

Book review by Mike Atnip

Introduction

In recent past issues, we at *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* have taken the offensive against the invasion of Protestant theology into Anabaptist and other “kingdom churches.” As expected, this has raised the ire of some of our readers, but has also raised the hopes of others. Some are canceling subscriptions while others are excitedly climbing aboard with a “Hallelujah!” and an “Amen!”

We would be fools to let either cancellations or subscriptions determine what we publish. It is truth we seek, and truth we desire to publish. For this reason, we push ahead with articles contrasting the distinction between “Anabaptism” and “Evangelicalism” or “Protestantism.”

Rest assured; those terms are used in general to summarize a theological viewpoint. They are not a total condemnation to everyone and everything that may fall under the umbrella of “Evangelical” (with a capital “E”), and certainly not a total approval of all things or people that may be tagged “Anabaptist.” They are terms we use to represent two distinct views of what it means to be a Christian. We do not worship Anabaptists nor Anabaptism, and recognize other movements in church history (Bohemian Brethren, Waldensian, German Baptist Brethren, etc.) as valid expressions of genuine Christianity. We use Anabaptism as a reference point since it was, arguably, the best example of a return (in spite of its imperfections) to the true Christian faith in the history of the church of Jesus Christ.

In that frame of mind, we are reviewing Robert Friedmann’s book *The Theology of Anabaptism*. While we certainly would not call it a “perfect” book, Friedmann does a good job of laying out some of the fundamental distinctions between Anabaptism and Protestantism.

The Theology of Anabaptism is not for everyone. Admittedly, it is not a devotional type book that your typical 16-year-old daughter will read and reread 15 times in the next decade. But it is a book that you, as a pastor, missionary, or father concerned about the future of your congregation, should make an effort to locate and read. If nothing else, you will at least begin to understand, perhaps, our passion here at *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* for standing in the gap against an onslaught of false theology that threatens to overwhelm God’s remnant here in North America.

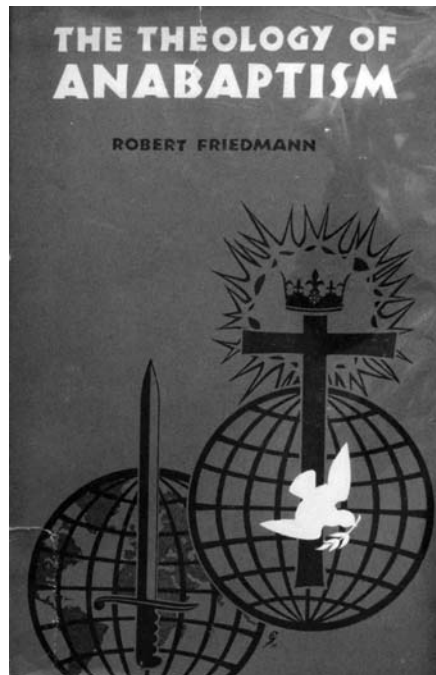
About the author ...

Robert Friedmann (1891-1970) was a typical Austrian liberal Jew, studying history and philosophy in Vienna as a young man when a life-changing decision occurred. He decided to study—for whatever whim it was that hit him—the smaller groups of the 16th-century Reformation. Little did he know that this decision would alter his life course so radically!

For source materials, a professor loaned him three early Hutterite codices. Friedmann would never be the same, saying that what he found in those writings—despite not even

looking for anything extraordinary—“gripped [him] profoundly.” He found people who actually lived out the teachings of Jesus, people whose life had been radically changed by the Gospel!

From that point on, the study of Anabaptism would be one of his greatest interests. When he was arrested and jailed in 1939 along with other Jews, friends procured his release and urged him to emigrate, which he did. He ended up in the USA, joining a Mennonite church in Goshen, Indiana. During the last four decades of his life, he would write over 100 articles and books on his findings,



Is the Gospel to be understood through Paul, or is Paul to be understood through the Gospel?

uncovering documents that had long been lost, and perusing those that were already known.

Friedmann's favorite term for what he found was "existential Christianity." In other words, a Christianity that had some "existence," or some reality, to it. It was more than some creed or performance or tradition. It was *real!* **Life-altering!**

My reason for telling Friedmann's story is that I have to wonder how my writings will affect some university student four centuries from now. Would what I write about Christ and His teachings cause an unbeliever in 2400 A.D. to become a believer? Would he sense "existential Christianity" if he read my books, or books about me, to the extent of turning to Christ? Certainly a challenge!

Finding a nonexistent theology

"The Anabaptists didn't write any theology." "To talk about the theology of Anabaptism seems like talking about squaring the circle." Thus run the typical comments of researchers looking for a theological treatise among Anabaptist writings. But Robert Friedmann counters that argument, and rightfully so. He explains that "theology deals by and large with man's ideas about God and relationship to man, or with man's grasp of his relationship with God." He asks how it could be that a movement as vigorous as Anabaptism could be lacking in some basic theological ideas? The answer is simple: Although they did not publish explicit theological treatises, they did have an "implied theology," just like we all do. So to find this supposedly nonexistent theology, you need only read between the lines of their writings.

The problem is that most people think of theologians as those who specifically study and write about deep doctrinal questions. In that sense, it is true, early Anabaptism didn't have any theologians. Friedmann calls such men

"discursive thinkers on religious questions instead of doers of divine commandments."

As an example of this, Friedmann mentions Martin Luther's theological idea of *simul justus as peccator*: man is simultaneously righteous and sinner. It takes some pretty fancy theological dancing to come up with such a formula. 1 John 3:7-8 tells us that "he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil ..." Is it possible to be both a sinner and righteous man? To see how Luther does his fancy footwork to come up with the idea of *simul justus as peccator*, you need to read his sophisticated theological treatises.

To see the Anabaptist view of such questions, you can read the third article of the Schleitheim Confession. This simple document is not a theological treatise as such, but rather an overview of some of the points that a group of brethren came to an agreement on. The third article reads:

... we cannot be partakers at the same time of the table of the Lord and the table of devils. Nor can we at the same time partake and drink of the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils. That is: all those who have fellowship with the dead works of darkness have no part in the light. Thus all those who follow the devil and the world, have no part with those who have been called out of the world unto God. All those who lie in evil have no part in the good.

The fourth article says:

Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good or evil, believing and unbelieving, darkness and light, the world and those who are [come] out of the world, God's temple and idols. Christ and Belial, and none will have part with the other.

So what was the "implied theology" of the Anabaptists concerning the idea of a Christian being *simul justus as peccator*? Their response to that theology could probably be summed up in one word: Nonsense! Yet you will not find any explicit Anabaptist theology that speaks directly about *simul justus as peccator*. You have to "read between the lines" to find the *implied theology*.

Which formula is correct?



1. Faith vs. Good works
2. Faith and good works
3. Faith works.



Answer: 3. Faith works. Where there are no good works coming forth, there is no faith. James 2:18

Two opposing world orders

Friedmann enters Part 2 of his book with what he calls the “heart of the implicit theology of Anabaptism”: the doctrine of the two worlds. Again, one cannot find a 10-volume set of “Menno Simons Systematic Theology” nor even a 1-volume tome by Pilgram Marpeck on “The Meaning of Justification, Sanctification, and Glorification.”

But by reading their pastoral letters and admonitions, one can come to see the underlying perceptions that the Anabaptists held concerning their walk with God. Everywhere you read, you find them warning against the temptations of “the world.” *Nachfolge* (discipleship, or more literally, “following after” [Christ]) is the constant theme in their devotions and hymns.

This dualistic view of either following Christ or following the passions of this world can be contrasted with typical Protestant theology that puts the Christian battle to be one of grace in confrontation with law. To the Protestant, Christian warfare was not so much about fighting against the flesh and its temptations, but law warring against grace. The big question for the Protestant was not, “How is your battle against the flesh going, brother?” but rather, “How is your trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross doing?”

Anabaptists did not pit law against grace. The law was the reminder from God that things were not going well with man, and man needed to be changed to match God’s character. Grace was the power, given undeservedly, to fulfill the commands, not to eliminate them. Law and grace were not opposed to each other, just like faith and works were not opposed. Faith worked. As Balthasar Hubmaier put it, “Such a faith does not like to stay idle but must break out in thanksgiving toward God and in all kinds of works of brotherly love toward man.” Menno Simons said the same thing in other words: “True evan-

gelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people.”

A faith that didn’t work was a dead, useless faith.

In conjunction with the doctrine of the two worlds, the Anabaptists held to another concept almost unknown in Protestantism: the *Gemeinde*, the brotherhood/communality. This brotherhood was “a gathering in of the reborn, an attempt to translate the kingdom idea into practical forms of everyday living . . .” This *Gemeinde* was for the edification of the body of Christ, and the admonition and discipline should one member fail. The disciple of Jesus gave up his own agenda and threw all his efforts in the promotion of the good of the *Gemeinde*, not the good of the individual.

Come and see!

Friedmann then moves into Part Three, concerning how the Anabaptists dealt with traditional theological questions that both Catholics and Protestants threw at them in their court trials. When confronted with such questions (like, for example, “What do you believe about the atonement?”), Friedmann is sure that the Anabaptists would have much preferred to say, “Come and live with us, then you will know.”

Obviously, that answer would never do for a theologian. But to the Anabaptist who had been saved from a life of immorality and drunkenness, his now sober and virtuous life would have sufficed to say everything he needed to say about being atoned to God!

Gemeinde: an attempt to translate the kingdom idea into practical forms of everyday living.

Christ lives in them!

Just as the righteousness of Christ is of no avail to anyone unless he makes it part of his own being through faith, so also Adam’s sin does not impair anybody except the one who makes it a part of his own being, and brings forth fruits of this sin. For as foreign righteousness does not save anybody, so will foreign sin not condemn anybody either. On the other hand, if Adam’s sin condemns all men at once by its inherent nature, it necessarily follows that Christ’s righteousness would save all men at once. But if Christ’s righteousness saves only believers who by faith have become transformed into Christ, that is, who no longer live in themselves but Christ lives in them, then it follows clearly that Adam’s sin likewise condemns only nonbelievers who became Adam—not by the mere fact of having been born, but by their particular faith, or rather unfaith—and by the fact that they bring forth fruits of this kind of faith. In other words, that they are rooted and planted in him and he in them.

—Sebastion Franck, describing the Anabaptist view of original sin

For the lack of a better scheme, Friedmann then turns to typical theological categories to define the theology of Anabaptism. Concerning the “trinity” and “Christology” (terms many Anabaptists would not have even ever written about), the Anabaptist position on the “trinity” could be summed up with a quote from Hans Schaffler in “A Letter to a Weak Brother.” Hans simply says, “God is neither this nor that.” The *implied theology* was that Anabaptists didn’t get much involved in deciding whether God was three-in-one or one-in-three. The important thing was to obey Him!

Moving into anthropology (the study of man and his nature), the Anabaptists again wrote no declarative theological statements. Yet they, like all of us, do believe *something* about man and his natural state. To the Protestant mind, man was depraved from day one of his life. So depraved that he could never make any move toward God on his own, neither could he be much more than a forgiven sinner all his days, at best.

The Anabaptists generally didn’t take such a low view of man. Sure, he was corrupted, but as Hubmaier put it, “The image of God is not altogether erased in us.”

But perhaps more important than man’s original state is the state that grace puts man into. Again, the Protestants generally held that man was saved by being declared righteous by a legal act of God. This was in contrast to the Anabaptist view that man was actually restored to a righteous character by means of a rebirth of his spirit; to the condition of being able to fulfill the commands of God.

On the theological idea called “Original Sin,” Ulrich Stadler summed up the Anabaptist thought quite well:

The word *Erbsünde* (hereditary sin) has no foundation anywhere in the Holy Scriptures, in fact has not been written in it at all.”

This little fact threw a wrench into typical Catholic and Protestant theology, since their view of Original Sin was the foundation for infant baptism. Because if little Johnny didn’t need to be baptized as a baby to be saved from “Original Sin,” why baptize him at all? In Anabaptist thought, little Johnny was born with a self-centered nature, to be sure. But he was in no way responsible for Adam’s sin. When Johnny matured to the point of understanding his self-centered condition and wanted to be redeemed from it, his heart could be changed by a new birth [an infusion of divine love into his heart], but until then, little Johnny was not held accountable for his sin, much less Adam’s.

Redeemed how I love to proclaim it!

Friedmann then moves into soteriology, the study of salvation. To the Anabaptists, “finding a gracious God,” as Luther termed it, was not a major concern. Yes, Anabaptists did believe in redemption. But “redemption” did not mean merely having one’s sins forgiven. It meant the “genuine restoration of God’s image in man.” The assurance of salvation, for an Anabaptist, did not come from any feelings he experienced. Rather his assurance came from the fact that he was enabled to live out Christ’s commands. If he had power to obey Christ, then he was certain that Christ lived within. This power over sin, self, and the flesh was his assurance of salvation. As Conrad Grebel put it:

Faith must have fruits, otherwise it is a false or hypocritical faith. If one separates oneself from sin, one may be sure of salvation. ... Such a one shall certainly be saved, if, according to this idea, through inner baptism he lives his faith.

Friedmann then comments on Grebel’s words:

“In other words, salvation is not simply the certitude of being saved from damnation (which is only a reassuring idea of feeling), but a “walking in newness of life”; or in another formulation, “the transformation into a new creature in whom Christ is increasingly being formed.”

Moving on to the doctrine of the cross, the author explains the Anabaptist view, which meant one is saved by the cross when he takes it up and follows Jesus. This is compared to the Protestant doctrine of the cross which basically says, “Trust in the work Jesus did for you on the cross, and you will be saved.”

Continuing, Friedmann touches on justification and cheap grace. He mentions Luther’s advice to Melancthon to “sin boldly ... but believe and rejoice in Christ more boldly still.” Friedmann then mentions how that the Anabaptist view of justification was “not merely an acquittal in court but an actual change in man’s nature.” In other words, to the Anabaptist, “justify” meant “to make a man live justly,” not merely “to declare a man innocent.”

And then there is grace ...

In short, the Anabaptist never looked at “grace” like the Protestants or Catholics did. While to the Catholics grace was almost a sort of substance that the Church dispensed through the Sacraments, the Protestants held that grace was “the well-disposed favor of God toward the understanding sinner.”

Grace produces a restoration of man’s original nature, renewing his lost faculties and virtues.
—Pilgram Marpeck

To the Anabaptists, grace was almost a synonym of “creative love.” When God pours grace into a man, He pours love, a love that empowers a man to live holy and righteous, and changes his character into the character of Christ. According to Pilgram Marpeck, grace “is the act whereby God renews the divine image in man and thus makes a believer a participant in the divine nature. Grace produces a *restoration of man’s original nature*, renewing his lost faculties and virtues.”

The last times

Moving on, the author spends a few pages looking at Anabaptist eschatology. The topic was quite fore and center in the early days of Anabaptism, with many of them looking for an imminent return of Christ to bring in the fullness of His kingdom. This of course only put more fuel on the fire of their evangelistic outreaches, since there were expectations that God was about to do something “big,” and soon.

To be sure, there were some pretty fancy speculations in the early days of Anabaptism, and even some false prophecies or predictions that got mixed into the fervency of the times. Some who would be better classed as “Spiritualists” also re-baptized and were therefore technically “Anabaptists.” As time moved on and Anabaptism crystallized into a more steady and sure movement, these more radical elements of eschatological prophecy faded from the scene.

The *Gemeinde*

Early Anabaptism represented a strange paradox. With the exception of Moravia and a few other individual locations, it was pretty strictly forbidden that they meet and form congregations. Yet, Friedmann notes that “the idea of *church* [brotherhood] represents the very center of Anabaptist theology and thinking.” In other words, the focus was not, as in Protestantism, on the idea of a personal salvation experience [which Anabaptists did not totally deny], but rather on the restoring of brotherhood among men, or the restoring of the heart of man to such a condition that he dwelt in harmony with his brother. For this reason, the Anabaptists tended to use the term *Kirche* (church) for Catholics and Protestants, but for themselves and others who actually followed and obeyed Jesus, they used the term *Gemeinde* (community). It was almost unthinkable to an early Anabaptist that a disciple of Jesus would be a loner, an individualist. How can you

love your brother if you go hide in the woods somewhere by yourself?

To the Anabaptist, the *Gemeinde* was the “nucleus of God’s kingdom on earth, or at least its attempted realization.” In other words, God had given the call for the saints to be an example on earth of what heaven will be like. If people cannot get along here on earth, how will they get along in heaven? Peter Riedemann summed it up by saying:

The church is a lantern of righteousness in which the light of grace is borne and held before the whole world.

Connected with the idea of the *Gemeinde* being an establishment of Christ’s reign on earth is the idea of sharing material goods. While the Hutterian brethren adopted a common purse, the Swiss Brethren held to each family having its own purse. But a common idea lay behind both: the grace of God (remember ... “saved by grace” equals being filled with divine love!) eliminated “mine and thine” and restored man’s horizontal relationships as well as his vertical relationship. And the *Gemeinde* was simply an outward expression of those restored relationships, a working model of the kingdom of God on earth.

Friedmann then looks at other aspects of the *Gemeinde*, including the covenantal aspect, and discipline and order in God’s community. And not to be ignored is the aspect of “the church under the cross,” or the role of suffering in the brotherhood.

Winding down, the author briefly looks at baptism and the Lord’s Supper. He also takes a brief peek at the use of the *Bann*, the office of teaching, and evangelism. Friedmann then ends with a profound question, relevant for anyone, since we are all prone to falling away:

Why did the *existential quality* of the Anabaptist church fade away even where persecution did not destroy its external situation?

In other words, why did the reality that the early Anabaptists experienced—the reality of lives transformed and molded into visible, living models of the kingdom of heaven on earth—fade away? To use some German words, why did *Gemeinde* become *Kirche*?

I don’t think Friedmann is saying that today there is absolutely nothing left of that *existential quality* in Anabaptism. His question, though, is one I have pondered in the 25 years of my Christian walk. To put it bluntly, why are today’s Anabaptists turning Protestant? Why are they turn-

The grace of God eliminated “mine and thine” and restored man’s horizontal relationships as well as his vertical relationship.

ing from a “faith that works” to a “faith that labels obedience and good works as self-righteousness or legalism”?

Thy yard sale betrayeth thee

Having lived in both Holmes County, Ohio, and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (as well as other smaller “Plain” communities) my heart has been saddened on more than one occasion by some of the yard sales I have dropped in to browse. Being an ardent reader, the book boxes usually are one of my prime targets at yard sales. As I look through the books that some of today’s Anabaptist people have in their yard sales, I go away pondering: D. L. Moody, C. Spurgeon, J. I. Packer, Charles Swindoll, C. Finney, E. M. Bounds, Ray Comfort, Andrew Murray ... (Not to mention—God have mercy—the occasional boxes of “Amish Romances.”)

And not only yard sales, but the book shelves I have seen in the houses ... It is the same story. We are turning Protestant in our thinking—and actions—because we have been reading Protestant theology for so long that we are actually becoming convinced that it is correct. We have even become convinced that the differences between Anabaptism and the local First Evangelical Church down the street are sort of trivial.

Again I want to state that I use the terms “Evangelical” and “Anabaptist” to represent two distinct theologies, and that many people probably do not neatly fit into either category. Also, calling oneself either this or that does not make one this or that. I can call myself the President of the United States of America, but not a single other country in this world would sit down with me and start negotiations for a Free Trade Pact.

The disturbing personal question is what do *you* believe about God and salvation? About what “church” consists of? About what it means to be “justified”? While we do not want to get caught up into splitting ridiculous theological ideas concerning the trinity, we do need to take a look at what we believe about what it means to “be saved,” to be “born again,” to be “saved by grace,” and many other terms that we commonly use. Both an Anabaptist and an Evangelical would claim to be “saved

by grace through faith,” yet they mean something very different by that phrase.

For this reason, *The Heartbeat of the Remnant* heartily recommends that all leaders of churches and homes read *The Theology of Anabaptism*.

No, not perfect

While recommending this book, we do not claim it is “the perfect book.” At a few points, we would have explained things a bit differently. Beyond that, the main defect of the book is perhaps its academic style. Robert

Friedmann spent most of his life moving in academic circles, being a researcher and professor. Hence, the style of the book is, naturally, academic. It is my dream to someday put some of the same thoughts that he presents into more idiomatic English. In fact, some of what I have written in this review has been rephrased for easier reading. If you get a copy of the book and go looking for where I quoted from, you will not find everything word for word.

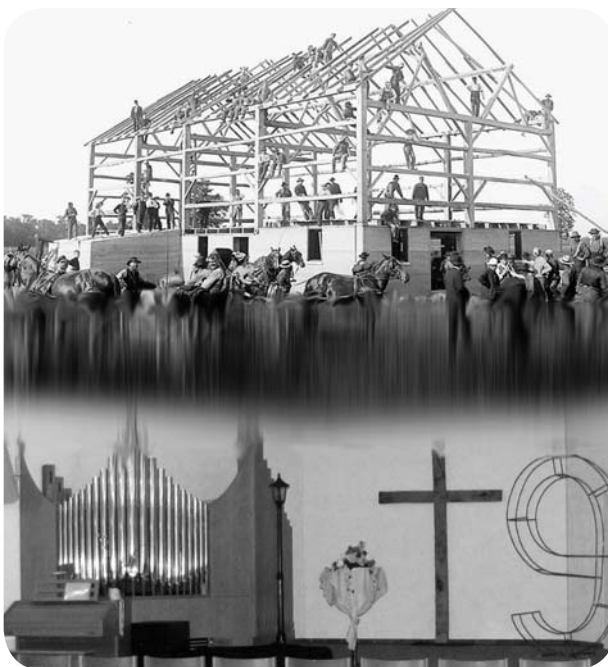
The Theology of Anabaptism is not overbearing. The average adult can understand Friedmann’s thoughts with some contemplation. But it is not particularly “light” reading.

The bottom line is that it is a

book that could be very helpful in grasping the difference between the gospel of the kingdom and the “cheap grace” that is peddled today in Evangelicalism.

If God’s remnant in North America is to continue to be salt on the earth, we will need to turn away from the peddler’s of cheap grace and return to the *existential Christianity* that the Anabaptists and other similar groups of Christians have upheld throughout church history. ~

The Theology of Anabaptism is a little hard to come by. It is not a very well-known book, and so very few bookstores carry it. Used copies can often be found online by searches at sites like www.bookfinder.com. A new reprinted edition (I assume the text is the same) can be ordered from Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 West 8th Avenue, Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401-2960, or online at https://wipfandstock.com/store/The_Theology_of_Anabaptism.



Why did “Gemeinde” become “Kirke”?