

# (Christian History) 15. the Anabaptists, Radical Reformers

by David Guzik

---

*David Guzik's sermon explores the Anabaptists as Radical Reformers who challenged the state church model established during the Reformation, emphasizing believer's baptism and voluntary church membership.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 18:15

**Topics:** "Church History", "Reformation Theology"

---

## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the actions of Munzer and Luther during the peasant revolt. Munzer encouraged his followers to fight for the Lord and not be afraid, while Luther wrote a strongly worded work against the peasants. The preacher also mentions Charles Spurgeon's observation that Luther's Reformation was important but left some errors untouched. Luther's focus was primarily on breaking the theological grip of the Roman Catholic Church, particularly in regards to salvation. The preacher references a biblical text, Luke 14:15-24, which Luther used to justify force. Additionally, Luther had an ideal of having church services exclusively for the genuinely saved, but he never fully implemented this concept.

---

## Transcript

With this lecture it would be a good idea if we started out with where we ended our last lecture with that quote from Charles Spurgeon that he made about Luther and the Reformation. Let me read it to you again. Spurgeon said, what a blessing it would have been in Luther's time if the Reformation had been carried out completely.

Great as the work was, it was in some points a very superficial thing and left deadly errors untouched. Now, Spurgeon's observation there about Luther and the Reformation was entirely true. Luther, of course, did an absolutely groundbreaking work.

He did an absolutely essential work, but his Reformation was much more of breaking the theological grip that the Roman Catholic had upon the Church, especially when it came to the doctrine of salvation. Nevertheless, it's true that Luther did not follow through with his reforms as much as he might have, but other people did have the heart and the will to do exactly that. Now, in the midst of this, we really need to keep in mind a concept that's going to come to be important through this lecture upon the Anabaptist movement or the radical reformers.

In the midst of this, we must keep in mind the concept of the state church. This is a church that is officially sponsored and supported and cooperating with the government, and the government, of course, cooperates with the church. It also means that in the conception of a state church, which, again, may be an unfamiliar concept to many of the American listeners, because in America, it's a completely different environment, and they have very little instinctive understanding of what it's like to have a Church of England or a Landeskirche, as it is in Germany, or a state church, as it would be in Sweden or in many other places.

But, again, the idea very much is that in any geographical area, there is only one church. This is exactly how it was understood all up until Medieval times, and even through much of modern Europe. The idea was very simple, was that, you know, the government and the church worked together to build a Christian society, and in that Christian society, there could only be one true church.

And so you didn't have this denomination or that denomination. You had one church. And Protestantism, at least in the form of Luther and Calvin and Zwingli and some of the other Reformers that we looked at, Protestantism did not shake that fundamental approach to the idea of there being a state church and only one permitted church in any geographic region.

It just said that the Roman Catholic Church was the wrong church, and that now it should be turned to a church that was much more evangelical and much more correct doctrinally. See, in the Middle Ages and in the days of the Reformation and for some time after that, it was very hard for them to think outside the box and to think that people could just worship as they pleased as long as they didn't cause trouble. In their thinking, having another church, another denomination, or an independent Christian group, it was trouble all by itself.

Therefore, all Christianity had to be expressed within the state church or those approved by the state church. And of course, this was the dynamic that in one sense created the Anabaptist movement. Now, let's sort of go back to Luther.

I want you to think about it in 1526. Luther published a translation of the Mass into common German. He said that he would have still been happy with the Lutheran Latin Mass of 1523, but he saw a need for something in the language of the common people, most of whom had no idea what was going on during the Latin Mass.

But in approaching this whole idea of having a service for the German believers in their own language, what Luther thought was really necessary was to have a service for those who were really saved. I think you could sympathize with what it must have been like for a man like Martin Luther. In any geographical place, any particular village, there's one church there, and virtually everybody in the village went to the church.

Because if you didn't, you were socially ostracized. It was very easy to tell if the neighbor down the street, or the other one up the block, or wherever, was not present at that particular church on that particular Sunday. And so social pressure made it very compelling for people to go to church.

And of course, a large number of those people would be going to church. Most, if I wouldn't say all, but let's just say a good number of them, would not be born again. And so here you can just imagine Martin Luther preaching on a Sunday morning, looking out over his congregation, and being able to pick out, you know, a few born-again believers, or maybe up to half, or who knows what the proportion was.

But being very aware that he was ministering to a group of converted and unconverted. What Luther thought was really necessary was to have a service for those who were really saved. And in his mind, this service would not be held in a public place for a mixed assembly, but it would be held privately for those, and I'm quoting Luther here, who want to be Christians in earnest, and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth.

In other words, those who really believed the truth and lived it out. And this is how he thought such a service should be conducted. Let me quote Luther here now again.

He says, They should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptize, to receive the sacrament, and to do other Christian works. According to this order, those who do not lead Christian lives could be known, reprov'd, corrected, cast out, or excommunicated, according to the rule of Christ in Matthew 18, 15 through 17. Here one could also solicit benevolent gifts to be willingly given and distributed to the poor, according to St. Paul's example, 2 Corinthians 9. Here would be no need of much and elaborate singing.

Here one could set out a brief and neat order for baptism and the sacrament, and center everything on the word, prayer, and love. Well, this is a wonderful ideal that Luther had in his mind. Instead of having the state church meeting that, in course, included saved and non-saved because it included everybody in the community, instead let's have a church service just for those who are genuinely saved.

The sad truth is that Luther never worked out such a service for the really saved. He said that given the current state of Christianity among the German people, he considered that it would be an impractical dream. And the great tragedy of not just Luther, but of other Protestants as well, is that when such groups did emerge, when those people came forward who really did say, let's just have a gathering of true believers, not necessarily being a part of the state church, Luther and his colleagues could see nothing in them but crazy, dangerous people.

Luther's strong opposition to those groups, those groups that would meet outside of the officially recognized church, was rooted in a Christian tradition that went back at least as far as Augustine. You see, when faced with the stubborn Donatists in the 5th century, Augustine eventually came to the conclusion that force was necessary to deal with those who were trying to divide the body of Christ. He said, Originally, my opinion was that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail only by force of reason.

But when it came right down to it, faced with this prospect of the church dividing, splitting upon significant lines, Augustine concluded that violence was the lesser evil. Look, it's not like he liked using violence against heretics, but he just believed that it was a lesser evil than allowing the church to be profoundly and permanently divided. And he even found a biblical text to support his view, at least in his own mind.

It comes from the parable of the banquet. You remember that passage in Luke chapter 14 verses 15 through 24, where the master of the house wants to have a great banquet, and he issues invitations to all kinds of people, and the people give the lamest excuses of all. They don't want to come to the master's banquet.

An excuse after excuse is given. People are unwilling to come. Finally, the master says, well listen, go out and bring in whoever you can.

And this is a specific line in Luke chapter 14 verse 23 that Augustine used to justify force. Listen carefully. He says, then the master said to the servant, go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

Those little words, compel them to come in, became the foundation for Augustine's doctrine, and later medieval church doctrine, and even extending into the Protestant days, and in the days after the Protestant Reformation, for actually using force, coercion, violence, torture, in order to keep the unity of the church. This became the standard justification throughout the Middle Ages, and as I said again, up until Reformation times, for the use of force in religious disputes. Now, this came to face Martin Luther in a very powerful way.

When Martin Luther went into hiding after the Diet of Worms, translating the New Testament into German, his work was carried on in Wittenberg by a man named Karlstadt. Karlstadt sought to implement Luther's ideas in Luther's absence. Karlstadt is depicted in the generally excellent movie, a recent movie about Martin Luther, as being a crazy fanatic.

And I can't say that I'm familiar enough with the historical evidence to say whether or not that picture is accurate. My sense is that it's overdone. It does seem that Karlstadt was somewhat of a fanatic, somewhat of an enthusiast, but maybe not, perhaps, to the extent that he is displayed so in the Luther movement.

But I would have to leave that up to better research and somebody else who would do more digging on that issue. Anyway, in his absence, Karlstadt, Andreas Karlstadt, was sort of left in charge while Luther was hidden out and being protected at the Wartburg in Eisenach. Karlstadt started, in Wittenberg, an evangelical communion service.

He started conducting things in simplicity and in the common languages. He started serving communion directly to the people, and he started preaching justification by faith. He started carrying on Luther's Reformation the way he thought Luther might very well want him to carry it on, taking it step after step, continuing to reform the things that needed to be reformed.

However, Luther's political backer, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, became alarmed. And he asked Luther to return to Wittenberg. When Luther returned, he put down the changes that Karlstadt made, and he preached a blistering series of sermons denouncing Karlstadt and the changes that he made.

You know, we referred to this in a previous lecture, how Luther came back to Wittenberg and he made these sermons, these denouncing speeches of Karlstadt, very demonstrably in his Augustinian monk's habit, because Karlstadt had already up to that time renounced his monastic vows and had left the habit of a monk behind and was saying, I'm going on to greater and greater reform. Luther came back, preached these blistering sermons in his monk's habit, as if to demonstrate the fact that he was putting the brakes on an out-of-control reform movement that Karlstadt was rushing forward to ruin. This is how Luther saw Karlstadt, quoting from his table talk.

He says, quote, Karlstadt opposed me merely out of ambition, for he flattered himself that on earth there was not a learned man, a more learned man than he. And although his writings he imitated me, yet he played strange tricks with my manner. He wanted to be the great man, and truly I would have willingly have left the honor to him, so far as it had not been against God, for I praise my God, I was never so presumptuous as to think myself wiser than another man.

And so this dispute obviously left Karlstadt out of Luther's favor, out of the circle of the Reformation as it was going forth there in Wittenberg, and it really changed the dynamic of things going forward, because now there was a more radical group of reformers. Right now, now Luther was sort of in the middle of two groups. On one side were the Roman Catholics, who wanted to take things back to the way they were, and there was Luther in the middle, and then on the other side were people like Karlstadt and people who agreed with him, who said, Luther, you're not reforming enough.

We've got to carry this on into more and more areas until the whole church is consistent with biblical understanding and biblical morality. You know, all of this points to a larger issue that troubles many people even today. How do you implement theological truth? How do you change the church? Karlstadt said, let's put it into practice right now.

As far as Karlstadt was concerned, that's all there was to it. Put it into practice right now, and it doesn't matter if the people seem ready for it, or if the society seems ready for it, or how fast the changes are coming. If the Bible says it, let's do it.

That's all there is to it. Luther said, look, let's wait. Let's wait until some of the changes we've already made have taken root and are secure, and let's wait until everyone is taught to agree and things just sort of move that way naturally.

In any regard, Luther was in charge, so he ousted Karlstadt, and he became what could be considered an Anabaptist leader. Certainly, he became a leader of a spiritual movement that was outside of the state church, as it was reflected by Luther and those who had the church there in Saxony in Germany. You know, when we think about this, I wonder if some of Luther's just general theological ideas didn't implement into this as well.

Luther being a man who believed so strongly in the idea of the sovereignty and predestination of God, and very much so how he was surprised at how Germany and Europe was taken by storm with the 95 Theses that he had presented some four years before this. You wonder if Luther didn't think, look, I never forced this thing to begin with. You know, this thing was just taken by God, and God has been doing this work thus far.

We're not going to take it into our own hands now and push the pace of Reform much faster than it should go by taking things in our own hand. Let's let God do it in a very organic way. Now again, I'm just supposing here that perhaps those kind of things might have played into Luther's mind, but it very well could have.

So because of this, the Reformation began to develop along two distinct different lines, sometimes known as the Magisterial Reformers and the Radical Reformers. It's not hard to figure out the name Magisterial Reformers. It's those who are in league with the Magistrates, those who thought that reform should be consistent with the idea of a state church in a certain time, in a certain governing over a certain geographical place.

The Magisterial Reformers, those who worked with the state church, were Lutherans and Calvinists and Anglicans, and the Radical Reformers are generally given the name Anabaptists. You see, let me just say it again, just to make the point even clearer, that the Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans were all part of what we might call the Magisterial Reformation, but the Anabaptists scattered all over Europe were the Radical Reformers, and much of the difference was based in a different understanding of what the church

is and how the church should relate to the state and to society. The Magisterial Reformers agreed to work with the Roman Catholic idea that the state and the church should work together to make a Christian society.

You see, the only debate between the Magisterial Reformers and the Roman Catholics was that the state they should work with should be the Protestant Church instead of the Roman Catholic Church. In the mind of the Magisterial Reformers, indeed in the mind of the Roman Catholics, the church was the whole community. There was an official, as I said before, state church, and to be a citizen of good standing meant that you were a part of that church.

You were therefore born into the church. By the way, it does not surprise us at all, therefore, that those churches which are rooted in this Magisterial Reform tradition, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Anglicans, or Episcopalians, each one of them practice infant baptism. Because they carry along very much the same idea carried through from the Roman Catholic Church that you are born into the church.

It very much goes along with the concept of a state church. But yet the Radical Reformers had a different idea. They saw the church as a called-out assembly, what we might consider a believer's church.

In their thinking, you weren't born into the church, you were born again into the church. And so the church just shouldn't be the people who are citizens of a particular town or a particular area. No, instead the church should be reflected of those who are true believers, who gather together without any kind of coercion, without any kind of social pressure, but because they love God and they want to gather together.

Now, we need to stop right here and just think about this before we talk any more about these Radical Reformers, or as they called sometimes in a more inaccurate way, Anabaptists. We need to stop and just consider how much we owe to these people. I mean, actually many of us would find a an instinctive likeness that is closer to these Anabaptist believers than we would to the believers from the Magisterial Reform Church traditions.

But you know, it's certainly a different way of thinking. Because one great difference was that the Magisterial Reformers would work with the political leaders of society and they were protected by them. Do you remember the graphic that I showed you before of Frederick the Wise, that painting of him with his hands on two swords and the Reformers, including Luther, being protected behind him? That was very much the mentality of the Magisterial Reformers.

They are there working with the state and in some measure the state protects them, sometimes by punishing heretics, sometimes by providing financial support, all different other levels of cooperation. But the idea there was that there was a rich cooperation between the church and the state together. Now, these people of the Radical Reformation were often known as Anabaptists, meaning Second Baptists.

But you see, they didn't really believe that they were baptizing people a second time. They only believed that baptism was only valid for believers. You see, in their thinking, if you were baptized as a child, it wasn't valid.

It might be a nice ceremony, it might be a nice symbolic dedication of a child to the Lord, but it was not a legitimate baptism because the person did not contribute any faith or repentance upon which they would be baptized. You could say in this that the real issue was not so much the nature of the baptism, but the nature of the church. How does somebody come into the church? Now, a baby comes into the church

without faith, without repentance, but through baptism.

Instead, these Anabaptists, these Radical Reformers, tended to say, no, you come into the church by a demonstration of your own faith in Jesus Christ and your own repentance, and then you can be baptized and be considered part of the church. This is taken from the Schleitheim Confession of Faith. It was prepared at a conference of Anabaptist Swiss Brethren in 1527, which actually is quite early, isn't it? Anyway, this is what they say.

They say, baptism shall be given to all those who have learned repentance and amendment of life and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and to all those who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him, and to all those who with the significant significance request baptism of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the Pope. In this you have the foundation in the testimony of the Apostles, Matthew 28, Mark 16, Acts 2, 8, 16, and 19.

This we wish to hold simply yet firmly and with assurance. You see, it's just very boldly considered that no baptism does not rightly belong to infants. As a matter of fact, you have to admit those words in that confession were very, very strong, in particular that line where he talks about infant baptism, which is the highest and chief abomination of the Popes.

Here's another angle on that from the writings of Menno Simmons, a man we're going to get to know a little bit better. He wrote this, he said, we are not regenerated because we have been baptized, but we are baptized because we have been regenerated by faith and the Word of God, referencing 1 Peter 1.23. He says, regeneration is not the result of baptism, but baptism the result of regeneration. This can indeed not be controverted by any man, nor disproved by the Scriptures.

Simmons went on in another quote and says, I know that Luther teaches that faith is present in infants, just as in a believing, sleeping man. To this I reply, first, that if there were such a sleeping faith in unconscious infants, which however is nothing but human sophistry, it would notwithstanding be improper to baptize such children, so long as they would not verbally confess it and show the required fruits. For the Holy Apostles did not baptize any believers while they were asleep, as we have shown in our former writings.

You see, this great parting on the issue of baptism was very much rooted in the idea that would controvert the defense that Luther and other Reformers, indeed Roman Catholics as well, made in favor of infant baptism. They would say that that faith is present in the infant, you just can't tell. It's as if faith being present in a man who's asleep.

You can't tell that the man who's asleep has faith, but he has it. It's just there. Well, Menno Simmons gives a brilliant argument there.

He goes, where ever in the New Testament do we see the example of the Apostles or anyone ever baptizing a sleeping man? And so it's a very strong and a very good argument. So this whole issue explains why baptism was so important to these radical Reformers, and why they are given, in general, this name, Anabaptists. Although they would not consider it to be a completely fair name, because they didn't think they were re-baptizing anybody, but rather baptizing true believers for the first time.

And secondly, it's not a very good name, because it encompasses such a broad group of people. Listen, the whole out-of-the-state-church movement was broad, it was big, and there were some people who were godly, and there were some people who were dangerous heretics. You remember several years ago, this whole thing that blew up in Waco, Texas.

And they sent a bunch of troops in, and many people got killed. And the leader of this whole movement was a man named David Koresh, and his group was known as the Branch Davidians. David Koresh was this charismatic leader who sort of had a spell over his people, and commanded this radical, almost insane, obedience from them.

There were charges of polygamy, there was weird doctrines going forth, and he had sort of this apocalyptic end-time scenario, which ultimately ended up with the death and destruction of his entire group. I'm here to tell you, there were some groups under the label of Anabaptists who were like David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. They were that bad.

However, it would be completely unfair to lump them in with other Anabaptist groups, who were some of the godliest people ever to walk this earth. And so what I want you to understand is that it's virtually unfair to use one title to apply to everybody who insisted on having some kind of group, or some kind of walk with the Lord, outside of the state church, outside of the magisterial reformers. But that's sort of the term that we're stuck with.

You know, there were some great tragedies in this Anabaptist or radical reform movement. One of them had to do with the Lutheran and the Anabaptist movement that sort of spun out from him, not so much under Karlstadt, but under another man named Thomas Munzer. You see, many of the radical reformers wanted to change society for the good of the common man, and one of the remarkable events in the wake of Luther's work was the Peasants' War.

You see, Thomas Munzer, who was a priest and a former follower of Luther, became a leader of peasant uprisings. These peasant uprisings had started somewhat spontaneously in 1524, but in 1525 they began to gather more and more steam, and Munzer put himself at the head of these peasant uprisings. You see, you could only imagine what it was like in those days of virtual medieval slavery, where you had serfs and lords, and where the peasants of the land would sometimes be abused and robbed from and treated horribly.

I mean, they had to do everything they could just to be able to have a little bit of food for themselves, while the lords and the aristocracy wanted to take more and more from them, and these sort of peasant rebellions were a somewhat common feature of medieval life. But these peasants, in particular, in Germany in 1524 and in 1525, they were stirred on mightily by the teachings of Martin Luther. You see, Luther taught them that the Pope wasn't who they thought he was, and that made them think, well, if the Pope as an authority figure isn't who we thought he was, then maybe the Lord who governs over me, maybe my landlord, maybe the nobleman who rules over me, maybe these people, maybe if everything's going to change in a revolution in the church, then maybe everything should change in society as well, in sort of a revolution all across the board.

And so these peasants called on the power of Luther's teaching, and they demanded more just economic conditions, even if that meant the downfall of the authorities. In his preaching, Luther condemned the peasants, and this was a huge disappointment to the peasants who expected him to support them. But in Luther's mind, he said, listen, I only encourage them to free themselves from the spiritual deputation of the

authorities, and not from their economic or political influence.

But you see, there were men like Thomas Munzer, again, outside of the magisterial reformers, outside of Luther's circle, members of what we would call the radical reformation, and he egged the peasants on and saw himself at the forefront of a revolution that would change Germany and Europe, not only spiritually, as Luther had sought, but also economically and politically. And so Munzer stirred them on. He said to his people, do not be afraid.

You are fighting the fight of the Lord. Don't let the blood dry on your swords. In other words, kill that viciously.

Well, when the peasants were angry with Luther for not supporting him, Luther was angry right back, and he wrote a very highly charged work titled, listen to the title, Against the Murderous and Thieving Hordes of the Peasants. Well, that title right there lets you know how Luther thought about them. Some historians estimate that 300,000 peasants were involved in this open rebellion and that a hundred thousand of them were killed.

The war has been called the last great peasant revolt and the first great modern revolution. The peasants were finally defeated decisively on May 15th at the Battle of Frankenhausen. Now, when Luther defended the aristocracy in the peasant rebellion, again, which started very much from ideas based on the priesthood of all believers, the Anabaptist leaders felt incredibly betrayed by Luther.

You see, there's some good evidence that Luther, and then Zwingli after him as well, somewhat retreated from positions that they once held when they denounced the Anabaptists. That maybe they moved out the reform to one certain level, one certain distance, and then they realized perhaps we've gone a little bit too far, so let's draw back a little bit. But in that drawing back, it seems that many people were hurt.

So the radical reformers of the Anabaptists began as break-offs from the most prominent reformers. And one of the characteristics of them was that they did not mind being known as separatists. This drove Luther and Calvin crazy.

Luther and Calvin and other magisterial reform leaders, they wanted it known that Rome broke away from them. You see, this stigma of the separatist, of the one who divides the body of Christ, this was a very heavy stigma in the medieval church, and indeed even to today, but not nearly the way it was back then. But Luther and Calvin and other magisterial reform leaders, they wanted to avoid that stigma at all costs, and they wanted it to be known that if the Roman Catholic Church would have allowed them to stay, and they would have stayed in, they were kicked out instead of leaving.

Now the radical reformers, the Anabaptists, they didn't care. They didn't care one bit being known as separatists. You see, the Anabaptists repudiated these church-state ties.

They considered the church to be a voluntary association of committed believers. Now again, for this very reason, the Anabaptists were not a monolithic movement. They were made up of various factions and groups.

It's almost misleading to refer to all these groups outside of the magisterial reformers as Anabaptists, but as I said before, that's pretty much the term that we're stuck with. Of course, Luther denounced them. He denounced them as shammer, enthusiasts, or fanatics.

While the Anabaptists did get extreme in many places, sometimes with wild prophetic expectations, it's wrong to think of them as being out of step with apostolic Christianity. Generally, they were terribly persecuted on all sides. They were persecuted from other Protestants and from Roman Catholics because again, they called into question the whole idea of the Christian society where church and state work together.

But Anabaptists often showed remarkable courage in their persecution. Generally speaking, we would say that they took the principles that Luther and Zwingli emphasized, justification by faith alone, the authority of the scriptures, and they took things farther than Luther ever wanted them to because he wanted to be careful to keep political support. You see, the Anabaptists applauded Luther's theology.

They only said that he failed in applying it fully. Luther just considered them to be dangerous fanatics and deceivers. But again, I want to remind you that when you believe in believers baptism, when you believe in a believers church, when you say that the church should have no control over religious matters, you're talking about things that were radical propositions in the days of the Reformer and you're talking about your own tie to the legacy of the Anabaptists.

Luther certainly had his problems with those who wanted to take the reforming principles further than he intended, but technically we could say that the Anabaptist movement began in Switzerland in the church of Ulrich Zwingli. As we saw before in 1519, Zwingli became the people's priest at the great Minster of Zurich and began teaching verse by verse straight through the New Testament. And then all the way from 1519 all the way through 1523, Zwingli taught and reforms were gradually being introduced.

It was a wonderful season of Reformation there in Zurich and in other places spreading around in Switzerland. But in 1523, matter of fact in October, Zwingli proposed changes in the mass and he brought these proposed changes before the city council. Zwingli didn't want to move ahead on things unless he had approval of the governing authorities.

You can see his state church mentality at work. So when Zwingli brought this before the city council, they said, no, we don't want to make these changes in the mass. Zwingli said, okay, we won't do them.

Then in December he suggested more changes, but he was refused once again. And again, Zwingli accommodated the refusal of the governing authorities. Now this greatly bothered some of the people in Zwingli's church who were beginning to think that what the Bible said was more important than what the government or particular religious leaders said.

And this was the root of the basic Anabaptist belief that the state was not to be the judge of true religion. So for these believers, the first great issue was adult baptism. A dissenting group right out of Zwingli's church in Zurich, led by a man named Kondrad Grebel, wanted to make adult baptism the general practice among the Swiss Reformation believers.

He said the Bible nowhere teaches or supports the idea of infant baptism. So the city council of Zurich became aware of their concerns and debated the issue. And they decided on January 21st, 1525, that these believers who wanted to practice adult baptism were wrong and that they should stop insisting on adult or believers baptism.

Well, these men, Kondrad Grebel and his his associates, these men who wanted to practice believers baptism and would do it even if the political power said no. They didn't agree with the idea that the city

council had the right or had the authority to tell them how to obey God. So on the very day that the city council refused them to do this, they went out and did it.

That snowy evening in a nearby village, they met and baptized one another. Later, they would receive again that name Anabaptist from their critics. The first baptism was performed by Kondrad Grebel to a man named George Blauroch in the name of Felix, in the home of Felix Manz.

And so they all baptized each other and in many ways you have to say that their radical obedience was a tribute to the way that Ulrich Zwingli had taught them. Don't you think so? Don't you think that this was really a great testimony to the influence that Zwingli had upon them to look at the Bible and to obey God even when it cost them something. Now Grebel was from a very fine patrician family.

He was a well-educated man. He studied at the University of Vienna. He made eloquent and educated arguments against the practice of infant baptism.

They just wanted to have what we might call a believer's church and not a state church. But this amazed and distressed Zwingli to no end. He attacked these Anabaptists with vigor.

He published works condemning them and their beliefs. Well, what happened to these three men who took part of this very first baptism service? Well, Grebel died of the plague in 1526. Manz was executed by drowning.

It was a favorite method of execution against the Baptists. You can understand the twisted and perverted logic behind it. They would basically say to the Anabaptists, well, you like to go under the water, don't you? So we'll really put you under the water and we'll kill you by drowning.

That was a common method of executing Anabaptists. Blaurock escaped to Austria but was arrested and burned at the stake in 1529. And so there were several leaders.

Another man, a very popular leader, was a Swabian man, Balthasar Hubemeyer, who shocked his congregation in 1525 by proclaiming that he now rejected infant baptism. On Easter Day, he had himself baptized as an adult together with most the members of his congregation. He became a traveling preacher who spread the message all over southern Germany and he was captured on March 10th, 1528 and he was burned at the stake and his wife was executed by drowning.

But I want you to notice something. These people seem to come up almost spontaneously and it's a spontaneous reaction to bringing the Bible back before the people, to challenging people to live biblical committed lives, and they come to these conclusions all on their own. As a matter of fact, you can see that it was a great spontaneous movement just by taking a look at the dramatic growth of the Anabaptist movement despite the severe persecution that they faced.

In Swabia, that is in southern Germany, 400 special police, they called them Baptist hunters or Tauferjäger, they were appointed to apprehend Anabaptists and to kill them on the spot. Now, you got to admit, if your movement is so big that they need to appoint 400 special police in order to capture them, that means you have a pretty big movement. But you see, soon the 400 police weren't enough.

Soon they had to appoint a thousand police just to try to combat the rising tide of Anabaptist belief. In 1529, the imperial Diet of Speyer placed the dissenters under the ancient law against heretics. This is what it said, quote, every Anabaptist and re-baptized person of either sex should be put to death by fire,

sword, or some other way.

Again, this is a testimony to how quickly the movement spread. One contemporary observer named Sebastian Franck described what took place. He wrote in the year 1531.

He says, the Anabaptists spread so rapidly that their teaching soon covered, as it were, the land. They soon gained a large following and baptized many thousands, drawing to themselves many sincere souls who had a zeal for God, for they taught nothing but love, faith, and the cross. Now, did you notice that? He said that they spread so rapidly that their teaching soon covered, as it were, the land.

And that thousands were being baptized. I think sometimes it's underappreciated what a popular movement the Anabaptist movement was and the radical reformers were in just reaching out with the simple gospel to the simple people of Europe and seeing an amazing work of God done. You know, I think it's very interesting if you study the Reformation through the historical context of Revival.

Revival is a very wonderful phenomenon in the history of the church that we're going to discuss in greater detail in a future lecture. But Revival is this phenomenon where, among other things, great numbers of people come to Christ and commit their lives to Jesus Christ in a remarkably short period of time. It's a time of tremendous harvest into the church.

Now, if you were to assess the Reformation as a work of Revival, this would be my assessment. I would say that the Magisterial Reformation, Luther, especially, Calvin, others, really did not see much of what we would call Revival in that sense. You know, Luther was profoundly discouraged that his work had not taken root in a greater and more powerful way among the German people than it had seemed to happen.

He spent the last years of his life in tremendous discouragement. He felt that his work had been in vain because it hadn't really connected with the common Germans. But listen, the message of the radical Reformers, of the Anabaptists, certainly seemed to.

They were coming to Christ by the thousands. They were spread all across the land. If there was a genuine Revival movement in the days of the Reformation, which I believe there was, it happened among the radical Reformers and not among the Magisterial Reformers.

However, we have to admit, there were certainly some bizarre people who were grouped under that name, Anabaptists. You see, the Anabaptists were often condemned as being bizarre, perverted heretics. The anti-Anabaptists literature loved to paint them as being crazy and immoral people.

One old woodcut cover of a booklet that I like to point out, it shows a very interesting thing around the perimeter of the woodcut. It shows several different cameos, so to speak, of different sort of supposed groups of Anabaptists. But in the middle, up at the top, it shows a demon holding a sign, and the demon happens to be vomiting at the time.

And the sign says, the description of several sorts of Anabaptists and the methods of their re-baptizing. And then right below the sign, it shows what is supposed to be an Anabaptist baptism service. But what's funny about it is, when you look at the picture, you see that the people at the Anabaptist baptism service are, they're a little too naked, let me put it that way.

They're a little too exposed. And the idea is supposed to make you think that they're immoral, that they're ungodly, that they're actually, you know, sexually loose and immoral. And this sort of message came back

again and again, that the Anabaptists were a dangerous, perverted sect that had to be combated at all costs.

Now, truthfully, the Anabaptist movement was like a big tree. And there were many branches among the entire tree that were somewhat bizarre. Now, some of them were very contentious.

They would interrupt sermons, for example, of the mainline reformers. Some of them practiced polygamy. Some of them were weird, but harmless.

I take the example of a man like Melchior Hoffman. Hoffman was a self-taught Lutheran preacher who was first heard of in Scandinavia and then in northern Germany. He started out as a follower of Luther, but then sort of shifted over to becoming a follower of Zwingli, but then sort of settled up as an Anabaptist.

He was converted and baptized and he preached a strong message regarding the soon return of Jesus Christ. He gathered some followers around him and supposedly through prophecy, and I can't tell you, I remember for sure whether it was a prophecy from Hoffman himself or from one of his followers, supposedly they received the prophetic knowledge that Jesus Christ was coming back and was going to establish his glorious kingdom at Strasbourg, France. And so instantly the idea was, well great, Jesus is coming back to Strasbourg, France.

But then this additional prophetic word came forth. The idea was that, yes, Hoffman, you will be prominent in his kingdom, but what you must do to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus's kingdom in Strasbourg is you must go to Strasbourg and let them imprison you for six months, and then Jesus will return in glory. Well, Hoffman was known for sort of his bizarre teachings and actions.

He wasn't dangerous to anybody, but he was certainly bizarre. And so when he went back to Strasbourg and said, I'd like you to put me in jail for six months, they were more than happy to accommodate him. They immediately arrested him, they threw him in jail, where he stayed there not just six months, but for some ten years in the most miserable and abject circumstances.

And some of his followers went on to do stranger things that we'll discuss in just a minute. But I want you to think about this Hoffman fellow, how he was an example of a man who was strange, but not dangerous. Now there was a dangerous Anabaptist movement, and that sort of centered around the German northern city of Münster, and what can be called the kingdom of the Baptists.

It all started with a traveling preacher named Bernard Rothman. This man who was influenced by Luther and the other reformers, he came to Münster and gained a large audience by his very good preaching and his holy lifestyle. Before long, the excited crowds that listened to him attacked the church, and they destroyed both the images in the church and the church itself.

Now the bishop of Münster, which by the way, in this particular city, Münster, it had a specific arrangement where the bishop was also the lord or the mayor. He was the royalty, so to speak, over the city. So the bishop of Münster, who was also like the mayor, he gathered some troops loyal to him to put down the disorder, but the political leader of the area, Philip, the Landgraf of Hessen, the lord of Hessen, he intervened and he declared Münster to be an evangelical or a protestant city.

Now, when Münster was declared to be a protestant city, it began to attract crowds of persecuted people from all over the region, and they were people of all kinds. Some of them were very godly, some of them were crazy. But some of the immigrants convinced Rothman that infant baptism was unscriptural, and so

he took that opinion.

The local magistrates tried to remove him from office, but he was too popular for that to happen. So with all these immigrants flooding into the city of Münster, some of them godly, some of them strange, one of the strange ones started to gain a lot of influence, and his name was Jan Matys. Matys was a tall, powerful man of commanding appearance.

He gave himself out to be a prophet, and he was believed in. He was one of those kinds of fanatics who's all the more dangerous because he really believes it, and he can get other people to believe it. Through his own personal influence, through politicking, through twisting arms, whatever he did, he obtained absolute control of the town council.

And his views as to the separation of the world were immediately put into action in a radical way. He believed that every person in the city of Münster had to be baptized. You basically had one of three choices.

Be baptized, leave the city, or be killed. Well, there was an outrage over this, but Matys had enough power and enough influence over the city to put these kind of things in action. So these are some of the things they did.

Again, that command of either baptism, exile, or execution. Secondly, they instituted a community of goods where everybody shared things as in a socialist system. They abolished the observance of Sunday as the Lord's Day.

They started celebrating the Lord's Supper in a public way. Matys also took control of the distribution of food and other necessities. And then they believed, because this is what I didn't tell you before, Matys and another gentleman who accompanied him to Münster, a man named John of Leiden, Matys and Leiden were both followers of Melchior Hoffman.

And so now, they didn't believe that the kingdom of God was going to come down to earth at Strasbourg anymore. Now they believed that the kingdom of God was going to come down to earth there at Münster. So they sent messengers all over Europe announcing the coming millennium.

But all it did was to tell Europe that something was seriously wrong at Münster, that crazy Anabaptists had taken over the city, and that it was a dangerous situation that the people had to address in some way or another. Matys ruled the city brutally. There was a shoemaker named Hubert Rucher who put himself at the head of a body of the original citizens of the city.

And you can only imagine how this must have galled the original citizens of the city. Those long-standing people who had been born and raised and lived their lives and raised their children there in the city of Münster to find it taken away from them and taken in bizarre courses by these foreigners who were doing all these strange things. You can only imagine how that would have affected them.

But this man Hubert Rucher put himself at the head of this group of people who were protesting what Matys was doing. And then Matys condemned him to execution right on the spot. His associate drew his sword and struck him, and he died of the wounds some days later.

And as all this was happening, the bishop of the city gathered his own troops and others who were outraged by what was happening in the city of Münster all came together and they laid siege to the city.

Well, any city with good city walls is going to hold out for a while. And Münster held out for a while against these siege armies.

And in the time that they held out and the city of Münster was under siege, if it is possible, things got even more bizarre in the kingdom of the Anabaptists in Münster. You see, John of Jan Matys unexplainably decided one day that he would get up and lead a force that would go outside the city walls and attack the siege army against them. It was a suicide mission, but he did it nonetheless.

And of course, his life was ended, as probably everybody thought that it would be. So Matys was out of the way. His associate John of Leiden took control.

And as I said before, if it could have gotten weirder in Münster, it got weirder right then. John of Leiden, first of all, claimed a prophecy. And under that claimed prophecy, he abolished the town council and replaced them with his own twelve elders.

Next, he made new laws that declared Münster a new Israel. In July of 1534, he introduced polygamy to the city. It was at first resisted.

But John of Leiden argued it so strongly, both because of the Old Testament examples, and then also because of the war and the siege around them, there were so much more women in the city than men. And then, immediately after he declared polygamy, he married the widow of his dead former associate, Jan Matys, a woman who was said to be very beautiful and very distinguished. Of course, this is probably the reason why he gave this issue of polygamy.

They passed a law that said all young women had to be married and that all older ones had to be in the protection of a man's household. Now, all of this started a civil war within the besieged city. And the leadership of John of Leiden survived the civil war.

He had himself proclaimed as king. And he appointed a prophet to proclaim him the king, not only of Münster, but king of the whole earth. And they called Münster the kingdom of the new Zion.

He appointed the widow of Matys, this woman known as Dvara, as his queen. And they lived lavish lives as the city starved and as it languished under the siege. The troops under the command of the bishop eventually overcame the city defenses and they slaughtered many of the citizens, including those who had surrendered and those who had been promised mercy.

What happened to John of Leiden and his prominent leaders in the Münster rebellion? Well, John of Leiden and two of his associates were taken to the town center. They were tortured with red-hot pincers and red-hot irons. And then they were killed.

And then their dead corpses were put in iron cages and hoisted up to the top of St. Lambert's church in Münster, where their corpses stayed there for decades upon decades. The rotting flesh could be seen. And then when the rotting flesh was gone, the bones remained up in those iron cages, which, by the way, still hang at the church of St. Lambert's in Münster.

Of course, don't look for the body or the bones in there. Those long ago vanished. But those cages are still up there as an enduring testimony of what happens when crazy people are able to take over a town.

Now, you can only imagine what this all did to the Anabaptist movement. Because the godly, wonderful people among the Anabaptists who endured persecution obviously had nothing to do with the kind of crazy people who conquered the city of Münster and used it for their own bizarre sort of cult-like presence. But the aberration of Münster almost killed the Anabaptist movement by association.

It seemed to justify every kind of persecution against them. Anabaptism had a ten-year record of returning good for evil when they were terribly persecuted. Yet when this handful of fanatics did what they did in Münster, everyone outside the established state church was now marked as a dangerous revolutionary.

So, what happened to the Anabaptist movement? Well, after Münster, they essentially had to rebuild. And God used many people to do it, but one of the very notable men that he used was a great man of God named Menno Simmons. God used him to rebuild the Anabaptist movement.

This is what Menno Simmons said. He said, No one can truly charge me with agreeing with the Münster teaching. On the contrary, for seventeen years until the present day, I have opposed and striven against it, privately and publicly, by voice and pen.

Those who, like the Münster people, refuse the cross of Christ, despising the Lord's word, and practice earthly lusts under the pretense of right-doing, we will never acknowledge as our brethren and sisters. So, Simmons did what was true and what was necessary. He forcefully distanced himself from such crazy people like that.

And the only thing that he had in common with these people who took over Münster was that they were both outside of the state church. But Menno Simmons and most other Anabaptists were godly people. But you see, the Münster debacle was another reason why most Anabaptist movements came to stress pacifism, the idea that war is always wrong and immoral, especially for a Christian, because they wanted to disassociate themselves from Münster as much as possible.

Nevertheless, these Anabaptists continued to be terribly persecuted and continued to live their simple God-honoring lives, of course, excepting the still bizarre groups that were also called by the same name of Anabaptists. One could say that they were persecuted on both sides, by both Roman Catholics and by both the magisterial reformers who were Protestants. Another example of the great men among the Anabaptist movement is found in the man Jacob Hutter.

In 1536, Hutter was arrested because his church was not approved by the state, and they tortured him to find out who and where the other illegal believers were. One of the tortures that they subjected him to was to sink him in icy water repeatedly until his skin cracked open, and then they would pour alcohol into the open wounds and light it on fire. But he remained absolutely silent and did not inform on any of his brothers or sisters, so they eventually burned him at the stake.

His wife had escaped, but was later captured and killed. This is how it went for the Anabaptists. You can imagine what a slow process it was to rebuild some sort of good reputation after the great Munster debacle.

It wasn't until the mid-1600s, until after the terrible religious wars in Europe, when Europeans were sick of killing people who believed differently than they did, that government officials started leaving the Anabaptists alone. They were tolerated as the quiet ones in the land, and they mostly settled in isolated mountain valleys and in rural areas, or they left their homelands to live in sparsely populated areas or

overseas. But very much so, their legacy passes on to us today.

Now, on the one hand, it would be very easy to look for the legacy of the Anabaptists in movements such as the Amish or such as the Mennonites, and there's definitely a historical connection between these modern groups of the Amish and the Mennonites and the Anabaptists from those days, no doubt about it. But I would say that probably most of us, I know I do, feel a real spiritual kinship with the Anabaptists. You see, their simple ideas of believer's baptism, of a believer's church, and the idea that the state should not stick its nose into the business of the way that the church runs, I think that it's a necessary thing for us to think about and to value, because I'll tell you something, we did not get those things from Martin Luther and the Reformers.

As wonderful as the work as Luther and Calvin and the other Reformers were, and we thank God for them, and we recognize that in some ways, Luther did something that nobody else did or could have done, at the same time, we recognize that many precious aspects of our faith, many of the assumptions that we just take for granted in the Christian life and in Christian society today, are given to us not from the magisterial Reformers, but from the radical Reformers. This is why sometimes today, when I hear of those people who speak of the need for a new Reformation and a new need to get back to Luther and to Calvin and those, I wonder exactly what it is that they mean. I wonder if they mean getting back to all of those things.

I wonder if those who believe in believer's baptism and in a believer's church, and that there should be a difference between the state and the church, I wonder if those people who really believe that should live in fear of their calls for a new Reformation. I don't think so, actually, of course. We're in a modern age, things are so much different, but yet it sometimes bothers me to hear of people speak of the work of Luther and Calvin and those people as an absolutely unqualified good.

I see wonderful models also in these radical Reformers to whom we owe a great debt in the faith.

---

Audio: [http://archive.org/download/SERMONINDEX\\_SID18570/SID18570.mp3](http://archive.org/download/SERMONINDEX_SID18570/SID18570.mp3)

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/david-guzik/christian-history-15-the-anabaptists-radical-reformers/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**