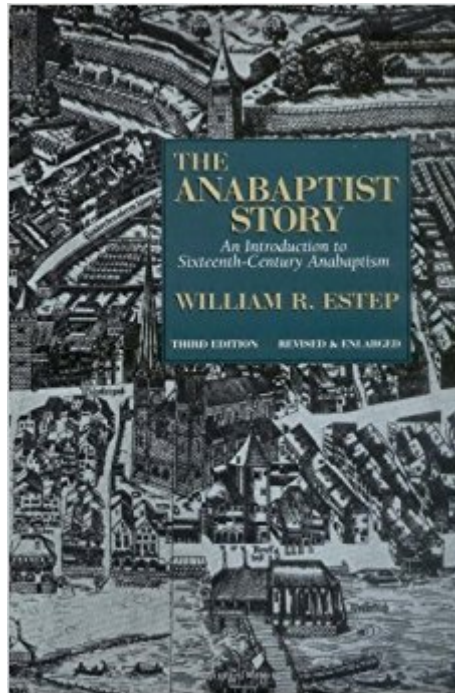




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# The Anabaptist Story



## Synopsis

Four hundred seventy years ago the Anabaptist movement was launched with the inauguration of believer's baptism and the formation of the first congregation of the Swiss Brethren in Zurich, Switzerland. This standard introduction to the history of Anabaptism by noted church historian William R. Estep offers a vivid chronicle of the rise and spread of teachings and heritage of this important stream in Christianity. This third edition of *The Anabaptist Story* has been substantially revised and enlarged to take into account the numerous Anabaptist sources that have come to light in the last half-century as well as the significant number of monographs and other scholarly works on Anabaptist themes that have recently appeared. Estep challenges a number of assumptions held by contemporary historians and offers fresh insights into the Anabaptist movement.

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## Customer Reviews

Restoration Quarterly "A sympathetic and fair-minded account. Estep is a spiritually sensitive, careful, and thoughtful scholar. His book is the best popular synthetic treatment of sixteenth-century Anabaptist history." *Fides et Historia* "A valuable contribution to Reformation studies. . . It would be difficult to find a better volume for an introduction to sixteenth-century Anabaptism." *Southwestern Journal of Theology* "Recommended for its forceful and engaging style and for its unquestionable scholarship. Pastors, students, and scholars will be better informed in the area of Radical Reformation studies by its careful perusal." *Church History* "Accurate historically and may be used effectively for introductions by those within the believing camp of Anabaptism as well as by inquiring

outsiders."

Four hundred seventy years ago the Anabaptist movement was launched with the inauguration of believers' baptism and the formation of the first congregation of the Swiss Brethren in Zurich, Switzerland. This standard introduction to the history of Anabaptism by noted church historian William R. Estep offers a vivid chronicle of the rise and spread of the teachings and heritage of this vigorous, important stream in Christianity. In this third edition, *The Anabaptist Story* has been substantially revised and enlarged to take into account the numerous Anabaptist sources that have come to light in the last half-century as well as the significant number of monographs and other scholarly research on Anabaptist themes that have recently appeared. In interacting with these materials, Estep challenges a number of assumptions held by contemporary historians of sixteenth-century Anabaptism and offers fresh insights into the historical movement to which we owe the notion of religious liberty that prevails today.

I was tasked with reading this work for a book report in my Baptist Heritage class at SWBTS. I was intrigued, having discovered via Ancestry that a distant relative of my father fled Switzerland because of religious persecution. He, like the men in this book was an Anabaptist. All in all this is a thorough treatment of the movement. However, the stories are presented in such a way that it can be confusing to the reader. Rather than use a chronological approach to presenting the movement, or even a geographic approach, the author tells the stories of each key figure. Since these figures intertwine, one has to constantly refer back to recall the specifics of that figure. I did take issue with the author in one regard. I am paraphrasing but he said "If we look to the government for a more moral or "Christian" society we are placing our faith in a broken reed." I can see his point through the lens of the 16th century Anabaptist's, but when you look at our society, it's hard to agree with this statement. And keep in mind that the first edition of this was written before *Roe V. Wade*. That being said it was a great introduction to this misunderstood movement.

This is a great text for anyone wanting to learn more about the Anabaptist tradition but without knowing where to begin. Estep does a fine job of explaining how the Anabaptists came to be and where their foundations and background came from. He does a great job of giving enough information without bombarding the reader with too much that would only cause more confusion than help. We are introduced to the main thinkers and proponents of Anabaptist belief. This also includes geographical locations and their own thoughts when possible through the use of original

documents. The book concludes with an introduction as to how Anabaptist belief may have affected other later denominations such as the Quakers and Baptists. Overall, a very good book that will help anyone to familiarize themselves with the core beliefs of the Anabaptist movement, the important figures, and some of the original documents pertaining to thought. This will be a book that I use as a source in my further studies of the Anabaptist movements. Definitely recommended for beginners or as resource material.

I think the biggest surprise and impact of this book is the clear connection to both religious and political thought today in Western societies. Estep makes a very strong case showing that Anabaptists were truly part of the Reformation movement. Rather than a group to be reviled as early reformers believed, Estep shows how they arguably took reformation ideas farther toward their logical conclusions. Though circumstantial at points, Estep gives a convincing argument regarding the influence of Anabaptists upon Baptist thought. Finally, Estep traces these ideas through to their impact upon the founding of the United States and later impact upon democracies around the world. As I read the book, I was struck by the similarities between the original Anabaptist ideas of the 1520s and both Baptist as well as my own personal beliefs regarding the Christian faith today. Even the phrasing seems familiar. This book is an excellent read. I would have liked a bit more discussion of the Munster rebellion and more detail on how Anabaptist ideas impacted the American Revolution, but I suppose that was outside the scope of Estep's work.

William Estep's *The Anabaptist Story* takes on a big task, summarizing in a little over 300 pages an incredibly diverse movement from four hundred years ago, a movement that has most of its historical documents written in a different language. The Anabaptists are one of the most reviled and least understood Christian groups and Estep has done them and the broader church a great service with this history. Written in an accessible manner while still being thorough and accurate, Estep shows that the common misconception of the Anabaptists (i.e. that they were kooks and heretic and that the best example of the movement was in the apocalyptic kingdom of Muenster) is false. I have engaged with a number of people who speak negatively about the Anabaptists while never bothering to actually read up on the subject. They would benefit from reading Estep's masterpiece and might find that the Anabaptists are far from heretics. In fact I would suggest that many of their doctrines and practices are far more in keeping with the New Testament than many traditional evangelical churches. While there is not perhaps a direct line from the 16th century Anabaptists to the free churchers/Baptists we know today, certainly many of their ideals are present.

Not merely believers baptism but also church government, the view of the sacraments, the separation of church and state. Many evangelical Christians have no idea the suffering and sacrifice endured by the Anabaptists at the hands of other alleged Christians but Estep brings their story to life. I wish more evangelical Christians would read *The Anabaptist Story* to see what sort of sacrifices produced the comfortable church culture we live in today, a marked contrast to the day when refusing to baptize an infant would get you ostracized, arrested and often murdered. I also wish more of my Reformed friends would read this book. The Anabaptists are often the whipping boy for many Reformed believers which is ironic because few of them seem to have bothered more than a cursory study of the Anabaptists and the very Reformers many of us idolize were the ones persecuting and even murdering Anabaptists. When you read the story from a different perspective, you start to wonder which of the three major groups in the Reformation (i.e. Roman Catholics, Protestants or Anabaptists) really were reflective of Jesus Christ. I did quarrel with Estep's assertion that the modern descendants of the Anabaptist of the 16th century have minimal impact on the culture. That may be true of the Amish and to a lesser extent some of the Hutterites, but certainly the Mennonites and other traditional Anabaptists I know are very involved in evangelism and mercy ministries. Other than that quibble, I can heartily recommend *The Anabaptist Story* to anyone who is interested in church history or the Reformation or who simply wants to know more about the men and women who came before us, taking up their cross and suffering for His sake. The lessons to be learned from the Anabaptists are likely to be very pertinent in the days to come for the followers of Christ.

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