

ANABAPTISM AS A CHARISMATIC MOVEMENT

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Originally Published in *Anabaptism Today*, Issue 8, February 1995, and on [the Anabaptist Network website](#).

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Introduction

What would sixteenth-century Anabaptists have made of the “Toronto Blessing” that has impacted many churches in Great Britain in recent months? How did the Radical Reformers respond to such spiritual phenomena? The charismatic aspect of Anabaptism has not received much attention from historians, but evidence of spiritual phenomena in early Anabaptist groups is substantial. Some welcomed manifestations of the Holy Spirit, while others were wary and attempted to regulate or discourage such expressions. Basic to the Anabaptist view of charismatic gifts, however, was a belief that a transformed life was the true measure and sign of Holy Spirit presence.

A charismatic view of discipleship

A sixteenth-century Anabaptist named Leonhard Schiemer wrote that believers receive “a power about which they have to say that things that were once impossible are now possible”. Christians lacking such a change, he argued, “are not yet horn again of water and spirit, even the Holy Spirit”.¹ Schiemer’s quote indicates two distinctive emphases in Radical Reformation theology: a preference for the term “horn again” rather than “justification by faith”, and a focus on the *experience* of new life. In contrast to other Reformers, Anabaptists spoke of power to live differently rather than mere freedom from guilt and assurance of forgiveness.

Anabaptists accepted the notion of “justification by faith”, but did not find this term adequate to describe their experience of Christ and his Spirit. Through the death of Christ their sinful past had been forgiven, and now they wanted to live a Christ-centred life in the power of the Spirit. Common Anabaptist terms for salvation were related to the work of the Spirit and the expectation of a changed life. Words that frequently occur are: new birth, conversion, illumination, enlightenment, the new creature, and regeneration.²

Inner light for a life of righteousness

For Dirk Philips, the Spirit had a vital role as agent of regeneration. The Spirit writes the new covenant on the hearts of believers and enables them to participate in the divine nature. The Spirit is the earthly presence of Jesus, empowering ministers called by God and helping believers interpret the Scripture. Anabaptists equated “baptism in the Spirit” with conversion, but expected more to happen *experientially* than did the Reformers. The radicals were not satisfied with forensic ideas of grace, typified by the legal terminology of “justification by faith”. Rather, they saw grace as “the inner light that directed a life of righteousness”.³

Hans Hut, the most successful evangelist of first generation Anabaptism, often relied on prophetic dreams and visions, Melchior Huffmann, who introduced Anabaptism to the Netherlands, encouraged the exercise of charismatic gifts and valued the prophetic ministries of both male and female colleagues. Later Dutch leaders, such as Menno Simons and Dirk Phillips, were more wary of reliance on visions. Perhaps this was because “revelations” played a significant part in the Munster catastrophe (1534-35), when an Anabaptist faction gained control of a city government in Germany and

inaugurated practices such as polygamy and holy war. But even the later Dutch leaders accepted charismatic gifts to the extent that they were authenticated by Scripture.

Jacob Hutter (from whom the Hutterite movement takes its name) claimed a miraculous dimension to his ministry as authentication of his calling. The Hutterite *Chronicle* contains several accounts of miraculous events. Among other Anabaptist examples of charismatic expression were the “prophetic processions” (at Zurich in 1525, at Munster in 1534 and at Amsterdam in 1535).⁴ The *Martyrs’ Mirror* mentions a martyr named Martin whom authorities led across a bridge to execution in 1531. He prophesied, “this once yet the pious are led over this bridge, but no more hereafter.” Just “a short time afterwards such a violent storm and flood came that the bridge was demolished”.⁵ In Germany some Anabaptists, “excited by mass hysteria, experienced healings, glossolalia, contortions and other manifestations of a camp-meeting revival”.⁶

Pilgram Marpeck rejected the belief that miracles were restricted to the early church, and assured readers miracles still were occurring. He referred to several Anabaptists who had gone joyfully to martyrdom “through the abundant comfort and power of the Holy Spirit”. He makes the astonishing statement that “moreover, one also marvels when one sees how the faithful God (who, after all, overflows with goodness) raises from the dead several such brothers and sisters of Christ after they were hanged, drowned or killed in other ways... Even today, they are found alive and we can hear their own testimony.” Marpeck said these things occurred “among those who are powerfully moved and driven by the living Word of God and the Spirit of Christ”.⁷

Bible interpretation guided by the Holy Spirit

Experience of the Spirit, Anabaptists said, would enable believers to interpret Scripture reliably and faithfully. Martin Luther, in his early years, ascribed a significant rule to the Spirit in reading the text. The Bible “cannot be mastered by study or talent,” he said; “you must rely solely on the influx of the Spirit.” Luther later reacted against those within his own camp and elsewhere with whom he disagreed. Increasingly he stressed the letter of Scripture, and said only those who were qualified and accredited should undertake interpretation.

Anabaptists felt Reformers quenched the Spirit, and said this disqualified them as trustworthy interpreters of Scripture. Pilgram Marpeck complained that “dull teachers have lost the sharpness of the Word, and the sword of the Spirit has been stolen from them and given over to human power. Thus the discipline of the Spirit, the sharpness of the Word, has been discontinued and blasphemed.”⁸ Anabaptists felt that relying on the Spirit would result in more faithful application of the Scripture than that produced by relying on tradition, learning, or human reason. They saw no necessary conflict between Spirit and (written) Word. As a charismatic and biblical movement, they were committed to a “pneumatic exegesis” of Scripture.

It was not only leaders who emphasised work of the Spirit. Ordinary Anabaptists, under interrogation, frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the Reformers’ forensic emphasis and testified to a more spiritual and life-transforming conversion. Heinz Kautz and Hans Peissner criticised the Reformer Philip Melancthon’s formulation of Justification by faith as lacking integrity. In their view, “if there was no evidence of the new man in Christ living a different kind of life from what he had lived before, if there was no moral change, then there could have been no forgiveness of sins.”⁹

It is clear from the way Anabaptists spoke about their experience of the Spirit that their focus was on ethical change and power for holy living rather than on spiritual phenomena. Anabaptists were distinguished from the Spiritualists, not only by the greater attention they paid to the written Word, but also by their understanding of the Spirit’s work as primarily ethical. Their use of terms such as “enlightenment” and “illumination” must be understood in this context.

In congregational life, too, Anabaptists welcomed activity of the Holy Spirit. An early Swiss Brethren tract complained about the exclusion of the Spirit from meetings in the state churches.¹⁰ Entfelder, a

Moravian Anabaptist leader, defined a church as “a chosen, saved, purified, sanctified group in whom God dwells, upon whom the Holy Spirit has poured out his gifts, and with whom Christ the Lord shares his offices and his mission”.¹¹ There was general agreement from the movement’s earliest years that church leadership was charismatic in nature and depended on the Spirit’s anointing rather than institutional recognition or academic training.

What about the “Toronto Blessing”?

Early Anabaptists certainly were acquainted with phenomena like the “Toronto Blessing”. Indeed, there are reports from some sixteenth-century radical groups of practices as bizarre as anything reported in recent months – including adults playing with toys as a sign that they were “becoming as children”, nude processions, and bodily contortions.

Reactions among Anabaptists probably would have been as divided in the sixteenth century as modern responses seem to be. Perhaps the questions their more discerning leaders asked in relation to contemporary phenomena are still helpful: What are the ethical results of spiritual experiences? How is the authority of the written Word maintained alongside activity of the Spirit?

It was the focus on ethical renewal, including a commitment to nonviolence, costly economic sharing, and truth-telling that prevented the Anabaptists from getting hung up on spiritual phenomena for their own sake. Pilgram Marpeck insisted, “Christ bids us to recognise prophets not by miraculous signs but by their fruits.”¹² And it was the ability of leaders like Menno Simons and Pilgram Marpeck to hold in creative tension the Word and the Spirit that ensured their churches were built on secure foundations as well as being open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Not all Anabaptist groups managed to maintain this tension: some slipped into spiritualism, many more into a wooden literalism where the work of the Spirit was quenched. Similar dangers continue to confront the church 450 years later.

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Notes

1. Leonhard Schiemer, “A Letter to the Church at Rattenberg” (1527), in Walter Klaassen, editor, *Anabaptism in Outline* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), 75.
2. Alan Kreider, “The Servant is not Greater than his Master: Anabaptists mid the Suffering Church” (*Mennonite Quarterly Review* 55:12).
3. Robert Friedmann, *The Theology of Anabaptism* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 138.
4. See Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic Nor Protestant* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1973), 63.
5. *Martyrs’ Mirror* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1950), 440.
6. George Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 443.

7. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978), 49-51.
8. Klassen and Klaassen, *Marpeck*, 299.
9. Friedmann, *Theology*, 163.
10. Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 127.
11. *Williams, Radical*, 267.
12. Klassen and Klaassen, *Marpeck*, 5 I.