

# My Journey to Anabaptism

John D. Martin

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The title of this message is "My Journey To Anabaptism". I sort of regret that I gave it that title because I don't feel that I was on a journey to Anabaptism, I don't feel like that was how my journey was described, and that will come clearer as we go along through this story.

I want to make a disclaimer that I think does need to be made in this conference: I think it's a mistake for anybody to decide to follow the Anabaptists. I think they would be horrified if they were living and heard that anybody was doing that. The fact of the matter is they did make some mistakes; they made some very serious mistakes. We're not going to talk about that. God blessed the good things that they did and they had many things right. And so I just want to put in that disclaimer. I could mention at least one group (which I won't) that have pretty closely followed them and have copied not only their strengths, but also their errors. So that's the disclaimer I want to make. They were pursuing Christ! If they knew that there was a group of people who were inspired to refocus their attention and their devotion on Jesus, that would be a fulfillment of what they had hoped would happen.

Now, I sort of hesitate to tell my story; Nathan wanted me to do this. This is the first time I have ever told anything like a complete story of my life and how I came to the conclusions I came to. I will try to do the best I can.

I want to make this disclaimer also: The people in the story that didn't get it as well as they should have, they were good people. They meant well. I'm not trying to criticize anybody and I'm certainly not trying to criticize the Mennonite church that didn't, sometimes, function quite the way it should.

Here's my story:

I grew up in a large Conference Mennonite church. My background is Old Mennonite. As somebody already described (I think it was Chester) when we say "Old Mennonite", we mean the original Mennonites that came to this country and formed the conferences: Franconia Conference, Lancaster Conference, Virginia Conference, Ohio Conference and all the different Old Mennonite conferences. That is my background and I don't have any Amish background that I know of. My wife does, but I do not.

I grew up in this large Mennonite church with about twenty peers, boys either a year or two older than me, or a year or two younger than me. We were a very plain congregation. All of the boys (all of my peers) wore plain coats. The girls wore large coverings. Most of them wore coverings with strings, black stockings, and all the marks of a very conservative Mennonite church.

We were very plain but there were no Christian day schools. I went to public school. I'm very sorry to say I never had any Christian education except what I got in the Bible Schools, which usually were one week long. I did have some of that, but basically most of my Christian training came from my parents and what I got in the church where I grew up.

I was not very old before it was called to my attention very forcibly that we were different. In my fourth grade public classroom, I think it was when I was in fourth grade, it all of a sudden hit me how different we were. I was one of several Mennonite children in that classroom, and I don't even know how it happened, but we started to sing three part music: soprano, alto, and tenor. I went to my fourth grade teacher later (when I grew up she was still living) and I said "Did you teach us to sing?" She said "I can't even carry a tune! You Mennonites taught the rest of the class to sing!"

The music teacher who came around was so impressed with this fourth grade (it was unusual that there was a grade in public school that sang three part music) that she arranged for us to sing on television! Now you have to remember that back in those days, television was in it's infancy. There was only one family in my fourth grade classroom that had a television, and almost all of the programing was local programing. It was sort of innocent stuff like this; local talent on television.

I thought "Well this will be great!" So my father found out about it. And he made a trip to school to talk to the music teacher. She was not very happy because I was one of the singers that she was depending on for this program on television. But my father made it very clear there would be no involvement on my part. I remember that very clearly. That made an impression on me. Obviously I wasn't very happy about it, but I was an obedient boy and I obeyed my dad.

As I began to realize how different I was, I became concerned for my best friend in fourth grade. I had a really close friend. His name was Greg and we just did everything together. We were sort of kindred spirits and I just thought I wanted Greg to be my life long friend. So I informed him that when he got older, he would have to become a Mennonite if our friendship was to continue. Well, he went home and told his parents and they weren't too blessed by my plans for Greg's life.

But in all of this, growing up, I never heard anything about the Anabaptists. I knew we were Mennonites, but I didn't have any concept of who we were. I don't think anyone in my congregation had any great knowledge of who we were. The first impression I have of who we were (what our history was) was when Ervin Martin from Mount Airy, Maryland gave an evening message in our church. Somewhere in the message, he told the story of Felix Manz. I remember him stepping to the edge of the platform and showing how they bound his hands behind him and put a stick through them and how they dumped him into the Limmat River. That made a deep impression on me. Then a few years later, Lloyd Hartzler came from Harrisonburg, Virginia and he also told the story of Michael Sattler. I was intrigued.

In 1954, George Brunk came with his tent. If you know the dates on those tent meetings, they began (I think) in 1951. Our community was one of the early tent meetings. My father loved good preaching. I owe much of my life to my father. My father was a deeply spiritual person, though he had his own problems. He loved good preaching. He loved good singing. Anytime there was genuine spiritual life somewhere, my dad was there, whether it was a prayer meeting or whatever it was. So George Brunk set up his tent in 1954 and held four weeks of meetings and then extended them a week. Five weeks; and I think our family went every night. You have to understand what that meant, because my father was sick; he had chronic asthma. He literally could not do much work. We children (there were eleven of us) basically did the farming. My mother helped with the milking. To get eleven children ready after chores to go to a tent meeting every night for five weeks was a task in itself that made its impression.

George R. Brunk was a wonderful preacher. If you see pictures of those tent meetings, in Edsel Burge's book, you'll see me sitting in the front row with my head up just like this, just drinking it all in. I was eight years old, and I loved George Brunk's preaching. I came under deep conviction. I think I was way too young, but I think the Lord took me seriously. I made a response in that meeting; that was the beginning of my Christian journey.

Looking back, I'm really, really surprised at what I remember of that commitment. It wasn't George R. himself that prayed with me that night. I'm not going to say who it was, but it was a mature person who, looking back, I would say should have known what this commitment was all about. I'm not blaming this person; he was a product of his generation. What I was asked to do that night was to kneel down, think of all the sins I'd ever committed, confess them (which was certainly proper), and then I was to ask Jesus to forgive me and to believe that Jesus forgave me. There was nothing said about lordship. There was nothing said about discipleship. There was certainly nothing said about the kingdom of God.

That was all it was. I was to believe that Jesus forgave me and now I was a Christian. I had no concept! I heard the word "obedience" sometimes preached. That was easy for me to translate into obedience to my parents or obedience to the church. I can't remember having any direct focus on Jesus Christ as my master in those years. I've asked a number of other people from my generation what they remember of what they were asked to do to become Christians. The story is pretty much the same for my community. That's what we did.

Now I think you can understand why the "Second Work of Grace" people came along in one of the other denominations, and won a lot of people to that doctrine. Here you have people who have been forgiven, but they never really received Christ as Lord. I'll let you decide where they are with the Lord in that. I think God took us where we were.

It's as one of my friends says, "People are forgiven but they're not cleansed. They need a second work." I then asked him to describe that second work and they described that as the time when you completely surrender to Christ and then you're filled with the Holy Spirit. And I said "Well, so that's what the second work of grace is all about." Anabaptism has always taught that it all happened in the first experience. Many people in my generation had a second crisis, which I am going to describe to you. I don't think it's a matter that they could not have experienced that in the first experience, I think it's a matter that they never where asked to do that. It was not taught. You prayed the "Sinner's Prayer," it's basically a prayer for forgiveness. So that's what I did.

Then I was instructed out of the Garden City, Missouri, 1921, Statement of Faith. I want to read you the statement about salvation. In the Dortrecht Confession of Faith, this article is called "Repentance and Amendment of Life." Here it is called "Of Salvation." *"We believe that man is saved alone by grace..."* That is Martin Luther's term: alone by grace. *"through faith in the finished work of Christ; that he is justified from all things on the ground of His shed blood; that through the new birth he becomes a child of God, partaker of eternal life, and blessed with all spiritual blessings in Christ."* Nothing is said about Lordship, nothing is said about surrender, nothing is said about the kingdom. That's what we believed about salvation.

I grew up very distinctly believing that we were like all other Christians except for our plain distinctive doctrines. That was taught. It was taught that the Mennonites have two distinctive doctrines: nonresistance and nonconformity (listed in the 1921 Confession of Faith as restrictions). Now, brothers and sisters, nonconformity and nonresistance are the greatest expressions of freedom! The glory of the Christian is his distinctions between himself and the world! To be different in the right way is to demonstrate the glory of Christian experience to one who doesn't know anything about those freedoms. Now I'm on a different subject; I'd better stay on topic.

So I grew up believing that we were just like all other Protestants and I would have told my friends that. "You know, we're like you except that we're nonresistant, and we wear these strange clothes. Other than that we're pretty much the same as the rest of you."

I heard many basic salvation messages. In fact, as I look back, most of the messages I heard were just basic salvation messages, calling people to accept (as if Jesus has to wait till we accept Him) Jesus as our personal Saviour. That was never defined. I think I could define that term now in a way that would be gospel truth. But that was never defined, it was just a constant statement: We need to have Jesus as our personal Saviour. You see where the emphasis is; it's all on me! Besides, I didn't even understand what those words meant.

I look back now and I heard this often from the pulpit, some version of this: "We are saved by grace alone (right out of the Statement of Faith), works have nothing to do with our salvation." I heard that across the pulpit many, many times!

Looking back, we were wearing our plain clothes and doing some things different. I think I heard an echo, "We are saved by grace alone, works have nothing to do with our salvation, but you better be good anyway." That's not a great motivation for holiness, to be sure. It wasn't happening in my life.

I was a very sensitive young man. You would have found me at any prayer meeting. If somebody was going to pass out tracts (which nobody ever did), I would have been there. I loved singing; I went to every singing school. I was just a very spiritually sensitive young man and just loved these activities, but in my own personal life, there was no victory. It went down, down, down until I was nineteen years of age. Now we're talking about eleven years later, after this original commitment, and I'm describing to you what the input was. All of a sudden - I don't remember the text, I remember it was a message by Isaac Sensenig (He was a good preacher). He started to define what it really meant to be a Christian. It went like an arrow straight to my heart because it was far from my experience.

I went home that night and I opened up my Bible and started reading. I read Hebrews 6:4, Hebrews 10:26 (those of you who have had problems with assurance of salvation know exactly what those verses are). "He that has once been enlightened, and has fallen away cannot be renewed to repentance." I can explain those verses now. "If we sin willfully after we've received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin." I went into the deepest, darkest valley that I hope no one here ever experiences this. I look back now, I probably had a nervous breakdown.

I would find out if one of the prominent theologians in the east, if he were coming through the community and was within fifty miles, I would drive there to counsel, to try to get help! I was desperate! I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep, my parents did not know what to do with me, the preachers didn't know what to do with me, nobody could help me. They would quote verses. I would say, "I've discovered that if I'm a Christian, I should have a proof of the Holy Spirit in my life." They would say, "Well, the fruits of the spirit!" I said, "You don't understand! When you have the problem I have, you have no joy! You have no peace! You don't have any of those things! You have no patience! You're irritable. You're unhappy. No. There is no fruits of the spirit evident in my life."

For two years that was my experience. You don't know how often I have wished that I had waited another six years before I made that commitment and that somebody had explained what that commitment meant. I could have made a better start in my life.

There was one glimmer of hope. It was J. Otis Yoder. How many remember J. Otis? I considered him the last word in theology. I heard he was going to be in the community. I arranged to have an interview with J. Otis. He talked to me, and it didn't help me an awful lot, but when he got home, here this very busy man wrote me six pages (yellow legal pages, I can still see them) on both sides to me personally, little me who he didn't know from Adam. I don't remember much of what J. Otis said in that letter, I just remember that it really touched me that somebody cared that much for me. I do remember that he referred me to Ezekiel 18, which has always been a precious scripture to me.

About this time, I picked up a copy of Thomas a Kempis – I still haven't gotten to the Anabaptist part. I'll try to make this short – I picked up a copy of Thomas a Kempis' "Imitation of Christ". I don't remember anything else that Thomas a Kempis said in that book, but I remember one statement that he made. He said "A true Christian would serve Christ if he never received one consolation for doing so." Now, Christ does not treat us that way, but we do go through some situations where we don't receive much consolation for our Christian commitment. That is a true statement. We go right through those periods, because that's not why we're serving Christ (for what we're getting out of it). I read that statement and I said "Well, I don't know if God is going to save me or not, but I'm going to serve the Lord anyway."

I remember going out behind the barn. I could take you to our family property and show you about where the spot was. I knelt down and I prayed the most desperate prayer that I ever prayed. I said "Lord, I'm going to serve you even though I go to hell." Then I went back inside and went to my Bible study.

It was after that, the Lord opened up the most beautiful scriptures to me. Would you turn to Romans chapter 8? I landed on this wonderful verse. If there is anybody here that is having trouble certifying your experience with Christ, by proof of the Holy Spirit, here it is. It's in verse 14. It says "For as many as are led..." That word "led" is a strong Greek term. If you look it up, it means "driven". It's the same word used in "Jesus was led into the wilderness". He was driven there by the Holy Spirit. As many as are driven "by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."

I said "Oh Lord, I have been driven for two years! I have the best proof in my life that your Holy Spirit has been there all the time!"

Then I looked down in verse 16. "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit..." If you are going to have a witness, you are going to need two things; two people that agree. I was able to say "Lord, when you say 'yes' my spirit says 'yes'. When you say 'no' my spirit says 'no'. Here's another proof that I have the Holy Spirit in my life!"

Then the Lord opened up a lot of other scriptures to me. Turn to 1 Corinthians 12. I won't turn to many of them. These are tremendous. A lot of people don't understand what the proof of the Holy Spirit is in a person's life. It's that drive. It's that drive toward Christ that won't let you turn and go the other way! There is something there just propelling you super-naturally toward Christ!

If there is anybody here that doesn't have that, obviously you have proof that you don't have the Holy Spirit. That is the proof, that there is a super-natural force moving us in the direction that God wants us to go. We turn and make a step in the wrong direction, but that Spirit is there and we're back on the road again. It won't let us go back [to our sinful ways].

The Bible says His seed remains in us and we cannot sin. That doesn't mean we can't commit any sin, but it means we can't go back to that pattern again. If we do it's going to be through lots of fighting against God. I think it's possible to do that.

There's the proof!

It says in 1 Corinthians 12:3 "No man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Ghost." I said, "I've been saved. Jesus is Lord, but I didn't know if he accepted me." It says that's proof of the Holy Spirit if you can honestly establish Jesus as the Lord of your life.

Then that wonderful verse in 1 John 1:7. It says "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light (following right behind Christ), we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ" just cleanses us from all sin and our record is always clean. These are tremendous passages.

So I became an enthusiastic preacher of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To my surprise, many people in my home community had never really heard a message on Jesus as Lord. That is sad to say. In fact some of the preachers in the community started to defend themselves and say that they had preached that message. Then people said "Well, we didn't hear it." I don't know what happened. I know I had never heard it. So I became an enthusiastic preacher of the Lordship of Christ.

In 1967 (I'm getting now to the heart of my story), these boys' uncle Joe took me along with him to Europe. I went on three tours to Europe with the Overholts and I went on three tours to Central America. After all the comments about the Overholts and their idiosyncrasies (they have some), after they're all done, I have to say this: I had never met people who were conservative and aggressively pursuing the Kingdom of God. That impressed me. In my community, I always had the impression that conservatives didn't do much witnessing, they didn't have much joy in their salvation, they didn't talk to many people about the Lord. It was the liberals that were always excited about the Lord and testifying. That was my impression. For the first time in my life I saw conservative Anabaptists that were enthused and filled with the joy of the Lord. They loved to sing and loved to testify all across Europe.

My Mother, to her dying day, said (She was a dear woman. She understood things well for her generation.) if I hadn't met the Overholts I might have been normal! When I came back from that trip, it was starting to solidify in my mind that these are my people. The conservative branch of the Mennonite people, these are my people.

In 1970-1971 I was teaching Bible in the Christian day school and I think the Lord had a twinkle in His eye when He led me to teach the book of Luke. Those of you who know the book of Luke know it has more to say about money than any other subject. I became deeply convicted on this whole subject of economics. If you want to know where this started, it was back there in that Bible class at Hartfield Christian School. Then I started to teach just as enthusiastically about voluntary poverty as what I was teaching about the Lordship of Christ. Now I was really in trouble with most people.

I remember one night I sat down and I thought "You know, I have never read much Anabaptist literature." In fact, I don't know if I had ever read any. I took the Martyr's Mirror, which was the only Anabaptist book we had in the house. I sat down and I read the introduction and, lo and behold, the words "voluntary poverty" is actually in the Martyr's Mirror! (I think that it's in the introduction.) I read that these people took a tremendous stand against materialism! Again, I said "These are my people." I was really enthused. By that time I was hooked. So I read *The Anabaptist Story* by Estep. I read *Mennonites in Europe*. I read *Introduction to Mennonite History* by Dyck. I just read and read and read.

You know what was happening? The convictions I had already formed about the Lordship of Christ and holiness and money and all of that, page after page the Anabaptists were confirming what I already believed! That's what Anabaptism has done to me. It's not that I have read and then said that I'm going to do like the Anabaptists, it was more that the Lord had already revealed things to me and I found these people had a very clear concept of all of this. That identified me even closer with these people.

Then I began to dream of a conservative Anabaptist school to train teachers for the Christian day school. Roman J Miller (He's now at EMC. He took a little different path.) and I and another brother met one morning to discuss this possibility. The second meeting that we had I took Dale Heisey along. We drove from Pennsylvania to Ohio for this meeting. How many of you know Brother Dale Heisey? He lectured me the whole way from Pennsylvania to Ohio on Anabaptist belief and practice. I was deeply impressed. That took me even deeper into the study of Anabaptism.

Then I was teaching church history at Anchor School shortly after that and I read that Luther's emphasis was on personal salvation and Calvin's emphasis was on the glory of God as the theme of the Gospel, and the kingdom of God. I have not taken much from Calvin, I'll be honest with you, but that struck me!

I had been taught all my life that the central theme of the Bible is salvation. That's what I grew up with; the red cord from Genesis to Revelation. The only problem is that it doesn't reach to Genesis 1 and 2 and it doesn't reach to the last 2 chapters of Revelation. This is the first time it occurred to me "Maybe this isn't the main theme of the Bible." Then I started to study and discovered that Jesus didn't say "Repent or you will go to hell" (although that's true), that's not where his emphasis was. He said "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has arrived." Then I looked and I saw that everywhere Jesus talked about the Gospel it was always the kingdom of heaven and everywhere the Apostle Paul talked about the Gospel it was the kingdom of heaven.

Now I'm teaching the Lordship of Christ, voluntary poverty, and the kingdom of heaven. I'm really excited about the Gospel and Anabaptism confirming all of it.

When I moved back to my home community after my father died in 1976 a group of us men got together and began to dream of what a church would be like that modeled itself after such teachings. I must confess we didn't handle that maybe the best way and finally the church we were in (they were very kind), they said "Your vision is so radical. We don't think we will ever be able to satisfy you people. Why don't we just peaceably part? Why don't you folks go and start a church and live out your vision?" So that's what we did. Some people thought we should have moved out of the community and I said "No. I do not believe in church divisions. If we live here and we live these principles and we build bridges with the other churches in this community, I honestly believe that our church (I believe in congregational church government) and the churches we left will eventually be one. I think it will all come back together on a better basis." Praise the Lord, I see that beginning to happen. I was asked to lead a singing out of my hymnal out of the church that told us we were to radical. Two sings out of my hymnal in the past year. I think it will happen.

In 1986 Shippensburg Christian Fellowship began, and it's been a wonderful challenge. I will say this to anyone who has dreams of starting a church and living out a vision: the devil will take notice. You won't prove anything to anybody until you have been thoroughly tested by fire and all the pride has been taken out of your heart. It has not been a free ride, but it has been a wonderful experience trying to re-capture original Christianity.

I want you to turn in closing (as a closing testimony) to 2 Corinthians 9:8 which is my favorite passage in the New Testament and has been abundantly true in my life. I sometimes think that verse in "Amazing Grace" "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come; 'tis Grace that brought me safe thus far and Grace will lead me home." I want you to notice verse 7 as the qualification for this wonderful verse. Let's read the wonderful verse first. This is my personal testimony. God is able to make all grace – grace is all the resources that heaven has, made available to human beings – God is able to make all grace abound (that means no limits) toward you that you always having *all* sufficiency in *all* things may *abound unto every good work*. If that weren't in the Bible I would say that is a gross exaggeration, but God said that and it's true.

I want you to notice the context (it fits with Brother David's talk). Verse 6: "He who sows sparingly shall reap also sparingly and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he has purposed in his heart so let him give, not grudgingly or of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver." Does anybody know what the Greek word for cheerful is there? Hilaros. God loves a hilarious giver! Giving is not an expense. You don't put the money in the offering basket and go "There it went, I won't see that anymore." It's an investment. If you start to see giving as an investment it will start to revolutionize your whole concept of money. This is true, but this is the prerequisite. Everybody wants to claim that verse 8 (that is a wonderful verse) but he is saying if you are a hilarious giver, then God is a hilarious giver in return.

I just simply want to encourage you in that. I just want to tell you that my decision to identify with the conservative Anabaptist church is a decision I will never regret. It has been a wonderful experience. It has brought me into contact with the finest people and some of the most blessed experiences that anyone could ask to have.

#### Question and Answer Time:

Nathan Overholt, Sarasota, Florida: John, there are some people maybe sitting here who are trying to work this out: "radical Christianity"; they're offended by that word Anabaptist. You touched on it at the beginning of your talk as a little disclaimer that they would be disappointed. Could you maybe just again say, how does this work with David Bercot's works? How does this work out for us today? Is there another word we could use that would be better or is it OK to identify with this name?

John D Martin: Let me say another thing that impressed me. Their father, John Overholt, when I was teaching at Hartfield Christian School, I asked him to come for devotions one morning and he stood up and the first thing he said was "Anabaptism is the bridge to the early church." I've come to believe that. For a thousand years that original definition of Christianity it existed. It never died out but it was up in the mountains where people had to flee, and with the Waldensians. The Anabaptists were the first people to come out after a thousand years and restore the original definition of Christianity as a passionate devotion to all that Jesus said and did. I don't think we need to be ashamed of the word Anabaptist as long as we make it very clear that the Anabaptists are an inspiration, the Anabaptists are a confirmation, but what they're confirming and what they're inspiring is a devotion to the person of Christ. That has to be clear. Don't ever leave the impression that you're following the Anabaptists. That's a wrong focus.

In fact I want you to turn yet to a reference which is in Revelations. It's a familiar reference. Revelation Chapter 2 that says to the people at Ephesus, you're a wonderful group of people, you haven't lost the intensity of your devotion because you've cast out apostles who said they were apostles and are not.

This is a very zealous church. They still had all the fire they ever had. But He said "You left your first love." It can't mean that they cooled off. It simply means that at first their devotion had been to the person of Jesus and now their devotion was to church purity maybe. That's a good thing, but they had left their first love. I cringe when I hear people say "This church is about evangelism." Our church is there not to be about anything but devotion to Jesus Christ and everything must come out of that, must flow from that.

I think we can use the term Anabaptist but I think we need to make it very clear that we are not following these people. They are simply a confirmation and an inspiration.