Remembering The Radicals Of The Reformation (Part I)

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Like 14

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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. In this first blog post, we start to tell their story. In a second post, we will share some of their names and faces, and give samples of their teachings.

The Who's Who of the Reformation Groups

The 16th Century Reformation can been seen to have three great sections. At its center, it was driven by the great Magisterial Reformers; Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin. Cramner, Bucer, Melanchthon and others clearly also brought the aid of their own voices. This major thrust of the Reformation is often divided into three subgroups; *Lutheran*, *Reformed*, and *Anglican*. In what could be 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 of Rotterdam as an early harbinger of its thought.

The Reformation						
Left Wing			Center			Right Wing
The Radical Reformation			The Magisterial Reformation			The Catholic Reformation
Anabaptists	Spiritualists	Rationalists	Lutheran	Calvinist	Anglican	
Evangelical Anabaptists						
Revolutionary Anabaptists						
Spiritualizing Anabaptists						

Then one has the element of the Reformation that historian Roland Bainton famously termed, "The Left Wing of the Reformation." This group was first 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*. Others have used the title, "*Inspirationists*" for his "*Spiritualists*." We focus here primarily 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*).

> "Both Luther and Zwingli were convinced that over the course of centuries Christianity had ceased to be what it was in the New Testament. Luther sought to cleanse it from all that contradicted Scripture. Zwingli went further, holding that only that which had a scriptural foundation should be believed and practiced. But soon there were others who pointed out that Zwingli did not carry such ideas to their logical conclusion" (Gonzalez, Justo L.. *The Story of Christianity: Volume 2: The Reformation to the Present Day*, pg. 67).

These "others" 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. Zwingli had made the most radical move in regards to the sacraments thus far, in suggesting that the mass was only symbolic. But these men 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 not just be connected to, but *follow* faith, as confessed by the one being baptized. It could thus be administered only to confessing adults. (Some expounded the notion of, "the age of accountability" as one way 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.)

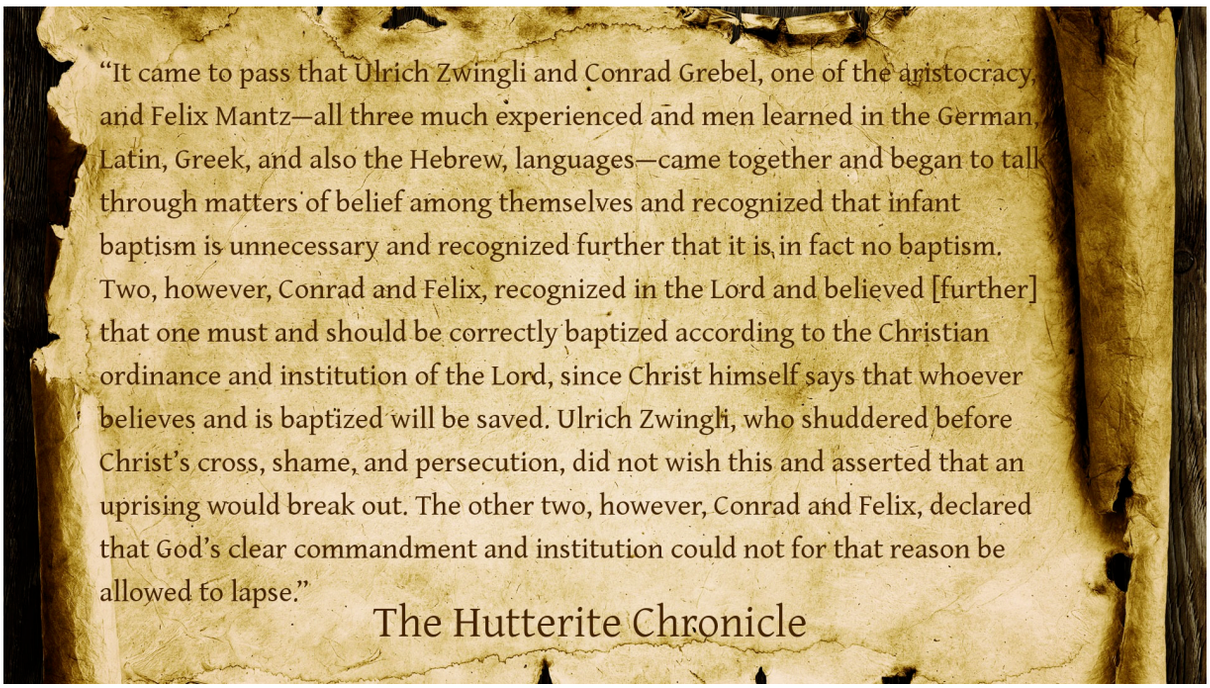
They were growing increasingly convinced that the baptism they had received as infants was in fact no baptism at all. And this implicitly raised the question of the very nature of the church. As they searched the Scriptures more insistently, the only kind of church they could find in its pages was a church composed entirely of believers. The rise of infant baptism had necessitated an understanding of the church-state as composed of confessing Christians, and those for whom only others had confessed. But they could find no warrant for this understanding in the New Testament. The question nagged at them, and they nagged at Zwingli. A historian of a prior age, Henry Vedder, put the matter into broader perspective when he explained the ultimate question that the debate over infant baptism was actually raising;

> "There was thus raised the weightiest question that arose for solution during the entire Reformation period—a question that goes deeper than any other, and has more momentous consequences than any other, according as one answer or the contrary is given. It was this question that became fundamental with this party, and held that position throughout the history of the Anabaptists. Anabaptism was but a necessary corollary from the answer given to the question, What, according to the Scriptures, is a church of Christ, and of whom should it be composed? The radicals could find but one answer: A church of Christ is a congregation of true believers, giving token that they have been born again of the Spirit of God by living in accordance with the precepts of their Lord. A church composed of the regenerate only was the ideal of this party, and they pressed upon Zwingli the adoption of this as his programme."
> (Vedder, Henry C. *Balthasar Hübmaier: The Leader of the Anabaptists*. Pg. 102)

For them, reform needed to go further. And this would shake the very foundations of the structure of the church. One of the most respected contemporary historical theologians, Jaroslov Pelikan, noted that we often think of the Magisterial Reformers as posing the greatest challenge to the catholic understanding of Apostolic Continuity. But this is actually a mistake, for, 'It was neither Luther nor Calvin nor even the Anglican Reformers, but the Radicals lumped together by their opponents as 'the marvelous and manifold divisions and bands of Anabaptists,' who put forward, as the fundamental issue of their own version of 'Reformation as re-formation,' the challenge to the supposed apostolic structure of the church and substitution for it of a restored form of truly apostolic church life" (The Christian Tradition, Vol. 4, pg. 314). Zwingli had been the most extreme of the Reformers thus far. But these disciples were convinced that he needed to go further still.

One can only imagine the heated discussions that must have taken place - the long nights, the open New Testaments, the pages excitedly ruffling, the heat of raised voiced fighting against the cold of winter's icy breeze in drafty and poorly insulated rooms. Wouldn't you have loved to be a fly on the wall at those meetings? Can you imagine what it must have been like? But we need not only imagine. A recorded account of their early conversations with Zwingli was preserved in *The Hutterite Chronicle*;

> "It came to pass that Ulrich Zwingli and Conrad Grebel, one of the aristocracy, and Felix Mantz—all three much experienced and men learned in the German, Latin, Greek, and also the Hebrew, languages—came together and began to talk through matters of belief among themselves and recognized that infant baptism is unnecessary and recognized further that it is in fact no baptism. Two, however, Conrad and Felix, recognized in the Lord and believed [further] that one must and should be correctly baptized according to the Christian ordinance and institution of the Lord, since Christ himself says that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Ulrich Zwingli, who shuddered before Christ's cross, shame, and persecution, did not wish this and asserted that an uprising would break out. The other two, however, Conrad and Felix, declared that God's clear commandment and institution could not for that reason be allowed to lapse."
(*A Reformation Reader: Primary Texts with Introductions*, pg. 200).



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 debate 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.

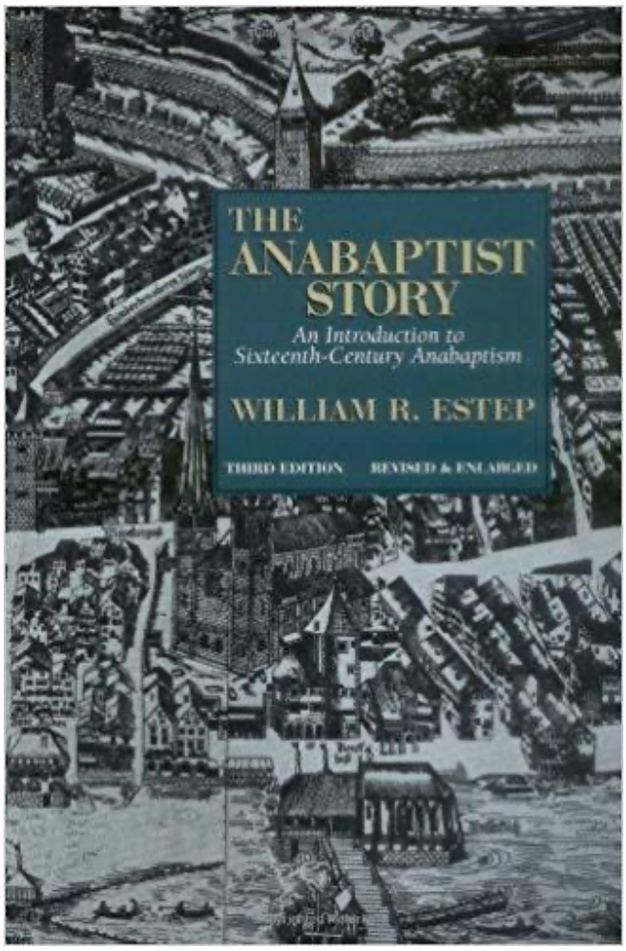
Where it all Started

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 greater distance, something entirely new and unprecedented was starting. Or, others might say, something incredibly ancient and long forgotten was being discovered 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.).

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> *- William Estep*

Here was born this small group which would claim for itself the simple name "Brethren," but which others would pejoratively label *Anabaptism,* the name by which it is most commonly known now. The word "Anabaptist" means "re-baptizer." But these Swiss Brethren didn't see themselves as actually "re" baptizing, (though they used that language sometimes). Rather, they saw themselves as administering baptism rightly for the first and only time. With the birth of this group 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, as Sam Storms helpfully explained here.

An Unfortunate Alliance

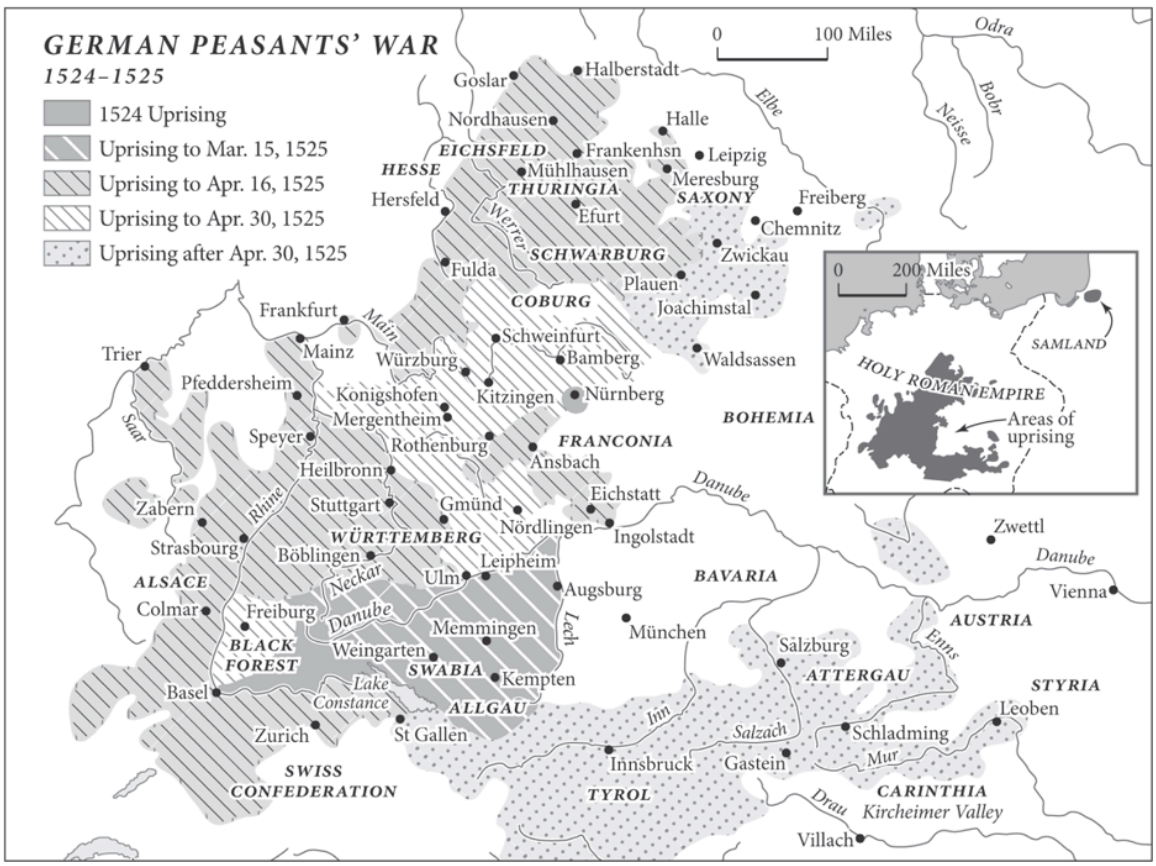
During the unrest and growing dissatisfaction with Zwingli in the early stages of the movement, Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and their friends reached out to Thomas Müntzer, who was also beginning to preach and write that baptism should be ministered only to adults upon faith. They wrote a letter to him 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, and a friend. 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 all 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, the stone was coming to crush the remnant of the Roman empire, and 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 and 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. 44:58 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.)

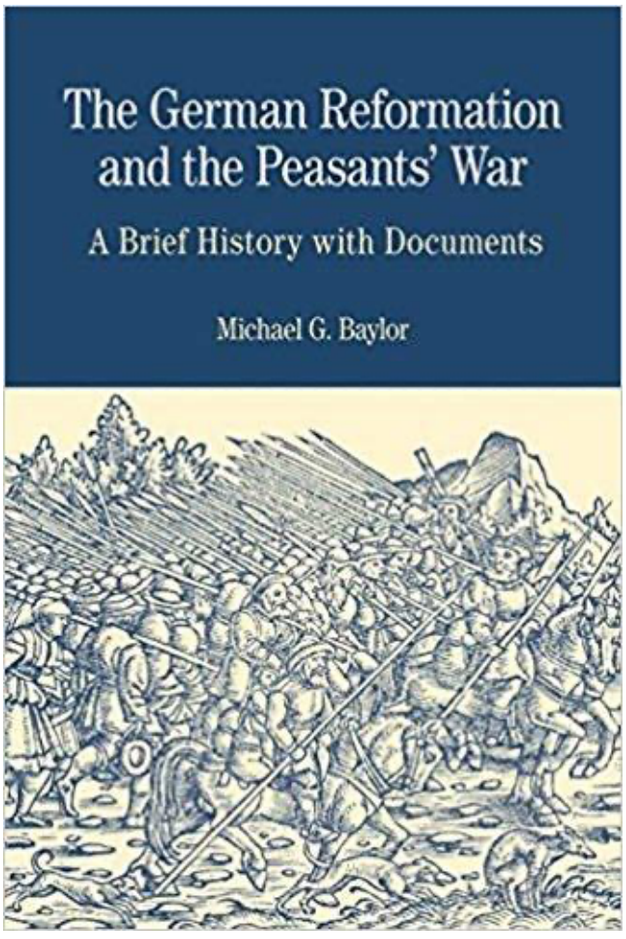
A political rebellion had long been fermenting, that would explode in the birth of what came to be known as "The Peasent's War." And the leaders in Zürich, while disagreeing with Müntzer's violent plan, and urging him to drop it, still appeared to have some alliance with him. Manz, Gerbel, and the others 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 even tortured by the Peasants, 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, with more details about the Peasants' War.

In short course, the Peasant Rebellion was crushed by the local magistrates. Before it was all said and done, one historian noted, some 150,000 were dead. 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." It's true that Müntzer, like a number of others, had begun to preach and write about re-baptism - but no one was bold enough to *practice* it until that fateful night in Zürich. 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 Zürich. Rebaptism began shortly *after* the outbreak of peasants unrest turned into the Great Peasant's War in [early] 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 cannot be held responsible for the insurrection, since it did not yet technically exist when it first 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 occasional communications and alliance with him, as well as with others that figured in the war, meant that in the popular verdict, 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. Noted church historian Justo 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." (4

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....
  With his well-armed servants, Christ will defeat the devil and all unrighteousness, and then he will enter into his kingdom, in full justice and peace.... In sum, the people of Christ must inherit the earth. The prophets and the psalmist, together with Christ's parables and the Apocalypse, undeniably give proof of this....

An apocalyptic bibliocracy was in full swing. However, the Catholics and the 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. Gonzalez explains how it all came crashing down;

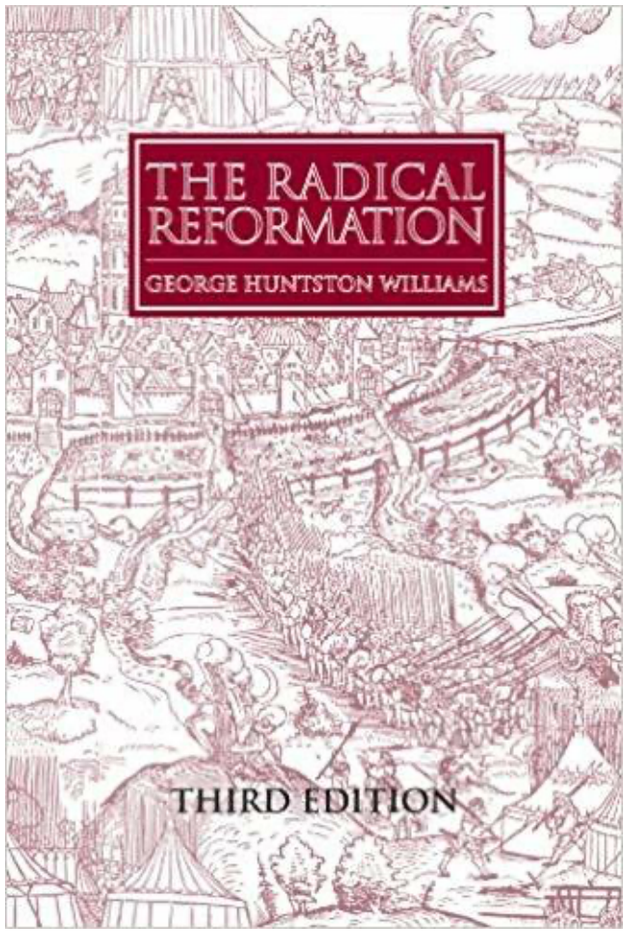
> "The defenders, seeing their situation worsen daily as food became increasingly scarce, became more emotional. There were daily claims of visions and revelations. In a military sortie against the bishop, John Matthys was killed, and John of Leiden became the leader of the besieged city... shortly after these events some of the inhabitants of the city, tired of the excesses of the visionaries, opened the gates to the bishop. The king of the New Jerusalem was captured and exhibited throughout the area, jointly with his two principal lieutenants. Then they were tortured and executed. Thus ended the primary outburst of revolutionary Anabaptism."
> (*The Story of Christianity: Volume 2,* pg. 74).

The anarchy had to end, and with it ended the small strain of Revolutionary Anabaptism. But this strain was never representative of the movement as a whole. In fact, almost every Anabaptist who ever lived would have staunchly rejected the actions of these few extremists. "The Anabaptists for the most part were not revolutionary...The great majority...obeyed the government in matters not directly related to their tenets, disobeyed when conscience required, and suffered meekly whatever penalties were imposed." (Roland Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century,* pg. 101).

"Charging all Anabaptists with Münster is like claiming all Baptists picket military funerals like Westboro. Almost every Anabaptist who ever lived would have staunchly rejected the apocalyptically driven

fanaticism. And many did reject it - in the voice that still cries today from their own blood."

Judged Guilty By Association



Far too much has been written about the extravagancies of these two fascinating events. The curiosity is understandable. Such extremism is fascinating. But in terms of their relation to Anabaptism, they have been treated all out of proportion to their importance. 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 effects both 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).

Thus the Radical Reformers were now universally 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, who we will briefly look at in the next post, perhaps the single most influential Anabaptist. His deep compassion and desire to follow the teachings of Jesus about non-resistance bleeds through every page he writes, and his followers remain pacifists to this day. However, sadly, 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, seditious, anarchists. Men, and even women, were treated as though they had personally sought the violent overthrow of all government. Roland Bainton explained that,

> "Those who thus held themselves as sheep for the slaughter were dreaded and exterminated as if they had been wolves. They challenged the whole way of life of the community. Had they become too numerous, Protestants would have been unable to take up arms against Catholics and the Germans could not have resisted the Turks. And the Anabaptists did become numerous. They despaired of society at large, but they did not despair of winning converts to their way. Every member of the group was regarded as a missionary. Men and women left their homes to go on evangelistic tours. The established churches, whether Catholic or Protestant, were aghast at these ministers of both sexes insinuating themselves into town and farm."

Who were these men and women who made such sacrifice? What were there names? Can we still learn their stories? What did they believe? Why did they preach? In a second blog post, we will look at some of the specific individuals, what they went through, and what they believed and taught. For now, it is enough to note that most of the negative slanders spoken about them were never really true of the majority of the Anabaptists. They were guilty only of having been wrongly accused as a whole of the attitudes and actions of a very small number. The result, which we will look at in all its gory detail in the next post, was a brutal slaughter.

"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."
- William Estep
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For now, we end with the assessment of two historians of the treatment of the Anabaptist. One, a noted Anabaptist scholar of the present, the second, a respected historian of a prior generation. Finally, we give an Anabaptist hymn recounted by Roland Bainton, and presumably translated by him, though he doesn't note its source, (*The Reformation Of The Sixteenth Century*, pg. 104);

"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).

"The most blood was shed in Roman Catholic countries. In Goerz the house in which the Anabaptists were assembled for worship was set on fire. “In Tyrol and Goerz,” says Cornelius, “the number of executions in the year 1531 reached already one thousand; in Ensisheim, six hundred. At Linz seventy-three were killed in six weeks. Duke William of Bavaria, surpassing all others, issued the fearful decree to behead those who recanted, to burn those who refused to recant.... Throughout the greater part of Upper Germany the persecution raged like a wild chase.... The blood of these poor people flowed like water so that they cried to the Lord for help.... But hundreds of them of all ages and both sexes suffered the pangs of torture without a murmur, despised to buy their lives by recantation, and went to the place of execution joyfully and singing psalms.”
(Schaff, Philip, *History of the Christian Church*. Vol. 8, pg. 84).

"Sheep without shepherd running blind
Are scattered into flight.
Our house and home are left behind,
Like birds we fly by night.
And like the birds, naught overhead
Save wind and rain and weather,

In rocks and caves our bed.

We creep for refuge under trees.
They hunt for us with the bloodhound.
Like lambs they take us as they please
And hold us roped and strong-bound.
They show us off to everyone
as if the peace we'd broken.
As sheep for slaughter looked upon,
As heretics bespoken.

Some in heavy chains have lain
And rotting there have stayed.
Some upon the trees were slain,
Choked and hacked and flayed.
Drownings by stealth and drownings plain
For matron and for maid.
Fearlessly the truth they spoke
And were not ashamed.
Christ is the way and Christ the life
Was the word proclaimed.
Precious in Thy sight, O God,
The dying of a saint.

Our comfort this beneath the rod
Whenever we are faint,
In Thee, O God, in Thee alone
Are earthly peace and rest.
Who hope on Thee, eternally
Are sustained and blessed."

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