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Anabaptism and the Reformation

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ALL SAINTS DAY, 1517, is a red-letter day in the history of Protestantism. On that day Martin Luther set in motion a chain of events that led to the break-up of western Christendom. The three and one-quarter years following that day, a period when Pope and Emperor found themselves unable to act for reasons of imperial and ecclesiastical politics, represented years of grace that gave Luther time to grasp the significance of what he had started and to take the necessary steps to consolidate what was now a revolt of extraordinary proportions and vigour. The Papal Bull of Excommunication of January 3, 1521, and the events at Worms the following April marked the point of no return for a movement that is still going on, and by which all of us today are affected in one way or another. Man's complete guilt before God and his justification by faith *alone*: it was from this that Luther would not budge, and it was this that formed the core of Reformation theology.

When in July, 1520, the Papal Bull *Exsurge domine* appeared against Luther many humanists, who had hitherto raised loud cheers at every withering blow from the cudgel of the German Hercules, began to have second thoughts about it all and gradually withdrew their support from Luther. The humanist preacher of the Grossmünster in the Swiss city of Zurich found this behaviour of many whom he had considered to be undaunted supporters of the new "philosophia Christi" very disturbing. He became convinced that such a betrayal could be accounted for only by a demonic force out to destroy the newly discovered truths. The cowardly defection of many of his friends shattered his faith in man's ability to educate himself into blessedness, and threw him back upon God, for from about this time a new theocentric note becomes dominant in his correspondence. He gradually became convinced that only God himself could help.¹ It was the beginning of the evangelical Reformation in Switzerland. Zwingli preached the gospel of the redeeming love of God in Christ regularly and persuasively and in January, 1523, the Reformation was formally adopted in the city of Zurich by order of the city council. Among Zwingli's most zealous supporters were two of his converts, Konrad Grebel and Felix Manz.

But there is a third side to the Reformation. When Luther suddenly returned to Wittenberg in March, 1522, from the Wartburg where he had been hiding, he did not come because he was invited. It was because his Reformation was in danger. About Christmas, 1521, three men came to

1. A. Rich, *Die Anfaenge der Theologie Huldrych Zwinglis* (Zurich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1949), p. 101.

Wittenberg from Zwickau, a city to the south, claiming to be prophets and proclaiming heavenly visions. They had been together at Zwickau with a Lutheran preacher named Thomas Muentzer who had similar ideas. In Wittenberg they found Andreas Karlstadt, the rotund and slightly unstable preacher of the Castle Church, who was inclined to favour their notions. Luther saw in these enthusiastic tendencies not only fanaticism, but also the destruction of Christian freedom, since they quickly led to iconoclasm and radical change. His strong line on these matters antagonized the preacher Thomas Muentzer, who gradually came out in opposition to Luther. Muentzer was strongly influenced by the mediaeval mystics and by the eschatological writings of Joachim of Fiore. He began to preach that in order for the true communion of saints to be established all the godless must be killed off. He proposed this program to Duke John and the Prince Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony in his famous sermon of July 13, 1524, based on a text from Daniel 7.² He suggested that they, the Princes, were the men to implement it, and if they would not do it, he thundered, the people would, for the sword would be given to them. The Princes, although no doubt opposed to all ungodliness, did not take the suggestion seriously, and Muentzer, who had never been more serious in his life, set about to fulfil his dreams. It all ended at Frankenhausen on May 15, 1525, when the peasant army under his command was massacred by the cavalry of the Princes, and Muentzer himself lost his head soon after. But somewhere along the line, perhaps while Muentzer was the parson in Allstedt, a town not far from Wittenberg, he had come in contact with a man named Hans Hut, a kind of travelling salesman, described as "a well educated, clever fellow, tall, with light brown hair and a blonde moustache." They certainly met personally before the Battle of Frankenhausen, and also after, when Muentzer gave Hut a pamphlet to publish. A comparison of the writings of these two men reveals the striking similarity of their thought, and one can only assume that Hut was strongly influenced by Muentzer's mystic and eschatological views.

Karlstadt also gradually came out in opposition to Luther, particularly in the doctrine of the presence in the sacrament. He went from place to place, being continually banished and exiled, for all of which he was at least partly to blame since he had an uncanny affinity for every degree of plain and fancy intrigue. He wrote a number of pamphlets and books about the sacrament, on the mystical virtue of *Gelassenheit* (surrender, yieldedness, a term very important for the German mystics), and also one on the question of whether it was right that a Reformation should be brought in slowly and carefully, herein attacking Luther who was doing just this. Karlstadt's works on the sacrament and this latter work quite probably influenced the angry young men of Zurich, Konrad Grebel and Felix Manz, who had, since 1523, gradually begun to differ with Zwingli's view of reform, and had come out in opposition to him.

2. Sermon in *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XXV.

The picture we have at the beginning of 1525 is this: the Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformations both in full flourish, but both of them already subject to attacks from within. In Germany Muentzer, Karlstadt, and Luther were keeping the presses hot, churning out pamphlets against each other; in Switzerland Zwingli was slowly and grimly arriving at the conclusion that something had to be done about the insolent young men who, with their dissenting views, were endangering his work. The Lutheran Reformation was eight years old; the Zwinglian five. Into this rather stormy scene a new factor was introduced on January 21, 1525, and this new factor was Anabaptism.

We have to make a slight pause at this point to make some general statements about Anabaptism. First of all the name simply means "baptizer again," and was a name of reproach invented by Zwingli. There would be nothing wrong with calling these people Baptists, but this would introduce confusion into historical research. Secondly, it has already been pointed out that the Radical Reformation began as early as December, 1521, and therefore the rise of the Zwickau prophets and Muentzer cannot be equated with the rise of Anabaptism. Thirdly, what do we mean by Anabaptism? Anabaptism was a very diverse movement, and this makes it difficult to define it clearly. However, to preserve some degree of order here, an Anabaptist is defined as a person who was baptized upon a personal confession of faith, and who did not repudiate that baptism. Fourthly, Anabaptism was never a unified movement. At least three reasons can be advanced for this. (1) Anabaptism had no history of a succession of strong leadership that might have worked for unity. Fierce and thorough persecution in its early stages by Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians alike removed very promising and talented leaders before 1528, and many more after that. (2) A great variety of influences played upon the initiators of the movement, causing widely divergent points of view on, for example, the attitude to the Scriptures and the work of the Holy Spirit. (3) The seed of this disunity lay in the very nature of Anabaptism itself, namely in the emphasis on the competence of the individual believer to interpret the Scriptures for himself, a situation with which modern Baptists are not altogether unfamiliar.

We need now to discuss the rise of Anabaptism in relation to the Lutheran, Zwinglian, and Radical Reformations. We start with Zwingli.

I. ZWINGLI AND THE SWISS BRETHREN

As was pointed out at the beginning, it was about July of 1520 when Zwingli turned his back upon the humanist ideal of reform, and began preaching about the grace of God offered freely to all men who by faith receive it. He preached about the necessity for repentance, the new birth, and of becoming a soldier of Christ, ready to obey his orders. With the conversion of Konrad Grebel and Felix Manz, Zwingli had acquired two highly gifted and energetic young men to help him in the cause of the Reformation. Both men had humanist educations, being proficient in the

three classical languages, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, although there is uncertainty about Grebel's knowledge of Hebrew. Thus equipped, these young men, while working with Zwingli, also studied the Scriptures on their own, and in October, 1523, at a public disputation about the validity of the Mass, differences between Zwingli and Grebel began to emerge. Since the Mass had been proved to be false according to the testimony of Scripture, Grebel pressed for immediate abolition of it. Zwingli desired to go more slowly and gradually to educate the people into accepting the idea of change. For this reason he put the decision about the "when" and the "how" into the hands of the city council.³ Furthermore Grebel wanted detailed guidance to be given to the priests about the celebration of the Lord's Supper and demanded that it be observed only in the evening, that common bread be used instead of the wafer, and that each believer ought to take the bread himself instead of having it pushed into his mouth by the priest. For all these demands Grebel appealed to the New Testament.⁴

At the time these differences were not of themselves of a serious nature, for Zwingli's answers seemed to satisfy Grebel. But this was only apparent, for a clearly defined chain of reasoned protest gradually developed as these young men, along with others, day after day pored over their New Testaments. They were convinced that they had scriptural support for this chain of reasoning. It went somewhat as follows. (1) Partly, perhaps, because of their humanist education, but more because of the revolutionary and thoroughgoing character of their experience of conversion, they came to accept a view of scriptural authority that was in some respects different from that of Zwingli. The motto that stood over Zwingli's work of reform was: "Everything that is not commanded in Scripture must be considered forbidden." But within that definition Zwingli tended to be lenient and to allow room for social and pastoral considerations. Grebel and Manz also accepted the motto, but they took it more literally. They said: the guidance that Scripture gives must be followed to the letter or we are in danger of being found disobedient. Because God himself has given the Bible to the church, and because his authority is mediated to the church through it, it is not right to allow social, pastoral, or political considerations to deter us from following it. The New Testament contains the very words of Christ. Who are we to disobey them? This was the basis upon which they later rejected the baptism of infants, and instituted adult believers' baptism. (2) The second point in this chain of reasoning came directly out of the first. If, they said, we accept the Bible, and especially the New Testament, as normative for a program of ecclesiastical reform, are we justified in taking our time and being slack about putting its precepts into practice? Is not this involving us in at least temporary disobedience to Christ to whom we owe our allegiance? In our relationship to Christ half measures will not do. Consequently we must insist on immediate action, and we believe Zwingli to be wrong in his insistence in going slow. (3) From this followed, thirdly, their view

3. Fritz Blanke, *Brueder in Christo* (Zurich: Zwingli-Verlag, 1955), pp. 6-7.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

of the nature of the church. Zwingli, it will be remembered, had put the decisions about the "when" and "how" of the abolition of the Mass into the hands of "my lords" the council. This seemed to Grebel and Manz a preposterous thing to do, for in matters relating to the Christian faith the church alone must decide, and it has no right to put such matters into the hands of a political body, which, although sympathetic to reform, may not necessarily be Christian. We have here the beginning of the doctrine of the separation of church and state. This church, in order to make decisions about the Christian faith, must be a church composed of true believers, not a church to which everyone in the city belongs by virtue of having been baptized in infancy. In any case, so far as they could see, the New Testament said nothing about infant baptism, but a great deal about the baptism of believers, by which baptism they were added to the church. This then was the way to identify the true believers who constituted the church; they were those who had repented of their sins, confessed Jesus as Lord, pledged to follow him in life, and who, upon such confession, were baptized.

Gradually, over the period of some months, this design of protest emerged. But consider: the notion of the church as a gathered company of believers had been erased from the consciousness of Christendom. The ideal of the *corpus christianum*, the coextension of society and ecclesia, was accepted as divine will by all, including Luther and Zwingli. Who were these few scholars to challenge Christendom on a doctrine so sacrosanct? Is it any wonder that they now hesitated—that they, who had so sharply criticized Zwingli's go-slow policy, should now go slow themselves? Can they be blamed for hesitating? From September, 1524, to January, 1525, they waited, but, as Grebel himself makes clear, it was prayerful waiting. They were looking to God for guidance.⁵ They knew that the step that their consciences and their loyalty to Scripture dictated would take them into persecution and suffering.⁶ And finally it was not they who took the first step that led to a complete break. During this period of waiting a number of infants had been left unbaptized. At a disputation on January 17, 1525, the council ordered all children to be baptized forthwith, and came down on the dissenting group with a heavy hand. Foreigners in the group were expelled from Zurich and all meetings of the group that was left prohibited. Now the time for action had come, the dissenting leaders knew that there could be no reconciliation except by capitulation, and their loyalty to what they believed to be right prevented this. On January 21 in the evening they met in a house in the Neustadtgasse near the Cathedral, and there, in prayer and in the act of believers' baptism, Anabaptism was born.⁷ The movement began its martyred way through an age of intolerance over the block, the gallows, and the stake. These men were the first witnesses to the

5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

6. *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz, I. Band, Zuerich*, edited by Leonard von Muralt and Walter Schmid (Zurich, 1952), pp. 16, 20, 24, 30; cf. *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, edited by H. S. Bender *et al.* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959), Vol. II, p. 571.

7. Blanke, *Brueder in Christo*, pp. 20-22.

ideal of the church that has today become a commonplace for many Christians. That there was no difference between Zwinglians and Anabaptists on the main points of the Christian faith, such as justification, Christ, and faith, is testified to by Zwingli himself, who ought to have known.⁸ The chief difference lay in their divergent views on the doctrine of the church.

II. LUTHERANISM AND ANABAPTISM

Several days after that event in the Neustadtgasse in Zurich a young schoolmaster was expelled from Nuremberg for holding heretical views. He was Hans Denck, a brilliant young humanist scholar who, like Manz, knew well the three classical languages. He was tall of person, and retiring and kindly in nature. During several years before his expulsion he had studied carefully the German mystics, especially the sermons of the Dominican John Tauler and the *German Theology*. He had made the acquaintance of Lutheranism several years before in Regensburg, and seems to have been an adherent.⁹ But on the basis of the insights acquired by his study of the mystics he began to criticize the Lutheran Reformation, especially its emphasis on the relationship of faith to the written word of the Bible. "Faith," he said, "cannot come from the Scriptures, but comes from God alone as he makes himself known in the depth of the soul."¹⁰ The written Scriptures, as they themselves testify, are a witness to Christ who is the truth, and are by no means the truth themselves.¹¹ He also dissented from Luther's view that man's will is completely enslaved, and from what he believed to be implicit in such a view, that God is the cause of evil.¹² After his expulsion from Nuremberg he is known to have spent some time with Anabaptists in St. Gall, Switzerland, and later we find him employed as a language teacher in Augsburg. During this time his mind was not idle. No doubt it was running in much the same channels as the minds of the men of Zurich before the break with Zwingli. When, therefore, Balthasar Hubmaier, a highly gifted Swiss Anabaptist theologian and preacher, passed through Augsburg early in May, 1526, Denck became an Anabaptist by accepting believers' baptism at Hubmaier's hands. Thus an Anabaptism with a different emphasis was launched in South Germany, the germinal idea of the church as a company of believers gathered by the Holy Spirit having come from Swiss Anabaptism.¹³

Partly because of the influence of mystic thought, and partly because of the differing nature of the opposition, South German Anabaptism developed in a different manner from Swiss Anabaptism. In its early stages (and that

8. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

9. *Hans Denck Schriften, Bd. II, Religiöse Schriften*, edited by Walter Fellmann (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1956), p. 9.

10. Walter Klaassen, "Modern Anabaptist Research," *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. 17 (1959), p. 19.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

13. Herbert Klassen, "The Life and Teachings of Hans Hut II," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. 33 (1959), pp. 302-304.

is what we are concerned with here), its protest was mainly against a renewed externalization of religion, against the all too easy dependence of the Lutherans on the written Scriptures and the sacraments. Let us be sure we understand this point. The protest lay here not so much against what Luther himself thought and said, as against "Lutheranism" as the Anabaptists observed it in the towns and cities where they lived. It is possible that we have to do here with a double misunderstanding of Luther: first that his own followers all too often mistook his trumpeting of *sola fide* to mean antinomianism, and secondly, that the Anabaptists took this applied and perverted Lutheranism to be Luther's teaching. That there was, however, in addition to this a basic disagreement between Anabaptists and Luther on the doctrine of the church must not be forgotten, for it is an integral part of the protest against this externalization.

Hans Denck himself, partly because of his retiring disposition, and partly because of the strong mystic element in his thought, could not have built up an enduring movement. But he took the step that ensured South German Anabaptism a strong and enduring life as a church. On May 26, shortly after his own baptism, he baptized Hans Hut, the friend of Thomas Muentzer, whom we last met at the Battle of Frankenhausen, which marked the end of the Peasants' Revolt. Hut, having shed his social-revolutionary notions when he vowed obedience to Christ in baptism, immediately turned out to be the most energetic and influential missionary of South German Anabaptism. Along with his mystical theology, which he inherited from Muentzer and Denck, he believed firmly in the possibility and necessity of a visible church, gathered by the Holy Spirit through repentance, faith, and baptism, and he proceeded to found churches throughout Franconia, Bavaria, and Austria, as far east as Vienna. Again the emphasis was on the inner experience of Christ over against a "false" faith, stolen from the Scriptures, by which he meant a purely intellectual acceptance of the word of Scripture without the experience of the rebirth. Allied with this caution against the false faith was a strong emphasis on the fulfilment of the ethical demands of Jesus.

As in Swiss Anabaptism, we find here that the two early leaders of South German Anabaptism came to their position by way of Lutheranism. Again we can say that on the central truths of the Christian faith, such as justification by faith, Anabaptists and Lutherans agreed. Many Anabaptist confessions of faith follow the Apostolic Creed, and some Anabaptists, when asked about their beliefs, simply repeated the Apostolicum.

III. THE RADICAL REFORMATION AND ANABAPTISM

When we look at the Radical Reformation apart from Anabaptism, the names of four men immediately spring to mind: Thomas Muentzer, Andreas Karlstadt, Kaspar Schwenckfeld, and Sebastian Franck, all of whom started out as Lutherans, but soon went their own way. Muentzer lost himself in

apocalyptically conceived social revolution, and Karlstadt, a Reformation version of the "wandering Aramaean," unable to agree for long with anyone, does not seem to have accomplished much. Schwenckfeld and Franck were individualistic "pietists," to use an anachronism. What about the relationship of these men to Anabaptism? Contacts of Muentzer and Karlstadt with incipient Anabaptists have already been mentioned. Schwenckfeld conducted a voluminous and lengthy theological warfare with Pilgram Marpeck, an Anabaptist leader in the fifth and sixth decades of the sixteenth century, and Franck never had much to do with them. What united these men with Anabaptism was the common protest against the externalization of Protestantism, a danger which they foresaw only too clearly. What separated Anabaptists from Franck and Schwenckfeld was the fact that the latter had little understanding for the visible church and the sacraments. Religion became with them a completely inward, individual matter, with no recognizable social dimension. Anabaptism, on the other hand, stressed the inner religious experience as well, but placed it into the context of the visible church with its means of grace, word and sacraments. In fact the Anabaptists were the only Protestants to make this emphasis in this way. They walked a continual tightrope between Lutheranism on the one hand, with its tendency to put too much emphasis on the external means of grace, and the spiritualizers like Schwenckfeld and Franck, who put too much emphasis on the exclusive individual experience. Naturally we find some Anabaptists leaning to one side and some to the other.

Thus we see that the Lutheran and Zwinglian Reformations were the source of Anabaptism. Almost without exception the Anabaptists recognized the debt they owed to these men. But this debt did not deter them from going their own way when they felt that the giants were wrong. Perhaps they took too seriously what the Reformers said. For when Luther and Zwingli gave the Bible into the hands of the people in their own tongue, and with it the right before God to interpret those Scriptures, these people did not in all cases implicitly accept the words of the Reformers, but checked them against the Scriptures, and sometimes they did not stand the test of Scripture. The Anabaptists studied the Bible more diligently than the Reformers bargained for, and Oecolampadius, the Reformer of Basel, had the embarrassment of being confronted with this fact by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Basel, who chided him for persecuting the Anabaptists simply because they took him at his word, and who also refused to be party to this persecution.¹⁴ On the other hand, one can only say that Luther and Zwingli could have reacted in no other way than to defend themselves even to the persecution of the dissenters, for they saw in this free church experiment the inevitable ruin of what they had laboriously built up. This is not to excuse them, but to extend to them the understanding they deserve. No

14. *Aktensammlung zur Geschichte der Basler Reformation in den Jahren 1519 bis Anfang 1534*, edited by E. Duerr and P. Roth (4 vols., Basel: Historische und antiquarische Gesellschaft, 1921-), Vol. IV, p. 268.

doubt, as already mentioned, the Anabaptists frequently misunderstood the Reformers, but on the crucial points of the conflict they saw the issues all too clearly, and the great modern free church movement bears eloquent testimony to the vision of these Anabaptists. It is clear that, although there were cranks among them—and what movement is free from such embarrassments?—they were relatively few in number, for it was Bucer, the Reformer of Strassburg, who complained that the people who turned Anabaptist were almost invariably the best and most thoughtful of his congregation.