

IN THIS ISSUE

Five hundred years ago, on January 21, 1525, the first adult baptisms of early-modern times took place in Zurich, Switzerland. The only named participants of this earliest baptism are Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock, although there were also unnamed adherents present and participating—“the others” who were baptized. The event is remembered in an early letter:

And it happened that they were together. After fear lay greatly upon them, they called upon God in heaven, that he should show mercy to them. Then Jörg arose and asked Conrad for God’s sake to baptize him; and this he did. After that he [either Jörg or Conrad] baptized the others also.¹

These first baptisms were not undertaken in response to a call from a church; there was as yet no specific church that could do such a thing. But these baptisms were an expression of novel church ideas given voice already in 1524 by a group of Zurich radicals who had grown to disagree with their erstwhile teacher and leader Ulrich Zwingli. Some of these radical ideas can be read in a letter addressed to Thomas Müntzer, signed by Conrad Grebel in September 1524,² and in more detail in a letter written by Felix Manz to the Zurich lords in December of the same year. Manz wrote “Only those should be baptized who reform, take on a new life, lay aside sins, are buried with Christ, and rise with him from baptism in newness of life.”³ True biblical baptism, the radicals insisted, should be baptism on confession of faith. It entailed a commitment to a new way of living and marked a novel way of joining and forming the church.

The first adult baptisms led to the establishing of what came to be called the Anabaptist—rebaptizing, or adult-baptizing—movement, established first in the village of Zollikon next to Zurich, and still surviving five

¹ Leland Harder, ed., *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 342. The presumed date of these first baptisms is January 21, 1525. It is not clear from the document whether Grebel or Blaurock baptized “the others.”

² Harder, *Sources*, 284–92.

³ Harder, *Sources*, 312. The necessary precursor to water baptism is baptism by the Holy Spirit; the water is an external sign of an “inner cleansing and dying to sin,” and so clearly cannot apply to children. Children are saved directly “through the suffering of Christ.” Harder, *Sources*, 290.

hundred years later in the Mennonite, Amish, Hutterite, and Brethren traditions. Clearly such an anniversary deserves to be celebrated, and so it has been in different ways around the world.

Here at *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* it was decided to celebrate the event by asking a number of authors and scholars to submit short pieces of writing. Contributors were asked to follow these general guidelines:

What stands out for you as most significant in this five-hundred-year-old history of the adult baptizing tradition? You may think of a particular theological, historical, or denominational development or incarnation, or in fact anything at all of significance to you. Your reflection can be positive, or negative; it may be personal, or academic; it may be historical, theological, philosophical, or none of the above. I am inviting you to [speak] from your personal perspective and in your own voice.

This broad personal request was answered in creative and unique ways by twenty-six respondents.

Taken together the wide-ranging reflections published here present a collage of individual snapshots that make it clear that there were also many potential snapshots that were not included in this collection. In some cases, this non-inclusion was the result of those invited not being willing or able to respond to the invitation; in other cases, potential participants failed to be invited for a variety of reasons, including the limitations of space and editorial incapacity. These limitations are regretfully acknowledged.

All the same, for all its imperfections, the resulting collection is rich and diverse and points to a baptizing tradition of surprising depth, scope, and breadth, as seen by participants and observers five hundred years after its beginnings. Although there is no way to summarize the whole, it probably is not surprising that baptism itself emerges frequently as an important theme, continuing to mark the tradition in significant personal, institutional, and social ways. Generalization is impossible; suffice it to say that each entry will reward careful and thoughtful reading.

The issue concludes, as usual, with several book reviews.

– C. Arnold Snyder