

Was Martin Luther A Mass Murder Of Baptists? (Part II)

Like 6

Timothy Berg

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In the last post, we began to look at <u>the accusation that Luther was a mass murder</u>, and that he "murdered Baptists," a charge frequently made in some IFB and some Roman Catholic circles. We especially examined Luther's writings on the Peasant's War, and pointed out that context demands that we not quote from those writings as though they represented his attitude to anabaptists. But what about the Edict of Speyer?

What about the Edict of Speyer?

In the section of the <u>internet article</u> linked by one accuser, the section about Luther and the anabaptists didn't even remotely say that Luther murdered anabaptists. But it did suggest that Luther drafted legal legislation demanding their death. The entire section on anabaptism contains not a single primary source reference. Most of their footnotes refer to a <u>modern mennonite work</u>, which I have not read. They seem to have read the work as connecting Luther to the Edict of Speyer in 1529. They write,

"In addition, Hoover points out that "Martin Luther and his colleagues met at Speyer on the Rhein in 1529 . . . At that time they passed a resolution: 'Every Anabaptist, both male and female, shall be put to death by fire, sword, or in some other way'" (p. 198)."

This is a reference to the famous Edict of Speyer, (or the second Diet of Speyer) in 1529. The Edict contained the phrase, "every anabaptist and repaptized man or woman of the age of reason shall be condemned and brought from natural life into death by fire, sword, and the like..." I suspect Luther's involvement here has probably been misrepresented, either by Hoover (if he is being accurately quoted), or the internet article (or both). A little background is in order.

The Diet of Worms - 1521



When Luther had nailed his 95 thesis to the doors of Wittenberg, he had never intended for a massive Reformation to be the result. He wanted only the corruptions (like the sale of indulgences, and the building of St. Peter's Basilica) to stop, and as he was lecturing in Romans, wanted the doctrine of Justification to be reconsidered, since he had become convinced that Paul had taught that justification was by faith alone. But his words spread like wildfire, and he continued to write, preach, and teach, that justification was by faith alone. In 1521, he was summoned to the Diet of Worms, for his views to be legally considered. On april 17th, 1521, at around 6:00, Luther was placed on the stand and questioned by Johann von Eck. Luther's various books, teaching justification by faith, and the authority of the Scriptures, were spread out before him. Luther was asked two questions. First, "Are these your writings?" Second, "Will you recant of them?" Luther acknowledged immediately that he had written the books. On the question of being asked to recant of them, he asked for more time. He was given one day, while he simmered in prison. Some have called that night, "the dark night of the soul." Luther knew if he wouldn't recant, it would mean both his own death, and the beginnings of a deep divide in the Church.

The next morning, he was summoned again from his cell. He was asked again if he would recount of his writings. He divided them into three classes; 1. Those teaching basic Christian truths with which all would agree. These he could not retract. 2. Those against the corruption and abuse of the papacy, that vexed the German nation. These he could not recant without cloaking wickedness and tyranny. 3. Books against his popish opponents. "In these he confessed to have been more violent than was proper, but even these he could not retract without giving aid and comfort to his enemies, who would triumph and make things worse." (Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Volume 7, pg. 303). The prosecution demanded an answer "without horns." To which Luther responded with the famous words,

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or clear arguments (since I believe nether the Pope nor councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound to the Word of God; I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against conscience." (Schaff, pg. 304-305).

While there is some uncertainty about the next proceedings, Schaff notes that he probably then uttered something like, *"Here I stand. [I cannot do otherwise.] God help me. Amen."* (Schaff, pg. 305).

The Edict of Worms

The Diet continued, and within a few weeks issued the ban. It legalized the Pope's bull of excommunication, pronounced a ban upon Luther and his teaching, and condemned his as a heretic. *"It commands the burning, and forbids the printing, publication, and sale, of his books, the sheltering and feeding of his person, and that of his followers, and directs the magistrates to seize him where ever he may be found, and to hand him over to the Emperor, to be dealt with according to the penal laws against heretics." (Schaff, pg. 319). Schaff concludes, <i>"Thus Luther was outlawed by Church and State, condemned by the Pope, the Emperor, the universities, cast out of human society, and left exposed to a violent death."* (Schaff, pg. 320). Luther became a fugitive of the state. Luther still refused to recant, fled, and in seclusion continued to write, and continued his work on a German translation of the Bible that would give the Word of God to the masses.

The Toleration of the Edict of Speyer - 1526

But as the Reformation progressed, the Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, spread across the land. Progress was made. In 1526, the first Diet of Speyer was held. As more and more states were considering the Reformation question, the Diet issued an edict for a temporary suspension of the Edict of Worms. For the time being at least, every State could determine for itself what religious branch it would subscribe to. It wasn't meant to be a permeant repeal, "but in its practical effect the resolution of 1526 went far beyond its intention... Luther himself understood the Diet of Speier as having given him a temporal acquittal of heresy." (Schaff, pg. 684-686).

The (Second) Edict of Speyer - 1529

Over the course of the next two years, the whole world shook. The Reformation message spread like wildfire. Rome was sacked in 1527. War with the Turks seemed imminent. A second Diet of Speyer was convened in March, 1529, "for action against the Turks, and against the further progress of the Reformation." (Schaff, pg. 690). At this second Diet, the toleration that had been granted at the first Diet was rescinded.

"The Diet neutralized the recess of the preceding Diet of 1526; it virtually condemned (without, however, annulling) the innovations made; and it forbade, on the pain of imperial ban, any further reformation until the meeting of the council, which was now positively promised for the next year by the Emperor and the Pope. The Zwinglians and the Anabaptists were excluded even from toleration. The latter were to be punished by death." (Schaff, pg. 691).

This is the decree noted above that commanded the death penalty for anabaptism. Lamentably, thousands died as a result of it, both anabaptists and other protestants wrongly accused of their practice. I don't know of a translation of the proceedings or the decree in English, and I'm no expert in the history (I'd love to read it if someone has access to these primary sources). I don't see any indication that Luther was even present. But what would Luther's response have been to the Diet? What was the response of Lutherans? It must be understood that the Edict was largely aimed against the entire Reformation project. It essentially made any form of Protestant faith illegal. Thus the Lutherans *protested* the Diet. Schaff explains,

"The Luthren members of the Diet, under the well-founded impression that the prohibition of any further reformation meant death to the whole movement, entered in the legal form an appeal for themselves, their subjects and for all who now or hereafter shall believe in the Word of God, the famous protest of April 25, 1529, against all those measures of the Diet which were contrary to the Word of God, to their conscience, and to the decision of the Diet of 1526 [the earlier edict of toleration], and appealed from the decision of the majority to the Emperor, to a general or German council, and impartial Christian judges....They were determined to defend themselves against every act of violence of he majority. Their motto was that of Elector John the Constant; 'The Word of God abideth forever.' They deserve the name of confessors of the evangelical faith and the rights of conscience in the face of imminent danger." (Schaff, pg. 691).

The followers of Luther (presumably acting as he himself would have) lodged their Protest against this Reformation-halting Edict. Schaff explains,

"The protest of Speier was a renewal and expansion of Luther's protest at Worms. The protest of a single monk had become the protest of princes and representatives of leading cities of the empire, who now for the first time appeared as an organized party. It was a protest of conscience bound in the Word of God against tyrannical authority... From this protest and appeal the Lutherans were called **Protestants**; with good reason, if we look at their attitude to Rome, which remains the same to this day." (Schaff, pg. 691-692).

If Schaff has accurately summarized the situation (and I know of no reason to think otherwise of the great historian), then understand what this means. Luther didn't draft legislation calling for the death of Baptists. (I don't think he would even have had this legal authority - and even if he had, he certainly did go around murdering them himself). Rather, the same Diet that condemned them to death also condemned the entire Reformation as heretical, and reinstated the Edict that had called for his own death. And it was in fact precisely by the *protest* of him and his followers against this very Edict that he came to be given the name "Protestant," for protesting the decision of Rome in this Diet. It seems quite unfair to quote a section from this Edict against anabaptists and pretend that Luther himself wrote the Edict out of his personal hatred for them. That, once again, would appear to be nothing more than slander.

I should note here that I have read in a few places that in his later days, Luther became a more harsh man. That he erupted in a vitriol against the Jews is well known. That he did the same against anabaptist in that period is likely, especially given what would happen at Munster, though I have not seen primary sources that would sustain that claim. In either case, many historians think that Luther began to lose his mind at the end of his life. His entire demeanor changed, as did his writings, and his positions in many areas. I watched my own grandmother become a much harsher person once she was in a home and her mind was slipping. Others have watched good pastors go through similar changes. It's a common occurrence, which men of God are not immune to. But I would suggests that anything from that period shouldn't be used to characterize his entire life, and that we should judge him and his attitudes by what he wrote when in a healthy state of mind.

So What Did Luther Actually Think About The Anabaptists?

Luther set out his own thinking about the Anabaptists in his treatise *"Concerning Rebaptism"* penned in 1528 to two Roman Catholic Clergy who had asked him his thoughts. Balthasar Hubmaier, one of the early and most important leaders in the anabaptist movement, had written a book in defense of anabaptism. He had mistakenly claimed Luther as an alley in this belief. And he had, sadly, been burned and his wife drowned in March 1528. What was Luther's attitude to this? Bergendoff and Lehmann explain,

"Luther was averse to this kind of punishment, but could not change the attitude of those who feared the heretical teachings. He observed that the movement was spreading, and in December 1527 and January 1528 wrote a treatise on the subject in reply to an inquiry of two pastors." (Luther's Works, Volume 40, pg. 227)

Their questions gave him the opportunity to offer publicly his thoughts about anabaptism and anabaptists. The treatise is contained in Volume 40 of "*Luther's Works,*" the standard english translation of Luther's writings (on pg. 227-262). It is the only sustained response we have from Luther on Anabaptism that I know of.

He writes a strong argument for infant baptism (not one I find convincing, but a strong one). He is grateful for their attack on the papacy, but sees their position as actually undermining the ability to correct the papacy. At one point he calls their doctrine "nonsense," and at several points "heresy," and even at some points, "blasphemy." But his normal word for them is the "enthusiasts," tying them (whether rightly or wrongly) with the Zwickau prophets. Yet, *"Still, we must admit that the enthusiasts have the Scriptures and the Word of God in their other doctrines. Whoever hears it from them and believes will be saved, even though they are unholy heretics and blasphemers of Christ."* He thought their rebaptism heretical, and an innovation that would undermine the gospel. But he acknowledged that their message could save.

But what of their treatment? How should they themselves be treated? He explains, in accordance with his standard position;

"Since there has not been much occasion for it, I have not, for my part, given much thought to these baptizers. But it serves you right as papists (I must call you such, as long as you are under tyrants). You will not suffer the gospel, so you will have to endure these develish rebels, as Christ says in John 5: 'I have come in my Father's name, and you did not receive me; if another comes in his own name, him you (i.e., the ones who are among you) will receive.' **Still, it is not right, and I truly grieve, that these miserable folks should be so lamentably murdered, burned, tormented to death. We should allow everyone to believe what he wills. If his faith be false, he will be sufficiently punished in hell-fire. Why then should we martyr these people also in this world, if their error be in faith alone and they are not guilty of rebellion or opposition to government?** [and he had just seen in the Peasant's rebellion what the kind of rebellion he speaks of looked like.] *Dear God how quickly a person can become confused and fall into the trap of the devil!* **By the Scriptures and the word of God, we ought to guard against him and withstand him. By fire we accomplish little."**

(Luther's Works, Volume 40, pg. 230, **bold emphasis** mine).

This is his statement. This is his clearly spoken attitude towards anabaptists. If we allow the already anachronistic connection between "anabaptists" and modern "Baptists," then I beg again, please support any accusation against Luther with multiple primary sources. My friend (mis)quoted an internet article. I have provided the context from the standard secondary sources, and have taken us directly back, at length, to the primary sources. I have engaged with Luther's own writings, in the standard English translation of them.

Luther stands accused of multiple homicides of Baptists. I think we should be heartbroken when we are forced to make such accusations. Paul used phrases like "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping..." when describing the faults of others (Philippians 3:18a KJV). I think it should pain us. I think we should cry and weep, when we are compelled to bring such a charge, especially against someone who did so much with his life for the cause of the gospel. The gospel should bind us in a way that makes accusations like that rare, and always well-researched and well-founded before being made. I don't think there is any historical basis for claims like that. His words about the Peasant's War need to be kept in their context. Claiming that those words represent his attitude towards anabaptists is slander. At most, if one could find that towards the end of his life, Luther wrote with stronger words about the anabaptists, then perhaps he could be accused of hate speech. But not murder. Certainly not mass murder.

And there shouldn't just be support for such accusations – there should be undeniable support. I'm not at all unwilling to hear such support for such accusations. But if the accuser cannot, or will not, provide it, then I humbly, graciously, and compassionately ask that they would repent of slander, and retract their accusation until it can be shown to not be a false one.

I love them.

I respect them.

I am grateful for their friendship.

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