



DEEPER

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# THREE STREAMS: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage (Part One)

For questions or concerns about this resource, to discuss this topic in more detail, recommend books, or to share wisdom from your own pastoral context, please contact Bishop Lynn Thrush ([lthrush@bicus.org](mailto:lthrush@bicus.org)) or Matthew Peterson at: Matthew R. Peterson, *Theologian in Residence* (Great Lakes BIC) [mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com](mailto:mpeterson490@ProtonMail.com) (631) 871-8339

## I. THREE STREAMS: THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST THEOLOGICAL HERITAGE

In the inaugural *Deeper* resource on church in the post-COVID era I posed the following question: *How can we recapture the importance of a shared identity for our church members as Jesus followers in the Brethren in Christ tradition?* At the time I assumed that the best approach was to reinvest in postures of biblical *fellowship* that put community at the heart of our discipleship journey. While I still affirm that approach, I have come to realize that as a church we are constantly in need of reminders about what our shared identity even is.

*What is it (or ought it be) that makes us Brethren in Christ as opposed to any other variety of Christian?* This is an important question regardless of how long we have been connected with the BIC, but is particularly important as increasing numbers of us in ministry and those in our congregations come from outside of the denomination that we now consider our spiritual home. For some, both traditional Brethren in Christ practices and distinct doctrinal postures are the focus of our credentialing coursework rather than lived experience. Of course even a lifelong affiliation with the BIC might not mean that one's discipleship journey has been substantially informed by such values as opposed to widespread trends in American evangelicalism.

Two members of our own Great Lakes Conference recently drew attention to these issues in the pages of *Brethren in Christ History & Life*. Following a lengthy survey of BIC pastors, Lisa Weaver-Swartz concluded that our *“denomination is in deep need of identity work”* (“A Giant Bag of Core Values,” 294). In another article Zach Spidel noted that *“if an outside observer were asked to say which of a group of churches belonged together in the Brethren in Christ Church based purely on the observation of worship style, preaching content, church architecture, the nature of the local liturgy, etc., it would be difficult for that observer to do so. There is not now one consistent ethos that is identifiably Brethren in Christ”* (“From Practice to Methods,” 353).

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Despite present ambiguity in our congregational identities, we do in fact belong to a denomination, and one with a particular theological heritage at that. This reality lies behind several of Weaver-Swartz's recommendations, including a need to recapture "collective memory" by developing "cultural resources" to reinvigorate a distinct BIC identity (Weaver-Swartz, 293-295). And that is the purpose of this new series of *Deeper* resources that I am titling ***THREE STREAMS: The Brethren in Christ U.S. Theological Heritage***. This series is designed as an introduction and overview of the three major theological traditions (Anabaptism, Pietism, and Wesleyanism) that inform the BIC's statements of doctrine and practice in the hope that we might refocus our attentions towards denominational views that might be taken for granted. This first resource will focus on the Anabaptist movement and how it has shaped the BIC's theological worldview.

## II. THE ANABAPTISTS

### History

The earliest Anabaptists lived in northern Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, etc.), with some potential predecessors elsewhere on the continent. As is often the case in history, the term "Anabaptism" first appeared as a derogatory label for reform movements that exclusively practiced adult (or "believer's") baptism and which existed outside of the official state-sponsored churches of the early modern period.

There is a fair amount of debate about the exact beginnings of the Anabaptist movement(s), namely whether there was a single point of origin or if it emerged from several independent local movements. But a few early developments are as follows:

- **1525:** Swiss Brethren (and former students of Huldrych Zwingli) Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, George Blaurock and others perform adult baptisms near Zürich, Switzerland.
- **1527:** Swiss Anabaptists in Schleitheim publish the *Schleitheim Confession* detailing their views on baptism, communion, and non-violence, amongst other topics. Felix Manz and Michael Sattler executed for rejecting state church doctrine.
- **1534-1535:** Radical Reformers seize control of Münster, Germany and establish a communal society with an apocalyptic outlook. This movement was violently put down by local authorities and contributed to longer-term suspicion of Anabaptists by Catholic and Reformed magistrates. Many Anabaptist groups viewed this event as a reason to stress nonviolent ethics and separation from worldly government.
- **1537:** Beginnings of Dutch Anabaptism among students of Melchior Hoffman, including Obbe and Dirk Philips, and Menno Simons (after whom the Mennonites were named).
- **1660:** Publication of *Martyr's Mirror*, a collection of stories about the deaths of early Anabaptist figures with an emphasis on their nonresistance.
- **1710:** Earliest Anabaptist (Mennonite) communities settle in the Americas near Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

### Theological Views

The broader Anabaptist communities hold views that are somewhat distinct from other branches of Protestant Christianity. In what follows I will largely adopt summaries of major views offered by Anabaptist scholars C. Norman Kraus, Lloyd Pietersen, C. Arnold Snyder, as well as the *Manual of Doctrine & Government* from the Brethren in Christ U.S.

***Christocentric Exegesis:*** The bible is not a "flat" book out of which one can select any text for application in any context. Instead, it is a collection of texts whose meaning is most clearly revealed through the person and

teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus himself is the primary interpreter of Scripture, as evidenced in the Sermon on the Mount – his teachings take priority over other passages in the life of the believer and outlook of the church.

**Community of Interpretation:** The hierarchical religious traditions of the sixteenth century held that biblical interpretation was primarily the task of either religious orders or the universities. Anabaptists, by contrast, viewed the entire community as involved in the act of scriptural interpretation, aided by those with formal training. The entire community was tasked with prayerful Holy Spirit influenced interpretation.

**Obedience & Discipleship:** For the Anabaptist, Christian discipleship is not primarily a belief in doctrinal systems or practices, but instead an on-going posture of obedience to the commands of Jesus. Members of the faith community are marked by this shared commitment rather than traditional identity markers.

**Free-will Community & Believers' Baptism:** In medieval and early modern Europe baptism was closely tied with identity as a subject of the ruling empire. Such a system took earlier ideas about the baptism of children and morphed those into a default action for members of society. Thus, to be a German was to be baptized into the Lutheran church and to not be baptized meant that you were not a German. The Anabaptists determined to practice baptism as a free will response to the teachings of Jesus (rather than a compelled action of the church/state) and therefore limited it to those who had reached an age of maturity to respond appropriately. This belief prompted the earliest generations to become “baptized again” as adults, an action that brought suspicion from religious and governmental authorities.

**Nonviolence & Peacemaking:** The ethical teachings of Jesus centered around love-of-enemy and were seen by Anabaptists as forbidding the use of violence or coercion in both secular and religious matters. This posture became even more central to Anabaptist identity after the Münster revolt.

**Simplicity:** Jesus’s teachings also emphasized the dangers associated with accumulation of worldly possessions and Anabaptists took this as a call to simplicity. Involved in this was a rejection of materialism in favor of a community oriented life.

## The Peace Position

The BIC is recognized as one of the historical “Peace Churches” because of our Anabaptist heritage. Here are some statements about this position:

*“Christ loved His enemies and He calls us as His disciples to love our enemies. We follow our Lord in being a people of peace and reconciliation, called to suffer and not to fight. While respecting those who hold other interpretations, we believe that preparation for or participation in war is inconsistent with the teachings of Christ. Similarly, we reject all other acts of violence which devalue human life. Rather, we affirm active peacemaking, sacrificial service to others, as well as the pursuit of justice for the poor and the oppressed in the name of Christ.”*

**BIC Manual of Doctrine & Government, pg. 13**

*“Christians should build a positive peace witness that permeates their daily lives, and should testify against violence and war, consistently showing love and concern for all. Since the body of Christ is international, love of nation is secondary to fellowship in the body of Christ and mission to people everywhere.”*

**BIC Manual of Doctrine & Government, pg. 21**

### **III. ANABAPTISM & THE BRETHREN IN CHRIST**

The earliest Brethren in Christ churches were modeled in large part after the Anabaptist vision inherited from their cultural roots among the Mennonites (Keefer, 33). Early BIC churches practiced a degree of separation from the surrounding culture, including non-involvement in government and simple attire. Rejection of violence was also strictly adhered to. They continued to follow Anabaptist views on church membership, baptism, and corporate discipline, although these practices were modified by later influences from Pietism and Wesleyanism.

Elements of this Anabaptist heritage remain in our denominational statements such as the *Manual of Doctrine & Government* and in our *Accents & Issues* series (accessible on the BIC U.S. website). For reflection, the following excerpts from BIC U.S. resources echo our Anabaptist heritage, and suggest for us continuing areas for growth in Christian discipleship:

***Baptism & Belonging (Accents & Issues):***

“Baptism is the sign that a believer is publicly beginning the new life in Christ and is becoming a responsible member of a congregation and denomination. Believer’s baptism is a significant event based on personal belief and a commitment to a lifelong journey with fellow believers and an act of obedience to follow the Lord and love his people.”

***Christians & War (Accents & Issues):***

“For followers of Jesus, the basic divide is between the saved and the lost, not between two or more political systems. Nations make war with their enemies. In sharp contrast, Christians share the gospel with non-Christians; they love those hostile to God. To kill non-Christians cuts them off from becoming followers of Jesus. Our task is not to take their lives but to give our lives so they can say yes to Jesus.”

***Simple Lifestyle (Accents & Issues):***

“A simple lifestyle recognizes that our needs are minimal. We are conditioned to want much, and our wants quickly become needs. Yet, true joy and blessing is not in the accumulation of things and satisfying desires, but in Jesus.”

***What We Believe About the Bible:***

“We believe that the Old Testament should be interpreted through the lens of the New Testament while affirming the integrity of the whole Bible as God’s written Word.”

In response to changes in American culture and the evangelical church subculture, several Anabaptist emphases have been adjusted, challenged, or even neglected across our denomination. The Church has had much discussion about the commitment to non-violence and whether it should include a concern for social justice. The traditional approach of separation has been challenged in our politically polarized world where faith is frequently exploited in the political arena. And the call to simplicity is at risk in a society that increasingly demands more of our wallets and our time in order to remain socially engaged. Some self-evaluation is needed to figure out how well our lives as individuals and churches match the Anabaptist views that are laid out for us on paper and how we might recommit to those views within a twenty first century framework.

## IV. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### General Summaries & History

- Brian C. Brewer, *T&T Clark Handbook of Anabaptism*,
- C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: Exploring the Historical Center of Anabaptist Teachings and Practices*
- William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth Century Anabaptism*
- Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*
- Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith*
- C. Arnold Snyder & Linda A. Huebert Hecht, *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers*

### Anabaptist Biblical Interpretation

- C. Norman Kraus, “Anabaptist or Mennonite? Interpreting the Bible.” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 22.3 (2004): 73-92.
- Lloyd Pietersen, “The Bible and the Subversion of Christendom: The Anabaptists” pages 59-85 in *Reading the Bible After Christendom*.

### Anabaptism & the Brethren in Christ; Brethren in Christ Heritage

- Myron S. Augsburger, “The Contemporary Relevance of the Anabaptist Faith” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 23.2 (August 2000): pages 325-332.
- Dale W. Brown, “Love Theology: Pietism, Anabaptism, and the Brethren in Christ Tradition” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 19.2 (August 1996): pages 306-318.
- David L. Hall, “Finding Our Roots: Anabaptism and the Early Church” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 4.2 (December 1981): pages 126-141.
- Nancy R. Heisey, “Anabaptist Heritage and Faithful Diversity” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 26.2 (August 2003): pages 92-108.
- Wilmer J. Heisey, “The Legacy of Menno Simons to the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 19.2 (August 1996): pages 275-305.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “The Origins and Core Beliefs of the Anabaptists” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 25.2 (August 2002): pages 237-256.
- Luke L. Keefer Jr., “The Three Streams in our Heritage: Separate or Parts of a Whole?” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* (April 1996): pages 26-63.
- Alan & Eleanor Kreider, “Economical with the Truth: Swearing and Lying – An Anabaptist Perspective” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 24.2 (August 2001): pages 153-177.
- E. Morris Sider, “The Anabaptist Vision and the Brethren in Christ Church” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 17.3 (December 1994): pages 283-296.
- Zach Spidel, “From Practice to Methods: Evangelical Utilitarian Ecclesiology and the Mid-Century Transformation of the Brethren in Christ” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.3 (December 2022): pages 325-354.
- Lisa Weaver-Swartz, “A Giant Bag of Core Values: Findings from the 2021 Brethren in Christ Pastoral Identity Portraits Project” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 45.2 (August 2022): pages 260-298)
- Nathan E. Yoder, “Refracted through Anabaptist Lenses: Doctrine, Piety, Nonconformity, and Mission” *Brethren in Christ History & Life* 33.2 (August 2010): pages 372-392.

## **V. CREDENTIALING UPDATE**

While it is my hope that this *Deeper* resource might be of benefit to anyone who reads it, it is particularly relevant for folks preparing for their *Doctrinal Questionnaire* (DQ). Part One, Section IV.C-D in the DQ asks questions directly related to our Anabaptist heritage, and so some familiarity with that part of our heritage would be helpful. These questions are included below for your reflection:

- *C. Relate the principles of obedience, discipleship, and holy living specifically to the concepts of:*
  - *Separation from the world; Simplicity in lifestyle; Stewardship of life and resources.*
- *D. With roots in the Anabaptist tradition the Brethren in Christ have been known as one of the historic peace churches.*
  - *1. State your understanding of the church's position on peace and non-resistance.*
  - *2. State your understanding of and commitment to the position of peace and non-resistance and show how it applies to: Interpersonal relationships; Conflict resolution; Participation in war.*