Believers' Baptism as an Ongoing Practice of Constellating Identities: Historical and Theological Insights after the Radical Reformation's 500th Year

Jacob Alan Cook

Revd Dr Jacob Alan Cook is Assistant Professor of Christian Ethics at Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Senior Research Fellow at IBTS Amsterdam.
jacob.cook@emu.edu
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8591-9431

Abstract
As Anabaptism celebrates its 500th year, authoritarianism and partisan violence loom menacingly on the horizon of possible futures. This article revisits early Anabaptists and English Baptists, who insisted upon believers' baptism amidst a broader struggle to distinguish between the loyalties generated by the orders of church and state. Before this insistence, however, these reformers worked within their local, mainstream reform movements. They became increasingly radical, advocating for soul liberty and the separation of church from state, only as their reforms were rejected and they were alienated from state-church spaces. Well-adjusted to the prevailing social order, their neighbours could not begin to fathom the radicals' worldview, and believers' baptism came to symbolise the radicals' break with reality itself. Ultimately, this article offers a constructive theology of baptism to prepare 'small b' baptists to discern intentionally the tensions among modernity's many loyalties and to navigate faithfully the twenty-first century's environmental pressures.

Keywords
Swiss Anabaptism; English Baptists; Radical Reformation; believers' baptism; church-state separation; religious liberty

Introduction

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has been marked by the rising popularity and, in some circles, ascendence to power of 'authoritarian reactionary Christianity'.[1] This virulent form of politics, ethicist David P. Gushee explains, is everywhere an attempt 'to bend the arc of history backward toward a premodern world of Christian political

[1] David P. Gushee, *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* (Eerdmans, 2021), ch. 3.

and cultural hegemony'.[2] Examples include Russia under Vladimir Putin, Hungary under Viktor Orbán, Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro, and the United States under Donald Trump. Each political leader has channelled populist, religious energy into cultural-reactionary politics with authoritarian stratagems.

This is not to say Trump's base, as an example, is driven by a singular, comprehensive worldview; rather, a variety of conservative Christians and other right-wing actors are animated by his promises to advance their goals with his power.[3] The idea of a 'Christian nation', invoked by a political leader who gestures toward 'conservative' policies, is a sufficiently empty signifier for culture warriors of many different stripes to pledge their allegiance.[4] This number includes modern-day millenarians like evangelical 'dominionists' and the charismatic New Apostolic Reformation movement. It includes Southern Baptists (e.g. Tom Ascol and Voddie Baucham) and Roman Catholics (e.g. Christopher Rufo) campaigning against 'critical race theory' (CRT), 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' (DEI) initiatives, and what they refer to as 'wokeness'.[5] But it also includes some untold number of Anabaptists and members of other historic peace churches.[6] The appeal to reactionary Christians of some kind of Christian nation and/or far-right nationalism is rising in many corners of the Western world.

These nations have their own histories with the imperial church-state, reformation movements, the violent struggles to establish and defend the integrity of state-church structures, and the promise and perils of modernity's pluralist, democratic nation-states. As authoritarianism and partisan violence loom menacingly on the horizon of possible futures, and as Anabaptism celebrates its 500th year, we

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2 Gushee, *Defending Democracy*, p. 51.

3 Gushee, *Defending Democracy*, pp. 138–140.

4 Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the term 'floating signifier' to denote 'a concept that is both specific enough to engender loyal activism and empty enough for individuals to bring their own complex sense of meaning to it' (Jacob Alan Cook, *Worldview Theory, Whiteness, and the Future of Evangelical Faith* [Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021], p. 294; see also p. 227).

5 Jacob Alan Cook, 'A New Fundamentalism Rising: The Southern Baptist Battle against the CRT "Worldview"', *Journal of American Culture*, 47.1 (2024), pp. 41–49.

6 Melissa Florer-Bixler, 'Anabaptist Trumpism', *Anabaptist World*, 4 February 2025 <https://anabaptistworld.org/anabaptist-trumpism> [accessed 12 April 2025].

might do well to revisit early radical reformers whose lives witnessed to the separability of church and state, who advocated for religious liberty in a time when few could even imagine such a thing, and who suffered at the hands of the nominally 'Christian' civil authorities. To this end, the following article examines early Anabaptists and English Baptists, comparing their trajectories out of mainstream reformations and established churches into ways of being that their neighbours found implausible. Then, it will briefly propose a constructive theology of the practice that came to symbolise these radical reformers: believers' baptism. In the end, this article argues that recovering a vibrant theology and practice of baptism can reinvigorate 'small b' baptists (à la Jim McClendon) to discern intentionally the tensions among modernity's many loyalties and to navigate faithfully the environmental pressures of this century.

Aspiring reformers have often shared an earnest desire for the renewal of the whole church, pictured as a universal, catholic body, and as such, church history is filled with moments that could have gone differently. What if the reforms of John Wyclif or Jan Hus had been accepted or even simply accommodated in some creative way?[7] The stories of early Anabaptists and English Baptists share these traits, with reformers earnestly pursuing a revitalised church and key moments when several possible futures branched beyond the visible horizon. Operating roughly a century apart, leaders at the head of these traditions became increasingly radical as their concerns about church practice and related reforms were rejected and as they were alienated from the ecclesial spaces authorised by civil powers. Before their practice of believers' baptism came to symbolise their radical differentiation, these reformers worked within their local, mainstream reform movements on matters like the celebration of the Lord's Supper.[8] In fact, as we will see below, the trajectory and locus of decisions about this other defining practice contributed significantly to when and why early Anabaptists and

[7] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols (HarperCollins, 1985), 1, p. 349; and 2, p. 122.
[8] Theological questions had often been debated, as with Wyclif's 14th-century argument for consubstantiation (González, *Story*, 1, p. 347), and practical questions regularly featured in proposed reforms, as with Hus's early-15th-century opinion that laypersons should receive not merely the bread but also the wine (p. 352).

English Baptists alike found themselves exiting the mainstream reformation. The shared experience of disaffection while retaining strong commitments to a fully reformed church highlighted and even intensified several key points of tension in the identities and worldviews of the radical reformers. They harnessed this tension's potential energy to fuel their innovative attempts to negotiate loyalties to God and one's people, to imagine and articulate the value of soul liberty and a human right to religious freedom, and to organise new voluntary communities under shared local leadership and accountability. Before moves like these were theorised by modern political philosophers, they were workshopped by radical reformers whose very ways of being challenged the plausibility structures of their mainstream counterparts.

The Implausibility of Early Anabaptists

The first to become Anabaptists originally gathered around the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli, who embraced Erasmus as his teacher, taking seriously the humanist call *ad fontes* — back to the textual sources in their original languages. This orientation is partly what drew hungry young students like Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz into his orbit in the early 1520s. These two had travelled abroad and studied in universities, taking in other cultures and taking up numerous languages, living and ancient.[9] In his study circle, Zwingli would lead his students to examine a biblical text in multiple languages and by several methods and to debate points of faith and practice, including where the text varied with church teaching and practice (e.g. dietary restrictions and clerical celibacy).[10] By the first disputation in January 1523, Zwingli could number Grebel and Manz among his co-reformers.

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[9] See William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd edn (Eerdmans, 1995), ch. 2. Grebel and Manz numbered among those 'particularly among the rising middle class who had a freedom for reflection and travel their ancestors had not had, and particularly in the cities, where commerce flourished and ideas fermented, new kinds of Christianity began to appear. (Church authorities of the time called this ferment not Christianity but heresy, and persecuted it vociferously and violently)' (*Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People*, ed. by Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, and C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell [Judson Press, 1999], p. 13).

[10] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, pp. 34–35, 42.

Disputationes as form of academic debate were commonplace in the universities of key medieval intellectual hubs, and matters of faith were routinely examined in these spaces — sometimes to put scholars through their paces, but other times to lodge genuine criticisms, promote reforms, or defend innovations.[11] Luther was announcing this method of public debate with his ninety-five theses in 1517, and such a thing is clearly what Zürich's city council envisioned when they called a *disputatio* in January 1523. Zwingli had been preaching in Zürich for several years, and the city council was ready to give him a stage from which to defend his reformed positions, which he distilled into sixty-seven articles for the occasion. The bishop's representative, however, refused on principle to respond to Zwingli's articles at the disputation. He claimed that matters of faith were subject to the authority of church councils and universities not civil bodies and assured them that a forthcoming council would settle their issues.[12] Hearing no refutation from the bishop's office, the council assumed the right to act, deciding Zwingli should keep preaching and teaching as he had been. This marked Zürich's formal break with Rome.

In the ensuing months, some of Zwingli's students were increasingly animated by a rather direct, practicable reading of the New Testament that began reforming their theology and ethics from the roots. The young radicals continued their informal studies and debates with Zwingli, but the leader repeatedly wavered on what he would advocate as *necessary* reforms before the city council. During the second disputation in October 1523, the use of images and the liturgy of the mass were among the few key issues considered. Zwingli repeatedly equivocated, differentiating 'the diverse functions of the disputation': (1) to determine the biblical truth of a matter and (2) to secure the implementation of relevant reforms.[13] While he agreed with his students via the first function (e.g. on the point of 'changing the mass into an observance of the Lord's Supper'), he deferred to the city council for the second.[14] Given this dynamic, there is little surprise that debates

[11] Justo L. González, *The History of Theological Education* (Abingdon, 2015), pp. 44–47.
[12] González, *Story*, 2, p. 49.
[13] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 17.
[14] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 16.

within the study circle began to spill into the public *disputationes*, where Grebel, Manz, and Simon Stumpf, among others, proposed more radical reforms before the crowds and the civil authorities. During that second disputation, Stumpf openly criticised Zwingli's deference to the city council on matters that, he argued, the Holy Spirit decides, and within months, he found himself banished from Zürich.

But it was the January 1525 disputation, called at the radical reformers' request, that focused on the practice of baptism. Here again, Zwingli largely agreed with Grebel, Manz, and company on the biblical norm (viz. that only after reaching the age of accountability and upon professed belief should one be baptised), but he would neither preach accordingly nor advocate reform to this end.[15] Instead, Zwingli professed this matter to be ambiguous in the biblical record, and the council sided with him, declaring the radicals' insistence on believers' baptism an error and mandating those who withheld their infants from the rite to change course or face banishment. Within days, Grebel baptised George Blaurock at Manz's mother's home, and by February these three and others were on the circuit, bearing witness, baptising the repentant, and observing the Lord's Supper in the simplest manner.[16]

Although this moment marked their formal break with the state church, and their baptismal practice implicitly (and its timing explicitly) criticised that arrangement, beginning with its submission of faith and practice to civil authorities, the radical reformers had not led with these emphases. Up until then, they essentially pursued their reforms through authorised channels, appearing at and even calling many *disputationes*, seeing public forums as important opportunities to win broader support. The question of church order — particularly whether congregations should discern their own beliefs and practices without the oversight of civil authorities — is in the subtext of all their points of dispute (sometimes becoming the text, as with Stumpf's criticism). But had the council decided for the radicals on some occasions, church history and tradition might have unfolded differently in Switzerland. Only in the

[15] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story* (following Leonard Verduin) reads this as a political move — avoiding offence and potential division of the fledgling reformation movement (p. 42).

[16] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, pp. 38, 45. Blaurock is widely known as one of the central figures in the emergence of Swiss Anabaptism along with Manz and Grebel.

weeks after Zürich's city council put Felix Manz to death — the first radical reformer condemned under their new anti-Anabaptist decree — did Michael Sattler draft and lead the ratification of the Schleitheim Confession. State coercion and violence necessitated rejection in the strongest terms and lived forms:

> Everything which is not united with our God and Christ cannot be other than an abomination which we should shun and flee from. By this is meant all popish and antipopish works and church services, meetings and church attendance, drinking houses, civic affairs, the commitments [made in] unbelief and other things of that kind, which are highly regarded by the world and yet are carried on in flat contradiction to the command of God.[17]

The Anabaptists' commitments to witnessing to the peaceable kingdom of God, gathering as free churches, and practising believers' baptism intensified through the persecution that came to characterise the nominal Christians in power.

With the benefit of 500 years' perspective, the Schleitheim Confession is quite understandable as a response to these early Anabaptists' immediate, real-world context, but at the time, this statement and other such acts only worsened relations with neighbours whose 'plausibility structure' simply could not make good sense of the Anabaptists' actions. Sociologist Peter Berger developed the concept of a plausibility structure to highlight prevailing, socially available ideas that form and constrain the beliefs of individuals within a society, such that certain ideas, explanations, and possibilities seem more reasonable or credible than others. 'Each world requires a social "base" [or "plausibility structure"] for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings.'[18] One level of plausibility is what people in various communities hold to be a shared, cultural 'worldview' and articulate as 'common sense'.[19] In the radical reformers' lived theology, human agency was ascendant in both personal-individual and collective-communal forms, set over against traditional state-church or church-

[17] 'The Schleitheim Confession of Faith', trans. by J. C. Wenger, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 19.4 (October 1945), pp. 247–253.

[18] Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (DoubleDay, 1969), p. 45.

[19] The concepts of worldview and common sense are, in themselves, deceptively simple and vulnerable to co-optation by ideology and authoritarian power.

state sociopolitical machinery that conceived of individual persons as so many instances of the same essential human form fulfilling predetermined roles. Manz, Sattler, and company were turning over the fields of traditional worldviews and planting the seeds of individualism and pluralism out ahead of the modern philosophers who would reap a great harvest.

Reform was in the air, so many European peoples increasingly recognised that some change was possible within their own churches' practices, but local civil authorities were continually working to ensure a singular social order — pushing all tensions to their borders rather than working creatively with those tensions within them. Church historian Justo González notes how most Europeans in this period shared the Constantinian assumption 'that the existence and survival of a state demanded religious agreement among its subjects. […] All who lived in a Christian state must be Christians, and faithful children of the church.'[20] This assumption was part of their plausibility structure. González continues, 'This view of national unity as linked with religious uniformity was at the root of the many wars of religion that shook both the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.'[21] In this period, when there was a settlement acknowledging diverse Christian practice, *cuius regio, eius religio* became the standard, affording rulers the right to determine the religious commitments within their territories.[22]

The radical reformers' moves beyond and separate from the state churches — the very notion of individuals gathering in voluntary communities around preaching and churchly practices based in their own convictions and interpretations of Scripture — were flatly *implausible*. Who on the Zürich city council could fathom Schleitheim's sixth article, on the sword, wherein civil and ecclesial spaces are strictly separated? And while this confession professes that God ordains state structures and their use of the sword to curb wickedness among non-Christian populations, sequestering faithful Christian living from

[20] González, *Story*, 2, p. 122. See also Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 257.
[21] González, *Story*, 2, p. 123.
[22] From time to time and place to place, exceptions were carved out — for Jews or Muslims or even certain alternative Christian church structures — but there were few reliable guarantees against civil disenfranchisement or outright persecution.

obedient civil service like this was, again, implausible to those for whom the (mainstream reformation) state-church order was indisputably Christian. And the practice of believers' baptism — framed as Holy Spirit-driven, personal repentance from sin and error as well as voluntary identification with Christ in a church community composed of true believers — came to symbolise this implausibility for those who had only ever known themselves to be incontestably Christian.

Diverse Approaches to Loyalties in Tension among Early Anabaptists

As the Anabaptist movement spread or arose in other locations, the church-state relation was expressed and lived in several ways. One of the most told stories may be about the commitment of many Anabaptists to live out the Christian faith, fully and with integrity, by withdrawing or otherwise divesting from the social structures governed by civil authorities (even nominally Christian ones) and tending to one another's needs as 'the quiet in the land'. In this narrative, the tension between church and state loyalties is resolved in favour of the former, with the believers' church forming an alternative community *next to*, or in some ways *over against*, secular society. It bears repeating that this form of life together follows earlier attempts to participate in the public processes of reformation as well as real rejection and persecution. Perhaps the other most told story is about the popular chiliastic-revolutionary strand that emerged alongside, and occasionally in conversation with, other streams of Anabaptism. Figures like Thomas Müntzer and Jan van Leyden became known for their active attempts to start the revolution that would inaugurate God's kingdom come. The former organised an armed militia during 'the commoners' movement', and the latter waged an ill-fated takeover of the city of Münster. Other figures, like Melchior Hofmann and Hans Hut (an erstwhile follower of Müntzer), were more active as preachers than sword-bearing revolutionaries — though Hofmann's prophecy-driven, self-instigated imprisonment created the aperture through which the Münster debacle

appeared.[23] These stories made it either (a) difficult for mainstream leaders to discern the differences among those who practised believers' baptism or (b) easy for them to ride roughshod over these differences, framing and punishing all nonconformists as seditious heretics.[24]

Other early Anabaptist figures reveal more tension between the loyalties that exert themselves upon the Christian and, accordingly, strengthen the emerging sense that something like 'Anabaptism' did not fall from the heavens as a singular, coherent whole. For example, Balthasar Hubmaier, the leading reformer in Waldshut, also first conferred with Zwingli and initially modelled his reformation programme after Zürich. He later aligned himself with the Anabaptists (e.g. the Lord's Supper, on church order, and believers' baptism), but Hubmaier 'appears never to have accepted the Schleitheim dictum on the sword'.[25] In his treatise entitled *On the Sword*, Hubmaier maintains, as William Estep helpfully summarises, 'Since governments are necessary for the sake of peace and justice, Christians have not only a moral responsibility to support and pray for rulers but to serve as judges, mayors, and the like when chosen for those offices.'[26] In fact, Hubmaier imagines the Christian making a better ruler than a non-Christian and a future in which 'governments would limit themselves to the secular ends for which they were ordained of God'.[27] To the Christian who finds themselves living under an unjust government, he offers options ranging from nonviolent resistance to flight to faithfully suffering in place. Here the tension between the competing loyalties of church and civil society can still be imagined, even if Hubmaier tends toward resolving that

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[23] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 98.

[24] The flows of influence (e.g. whether from Thomas Müntzer or the city of Münster to all leading Anabaptists) are few and far between, except inasmuch as key Anabaptist leaders attempted to reign in the wildcards. For example, as Estep explains, referring to an undelivered 1524 letter from Grebel to Müntzer, 'His would-be Swiss disciples knew little of Müntzer's actual teachings. They had read a few tracts from his pen and thought his position on infant baptism and his anti-Luther stance were analogous to theirs in Zürich' (*The Anabaptist Story*, p. 41). Among other things, Grebel admonished Müntzer against violence. For another example, Menno Simons was actively engaged as an opponent of the Münsterites' activities (1532–1535), though not against all their theological points (Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, pp. 163–164).

[25] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 100.

[26] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 100.

[27] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 101.

tension in a static, two-kingdoms model. Yet even this view was *implausible* to those who could only think within a traditional church-state model. Hubmaier was twice imprisoned in Zürich based on his baptismal views. When he called for a disputation, Hubmaier 'quote[d] Zwingli, place and time, when he asserted children should not be baptised until they could be instructed in the faith', but Zwingli claimed to have been misunderstood.[28] Nonetheless, it was the church and state authorities of Catholic Vienna that executed Hubmaier in March 1528.

Parallels with Early English Baptists

Emerging in another time but sometimes in overlapping places, the early English Baptists' narrative arc bears a striking resemblance to that of the Anabaptists. England's national reformation kicked off in the 1530s, and by that century's end, many publications and actions were challenging the crown's authority over religious life. Puritans agitated for further reforms within the Church of England (i.e. in a more disciplined, Reformed, often Presbyterian direction). And as the doors closed to mainstream reforms, they began to embrace the potential of independent congregations for pure worship.[29] Church historian David Bebbington explains, 'Those who believed, by the early seventeenth century, that the national Reformation had failed were at the heart of the circles in which Baptist convictions first appeared.'[30] First-order problems arose in an ecclesial atmosphere made volatile by its subjection to the contradictory whims of a rotating cast of monarchs as well as ever-shifting degrees of religious tolerance and persecution.[31] For example, during the reign of Charles I and his Catholic queen, the Archbishop of Canterbury

> called for communion tables to be removed from the body of the church, where they had normally been sited since the Elizabethan settlement, and put against the east wall of the chancel, where they could be aligned on the pattern of Catholic altars. In 1640 new regulations required the communion

[28] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 92.
[29] David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Baylor University Press, 2018), pp. 19–20.
[30] Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, p. 21.
[31] Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, p. 23.

> tables to be railed off from the people; they also encouraged bowing toward the altar as a devotional practice. Such policies made many feel that the government wanted to roll back the Reformation entirely.[32]

This lurching back and forth on central elements of worship frustrated both reformers who longed to see the *ecclesia semper reformanda* moving in a consistent direction and those who eschewed a hierarchical church order in favour of autonomous local churches.

Before John Smyth would become a Baptist trailblazer, he was first ordained in the Church of England. While he already shared Puritan sentiments by the time of his appointment to Lincoln, Smyth grew increasingly frustrated with the national reformation and left for a Separatist congregation in 1606.[33] Only two years later, facing religious persecution under the rule of James I, Smyth and his friend Thomas Helwys led a faction from this church to Amsterdam. That church-communities could uproot and leave their homeland suggests a lived theology in which church order and civil authority had already moved considerably from the traditional church-state and more recent but still singular state-church worldviews. Soon after arriving in Holland, Smyth's views on the practice of baptism were in flux, and around 1609, believers' baptism rose in his view to eclipse covenant relationship as the basis of church membership.[34] Eventually Smyth sought (but never received) membership with the Waterlander Mennonites, aligning himself with many of their more distinctive beliefs.

Helwys spurned his friend's overtures toward the Mennonites, and their fellow congregants were divided between them. While some successfully joined the Waterlanders — including Richard Overton, who would go on to become an important Leveller activist and an early human rights theorist — Helwys and others excommunicated Smyth in 1610 and returned to London about two years later to establish the first

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[32] Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, p. 21.
[33] Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Judson, 2004), p. 23.
[34] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, pp. 289–290; Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History*, pp. 24–25; and Freeman, McClendon, and Ewell, *Baptist Roots*, pp. 72–73.

Baptist church on English soil.[35] Whatever else transpired in this early Baptist community, the Helwys faction did not share many of the Waterlander Mennonites' distinctives. For example, Helwys aligned with Hubmaier's notion that a magistrate could also be a member of the church, even calling civil service a holy ordinance.[36] Moreover, church historian Bill Leonard explains, these early Baptists 'permitted the taking of oaths and rejected other "strange opinions" held by the Anabaptists, with whom they were often equated'.[37] From this time, Baptists were often found distancing themselves from Anabaptists, both because they truly were not Anabaptist in conviction and because the Münsterites had turned 'Anabaptist' into a byword for decadent revolutionaries. Putting aside any genuine concerns about identification with Anabaptists, Helwys and many Baptists who came after him were keen to advocate for religious liberty in an environment of intolerance and persecution. Already in 1612, Helwys penned one of the first defences of religious liberty written in English and addressed it to King James I.[38] By 1615, the monarch received the message and threw Helwys in prison, where he died.

In the 1630s and 40s, another generation of Baptists emerged virtually *de novo*, following their own path out of the so-called Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey church, founded in 1616 and referred to by the names of three successive pastors operating within a Separatist-Congregationalist structure. Starting in 1633, several groups splintered from this church with strong convictions around believers' baptism and church order, and even Henry Jessey received believers' baptism in 1645, 'though he remained pastor of a partly paedobaptist congregation down to his death'.[39] By this time, as Bebbington tells the story, 'There were seven churches in London that observed the immersion of none but those who could profess their faith. A network of Particular Baptist

[35] On Richard Overton's legacy, see Glen H. Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (WJK Press, 2012), ch. 5. On the Smyth-Helwys split, see Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History*, pp. 25–26.
[36] Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, pp. 292–295.
[37] Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History*, p. 26.
[38] Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Ministry of Iniquity* (1612; repr. Mercer University Press, 1998).
[39] Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, p. 47.

churches had come into being.'[40] These churches were theologically Calvinist but held to a congregational polity and Baptist proclivities around the ordinances. 'Despite their mainstream convictions,' Curtis Freeman, Jim McClendon, and Rosalee Ewell writing together note, 'Baptists in England and the colonies were held in suspicion by the established churches. The confusion was due in part to the proliferation of disestablished religious groups, many of which were subversive' — and, one might add, due in part to some Baptists moving among these groups.[41] In any case, the Particular Baptists had several reasons to disavow 'Anabaptists' in the opening lines of their first confession of faith, ranging from political posturing to genuinely weak flows of influence. Some see some such influence mediated through Helwys and the General Baptists.[42] Key differences between the two Baptist groups have always been clear (e.g. on soteriology), but their similarities (e.g. around church order and religious liberty) have also become more pronounced over time.

The fact that Baptists in the mid-seventeenth century represented a growing population within larger masses of those committed to disestablished reform movements, with many leaders sticking rather closely to the mainstream, indicates that the plausibility structure was indeed in flux. As González explains, 'Eventually, in some areas sooner than in others, the conclusion was reached that religious agreement was not necessary for the security of the state, or that, although desirable, its price was too high.'[43] He names France and the Low Countries as testing grounds for religious tolerance policies, which slowly crawled throughout the European states in various forms. Early English Baptist reformers were neither generally attempting to withdraw from civil society nor rejecting the divine mandate of civil government, but they were often found attempting to disentangle their loyalties to God and country. By the time they arrived at their Baptist convictions, their common efforts at social reform tended more toward the end of

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[40] Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries*, p. 47.
[41] Freeman, McClendon, and Ewell, *Baptist Roots*, p. 74.
[42] See Glen H. Stassen, 'Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 36.4 (October 1962), pp. 322–348; and Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, pp. 301–303.
[43] González, *Story*, 2, p. 123.

religious liberty than a state church reflecting their distinctives. However, it is no foregone conclusion that early Baptists would have reached a consensus on social reforms. Some Baptists, for instance, were to be found among the Levellers (e.g. Richard Overton), the Ranters (e.g. Lawrence Clarkson), and other more overtly subversive groups, including the Fifth Monarchy Men — a millenarian group that attempted armed uprisings in 1657 and 1661.[44] Juxtaposing this illustration with the tragedy at Münster, we might do well to observe how varieties of millenarism made the rounds in popular theology in those days (in preaching, in books and pamphlets), much as they do now. In the end, Baptists also responded to and resolved church-state tension in several different ways.

Concluding Segues into a Constructive Account of Believers' Baptism

Early Anabaptists and English Baptists emerged under different conditions, responding and adapting to differing pressures, and arrived at different emphases, but, as this section has revealed, their emergences share some common features. First, neither Anabaptists nor Baptists, in the main, started with what would become their most radical positions or by plotting revolutionary actions. As we have seen, these reformers attempted to shape mainstream reforms and otherwise remain in the conversation, including participation in public disputations. Their radical energy was both an evolving response to the *unrelenting external pressures* of church-state and emerging state-church authorities and an unfolding of earlier commitments as the passage of time permitted further reflection.

Second, the practice of believers' baptism as a symbolic break with the prevailing social order arose amidst a wider struggle to separate the orders of church and state — and to *distinguish between the loyalties* each generates. As their attempts to influence mainstream reformation efforts fell short and as state-church authorities prosecuted their

[44] See Bernard Stuart Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Millenarianism* (Faber & Faber, 1972).

ongoing dissent and organising as seditious, the radical reformers felt the need to become and advocate for free churches and religious liberty. Fidelity to divine authority required them to operate apart from and even defy civil authorities, but separatism was neither indispensable nor even preferable on theological grounds for these reformers in their early years, including among the Anabaptists. It was contextually pragmatic (even genuine) but not the logical starting point of their reform efforts. Separating the loyalties was key, not separating from the civic community, but all such moves composed a way of being quite foreign in their parochial context.

Third, while it was not the original breaking point for any of these reformers who found themselves taking their church communities back to their roots, *the practice of believers' baptism came to symbolise the specific way these groups made themselves implausible*, even threatening, to the world around them. To embrace personal agency and live as these radicals did, with a view to joining a voluntary, alternative community that called itself 'church' apart from the approved spaces for this kind of identification, was to participate in the cracking up of a premodern, monocultural worldview. The deeper story is one of (a) a decisive identification with Christ, in his death and the promise of new life, and (b) a commitment to the church community as that disciplining community that will keep believers free and responsible, and for many Anabaptists, as one's only true people.

Given the force of authoritarian reactionary Christianity, we would do well to ask whether and how we might renew our commitments to religious freedom (disestablishment and free exercise) and to minding the tension between loyalties to church and state — and other social groups we might now add. So, next we begin to make a creative turn with sections structured around the three features highlighted above, taking them as indicators of key points of departure for a constructive theology of believers' baptism in the radical reformation's 501st year.

Current Conformist Pressures on Baptising Communities[45]

In this section, I will register some prevailing environmental pressures, specifically some reasons Christians may be tempted to release important tensions, collapsing their many loyalties into a singular guiding narrative. And we begin with developmental psychologist Dan McAdams, who has proposed a 'narrative identity theory' that charts the healthy development of an integrated 'personal myth' over the course of a person's life. He intentionally uses the term 'myth' to signal how the *stories we live by* (to borrow one of his book's titles) need not be entirely accurate to be the true guide for an adult maturing through life. One of an adolescent's primary feats is consolidating an 'ideological setting' that provides 'a backdrop of belief and value upon which the plot of [one's] particular life story can unfold'.[46] McAdams invokes Erik Erikson's famous exploration of Martin Luther's 'identity crisis' to define the ideological setting:

> We will call what young people in their teens and early twenties look for in religion and other dogmatic systems *ideology*. At the most it is a militant system with uniformed members and uniform goals; at the least, it is a 'way of life,' or what the Germans call *Weltanschauung*, a world-view which is consonant with existing theory, available knowledge, and common sense, and yet is significantly more: a utopian outlook, a cosmic mood, or a doctrinal logic, all shared as self-evident beyond any need for demonstration.[47]

Then, through the middle-adult years, the individual's key task is to live with integrity within this way of life, 'integrating and making peace among conflicting imagoes in one's personal myth'.[48] To do so is to thrive, to mature. Already the notion of 'consolidating' a setting for one's identity-making work might give a thinker in the line of the radical reformation pause. What variety of beliefs and loyalties could be received or fused together as unquestionably singular under this rubric?

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[45] For further engagement with the current psychological theories summarised only briefly in the next two sections, see Cook, *Worldview Theory*, ch. 2.

[46] Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (The Guilford Press, 1997), p. 67.

[47] Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (W. W. Norton, 1993; originally published 1958), p. 41.

[48] McAdams, *Stories*, p. 37.

Moreover, when McAdams specifically analyses the personal myths of US Americans who most nearly resemble the cultural ideal of a 'highly generative' self, understood as those who vigorously 'strive, consciously and unconsciously, to pass on to posterity some aspect of our selves',[49] he finds *low degrees of self-reflection* upon the enduring coherence or truth of their ideological setting. Highly generative US Americans 'believe that their values are clear, consistent, and coherent and have pretty much always been so'.[50] In short, there is a strong correspondence between the way US Americans picture maturity — namely, as a person living with integrity within their ideological setting and striving to pass on something of oneself — and the tendency to neither reflect on nor question the substance of their own worldview all that much.

When a person is committed to a certain way of seeing themselves, they will strive for 'completeness' and tension will build within them while they perceive themselves to be 'incomplete'. What they do with such tension depends heavily on their character, which includes coping and defence mechanisms. To this end, 'symbolic self-completion theory' describes the tendency of those who experience this tension to seek symbolic routes to validating their self-definition, including doubling down on describing themselves as complete, attempting to enlist others to affirm that one is, in fact, who they say they are, being unwilling or unable to admit to transgressions of the ideal self, and relying on external signs and symbols to bolster this self-image.[51] Add into this mix the strength of one's commitment to certain ideal selves — for instance, the lofty ideal self of one's real or imagined faith community, or otherwise the tidy, heroic self of one's personal myth — and we have a recipe for both self-deception and, over time, the disfigurement of genuine community. So, what if a person or group of people overidentify themselves with a singular self like 'conservative

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[49] Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, rev. edn (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 31.

[50] McAdams, *Redemptive*, p. 136.

[51] Hazel Rose Markus and Elissa Wurf, 'The Dynamic Self-Concept: A Social Psychological Perspective', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 38.1 (February 1987), pp. 299–337 (p. 322), contextualise this theory within their plural self-concept, citing Robert A. Wicklund and Peter M. Gollwitzer, *Symbolic Self-Completion* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982).

US American Christian'? Or even merely 'Christian'? Undoubtedly, these overly simple identities are tied to beliefs and feelings gathered over a vast social terrain, consolidated and integrated into their ideological setting. The singularity of a person's self-conception, however, leaves them vulnerable to self-deception related to all critical feedback, a sense of antagonism toward those who might persist in their criticism, and seeking symbolic routes to relieve any tension that may appear.

It is relatively easy to imagine how believer-baptising traditions might become less radical in practice over time following the institutionalisation of reforms that once required deep personal and communal agency to discern and practice. In all too many ecclesial spaces, believers' baptism has become the rite by which an individual expresses their faith in the gospel as this or that church preaches it. Christians are guilty of turning believers' baptism into a process of taking up a singular worldview — whether coming of age within the church or exchanging one singular worldview for another in conversion. Here the practice of baptism is domesticated to play a simple gatekeeping role at the boundary of the community of the faithful. Moreover, more than a fair amount of sociocultural content is shared in churches, mostly informally, and when a believer is received in baptism without any instruction or support in disentangling that sociocultural content from the gospel itself, it is often baptised along with the person. The homogeneity of many Western churches lends to the sort of singular thinking and partisan politics that create incredible polarities across, but also within, 'Christian' communities. One might simply understand their identity as 'I am a Christian, and nothing else matters', but to overidentify oneself and likeminded others with Christ risks both self-deception and an evasion of the living One who calls us into deeper repentance and all manner of truth.

Embracing the Tension of Plural Selfhood

While one may consolidate an ideological setting and live into a coherent personal myth, people cognitively process their daily experiences of life through a bundle of selves. Social psychologist Hazel Markus, in many

co-authored works since the late 1970s, theorises 'self-schemas' to illuminate how 'individuals attune themselves to their significant social contexts, and they provide solutions to important existential questions such as *who am I, what should I be doing, and how do I relate to others*'.[52] In her research, Markus and company could measure a person's self-schemas to predict how they would process self-relevant information, including how they help subjects judge incoming information with relative ease, retrieve evidence for those judgements, predict their own future behaviour on that basis, and resist counter-schematic feedback.[53] These self-representations range from traits and characteristics (e.g. self as 'a good student' or 'conscientious') to sociocultural contexts. 'In the United States, these contexts might include specific collectives in addition to the nation of origin, such as the family or workgroup, as well as contexts defined by gender, ethnicity, race, religion, profession, social class, birth cohort, and sexual orientation.'[54] Markus and company use the term 'working self-concept' to refer to that set of self-schemas which is presently active and operating and thus lending 'structure and coherence to the individual's self-relevant experience'.[55] It is also 'working' in the sense that it is 'a continually active, shifting array of available self-knowledge' subject to any number of affective, motivational, and environmental conditions.[56] All the same, we can reasonably expect a consistent showing from a core bundle of selves within 'the self that is very much a part of the public domain'.[57]

While an accurate description of who we are is important to the present conversation, we must also attend to questions of motivation — including loyalty, repentance, and growth over time. The research

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[52] Tiffany N. Brannon, Hazel Rose Markus, and Valerie Jones Taylor, "'Two Souls, Two Thoughts," Two Self-Schemas: Double Consciousness Can Have Positive Academic Consequences for African Americans', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108.4 (2015), pp. 586–609 (p. 587).

[53] Karen Farchaus Stein and Hazel Rose Markus, 'The Role of the Self in Behavioural Change', *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, 6.4 (December 1996), pp. 349–394 (p. 351).

[54] Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, 'Cultures and Selves: A Cycle of Mutual Constitution', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5.4 (July 2010), pp. 420–430 (p. 423).

[55] Hazel Rose Markus and Paula Nurius, 'Possible Selves', *American Psychologist*, 41.9 (September 1986), pp. 954–969 (p. 955).

[56] Markus and Nurius, 'Possible Selves', p. 957.

[57] Markus and Nurius, 'Possible Selves', p. 964.

suggests we should distinguish between (a) those self-schemas that are grounded in social reality as past and present selves and (b) those possible selves that we desire (e.g. the successful self, the influential self, or the Christlike self) or dread (e.g. the impotent self, the lonely self, or the damned self).[58] A person's thoughts and behaviour depend on the nature and depth of the feeling they get when noticing a mismatch between who they are and who they (do not) want to be and as they anticipate attaining (or avoiding) a possible self. What a person does with this kind of motivation also depends heavily on their character, which includes coping and defence mechanisms like those mentioned above as symbolic routes to self-completion.[59] In any case, some degree of counter-schematic feedback is crucial for growth within any given self-schema since awareness of a mismatch motivates the process of change and growth more than the mere existence of possible selves, which on their own can function self-deceptively.[60]

Research is showing that persons who understand themselves to be complex (i.e. have a complex self-theory) demonstrate an improved ability to integrate or otherwise weather self-critical information. 'Failure in a single self-domain does not imply failure in all domains. Complexity thus permits maintenance of positive self-esteem despite specific failures.'[61] Criticism is then perceivable not as an attack on the singular, core identity we believe ourselves to be (my *true* self, my *total* worldview) but as addressed to a specific element or tension within our confident, plural self-concept.

A plural self-concept might helpfully figure into a world that is increasingly aware of not only its pluralism but also the social problems that arise in the consolidation of power across social groups in certain uncritical identity constellations. The best context for spotting defects in one's lived expressions of faith is a diverse community committed to

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58 Drew Westen, 'The Cognitive Self and the Psychological Self: Can We Put Our Selves Together?', *Psychological Inquiry*, 3.1 (1992), pp. 1–13 (p. 4).

59 Drew Westen, *Self and Society: Narcissism, Collectivism, and the Development of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 119, 123–124.

60 Markus and Wurf, 'The Dynamic Self-Concept', p. 303.

61 Westen, 'The Cognitive Self', p. 4. See also Patricia W. Linville, 'Self-Complexity and Affective Extremity: Don't Put All of Your Eggs in One Cognitive Basket', *Social Cognition*, 3.1 (1985), pp. 94–120.

radical obedience, seeing each other often enough or and having conversations important enough to recognise these things in each other. Who could better surface just where my national loyalties might be damaging my reading of the gospel or my sense of justice than someone from another nation or at least another point on the political spectrum? A commitment to religious liberty and the spirit of dissent could facilitate fellowship across a diversity of worldview constellations, which we might now hypothesise would correlate positively to the capacity of the members for seeing complexity not only in themselves but also in their fellows, their neighbours, and even their enemies. I wager we need such diversity to practise real peace, to unhinge the prevailing patterns of polarisation, and to undercut the battles between or among oversimplified, singular worldviews in which the authoritarian reactionary Christian would prefer to engage. Following the pattern of the early radical reformers, this could play out in social ethics as a commitment to engagement and disputation — perhaps with guidance from expert practitioners in the field of conflict transformation, which numerous inheritors of the radical reformation have become.

Baptism as an Ongoing Practice of Constellating Identities

From the outset, my constructive account of believers' baptism carries a sense of the arcane discipline (or 'discipline of the mystery'), referring to an ancient Christian way of indicating that some things are difficult to communicate in didactic forms and are best conveyed through interpersonal engagement. While the term 'baptism' in Christian circles indicates a specific practice by which some mixture of water and Spirit identify a person with Christ and his church, I argue this practice is best understood as an *ongoing* practice — more in the sense that one practises medicine or law. Put succinctly, believers' baptism is *the ongoing practice of analysing and constellating one's various identities and loyalties around the lordship of Jesus*.

What happens on the believing human side of baptism is an informed, public identification with the living, biblical, historical person of Jesus — a solidification of one's loyalty to this person and his way in the world — but this new identity and loyalty set in motion a cascade of

changes, big and small, that take a lifetime to play out. While many will have heard of the baptisms of Spirit and water, not least through the testimony of John the Baptist, Balthasar Hubmaier mentioned a third phase of baptism: blood. As theologian Thomas Finger explains,

> The first was the internal, often painful process that brings one to faith. The second was the public ceremony, valid only if it bore witness to the first. The third was 'daily mortification of the flesh' brought on largely by following Jesus in the world, culminating in martyrdom or deathbed.[62]

Inasmuch as the baptismal act commits one to dying to self and rising to new life in Christ, that new life entails future changes and ongoing repentance, dying to oneself by a thousand cuts, and an active posture of seeking alignment with Jesus. Some may prefer other ways of communicating this underlying reality — for example, that baptism is practised only once but remembered often. The language concerns me less than the impact: the identity constellation of a Christian sets Jesus as the centre and continually realigns as one discovers disorder between the gospel and whatever else there is. Lesser loyalties need not be abolished, but they must be set and kept in orbit around that bright, shining star in the centre of it all.

I anticipate that some will object to something in this description along the lines of a theological commitment, like the efficaciousness of Christ's work on the cross, or with reference to biblical passages that make the pivotal change within a person sound complete, as in Second Corinthians 5:17, 'So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; what is old has passed away — look, what is new has come!' But it seems to me that to fall back on these firm, final pronouncements is to mistake one kind of truth for another and, thereby, to miss important aspects of the whole truth. I propose that we apply a theological ethic that admits of multiple aspects or 'moods' of truth, understood along the lines of how an artist might perceive a work's 'mood' as the state of mind or feeling it suggests. In this case, we might understand that something can be formally true, and thus worthy of one's confession of faith (e.g. the statements from Second

[62] Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (IVP Academic, 2004), p. 163.

Corinthians just above) while being experientially in process.[63] I submit there are multiple moods in which we are to understand baptism as a dying to self. In a formal-confessional sense, the believer does this once and for all — the act of baptism need not be repeated. But in a moral-pragmatic sense, the believer must continue to enact this death to self, with a thousand deaths of varying scales and timelines over the course of a lifetime. To misplace the concreteness of death-to-life, old-to-new-person claims is to sell short the normative model that baptism sets up for ongoing repentance and change.

Before closing, I would like to deepen the discipline of the mystery with a suggestive view to some relational components of baptism understood as an ongoing practice of identifying with Jesus across various social terrains over time. As a matter of discipleship, those who would identify (with) Jesus over time must pay attention to how Jesus identifies (with) both *us* and *others*.[64] For example, take Jesus's identification with 'the least of these', as in Matthew 25. Those who feel compelled to identify (with) Jesus must first hear the lament of the other as the voice of Jesus to them — identifying them and their place in the communion of persons. This voice, when recognised in its dignity, creates the occasion for responsibility, repentance, and restorative action. One may be tempted to think first of oneself as 'being the hands and feet of Christ' to another in dire circumstances whereas, to the contrary, Jesus identifies himself in them on his own account. Furthermore, no one should set out thinking they can rightly identify (with) Jesus in all circumstances based on what they think they know of him or themselves. When we think we have grasped for ourselves all the most important truth that is consonant with God's own will, we risk treating others (including God) as objects in our moral universes on that basis. And this problematic posture can bend even the truest and most beautiful theologies out of the spiritual, relational, person-oriented shape of faith.

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[63] This question of truth's many moods is deeply implicated in the theological tension classically located in the relationship between election and sanctification.

[64] For further development of this argument, see Jacob Alan Cook, 'Toward an Incarnational Theology of Identity', in *Justice and the Way of Jesus: Christian Ethics and the Incarnational Discipleship of Glen Stassen*, ed. by David P. Gushee and Reggie L. Williams (Orbis, 2020), pp. 25–38.

While my concepts and language may fail here or seem at present rather implausible given the strong environmental pressures we endure, my aim has been to begin marking some theological footholds that might enable encounters with Jesus, including those mediated by other persons, that genuinely surprise us by somehow upsetting the expectations of our stable worldviews, calling us to still further repentance, restoration, or even reformation.