

The Radical Reformers

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – An examination of the early radical reformers, including the Anabaptists
2. aim – To cause us to understand the growth of the reformation, even as it spawned new movements

b. outline

1. The Early Anabaptists
2. The Revolutionary Anabaptists
3. The Later Anabaptists

c. overview

1. the **state** of the Reformation
 - a. our timeframe is the first-half of the 16th C – the reformation is in *full swing*
 1. the W medieval church is deeply corrupt *ecclesiastically*, and deeply flawed *theologically*
 - a. **i.e.** the church no longer resembles the early church, or even the Imperial one – it has virtually *abandoned* justification by faith for forms of *sacramentalism*, and the typical “Catholic” is theologically *illiterate* and trapped in a system of *religiosity*
 2. Luther has had his theological epiphany, and his ideas have spread throughout Europe
 3. simultaneously, Zwingli (in Zürich) has come to similar realizations regarding the faith
 - a. his “path” was via the profound and dedicated study of Scripture, while Luther’s reforms flowed out of his experiences, especially those of his upbringing and his opposition
 - b. both men were convinced that Christianity in the W had ceased to resemble the faith established by the apostles in the NT, although they disagreed on *how far* to take that
 1. Luther was content to cleanse from the church that which simply *contradicted* Scripture
 2. Zwingli felt that the church should be reformed to *include* only that which was Scriptural
 - b. but ... into the picture arrives men who believed that *both* Zwingli and Luther *had not gone far enough* – they believed that a *marked difference* between the church and the world was essential
 1. thus, we are introduced to the **Radical Reformers** (and the movement associated with them)
 2. this is in *contrast* to the **Magisterial Reformers** (**i.e.** Luther, Zwingli, and [later] John Calvin)
 - a. magisterial = authoritative teachers; men who developed “schools” of thinking that were later followed by others; **i.e.** the leader of a *movement* to whom its adherents look
 - b. magisterial = reformers who understood an *interdependency* between the church and the secular authorities (**i.e.** the magistrates), often looking to them for support of the church, even in their work of reformation
 3. the **Radical Reformers** rejected secular authority over the church – the Reformation needed to encompass the *entirety* of the church, purifying *both* the theology of the church *and* the lives of Christians, especially in their political and social relationships (**see below**)
- c. the term used for this movement: the **Anabaptists**
 1. prefix “ana” = re; **i.e.** *re-baptizers*; the Radical Reformers in Zürich first received this name (as a pejorative) because (it was thought) that they believed in *re*-baptizing believers
 2. however, the Anabaptists *actually* taught that an original infant baptism (given by the church) was invalid (**i.e.** a non-event), since it was not *consciously* undertaken by the faithful

I. The Early Anabaptists

Content

a. the rise of the movement

1. **again:** these critics of Luther and Zwingli believed that the church was to be *utterly distinct* from the world around it – the church was a *unique institution*, and its *substance* made it distinct
 - a. **e.g.** the persecution during the Early Church was the result of the state not being able to tolerate the beliefs of the church, especially when those beliefs *contradicted* the desires of the state
2. so, in order to be *truly obedient* to Scripture, the reformation *must go much further*
 - a. the *true* reforming work was to make the church *distinct* from society – one can be a citizen of a nation simply by being born into it; one can *only* be a citizen of the church by an *act of faith*

1. **e.g.** Kierkegaard (1813-55): the utter *meaninglessness* of Christianity in Germany, where *everyone* is born into the church yet very few ever live as the Bible commands
 - b. these men believed that infant baptism *must be rejected* – it is a ritual *codifying* a person into the church, thus implying that such a person is “born” (automatically) into the church (and the state)
 - c. and, the church is to be a *community of faith* (not a community of citizens) – the *spiritual* discipline of the individual to a life of purity is a witness to the gospel, which cannot be enforced by civil government (**note:** a position John Calvin would eventually embrace)
 3. and ... in order to be *truly obedient* to Scripture, the church must embrace **pacifism**
 - a. Christians must not take up arms to defend themselves – they must obey the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount (particularly, **Matthew 5:38-48** re: retaliation and loving your enemies)
 - b. **i.e.** the Christian is to *trust in God* for matters of personal safety – if all things are ordained by God, then *he* will lead the believer “through” whatever difficulties may arise
 - c. **note:** this *particular* view of the Anabaptists was *not* well-received in parts of Europe (**i.e.** Germany, under the constant threat of the Turks; Switzerland under the threat of Catholic armies)
- b. the beginnings of the movement**
1. although these ideas were circulating throughout Europe, it was in Zürich that they gained attention
 - a. a group of Zwingli’s critics in the city began to call themselves *brethren*, and founded a congregation of “true believers” – they did so after it became apparent that Zwingli would not follow
 - b. George Blaurock (a former priest) asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him – he did so, January 21, 1525, at a fountain in the city square, which was followed by Blaurock baptizing several others
 1. **note:** *at this point*, the “method” of baptism was not the key issue (see below) – the issue was *faith preceding* the ritual (they *later* adopted immersion as the Scriptural method)
 - c. it was at *this point* that their enemies began calling them Anabaptists
 2. the movement (of course) began to threaten the stability of the social order
 - a. Luther and Zwingli still held that the church and state were intertwined, but the teaching of the Anabaptists (along with their pacifism) threatened *the state* and its control over its citizenry
 1. **remember:** Lutheranism was supported by the princes of Germany (who exercised great control over the churches) and Zwingli was supported by the Council of Government in Zürich
 - b. the Anabaptist movement “disconnected” the power of the state from the church, with the church being an entirely *voluntary* community *with the state having no power over it*
 1. and, this led (some) Anabaptist communities to also become highly *egalitarian*, with women enjoying the same rights as men (in theory), and the poor being as important as the rich
 2. this became the forerunner of the modern spirit of *religious tolerance* – **i.e.** the church and state being distinct entities with the state allowing the church to operate *outside* of its direction
 3. **note:** on rare occasions Anabaptists would abandon this principle (**see below**)
 3. the Anabaptist leaders met in Schleithem, Switzerland, in 1527
 - a. the goal was to curb some of the “extremism” amongst their groups
 - b. they issued the *Confession of Schleithem*, which included their seven fundamentals:
 1. baptism shall be administered *only* to those who have repented of sin and trusted in Christ
 2. the **ban**: those who refuse to amend their lives after two private and one public admonition (**see Matthew 18**) shall be “banned” from communion
 3. communion is to be a ritual of remembrance only to be taken by baptized adults, as a part of the “one bread” and “one drink” known as the church
 4. true believers must separate themselves for that is not united with Christ, and believers must actively shun all that is evil (**i.e.** the fundamentalist doctrine of separation)
 5. pastors are to be men of good report (amongst outsiders), dedicated to the reading and teaching of Scripture, to discipline and to the ban, to prayer, to administer communion, and to the care of the body of Christ; supported by the church (financially) and treated as an elder
 6. Christians are not to take up the sword, which is reserved for the state, and not to serve in any capacity within the state (as a magistrate)
 7. Christians are never to take an oath, but simply to speak truthfully at all times
 4. the result was *severe* persecution
 - a. in 1525 (before Schleithem), the Catholic areas of Switzerland began condemning them to death
 - b. in 1526, the Council of Government followed suit, then spread to the rest of Switzerland
 - c. in 1528, Charles V (of Germany) ordered their deaths (using a law directed against the Donatists)
 - d. in 1529, the Diet of Spire approved the imperial decree
 - e. many were martyred – ironically, many were drowned – potentially more died in this period than all who died in the church *prior* to Constantine!

II. The Revolutionary Anabaptists

Content

a. the radical movement

1. one of the *additional* traits of the Anabaptists was a heightened view of the return of Christ
 - a. **i.e.** the sense that the church, being utterly distinct from the world, is established to *await* the coming of the Christ to take it to himself (**e.g.** a fundamentalist Baptist preoccupation)
2. Melchior Hoffman (a leather-dresser), originally a follower of Zwingli, began to announce, in Strasbourg (where tolerance allowed the movement), that the Day of the Lord was near
 - a. his preaching caused many to flock to the city in the hope it would become the “New Jerusalem”
 - b. he also rejected the initial adoption of pacifism – as the end approached, Christians would need to take up arms against the children of darkness
 - c. he was imprisoned, and many of his followers saw this as a fulfillment of his preaching – he was still in prison on the day he had predicted the Second Coming
 - d. as a result, some suggested that it was *Münster* where Christ would return, and the faithful flocked there, taking over the city and expelling the Catholics
3. the “New Jerusalem” of Munster was led by John Matthys and his disciple, John of Leiden
 - a. everything was conformed to Scripture – there were daily claims of visions and revelations
 - b. the ousted Catholic bishop gathered an army and besieged the city – John Matthys was killed on a sortie out of the city for food – John of Leiden then took over
 - c. but ... the experiment waned – many of the inhabitants grew tired of the excesses, and they opened the gates; John of Leiden (the king of the New Jerusalem) was captured and killed

II. The Later Anabaptists

Content

a. the later Anabaptists

1. Menno Simons – a Dutch priest, left his position in 1536 and joined an Anabaptist fellowship
 - a. his followers would later be called *Mennonites*
 - b. he was convinced that pacifism was an essential part of Christianity, and refused to have anything to do with the revolutionary Anabaptist (see above)
 - c. Simons embraced all of the tenets of the *Confession of Schleithem*, and (later) added the ritual of foot-washing to their religious practices
 - d. the Mennonites were considered subversive by the civil authorities (because they wouldn’t swear oaths or take offices that demanded them)
 - e. thus, they were scattered throughout E Europe and Russia, eventually coming to N America – they eventually immigrated to S America, where they remain the last bastion of the Anabaptists

b. the connection of Anabaptists to Baptists

1. the Baptist movement in America owes its heritage to the Baptists of England in the 17th C., *not to the (short-lived) Anabaptist movement* in Europe in the 16th C.
 - a. however, the “spirit” of the Anabaptist (see the *Confession of Schleithem*) would endure into the Baptist movement
 - b. **i.e.** Baptists would embrace the ideas of credobaptism and the Lord’s Supper as a memorial, but would shun the ideas of pacifism and oath-taking (**e.g.** LBCF, chap. 23, of Lawful Oaths, and chap. 24, of the Civil Magistrate would *clarify* the Baptist position as less “radical”; see Truth4Generations, 2022)