Modern Anabaptist scholarship has long agreed that Anabaptism began as a schism in the Swiss Reformation that built up to the first believers’ baptisms in Zurich (January 21, 1525) and “crystallized” (the expression of John Howard Yoder) ecclesiologically with the Seven Articles of Schleitheim (February 24, 1527). Little else is universally agreed upon about Anabaptist beginnings. Probably the biggest contentious issue is whether there was a significant connection between Anabaptist beginnings and the German Peasants’ War of 1524-26. Virtually no scholar will now argue that there was no connection between the two movements, or that there was no distinction between the one and the other; but the controversies about the connections and the distinctions are unending.

The first Anabaptists emerged from a group of committed laymen who supported Ulrich Zwingli’s project of Reformation in Zurich. As a recent scholar intoned, these people were “eifriger als Zwingli,” “more zealous than Zwingli.” Traditionally, the focus was on Conrad Grebel, a patrician’s son who had spent some time at the University of Paris, and Felix Mantz, the educated son of a cathedral canon. They participated in a sort of humanist sodality with Zwingli, studying Scripture as well as the languages in which it was originally written, Greek and Hebrew. It was only in 1969 in a ground-breaking article on “Die Vorgeschichte des Täufertums in Zürich” that the German scholar, J. F. Gerhard Goeters, focused attention on the rural priests Wilhelm Reublin and Johannes Brötli and the villagers of Witikon and Zollikon, whom they led to the Reformation. These preachers led a protest movement against the ecclesiastical tithe of the sort that heralded the civil disobedience of the early Peasants’ War throughout the German southwest. I remember my astonishment as a young academic on discovering Anabaptist demands that duplicated the first two articles of the famous Twelve Articles of the German Peasantry: (1) the right of villagers to choose and dismiss their priests, and (2) local control of the ecclesiastical tithe.

It is now generally accepted that the first estrangement between Zwingli and the group led by Grebel came in the summer of 1523, when Grebel supported the village priests and their flocks in opposing the Great Minster chapter in Zurich over its control of the ecclesiastical tithe. Zwingli justified the chapter’s receipt of the tithe as a conventional exercise of “human justice,” even though tithe collection could not be defended from the New Testament. He worked through Zurich’s governing council to reform the Great Minster chapter in such a way as to use its revenues to endow the “Prophecy,” a school for study of Scripture used to prepare a reformed pastorate. Zurich’s dependent villages regarded themselves as somewhat exploited and resented the
concentration of power in the Zurich council, whom Zwingli aspired to guide and lead as a prophet. Grebel, Mantz, Reublin and Brötli stayed with the text from Matthew 15:13: “All that has not been planted by God should be uprooted.”

The common denominator among the people who later became Anabaptists was not countryside vs. city or ordinary people vs. the highly educated. There were a cabinet-maker, a baker, a weaver and a tailor in the inner circle, besides the more highly educated Grebel, Mantz, Reublin and Brötli just mentioned. They were united by Zwingli’s original belief in the clarity of the word of God, even when transmitted in the new German translations that were such a mark of the early Reformation. They were willing to question both religious and political authority on the basis of their understanding of Scripture. For his part Zwingli was religious authority in Zurich, certainly from the time of the public disputations of 1523 which were the foundation of the Reformation there. He regarded Zurich as God’s Israel, a proto-democratic community which was at the same time the church of Jesus Christ in that place, led politically by councils and mayors to whom he could provide guidance in the manner of an Old Testament prophet. But from the time of the second Zurich disputation of October 1523 there was tension between Zwingli and his increasingly articulate opposition about how much authority to grant the government over the implementation of the Reformation. Simon Stumpf, a humanist priest close to Grebel and Mantz, declared to Zwingli on this occasion: “You have no authority to place the decision [about the abolition of the mass and the removal of sacred images from the churches] in the government’s hands. The decision is already made: the Spirit of God decides!” Zwingli responded that the disputation was an opportunity for the community to learn what the Bible taught on these matters. The government had no right to decide whether to obey what was learned from the Bible, but it was their task to decide how to carry out biblical reforms while maintaining public order.

Four years later Zwingli recalled that around this time Grebel, Mantz and Stumpf approached him with the proposal that he should lead a separation of his followers from the church of Zurich. This church, they assured him, would be a majority church; and it could proceed to replace the present government with one that unequivocally supported the Reformation. He added that Mantz in particular had wished to create a church of true Christians who no longer sinned. Scholars have responded to this recollection of Zwingli’s in ways that say a lot about how they wished to tell the Anabaptist story. Mantz’s supposed perfectionism has been dismissed as either a misunderstanding or a polemical distortion. On the other hand, the proposal of a separate church has fit twentieth-century understandings of Anabaptist/Mennonite ecclesiology. In sixteenth-century understanding, however, the notion of a “special church” was taboo to the orthodox – people who advanced such notions labeled themselves as “heretics.” It seems safer to assume that the Zurich dissidents, like everyone else at the time, were seeking reforms to the one church, but that, unlike Zwingli, they saw the government as an obstacle to such reforms. Anabaptists generally had a higher confidence in the possibilities of Christian regeneration than the major Reformers, but “sinless perfection,” too, is more likely Zwingli’s caricature than Felix Mantz’s idea. The one thing that makes one hesitate here is that Mantz was the first to articulate what became the later Anabaptists’ highest ethical ideals: absolute nonviolence for Christians (to the point of
refusal to accept public office), and absolute community of goods on the model of the early New Testament church in Acts 2 and 4. Conrad Grebel is more difficult to associate with these ideas; and in his period of leadership of the Swiss Anabaptists of 1525 he showed a more pragmatic spirit than Mantz.

One of the external co-chairman of the October 1523 disputation, representing the geographical expansion of the Zurich Reformation, was Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier, priest of the upper parish of Waldshut in the Black Forest, an Austrian territory on the Swiss border. Educated in theology at John Eck’s University of Ingolstadt, Hubmaier was a Reformation supporter from 1523. He won the protection of the Waldshut council, which resisted the demand of the Austrian government that he be arrested and tried for heresy. Hubmaier met Zwingli in May 1523 and, according to the recollection of both men, they agreed that “children should not be baptized before they were of age” and could be instructed in the faith. At the time both held to a New Testament centered hermeneutic of the sort Zwingli developed from his study of Erasmus’ biblical scholarship. The main difference between them was that Zwingli was less strictly Biblicist; it was true that there was no explicit New Testament command for the baptism of infants, but Christ did bless children, and what the Bible did not forbid was permitted to the church. Hubmaier’s standpoint, however, was the one that the Zurich dissidents seem to have borrowed from Andreas Karlstadt: “All that has not been planted by God should be uprooted.”

The reason that the Austrian government was not able to close down the Reformation in Waldshut was that it had outside defenders. In the Black Forest lands surrounding Waldshut beginning in 1524 peasants started a kind of armed general strike against their clerical and aristocratic landlords. They demanded reduction of rents and forced labour, freedom to use forests, streams and meadows that the landlords had made them pay for, and control of their own tithes and of the preaching in their village churches. The Black Forest peasants held an assemblage that summer in Waldshut. Also in October 1524 some hundreds of “volunteers” from the most zealous evangelical circles in Zurich garrisoned Waldshut and assisted with its fortification.

In 1524 baptism became a contentious issue in the Zurich Reformation. The Saxon radicals, Karlstadt and Müntzer, were critics of infant baptism, Karlstadt more distinctly than Müntzer; Karlstadt discontinued the practice, Müntzer didn’t, but wrote things that were appealing to anti-pedobaptists, leading them to ask him to write more. Mantz played a major role in distributing Karlstadt’s anti-Lutheran sacramental tracts, which were published in Basel in the fall of 1524. Three letters written by the Zurich dissidents to Karlstadt around this time have been lost. Clearly they wanted to establish contact with him. A letter of September 5, 1524 to Müntzer has been preserved. Extensively analyzed, it is the first important historical document produced by the proto-Anabaptists. The letter, with a postscript, was written by Conrad Grebel on his behalf and that of others, of whom seven besides Grebel are named. It sets forth prescriptions about baptism, the Lord’s Supper and the ban according to Matthew 18, all of which became central in the further development of Anabaptism. It also contains the affirmation that true Christians “make no use of the secular sword or of war, for among them killing has been done away with altogether.” Current scholarship, including the recent book of Andrea Strübind, does not regard this letter as a fixed congregational charter for the future Anabaptists but as representative of a stage in the development of their thinking. For instance, after this
letter some of Grebel’s liturgical proposals for celebration of the Lord’s Supper were never heard of again in the history of the movement.

The biggest issue about the letter, however, is whether it means that the tenets of Anabaptist nonresistance, including separation from secular government, were affirmed as collective beliefs in September 1524. Recently Arnold Snyder has argued that this is not the case, judging from the future actions of the baker Heini Aberli, the priest Johannes Brötli and, most of all, Grebel himself. When Brötli had earlier been expelled from his parish in southern St. Gall because of his evangelical beliefs he declared that he disapproved of “driving out violence with violence.” A month after the letter to Müntzer Heini Aberli received a letter asking for his help in recruiting Zurich volunteers to help defend Waldshut from its Austrian overlords. In fact, we don’t know what he did about this; but we do know that he helped spread Anabaptism in Waldshut, and that when Balthasar Hubmaier had to flee Waldshut in December 1525 he took refuge in Aberli’s house in Zurich. As for Brötli, when he established himself as pastor of the village of Hallau during the Peasants’ War, he received armed protection in August 1525 against a contingent from Schaffhausen sent to arrest him. As for Grebel, in 1525 he seems to have tried to win first Schaffhausen, then St. Gall, and finally the important Zurich dependency of Grüningen to his program of evangelical reform. These were places where the patrician Grebel had important religious, political and family connections; and they were places where regular government was shaken and insecure because of the civil disobedience and sporadic violence of the Peasants’ War. To be sure, Grebel was no Mohammed, he was persuading and preaching, not leading rebellions or holy wars; but after the letter to Müntzer we have no evidence at all of Grebel preaching nonresistance. He displayed what Arnold Snyder describes as “an open, flexible approach to government and the sword in 1525.”

The next important document in the ever-sharpening confrontation between Zwingli and the Zurich dissidents was Felix Mantz’s Protestation of December 1524 (thought to have been written by Grebel until Felix Krajewski corrected Harold Bender’s biography on this point). Andrea Strübind analyzes the Protestation very convincingly as a rebuttal of Zwingli’s ripening conviction that the covenant with Christ continued the covenant with Abraham, and that therefore baptism was a continuation of circumcision, rightly bestowed on infants. Rather than to assert the hermeneutical superiority of the New Testament like later Anabaptists, Mantz made a strained argument with ceremonial episodes from the Old Testament. Zwingli, becoming ever more irritated with his critics, began to abandon the notion that the Bible was accessible to laity. Increasingly, he reverted to the humanist stress than only persons educated in the Biblical languages could properly interpret Scripture.

The debate on baptism before the Zurich council on January 17, 1525, was not a public affair like the disputations of 1523, hardly more than a hearing of the dissidents. Grebel, Mantz and Reublin opposed the pastors. Grebel had heard a rumor that Hubmaier was invited, but didn’t think the Zurich pastors would dare: “he is against Zwingli on the matter of baptism and will write against him if he does not back away.” The Zurich government made uniformity on baptismal teaching a matter of public order – it undertook to suppress the opposition. The outcome was the beginning of believers’ baptism in the Reformation on January 21, 1525. Present and participating were Grebel
and Mantz, and the newly arrived evangelical priest from Chur, George Blaurock. Well known from the research of Fritz Blanke, the center of the baptizing congregation emerged, starting the very next day, in the village of Zollikon two miles from Zurich, where Brötli had been pastor. Besides Brötli, Blaurock and Mantz were active in Zollikon, teaching, baptizing and administering a simple Lord’s Supper. The revivalistic atmosphere, centering on repentance and pledges of a new life, swept over the village for eight days. Mantz taught the baptized “love, unity and community of all things, like the apostles in Acts 2.” On January 26, 1525, Reublin and Brötli traveled from Zollikon to Hallau, a rebellious village in the territory of canton Schaffhausen. Reublin continued on to Waldshut, where he arrived on January 29. In just one week after the baptisms in Zurich the dissidents had established a baptizing congregation in Zollikon, and were now fanning out into the neighbouring lands that were sympathetic to Zwingli’s Reformation. Their object was to replace Zwingli in the regional leadership of the evangelical cause.

As noted earlier, Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier discussed the issue of baptism with Zwingli in 1523, before it became particularly controversial in Zurich. In the course of the next year he discussed it with his Reformed colleagues, Johannes Oecolampadius in Basel and Sebastian Hofmeister in Schaffhausen. None of them had worked out a satisfactory theological justification for the baptism of babies. The visit to Waldshut in January 1525 by Reublin, followed by a visit from Grebel, brought Hubmaier closer to a decision for the baptism of adult believers. But the Reformed communities in northern Switzerland were in danger of being suppressed militarily; and Waldshut, as an Austrian territory across the border from Switzerland, was even more imperiled. So, Hubmaier was not willing to defy Zurich’s government and leading pastor lightly. His only other possible ally was the band of rebelling peasants from the Black Forest. In March 1525 Waldshut asked to be taken under the protection of the three cities of northern Switzerland that were leaning towards the Reformation: Zurich, Schaffhausen and Basel. Not willing to risk war with Austria, they declined. This political obstacle removed, Hubmaier was free to make the religious choice closest to his heart. On Easter Saturday, April 15, Reublin baptized Hubmaier and sixty others; the next day, Easter Sunday, Hubmaier began to baptize his congregants, until in a few days he had baptized three hundred, the majority of Waldshut citizens including the majority of the council.

Traditionally, Hubmaier has been regarded by Mennonites as a sort of mixed breed between Anabaptist and Reformed – a “state church Anabaptist” who used the sword to defend the gospel. Besides, he was a university educated theologian, more like Luther and Zwingli than like “genuine” Anabaptists. (Cornelis Augustijn has observed that Menno showed evidence of an excellent education, but it was not something he put on display.) Recently Arnold Snyder has observed that Grebel and the Zollikon Anabaptists moved freely into Waldshut, and that there is no evidence of disagreements between Grebel and Hubmaier. Instead, in his writings of 1525 Hubmaier was not only the most articulate defender of the baptism of adult believers, but also the shaper of a mature Anabaptist ecclesiology. To put a sharp point on it, Hubmaier was not only Grebel’s most valuable convert but also the most powerful leader of early Anabaptism.

Snyder focuses on two tracts that Hubmaier wrote in Waldshut in July 1525. The first, A Summary of the Entire Christian Life, epitomizes the life of the Anabaptist Christian in five stages. The first is the repentance that follows from profound self-
examination. The second is faith, which involves grasping the promises of Christ. Third comes water baptism, and connected with it, submission to the discipline of the church. Fourth is the good fruit of a truly Christian life in spite of persecution. Fifth is thankful celebration of the Lord’s Supper with the brothers and sisters of the congregation. Ten days after the Summary came On the Christian Baptism of Believers, a reasonably non-polemical response to Zwingli’s first explicitly anti-Anabaptist writing, Of Baptism, Rebaptism and Infant Baptism, written in May 1525. Snyder writes: “The fact that Hubmaier’s two publications of July 1525 have either been passed over in silence or marginalized as idiosyncratic by most historians writing on Swiss Anabaptism is undoubtedly due to the fact of Hubmaier’s support for the military action of his Waldshut parishioners, and the conclusion by many historians that Conrad Grebel and the majority of Zurich radicals were firmly nonresistant – the primary and virtually only evidence supporting the latter conclusion being the ‘Letter to Müntzer’.” Against the notion of a nonresistant consensus in 1525, Snyder weighs the dearth of evidence of nonresistant statements from 1525 and “the opportunistic political engagement undertaken with help of rebellious subjects” in that year. Not only in Waldshut, but “whenever possible [my italics], the first Anabaptists moved to establish baptizing communities with local political support.”

Is this so – and, if it is so, how has it passed unnoticed for so long? Snyder acknowledges the clear nonresistant statements of Felix Mantz: “No Christian should be a government official, nor judge with the sword, nor kill or punish anyone.” He regards Mantz’s statements as an isolated, personal position in 1525. There was opposition to Hubmaier’s cooperation with the defense of Waldshut, as he himself recollected. Some of his parishioners (and presumably not Catholics or Zwinglians) had interrupted his sermons “and cried out that I was a bloodthirsty man who did nothing but support the sword of the government.” Jacob Groß, a citizen of Waldshut who was won to Anabaptism by Grebel, was exiled for refusing to join the Waldshut contingent when it joined a peasant band. He tried to compromise, offering to do sentry duty, to work on the city’s bulwarks and entrenchments; but he refused to fight or bear arms. Clearly, there was discussion from early on whether it behooved a Christian to fight or kill. But the view that Jacob Groß represented Grebel’s position against Hubmaier’s lacks sufficient grounding. Hubmaier himself did not accept Zwingli’s view that the government could be an arm of the church. He had written against compelling people to accept a particular form of religion; and he seems to have accepted the right of adults not to accept baptism, then in Waldshut, and later at Nikolsburg in Moravia. Nonresistance did not come to the fore immediately in sixteenth-century Anabaptism. If it had, there would have been more evidence for it. It is not totally absent from the early record, in the way that infant baptism was absent from the New Testament; but there is a similarity in the two cases – just as the defenders of infant baptism knew that it had to be in the Bible somewhere, somehow, so later generations of peaceful Anabaptist/Mennonites from Hans de Ries onward knew that the peaceful testimony had to be there from the very beginning. I think that Arnold Snyder has at least established probable cause that Balthasar Hubmaier’s Anabaptism was Conrad Grebel’s Anabaptism. And for Ulrich Zwingli, Conrad Grebel and Balthasar Hubmaier were the only two Anabaptists that he, as a Reformer and a
theologian, took seriously. His *Answer to Hubmaier* of November 1525 is the beginning of the history of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant.

But for those of us who hold to the “two phase” picture of Anabaptist beginnings, there was a second phase that set in after the peasant disorders subsided. Here the ideals of Felix Mantz, fully nonresistant, fully opposed to property, possibly carrying ideals of Christian regeneration to the point of moral perfectionism, prevailed. After the suppression of the Peasants’ War Anabaptist congregations were differently constituted. Previously they were focused in towns and villages, whether they were in the majority, as was the case certainly in Waldshut, probably in Hallau or the villages of St. Georgen and Tablat outside St. Gall, possibly in Zollikon, or where they were a significant minority as in St. Gall or Grüningen. In his essay in *Umstrittenes Täuferum* Martin Haas described Anabaptism in this first phase as a “mass movement.” These localized mass movements lasted until they were suppressed – a few weeks in Zollikon; seven months in Waldshut. Afterward Anabaptism continued in the form of adherents scattered over large areas, as a minority, a “gathered church.” Haas identified the first of these new Anabaptist congregations as arising in the lowlands stretching north of Zurich to the Rhine, a rough triangle bounded by Zurich to the south and Schaffhausen and Waldshut to the north, but under the political jurisdiction of Zurich. The chief preacher there from 1526 until his execution by drowning in 1530 was Konrad Winckler, typical of the second wave of Anabaptist leaders in Zurich territory in his lack of formal education. He held secret meetings “in woods, fields, houses, barns and other special places.” Winckler was assisted by Mantz and Blaurock until the Zurich government decided to deal with them permanently.

The Zurich government learned that the Anabaptist leaders could be silenced neither by successive public disputations nor recurrent imprisonments. On March 7, 1526, Mantz, Grebel and Blaurock were sentenced to imprisonment on bread and water “until they die and decay,” with the stipulation that continuation of baptismal activity would be punished by drowning. Two weeks later the prisoners succeeded in a jailbreak. Grebel died in the summer of 1526, so far as we know from natural causes. Mantz and Blaurock were rearrested in December 1526. Unlike Blaurock Mantz had broken his *Urfehde*, a solemn oath not to continue the new baptism. So, while Blaurock was ceremoniously whipped out of the city, Mantz was singled out for execution. On January 5, 1527, he was pushed, hands and feet bound, into the Limmat, the river that runs through Zurich, thereby becoming Zurich’s first and most prominent Anabaptist martyr.

Michael Sattler became Mantz’s successor as major Anabaptist leader in Switzerland and south Germany. Sattler, a former prior in a Benedictine monastery in the Black Forest, began preaching and baptizing north of Zurich in the summer of 1526. At the end of 1526 and the beginning of 1527 he reappeared in Strasbourg, pleading the case of imprisoned Anabaptists with the city’s chief evangelical pastors, Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito. Although Bucer and Capito were closer theologically to Zwingli than they were to Luther, in some respects Strasbourg was a world apart from Zurich. Partly because of the tolerant attitude of Strasbourg’s chief magistrate, Jacob Sturm, there was no brutal enforcement of religious uniformity as in Zurich. Doctrinal differences were freely discussed between the city’s pastors and a variety of dissenters, who flooded into the city to take advantage of its tolerance. Capito was particularly open-minded. Sattler’s
letter to the Strasbourg pastors foreshadows the ideas of the Seven Articles of Schleitheim, which emerged from a meeting Sattler presided over in the rural territory of Schaffhausen on February 24, 1527. Almost certainly Wilhelm Reublin, of the original Zurich leaders, would have been present at Schleitheim, since he was traveling with Sattler at the time.

In discussing the Schleitheim Articles, Arnold Snyderremarks on basic continuities with the two tracts written in July 1525 by Balthasar Hubmaier. He goes on to stress what is new in Seven Articles: “The radical polarity between Christ and Satan – and correspondingly between church and world as two kingdoms each manifesting the ‘minds’ of their respective masters – is something new in Anabaptist ecclesiology. The strongest hints in this direction…came from Felix Mantz who saw Christocentric, nonresistant suffering as definitive for the Christian life…Significant themes emphasized by Mantz reappear in Sattler and at Schleitheim, now articulated ecclesiologically within a political context of unrelenting persecution. It is therefore possible to see some signs of an early separatist stream of Anabaptist ecclesiology – or perhaps ‘rivulet’ would be more accurate – running submerged through 1525 and 1526. Although these isolated separatist themes (or ‘analogies’ as Strübind would say) were not put into ecclesial practice in those years, perhaps they somehow informed Michael Sattler, in ways not documented historically, and perhaps Sattler then elaborated on them in the post-Peasants’ War period. In the absence of evidence, however, it remains just as possible that the radically separatist Anabaptist ecclesiology of Schleitheim was as much Sattler’s own creative contribution to Anabaptist ecclesiology. There simply are no documented connections.”

The preface to the Seven Articles gives some information about the background for their composition: “A very great offense has been introduced by some false brethren among us, whereby several have turned away from the faith, thinking to practice and observe the freedom of the Spirit and of Christ.” The reference seems to have been to a Spiritualist element among the Anabaptists that we know to have been present in 1526 (e.g. Hans Denck, then prominent in Strasbourg). The Seven Articles outlined a series of concrete practices which identified the true church; in this sense they were anti-Spiritualist. The articles prescribe the baptism of believing adults and a Lord’s Supper observed as a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice. The congregations were to have leaders (“shepherds”) and to provide material support for those leaders. Congregational discipline was to be maintained through the ban, according to the prescriptions of Matthew 18, and to be carried out by the shepherd. These four articles stand in continuity with Hubmaier’s Summary of July 1525, discussed previously.

The other three articles of the Schleitheim agreement – Article 4 on separation, and Articles 6 and 7 on the sword and the oath – were more innovative and ultimately reshaped the ecclesiology of Swiss-south German Anabaptism. The article on separation set the tone for the whole statement: “Now there is nothing else in the world and all creation than good and 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.” Therefore, “all popish and new-popish works and idolatry, gatherings, church attendance, wine houses, guarantees and commitments of unbelief” are abominations to be shunned. In the spirit of this separation from the world
and its godlessness, the Anabaptists were forbidden all oaths, all use of weapons, and all participation in public office. Some of this was new, certainly the clear prohibition of oaths, as Edmund Pries and Andrea Strübind have noted. To that I would add the clear statement of nonresistance in Article 6, the longest article, and the dualist separation between church and world, which Sattler articulated in a strong faith that the end of days was at hand, and under the pressure of intense persecution.

The Seven Articles were often circulated together with the account of Sattler’s horrific martyrdom in mid-May 1527, at the hands of the Austrian authorities at Rottenburg. His status as a martyr of Christ, recognized even by his erstwhile opponents, the evangelical pastors of Strasbourg, lent special authority to the Articles among Anabaptists. However, from the time the Articles were drawn up, they lacked absolute authority among Anabaptists, criticized not only by the church of Balthasar Hubmaier, now translated to Nikolsburg in Moravia, but also in the Augsburg interrogation of the apocalyptic Anabaptist missionary, Hans Hut. Even Swiss-south German Anabaptist groups that had the benefit of a more or less tolerant evangelical regime, as in Appenzell or Esslingen, fudged both on the pastoral leadership and the dualistic temperament prescribed by the Seven Articles. The Articles could be reinterpreted, for instance by leaders like Leupold Scharschlager, to introduce an internal contradiction between Article 4 and Article 6, thus blessing the secular government in a way that Sattler had never intended.

The Seven Articles were not the terminus of Anabaptist development, as was once implied in my Anabaptists and the Sword (one of my errors that seems even to have led Andrea Strübind astray). They were only “the end of the beginning,” as Churchill said about the invasion of Sicily in 1943.

In the beginning Anabaptists were focused on the baptism of adult believers, to the exclusion of nonresistance. But if, as Anabaptist/Mennonites have understood from Hans de Ries on, “true evangelical Anabaptists” are marked both by believers’ baptism and the peace message, then why not make the Seven Articles the beginning, rather than “the end of the beginning.” If history is constructed, why not re-construct it in such a way as to make the whole 1523-27 period a prologue to Anabaptist history? There are prominent voices in the present Mennonite community such as my friend John Roth, editor of the Mennonite Quarterly Review, who think that Bender and Blanke misled us with the emphasis on the first baptisms of January 21, 1525. But if we, so to speak, move the goal posts to Schleitheim, why stop there? Whether he is aware of it or not, Gerald Mast has made a compelling case that not Schleitheim but the Dordrecht Confession of 1630 is the foundational document of the Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition. If history is to be made relative to the interests of a contemporary religious denomination there are no limits whatsoever to its plasticity.

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Outline

Anabaptist Beginnings - July 1523-February 1527: Grebel and Hubmaier, Mantz and Sattler

Consensus – Anabaptism began January 21, 1525, as a schism in the Zurich Reformation, and took on a firm structure with the Seven Articles of Schleitheim, February 24, 1527

Controversy – the connection and distinction between early Anabaptism and the German Peasants’ War, 1524-1526

Traditional focus on Conrad Grebel and Felix Mantz, educated followers of Zwingli in a Zurich humanist sodality studying Scripture in original languages

J. F. Gerhard Goeters’ article (1969) adds attention to Witikon and Zollikon, rural priests Wilhelm Reublin and Johannes Brötli, and villagers’ demand to choose their own priests and not pay ecclesiastical tithes to Zurich. The break between Zwingli and Grebel came in summer 1523, when Grebel supported the villagers’ tithe resistance and Zwingli opposed it.

In the second Zurich disputation, October 1523, Zwingli granted the Zurich government authority over the implementation of the Reformation in city and countryside, while the group around Grebel saw the Zurich government as an obstacle to the Reformation.

Did Felix Mantz propose a church of sinless Christians? In 1525 he advocated absolute Christian nonviolence and community of goods in the manner of Acts 2 and 4.

Dr. Balthasar Hubmaier, priest of Austrian city of Waldshut, co-chairman of second Zurich disputation, a regional participant in Zurich Reformation, shared Zwingli’s early (1523) doubts about infant baptism, held to principle of Andreas Karlstadt: “All that has not been planted by God should be uprooted.”

The Waldshut Reformation was protected from Austrian Catholic suppression by the uprising of the Black Forest peasants and by radical pro-Reformation “volunteers” from Zurich.

When the legitimacy of infant baptism became the main point of contention between Zwingli and his radical opponents in the Zurich Reformation, the Zurich radicals turned to the Saxon radicals, Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer, for support in their opposition to infant baptism. Felix Mantz was a major distributor of Karlstadt’s anti-Lutheran sacramental tracts, published in 1524 in Basel.

A letter of September 5, 1524, from the Zurich radicals to Thomas Müntzer, is the first major document of the proto-Anabaptists. It was written by Conrad Grebel on his behalf and that of seven associates. It contains statements about baptism, the Lord’s Supper and
the ban, as well as a statement that “the secular sword and war” have no place among Christians.

The present interpretation of the letter to Müntzer (Andrea Strübind and Arnold Snyder) is that it represents a stage in the development of the thinking of Grebel and associates. Snyder questions whether a teaching of nonresistance to violence had developed at the time, since two co-signers of the letter, Heini Aberli and Johannes Brötli, became entangled in the violent resistance of the peasant uprisings of 1525 and Grebel himself displayed “an open, flexible approach to government and the sword in 1525.”

The next document in the confrontation between Zwingli and the proto-Anabaptists was Felix Mantz’s Protestation of December 1524, convincingly analyzed by Strübind as rebuttal of Zwingli’s view that the covenant with Christ continues the covenant with Abraham. Strübind notes that Mantz does not assert the superiority of the New Testament but uses Old Testament arguments.

After the opponents of infant baptism received a hearing before the Zurich council (January 17, 1525), the council made uniform acceptance of infant baptism a matter of public order. The result was the first believers’ baptisms in Zurich on January 21, 1525, involving Grebel, Mantz and George Blaurock. The baptizing movement spread within ten days to Zollikon, where Brötli was priest, the village of Hallau near Schaffhausen, where Brötli and Reublin took over the church, and to Waldshut, where Reublin, and then Grebel, made contact with Hubmaier.

Balthasar Hubmaier was Conrad Grebel’s most valuable convert to Anabaptism in early 1525. There was regular movement of Anabaptists from Zollikon to Waldshut. Hubmaier tried to move Swiss Reformers with doubts about infant baptism – Johannes Oecolampadius in Basel and Sebastian Hofmeister in Schaffhausen – to acceptance of believers’ baptism. He moved Waldshut to Anabaptism in April 1525 after he failed to secure Swiss protection for Waldshut’s endangered Reformation.

In his writings of 1525: A Summary of the Entire Christian Life and On the Christian Baptism of Believers, Hubmaier is the most effective early Anabaptist defender of believer’s baptism and the first important shaper of Anabaptist ecclesiology. But these writings of 1525 have been mostly ignored by Mennonite (but not by Baptist) historians of early Anabaptism.

Arnold Snyder argues that Hubmaier has such a small stature in early Anabaptist history because he joined with peasant insurgents in the defense of the Waldshut Reformation against Austria, given the majority opinion among Mennonite historians that at the time “Conrad Grebel and the majority of Zurich radicals were firmly nonresistant.” He says that this opinion is incorrect, since “whenever possible the first Anabaptists moved to establish baptizing communities with local political support.” He holds that Felix Mantz’s clear nonresistant statements were an isolated, personal position in 1525.
Hubmaier was not a “Zwinglian, state church Anabaptist” in 1525; he accepted the right of adults not to accept baptism, first in Waldshut, then later in Nikolsburg in Moravia. Balthasar Hubmaier’s Anabaptism was Conrad Grebel’s Anabaptism.

According to the “two phase” view of Anabaptist beginnings, Felix Mantz’s nonresistant Anabaptism, which also endorsed the community of goods of the first, Jerusalem church, emerged after the suppression of the Peasants’ War. The second phase of Anabaptism did not have large concentrations of followers in towns and villages, but had individual adherents scattered over large areas – it was no longer a “mass movement,” but a “gathered church” that developed a separatist ecclesiology (as argued by Martin Haas).

The Zurich government first tried, and failed, to suppress Anabaptism through public disputations and imprisonments. Then it resorted to executions. Conrad Grebel died in summer 1526, probably of natural causes; on January 5, 1527, Felix Mantz was executed, Zurich’s first and most prominent Anabaptist martyr.

From late 1526 Michael Sattler was the most prominent Anabaptist leader in Switzerland and south Germany, basing himself in Strasbourg, which had a Reformed Church, but in those years tolerated all varieties of Christian belief. On February 24, 1527, he authored the Seven Articles of Schleitheim (a village in rural Schaffhausen). The Articles bring new elements to Anabaptist ecclesiology – separation from the world, the state and the sword – which are in the spirit of Felix Mantz, whether or not he was their source, and are suited to the time of brutal persecution, which killed Mantz and Sattler in quick succession. Article 7, prohibiting oaths, was entirely new (Edmund Pries and Andrea Strübind), well suited to the shunning of civil society.

The Seven Articles were never fully authoritative among early Anabaptists. They were openly criticized by Balthasar Hubmaier and by his apocalyptic opponent Hans Hut, and modified in practice wherever the Anabaptists met with a more tolerant order of church and state, as in Esslingen and Appenzell.

Were the Schleitheim Articles the “end of the beginning” of Anabaptism – or should we move the beginning of Anabaptism to February 1527, and regard the whole period from July 1523 to February 1527 as a “prologue to Anabaptism”? Have Harold Bender and Fritz Blanke misled us with their emphasis on the first Zurich baptisms of January 21, 1525?