

Anabaptists and Regenerate Church Membership

Story: The anabaptists and the first “Baptists” in England.

Doctrine: Regenerate church membership. (To a lesser extent separation of church and state and baptism of believers by immersion.)

Definition: Regenerate church membership is the view that the church is composed of only those who have faith in Jesus Christ and have been baptized.

Introduction: A Baptism in Zurich.

As you walk into the Grossmünster, the large cathedral or “great minister” in the city of Zurich, and take your seat, your eyes eventually rest on a man near the front of the room: Ulrich Zwingli.

I. Union of Church, State, and Baptism

The Political and Theological Landscape.

Church. Zwingli, along with Luther and Calvin, was one of the primary voices advocating for Reformation in the early 1500s. He was calling for reform in the Roman Catholic Church right around the same time as Luther was in Wittenberg.

State. The city of Zurich broke with Rome in the mid-1520s, their city council slowly making decisions that diminished the authority of the Roman church in the city. The city council had authority not just to govern the civil affairs of the city, they also exercised power in the church.

- In fact, “Most sixteenth-century Protestants could not envision a world where state and church were not working together for the cause of Christ.”¹
- **Definition:** Magistrate—a public civil officer invested with authority.²
- Zwingli, Calvin, and Luther are called Magisterial Reformers because they worked with the civil magistrate, or the public civil officer, to bring about reform within the church.
- For Zwingli himself, the leader of the Reformation movement and therefore a significant political power in Zurich:
 - He occupied the theocratic standpoint of the Old Testament. The preacher is a prophet: his duty is to instruct, to exhort, to comfort, to rebuke sin in high and low places, and to build up the kingdom of God; his weapon is the Word of God. The duty of the magistracy is to obey the gospel, to protect religion, to punish wickedness...³

Baptism. As you sit in the Grossmünster, the service begins. Scripture is read, songs are sung, the Word is proclaimed, and also a child is baptized. Since the church and the state are united, baptism does two things that may surprise us.

¹Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: Second Edition* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025), 44.

²M. G. Easton, *Illustrated Bible Dictionary and Treasury of Biblical History, Biography, Geography, Doctrine, and Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 436.

³Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), 66.

First, baptism granted you entrance into the visible church.

Second, baptism granted you citizenship in the city of Zurich. At this time, there were no records of births. Instead, baptismal records were used and kept for that purpose.

Confluence. The combination of church and state is easy to see in this relationship. Zurich truly had a state-church. Additionally, there was only one church in Zurich. All others were deemed illegitimate and shut down. In this sense, there was no religious liberty. Instead, there was the state-church to which all citizens were subject. The civil magistrate was responsible for the state-church and assumed the responsibility to “obey the gospel, to protect religion, and to punish wickedness...”⁴ [SEE DIAGRAMS]

The invisible and visible church. Infants were baptized into what was called the visible church. The visible church consists of “all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children, and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”—[Westminster] Conf. Faith,” chap. xxv., section 2.⁵ The invisible church is composed of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ—in other words, true believers. This is a work of God on the heart and is therefore invisible.

This means that infants are a part of the church, though they do not yet believe. Thus, with this understanding of the church, the church is composed of both people who do and do not have faith. In the words of Exodus, they are a “mixed multitude” (Ex 12:38).

II. Regenerate Church Membership

Definition. Some wanted to reform further than the Magisterial Reformers. They advocated for what is called regenerate church membership, which is the view that the church is composed of only those who have faith in Jesus Christ. These are those who have been regenerated, or made spiritually alive, in Christ. In other words the church should only be composed of believing Christians.

Where might they have gotten this idea? Let’s consider a few passages:

Mt. 28:16-20. This was their primary text. They argued from the Great Commission that disciples must receive the gospel, that is, understand it, and be taught to obey all that Christ commanded. This requires the ability to comprehend the gospel and faith to believe it. Therefore, the church should be composed of people who are disciples of Jesus.

Acts 2:36-41. This passage is the conclusion to Peter’s sermon on Pentecost. He stands before thousands in Jerusalem and boldly proclaims that Jesus is Lord and Savior to those who crucified him. Our purpose lies in an examination of verse 41. There, Luke, the human author of Acts records, “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41 ESV). Grudem notes that “The text specifies that baptism was administered to those who ‘received his word’ and therefore trusted in Christ for salvation.”⁶ There is an unbreakable link between receiving the word of the gospel, baptism, and being added to the church. One cannot receive the gospel if one cannot

⁴Schaff, 66.

⁵Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology: Rewritten and Enlarged* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1878), 617.

⁶Grudem, 970.

understand it; comprehension is necessary. Therefore, only believers are to be baptized and only believers are added to the church.

The promise of new life in Christ was not only for those who would believe but also for their children. It seems that the sense here is that parents who believe are given the responsibility to train up their child in the fear of God so that they will one day profess faith in Christ and be added to the church. Since infants are not able to receive the gospel, they should not yet be baptized and added to the number of the church—though they certainly should attend church meetings with their families!

Acts 8:12. A second example that confirms this finding is found in Acts 8:12. This passage records Philip the apostle's missionary work in the city of Samaria. Here, we read, "when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women" (Acts 8:12). Again, the pattern is established. First, the Samaritans received the word of the gospel—they believed—and then they were baptized. To believe requires comprehension. Therefore, this excludes infants.

Bonus: Acts 10:44-48. Baptism is for those who have received the word of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. In other words, those who have been regenerated.

Galatians 3:27. Grudem masterfully argues that "Paul here assumes that baptism is the outward sign of inward regeneration [or new birth]. This simply could not have been true of infants—Paul could not have said, 'As many *infants* as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ,' for infants have not yet come to saving faith or given any evidence of regeneration."⁷

All this points to the conclusion that the objects of baptisms are those who are already members of Christ Jesus. That is, those who have received Christ as their savior by faith alone in the gospel. In short, baptism is for believers.

Advocates. A small number of individuals refused to identify themselves with this the uniformity of the state-church and its view of the invisible-visible church. These men and women rejected the idea of a national church to which every individual in the state belonged and its support of infant baptism. Instead, they advocated for churches composed solely of believers who were admitted based on a personal confession of faith and believer's baptism. In the early days of the Reformation, this small group of Protestants would have been baptized as infants. When they were baptized as believers, their opponents, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, dubbed them "rebaptizers," or Anabaptists.⁸

- At this time, the Anabaptists generally baptized by pouring or sprinkling. "The first Anabaptist baptism took place in Zurich on January 21, 1525, when Conrad Grebel baptized Jorg [George] Blaurock by affusion, or pouring water over his head."⁹
- The Anabaptists in many cases shared the theology of the Reformers.
 - For these early Anabaptists, believer's baptism was the doorway to a life of ongoing transformation as they sought to live as disciples of Christ in community with like-minded believers. They shared the conviction with Martin Luther and the French Reformer John Calvin that "faith alone makes us righteous before God," to quote the words of the German Anabaptist leader **Balthasar Hubmaier**. But

⁷Grudem, 971.

⁸Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 44.

⁹Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 44.

the Anabaptists insisted this faith was an active faith, full of “all sorts of works of brotherly love toward others.” For Hubmaier, these fruits of the faith were central to the essence of genuine faith. Sadly, because these early Anabaptists rejected the union of church and state assumed by most professing Christians in Western Europe, their communities were regarded as a dire threat to the stability and security of the state. [Thus, many of the Anabaptists perished at the hands of both Roman Catholics and Protestants. Hubmaier was burned at the stake in 1528 in Roman Catholic Vienna, while **Felix Manz**, in whose house Blaurock had been baptized, was drowned in the Limmat River in Zurich by fellow Protestants.]¹⁰

Felix Manz. Felix Manz was a young anabaptist preacher and pastor in Zurich. He was educated in the biblical languages and sought to help spur the Reformation forward in Switzerland. However, his views about regenerate church membership and baptism were too progressive for the city council.

After several public disputations with representatives of both the state-church (Zwingli) and dissenters who held to regenerate church membership with the Zurich city council. Between March 5-7, 1526, the council decided that, in order to protect the integrity of the city and the church, it would punish the dissenting anabaptists.

Hans Leaman writes the following about that event:

The beginning of March proved a turning point in Zurich for its handling of Anabaptism. Having grown impatient with the ineffectiveness of measures taken against Anabaptist leaders up to this point, the city council decided it would no longer show forbearance. Over the course of one day on March 5, Zurich had three prosecutors interview at least twelve men and six women that it held in its prisons on account of Anabaptist activities. The evidence-gathering task of the prosecutors appeared to be simple: ask the prisoners if they would remain by their Anabaptist positions or if they would desist and become obedient subjects of their government. Two days later, upon reading the prisoners' responses, the council issued the sentence for those who would not change: they would be sent back to prison and served merely bread and water until they either died or recanted. Then the council issued a mandate leaving no room for ambiguity about the penalty for rebaptizing others: anyone convicted of rebaptizing would be executed by drowning.¹¹

Grebel, Manz, and Blaurock were rearrested, and charged with communistic and revolutionary teaching. After some other excesses, the magistracy proceeded to threaten those who stubbornly persisted in their error, with death by drowning. He who dips, shall be dipped,—a cruel irony.¹²

On January 5, 1527 Felix Manz was executed by drowning in Lake Zurich while Huldrych Zwingli looked on. His mother and family were on the shore urging him to hold fast his faith in Christ. He died a true martyr at the hands of fellow protestants.

¹⁰Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 45.

¹¹<https://sattler.edu/blog/zurich-sentences-early-anabaptist-leaders-to-life-in-prison-and-announce-s-the-death-penalty-for-future-rebaptizers/>

¹²Schaff, 82.

“We are, alas, like scattered sheep,
The shepherd not in sight,
Each far away from home and hearth,
And, like the birds of night
That hide away in rocky clefts,
We have our rocky hold,
Yet near at hand, as for the birds,
There waits the hunter bold.”¹³

Persecution was even worse in other places:

In Germany and in Austria the Anabaptists fared still worse. The Diet of Speier, in April, 1529, decreed that “every Anabaptist and rebaptized person of either sex be put to death by sword, or fire, or otherwise.” The decree was severely carried out, except in Strassburg and the domain of Philip of Hesse, where the heretics were treated more leniently. The most blood was shed in Roman Catholic countries. In Goerz the house in which the Anabaptists were assembled for worship was set on fire. “In Tyrol and Goerz,” says Cornelius, “the number of executions in the year 1531 reached already one thousand; in Ensisheim, six hundred. At Linz seventy-three were killed in six weeks. Duke William of Bavaria, surpassing all others, issued the fearful decree to behead those who recanted, to burn those who refused to recant.... Throughout the greater part of Upper Germany the persecution raged like a wild chase.... The blood of these poor people flowed like water so that they cried to the Lord for help.... But hundreds of them of all ages and both sexes suffered the pangs of torture without a murmur, despised to buy their lives by recantation, and went to the place of execution joyfully and singing psalms.”¹⁴

¹³Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 8 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 81.

¹⁴Schaff, 84.