

Reading Scripture Together

An Invitation to Participate in the Anabaptist Bible

LEADER'S 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

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Additional Bible Study Resources (available online)

[FAQ: The Anabaptist Bible](#)

[Why We Chose 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!

3 Scriptures; 4 Sessions; 5 Prompts

This guide is intended to provide helpful information and resources as well as a framework for the Bible study sessions. Feel free to use and adapt the information in this guide to fit your group. A separate participant guide is available for download and reproduction at www.AnabaptismAt500.com.

- **3 biblical passages** will be assigned to each Bible study group.
- Each Bible study group will meet **4 times** to read and study the passages.
- Use the **5 prompts** to guide your Bible study.

Three easy steps to organize your Bible study group

Step 1: Identify your study group and distribute materials

Identify a small group of people in your congregation or faith community to participate in the Bible study. You could do this as a small group or as a Sunday school class. Register your interest in participating as soon as possible, but no later than **April 1, 2023**. You can do this by filling out the “Get Involved” submission form on the Anabaptism at 500 website. You will then be assigned three biblical passages (Old Testament; New Testament; Psalms/Proverbs) for your group to study. We anticipate that the slots will fill up quickly, so sign up soon!

Step 2: Schedule four sessions . . . reflect on the passages together

Plan to commit at least four weeks to the project. This will generally consist of four regularly scheduled sessions (60–90 minutes each) to organize your work, compare notes on the passages you have read, and compose the marginal notes. Decide when and where you will gather (i.e., in person or online). Make sure that all members of the study group have access to the participant guide *before* your first session.

The first Bible study session will provide an opportunity to review the assignment, share your past experiences with Scripture, and agree on format. Most participants will have been part of Bible studies in other settings. This project, however, is different in that we are asking you—individually and as a group—to distill your insights, comments, and questions into marginal notes that are an essential part of the Anabaptist Bible. So you will need to appoint a scribe to take careful notes of your conversations (this person will gather all the insights and submit them to the Anabaptist Bible editors). Each of the following three sessions will focus on one of the biblical passages you have been assigned, structuring your conversations around five prompts that participants will reflect on ahead of each session.

Step 3: Submit the insights and questions

The group will share relevant insights, comments, and questions from the five prompts. At the end of each session, the group will spend time summarizing some of the key themes of the conversation, which the scribe will record. After each session—or at the end of the Bible study process—the scribe 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 using this [website](#). **Please submit your notes within 2 weeks of your final meeting.** The online submission form will close **June 1, 2023**.

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.

Session 1: Introduction to the Bible Study

Purpose: The goal of this session is to communicate the basic vision of the Anabaptist Bible, to share some personal experiences with Scripture, to review the Bible study format, and to identify a scribe.

Before the Bible study session

1. Read the short essay “Anabaptists and the Bible” (see p. 13). We assume that participants in the Bible studies will not always agree on the passages you are reading together; but this text briefly outlines the basic assumptions for an Anabaptist approach to Scripture.
2. Make sure that each participant has access to a copy (either in print or an electronic version) of the [“Participant Guide”](#) *before* your first session. Encourage participants to read through the guide carefully before your first session.

Possible agenda

1. Welcome the group. Thank everyone for their willingness to be part of the Bible study, and introduce the Anabaptism at 500 initiative. You might want to view together the brief Vimeo video [“AB@500: 500 Years”](#) describing the Anabaptist Bible project.
2. Have the group members introduce themselves by sharing a significant story or experience they have had with the Bible (e.g., What is your favorite Bible? Why? What verse has become important to you? Why? How has your understanding of Scripture changed over time?)
3. Discuss the goals and expectations of the Bible study group:
 - a. To grow in the grace and knowledge of God through Jesus
 - b. To read the Bible together from a Christ-centered perspective
 - c. To share relevant insights, comments, and questions in the form of marginal notes
 - d. To participate in a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape an Anabaptist Bible
4. Spend some time reviewing the essay “Anabaptists and the Bible.” 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?

5. Spend time setting boundaries as a group to create a safe space for open conversations and discussion. Different interpretations inevitably arise when reading Scripture; can you agree to grant each other love and grace even when you see things differently?
6. Briefly review the [“Participant Guide.”](#) Share the assigned scripture passages given to your group by Anabaptism at 500 staff. Distribute the worksheets for each biblical passage and describe the assignment for the upcoming weeks. Remind participants of the basic process:
 - a. Each week, participants will study a passage and reflect on the discussion prompts in the worksheets. Ideally, participants will write several responses to the discussion prompts, noting the verses they are responding to.
 - b. It is fine—even expected—for participants to study other resources in preparation for your conversation (e.g., a text from the Believers Church Bible Commentary series, for example, or other study Bibles); but this Bible study is not really about providing exhaustive information from the world of biblical scholarship. We are much more interested in how the text “comes alive” in your study and conversation—How is it relevant to your life? What questions does it raise for you?
 - c. During the Bible study, participants will share their insights and questions with each other.
 - d. At the end of each session, the group will spend some time summarizing some of the key themes of the conversation, which the scribe will record. The scribe will pass along up to three insights, comments, or questions (15–150 words each) for each of the discussion prompts.
 - e. Participants begin to study the next passage.
7. Close your time together by praying as a group and agreeing on when you will meet next.

After the Bible study session

Consider sending an email or text message a few days before the next session reminding participants of the assignment and the time and location of your next meeting. You could also invite group members to add their insight notes to a worksheet shared as a Google doc.

Sessions 2–4: Bible Study on Assigned Passages

1. Start with a welcome and a prayer. You might consider using this prayer as an opening for each session:

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)

2. Read the assigned scripture passage aloud (either one person or take turns). Allow for some silence after the passage has been read.
3. You might open with a few words regarding the larger context of the passage; keep this brief.
4. Work through the five discussion prompts (spend 10–15 minutes with each).
 - What does the verse or passage suggest about God?
 - What might/does Jesus have to say about it?
 - What does the verse or passage suggest about humans—our possibilities and mistakes?
 - How do you live differently because of this verse or passage?
 - What questions remain with you?

Note shared insights or questions; where did you have differences? What insights, comments, applications, or questions generated by your group do you think would be helpful for others who read this passage?

5. Be sure that the scribe in your group is taking notes. If participants brought worksheets to the meeting, the scribe could collect these as well. Some groups might want to experiment with sticky notes for each question, or use a Google doc format to gather insights from group members during the week. *The important thing is that your thoughts and questions are gathered in a form that can be passed along to the editors of the Anabaptist Bible.*

6. Remind your group of the assigned text for the following week. At the end of each session, take some time to reflect on the process. What might you do differently at the next session?
7. End with a prayer.

Summarize and Submit Notes: Final Step for the Scribe

This is a crucial step in the process. You will need to find an approach that fits your group best. You will not be able to comment on every verse! What information, insights, applications, or questions seem particularly relevant for an Anabaptist Bible?

After each session—or at the end of the Bible study process—the scribe should summarize key insights, comments, and questions into notes (15–150 words each) that are identified by a specific verse or verses and then submit them online, following the instructions at the [Anabaptism at 500](https://www.anabaptismat500.com) website.

We suggest that you structure your notes around the five discussion prompts (with up to three notes per prompt). But here too, you are free to use an approach that works best for you.

- Clearly identify each note with a specific verse (or verses).
- Try to limit the total responses to each passage to 10–15 notes (we will also be adding Anabaptist Context and Biblical Context notes from other sources).
- Please submit your notes within two weeks of completing your Bible study (all notes must be submitted by June 1, 2023, but we hope that many groups will finish long before this).
- Once your marginal notes are submitted, they will be reviewed, edited for clarity and length, and then formatted in the margins of the Anabaptist Bible.

We don't want this part of the process to feel overwhelming! So if the online option seems too difficult, you can also send your notes as a Word file, a Google doc, or an email (AnabaptismAt500@MennoMedia.org).

Reminder: Don't forget to take a few pictures of your group reading and studying the Bible together. Make sure you obtain consent from everyone in the photo. Upload some photos to [Anabaptismat500.com](https://www.anabaptismat500.com) or post them on a social media platform (e.g., Instagram or Facebook) with the hashtag #AnabaptismAt500.

Group leaders will also be asked to share some reflections on the nature of your experience. For example, how did you decide who was in your group? How was the experience of reading and sharing? What about the experience did you find especially frustrating? Interesting? Inspiring? What are your hopes for this project?

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)

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.