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The Anabaptist Approach to Mission¹

Hans Kasdorf

The Swedish historian Gunnar Westin points out that beginning with the apostolic era God's *ekklesia* consisted of free independent minority fellowships within Jewish and pagan societies. This *ekklesia* was free from governmental control, separated from the world, voluntary in terms of membership, bound together by a sense of fellowship among its members, submissive to the authority of Scripture in matters of theology and ethics, and strong in missionary outreach.² These were precisely the characteristics that captured the attention of the Anabaptists during the Protestant Reformation, as both European and Anglo-American scholars have pointed out.³

Their primary objective was not to reform the Constantinian-Theodosian structures of the territorial church, but to restore the primitive-apostolic model of the believers' church with its implicit theology of discipleship under Christ's lordship



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and explicit evangelistic witness in the power of the Holy Spirit. This led them to unquestioned obedience to the risen Christ's mandate to "make disciples of all peoples" (Mt. 28:19). "No words of the Master," contends Franklin H. Littell, "were given more serious attention by the Anabaptist followers than His final command."⁴

So central was the Great Commission to the total life of the Anabaptists that it became a key factor to enhance their understanding of history and the world, the church and the kingdom, discipleship and witness.

The missionary mandate and radical obedience were considered to be inseparable ingredients for a life of discipleship under Christ's lordship. This found its clearest expression in Anabaptists' engagement in world mission which in turn reflected an advanced concept of a mission strategy.

Mission strategy may be defined as the way and manner in which the church carries out the Lord's command to make disciples. Every strategy must be in harmony with biblical teaching, relevant to the time in which it is used, and effective when applied to mission situations. This implies adequate goals, appropriate time and place, well-defined methods, the right kind of people, and, above all, the dynamic and power of the Holy Spirit, without whom no person can be a witness in this world, as the Lausanne Covenant points out.⁵ The Anabaptists firmly believed in this kind of mission strategy. Although these terms were not used, the principles they expressed undergirded the entire Anabaptist mission program. Thus the application of contemporary mission concepts will enhance our understanding of—and appreciation for—the dynamic mission movement of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.

Setting Definable Goals

The Anabaptists firmly believed that it was significant to observe carefully the order laid down by the Lord in the Great Commission for the sole purpose of making disciples of all peoples: (1) *going* into all the world; (2) followed by *preaching* the gospel to every creature; (3) upon preaching, a sense of *anticipation* that humankind will respond by believing in the gospel; (4) then *baptizing* those who respond by faith, having the promise of being saved; and (5) subsequently *incorporating* the saved into the fellowship of believers, the true Christian church.⁶

The Anabaptists dealt in depth with the concept of making disciples. No other Christian movement between the apostolic era and the modern mission period has articulated and demonstrated more clearly the meaning of discipling than have the Anabaptists. While mainline Reformers rediscovered the great Pauline term *Glaube* (faith), the Radical Reformers rediscovered the evangelists' word *Nachfolge* (discipleship). People cannot, they maintained, call Jesus Lord unless they are his

disciples indeed, prepared to follow him in every way. This was the message they preached, the code they lived by, and the faith they died for. This was a unique message, one of reconciliation and forgiveness. But it was a costly message, one that people heard mainly from the Anabaptists. Harold S. Bender (1897-1962) has described the Anabaptist concept of discipleship in these words:

It was a concept which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of the individual believer and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ. The Anabaptist could not understand a Christianity which made regeneration, holiness, and love primarily a matter of intellect, of doctrinal belief, or of subjective “experience,” rather than one of the transformation of life. Repentance must be “evidenced” by newness of behavior. “In evidence” is the keynote which rings through the testimonies and challenges of the early Swiss Brethren when they are called to give an account of themselves. The whole life was to be brought literally under the lordship of Christ in a covenant of discipleship, a covenant which the Anabaptist writers delighted to emphasize. The focus of the Christian life was to be not so much the inward experience of the grace of God, as it was for Luther, but the outward application of that grace to all human conduct and the consequent Christianization of all human relationships. The true test of the Christian, they held, is discipleship.⁷

The missionary objectives emerge from the Christian’s life which is, as the Anabaptists understood it, that of being a disciple. This, in turn, means multiplication of that life by making more disciples who not only enjoy the privileges, but also participate in the responsibilities and share in the cost which such life entails.

Selecting Responsive Population Groups

Some evidence suggests that the Anabaptists operated on what some missiologists today call the homogeneous unit principle.⁸ That means that the missionaries sought to witness to people with whom they had things in common. They concentrated their efforts on peoples who were of similar social and economic status as the missionaries themselves. Thus the lay missionaries were sent to rural areas, winning whole family units to Christ; the artisan evangelists were sent to people of their profession, leading them to profess Jesus as Savior and Lord; the educated were sent to the cities where they were bound to meet the sophisticated and secular elite, introducing them to Christ.

Time and place were equally significant in finding people who readily responded to the claims of Christ. This became particularly crucial in view of existing ecclesiastical and civil laws. To preach the gospel outside the framework of either the Roman Catholic or Protestant Church and by people not authorized by ecclesiastical and state officials was punishable by one or more of the following measures: confiscation of property, expulsion from the land, imprisonment, or death. But multitudes of people were not reached through the institutional channels, and the Anabaptists felt responsible to witness to them, even if that meant suffering the consequences. This meant that prudence had to be exercised in selecting time and place for evangelistic gatherings. That is precisely what they did, as a German historian has convincingly pointed out:

Usually they had their gatherings in a forest. In the Forest of Strassburg, [Alsace], for example, they had as many as 300 people in one single meeting. They also met regularly in the Ringlinger Forest at Bretten, in the Schillingswald between Olbronn and Knittlingen, and in the Forest of Prussia near Aachen. These meetings were held between 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. In the section of the forest called *Bregehren* at Walkerbach in Wuerttemberg one can still find a pulpit-like rock known as *Gaisstein* where they conducted their worship and gospel services with the aid of two lanterns to dispel the darkness. In addition, they met in isolated mills, such as the one at Kleinleutersdorf in Orlammunde, or at the sawmill in Zorge on the Harz and in similar places. Peter Valk preached in a sheep barn at Saal in Thuringia. Enders Feckelein preached to a number of people sitting there with open Bibles around two tables in a blacksmith shop. Sometimes they gathered for meetings at places that would allow them to escape quickly from the hands of persecutors in the event they were found out. In Tirol, for example, they met on remote farms, in sand pits, and in the shelters of huge rocks. But not all places were hideouts. There were at least two castles where the Anabaptist missionaries evangelized. One was the Schloss Munichau at Kitzbuhl and the other the Schloss Neuhof at Brunneck in Tirol. The records also show that these meetings generally drew large crowds.⁹

Applying Relevant Methods

We will consider the Anabaptists' missionary methods in terms of an earlier spontaneous expansion and a later strategized expansion. The first period covers about three-and-a-half years. It began on January 21, 1525, when the unavoidable

breach between Zwingli and his most faithful disciples occurred over the issue of the mass and ended with the famous Missionary Conference of Augsburg (also known as the Martyrs' Synod), held from August 20-24, 1527. From this time on every mission endeavor of the Anabaptists became increasingly marked by a deliberate mission strategy that aimed at evangelizing all of Europe and the whole world.

Spontaneous Methods before August 1527

Historical records point to at least four specific methods the Anabaptists used to make known their faith.

Preaching pilgrims. During the early period the Anabaptist faith spread much like that of the apostolic church. "Anabaptist leaders at first wandered as pilgrims, seeking relief from persecution, and shepherding from time to time the little groups of the faithful. As persecution grew more savage, hundreds of families took to the road, moving slowly eastward toward the Moravian settlements. A whole people thus became pilgrims, exiles for Christ."¹⁰

Wherever they went these persecuted, wandering Anabaptists preached the gospel of the kingdom, calling men and women to repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. They may well have learned this method from Zwingli, whom they respected as a dynamic preacher.

House meetings. The Anabaptists' objective was to reach whole households with the gospel. Fritz Blanke records a number of house meetings held during the week of January 22-29, 1525. At times these were the spontaneous result of a casual visit; at other times they were planned by believers. Sometimes these meetings resulted in the conversion and baptism of all adult members, who then celebrated the Lord's Supper together. These meetings frequently manifested the typical characteristics of a spiritual awakening. Fritz Blanke comments:

When we seek a caption for the inner processes of these eight days, the concept "revival movement" presents itself. We thereby understand the sudden occurrence of a religious awakening, in which not just a few individuals but a considerable number are gripped by a personal Christian disposition to repentance and break through to the joy of salvation.

This happened in Zollikon. We can still dearly see the process of repentance in sequence from the protocol of the hearings (Nos. 29, 31, 32)... Here we meet the reformational understanding of sin, and that not just as abstract theory but as personal experience.

The impact of this experience is underscored by the strong emotions accompanying it. These farmers, who otherwise certainly were accustomed to hide their feelings, broke out in wailing and weeping.¹¹

Professor Blanke concludes that the “soul struggles” of countless ordinary nameless Christians of this period were crowned by forgiveness and sealed by baptism, the visible sign that God has pardoned the sinner.¹²

Bible reading and lay evangelism. Since the leaders of the awakening were quickly arrested and banned, the responsibility of spiritual care and continued evangelism was transferred to local farmers and artisans. Those who could read began to read the Word of God to nonliterate as they met in homes and barns and village churches. When people confessed Christ, lay brothers performed the rite of baptism. Hans Bichter, for example, baptized thirty believers within a week, and Jörg Schad baptized forty in a single day—in the village of Zollikon.¹³ A significant benefit these new Christians shared with other reformers was Luther’s New Testament which had gone through at least twelve editions between 1522 and 1525.

Persecution. Persecution was severe, and only two or three of the sixty leaders who met in Augsburg for the missionary conference in August 1527 lived to see the fifth year of the Anabaptist movement.¹⁴

Witness of the Accused

(Ausbund Song No. 12)

A few excerpts translated from song Number 12, written in 1550, serve as an example. Followed by a fairly long narrative conversation between the official accusers and the Christian accused, the latter vindicates his case by saying, “We speak of these things only from the Word of God.” Then he adds in rather unso-phisticated but in no uncertain terms this appeal:

We do not want you to forego
The truth which we ourselves do know;
That by erroneous teachings
And even by decrees,
By falsehood and deceptions
You have been totally deceived;
For thirteen hundred years
You have these lies believed.

I plead, please let me say to you
That wolves are anxious to pursue:
They come clad in clothes of sheep—
With subtle stealth and guile
Deceive the poor in spirit.
To count the cost they do refuse,
They see not their reward;
In death their life may lose.

Oh hear the call from God, our Lord,
The apostles’ teaching of His Word
With compassionate voices
Wooing to Him to come.
So knock and call now on Him,
He will open wide the door,
Will break your prison walls.
Oh praise Him evermore!

(My translation)

Some of the early Swiss leaders did not even live to see the 1527 conference. As one pages through the *Ausbund*,¹⁵ the first Anabaptist hymnary published in 1564, one reads time and again a biographical note about the author, including such execution data as burned 1525, beheaded 1528, drowned 1526, hanged 1537. Many of these songs not only told the story of the martyrs and their deaths; they also were a powerful evangelistic message to the executioners and those who witnessed the executions. The appeal was to repent and be converted and reconciled to God. Donald F. Durnbaugh states that “in the duchy of Wurttemberg in the sixteenth century, all of the Anabaptist men were expelled or executed,” and “only women with small children were allowed to remain at home.” That is not to say, however, that the authorities considered the women less dangerous than the men in spreading the “illicit faith.” In fact, the government chained the women in their homes “to keep them from going to their relatives and neighbors to witness to their faith,” as was their custom.¹⁶

Despite such stringent measures, the martyrs and evangelists seldom recanted. Their testimony made a lasting impression on many executioners and spectators, so that not a few came to accept the same faith they had tried to resist and obliterate. Yet by 1527 all Anabaptist founding fathers in Switzerland had either been executed or banished and all followers so successfully exterminated that the movement became more dynamic in other European countries than in Zürich and Zollikon. As the movement spread through the pilgrim witnesses, the biblical message was so winsome, so overpowering, and so appealing to the masses that, as one recent German historian has put it, “often a few hours at a new place were sufficient to found a new congregation.”¹⁷

Strategic Methods after August 1527

This section highlights several missionary methods between 1527 and 1565, covering the time from the first missionary conference in Augsburg to the so-called golden age of the Anabaptist movement in Moravia. I will not discuss this golden age which was initiated after 1565 under the dynamic leadership of Peter Walpot. Walpot headed “the greatest missionary organization of the epoch maintaining an extensive correspondence and guiding a large and effective corps of lay missionaries.”¹⁸

Evangelizing Wandermisionare. This method of preaching by the wandering missioners continued past the second half of the sixteenth century. Like the famous Irish *peregrini* almost a thousand years before them, these Anabaptist preachers wandered from place to place and proclaimed the gospel. But unlike *the peregrini*, these Anabaptist missionaries baptized new converts, established Christians in their

faith, and gathered them into local congregations. One such preacher was the ex-priest Georg Blaurock (1492-1529). He was no doubt the greatest evangelist of the time, traveling far and wide throughout Europe. During the four years from his conversion under Zwingli in 1525 until his death at the stake in 1529, he baptized at least a thousand (some say 4,000) new converts and planted many new churches.¹⁹

Systematic sending of missionaries. The Anabaptist churches discerned and systematically sent out many apostles. The designation *apostles* was deliberately chosen for those who were sent out in apostolic teams. Generally, such teams consisted of three people who were commissioned to specific places for the sole purpose of evangelism and church planting. Hans Hut (d. 1527), one of the chairmen of the 1527 missionary conference in Augsburg, had already been instrumental in sending apostles to many parts of Europe. But by then the Augsburg church was behind the program in evangelism, and the Anabaptist apostolate took on new shape and form.

Due to intensified persecution, these apostles were convinced that time was running out for their missionary efforts. The sending church of Augsburg shared this conviction of the missionaries and urgently called for commitment to evangelism. Within two weeks (from the termination of the conference on August 24, 1527, to the issuance of a new mandate by the Augsburg authorities against the Anabaptists on September 6) the Augsburg church recruited and sent out more than two dozen missionaries to strategic centers in Germany and Austria. But what had happened to the dynamic mission centers in Switzerland a few years earlier now became the fate of the sending church in Augsburg: It was choked by fierce persecution. Three years after the conference only two or three of the sixty leaders in attendance had escaped the hangman's scaffold. That is why history has ironically recorded the first Protestant missionary conference of August 1527 as the Martyrs' Synod.

Dynamic lay witness. Early Anabaptism operated on the principle of the priesthood of all believers. Lay people were missionaries. Schäufole has likened this method to that of the primitive church where the bearers of the gospel message were predominantly the common folk, not the ordained leaders. The sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) is reported to have said that Luther's principle of the priesthood of all believers was actualized "in Anabaptism with its revivalistic character, on the basis of its sect sociology."²⁰ Durnbaugh observes that the Reformation churches have scarcely anything like it to set over against the Anabaptist phenomenon. This applies to both the ministry of mission to the world and the ministry of care in the church.²¹

With lay evangelism, one authority notes, the Anabaptists made use of three specific channels to point people to Christ. One of them was the web of family relationships. Schäufole comments: "Family relationships played an important role in

the expansion of the Anabaptist revival in the years 1527 and 1528 in Augsburg.”²² Thus an old Anabaptist calendar of the time reports on the lay ministry of a certain Endris Fachlein near Stuttgart who is said to have won almost his entire relationship to the Anabaptist faith. The historical record offers interesting illustrations as to how one family member won another to Christ and how the faith contagiously moved on to cousins, uncles, and aunts.²³

Another channel for lay witness among the Anabaptists was to neighbors and other acquaintances. Bible study groups met in homes and invited unbelievers from the neighborhood with the objective of winning them to the Lord. Social events such as weddings and similar community affairs, as strange as it may sound to us, provided excellent opportunities to make new acquaintances and to invite people to a Bible Reading.

“There is indeed impressive evidence,” says one historian, “that most members felt the call to convince and convert others, relatives, neighbors, strangers. The rapid spread of the movement is otherwise inexplicable. The well-known Martyrs’ Synod of 1527 staked out separate areas of mission responsibility in a ‘grand map of evangelical enterprise.’”²⁴

Occupational contacts provided another channel for lay missionary outreach. The Anabaptist employer sought to win employees to a life of discipleship under Christ. When Katherin Lorenzen, who later became the wife of Jacob Hutter, had to testify in court about her faith, she said that her employer, a Christian baker, as well as other believing employees, had witnessed to her and persuaded her to join the Anabaptist sect. Records also show that laborers and artisans took their evangelistic tasks seriously in everyday contacts with people. Since many of them were banned from their cities and states, they had to search for employment elsewhere, either in the craft of their occupation or with farmers on the land—at least until 1539 when the Decree of Regensburg made it illegal to hire an Anabaptist. Until that date the Anabaptist workers witnessed to their masters and fellow workers.²⁵ Thus, sent missionaries and laity alike made a deliberate and conscientious effort to form what we might call extension chains for the spreading of the gospel and the planting of believers’ congregations.

Sending Responsible Agents

These people were at the right time in the right place, employing the right methods to achieve the goal of making disciples and multiplying churches. The Anabaptist annals record several characteristics of those who were committed to present the claims of Christ to the lost in the world.

Compelled by the Great Commission

The great Anabaptist missionary Hans Hut often preached to large crowds. Upon baptizing large numbers of those who repented of their sins and confessed Christ as Lord, Hut would challenge each one to obey the Great Commission and tell others the good news. Those who obeyed always went under the shadow of the cross, “where the representatives of the state churches dared not go, and for the Gospel’s sake were made pilgrims and martyrs throughout the known world.” When asked what compelled them to go, they answered without hesitation: the Great Commission.²⁶

Convicted by a Deep Sense of Calling

The Anabaptists called it *Berufungs-bewusstsein*. Nothing is more apparent in the Anabaptist missionaries than their deep sense of calling to the task. This call, as they understood it, always had two dimensions: One is internal, the other external. They explained this experience as a direct call from God inwardly perceived and a call from the church outwardly confirmed.²⁷

In the first place, the Anabaptists placed great emphasis on a specific spiritual gift for the missionary task. “It is God who sends us, but the Holy Spirit who gives to us the apostolic gift for the preaching of the Gospel of Christ.” Again they said, “The Spirit of God tells our spirit that we are called and must go and preach ... for it is for that purpose that He has given us to possess the gift of the Holy Spirit.”²⁸

Second, the call contained an external dimension. Schäufele states that in addition to the inward charismatic call, the Anabaptists followed Luther’s principle of the authority of the local congregation to discern the inner call and then to commission people to the ministry to which they felt called.²⁹ In the early Anabaptist document known as *The Schleitheim Confession* (February 24, 1527), we find the instruction that the local church has the responsibility to choose the right person for the right task, whom the Lord has thus appointed. Once the persons had been discerned, the congregation publically confirmed their calling and sent them on their way as missionaries.

Commissioned by a Supporting Church

The Graner Codes, found in the so-called Brunner Archives, describe in some detail an Anabaptist commissioning service.³⁰ First, the candidates reported to the congregation how God had called them into mission work and to preach the gospel in other lands. This was followed by a session of admonition and encouragement. The missionaries asked the congregation to remain faithful in their local tasks, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and providing for the poor and unemployed. In

conclusion the missionaries asked that they themselves be remembered with prayers and material provisions. In response the people of the congregation pledged their support, wished them well, and prayed for God's mercies upon their ministry. Thus the commissioning service was actually a kind of covenant between the commissioning body and the commissioned team.

The entire congregation observed the commissioning ceremony. In most cases the missionaries were married men, leaving families behind; occasionally wives went with their husbands. In the event that the missionaries would be executed by "sword and fire," as expressed in the song, the church was committed to take care of the widow and the orphaned children.³²

All this speaks of a profound *Sendungsbewusstsein* or sense of sentness. According to the late professor J. A. Toews, Sebastian Franck (1499-1543) was both friend and critic of the early Anabaptists. He was so impressed by their consciousness of mission that he described this aspect of their life as follows: "They wish to imitate apostolic life . . . move about from one place to another preaching and claiming a great calling and mission." Some of them were so sure of their calling, wrote Franck, that they felt "themselves responsible for the whole world."³³

Committed To a High View of Discipleship

The missionaries sent out from the main centers in South Germany, Switzerland, and Moravia were all of noble character. Since they were committed to the concept of the believers' church as a visible structure within society, they

A Song of Commission

Since singing played a significant role from the inception of the Anabaptist movement, and since hymns were often written for specific occasions, I have selected and translated several verses from a twenty-five stanza song used for an early commissioning service.³¹

"As God his Son was sending
Into this world of sin,
His Son is now commanding
That we this world should win.
He sends us and commissions
To preach the gospel clear,
To call upon all nations
To listen and to hear.

To Thee, O God, we're praying,
We're bent to do thy will;
Thy Word we are obeying
Thy glory we fulfill.
All peoples we are telling
To mend their sinful way,
That they might cease rebelling,
Lest judgment be their pay.

And if thou, Lord, desire
And should it be thy will
That we taste sword and fire
By those who thus would kill
Then comfort, pray, our loved ones
And tell them, we've endured
And we shall see them yonder—
Eternally secured.

Thy Word, O Lord, does teach us,
And we do understand;
Thy promises are with us
Until the very end.
Thou hast prepared a haven—
Praised be thy holy name.
We laud thee, God of heaven,
Through Christ, our Lord. Amen!"

insisted that their converts live exemplary lives. “No one can truly know Christ,” they said, “unless he follow Him in life.”³⁴ This was precisely one point of tension between the Church of the Restitution and the *corpus christianum* of the Reformation. The emphasis in the latter was on faith, but the Anabaptists stressed faith plus *holy* living. That is why all missionaries had to undergo rigorous tests as to ethical character before they were sent out by the church.

The Moravia churches (after 1565) had a special mission committee, a kind of sodality, whose members were well informed about both the missionary’s character and the needs and opportunities for mission work. The task of this committee was to screen each of the candidates on the basis of call, gifts, and moral and spiritual qualifications. Their concept of discipleship under the lordship of Christ covered all these areas.

Called to Carry Out the Apostolic Task

We find a close correlation between the call of the missionary to the apostolic task and the responsibility felt by the sending church to help individuals carry out the task. Whenever possible, the area of service was clearly defined by the church, taking into account such important matters as education, trade, social status, culture, and language of the candidates.³⁵

As already noted, the missionaries were sent in apostolic teams to carry out their task. Since persecution was almost inevitable, the missionaries were usually sent in teams of three: First was the *Diener des Wortes*, or minister of the Word. That person was the preacher and the teacher. Second came the *Diener der Notdurft*, the servant to the needs of others, a type of deacon. Finally was the *gewöhnliche Bruder*, or common lay brother. These as well as their families were supported by the sending church. Professionals (such as architects or engineers) sometimes worked as tentmaking missionaries, supporting themselves.³⁶ In the event that one of the team members was apprehended, the church was immediately notified so that reinforcement could be sent and those in prison visited and their needs supplied. The task of the common lay person was usually to serve as liaison between the church and the missionaries.

Measuring the Resulting Harvest

As we look at the missionary effort of the Anabaptist movement we are naturally interested in measurable results, in terms of both quantity and quality.

Quantitative Results

Unfortunately, sixteenth-century church records are unavailable or incomplete. Then, too, many records are inconsistent. Furthermore, no statistics are available concerning some of the best-known leaders of the Anabaptist movement. Yet from

the fragmentary records that have been preserved we can measure, at least in part, Anabaptists' fruitful mission work.³⁷ (See chart below)

Name of Missionary	Known Number of Converts Baptized	Time of Baptism	Estimated Total	Time of Service
Jakob Gross	35	1 day		1525
Jörg Schad	40	March 12		1525
Wilhelm Roubli	60	1 day		1525
Balthasar Hubmaier	360	Easter	6,000	1525-28
Conrad Grebel	"a whole procession of men and women"			1525-1526
Johannes Brötli	"nearly a whole village"			1525
Hans Bichter	30	March 8-15		1529
Martin Zehentmaier	40			1527
Leonard Dorfbrunner	100 (about)	few mts.	3,000	1525-29
Georg Blaurock	1,000		4,000	1525-29
Hans Hut	100 (about)	2 weeks	12,000	1527-29
Georg Nespitzer	22	2 years	4,000	1527-29
Leonard Schiemer	200 (over)	6 mts.		1527
Michael Kürschner	100 (about)	11 mts.		1528-29
Jacob Hutter	19	August '35		1533-35
Leenaert Bouwens	10,378	31 yrs.		1551-82
Hans Mändl	400 (about)		4,000	1561

Most of these missionaries died a martyr's death, and their short time of service was interrupted by days, weeks, and even months of persecution and imprisonment. Nevertheless, congregations of believers sprang up almost overnight in many parts of Europe, especially after the 1527 mission conference. By 1528 Austria was dotted with Anabaptist churches. From 1532 to 1539 the Tirol area was permeated with missionaries and young congregations, a number which grew daily.³⁸

The famous social philosopher-theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) has written extensively on the impact of the Anabaptists, whom he calls "an early premature triumph of the sectarian principles of the Free Church." Troeltsch underscores their drive for missionary expansion in these words: "The whole of Central Europe was soon covered with a network of Anabaptist communities, loosely connected with each other, who all practiced a strictly Scriptural form of worship. The chief centers were Augsburg, Moravia, and Strassburg, [Alsace], and later on, in Friesland and the Netherlands."³⁹

The historians Wiswedel, Littell, and Schäufole record similar achievements of the Anabaptist mission movement. Like Troeltsch, these scholars point out the growth of the church in Europe and add that scores of missionaries were sent from these centers in all directions. By the middle of the sixteenth century Anabaptist missionaries were preaching in every state of Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, France, Poland, Galicia, Hungary, and Italy. Several even went as far as Denmark and Sweden in the north and Greece and Constantinople in the south. The record of a conversation among early Swiss Anabaptists states that on one occasion they talked about going “to the red Indians across the sea.”⁴⁰

Qualitative Results

The cost of obedience to the Great Commission, however, was high. Over 2,000 Anabaptist martyrs are known by name. One authority estimates that 4,000 to 5,000 “men, women, and children fell prey to water, fire and sword.”⁴¹ To this Roland Bainton adds:

Those who thus held themselves as sheep for the slaughter were dreaded and exterminated as if they had been wolves. They challenged the whole way of life of the community. Had they become too numerous, Protestants would have been unable to take up arms against Catholics and the Germans could not have resisted the Turks. And the Anabaptists did become numerous. They despaired of society at large, but they did not despair of winning converts to their way. Every member of the group was regarded as a missionary. Men and women left their homes to go on evangelistic tours. The established churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, were aghast at these ministers of both sexes insinuating themselves into town and farm. In some of the communities of Switzerland and the Rhine valley Anabaptists began to outnumber Catholics and Protestants alike.⁴²

Concluding Lessons

Every biblical mission strategy calls for total obedience on the part of a missionary people in every generation. As the Anabaptist of the sixteenth century, so the members of the believers’ church in the twentieth century must view with equal significance the ethical teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the *Magna Carta* of the Great Commission. The one is a call to discipleship, the other a command to make disciples. Both are given by the same Lord. Both are rooted in his abiding Word. Both must find expression by *telling*, *being*, and *doing* in the lives of Christ’s

disciples, the people of the way (cf. Acts 9:20). Unless we learn from history, history's record has been written in vain. From the annals of our Anabaptist forebears come several lessons.

Radical Obedience

The Anabaptists' uncompromising obedience to the Great Commission is best understood in the light of their concept of discipleship on one hand and their view of Christ's lordship on the other. Robert Friedmann (1891-1970) has pointed out that the Anabaptists lived by an implicit, relational—rather than by an explicit, creedal—theology. Such a theology of *being* and *doing* finds its clearest expression in discipleship and obedience, yet not without a verbal witness.

Obedience, however, does not emanate from a servile or legalistic attitude, but from an attitude of freedom of the will which is in harmony with the Lord's will. "If God gives commands in his Scriptures, they are meant to be obeyed and not only to be looked at as something unattainable and paradoxical."⁴³

The test of discipleship stands or falls with the ancient question, "What think ye of Christ?" (Mt. 16:13-16). Hans Renck (1500-1527), one of the early Anabaptist missionaries, maintained correctly that to know Christ means to follow him; to follow him means to know him.

Harold Bender (1897-1962) attempted to answer the question of who Christ really is in Anabaptist thought:⁴³ Christ is more than a prophet or moral teacher of an ethical code—though he taught ethics; he is more than the second person of the Trinity included in a liturgy of praise and worship—though he is worthy of our highest adoration; he is more than an exclusive Savior who gives the gift of forgiveness and the blessings that go with it—though he is the only Savior reconciling people to God. Christ is the prophet and teacher to be listened to, the Son of God to be worshiped, the Savior who saves from sin. He is all that and more: Jesus Christ is *the Lord* who makes the believer his disciple who follows and obeys him. Radical obedience is the key.

Priority of Mission

As the believers' church is Christocentric, so its mission is ecclesiocentric. The Lord said on one occasion, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn. 20:21). As Christ maintained a consciousness of being sent by the Father, so the members of the believers' church in the New Testament tradition maintain their deep awareness of *sentness* for *witness*. Their sense of priority of mission found expression not only in a conviction of *being sent* by the Lord, but also in a recognition of responsibility *to send* missionaries into all the world across social, cultural, linguistic, economic,

religious, and geographical frontiers. Mission always implies the crossing of frontiers from faith to unfaith.

Legitimacy of the Apostolate

The Anabaptists retained the New Testament concept of apostle and applied it to their own missionaries. In fact, they considered the apostolic band of a Paul and Barnabas to be a legitimate model for the proclamation of the gospel as a means to extend and expand their newfound faith and life in Jesus Christ, their Redeemer and Master.

Living Witnesses

The Anabaptists looked to the mission of the apostolic era as the golden age of evangelism. All believers have the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives and are, therefore, living witnesses to give expression in relationships with others of the divine life within. As believers witness by *telling*, *being*, and *doing*—and even by dying for their faith—unbelievers become believers. Whether people come to Christ through spontaneous expansion or through strategically planned evangelization, those who believe, the Anabaptist maintained, must be baptized and gathered into local congregations. New converts were taught all the things which the Lord commanded pertaining to both discipleship and lordship (Mt. 28:20). They were being equipped to worship, honor, love, serve, and *obey* the Lord between his ascension and coming again.

Notes

- ¹ From *Anabaptism and Mission*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk. © 1984 Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA 15683. Used by permission.
- ² Gunnar Westin, *The Free Church Through the Ages*. From the Swedish by Virgil A. Olson (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958), pp. 2-8.
- ³ Hans Kasdorf, "The Reformation and Mission: A Survey of Secondary Literature," *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6:4 (October 1980). The section on the Anabaptist mission involvement affords significant references for in-depth studies.
- ⁴ Franklin H. Littell, "Protestantism and the Great Commission," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 2:1 (1959), p. 30. Cf. Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church*, third printing (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 109-37; notes on pp. 195-206.
- ⁵ J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World-Wide Publications, 1975), p. 8.
- ⁶ Cf. Franklin H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Theology of Mission," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 21:1 (1947), p. 13.

- ⁷ Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Vision," *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. by Guy F. Hersherberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1962), pp. 42-43.
- ⁸ Cf. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 851. The HUP (homogeneous unit principle) is a much-debated concept in missiological circles. Those interested in studying the subject may want to consult the following: *Global Church Growth Bulletin* 17:1 (January-February 1980) and 17:2 (March-April 1980). Both issues are devoted to that debate. Several years ago the Lausanne Continuation Committee sponsored a consultation on the HUP. The conclusions were published in "The Pasadena Consultation-Homogeneous Unit," *Lausanne Occasional Papers* No. I (Wheaton: The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978).
- ⁹ Wilhelm Wiswedel, "Die alien Täufergemeinden und ihr missionarisches Wirken," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 40 (Part I, 1943); 41 (Part II, 1948). The quotation is from Part II, p. 124. Translation mine.
- ¹⁰ Littell, 1972, p. 120.
- ¹¹ Fritz Blanke, *Brothers in Christ*, translated from German by Joseph Nordenhaug (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1961), pp. 32-33.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 34-38.
- ¹³ Wolfgang Schäufele, *Das missionarische Bewusstsein und Wirken der Täufer* (Hamburg: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1964), pp. 121-23.
- ¹⁴ Littell, 1959, pp. 15-16.
- ¹⁵ The full title of this hymnbook reads, *Auss Bundt, des ist: etliche schöne Christenliche Lieder, tote die in der Gefängnuss zu Passau in dem Schloss von den SchweizerBrüdern und andern rechtgläubigen Christen hin und her gedichtet worden*. Reprinted edition (Basel: Jak. Heinr. von Mechel, 1838).
- ¹⁶ Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 231-32.
- ¹⁷ Horst Penner, *Weltweite Bruderschaft* (Karlsruhe: Verlag Heinrich Schneider, 1960), p. 20.
- ¹⁸ Littell, 1959, pp. 38-39.
- ¹⁹ John Allen Moore, *Der Starke Joerg: Die Geschichte Georg Blaurocks, des Täuferführers und Missionars* (Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1955), p. 35. John C. Wenger, *Even Unto Death* (Richmond: John Knox, 1961), p. 24.
- ²⁰ Wolfgang Schäufele, "The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36:2 (1962), p. 100.
- ²¹ Durnbaugh, *op. cit.*, p.132.
- ²² Schäufele, 1962, p. 99.

- ²³ Ibid., pp. 104-105.
- ²⁴ Durnbaugh, op. cit., p. 233.
- ²⁵ Schäufole, 1962, pp. 106-109.
- ²⁶ Littell, 1972, p. 112. Cf. Wiswedel, op. cit., Part II, p. 123.
- ²⁷ Schäufole, 1964, p. 117.
- ²⁸ Wiswedel, op. cit., Part 1, p. 196.
- ²⁹ Schäufole, 1964, pp. 122-23.
- ³⁰ Cf. Wiswedel, op. cit., Part II, p. 119ff.
- ³¹ Ibid., pp. 121-22.
- ³² Schäufole, 1964, pp. 165-72.
- ³³ John A. Toews, "The Anabaptist Involvement in Mission," *The Church in Mission: A Sixtieth Anniversary Tribute to J. B. Toews*, ed. by A. J. Klassen (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, Mennonite Brethren Church, 1967), p. 95.
- ³⁴ Schäufole, 1964, p. 62.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 167f.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 185. Modern examples of tentmaking ministry are described by Professor J. Christy Wilson of Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary in *Today's Tentmakers* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1981).
- ³⁷ Cf. ibid., pp. 238-46. Ernst Crous, "Anabaptism, Pietism, Rationalism and German Mennonites," *Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision*, ed. by Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1962), pp. 237-38.
- ³⁸ Schäufole, 1964, p. 245.
- ³⁹ Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, two volumes, tran. from the German by Olive Wyon (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), Vol. 11, p. 704.
- ⁴⁰ Moore, op. cit., p. 29.
- ⁴¹ Schäufole, 1964, p. 34.
- ⁴² Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); pp. 101-102.
- ⁴³ Robert Friedmann, *A Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), p. 44.
- ⁴⁴ Harold S. Bender, "The Anabaptist Theology of Discipleship," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 24:1 (1950), pp. 27-29.

Study Questions

1. The author includes this statement: “often a few hours at a new place were sufficient to found a new congregation” (for the early Anabaptists). Discuss some factors that made this possible that might not be present for a cross-cultural missionary.
2. Compare Kasdorf’s record of early vocational Anabaptist missions effort to what Jonathan Lewis writes about in the article called “Tentmaking Missionaries.”
3. Why do you think that the first decades of Anabaptist history saw such missionary zeal and today such a small percentage of Anabaptists go into mission work?