

Embracing the extremes: [b]aptist takes on the Anabaptists and the magisterial reformation – some historical examples with emphasis on the Danish context.

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Which way is our baptist movement linked to or in tension with the Reformation in Europe in the 16th century?

One way of reformulating this question is by asking: What is the connection between modern baptists and those movements of the reformation period often referred to as the Anabaptists? Which elements of the reformation can be claimed by baptists as a part of their ‘heritage’?

Any Protestant denomination might indeed ask itself similar questions as we celebrate or commemorate the reformation jubilee in 2017. But answering questions such as these is made a complicated task by the fact that it is not easy to talk about baptists as forming one specific denomination or church tradition.

Now, you can’t of course tell from what I’ve said so far how I spell ‘baptist’. But by ‘baptist’ I mean a somewhat broad definition as implied by the well-known idea of ‘small b-baptists’. As the notion of ‘small b-baptists’ tend to define baptists in terms of certain narratives and ways of doing church rather than particular doctrines and dogmas, this notion makes it possible to include such phenomena as 16th century Anabaptist-movements in the larger ‘baptist’-denominator.¹

Though I sympathize with the idea of a somewhat non-dogmatic definition of ‘baptists’, I will, however, argue that we should be cautious about too quick an identification between modern baptists and the Anabaptists of the 16th century. There are, of course, likenesses, but there are also clear differences between the historically sometimes very ‘reformed’ theology of some baptists (or capital B-Baptists!) and many or most Anabaptists of the reformation. Many reformed baptists would be more likely to identify with Zwingli and Calvin, than with, say, Balthasar Hubmaier or Menno Simons.

But rather than trying to side with one or the other theological or churchly tradition stemming from the reformation years, there are good reasons for modern baptists to keep a safe distance to the reformation debates, so to speak. Such a distance would allow us not just to claim a degree of non-partiality, but also to embrace the sometimes very different elements of reformation theology, thinking and practice.

By acknowledging that doctrinal differences are part of our own history as modern baptists we also gain the opportunity of embracing more than just a few elements of reformation theology. This makes it possible to celebrate the achievements of the magisterial reformers without compromising our appreciation of what we perceive as the most important elements of the Anabaptist-movements.

1 James McClendon, *Systematic Theology Vol. I-III* (2012).

The reformation – what was the difference between the magisterial reformation and the Anabaptists anyway?

“The whole point of the reformation was...” Well, what was it? For someone like Martin Luther, going up against Rome had a very different purpose and meaning than it had for someone like, say, Thomas Müntzer. And for someone like Balthasar Hubmaier or Hans Denck, reformulating Christian doctrine probably had a different purpose and function than it had for, say, someone like Ulrich Zwingli.

In the traditional Lutheran narrative, which is the predominant one in traditionally Lutheran societies like Denmark, the main issue of the reformation was the question of justification. Often this is formulated in terms of the so-called exclusive particles like “justification by grace alone” or “justification by or through faith alone”.

In the popular version, the dichotomy was one between “justification by works” on the one hand and “justification by faith” on the other. It quickly turns out, however, that we only really understand the meaning of the reformation exclusive particles on the background of certain philosophical and theological assumptions – namely the idea of God’s sovereignty and the incapability of the human will to choose whether or not to have faith.

Erasmus of Rotterdam defended a humanistic position, as he argued in his *De libero arbitrio diatribe sive collatio* from 1524, that human beings have a free will – also when it comes to choosing salvation: “By free choice in this place we mean a power of the human will by which a man can apply himself to the things which lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from them.”² The equation of divine providence with predetermination, so central to the Augustinian doctrine of predestination, was not biblical, Erasmus argued. It is the will of God to save all, but individual salvation depends on personal response.

Martin Luther, on the other hand, argued that “free choice is in reality a fiction, or a name without reality. For no one has it in his own power to think a good or bad thought, but everything [...] happens by absolute necessity.”³ Luther, against Erasmus, argued in his *De servo arbitrio* that God unconditionally decides who to love and who will have saving faith and who will not. In philosophical terms, the main issue at stake is the understanding of the relationship between the absolute and the relative. But this was, of course, not just a philosophical discussion, but a question of what we understand by grace and justification by grace. If salvation depends on our choice, works or even faith, if it is from us, then it is not of grace.⁴

2 Erasmus, *De Servo Arbitrio*, E. Gordon Rupp, Trans. and Ed., in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, Trans. and Ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 47.

3 Martin Luther, WA VII.146.

4 Sin means the inability to choose anything else than evil, and salvation means exactly being released from this bondage.

So where did the Anabaptists stand in this discussion? In 1527 Balthasar Hubmaier made his comment to the debate on the freedom of the human will as he released a work with a title that more or less says it all. The title was *On the Freedom of the Will which God through his Sent Word offers to all people and thereby gives them the power to become His Children and also the choice to will and to do good, or else to let them remain Children of Wrath which they are by nature.*⁵ In his treatise Hubmaier, to put it in short, argued that though the human soul lost its freedom to choose between good and evil after the fall, its capabilities of choice has been restored with Christ. In this way, salvation is of grace, but human beings have the freedom to reject grace or accept and utilize grace.⁶

This was, again, not just a theoretical discussion. For Hubmaier and many other Anabaptists the importance of human free choice seems also to have been a driving element in the argument for credo-baptism. Erasmus had already argued that the great commission in Matthew 28, should be understood as containing a specific order. First, make disciples, then baptize, and then teach. This order of discipling and baptizing became central for Hubmaier and other Anabaptists. The plausibility of this order was arguably strengthened by the humanistic conception of free-will: If faith is a matter of choice, then one must first be informed in order to be able to make that choice, and then be baptized.

It could be, and has been, argued that the Anabaptists were not just a radical version of the Lutheran or Zwinglian reformation, but formed a third alternative (to Roman Catholicism on the one hand and the Magisterial Reformation on the other) that could be understood as radicalizing elements in Erasmus' humanistic theology. Again, free will is central, as the importance of individual choice and discipleship was crucial to the idea of credo-baptism. The importance of free-will and freedom of choice arguably also played a role in why the Anabaptists and the early free-church tradition emphasized the importance of freedom in matters of religion to a degree that the magisterial reformers did not.

The idea of free-will was in many cases based on a classic idea of human beings being made in the image of God. Though God is transcendent, there is also a fundamental likeness between God and human beings, at least in spirit.⁷ The defense of human free-will was, in other words, a defense of the dignity of human beings. But it was also a defense of the dignity of God, a theodicy, to use a later term.

5 Balthasar Hubmaier, "Freedom of the Will, I" in Yoder, Pipkin, *Classics of the Radical Reformation, Balthasar Hubmaier* (Scottsdale: Herald Press 1989), p. 427ff. A follow-up came the same year with the title *The Second book On the Freedom of the Will Of the Human Being In Which it is Testified With Scriptures that God by Means of His Sent Word Gives Power to All People To Become His Children and Freely Entrusts to Them the Choice to Will and to Do Good. Also Thereby Are the Counter Scriptures Of the Opposition Dissolved.* See Balthasar Hubmaier, "Freedom of the Will, II" in Yoder, Pipkin, *Classics of the Radical Reformation, Balthasar Hubmaier* (Scottsdale: Herald Press 1989), p. 450ff.

6 See also Kirk R. MacGregor, 'Hubmaier's Concord of Predestination with Free Will', in *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 35, no. 2 (2006), pp. 279-99.

7 Balthasar Hubmaier defended the somewhat strange idea that only the flesh, and partly the soul, but not the spirit, of human beings, were damaged by the fall. Balthasar Hubmaier, "Freedom of the Will, I" in Yoder, Pipkin, *Classics of the Radical Reformation, Balthasar Hubmaier* (Scottsdale: Herald Press 1989), p. 427ff.

Balthasar Hubmaier noted that: “That would be a perfidious God who would invite all people to a supper, offer his mercy to everyone with exalted earnestness, and would yet not want them to come[...].”⁸ In other words, as Hubmaier says, “if not all people are saved, then it is not God but we who are guilty of that, for he gave his most beloved Son into death for us all” (p. 470). The will of God to save is not unknown or hidden in the way that Luther believed. Only when we by free choice reject God’s grace do we encounter the hidden, punishing will of God, Hubmaier argued (p. 472ff). When it came to the scope of God’s love, God was not for Erasmus and the Anabaptists a capricious stranger, who could not be trusted, someone who arbitrarily predestined some to salvation and others to damnation.

Of course, a certain biblicism may also have been influential here: If we read in the bible that it is the will of God that all human beings are saved (1 Tim 4,10), then we cannot, like Luther, assume a hidden will of God, that wills most people to be damned against God’s word.⁹ God has fully revealed his will to save, and we do not have the right to claim, as Luther did, that God is “not bound by his word”.

This belief, that God had invited all human beings to salvation, but that grace must be accepted by free-will, arguably also influenced the idea of mission and witnessing, and it was probably also connected to the idea of church as an intentional community separate from the state. At any rate, in my opinion, the clearest differences between the mainline reformers and the Anabaptist were in their emphasis on the sovereignty of grace on the one hand and free-will on the other.¹⁰

What does baptist traditions have to say about these issues?

Now, it is no secret that the first English baptists like John Smyth and Thomas Helwys seems to have held beliefs reminiscent of Balthasar Hubmaier and later Anabaptists, as they explicitly rejected the Calvinist idea of predestination. Mennonite theology clearly seems to have influenced Smyth while he staid in Amsterdam.¹¹

But a reformed notion of predestination and election quickly became a part of baptist-theology as baptists gained ground in Puritan English soil.¹² This was clear from early Particular Baptist confessions in the 17th century, and in the 18th century the reformed influence became especially evident in the radical or so-called “Hyper-Calvinism” of baptist ministers and theologians such as John Gill.¹³

8 Hubmaier contiunes: “That would be a false God who would say with the mouth, “Come here,” but would think secretly in the heart, “Stay there,” Isa. 55:1; Matt. 11:28; John 1:12; Luke 15:22. That would be a disloyal God who would give a human being grace publicly, and clothe him in a new garment, but secretly would take it back again from him and prepare hell for him.” (Hubmaier 1989, p. 466).

9 Martin Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio* (1525), WA 18,685.

10 See also the GAMEO article on free-will, which concludes that: “In general, Anabaptist concern with the problem of free will appears to have been motivated by three considerations. In the first place, God is righteous; therefore, He can in no way be responsible for evil. Secondly, without free will there can be no real repentance, which for Anabaptists was an indispensable element in entering the Christian life. Thirdly, without free will there can be no real commitment to discipleship.” GAMEO – Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Free_Will, accessed 2016-06-12).

11 See James Leo Garret, *Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study* (Macon: Mercer University Press 2009), p. 16ff; p. 23ff.

12 John Howard Shakespeare even argued that the Calvinists were “the real forerunners” of the Baptist denomination. See John Howard Shakespeare, *Baptist and Congregational Pioneers* (London: National Council of Evangelical Free Churches 1907), p. 180.

13 See Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London: Oliver Tree 1967), p. 70ff??.

Thus, from the 17th century baptists were divided in two separate camps, on the one hand the General Baptists, holding to an Arminian soteriology pretty similar to that of Balthasar Hubmaier and other Anabaptists, and on the other hand the Particular Baptists holding to a more or less reformed soteriology.

Glen Stassen noted that “the Particular Baptists are the fathers of the present-day Baptists”.¹⁴ But Stassen also convincingly argued, that the Particular Baptists derived much of their thinking and practice from Dutch Mennonites, through the Rhynsburgers. But nevertheless, the Particular Baptists arguably formed a theological tradition quite different from the continental Anabaptists of the Reformation period.

Now, one thing is “origins” as such, another thing is how baptists perceived their origins. So how did later baptists perceive their origins?

That baptists for a long period were associated with a reformed view on human free-will – that is, the believe that there is no such thing as free-will! – was not only true in the English context, but also at the continent, for example in Germany and Denmark, with J.G. Oncken and Julius Köbner as important examples.¹⁵ As many reformed baptists before him, Julius Köbner combined the strong emphasis on religious liberty from the free-church tradition with the high view of God’s sovereignty and grace from the reformed tradition.

For reformed baptists the emphasis on religious liberty and credo-baptism did not follow from an idea of free-will and the ability of human beings to choose for themselves, as it did for many Anabaptists. On the contrary, the emphasis on religious liberty and credo-baptism followed from the idea that God, and only God, chooses for human beings, and that credo-baptism is the result in time, rather than the beginning or condition of God’s eternal choice.¹⁶

Købner is reported to have said that he highly esteemed Calvin, and preferred the reformed church over the Lutheran – and that baptists agree with the reformed church in most respects.¹⁷ When Köbner in 1841 made his report about the awakening in Denmark to the baptists in London, his first complaint was not about the baptismal practice of the Lutherans, but that most held what he saw as an Arminian notion of free-will.

“The essence of Christianity, justification by Christ, and not by works, they clearly recognised and admitted; but they were perfectly in the dark on the sovereignty of God in the free choice of the objects of his redeeming grace; and, like the Lutheran Church, were Arminian in sentiment.”¹⁸

Købner does not seem to have been aware at this point, that the founder of the first Danish baptist congregation, P.C. Mønster also held an Arminian view of the human will. Købner would soon learn, however, that many Danish baptists did not agree with the reformed theology of Oncken’s congregation in Hamburg. In many years following, discussions on election, free-will and grace resulted in controversies among Danish baptists.

14 Glen Stassen, “Anabaptist Influence in the Origin of the Particular Baptists” in *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* Oct 1, 1962, Vol.36(4), p. 322ff.

15 See also Julius Köbner: *Worin besteht die Heiligung des Christen? Beantwortung nach der Heiligen Schrift* (Hamburg 1855); Søren Hansen, who frequently quotes Martin Luther in support of the doctrine of election. See Søren Hansen: *Om Udvælgelsen til Salighed* (Aalborg 1869).

16 Compare with John Gill, *Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, p. 914.

17 Julius Köbner according to Niels Larsen, *De danske Baptistmenigheders Forenings-Konferents, holdt i den jetsmarkske Menighed den 30te Juni og 1ste og 2den Juli 1870* (1870), p. 25.

18 Julius Købner, *Revival of Religion in Denmark; Including an Account of the Rise and Present State of the Baptist Churches in that Kingdom* (London: Houlston & Stoneman 1841). Though Martin Luther did obviously not believe in the possibility of rejecting grace, this belief became widespread in subsequent Lutheran Orthodoxy.

These controversies seem to have culminated in the 1860s where the baptist preacher Niels Hansen released a book against the Calvinism of the reformed baptists, in which he argued that Calvinism was a sort of golden calf (pun intended – Niels Hansen calls it “kalv-i-nisme”, i.e. “calf-i-nism!”).¹⁹ Against the doctrine of election Niels Hansen emphasized the generality of the atonement and the reliability of God’s love.

In response Julius K bner eagerly defended a predestinarian idea of election. K bner furthered the traditional reformed argument that human beings cannot be considered sovereign over their own destiny without robbing God of his sovereignty. At the same time, however, K bner emphasized the necessity of not disturbing peace because of doctrinal issues. During yet another discussion on grace and free will K bner remarked:

“It is my highest priority to warn against quibbling. Church history contains many battles about opinions and immediately after the reformation there came a time with much fighting about doctrines. Everything had to be orthodox and precisely right in that respect – but besides that people forgot the heart, and the Christian life was not mentioned. The main concern is to be reborn and to love Christ.”²⁰

Though K bner did not succeed in keeping the fragments of the Danish baptist denomination together, his hope was, that it would be possible to embrace a variety of views. But only as doctrinal issues were softened up in the early 20th century was this achieved.²¹

P. Olsen, who was the leading Danish baptist theologian of the early 20th century, argued that we cannot resolve the debate on grace, free-will and providence theoretically: “Only when we by Jesus Christ has entered a communion with God do we learn from personal experience what the providence of God really is.”²² P. Olsen, however, still affirmed that baptists belong to the reformed part of the church.²³ In an essay on Martin Luther at the occasion of the 400-jubilee of the reformation in 1917, P. Olsen expressed a high appreciation of Luther, though he argued that in regards to issues such as baptism and ecclesiology, Anabaptists such as Balthasar Hubmaier was preferable.

In general it seems evident that most early Danish baptists have been reluctant, to say the least, about identifying with Anabaptists. Even P.C. M nster, the founding father of the Danish baptists, who identified with General Baptists, in his defense during trials after his baptism, asserted that he was not an Anabaptist, and that he agreed with all points in the Lutheran Confessio Augustana, except, of course, for those on baptism.

Overcoming conflict without ignoring differences

19 Niels Hansen: *Hedel rken om Forudbestemmelsen eller Calvinismens hemmelighed afsl ret* (1870), p. 26.

20 Julius K bner according to Niels Larsen, *De danske Baptist-Menigheders forenings-Conferents, holdt i K benhavn den 1ste Juni 1866* (Nakskov 1866), p. 26.

21 Elements of pragmatist and liberal philosophy and theology seems to have been instrumental in attempts at reconciling doctrines that were not systematically reconcilable from a merely “theoretical” perspective.

22 P. Olsen 1925, p. 43

23 P. Olsen according to Bent Hylleberg, et al, *Et kirkesamfund bliver til* (1989), p. 226.

In general it could be said that the reformed baptists of the 19. century had much in common with Anabaptist ecclesiology, but that they arrived there from a very different perspective. Only in recent years have a new interest in the Anabaptists gained a stronghold in a Danish context. This interest is, of course, similar to that which can be found in the American context as well as other European countries. The works of especially John Howard Yoder and James McClendon have led to a higher appreciation for the Anabaptists among baptists.

McClendon's claim was that baptists have too often failed to appreciate what is the particular strength of the baptist tradition. Instead, baptists have engaged in discussions foreign to their tradition, such as the discussion on free-will and the sovereignty of grace.²⁴ Theological reflection, McClendon argued, has for baptists too often been defined in terms of "the Calvinist-Arminian polarity", rather than "on terms provided by earlier Anabaptist motifs".

The example of Balthasar Hubmaier shows, however, that the discussions on grace and free-will was not something 'strange' or 'foreign' to the Anabaptists.²⁵ These debates were, in fact, central for much Anabaptist theology. The Anabaptist emphasis on discipleship and New Testament-ethics cannot, I believe, be detached from their emphasis on the importance of free-will and human choice.

But neither was the debate on grace and free-will a strange element to 19. century baptists like Julius Köbner, which is clear from his very dedicated use of reformed theology. For Köbner it was central to his personal history and biography of faith that he did not choose God, but that God chose him.²⁶ Nevertheless, this did not prevent him from emphasizing the need to keep peace despite of doctrinal differences. What matters is the Christian life in the light of the gospel – and in this I think Köbner would have agreed with McClendon.

Again, my claim is not that we should find a "moderate" middle-position between the Anabaptists and the Magisterial Reformation on these issues, but rather that we should work to find an approach to doctrinal and ecclesiological history that allows us to embrace differences without ignoring their incompatibility. Of course, this requires some work in choosing which elements are actually essential and which should be discarded as unimportant. This eclectic process will, of course, reflect our own opinions about what is important and what is not.

The most important contribution of the magisterial reformation was, I believe, the emphasis on the unconditionality of grace and the notion of justification by grace through faith – and probably also the rather realistic view on human morality. From the radical reformation the most important contribution may have been the emphasis on autonomy and freedom from worldly power in matters of faith – in combination with the insistence on restoration rather than simply reform – and, of course, the insistence on the universal scope of God's love and will to save.

These are just some of the elements from the different traditions that could be emphasized. What we emphasize is of course a matter of picking and choosing. But rather than discarding this method as just a biased way of doing history, we could see the work with church history as itself a way of doing theology. As we study different traditions of thought we have the opportunity to emphasize the aspects of each tradition that we believe should also be central to contemporary theological thinking.

24 "Does God's election discourage human effort, or legitimate it? Is grace "particular" (only for some) or "general" (offered to all)? These dilemmas set the agenda for American theological reflection both inside and outside the baptist camp, not on terms provided by earlier Anabaptist motifs or demanded by their current experience. [...] Thus the theological question is this: Why have others' agendas so largely prevailed? Why have these surviving older convictions not given birth to theologies richly Christian *because* richly baptist?". James McClendon, *Systematic Theology I – Ethics* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press 2012), p. 25.

25 Hans Denck also engaged himself in this debate. Hans Denck, *On Whether God is the Cause of Evil*.

26 See Köbner according to Niels Larsen 1869, 29-30.

So how should [b]aptists relate to the reformation? Should we celebrate or just commemorate?

A final remark. In the Danish context baptists are sometimes met by regret and apologies from Lutherans for what happened after the reformation – which is a bit silly really, since Danish baptists have neither a direct historical or a doctrinal fellowship with 16th century Anabaptists, even if many identify with elements of that tradition.

The thing is, however, that much of the fuzz about the reformation is really Luther-fuzz, and not so much an interest in the larger picture. Baptists could, of course, try to widen the picture by insisting on the need to commemorate the Anabaptist-movements and others, by publicly identifying as a living product of that tradition. I do not think, however, that this is always the right way to go.

Much rather, by not identifying too narrowly with one or more Anabaptist-strains of the reformation, modern baptists have the opportunity of identifying with a broader range of reformation causes and profiles: Luther *and* Hubmaier. Calvin *and* Menno.

My point is that baptists have the opportunity or at least the possibility to position themselves as a truly ecumenical church, by embracing elements of the reformation tradition(s) that have often been considered as irreconcilable. The narrative take on faith and theology implied by the notion of ‘small b-baptists’ and similar ideas, makes this possible – if we are careful not to make a too direct link between baptists and one or the other strain of the Anabaptist-movements.

The job of baptists today could be to make the case, that the so widely celebrated ideas of religious liberty did in fact not result from the efforts of the magisterial reformers, but was a product of the free-church movements. This should be done without siding too much with one or the other part of the reformation, though.

To be sure, my claim is that baptists have a unique opportunity of bridging the contending traditions of the reformation by keeping a safe distance. In other words, baptists could and should celebrate the reformation – in all its diversity.