

Reading Scripture Together

An Invitation to Participate in the Anabaptist Bible Project

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Introduction to Anabaptism at 500

As the Anabaptist movement approaches its five hundredth anniversary in 2025, MennoMedia is commemorating the event with an Anabaptist Bible that will feature marginal notes and commentary from five hundred Bible study groups from a wide spectrum of Anabaptist faith communities.

Along with the other resources envisioned by Anabaptism at 500, the Anabaptist Bible will inspire Anabaptists—as well as Christians from beyond this tradition—to a fresh engagement with Scripture, renewed faith in Jesus, stronger faith communities, and a more vibrant witness in the world.

With the Spirit's leading, Anabaptism at 500 will reflect critically on the past and call the church to renewal as we face the future together.

Thank you for taking your place in this ambitious undertaking!

John D. Roth
Project Director

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Additional Bible Study Resources (available online)

[FAQ: The Anabaptist Bible](#)

[Why We Choose the Common English Bible](#)

[Group Facilitator Resources](#)

[A Litany for Opening and Closing Your Bible Study *by Sara Wenger Shenk*](#)

Reading Scripture Together

Central to the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century was the conviction that the Bible was intended to be read and interpreted by ordinary people in the common language of the day. The movement flourished as young men and women from all walks of life began to read Scripture together and hold themselves accountable to its message, especially the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. In the centuries that followed, Scripture continued to sustain Anabaptist congregations, convicting, encouraging, and transforming believers in settings all around the world just as it did in the 16th century.

In 2025, the global Anabaptist church will commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of Anabaptist beginnings. This occasion offers a unique opportunity to renew the movement in the 21st century by inviting readers—believers and unbelievers, young people and older people, earnest seekers and the indifferent—to engage Scripture anew through the distinctive lens of the Anabaptist tradition.

The Anabaptist Bible is the first attempt to create a study Bible from an Anabaptist perspective. Like *The Lutheran Study Bible* and *The Catholic Study Bible*, it will include commentary and insights from leading biblical scholars. But the Anabaptist Bible will also reflect an approach distinctive to the Anabaptist tradition by including insights, comments, and questions in the form of marginal notes generated by five hundred Bible study groups of lay Anabaptist Christians.

In the coming year, Anabaptist believers from many different cultural contexts, backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages will gather around specific passages of Scripture. Attentive to the Holy Spirit, they will share insights, wisdom, and questions as they engage these texts. The conversations generated by these study groups—reproduced in the form of marginal notes in the Anabaptist Bible—will both reflect the careful work of the “hermeneutical community” and invite readers to continue that work for generations to come.

You and your faith community can participate in creating the Anabaptist Bible, joining hundreds of other Anabaptist Bible study groups who will collectively read and interpret every passage of Scripture—from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21.

Take your part in a radical tradition of ordinary people reading Scripture together, trusting that the Holy Spirit will inspire, comfort, unsettle, and transform God’s people today, just as it has in the past.

This is a unique opportunity—you can be part of the renewal of the Anabaptist movement!

A Quick Overview of the Anabaptist Bible Project

3 Scriptures; 4 Sessions; 5 Prompts

This guide is intended to provide helpful information and resources for the Bible study sessions that will contribute to the Anabaptist Bible. Your role in the project is crucial—thanks for participating!

- Each group will be assigned **3 biblical passages**.

We have divided the Bible into five hundred clusters of text, each with a passage from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and Psalms/Proverbs. Your group will be assigned three passages to work with.

- Meet **4 times** as a Bible study group.

The first session will introduce you to the project and clarify the nature of your work. In preparation for this meeting, you should read the essay that is included at the end of this guide: “Anabaptists and the Bible.” This text outlines the basic approach to Scripture that we are proposing for your Bible study. You will then meet three more times (usually for 60–90 minutes), once for each of the three passages you have been assigned.

- Use **5 prompts** to guide your Bible study.

There are many ways to approach Bible study. For this project we suggest the following during the week before your meeting:

- a. Read the text carefully several times
- b. Review the five prompts or questions on the worksheet
- c. Read the text again with these questions in mind
- d. Take some time to write down your responses—comments, insights, questions, applications—to each of the discussion prompts, linking your comments to a specific verse or verses. You can do this directly on the worksheet, or your group leader may suggest using a Google doc so you can see also see the responses of others in your group.
- e. Come to the Bible study ready to listen, to share, and to transformed

At the end of each session, your group will spend some time summarizing some of the key themes of the conversation. After each session—or at the end of the Bible study process—the scribe in your group will pass along up to three insights, comments, or questions (15–150 words each) for each of the discussion prompts that are identified by a

specific verse or verses and then submit them online, following the instructions at the [Anabaptism at 500](#) website.

Roles

The **Bible study leader** should guide the conversation, ensuring that your group is a safe space for open conversations and making sure that everyone has a chance to speak.

The **scribe** will take careful notes of the conversation, review the worksheets that participants have filled out ahead of each session, compose the comments that reflect your group's conversation, and submit them to the editors of the Anabaptist Bible.

All **participants**, including group leaders and scribes, commit to studying the assigned passage in the week before the Bible study, using the worksheet to organize your insights and questions in preparation for the conversation. Bring your worksheets to each session so you can add further insights before giving them to the scribe.

A prayer to guide your preparation

As you read and reflect on the text during the week, you might include this prayer:

Living God,
 by the power of your Spirit,
 help us to hear your holy word,
 that we may truly understand;
 that, understanding, we may believe;
 and believing, we may follow
 in faithfulness and obedience,
 seeking your honor and glory in all that we do,
 through Jesus Christ. Amen.
 (Ulrich Zwingli, 16th-century Reformer; *Voices Together* 911)

Marginal Notes

The Anabaptist Bible will feature four categories of notes: Cultural Context, Faith Reflections, Biblical Context, and Anabaptist Context. Each marginal note will be assigned to one of the four categories and be roughly 15–150 words long.

Cultural Context

- Invites readers to make sense of our world. These notes point to how people, places, and events in today's world use and interpret the text, and consider how a text speaks to current global concerns.
- Since we want the Bible to be relevant in many settings over a long period of time, it is better to speak in general terms (e.g., poverty, militarism, stewardship) than about specific people or policies, but it would be appropriate to start a Cultural Context note with something like "In our context in ____, we . . ."

Faith Reflection

- These notes open up the text in ways that encourage further reflection or discussion. Like some of the psalms, these notes could include questions, laments, or even bewilderment about the meaning of a text; they could be words of confession or encouragement; or they could suggest specific ways or examples for applying the text to daily life.

Note: We will have a separate process to identify most of the notes in the following two categories.

Biblical Context

- Explains a historical or technical detail (e.g., a name, place, word) that would help uninformed readers better understand the larger meaning of the passage
- Helps readers draw connections between parts of the Bible. These notes consider connections within a scripture text as well as connections to other stories and how a particular text fits into the larger biblical narrative, especially as it is relevant to Anabaptist themes.

Anabaptist Context

- Connects Bible verses and passages with distinctive Anabaptist theological perspectives, teachings, and practices.
- Commentary on specific texts from historical figures in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition.

Marginal Note Examples

1. *Cultural Context*

Scripture reference: 2 Corinthians 8:1–15

Economic relations are a repeated theme in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In his context, wealthy and prestigious people expected to be honored by those who lacked wealth or prestige. Here Paul challenges these assumptions, not as a “command” but as an expression of genuine love that the new community should demonstrate to each other. How does Paul’s admonition find expression in your congregation? How does it extend beyond your congregation to include brothers and sisters around the world who are also part of the church? (86 words)

2. *Faith Reflection*

Scripture reference: Numbers 27:1–11

The daughters of Zelophehad give inspiration and courage to those of us who are facing injustice. In a time when women did not receive inheritance, they boldly approached the decision-makers of their day, made their case, and changed the law for future generations. They challenge us to take hold of our lives by being knowledgeable and wise and to speak even when the odds are against us. How can you take courage to stand with others against injustice in your community? (82 words)

3. *Biblical Context*

Scripture reference: Acts 2:1

The word Pentecost means fifty, and refers to the Jewish festival that is celebrated fifty days after the Passover (Leviticus 23:15–16). Each year, Jews from all over Palestine would gather in Jerusalem to observe this event as a way of remembering God’s faithfulness in their history. Although Christians today think of Pentecost almost exclusively in terms of the gift of the Holy Spirit, we should remember the deep Jewish roots of that event and the many points of continuity between Judaism and Christianity. (84 words)

4. *Anabaptist Context*

Scripture reference: Mark 16:16

“We know well that salvation is bound neither to baptism nor to works of mercy. Being unbaptized does not condemn us, nor do evil works, but only a lack of faith. However, whoever truly believes takes the step of baptism and brings forth good fruit” (Balthasar Hubmaier, 1526, *Complete Works*, 191). (50 words)

Session 1: Introduction to the Bible Study

Before the Bible study session

Come prepared to talk briefly (2–3 minutes) about a particular Bible, a formative experience with Scripture, or a specific Bible story that has been important to you. If you need a prompt to help you think about this, consider sharing one of the following:

- A childhood memory of a certain Bible story, and how its meaning has changed for you over time.
- A Bible story or Scripture passage that is especially meaningful for you right now.
- A passage from Scripture that you memorized and how it has encouraged or challenged you in your faith walk.

Write down some notes for what you will be sharing here:

Read the essay that is included at the end of this guide (page 15): “Anabaptists and the Bible.” Reflect on the following questions after reading: Is there anything new or surprising here? What can you affirm? What do you see as a potential challenge in approaching Scripture in this way? Write your reflections below:

Session 2: Bible Study Notes

Passage: _____

1. What does the verse or passage suggest about God?
2. What might/does Jesus have to say about it?
3. What does the verse or passage suggest about humans—our possibilities and mistakes?

4. How do you live differently because of this verse or passage?

5. What questions remain with you?

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Session 4: Bible Study Notes

Passage: _____

1. What does the verse or passage suggest about God?
2. What might/does Jesus have to say about it?
3. What does the verse or passage suggest about humans—our possibilities and mistakes?

4. How do you live differently because of this verse or passage?

5. What questions remain with you?

Anabaptists and the Bible

Mollee Moua and John D. Roth (Anabaptism at 500)

The goals of Scripture study include growing in the grace and knowledge of God and Jesus (2 Peter 3:18); taking on the righteous character of Jesus (2 Timothy 3:16); and being equipped to teach others (2 Timothy 2:15). In essence, the goal of reading Scripture is to *embody* Scripture, not just individually but as part of a Christian community.

—Dennis Edwards, *What Is the Bible and How Do We Understand It?*

There are several key aspects of Anabaptist approaches to studying the Bible. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it does capture some of the important and distinctive ways that Anabaptists have interpreted Scripture.

Reading Scripture as a community

Anabaptists believe that all believers are capable of studying and interpreting Scripture. We understand the church to be a community that is committed to living the way of Jesus. Studying the Bible in a group allows us to learn from one another; blind spots in our thinking can be corrected and we can be challenged by others to grow in our faith. This is made possible when the group consists of committed believers who are willing to obey Scripture and are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Reading the Bible as a community means

- *Including ancient and contemporary believers.* Many have studied the Bible before us and can provide valuable insight. Our history, experience, and knowledge inform and provide us with different lenses when we read Scripture. Allowing for all voices helps us gain a fuller picture of who God is.
- *Including those who are formally trained and those who are not.* We can learn from both those who have been trained and those who are untrained. The Holy Spirit empowers all believers to interpret and understand the Scriptures.
- *Centering those who have historically been marginalized or ignored.* The Bible was written by and to people who were marginalized. Including voices that have typically been ignored or pushed to the side can provide us with a clearer understanding of what is happening in the Bible.

Reading Scripture with Jesus in the center

Anabaptists believe that Jesus is the center of our faith. This means that Jesus is the ultimate example of how we should live, and that this principle guides our interpretation of Scripture. We read with the life, death, resurrection, teaching, and reign of Jesus in mind. A Jesus-centered reading of Scripture not only pays attention to the historical and literary contexts of particular verses; it also involves the overarching story of the Bible with a focus on the way Jesus taught and acted. As the Old Testament pointed forward to Jesus, so the New Testament directed all attention to him.

Here is an example of a Jesus-centered reading from Jennifer Davis Sensenig's article "Rereading the Bible with Jesus in the Center." She observes that when reading Psalms, for example, one could ask: "When might Jesus have prayed this psalm? With whom or for whom did Jesus pray this psalm?" In Mark, we read that Jesus and his disciples left what would come to be known as the Last Supper and together sang a psalm. Jesus knew the Psalms; it was the prayer book of the Israelites. Sensenig continues, "Jesus identified with people whose circumstances were different from his own. He was for others. . . . Which prayer was on his lips for the Galilean women followers who would announce his resurrection? What might he have prayed for the hungry crowds after the miracle of enough bread, enough fish for all?" (*Vision* 11, no. 2, pp. 40–41).

Spirit-led interpretation and transformation

Anabaptists believe that anyone can understand the Word of God and apply it to real-life situations. We interpret Scripture as faithfully as we can, and depend on the Holy Spirit to guide our interpretation. In the earliest years of Anabaptism, the church leadership was charismatic in nature and depended on the Holy Spirit's anointing rather than on institutional or academic training.

The experience of the Holy Spirit when reading Scripture should lead to transformation, particularly ethical change and power for holy living. It is important that we *embody* Scripture as a community, and this is done when we strive to live together in love. Different interpretations arise when reading Scripture, but when we place our values of love and grace over being right, we allow space for each other.

Five elements of a basic strategy for studying the Bible

These five guidelines, drawn from Dennis R. Edwards's *What Is the Bible and How Do We Understand It?* (pp. 74–77), are not exclusive or exhaustive but are meant to help you get off to a great start in your Bible study.

- *Be a humble, prayerful, collegial learner.* Individual study and being personally invested in the prayerful reading of Scripture can be transformative. Bring what you are observing during your own reading into a group context. Be willing to be shaped and corrected by group discussion, as well as by other interpersonal interactions. Expect the Holy Spirit to communicate in some way through the group experience. Keep in mind that being collegial is paying attention to how others have understood particular passages. Read ancient as well as contemporary commentary on Scripture, being careful to include the voices of women and others on the margins of society.
- *Pay attention to the genre of a particular biblical passage.* Different genres can affect our understanding of how a text operates. The Bible contains narratives, poems, parables, letters, and a variety of other literary genres that are often connected to oral forms. Consider this poetic passage from Isaiah 55:12: “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” Mountains and hills do not possess vocal cords, and trees do not have hands. Those who claim to take the Bible literally have a challenge with this verse and others like it. Respecting that the verse is poetic means letting the images speak to us in addition to the words. Poetry, perhaps more than any other genre, intends to stimulate our emotions and imaginations, not just convey information.
- *Respect context.* It is important to respect both the literary and historical context of the passage. The literary context is how a particular passage fits into the entire book. The historical context informs us about the historical and cultural situation when the passages were written. It is helpful to consult a few of the many scholarly commentaries (e.g., Believers Church Bible Commentary series) that shed light on literary and historical contexts.
- *Consider how your contemporary situation might mirror the situation in the scripture text.* For example, many stories in the Gospels reference peasants in an agrarian society, whereas many readers in the modern West are more likely to be urban dwellers. We’ve never been responsible for sheep, but when we read in Matthew 9:36 that “when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” we can appreciate the point. We’ve encountered beleaguered and rudderless people in our urban context. We understand that our disposition toward “harassed and helpless” people must be one not of judgment but of compassion.
- *Ask questions of the text that keep the bigger story, as well as your place in that story, in mind.* Here are some good questions to ask as you read:

- What might the passage say about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit?
- What might the passage say about people?
- How might the passage be inviting us to be more like Jesus in the way we think or behave?

Additional Resources on Anabaptist Hermeneutics

Dennis R. Edwards, *What Is the Bible and How Do We Understand It?* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019).

Meghan Larissa Good, *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2018).

Walter Klaassen, “Anabaptist Hermeneutics: Presuppositions, Principles, and Practice,” in *Essays in Biblical Interpretation: Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984), 5–10, available at https://anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php?title=Anabaptist_Hermeneutics:_Presuppositions,_Principles_and_Practice.

Erv Wiens, comp., “An Overview of Anabaptist Hermeneutics: A Summary of Stuart Murray’s book *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*,” February 2011, https://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/13623/An_Overview_of_Anabaptist_Hermeneutics.pdf.