide range of activities that involve working for justice, responding to human needs, caring for creation, and much else. But many Baptists are much less reluctant to combine these activities with evangelism, which is often seen as the priority. According to a statement on the website of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, 'It is a core principle of the Baptist Union to evangelise the world. This it does through both living and speaking the gospel. We are committed to evangelism and making Jesus known through word and deed.'[38] Like Anabaptists, Baptists recognise the importance of lifestyle witness, of deeds as well as words, but there is usually a much stronger emphasis on verbal evangelism. And some Baptists are reluctant to support mission activities that do not accord with their narrow definition of evangelism.[39]

If conversations between Baptists and Anabaptists might be mutually beneficial in developing a truly holistic approach to evangelism, these might also give attention to a theological issue that has been highly contentious in recent years. Many Baptists, in common with most Evangelicals, subscribe to an understanding of the atonement that prioritises the motif of penal substitution. Although other biblical images are also acknowledged as valid, this is the primary interpretation.

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[38] See 'Evangelism', Baptists Together <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/310263/Evangelism.aspx> [accessed 2 April 2025].

[39] This has been the case, for example, with funding provided by the Baptist Insurance Company.

Challenges to this provoke outrage and accusations of heresy, as evidenced by responses to certain statements in *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann.[40] The debate around this issue highlighted for many Baptists and others their discomfort with the notion of penal substitution. This explanation of the significance of the death of Jesus may have been acceptable and persuasive in the Christendom era, but many realise that it is ill-suited to evangelism in post-Christendom cultures. Furthermore, there are serious theological and ethical problems with this understanding of the atonement.

Contemporary Anabaptists (among others) have engaged in critical reflection on this issue and have suggested other ways of interpreting the death of Jesus. Some retain a nuanced version of penal substitution; others reject this as inauthentic and propose alternative explanations.[41] An approach that has received both approval and critique is 'narrative Christus Victor', a revision of a classic theory of the atonement propounded by Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver.[42] As the title of his book (and his other writings) makes clear, one of his main concerns is to understand the atonement in light of his commitment to non-violence. Although not all have been persuaded by Weaver's approach, Anabaptists have been antipathetic to ways of interpreting the atonement that appear to involve divine violence. Another Mennonite author who has explored various dimensions of the atonement is John Driver, whose concern is to demonstrate its significance, not just for individual salvation, but for the emergence of reconciled and reconciling communities and the renewal of all creation.[43] Perhaps further reflection by both Baptists and Anabaptists might help us to find ways of interpreting the atonement that are biblically founded, theologically and ethically appropriate, and able to communicate good news in post-Christendom societies.

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[40] Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Zondervan, 2004). Members of the Anabaptist Network offered support to the authors in the debates which followed.

[41] See, for example, *Consuming Passion: Why the Killing of Jesus Really Matters*, ed. by Simon Barrow and Jonathan Bartley (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005).

[42] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Eerdmans, 2011). See also J. Denny Weaver, *God Without Violence: A Theology of the God Revealed in Jesus* (Cascade, 2020).

[43] John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Wipf & Stock, 2005).

Multi-Voiced Church

A distinctive feature of early Anabaptist congregations was the expectation that all members of their communities were gifted by the Holy Spirit and would contribute to their gatherings. Across the different groups that comprised the various Anabaptist movements, 1 Corinthians 14 was a frequently quoted text with its encouragement that everyone had something to offer when the church met together. Church leaders facilitated hermeneutical communities, in which different perspectives were shared and discussed. Members of the community contributed songs, prayers, and insights, and in some places exercised various spiritual gifts. An anonymous early Swiss Brethren tract gave several explanations as to why they refused to attend the state churches, but the primary reason was domination by the priest or minister:

> When someone comes to church and constantly hears only one person speaking, and all the listeners are silent, neither speaking nor prophesying, who can or will regard or confess the same to be a spiritual congregation or confess according to 1 Corinthians 14 that God is dwelling and operating in them through his Holy Spirit with his gifts, impelling them one after the other in the above mentioned order of speaking and prophesying?[44]

Not all early Anabaptist communities expected or allowed such multi-voiced participation, but evidence from various places suggests that many did and that women took part alongside men.[45] A fascinating example from 1576 is a hostile account of an Anabaptist gathering by a Lutheran minister who had crept into the meeting. He comments disdainfully on its multi-voiced nature.[46]

Another expression of multi-voiced ecclesiology in the Anabaptist tradition has been a commitment to practise 'mutual admonition' on the basis of Matthew 18:15–20 and other New Testament texts. A further reason early Anabaptists gave for not attending the state churches was their failure to exercise proper church

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[44] Paul Peachey, 'Answer of Some Who Are Called (Ana)baptists Why They Do Not Attend the Churches: A Swiss Brethren Tract', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 45 (1971), pp. 5–32 (p. 7).
[45] See, for example, Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Herald Press, 1981), p. 124, and *The Radical Reformation*, ed. by Michael Baylor (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 224–225.
[46] Elias Schad, 'An Anabaptist Meeting, Strasbourg, 1576', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 58 (July 1984), pp. 292–294.

discipline, resulting in low moral standards. Church discipline in the Christendom era, it seems, was either absent or punitive if the authorities detected heresy or disloyalty. Anabaptists sought an alternative approach that was non-violent, persuasive, and restorative. This was often exercised unwisely and was corrupted by legalism, harsh attitudes, and discord, but it was a courageous attempt to restore a practice advocated by many New Testament writers.[47] Baptism for early Anabaptists involved a commitment to give and receive mutual admonition in recognition that following Jesus faithfully required the support of a community of disciples.

The early Baptist congregations also exhibited multi-voiced characteristics, although many Baptists today seem unaware of this. Christopher Hill provided several examples of multi-voiced practices in early Baptist churches: Mrs Attaway encouraged the congregation to ask questions and make objections after hearing her sermon; Henry Denne asserted that it was a rule among the General Baptists 'that it shall be lawful for any person to improve their gifts in the presence of the congregation'; and Hanserd Knollys created 'several riots and tumults' by going around churches and speaking after the sermon.[48] And Michael Watts noted the influence of 1 Corinthians 14 on John Smyth:

> Smyth's conception of worship, derived from 1 Corinthians 14:30–1, was the spontaneous out-pouring of the Holy Spirit through prophesying, and so the Bible was laid aside and a speaker rose to propound 'some text out of Scripture, and prophesieth out of the same, by the space of one hour or three-quarters of an hour'. Then a second speaker stood up 'and prophesieth out of the said text the like time and space', and after him a third, a fourth, and a fifth 'as the time will give leave'.[49]

Although a commitment to mutual admonition did not feature in their baptismal services, Baptists also exercised a form of church discipline similar to that of the Anabaptists. Meetings of church members dealt with various strategic and practical matters, as they do today, but a substantial amount of time was spent dealing with

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[47] For example: Rom 15:14; 1 Cor 5:1–13; Gal 2:11–14; Phil 4:2 3; Col 3:16; 1 Thess 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6, 14, 15; 1 Tim 5:19, 20; Tit 3:10; James 5:19.

[48] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Penguin, 1972), pp. 104–105.

[49] Watts, *The Dissenters*, pp. 74–75.

behavioural issues and the disciplining of those who had fallen short of ethical or relational standards.[50] As with the Anabaptists, this could result in the exclusion of recalcitrant members from the congregation, although with the hope of restoration in due course.

Multi-voiced worship and biblical interpretation rather quickly gave way in both traditions to monologue preaching and more formal gatherings, as Anabaptists and Baptists conformed to the more traditional expressions of church that had dominated the Christendom era. Echoes of early Anabaptist practices can still be found in some Mennonite churches and the charismatic movement restored multi-voiced worship to many Baptist churches, albeit often only temporarily. Mutual admonition survived much longer in the Anabaptist tradition but struggles for acceptance in a culture of individualism and 'toleration'. However, in post-Christendom culture both practices might be essential if churches are to nurture faithful disciples.[51] Participative and disciplined communities are more likely to survive, thrive, and be effective in mission in this context. Perhaps Anabaptists and Baptists can encourage each other to reappraise and recover these aspects of their early history.

Conclusion

The three issues introduced in this article are indicative of areas in which Baptists and Anabaptists might profit from interaction and reflection on their past and present practices. Several others could be suggested, including attitudes to and involvement in politics, aspects of economic discipleship, understandings of ministry, and a range of hermeneutical issues. Our post-Christendom context might open up many opportunities for fresh thinking and creative developments.

A serious limitation of the above discussion is the absence of perspectives from the Majority World. Baptists and Anabaptists are now

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[50] See, for example, Roger Hayden, *English Baptist History and Heritage* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2005), p. 32.

[51] See further, Sian Murray Williams and Stuart Murray Williams, *Multi-Voiced Church* (Paternoster, 2012).

members of global communities in which growth is taking place elsewhere, rather than in their original heartlands. And Baptist and Anabaptist churches in western societies, struggling with decline, are being strengthened, enriched, and challenged by brothers and sisters who arrive from Africa, Asia, and Latin America as missionaries, students, immigrants, or employees. Some bring with them polities and practices that were exported from Christendom in previous generations and their churches will take time to adapt to our post-Christendom context. But they also bring fresh insights and a spiritual vitality that we desperately need. If Baptists are to learn and grow together, and make a missional impact on their societies, they will need to wrestle with the challenges of post-colonialism as well as the challenges of post-Christendom.

Exploration of these issues is well beyond the scope of this article, but it is likely that Baptists and Anabaptists in and from the Majority World will have fresh perspectives to offer on ethical, missional, and ecclesial issues, such as those we have considered above. They may also encourage us to look afresh at other issues. The Anabaptist vision of a multi-voiced church is applicable not only within local congregations but between traditions and across the globe as we learn to listen out for the voice of the Holy Spirit through the diverse contributions of many people and communities.