

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

*THE ANABAPTIST STORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO SIXTEENTH CENTURY ANABAPTISM*

A BOOK REVIEW

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## **Introduction: William Estep and His Work**

William R. Estep (1920–2000) was a historian who served as a distinguished professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (SWBTS) from 1954–1990, though he continued to teach even after his retirement. His educational background is rooted in the Baptist tradition, receiving a master’s degree from Southern Seminary and a doctorate in theology from SWBTS. His education prepared him to contribute to the scholarly world, particularly in the areas of history and mission. He authored a number of books, including *Renaissance and Reformation* (1986), and *Whole Gospel, Whole World* (1994). In addition, he served organizations such as the American Society of Church History, the Conference on Faith and History, while laboring in numerous churches. James Leo Garrett, a heavyweight in the Baptist world, once stated that Estep “represented the best of Southwestern” and was a “first rate scholar.” The present work, *The Anabaptist Story*, surely displays the capabilities of the late Dr. Estep.<sup>1</sup>

*The Anabaptist Story* first appeared in 1963 and was well received (vii). The work was updated in light of the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the launch of the Anabaptist movement. The second edition (1975) retained the title and structure while updating the book in light of the most up-to-date scholarship.

The third edition was released thirty-three years later, in 1996. Estep, though he considered writing a completely new book, instead offered an updated version of the original work. Estep thought it worth his effort to update the volume due to the success of the book, the

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<sup>1</sup> Corey J. Hailey, “Baptist historian W.R. Estep dies; 'scholar of scholars' among accolades,” Baptist Press, [www.bpnews.net/6192](http://www.bpnews.net/6192), July 17, 2000.

appearance of new translation of Anabaptist sources, new monographs and reference works that had appeared covering different parts of Anabaptist thought, as well as his continuing belief that a study of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists “can be instructive for those of us who seek to follow Christ in obedient discipleship... (xiii).

The aim of *The Anabaptist Story* is clear from the outset. Estep endeavors to (re)tell the story of Anabaptists. Clearly, Estep does not believe the story of the Anabaptist tradition has always received a fair representation. Though he does not intend to paint over their faults, he does intend to paint a more positive and honest picture of the tradition. However, Estep is not interested in helping the reader simply gain historical and intellectual weight. He wants to “impart something more than information” (xiii). He wants Anabaptist’s to “come alive” in order to help the modern reader understand what motivated them to live as they did in the face of pain and hardship. Perhaps, it seems, if we see their ancient example of faithfulness it will strengthen us for faithfulness today.

### **The Flow of Estep’s Work: An Outline**

#### **Origins**

Estep begins with a discussion of origin. That is, the first two chapters describe the birth of Anabaptism and introduces the reader to the earliest leaders. The movement finds its origin in the Protestant Reformation. Against the backdrop of religious, philosophical, and even economic upheaval, the stage was set for reform. “It was an unsettling time,” as Estep notes (11). In addition to the unstable times, the printing press provided the means for ideas to reach further faster than ever before. When Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door in Wittenberg, the printing press was primed and ready to help spread those ideas across the land.

Around the same time Luther was reading his Bible, a humanistic reformer was wrestling with his Greek New Testament. His name was Ulrich Zwingli, the man who stands at the headwaters of the Anabaptist movement. This is the case not because Zwingli is counted among their number, but because it is the followers of Zwingli who would carry the reforms initiated by him to what seemed their logical conclusion. The Anabaptist movement may not find an adherent in Zwingli, but he certainly stands as one who helped open the flood gates when it comes to the water of Anabaptism.

Estep is careful to tell the story of how the movement began. He notes the widening gap that emerged between Zwingli and his students, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz. Grebel, an admirer of Erasmus, eventually began to study the Scriptures for himself. By 1522, Grebel had become “zealous for reform.” Three years later, the students had surpassed the master and publicly broke with Zwingli. In January of 1525, Grebel and others made their way to the home of Felix Manz. In this meeting, Grebel baptized George Blaurock who in turn baptized the rest in attendance. The Reformation had officially given birth to Anabaptism.

Importantly, however, when it comes to origins, Estep situates the Anabaptist’s within the context of the various groups emerging during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. One of the failures of historians has been the lack of care in distinguishing the Anabaptists from “Inspirationists...and rationalists...” (21). Estep notes that “the Anabaptists frequently found themselves theologically closer to the magisterial Reformers than to other “radicals” (21). Unfortunately, it is too often the case the entire radical reformation is simply subsumed underneath the broad category of Anabaptist. Though all the “radical” groups had shared beliefs (e.g. rejection of state authority in matters of faith, embracing believer’s baptism), their differences were significant. For the Inspirationists, “the Spirit took precedence over the Bible” (22). For the rationalists, reason was

supreme and they were often antitrinitarian (23). As Estep shows in his work, the Anabaptists differed significantly on these (and other) points. Since that is the case, and Estep seeks to tell the story of what he defines as Anabaptism, certain groups that one might find in other treatments of the Anabaptist movement are either ignored or sufficiently differentiated from the Anabaptist tradition.

### Biographical sections

Having located the origin of the Anabaptist movement, Estep moves to introduce the reader to key Anabaptist leaders and the geographical expansion of Anabaptist ideas. Against the backdrop of hypocrisy of Medieval Christianity, where external acts were the measure of a person's piety, Anabaptists "shone like meteors in the night" (29). In this opening biographical chapter, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manx, and George Blaurock receive individual attention. Grebel had wrestled with Zwingli, instituted believer's baptism, and died a martyr's death. Felix Manx, however, was "the first Anabaptist martyr to die at the hands of Protestants and the first to die in Zurich" (43). It was in the home of Manz where Blaurock, the "Hercules" of the early leaders, would baptize the first Anabaptist converts. All three men were learned men who had attended universities, studied the Greek New Testament, and led reform further afield than Zwingli, or even Luther. They were branded traitors and each died a traitor's death.

Leadership would pass to those like Michael Sattler. Sattler stood as the major influence behind the early Anabaptist statement of faith, the *Schleitheim Confession* (1527). Here we find Swiss Anabaptism setting forth their faith in creedal form. It would represent a turning point in Swiss and south German Anabaptism as "it marked the beginning of sectarian Anabaptism" (65).

Though it was not the beginning of the movement, it nonetheless stated the distinctives of the faith in clear terms, something that had yet to take place.

Theologically, the most impressive early Anabaptist was Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier. Estep describes Hubmaier as a “creative theologian” who was “well trained in scholastic theology and patristics” (77). When it comes to the theological development and defense of Anabaptist theology, Hubmaier would touch on every point of doctrine. The level of brilliance displayed by Hubmaier even garnered the admiration of Dr. John Eck, the famous opponent of Martin Luther. Yet, regardless of his intellectual prowess, on March 10, 1528 Hubmaier was burned to death as his wife looked on, urging him to remain steadfast.

Other figures emerge that are important to the movement of Anabaptist “into south Germany and Moravia” (107). Hans Denck, who was baptized by Hubmaier, was an earlier Anabaptist laborer in south Germany, himself teaching in ways that anticipated Arminian theology. Others in southern Germany included Sattler, Hans Hut, and Wilhelm Reublin. It is Reublin who offers the closest and most direct link to the Swiss Brethren. Reublin was the first follower of Zwingli to preach against infant baptism and to marry, a clear repudiation of Roman Catholicism. Pilgram Marpeck, another laborer in southern Germany was more of a “layman’s theologian,” but according to Estep “became the most influential theologian among the south German Anabaptists” (125).

As Anabaptist spreads through the influence of these individuals into new lands, Moravia would become one of the most important centers of Anabaptist life. Jacob Hutter and Peter Riedmann led their followers to share their material goods in an effort to care for one another practically. What this communal life looked like led to internal strife, even as external suffering was always at hand. The Anabaptists were continually hounded by the Roman Catholic

authorities. Hounded and hunted, by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Anabaptist are still looking for a spot to live and worship in peace.

Estep closes the biographical section by taking his readers to the Netherlands. The reader is introduced to one of the most famous Anabaptist's and perhaps one of the most famous Christians in the history of Christianity. Menno Simons came from a Roman Catholic background but would eventually renounce Roman Catholicism and embrace Anabaptist views in the early to mid-1500's. Simons would write extensively on theological issues, and, at times, in ways that were controversial. His views on Christology are still fertile soil for investigation and debate today. Yet, it is the legacy of Simons that gives us the Mennonite faith, a faith found around the world. The reason for his influence is surely tied to his theological and leadership abilities. But according to Estep, Simons "greatest contribution to the Anabaptist movement was his character" (174).

### Theology Sections

Estep moves from considering the leaders and expansion of Anabaptism to an examination of their theological positions on four issues: trinitarianism, *Sola Scriptura*, justification by faith, and baptism. From the statements of early Anabaptist leaders like Hubmaier, and their reference to the ancient creeds of Christendom (e.g. The Apostles Creed), Estep builds the case the Anabaptists were not heretics but orthodox and Reformational in their faith.

The Trinitarianism of the Anabaptist is defended first. "From Conrad Grebel to Menno Simons there is an abundance of evidence which suggests that the Anabaptists found the Triune God an inescapable reality" (182). It is true there has historically been questions concerning Menno's doctrine of the incarnation, and Estep admits there is something unique in Menno's

approach (Menno taught that Jesus did not receive his human body from Mary, but “he himself became a body”), yet in the final analysis, Menno never denies the reality of the incarnation. In short, Anabaptists were trinitarian.

Furthermore, Anabaptist held closely to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. “Within the reformation no group took more seriously” this particular principle (190). Though they were not entirely averse to the use of Creeds and Confessions (e.g. the Schleithem Confession), the Anabaptists were Bible people. In addition, they stood in continuity with Luther, Zwingli, and latter Calvin, as they held and taught justification by faith alone. Though they thought deeply about baptism, Anabaptist leaders did not allow their focus on baptism to cloud the doctrine of justification by faith. Indeed, their (re)baptism was not a work that sought righteousness in the sight of God. Instead, baptism was a sign that pointed to the reality of faith which alone justifies. Baptism was of those who had been justified in faith (i.e. believers). Furthermore, this theological understanding of baptism was linked to discipleship. To follow Jesus in believer’s baptism was the most distinguishing mark of Anabaptist theology and was part and parcel of discipleship.

Theologically, Anabaptists (save a couple of aberrations) denied the state had any authority in spiritual matters. The church and state were separate, though both had their jurisdiction. In fact, the great fall of the church is located precisely when Constantine linked the church and the state together. Instead, the church, a visible body of baptized saints who practiced baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and church discipline, were to govern their own affairs as they strove for holiness of life. Given their political theology, early Anabaptists led the way in arguing for religious freedom. Being a Christian is not something the state could coerce, but

must be left to the conscience of each individual. This, indeed, is perhaps “their most far-reaching contribution to the modern world” (257).

### The Spread of Anabaptism

Estep closes his book tracing the spread of the Anabaptist faith around the globe. There are direct descendants that are easily traced. The Mennonites, Hutterites, and the Amish are three such groups. Modern day Baptists, perhaps not direct descendants, were significantly influenced by Anabaptist groups as they emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Estep goes to some length to argue for the influence of early Anabaptists on emerging Baptists, particularly English Separatists and early English Baptists that would eventually give birth to our modern Baptist churches. In the end, Baptists, Quakers, and the Church of the Brethren owe some of their heritage to Anabaptist “influence,” a term Estep continues to employ to make his point. At their best, these Anabaptists should continue to influence us today as we seek to pursue religious freedom and the worship of God according to our own understanding of the Word of God.

### Critical Evaluation

What do we take away from this introduction to the Anabaptist tradition? First, Estep attempts to provide a corrective in distinguishing the various reform groups that were emerging in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to him, it has too often been the case that sources have lumped groups together under the heading, “Anabaptism.” Furthermore, given the identity of the Anabaptists and what is normative in Anabaptist life, one must view certain groups as fringe groups at best. For instance, perhaps unfortunately, the events in the city of Muntzer in 1534 has served to obstruct an honest view of the Anabaptism movement. The Muntzer group, according

to Estep, “attempted to set up the kingdom of God by force” but represent an “aberration of sixteenth-century Anabaptism.”

Yet, in the available historical literature, it is not clear to me that it is pedagogically helpful to jettison the use of Anabaptism to denote a broad river of reform that has as its common denominator, rebaptism. Spiritualists and Rationalists are certainly distinct from say, Hubmaier. Yet, all three share in common the most distinguishing mark of Anabaptism. Perhaps, Anabaptist is a term that can refer to this entire river of reform and another term (e.g. Swiss Brethren) can identify the stream that flows from the likes of Grebel, Manz, Blaurock, Hubmaier, and others.

When it comes to the intellectual respectability of Anabaptist’s. Dr. Estep helpfully shows the learned nature of Anabaptist leaders. Grebel studied in Paris, imbibed humanism, and had studied Greek. Blaurock had studied at Leipzig. Hubmaier had garnered the praise of John Eck. And though Pilgram Marpeck was not a trained theologian, he becomes one the southern Germany Anabaptist leaders and thinkers. If, in the past, one was prone to think of the Anabaptists as less thoughtful, less theologically robust and astute than the magisterial reformers, one cannot continue to think in those ways after perusing Estep’s work. As Estep proves, the Anabaptist’s were serious students of Scripture and formulators of theology.

In addition, several important points are worth noting. Anabaptist devotion to *Sola Scriptura* is cause for thanksgiving and emulation. May the Lord give us such Bible-saturated conviction today. As Anabaptist’s laid down their lives for their faith, and the blood of Anabaptist martyrs served as the seed of the latter movement, so too would the Lord give us spines of steel that would stand firm in the face of fiery trials. Lastly, as the Anabaptist’s influenced early Baptist traditions (as well as others), may they continue to influence us. May the Lord use the Anabaptist tradition to encourage us to hold firm to the faith, trust our Bibles, stand for immortal truth, keep

the church and the state in proper balance, and pursue the purity of a believers church until Christ returns or calls us home.