Remembering The Radical Reformers

Timothy Berg

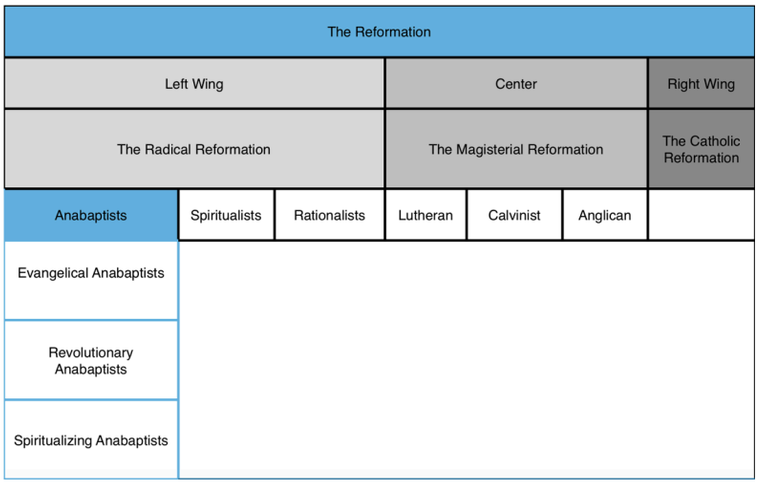
Like 0

Monday, October 23, 2017

In a few weeks, many will celebrate the 501st birthday of the Reformation. Well known heroes will rightly be lauded. But I'd love to point your attention to some heroes you may never have met.

The Who's Who of the Reformation Groups

The 16th Century Reformation can been seen to have three great "wings." At its center, it was driven by the great Magisterial Reformers, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. Cramner, Bucer, Melanchthon and others bringing the aid of their own voices. This major thrust of the Reformation is often divided into three subgroups, Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican. In what has sometimes been called "The Right Wing" of the Reformation, one finds the great Catholic Reform which stood within the established Church pushing for doctrinal reforms that would later be opposed by the Council of Trent. I confess to being more ignorant of this element of the Reformation, though I suspect one might see Erasmus as an early harbinger of its thought.



Then one has the element of the Reformation that historian Roland Bainton called, "The Left Wing of the Reformation." This group was termed, "The Radical Reformation" by George Williams in his magisterial treatment of the diverse individuals and sects that made up this group. The word "Radical" in this connection means, "returning to the roots." Like most scholars of the Radicals, he distinguished three loosely divided (but also overlapping) sub-groups within this larger movement. He called these three groups *Anabaptists*, *Spiritualists*, and *Rationalists*. We focus here most on the *Evangelical Anabaptists*.

Getting to Know the Radicals

The Reformers were united in a conviction that the Church had drifted from her apostolic roots. And they slowly began a campaign to return to NT ideals. (Some might say, the campaign to return to NT ideals actually birthed the Reformation, rather than vice versa). While Ulrich Zwingli was leading Reformation in Zürich, a group of his followers were pushing him to go further. This group and those they influenced would become the *Radical Reformers*. Zwingli urged reclaiming the biblical pattern, but in what they perceived as key issues, he wasn't willing to alter the traditions as radically as they felt necessary. The initial of these issues concerned the practice of the mass and church authority. In a public debate in October, 1523, the question of mass observance was debated by Zwingli and these followers. Things were not settled, and a fissure was opened between them.

As traditions were giving way to (admittedly, increasingly subjective) understandings of what the NT patterns really were, the related question of the purpose of baptism was also coming sharply into relief. The Church had long promoted the baptism of infants as a way to deal with the issue of Original Sin. This was for many a logical solution to the problem of how to prevent infants from being damned to hell, since they could not profess faith as an adult could, but were born as already condemned sinners. But these followers of Zwingli pointed out an inconsistency in his position. He had come to view the mass as only symbolic, without power to grant grace of any kind. But if the mass was only symbolic, then wouldn't baptism be as well? And if baptism was only symbolic, then it should *follow* faith, and be administered only to believing adults. (They would only later expound the notion of, "the age of accountability" to solve the theological problem of babies and children condemned by Adam's sin, but not yet able to personally profess faith, previously solved by the practice of infant baptism.) For them, reform needed to go further. An account of their early conversations with Zwingli is preserved in *The Hutterite Chronicle*;

The Chronicler goes on to note that Grebel and Manz were soon joined by George Blaurock. Another public debate took place in January of 1525 between them and Zwingli, now specifically to discuss the issue of baptism. Despite Zwingli's promise to reform anywhere his practice didn't conform to what has shown in the NT, it was apparent that no such changes would be made. The city council ruled in his favor. As that debated ended, so did their acceptance with Zwingli. They were given three options; conform to Zwingli, leave Zürich, or face imprisonment. They opted to leave. Conrad Grebel, Simon Stumpf, Felix Manz, George Blaurock, and a few others, now found themselves the unintentional leaders of a whole new sect. They had been meeting regularly at the home of Felix Manz, and after the defeat of the debate, they regrouped there.

Where it all Started

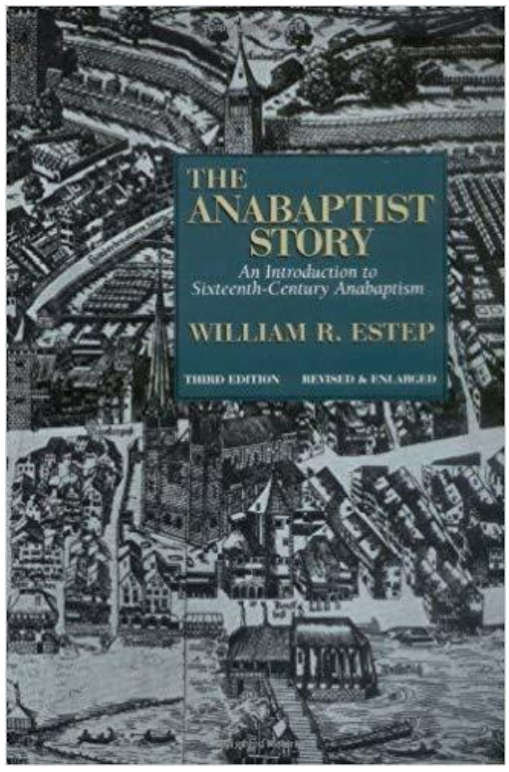
Anabaptist scholar William Estep paints the picture vividly of those first few days of their exile;

> "A few days later, January 21, 1525, a dozen or so men slowly trudged through the snow. Quietly but resolutely, singly or in pairs they came by night to the home of Felix Manz, near the Grossmunster. The chill of the winter wind blowing off the lake did not match the chill of disappointment that gripped the little band that fateful night. The dramatic events of the unforgettable gathering have been preserved in The Large Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren. The account bears the earmarks of an eyewitness, who was probably Jorg Cajakob, called George Blaurock, a priest who had recently come to Zurich from Chur."

Estep goes on to quote briefly an excerpt from the account in *The Hutterite Chronicle*, which I quote here at greater length in the translation by Williams;

> "And it came to pass that they were together until fear (*angst*) began to come over them, yea, they were pressed (*gedrungen*) in their hearts. Thereupon, they began to bow their knees to the Most High God in heaven and called upon him as the Knower of hearts, implored him to enable them to do his divine will and to manifest his mercy toward them. For flesh and blood and human forwardness did not drive them, since they well knew what they would have to bear and suffer on account of it. After the prayer, George Cajacob [of the house of Jacob] arose and asked Conrad to baptize him, for the sake of God, with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with that request and desire, Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no ordained deacon (*diener*) to perform such work. After that was done the others similarly desired George to baptize them, which he also did upon their request. Thus they together gave themselves to the name of the Lord in the high fear of God. Each confirmed (*bestätet*) the other in the service of the gospel, and they began to teach and keep the faith. Therewith began the separation from the world and its evil works."
> (Williams, Huntston George, ed. *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, pg. 43–44.)

The action was more profound than any of them could at that time know. While they saw themselves as simply continuing the reforms of Zwingli to a slightly greater length, something entirely new and unprecedented was starting. Or, others might say, something incredibly ancient was being rediscovered anew. Estep summarizes what that night meant; "With this first baptism, the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren was constituted. This was clearly the most revolutionary act of the Reformation. No other event so completely symbolized the break with Rome. Here, for the first time in the course of the Reformation, a group of Christians dared to form a church after what was conceived to be the New Testament pattern." (William Estep. *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism,* pg. 13. Hereafter *Estep.*)



"This was clearly the most revolutionary act of the Reformation. No other event so completely symbolized the break with Rome." (William Estep)

Here, with this small group which would claim for itself the simple name "Brethren," but which others would pejoratively label *Anabaptism,* was born. With it was born the free church movement. *The Hutterite Chronicle* goes on to explain that they were soon joined in their cause by Balthasar Hubmaier, who was perhaps the most theologically astute of the Radical leaders. They would have no creed or formula except that which they saw in the teaching of Christ and the Apostles. Even the most ancient traditions and practices were up for grabs if they seemed not to align with this teaching. And because they were passionate to return to the apostolic pattern, they could endorse no union between Church and State, a union that had arisen much later, and had mixed together in the church believers and unbelievers. Today, we are so marked in North America by the legacy of a matured form of their claims to separation of Church and State that it is almost impossible for us to perceive how subversive such claims seemed in the 16th century. Such an idea - that the State had no true authority in matters of religion - seemed to threaten the very existence of social order that had been universally upheld for a millennium. This was not just a question of opposing religious teaching - this was seen as a question of treason against the government, for these two entities were at the time indivisible.

An Unfortunate Alliance

During the unrest and growing dissatisfaction with Zwingli in the early stages of the movement, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and their friends found an ally in Thomas Müntzer, who was also beginning to preach and write that baptism should be ministered only to adults upon faith. They wrote a letter to him in April 1524, noting, "While we were taking note of and lamenting these things your writings against spurious faith and baptism was brought to us, and we were most fully informed and confirmed. It made us wonderfully happy to have found one who was with us in a common Christian understanding, and who ventured to point out to the evangelical preachers their deficiency..." They go on later to note, "We stand together on everything, except we learn with sorrow that you have erected tablets (in the church building), when the New Testament teaches nothing of the kind, neither by text nor example." (Estep, *The Reformation: Luther and the Anabaptists*, pg. 270-74).

They thought they had found a more mature kin. But this friendship would prove to be disastrous for the

Anabaptist cause. Müntzer was one of a number of what might properly later be called "Revolutionary" Radicals. Müntzer felt that violent overthrow was the means of bringing the changes they felt Scripture demanded. In his infamous *Sermon Before the Princes* on July 23 ,1524, he claimed that God was speaking through dreams and visions to say that the Eschatological age prophesied by Daniel was here, and that God's people should take up the sword and fight. He urged that government especially must root out evildoers, and slay the enemies of Christ. If they refused to do so, the sword would be taken from them. He preached, "[Christ commands] 'Take mine enemies and strangle them before mine eyes.'... You can gloss over here and there as much as you like—these are the words of Christ." He made it plain that the sword must be used to spread the kingdom slaughter dissenters. He invoked the conquest of Canaan as a model;

> "He [Joshua] notwithstanding did not spare them [the Canaanites] the sharpness of the sword. Look at Ps. 44:588 and 1 Chron. 14:11. There you will find the solution in this way. They did not conquer the land by the sword but rather through the power of God. But the sword was the means, as eating and drinking is for us a means of living. In just this way the sword is necessary to wipe out the godless (Rom. 13:4). That this might now take place, however, in an orderly and proper fashion, our cherished fathers, the princes, should do it, who with us confess Christ. If, however, they do not do it, the sword will be taken from them (Dan. 7:26 f.)."
> (Müntzer, Thomas. In *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*. pg. 68.)

A political rebellion was beginning to ferment, that would lead to the birth of what came to be known as "The Peasent's War." And the leaders in Zürich, while disagreeing with Müntzer's violent plan, and urging him to drop it, still appeared to have some alliance with him. Manz, Gerbel, and the others wrote a second letter to him, as "Dearly Beloved Brother Thomas," noting,

> "The brother of Hujuff writes that thou hast preached against the princes, that they are to be attacked with the fist. Is it true? If thou art willing to defend war, the tablets, singing, or other things which thou dost not find in express words of Scripture, as thou dost not find the points mentioned, then I admonish thee by the common salvation of us all that thou wilt cease therefrom and from all notions of thy own now and hereafter. Then wilt thou be completely pure, who in other points pleasest us better than anyone in this German and other countries. If thou fallest into the hands of Luther or the Duke, drop the points mentioned, and stand by the others like a hero and champion of God. Be strong."
> (Grebel, Conrad. “Letters to Thomas Müntzer.” In *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*. pg. 83–84.)

Almost exactly one year after the leaders under Zwingli had written to him the first time, Müntzer would write to leaders at Allstedt, including some of these same men, the following inflammatory words;

> "Even if there are only three of you who are firm in God and who seek only his name and honor, you need not fear a hundred thousand. Now, at them, at them, at them! It is time. The evildoers are obviously timid as dogs. Stir up the brothers, so that they arrive at peace and give witness to their soul's agitation. It is infinitely, infinitely necessary. At them, at them, at them! Do not be merciful, even though Esau offers you good words, Genesis 33:[4]. Pay no heed to lamentations of the godless. They will bid you in a friendly manner [for mercy], cry, and plead like children. Do not let yourselves be

> merciful, as God commanded through Moses. Stir up the villages and cities, and especially the miners with other good fellows who would be good for our cause. We must sleep no longer....The peasants of the Eichsfed have taken up arms against their lords, and shortly they will show them no mercy. May events of this kind be an example for you. You must go at them, at them! The time is here! Balthasar and Barthel, Krump, Valentin, and Bischof, advance first to the dance!... At them, at them, while the fire is hot! Do not let your sword get cold [that is, let it stay warm with blood], do not let your arms go lame! Strike--cling, clang--on the anvils of Nimrod. Throw their towers to the ground! As long as the godless live, it is not possible for you to be emptied of human fear. You cannot be told about God as long as they rule over you. At them, at them, while you have daylight!"
> (Collection of Primary Sources in Baylor, *The German Reformation*, pg. 99).

The age was ripe for rebellion, and some saw violent overthrow as the God-ordained means of bringing about the fuller Reformation they desired. Insurrection broke out, and local government leaders were slaughtered in the name of the Reformation. Catholic Churches were burned, priest were attacked and tortured, and anarchy exploded. Luther himself saw the need to immediately make clear the distinction between the cause of the Reformation and this growing insurrection, and wrote sharply against it, as I explained here.

In short course, the Peasant Rebellion was crushed by the local magistrates. But the connection in the popular mind between the seeds of the new movement and this violent outbreak would not bode well for them. In the popular mind, this was the ultimate end to which Anabaptist thought would always lead. Technically, the violence broke out before Anabaptism had yet even been practiced, and the Peasants thus cannot actually be called "anabaptists." As Williams noted, "Clear is the fact that in so far as anabaptism is understood as the espousal of believer's baptism among Germans caught up in the Reformation yearnings, its first notable manifestation was in canton Zurich. Rebaptism began shortly after the outbreak of peasants unrest turned into the Great Peasant's War in January 1525. The first recorded evangelical baptisms date from late January 1525..." (*The Radical Reformation*, pg. 137-138). He goes on to trace three ways the Peasants anticipated anabaptism, but maintains, rightly, that anabaptism itself was not responsible for the insurrection, since it did not yet exist when it broke out.

"Anabaptism must not be held responsible for the Peasants' War, because Anabaptism didn't yet exist when it broke out."

But the careful distinction of later historians are often lost on the contemporaries of such events. The lines of connection between them seemed apparant to most, and were never forgotten by those who feared their campaign. Had the young leaders of the new sect immediately repudiated all ties with Müntzer, perhaps their reputation could have been salvaged. But their sometime friendship with him, as well as with others that figured in the war, meant that in the popular mind, Anabaptists would all end up urging the same violent insurrection which he promoted.

An Action Of Apocalyptic Proportions

A second travesty would cinch their doom. The passion to see God's Kingdom come now, even by extreme measures, led a small group to attempt a kind of apocalyptic experiment. Zealous Chiliasm consumed them. Three different leaders, in turn, tried to bring the kingdom into the present age by means of violent force. It started with a claim that Strasbourg would be the new Jerusalem. But when that plan failed, the visionaries regrouped and pushed the envelope even further. González explains;

> "Then someone suggested that the New Jerusalem would not be established in Strasbourg but rather in Münster. In that city, the existing balance of power between Catholics and Protestants had forced a measure of tolerance, and therefore Anabaptists were not persecuted. The visionaries went there, as did many others whom intolerable oppression had led to despair. The Kingdom would come soon. It would come in Münster. And then the poor would receive the earth as their inheritance. Soon the number of Anabaptists in Münster was such that they took over the city. Their leaders were John Matthys, a Dutch baker, and his main disciple, John of Leiden. Abandoning the Anabaptist principle of religious tolerance, one of their first acts was to expel the Catholics from the city. The bishop, forced to leave his see, gathered an army and laid siege to the New Jerusalem. Meanwhile, inside the city, there was a growing insistence that everything must conform to the Bible. Moderate Protestants were also expelled. Sculptures, paintings, and all sorts of items connected with traditional belief and worship were destroyed."
(Gonzalez, Justo. *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*, pg. 73-74.)

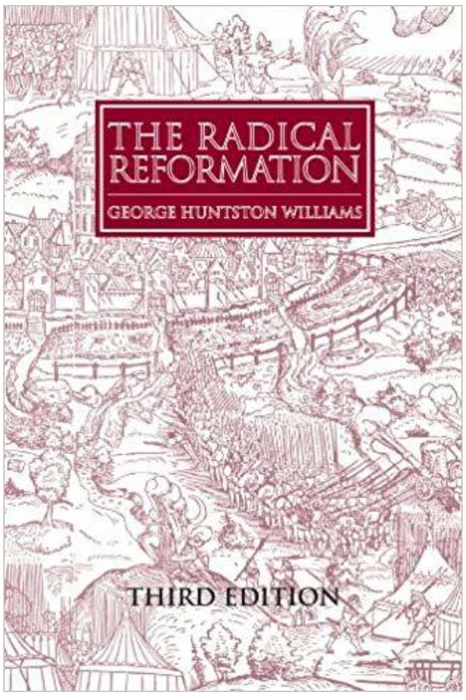
The debacle grew to astounding proportions. These Revolutionary Anabaptists were convinced God was restoring the true church through them, and that all Catholic and Protestant churches were false churches. For them, Anabaptism wasn't just biblical teaching - Anabaptists alone were the true church. (Perhaps one should always be wary of anyone making such bold restorationist claims). One of their leaders, Bernard Rothmann, set out their faith as follows; "God the Almighty rightly began the restitution when he awakened Martin Luther. When Luther, however, would not further God's grace, but remained lying in his own pride and filth, then the Antichrist became evident, and the true gospel began to appear. But the fullness of truth was magnificently introduced in Melchior Hofmann, John Matthys, and here in our brother, John of Leiden [the three afore-mentioned leaders]. Thus the kingdom of Christ has begun in Münster. What has been restored by God in the New Zion will now be shown, point by point." (*A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, pg. 222). He goes on to elucidate. We quote here selections from some of the points set out by Rothmann;

- 6. Baptism is here restored. The Antichrist began child-washing, and made an idol out of water, with his magic. True baptism belongs only to those who understand and believe in Christ.
- 7. Through God's grace, the true church has been restored to Münster. For 1400 years, the truth has been falsified and repressed.... The true, holy church cannot be found either among Catholics or Evangelicals. The latter would have better remained papists, than to have taught half-truths, for a half-truth is no truth....
- 12. God has restored the true practice of holy matrimony amongst us. Marriage is the union of man and wife—"one" has now been removed—for the honor of God and to fulfill his will, so that children might be brought up in the fear of God....Freedom in marriage for the man consists in the possibility for him to have more than one wife.... This was true of the biblical fathers until the time of the Apostles, nor has polygamy been forbidden by God....But the husband should assume his lordship over the wife with manly feeling and keep his marriage pure. Too often wives are the lords, leading their husbands like bears, and all the world is in adultery, impurity, and whoredom. Nowadays, too many women seem to wear the trousers. The husband is the head of the wife, and as the husband is obedient to Christ, so also should the wife be obedient to her husband, without murmuring and contradiction....
- 13. Previously, there has been no true understanding of the glory of the kingdom of Christ on earth.... We know, however, that this kingdom must be fulfilled during our generation, and that the scriptural reference to the kingdom of Christ must be awaited here on earth....

An apocalyptic bibliocracy was in full swing. However, the Catholics and Bishop they had violently abused and excommunicated from the city would not accept such embarrassing defeat. The Bishop began to seize and execute any Anabaptist who exited the city. It had to end, and with it ended the small strain of Revolutionary Anabaptism. Almost every Anabaptist who ever lived would have staunchly rejected the actions of these few extremists.

Guilty By Association

Far too much has been written about the extravagancies of these two fascinating events. What's important to note here is that all the Radicals came to be painted (or better, tarnished) with the same brush after these two debacles. Catholic and Protestant leaders of the day, scared of the implications of the Radical's program, were all too happy to paint with this broad brush. This had the twin effect of increased persecution against the Radicals, and increased pacifism among them. While there were strains of pacifism in the teaching of many of the group's leaders from early on, these tragedies led to the almost wholesale adoption of pacifism by Anabaptists of all stripes, and the only Radicals that remained from that point forward became united in their conviction that no Christian should ever raise the sword, to attack, in military, or even in their own self-defense. George Williams suggests that,



> "One can interpret the pacifism of the Anabaptist sects after the Peasants' War and again after the Münsterite Bibliocracy as the disciplined sublimation of their apocalyptic fervor. This drastic transformation from militancy to pacifist nonviolence is reminiscent of a similar transformation on the part of the millenarian Taborites after their military defeat in the Hussite revolution. Consistency in the working out of the laws of devotion is apparent when one bears in mind that the Anabaptists would come to interpret their military defeat and subsequent persecutions as but divinely ordained phases in the eschatological schedule leading to the Last Judgment." (The Radical Reformation, pg. 173-174).

The Radical Reformers became passionately pacifists. The many had to distance themselves from the extremes of the few. This is powerfully seen, for example, in the preaching and writings of Menno Simms, perhaps the single most influential Anabaptist, whose deep compassion and desire to follow the teachings of Jesus about non-resistance bleeds through every page he writes, and whose followers remain pacifists to this day. But most common people in that day could not distinguish between the actions of the seditious few, and the sect as a whole. The response was the widespread treatment of the Anabaptists as traitorous and seditious insurrectionists. Men, and even women, were treated as though they had personally sought the violent overthrow of the government. "Rebaptism, sedition, anarchy, blasphemy, sacrilege, and hypocrisy were lumped together indiscriminately under the label of treason. Often there was not the slightest symbol of justice in the treatment of the accused. Frequently an accusation of Anabaptism was tantamount to condemnation. Imprisonment and torture were normally followed by death. Drowning, sword, and stake were all used to exterminate the hated movement" (*Estep,* Pg. 29).

Anabaptist Sheep Led To The Slaughter

Felix Manz

Felix Manz, the son of a Roman Catholic priest, had developed a passion for the languages of Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. He had learned Greek under Zwingli as his tutor. It was in his house that the young rebels first began to meet, and he regularly would teach in these meetings. After that first fateful night where they all baptized one another, Manz began going house-to-house preaching faith, repentance, and believer's baptism. Manz was there when Grebel was imprisoned, but he managed to escape. He preached again, and was imprisoned again. This became something of a regular pattern. He was arrested again on Jan. 5, 1527 for preaching and practicing Anabaptism. A mandate had been passed issuing the death penalty for re-baptism, and he was its first casualty. He preached and witnessed to the Gospel the entire time while he was led through the fish market and to the water. As his hands and feet were bound so that he could not swim, he cried out, "Into thy hands, oh Lord, I commend by spirit." He was pushed over the edge of the boat to drown. "Baptized again," as the saying would later go.

George Blaurock

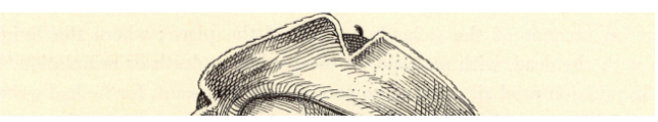
On that same day, George Blaurock, who had been repeatedly imprisoned with Manz and Grebel, was stripped and beaten with rods till the blood ran from his back. For two more years he continued to preach and re-baptize in an incredibly fruitful ministry. Because he refused to stop preaching his "heresy," he was later tortured, and burned at the stake, on Sep. 6, 1529. He continued to loudly preach the gospel the entire time he was being led bound to the stake.

Michael Sattler

Micheal Sattler came to join the movement at some unknown point, and became one of its most respected leader. He was regarded even by many of his enemies as one of the most gentle of Anabaptists, and all spoke well of him and his irenic spirit. He drafted "The Schleitheim Confession," which set out Anabaptist faith (the article on baptism being first), and which was adopted by a conference of Swiss Brethren on Feb. 24, 1527. As he continued to preach re-baptism, he was imprisoned, tried, and sentenced to torture and death in Rottenberg for his crimes. They cut part of his tongue out, to punish his "false preaching," and then repeatedly used red-hot tongs to pull pieces of flesh from his body. At the execution site, they tied his hands and feet to a ladder and prepared to burn him. His response? He prayed out loud, with what words he could form, that God would forgive his persecutors. As the fire reached his body, he stuttered though his butchered tongue to urge the people, the judges, and even the mayor, to repent and believe. As the fire burned though the ropes, freeing his hands, he raised his two forefingers in a signal that extolled the bearability of martyrdom. And he prayed, like Manz, "Father, I commend my spirit into thy hands." It was an image that would stamp itself upon the public mind for generations to come. Estep notes,

> "Perhaps no other execution of an Anabaptist had such far-reaching influence. Wilhelm Reublin's booklet containing an account of Sattler's execution found its way throughout Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Lutheran, Reformed, and even Catholic witnesses were never quite able to get away from the scene of that infamous day in Rottenburg. Bucer and Capito were grieved at the news of the execution. The impact of Sattler's superlative witness is felt to this day. To this fact Gustav Bossert, Jr., a contemporary Lutheran pastor and Anabaptist scholar of Wurttemberg, testifies. He writes, "Sattler's character lies clearly before us. He was not a highly educated divine and not an intellectual; but his entire life was noble and pure, true and unadulterated."
> (Estep, pg. 72).

Balthasar Hubmaier



Balthasar Hubmaier had been a well loved Roman Catholic priest, and when he converted to the Reformation cause, and then became one of the first

Anabaptists, he quickly rose to be perhaps the movement's most theologically astute leader. He came to Anabaptist convictions, and as we noted above, was part of the early conversations and disputes with Zwingli. While pastoring at Waldshut, he was baptized by the visiting Wilhelm Reublin in April 1525. The next Sunday, he baptized almost his entire congregation of some 300 people from a milk-pail of water. He soon wrote, against Zwingli's anti-anabaptist tract, the book, *On The Christian Baptism Of Believers*, perhaps the most clear and thorough presentation of scriptural arguments ever produced by the Anabaptists, and which has become its classic expression. When Hubmaier entered Zürich again, he was arrested, and found himself again in debate with Zwingli, whom he kindly reminded had himself once admitted that infant baptism had no scriptural basis. Zwingli denied that he had ever taught this, and a shell-shocked Hubmaier agreed to recant of his anabaptism. He wrote this recantation out, and was instructed to read it to the congregation the next day. But when he got up to read it, he instead recanted of having ever recanted, and declared, "So I say here and now, I cannot and will not recant." As he began to present a scriptural defense of believer's Baptism, Zwingli quickly had him seized out of the pulpit, imprisoned, and brutally tortured.

During the torture, Hubmaier again recanted of his anabaptism, a fact for which he later wept bitterly and repented. His recantation purchased his release, and moving to Nikolsberg, he continued to preach, and reportedly re-baptized an astounding 6,000 in one year there. He continued to write, setting out Anabaptist understanding of anthropology and christology. Unlike most Anabaptists, the felt that the rejection of the authority of the State was a dangerous sedition. And unlike most Anabaptists, he invoked the authority of the early church Father's to support his teachings. He affirmed the power of the sword in the hand of the state, but denied the State's power to control the church. As he continued to preach Anabaptism, he and his wife were arrested and imprisoned on Aug. 28, 1527. He was tortured again on Mar. 3, 1528, and this time recanted not a word. Maturing thoughts had apparently become deeply rooted convictions. He was executed as they rubbed gunpowder in his beard and lit him on fire. He prayed, "I forgive all those that have done me harm," and added in Latin, "O Lord, into thy hands I commend my spirit." His wife was then drowned in the river. "Martyrdom became an Anabaptist hallmark. Among those who died at the hands of the authorities for their faith were countless worthy, often unknown, unforgettable witnesses" (Estep, pg. 57).

"Truth is immortal."
(The regular signature line of Balthasar Hubmaier)

The next two hundred years were stories of constant slaughter. Estep goes on to note the horrid tragedy;

> "The severe persecution was not without effect. However, the effect was not always what those in authority might have wished. Untold thousands must have died. The extant records preserved in the *Geschichts-Buch*, *Buch*, the *Martyrs' Mirror*, and court records are fragmentary and at times inaccurate. Nevertheless, they indicate that thousands of Anabaptists fell victim to one of the most widely spread persecutions in Christian history. The Count of Altzey was dismayed at the increase of Anabaptists after mass executions failed to halt their spread. He is reported to have said, 'What shall I do, the more I execute, the more they increase.' Persecution was so intensive and thorough in some areas that the Anabaptist movement was effectively stamped out. In other sections where persecution was less thorough the testimony of the martyrs led to phenomenal growth. Persecuted in one country, those dispossessed and threatened fled to another, hoping for respite in one of Europe's vanishing

> islands of freedom. It was a vain hope. Nowhere did the Anabaptists escape. Burning fagots and smoldering stakes marked their trek across Europe. Even a century and a half later, Anabaptists were the objects of court procedure in Bern, Switzerland.
>
> Such is the sordid story that stains the history of the established state churches of the Continent. Against the darkness of Europe's long night of death, the Anabaptist's "meteors" shine even more brightly. The darkness, while extinguishing the meteors, could not put out the light. The Anabaptists they killed, but the truth they could not quench. [In the common words of Balthasar Hubmaier] 'Truth is immortal.'"
> (Estep, pg. 74).

As Estep notes in his introduction, "Perhaps there is no group within Christian history that has been judged as unfairly as the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Theirs has been the lot of the widely misunderstood, deliberately misrepresented, or completely ignored" (Estep. pg. 1).

Their Beliefs

Delineating exactly what the Anabaptists believed can be difficult. They wrote little, and often disagreed among themselves. They all rejected the connection between state and church. Eventually, they all came to believe firmly in pacifism (though this was not universal at first). They all believed in a strong separation from secular society. They mostly found themselves in sharp disagreement with the soteriology of the Reformers, which they felt owed more to Augustine than to the Bible itself. They all repudiated the validity of infant baptism, and held tenaciously to the Reformer's doctrine of the sole authority of Scripture. Many of them lived in isolated communes, sharing all their goods in a common socialistic equally. Most of them practiced, "the Ban" of excommunication for sinful members of their congregations. We've noted above that they fall into three groups; *Evangelical*, *Revolutionary*, and *Spiritualist*. These were not sharply drawn lines, and many could be classed in more than one group. In fact, these lines are recognizable only from the hindsight of history. At the time, no one could have drawn such demarcations so clearly. (For quotations here I cite only the writer speaking and page numbers in *Anabaptism in Outline*.)

Christology

Most of the Anabaptists held orthodox Christology. But the problem of setting aside the ancient creeds is that the lessons learned in the battles that forged them can easily be forgotten. Many of the anabaptists held to a kind of soft docetism, suggesting that Jesus was not fully human. The notion that God had implanted divine flesh (rather than truly human flesh) into Mary (who they all affirmed as a perpetual virgin, and as *theotokos*, the Mother of God) became common among some. The "Rationalist" element became flat-out anti-trinitarian, but all of the other Anabaptists would have affirmed the Trinity, though their minimizing of Nicaea meant that they rarely articulated this truth directly. For all of them, Christ was the eminent pattern to be followed. The teaching of Christ and the Apostles was the core of all that they believed. His teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in particular became the basis of the lives of suffering they universally lived. And few have ever lived it in such a Christ-like way.

"Few believers have ever lived out the Sermon on the Mount so consistently and passionately as have the Radicals."

Soteriology

The Anabaptists seem to have been convinced that Luther's notion of Justification by faith alone (*Sola Fide*), which viewed works as only a fruit of faith, was generally right, but slightly misguided. They refused to so divide faith and works. Justification for them wasn't so much a declaration of imputed righteousness as a process which creates true righteousness, essentially identified with sanctification. Faith that wasn't connected to works was what they termed "mere faith." Hubmaier wrote,

> "Faith alone and by itself is not sufficient for salvation...Faith must be active in love (Gal. 5). Therefore faith by itself alone is like a green fig tree without fruit, like a cistern without water, like a cloud without rain...O we wish to be good evangelical Christians; we boast about our great faith, but have never touched the works of the gospel and faith with the smallest finger...I confess this article with all my strength: that faith by itself alone is not worthy to be called faith, for there can be no true faith without the works of love"
> (*Hubmaier,* 44).

He went on to explain, "Since mere faith is not sufficient for salvation, good deeds must truly be added to the faith." Williams explains, "Anabaptism in general continued the medieval Catholic usage when they interpreted justification in the sense of sanctification. They expected converts, after their baptismal resolve and symbolic ablution, to live evangelical lives" (*The Radical Reformation*, pg. 434). The editors of Dirk Phillips' works note,

> "In this conception of salvation, the Anabaptists differed from the other reformers. The other reformers saw salvation as a change in status. Through justification by faith, the person's status was changed from guilty to innocent. This 'forensic change' was brought about by God's acceptance of the person. The Anabaptists saw the transformation as a real and continuing change in nature. It was not simply a change in status. For the Anabaptists justification began a dynamic process by which the believer partook of the nature of Christ and so was enabled to live increasingly like Jesus" (*The Writings of Dirk Philips*, pg. 40).

Anthropology

On the issues of the freedom or bondage of the will, the Anabaptists sharply disagreed with the Magisterial Reformers' doctrine of total depravity. The basic issues had been set out in the great fifth century debates between Augustine and Pelagius, and were later revived in debate between Luther and Erasmus (and again between Dort and the Remonstrants). Over time, the two sharp poles of this debate had produced intermediate positions, which Phillip Schaff labeled "Semi-Augustinianism" and "Semi-Pelagianism" (Volume 3 of his *History*, pg. 857f.f.). The Anabaptists seem to have almost universally held, against Luther, to the Semi-Pelagian system. At times they seem to stand between the "semi"s, but they utterly repudiated the teachings of Augustine, and thought them a blight on the church.

Pelagianism	Semi-Pelagianism	Semi-Augustinianism	Augustinianism
Man is not born sinful, and has no universal sin nature. Man is basically good at heart.	Man is born sinful, due to the fall.	Man is born sinful, and condemned to death, by the sin of Adam.	All men are not only born with a sin nature, they have already sinned in Adam (Original Sin).
Every man is born free to choose sin or good, like Adam.	Man's will is weakened, or crippled, by the Fall, but not totally corrupted.	Man's will is weakened by the Fall, but not totally corrupted. Free-Will can be restored by prevenient grace (usually seen as given in Baptism).	Only Adam had libertarian Free Will. All since Adam have only the freedom to choose what they will, and what they will is always sinful due to their corrupt nature, unless God changes their nature.
Every man has total free-will, and only the	Man sins because of his sin nature inherited from	When man sins, he follows his own will; but when he does good, he	The will of man is so totally corrupted by the fall that no one

Bibliology

The attitude toward the Bible was diverse among the Anabaptists. There's some evidence that many accepted the Catholic canon (including the deuterocanonical books), which they quoted from as commonly and as authoritatively as the OT. While none were fully Marcionite, many believed the OT was less inspired than the NT. For Denk and some others, against Luther, the Scriptures were not themselves the Word of God, (a title they would grant only to the living Christ), but could bear witness to the Word of God. For the Spiritualists element, the authority of Scripture was entirely subsidized under the continuing revelations of the Spirit. But for Menno Simons, and some others, the Scriptures were the infallible rule of faith. For many the "inner word" of Christ in their hearts held higher authority than the "outer word" of Scripture.

- "I value the Holy Scripture above all human treasures but not as high as the Word of God, which is living, powerful and eternal, and which is free and unencumbered by all of the elements of this world. For insofar as it is God himself it is spirit and no letter, written without pen and paper that it may never be expunged. Therefore also salvation cannot be tied to the Scriptures, however important and good they may be with respect to it" (Denk, 142).
- "Therefore whoever wishes to use the Scripture with true reverence and not to attribute to it more than it deserves or belongs to it, the same must radically separate the Scriptures and the spoken word from the inner word of the heart" (Stadler, 143).
- "When you read, read mostly in the New Testament and the Psalms.... Although it is good to read in the prophets and in the books of the kings and Moses it is not really necessary. One finds everything in the New Testament" (Schiemer, 148).
- "The divine, unquestionably Holy Scriptures which are called the Bible alone have the fame that they are needful and sufficient for teaching, reproof, correction, and for instruction in righteousness, for which purpose also almighty God has given them, in order that the man of God be without error and equipped for every good work. Since the apostasy first began through human writing and teaching by means of which the divine Scriptures were darkened, the Almighty has among us provided that all writings both new and old which are not biblical should be destroyed [This is a reference to the destruction of all books in Muenster on March 15, 1534], so that we should cling only to the Holy Scriptures. We are minded, by the grace of God to hold to this, since God's actual will is sufficiently expressed in them...
- For he who holds only to the Scriptures needs no other writings. Rather he will have enough to do with the Scriptures and he will be abundantly taught by them about God as long as he approaches them with the right understanding " (Rothmann, 149).
- "We certainly hope no one of a rational mind will be so foolish a man as to deny that the whole Scriptures, both the Old and New Testament, were written for our instruction, admonition, and correction, and that they are the true scepter and rule by which the Lord's kingdom, house, church, and congregation must be ruled and governed. Everything contrary to Scripture, therefore, whether it be in doctrines, beliefs, sacraments, worship, or life, should be measured by this infallible rule and demolished by this just and divine scepter, and destroyed without any respect of persons" (Simons, 151).

Baptism

Baptism Only of Believers

The doctrine of baptism, while not the most important element of theology to the Radicals, was *the* issue that set the Radicals apart from the other Reformers. "If the most obvious demarcation between the reformers and the Roman Catholics was biblical authority, that between the Reformers and the Anabaptists was believers' baptism. Believers' baptism was for the Anabaptists the logical implementation of the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*. Almost as soon as the Anabaptist movement could be distinguished within the context of the Reformation itself, believers' baptism became the major issue." (Estep, *The Anabaptist Story,* pg. 201). We noted above that Hubmaier baptized 300 out of a milk-pail of water. He wrote a treatise on believer's baptism, against Zwingli, titled, "On The Christian Baptism Of

Believers." This treatise became one of the more influential statements of Anabaptist belief. Hubmaier wrote, in his treatise (to quote excerpts) that;

> "Thus we confess openly that we were not baptized in childhood. Therefore we let ourselves be baptized on the authority of the earnest command of Christ and the apostles in many places...Therefore it follows that no one can be so bling and crippled that he cannot see and grasp the fact that no one should be baptized with water before he confesses his faith and knowledge in God...Now let every Christian judge and consider whether or not young children should be baptized to whom neither the preaching of the Word nor faith is intelligible. Oh Christ, how far have we fallen from away from your ordinance and your command! We pray that your grace will help us find the right way again!...Every man who believes and has not been baptized, since the baptism of infants is no baptism, is obliged to be baptized, even if he were a hundred years old."
> (*Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, excerpts from throughout his *On The Christian Baptism Of Believers*).

Baptism by Pouring
While the validity of infant baptism was universally repudiated by all Anabaptists groups, this should not be read as anabaptists practicing the baptism of believing adults by *immersion*. The early Anabaptists universally practiced baptism by effusion (pouring) or sprinkling (see Williams, "The Radical Reformation," pg. 434). When Hubmaier baptized his congregation it was by pouring. When Zwingli's followers baptized one another in that first act of Radical Reformation, it was by pouring (as the account quoted above makes clear). Hubmaier explained and taught what he saw as the Scriptural delineation of water baptism; "Baptism in water according to the divine command is to pour outward water over the person who confesses his sins and by his own knowledge and agreement to count him among the number of sinners," and again, "Baptism in water for or unto change of life is also by divine command to pour outward water over the person who confesses his sins and by his own knowledge and agreement to count him among the number of sinners and to lead him into a new life according to the Rule of Christ, Matt. 3:11ff." (*Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, pg. 99).

It wasn't until later that the traditional mode of baptism would in some circles be altered to become the mode of immersion. Numerous examples from the sources could be provided. Dirk Philips noted of a passage in Peter that was evidence that baptism didn't save, "Here the apostle says clearly that in baptism the washing or pouring with external water does not accomplish the matter but [only] the covenant of a good conscience with God through the resurrection of Christ" (The Writings of Dirk Philips, pg. 82). Both without a preference occur in the writings of Pilgrim Marpeck; "...the true baptism is a burial of the old being and a resurrection of the new to a new life. However, this resurrection does not happen because of the power of a work, be it pouring over with water or immersion in it but, rather, because he who is baptized correctly confesses that he has died to sin in true repentance," and, "...let also the pouring of water or thrusting into water be a sign..." (*The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, pg. 205, 193, cf. 199). Grebel seems to have been the first to make the move totally to immersion. It has sometimes been suggested that this sprang out of a desire to be more biblical, but there is no evidence that any of the anabaptists felt their pouring to be unbiblical, and the actual account suggest that the switch was made more out of an enthusiastic moment. "Further it happened that our citizen and one of the brethren of whom I have written elsewhere, Wolfgang Uliman, how he had earlier been taught against infant baptism by Lorenz Hochrütiner, met with Conrad Grebel on his way to Schaffhausen and was so thoroughly convinced by him in favor of rebaptism that he would not have merely a pan of water poured over him but entirely naked and bare was pushed under and immersed in the Rhine by Grebel" (Harder, Leland, ed. *The Sources of Swiss Anabaptism,* Vol. 4, pg. 360). In any case, many (most?) of the other anabaptists never did make this move, and continued with effusion as the common mode.

Your Debt to the Radicals

Today, belief in Believer's Baptism marks a large swath of Protestant Denominations - despite the ironic fact that outside the Radicals, all other reformers staunchly opposed the principle. (A reasoned defense of the practice of believer's baptism can be seen in the recent work here.) And the "Free Church" model has spread to include a significant element of Protestantism. Congregational church government, egalitarian opportunities for women, and even the principles of religious liberty which North Americans typically hold so dear, all stem in one way or another from these grossly abused people. In a very real way, as precursors, they purchased our religious freedom at the cost of their own blood. They were misunderstood, maligned, and slaughtered on charges of treason. And this despite the fact that most of them had not only never lifted a sword in violent sedition, they had not even lifted a finger in their own defense. One could not find a better example of lives lived in imitation of Christ as taught in the Sermon on the Mount.

They continue directly today in small groups, like Mennonites, Hutterites, and modern Anabaptist congregations, who follow and propagate the teachings of the group's early leaders. But their legacy extends far outside the small circles of those who continue their lineage. They should not - must not - be forgotten. The great tragedy that was the slaughter of the Anabaptists cannot be undone. But that tragedy is enforced anew in every generation that forgets their sacrifice. May we never forget.

There are many great figures of the Reformation, on all sides. And we do well to remember them each. We also do well to never forget their human brokenness. But I urge you, if you celebrate this Reformation Day, not only to think of the "Great Names" you may know so well. I urge you to remember the Radicals. You may owe them more than you realize. I end with the opening verse of a hymn usually attributed to Hubmaier, which captures well the devotion of these mistreated people and their passion for the the Christ revealed in Scripture;

Rejoice, rejoice, ye Christians all,
And break forth into singing!
Since far and wide on every side
The word of God is ringing.
And well we know, no human foe

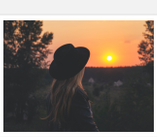
If You Enjoyed it, Share This Blog!

Facebook | Twitter | LinkedIn

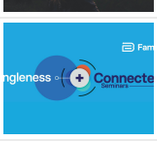
And Subscribe to The Blog Here!

Blog RSS

SEE ALSO



How The Gospel Reshapes Your Worth...
The church does just tolerate...



Single Not Dead: A Holy Handling Of The Single...
The possession of your sex...

0 Comments

Sort by Oldest

Add a comment...

Jesus > The Bible (Part 2)

Jesus is the core of the...

Facebook Comments plugin

Exegesis	Bible	Kjv
Kjvo	Kjv Only	Textual Criticism
Gifts	Gospel	Fundamentalism
Preservation	Resurrection	Textus Receptus
Reformation	Luther	Neo-Fundamentalism
New Testament	Tongues	Apologetics
Church History	Eschatology	Kingdom
Tr Only	Tyndale	Apostolic Fathers
Commentaries	Easter	Gospels
Jesus	Luke	Sex
The Shire	Theology	Tr
Anabaptist	English Bible	Holy Week
Inaugurated Eschatology	King James Bible	King James Only
Lord Of The Rings	Luke-Acts	Missions
Objections To Christianity	Preaching	Protestant
Single	Singleness	Slander
Slavery	Song Of Songs	Technical Commentaries
Textual Essays	Translation	Acts
Already/Not Yet	Anabaptists	Apostles
Bible Study	Biblical Commentaries	Burgon
Ccm	Charismatic	Charity
Christmas	Christology	Chronology Of The Life Of Christ
Church History \	Contemporary Issues	Cross
Cursing	D. A. Carson	Demonization
Die Hard	Doctrine Of Preservation	End Times
Exegesos	Exegsis	Faith
Fathers	Fundamentaism	Gordon Fee
Gospel Contradictions	Greek	Hands
Historical Jesus	Historical Theology	History
Homosexuality	Journal Of Travels	Kingdom Chronicles
Kingdom Of God	Kjvonly	Lewis
Liturgy	Marriage	Matthew
Mattthew	Minimal Facts	Music
Nt	Oh My God	Omg
Paraphrase	Pastor	Paul
Philosophy	Polycarp	Praying
Psalms	Radicals	Reformers
Satire	Sermon Notes	Sex Drive
Sexuality	Single Life	Singles
Spiritual Gifts	Spirituality	Strongs
Synoptic Problem	Taking The Lords Name In Vain	Tattoo
Text	The Doctrine Of Preservation	The Power Of The Tongue
The Singer	Translation Methods	Tro
Webster's	William Tyndale	Word Studies
Words	Worship	