

“The world needs to know about Anabaptism, a vibrant Christian tradition that rejects militarism and many other traits of modern society. Marcus Yoder tells their story beautifully.”

 **Dr. Richard Shiels**

Professor Emeritus, The Ohio State University; Newark Earthworks Center

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 **Wayne R. Miller**

Author, Archivist, Ohio Amish Library

“This volume presents a fresh perspective on the beginnings of Anabaptism. The reader’s understanding is greatly broadened to consider the religious, cultural, and political conditions that existed before and during that time.”

 **Edward Kline**

Historian; Editor of “Songs of the Ausbund”

MARCUS A. YODER

CATHEDRALS, CASTLES, CAVES

The Origins of the Anabaptist Faith

👉 from Christ to 1569 👈

JPV  PRESS

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my father,

LEROY M. YODER

1948 - 2015

A true Hero of the Faith.

*“The conduct of our lives is the true
reflection of our thoughts”*

Michel de Montaigne

CATHEDRALS, CASTLES, & CAVES

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CATHEDRAIS, CASTLES, & CAVES



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



There are three groups of people who have directly and indirectly shaped this work: those professional historians who have taught and mentored me in how to think, write, and speak about history; my colleagues, students, and fellow historians that I am blessed to be surrounded by at various moments in my life; and those people who know all my weaknesses, problems, and foibles and yet keep loving me and walking with me in this journey of life. Then there are the few people who are nearly impossible to categorize because they walk in all three categories. Family and close friends shape our lives and opinions in ways we never realize until we try a project like this.

Two men, Walter Beachy and Stephen Russell, were powerful influences in developing my love for, and my approach to, Anabaptism and history early in my academic life. They gave me a space at the table to begin the journey that allows me to write and speak today.

My professors and advisors in whose classes I have been privileged to partake at both Ohio State and Yale universities have shaped my academic experience. Dr. A. Harding Ganz instilled in me a love for details and maps and believed in me as a historian. I am profoundly grateful for his love of history. Dr. John Demos taught me that history is about the story and encouraged me to write, and write well. In addition, he loves baseball! Dr. Kenneth Minkema gave more invaluable advice and encouragement than he will ever fully realize. His office was a safe space to wrestle with the work at hand. Dr. Keith Wrightson has given me the heart to keep going; his encouraging input on my first raw attempts at writing made me want to continue. Because of that, the smell of pipe tobacco by the park bench will forever warm my heart. Dr. Bruce Gordon believed in me. His sage advice at crucial times, often over coffee, was invaluable. As my advisor, he also allowed me – encouraged me – to step outside the boundaries in pursuing history. He is a world-class historian who is both humble and available to his students. Thank you!

Last but not least, the one constant in my academic experience has been the encouragement of my mentor, Dr. Richard Shiels. He has consistently encouraged me to keep going when it seemed impossible to do so. He is a superior historian with an insatiable curiosity to learn, even from his

students. His heart and spirit have given me the courage to keep going even when the path diverged and detoured. He is a true historian and remarkable human being. He is family and, as such, is much more than a professional mentor to me. He is, in fact, a dear friend and as near to an “academic father” as I have.

Another group of professionals have shaped this work: that is the team at JPV Press. They have been unfailingly professional, deeply engaged, and supportive of this process. I have often heard authors speak about their editors with a sense of reverence and awe. I feel the same about Sue Wengerd and Phil Barkman. While I felt pressure (and I should have, with my disregard for deadlines), they were kind, considerate of the process and, above all, concerned that I not lose my voice. Thank you. Please let’s keep having our two-week coffee klatch. The design team, led by Isaac Hershberger, does wonders with limited ideas from the author. The man who has given them the vision, Marlin Miller, has become much more than a professional connection; he is my friend. Thank you for believing in me.

One of the joys of the last few years of my life is to engage in the craft of history with a group of fellow historians. A few of them have read this work and given invaluable feedback. Bruce Gordon, Richard Shiels, Norita Yoder, Mark Oliver, Wayne R. Miller, Adam Hershberger, Edward Kline, and James Hershberger have graciously offered their input. In addition, the lunches shared with Adam Hershberger, Wayne R. Miller, and, on occasion, Mark Oliver over the past two years have richly and profoundly impacted my life. The freedom to

discuss ideas, whether logical or not, is a powerful gift that I have been afforded by these men. While these three have not had the opportunities of a formal education, they are richly informed and well educated and have taught me much about life. That is a gift for me.

Two close friends, the Reverend John Mullett and Sam Breneman have encouraged, pushed, and stood by me in both good and bad. From golf to life, they have taught me what true friendship is. I am a blessed man to have such friends.

My four sisters and their spouses, along with my wife's family, have motivated me and given me the gift of their love. They have been there for me in ways that are too deep and powerful to write out in words. The oddity of "going back to school" has not precluded their love and respect of our journey. The inability to attend the family reunions, get-togethers, and other events as this work neared completion is the hardest part of doing something like this. As their families have expanded, they have embraced us, and have encouraged our nieces and nephews to love and care for their strange uncle. Family is something beautiful.

And especially to my Dad and Mom, I say thank you. Thank you for encouraging me to read. In 1974, you were persuaded by a door-to-door salesman to "invest" in a set of World Book Encyclopedias; that began this journey. But even more, thank you for the investment you have made in my life and my calling. I want to be like you. One of my biggest cheerleaders is my mother, who gave me the gift of the love of reading. Thank you. As noted, this work is dedicated to the memory of my father who died before the final product could

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

be realized, but who so often cheered me on. Dad, you are the real deal.

While others have shaped and aided, there is yet one person who has done more than all these others to shape my life and work. To my dear wife Norita, an incredible historian in her own right, I owe so much. I look forward to repaying that debt through the years. She has heard more stories and trivial facts, silences, and discussions about this work than any one person should have to endure. And yet she has encouraged, extended grace, and covered for me to make this possible. She could fit in any of these three categories, but at the end of the day, I am delighted that she is my partner in the pursuit and work of history, but even more importantly, in the journey of life. Thank you!



A NOTE TO THE READER



A work such as this is never the result of only one person's study, research, and knowledge. Rather, think of the author as being at the point of a triangle, where what they present, is the result of so many other factors, people, and research which make up the base of the triangle. I have included many of those works in the resource section at the end of the book. This work – and my life – has been shaped by endeavors of many historians before me, for which I am grateful. Buy them, borrow them, read them, and read **in** them. They will allow you to see a much larger picture than I have been able to present in these few pages.

This work, and my view of history, is shaped by one of the most magnificent paintings in the world. *Behalt* is a 265-foot-long, ten-foot-high, oil-on-canvas mural that I have interacted with nearly every day for the last five years. To say that it is a hidden jewel is an understatement. Painted by one man, Heinz Gaugel, it depicts the story of the Anabaptist people and Christian history from Christ to the present. My own writings that you hold in your hand have been deeply impacted by this beautiful panorama, and are loosely fashioned after the first half of it. The multi-dimensional world that art creates opens a unique venue to understand the grace of God, and His moving in the past. It allows history to “come alive” in ways that words on paper are never able to convey.

The mural is housed at the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center near Berlin, Ohio. Here, people from the nations of the world gather to express their interest in the belief and culture of the Anabaptist people. Here, the nations can see and hear the story of Dirk Willems and Michael and Margaretha Sattler. Even more importantly, they can hear and see the story of God’s grace and movement across the world and in the church. I am deeply grateful to the community, the Board of Trustees, and the staff of the Center that have allowed me to interact with this beautiful mural. If you choose to visit the Center, take a moment to allow the art to speak to your own heart.

Since this book is intended to be the first of at least two volumes, it includes context and information that will extend into any future effort. The first two sections, which include fourteen chapters, are a sweeping survey of history from Christ to the Reformation. This information sets the context

on when, where, how, and why a Reformation could happen. The third section, from chapters 15 to 19, look at the event that we call the Reformation. Midway through this section we meet the Anabaptists for the first time. That is intentional. Movements that have endured for nearly five hundred years do not arise in a vacuum. To understand the world in which it began is to understand the world in which it grew. The final section narrows down into the movement, and the last seven chapters focus on these radicals of the Reformation.

As I reflect on all that has been written concerning the Reformation, I am reminded of the vastness of the topic. My personal library of books related to the subject is extensive, and I have only a small sample of what is available. Multi-volume sets and books massive enough to weigh one down with their knowledge exist on this subject. We must, of necessity, pare down this work to manageable size. Barbara Tuchman has said that one of the most important jobs of any writer of history is to distill information and, most importantly, to know when to stop research and what to *leave out* of their work.¹ This is one of the hardest of tasks, since there are so many events and stories. But as we move into the circumstances that shaped the birth of Anabaptism, this becomes even more important to remember.

I have tried to give an accurate overview of the early church and medieval Christendom, and then a more focused glimpse into the time and area that shaped the Anabaptist movement. To do so well, we must set boundaries. Those boundaries are both geographical and theological. Geographical, since the movement developed primarily in the German-speaking areas

of Europe. Theological, in the sense that we will focus less on the broad belief structure of Christianity and more on the efforts of the Anabaptists.

While this work is shaped by many other influences and people, it is ultimately mine. As such, the errors are my own, and not my mentors, or the world-class team at JPV Press. As we interact over these ideas (and to read is to interact), I invite your disagreement, discussion, and ideas. For, as one of my historian heroes says, “Memory, of course, is inseparable from interpretation; every historical narrative is an argument. So, it should not be surprising that descriptions of the Reformation have been embedded in controversy from the very beginning.”² As we connect around these “controversies,” a more complete picture of the events and the importance of history can be formed in your life and in mine. And for that, dear reader, I am thankful.

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1. Barbara Tuchman has formulated what she calls “Tuchman’s Law,” which is simply put, “The fact of being reported multiplies the apparent extent of any deplorable development by five- to tenfold.” Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), xviii.
 2. John D. Roth



INTRODUCTION



What is history? Is history the study of “how it really was,” is it a proper understanding of the cause and effect of the past, or is it some combination of the two? By nature, history is the study of the past, including *what* happened and some sense of *why* it happened. When one studies a distinct person or subculture in the past, the risk is always to err on one side or the other. The picture is never complete unless we attempt to understand the cause of the event, the actual happening as it occurred, and the effect it had on our world.

If the past is important, then we must think carefully about how to both learn and teach it, first to ourselves and

then to future generations. Reading is an excellent way to begin that process. Another way is to encourage and support the efforts of historians to write and tell the stories of the past. If this is important, not only for our generation but also for our children and children's children, then supporting these efforts is an investment in both the story and the future.

Any thorough study of history must deal with religion in order to understand the impulses of humanity; it is often at the core of why people move, speak, fight, and die. Religion is one of the most significant factors influencing and changing the course of history. Along with other belief systems, Christianity has shaped much of our present world. In fact, it has over two thousand years of history. An accurate understanding of the founding and function of Christianity helps us see the guiding factors in the formation of modern society, and why and how Christianity interacts with the rest of the world.

Mention the name Amish, Mennonite, or Hutterite in our world today and there will be a variety of responses. Many outsiders think of the Anabaptist people as unique and quaint with good, down-to-earth cooking, and living as they imagine Laura Ingalls Wilder may once have lived. Others see us as someone to make fun of, and so they develop jokes, television shows, and other media stories that are wrong and shameful. It is an inaccurate understanding of history that shapes these views.

The Anabaptists have a unique story, and it is imperative that we tell it as succinctly as possible. It is the thesis of this book, and my own belief, that we need to teach Anabaptist history to our people in order to remember how God has

moved in the past. Then, and only then, can we really tell the story to those outside our circles in a way that reflects the grace of God in our lives and history. I believe this, not because it makes us look good (or bad, for that matter), but because, ultimately, the Christian view of history is to speak of how God has moved in the past to give hope and courage for the future. And truly, we all need more hope and courage.

The Anabaptists are no different from any other people in that it is easy for us to forget history. When that happens, we run the risk of not only losing the coming generations but also our distinctiveness, which is much more than just plain clothing or lifestyle; it is a set of beliefs and ideas about how to live out Christianity in the world. The need to establish communities that were different – and the persecution and immigration that followed – played an enormous role in our history. Many of our forefathers have suffered in ways that are unimaginable to us today. The *Martyrs' Mirror*, The *Ausbund*, and other books reflect those stories. That effort is wasted if we choose to forget our past. As recently as the early 1900's, Amish and Mennonites in America suffered because of their view regarding war and non-resistance. Their willingness to stand came because they understood something about the past that influenced and changed their lives in their circumstances.



We often speak of the Reformation without defining what it is and what we mean by the term. The word ‘Reformation’ means a “restoration or renewal.” Sometimes referred to as the *Protestant Reformation*, it is the schism that resulted from

Martin Luther's action against the Roman Catholic Church. It is generally noted to have begun in 1517 when Luther attacked the Catholic practice of indulgences and ended in 1648 at the end of the Thirty Years' War. This was the first time that a church other than the Catholic Church was recognized in Europe. In order to understand what happened and why this change was even possible, we first need to examine the world of that time and its leaders, and then move to the rise of another way that was different from both Catholics and the followers of Martin Luther. This movement, Anabaptism, is what is at the heart of this work. However, to understand the basics of Anabaptism, we must first understand the world in which it developed.

Making sense of events and the lives of people that are hundreds of years in the past is difficult since we often impose our own worldview onto theirs. The world was vastly different in those years and in order to understand the changes, we must understand what we can about their particular circumstances. To do so requires several things from us today. First, we must realize that while much has changed, much stays the same, especially human nature. It is easy to dehumanize history and require much more of those people than we do of ourselves. These were people who experienced birth, life, and death with the same sadness, fear, grief, happiness, joy, and belief as we do today. We often moralize and suggest that people should have acted differently when we ourselves are not willing to do so.

Secondly, we must remember that our study is selective. History is too vast to include all the events and people. As the

author of this book, I was selective in choosing what to include to make this work manageable both for the reader and myself. It is easy to think about wars, famines, plagues, diseases, and other disasters as being all-pervasive and powerful; the negative events become the focus. Historians rarely record the ordinary circumstance, which is often the more persistent reality.¹ While history is frequently the record of the disasters, we should at least remember the normal, and know that most people lived ordinary lives.

The third factor is that our modern world is much more segmented than the late Medieval and Early Modern times. Today, religion, economics, social patterns, and politics are often separated and viewed individually. In the early 1500's, these systems were much more integrated. Religion invaded all portions of life, and economics, social positions, and politics were often deeply woven into the fabric of church life. Christianity, as expressed in the Roman Catholic system, was the primary organizing principle of that era. While political leaders would rise and fall from the time of Constantine until the Reformation, the Church was the one constant factor in life. For people of this era, God and the Church were actively and intimately involved in their past, their present, and their future.



As with any work, this particular one has been shaped by my own biases and studies. I am a Christian and an Anabaptist in practice and belief. By necessity, I have had to choose both what I included and what I did not. A comprehensive work

would take hundreds of volumes and lifetimes of study. As a historian, the anguish of this endeavor was in what I had to omit. Many times in this process I have wrestled with whether or not to include an event, a person, an era, or a movement.

It is true that none of us were alive when the Reformation occurred, or at any other time in the past. We are selfish enough to believe that we live in the most important era simply because we are alive. That self-centered perspective often causes people to think that history is not important; rather, what really matters is the here and now. With this attitude, history becomes irrelevant. This view breeds a contempt for anything in the past, especially the idea of using the lessons of history as a way to make sense of our world today. What we strive for is some sort of historical dementia where we live only in the present with no concept of, or connection to, the past.

On the other hand, we live in this present time and any attempt to re-create the past is nothing but a fantasy world. In this fantasy world, we are safe because we know the past and the future. We know why things happened and we see the larger picture much more completely than our present world. Yet living in an alternate reality is essentially useless and demeans the story of the past. When we do that, we dishonor both the story and the God of that story.

The clear biblical call is to live in the reality of this present broken world by seeing how the God of history has moved in the past, and recognizing that He is not bound by time, space, or history. For He is *“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever.”* (Hebrew 13:8)

INTRODUCTION

1. Barbara Tuchman has formulated what she calls “Tuchman’s Law,” which is simply put, “The fact of being reported multiplies the apparent extent of any deplorable development by five- to tenfold.” Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), xviii.

CATHEDRALS, CASTLES, & CAVES

PROLOGUE

ON THIN ICE



The small, thin man ran with the fear of death powering his legs. He had just escaped from the awfulness of the small, windowless cell and the impending death by the hooded executioner. His only crime was his own conscience and the anguish of faith that had led him to the small gathering of “baptism-minded” believers, where he finally found a home for his soul. This group practiced the love and acceptance that allowed the man to bring his wife and children to the meetings. Suddenly, the way was much clearer. But then came the arrest. History has not left record of what the crime was; suffice to say it involved matters of faith and the following of King Jesus. This approach to faith offended the nobility and

the church in which the man grew up. In 1569, he was arrested and imprisoned in his home village of Asperen, about forty miles south of Amsterdam.

Now the man, Dirk Willems, had managed to escape the impending doom of execution and was fleeing to where his wife and children were hiding. Somehow, in his escape, he was seen by *Tauferjaegers* (Anabaptist bounty-hunters) and pursued. Rather than leading his pursuers to his family, Dirk fled across the open countryside. He was a small man to begin with, and had suffered much anguish, both physical and emotional, while in prison, which only fueled him in his escape. In addition, the ever-impending fear of the executioner gave flight to his feet. He arrived at a river that he saw had precariously thin ice but which, as he ventured onto it, held under his weight. Treading lightly, he made it across the treacherous expanse and onto solid shore. He finally had some space between himself and his fears.

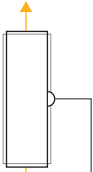
The *Tauferjaeger*, however, were heavier with the weight of responsibility and the good life they were able to live. As they arrived at the riverbank, one of the more daring men followed Dirk out onto the ice. As loud as a shot, the ice cracked and broke, and the stout, well-dressed hunter plunged into the cold waters. As he sank, he cried out in fear. Hearing his pleas for help, Dirk turned back and, once again venturing onto the slippery surface, helped his pursuer to the safety of the shore. Sincerely grateful, the *Tauferjaeger* wanted to allow Dirk his freedom, but his companions convinced him otherwise. So now this man-hunter, whose life and decisions were based on fear, had to fear his own fate as he faced this

dilemma. Unfortunately, he, like so many others, decided that the life of the man he was pursuing was not worth the giving up of his own.

The *Taufjerjaeger* restrained Dirk until soldiers arrived and he was arrested, chained, and returned to a more secure cell in the church bell tower. A few short weeks later, on May 16, 1569, Dirk was condemned to death and burned at the stake. What went through his mind as he sat in his cold, dank cell? Did he question what could have been if he had not turned back to assist? Surely, he worried about his wife and family and their empty future without a provider and leader.

The story of Dirk Willems lives on in such a way that forces us to ask; what did Dirk have that gave him the strength to return across that thin ice and give his life for his enemy? To answer that question, we turn not to that time but rather to the church in its infancy and their perception of the God of history. We must consider God's love for His people and His involvement in history that led to Dirk being willing to give his life for another person.

CHRIST



CHRIST - 367

| <i>YEAR</i> | <i>EVENT</i> |
|-------------|---|
| 33 | Jesus' Crucifixion |
| 35 | Paul's Conversion |
| 70 | Jerusalem Destroyed |
| 99 | All New Testament Writings Completed & Last Apostle (John) Dies |
| 115 | High Point of the Roman Empire |
| 126 | Grebel Dies of Plague |
| 300 | Tetrarchy Formed |
| 306-337 | Constantine Reigns |
| 312 | Battle of Milvian Bridge |
| 313 | Edict of Milan Legalizing Christianity |
| 325 | Council of Nicaea |
| 367 | New Testament Canonized |

1569

See page 210 for complete timeline

SECTION ONE

“

“Above all, I saw history as a play, with narrative structure and drama. If it is not that, then it is not full human. God, someone said, made man because he likes interesting stories. We humans tell the stories; God alone is as objective as some historians would like to be.”

— John Toland —

CATHEDRAIS, CASTLES, & CAVES

CHAPTER ONE

LIVING STONES



For those who believe there is a living God who is actively involved in both the past and the present, history takes on a deeper meaning, and another dimension is added. If this is true (and I believe it is), then we must ask, “How does this living God view history?” Perhaps the most significant idea about God’s view of the past is that we actually have the story of God’s people preserved. God deemed it important enough that He invested men with His Words, and they are maintained in remarkable fashion today. Both the Old and New Testaments are a record – a history, if you will – of this living God’s interactions with humanity.

That God cares about history is evidenced by His

careful attention to ensuring that His people remember. This remembering is always connected to their interactions with each other, with other cultures and worlds, and especially their interactions with God. After the Israelites had crossed the Jordan River, with the memory of their momentous deliverance from slavery and then the death and wanderings in the wilderness, He asked them to set up a historical “remembering point” so they would not forget. He had Joshua take twelve stones, chosen by the heads of each of the 12 tribes, and pile them beside the river. This must have created a bit of stir as each of the twelve men, cheered on by his tribe, looked for a suitable stone and then, together, piled them at an appropriate spot on the river bank.

The point of this exercise was not some kind of weight competition; rather, God tells their leader Joshua that, “*When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean to you?’ then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off... So these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever.*” (Joshua 4:6b-7) This strange pile of stones was to serve as a marker, a visual cue, to the history and interactions of this living God with His people. It was an anomaly in the landscape that would cause the generations to come to ask, “What happened here? What is the meaning of this pile of stones?” At that moment, someone who remembered was to tell the story. To tell the story was to give account for both the event and the effect. God moved. The river stopped. God delivered.

This memorial of stones was a way to speak about the *what*, *how*, and *why* of history. But it was also to remind the

people, whether in the next generation or any of the subsequent generations that the living God is involved in both the past and the present.

Many years later, at the same spot that these stones had been piled, another event took place that reveals how God wants His people to regard history. John the Baptizer, this strange and fiery prophet, engaged the descendants of these same Israelites with the timeless message that God was still alive and bringing deliverance. As the people began to receive his message, the leaders of the Jews decided to see what this strange man was doing.

These leaders had made it their life's work to move their people back in time. Their world was being restructured and re-created by these pious men. Old ways were kept, regardless if they were biblical. When these self-righteous leaders arrived at the scene, they were shocked at the amount of poor and broken people who had embraced the strangeness of this man. They were even more surprised at the prophet's response to their carefully tuned words and worlds. Rather than recognizing their standing and efforts at preservation, he suggested that their ancestors had been snakes! And even more tellingly, he urged them to repent because if He wanted to, this living God "*...is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.*" (Matthew 3:7-9)

While we will never be completely sure, it is likely that John was not pointing to some random pile of stones, but rather to specific stones that held a special significance to the children of Israel. Is it possible that these were the stones that were placed there in Joshua's day to remind the people of

who their true Deliverer was? Could it be that the story has a deeper meaning than merely God's ability to make stones living? Rather, He was telling them that their attempts to re-create history in their present world was fraught with idolatry. That is what happens when our study of history is about the "good old days," and re-creating any world except the present one in which we live.

What this pile of stones teaches us about the Christian view of history is that God cares deeply about the past, and about the way that the story is told. He cares that His followers know the *what* and the *why*. Understanding the past is key to understanding the present. On the other hand, He does not want His people to live only in the past, for in so doing they are no good in the present world. We are not called to re-create; rather, we are called to give to our present world in such a way that people may see the living God. In the end, neither a wholesale rejection of history or any attempts to move back into the "golden days" really honor His story. For in the end, that is what history is; His story.



Christianity argues that the most important factor in history is the involvement of God Himself. Humanity mattered enough that God sent His only Son into human history to live, die, and rise again for His created. That is enough to make history important. The fact that God, who is not bound by time, chose to enter history and time is truly love and grace! He is the central part of the history of humanity. The Christ of history changed the world.

And that is what the story of history should do – give us hope for the future, because we see the God of the past working in the present. Because He is “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*” (Hebrews 13:8)