

The Anabaptists

by William Cathcart

The Anabaptist movement was a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that emerged during the Reformation, driven by a desire to separate Christians from the ungodly and to establish churches based on believers' baptism.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, Romans 6:4, Galatians 3:27, Ephesians 4:5, Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5, 1 Peter 3:21

Topics: "Church History", "Baptism"

Description

William Cathcart preaches about the history and principles of the Anabaptists during the Reformation, highlighting their rejection of infant baptism and their emphasis on believers' baptism as the only Christian baptism. The Anabaptists sought to establish churches based on regenerate church membership and separation from the ungodly, believing in the necessity of personal faith before baptism. The sermon delves into the divisions among Anabaptists, including the fanatical, Baptist Anabaptists, and mystical Anabaptists, shedding light on their struggles, beliefs, and influence on the Reformation.

Transcript

The name "Anabaptist" was originally a reproachful epithet applied to those Christians in the time of the Reformation who, from rigid adherence to the Scriptures as the infallible and all sufficient standard of faith and practice, and from the evident incompatibility of infant baptism with regenerate church membership, rejected infant baptism and inaugurated churches of their own on the basis of believers' baptism. While reproached by their enemies with rebaptizing those that had been already baptized in the established churches, they maintained that the baptism of believers, such as was administered by themselves, was the only Christian baptism, the baptism of infants being unworthy of the name.

Anabaptists, The German and Swiss.--The Anabaptist Reformation was nothing more than a consistent carrying out of the principles at first laid down by the Reformers, Luther and Zwingli, who both proposed, at the outset, to make the Bible the only standard of faith and practice. Many men of great religious earnestness, filled with this idea, could not bear to see the godly and the ungodly living together in the church, the latter as well as the former partaking of the Lord's Supper.

The necessity of a separation of Christians from the ungodly was, therefore, the most fundamental thing with the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, as it is with Baptists today. If only the regenerate are to be members of this body, it follows, necessarily, that those baptized in unconscious infancy, or later in life

without faith, are not truly baptized. They understood the Scripture to make faith a prerequisite to baptism; and they found in Scripture no precept nor example for infant baptism.

They rejected infant baptism as a matter of course and baptized anew all that came to them. Hence the name of reproach--" Anabaptist." Luther was as uncompromising as Baptists in making personal faith prerequisite to valid baptism. He reproached the Waldenses for baptizing infants, and yet denying that such infants have faith, thus taking the name of the Lord in vain. Not baptism, Luther held, but personal faith, justifies. If the infant has not personal faith, parents lie when they say for it "I believe."

But Luther maintained that through the prayers of the church the infant does have faith, and he defied his adversaries to prove the contrary. This was more than the average man could believe. Hence he would be likely to accept the principle and to reject the application. Luther attached great importance to baptism; Zwingli very little. Hubmaier and Grebel both asserted that, in private conversation with them, Zwingli had expressed himself against infant baptism. His earlier writings show that for a time he doubted the scripturalness of infant baptism, and preferred to postpone baptism until the subject should be able to profess his faith.

We have indisputable evidence that almost every other leader in the Reformation, Melancthon, (Ecolampadius, Capito, etc., had a struggle over the question of baptism. It seems equally certain that they were deterred from rejecting infant baptism by the manifest consequences of the Baptist position. It appeared to them impossible that any movement should succeed which should lose the support of the civil powers, and should withdraw the true Christians from the mass of the people.

Endless divisions, the triumph of the papists, and the entire overthrow of the Reformation, seemed to them inevitable. Hence their defense of infant baptism, and their zeal in the suppression of the Anabaptists. Those that rejected infant baptism believed that Zwingli thought as they did, but held back from unworthy motives. We may divide the Anabaptists into three classes: (1) The fanatical Anabaptists. (2) The Baptist Anabaptists. (3) The mystical Anabaptists. Great injustice has been done to many that fall under the name Anabaptist by failing to make this distinction. Was a certain party fanatical? The stigma is attached to all. Were a few mystics Anabaptists? All classes are blamed for it.

Anabaptists, The Fanatical,--These were for the most part a result of Luther's earlier writings. It is remarkable that fanatical developments occurred in connection with Lutheranism, and not in connection with Zwinglianism.

Thomas Munzer and the Zwickau Prophets.-- Thomas Munzer was never really an Anabaptist. Though he rejected infant baptism in theory, he held to it in practice, and never submitted to rebaptism himself nor rebaptized others. Yet he is usually regarded as the forerunner of the movement, and he certainly was influential in that direction. Having studied previously at Halle, he came to Wittenberg, where he came under Luther's influence, and where he received his Doctor's degree.

Like Luther, Munzer was a great reader of the German Mystics, and when Luther came forward as a Reformer, Munzer became one of his most decided and faithful supporters. On Luther's recommendation he came to Zwickau in 1520 as parish priest. Here he entered into controversy with the Erasmic rationalistic Egranus. The common people, especially the weavers, took sides with Munzer. Chief among these was Nicholas Storch, a Silesian, probably a Waldensian. Munzer was naturally inclined to fanaticism, and this controversy, together with the zealous support he received from the common people, did much to bring it out.

He regarded Luther's movement as a half-way affair, and demanded the establishment of a pure church. He denounced Luther as an incapable man, who allowed the people to continue in their old sins, taught them the uselessness of works, and preached a dead faith more contradictory to the gospel than the teachings of the papists. While he held to the inspiration of the Scriptures, Munzer maintained that the letter of Scripture is of no value without the enlightenment of the Spirit, and that to believers God communicates truth directly alike in connection with and apart from the Scriptures.

The excitement among the common people became intense, and Storch and others began to prophesy, to demand the abolition of all papal forms, and objects, and to speak against infant baptism. Munzer had gone to Bohemia to preach in 1521. Here he published an enthusiastic address to the people in German, Bohemian, and Latin, denouncing the priests, and declaring that a new era was at hand, and that if the people should not accept the gospel they would fall a prey to the Turks. Meanwhile, Storch's party attempted to carry out their ideas by force, and proclaimed that they had a mission to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth.

They were suppressed by the authorities, and some of them thrown into prison; but Storch, Stubner, and Cellarius escaped and fled to Wittenberg. Stubner, a former student of the university, was entertained by Melancthon, who for a time was profoundly impressed by the prophets. Carlstadt especially was brought under their influence. Storch traveled widely in Germany and Silesia, disseminating his views mostly among the peasants. He seems to have been a man of deep piety, great knowledge of Scripture, and uncommon zeal and activity in propagating his views.

In Silesia, he is said to have labored for some time in connection with Lutheranism, which had just been planted there, withholding his peculiar views until he had gained a sufficient influence to preach them effectively. Then he brought large numbers to his views. Here also the attempt to "set up the kingdom of God on earth" was accompanied with tumult, and Storch was driven from Glogan. Driven from place to place, he established Anabaptist communities in various places, in the villages, and among the peasants.

From Silesia Storch went to Bavaria, where he fell sick and died. But he left behind him many disciples, and two strong men who became leaders: Jacob Hutter and Gabriel Scherding. From Silesia and Bavaria many Anabaptists fled into Moravia and Poland, where they became very numerous, and although they were afterwards persecuted severely they continued to exist for a long time. The followers of Storch practiced in many instances community of goods, and under persecution manifested some fanaticism.

But we do Storch some injustice in classing him among the fanatics. Inasmuch, however, as he, was closely connected with Munzer at the beginning, and inasmuch as our information about him is not definite, we class him here with the expression of a probability that he repudiated much of Munzer's proceedings, and was in most respects a true preacher of the gospel. In 1523, Munzer became pastor at Alstedt. Here he married a nun, set aside the Latin -Liturgy and prepared a German one.

In this he retained infant baptism. About the beginning of 1524 he published two tracts against Luther's doctrines with regard to faith and baptism. He had become convinced of the unscripturalness of infant baptism, yet continued to administer it, telling the people that true baptism was baptism of the Spirit. Munzer's ministry in Alstedt was brought to a close by the iconoclastic zeal of his followers. His preaching all along was of a democratical tendency, for he longed to see all men free and in the enjoyment of their rights.

During this year he went to Switzerland, where he attempted to persuade (Ecolampadius and others of the right of the people to revolt against oppression. Here also he probably met the men who soon became leaders of the Swiss Anabaptists: Grebel, Manz, Hubmaier, etc.

His main object in this tour seems to have been to secure co-operation in the impending struggle for liberty. Returning to Muhlhausen he became chief pastor and member of the Council. The whole region was soon under his influence. Luther visited the principal towns and attempted to dissuade the people from revolution. He also attempted to induce the rulers to accord to the peasants their rights. But in neither respect did he succeed. When the peasants revolted, Luther, although he knew that they had cause for dissatisfaction, turned against them and counseled the most unmerciful proceedings. Munzer showed no military capacity. The peasants had no military discipline, and were deceived by Munzer into reliance upon miraculous divine assistance. The result was that they were massacred in large numbers. Munzer was taken prisoner and afterwards beheaded.

Melchior Hoffman, born in Sweden, accepted Luther's doctrine about 1523, preached with great zeal in Denmark and Sweden, laboring with his hands for his support. In the same year he came under the influence of Storch and Munzer. Like these, he believed that the last day was at hand, and with great earnestness warned men to turn from their sins. His interpretation of Scripture, especially the prophetic parts, which he freely applied to his own time, and his constant effort to arouse men to flee from the wrath to come, led to his being hunted from place to place by Lutherans as well as by papists.

In 1526, King Frederick of Denmark came to his aid and gave him a comfortable stipend and freedom to preach the gospel throughout Holstein. Here Hoffman remained about two years, and might have remained longer had he not declared in favor of the Carlstadt-Zwinglian view of the Lord's Supper. This led to controversy, which caused his expulsion and the confiscation of his goods. In company with Carlstadt he took refuge in Switzerland, and in 1529 went to Strassburg. Here he was joyfully received by the Zwinglians, but his preaching soon disgusted them, the difficulty here, as elsewhere, being that he claimed a special inspiration of God to interpret Scripture, and did this in a manner that tended to produce an unwholesome popular excitement. Hoffman now came to see that there was a wide breach between him and the other evangelical preachers. Their apprehension of Scripture, he thought, was an apprehension of the letter, his, of the spirit. Their religion was of the understanding, his, of the heart. Their religion admitted of pride and pomp, his, only of humility. The Anabaptists had by this time become numerous in Southern Germany. When Hoffman came to know them it is not strange that he should have been led to unite with them. In 1530 he declared his acceptance of their views on baptism, justification, free-will, church discipline, etc.; and as most of the Anabaptist leaders had either suffered martyrdom or died of the pestilence, Hoffman became a leader among them, and led many to his own fanatical and false views. Under Hoffman's influence the opinions of the Anabaptists, which had been in great part sound and biblical, underwent many changes. Hoffman believed that Christ did not receive his body from the virgin. This view was perpetuated by the Mennonites (a sort of Manichean view). His Millenarian views also became common among the Anabaptists. Through him the Anabaptist movement spread over all the Netherlands, and he came to be regarded as a great prophet. At Embden, in Friesland, the Anabaptists became so strong that they were able to baptize openly in the churches and on the streets. The most influential leader in the Netherlands (after Hoffman) was Matthiesen. In 1532 Hoffman was thrown into prison in Strassburg. Here he became more and more fanatical. Several men and women began to have visions and to interpret them with reference to current events. Hoffman they called Elias ; Schwenkfeldt was Enoch, etc. The enthusiasm spread, and the Anabaptist movement made rapid conquests.

Persecution was probably the cause, and certainly a means of promoting the fanaticism. Hoffman died in prison, January, 1 1543, after more than ten years confinement.

The Munster Uproar.--The episode in the history of the Reformation that did most to make the Anabaptists abominable in the eyes of the world, and from the effects of which Baptists long suffered in England and America, and even now suffer in Germany, was the Munster kingdom. Doubtless the preaching of Hoffman, and still more that of his followers, had something to do with this event. Yet the idea that this preaching constitutes the chief factor is utterly unfounded. In 1524--25, Munster shared in the communistic movement (Peasants' War), but the magistrates and clergy had been strong enough to crush out the communism and Lutheranism together. After this the Reformation gained scarcely any visible ground there until 1529. About this time, Bernard Rothmann, an educated and eloquent young man, as chaplain in the collegiate church at St. Mauritz, near Munster, began to preach Protestant sermons. Despite the determined opposition of magistrates and clergy, the Munster people forsook the parish churches and flocked to St. Mauritz. In 1533 the Protestants obtained in Munster the right to the free exercise of their religion, and six parish churches came into their hands. Soon they obtained the supremacy in the Council, and began to carry out their principles of reform. The bishop and Romish clergy were driven away, and an army was equipped for the protection of Lutheranism. Thousands of insurrectionary spirits assembled from the surrounding regions, and among them many of the Hoffmanite Anabaptists. It was natural that, when these latter saw the papal party crushed, they should have supposed that the kingdom of Christ was about to be set up at Munster. In 1532, Rothmann, the recognized leader of the Lutheran party at Munster, became an Anabaptist. As a Lutheran, Rothmann is said to have been dissolute. When he became an Anabaptist he adopted an almost ascetical mode of life. He exhorted the people to the practice of charity and humility, and warned them against yielding to the senses and passions. He also declared that the millennium had come, and that the end of the world would come a thousand years later. The Anabaptists gained the ascendancy just as the Lutherans had done before them. Once in full power, their fanaticism increased until a king was set up, polygamy was introduced in accordance with pretended revelations of the Spirit, and many other abominations were practiced. After a few months the Munster kingdom was overthrown and the leaders executed. This affair has commonly been looked upon as a natural culmination of Anabaptism. The fact is, that Lutheranism was responsible for it far more than Anabaptism, and that the rigor with which evangelical Christianity was suppressed in Munster until 1531 was the most potent cause of all.

The Baptist Anabaptists--While none of the Anabaptists were free from what we regard as errors, the great body of the Swiss Anabaptists made a very close approach to our position and if we take into consideration the circumstances under which they were placed, we shall not be inclined to judge them harshly in the things wherein they seem to have gone astray. Fundamentally they were Baptists, but it required time for them to reach a complete development. Roubli, when expelled from Basle, came to Wyticon, near Zurich, and under his influence the parishioners almost all refused to have their children baptized, as early as 1524.

Roubli did not yet insist on rebaptism, but simply set forth the unscripturalness of infant baptism. In 1524, Grebel, Manz, and others began to manifest their dissatisfaction with the state of ecclesiastical affairs at Zurich. They pressed upon Zwingli the necessity of a further reformation of the churches, and reproved him for tardiness and coldness in the matter. Zwingli urged that the unregenerate had been retained in the churches, on the ground that "he that is not against us is for us;" and that in the parable it is commanded to let the tares grow with the wheat.

They objected also to the dependence of religion on the civil magistracy. They were answered that the magistracy, while not free from human elements, was not merely not opposed to the Word of God, but gave protection to the preaching of the same. They soon began to accuse Zwigli of sacrificing willfully the truth in order to maintain the favor of the civil rulers. They now began to absent themselves from the churches, to hold secret meetings, in which they discussed freely the desirableness of setting up pure churches.

During this year the writings of Carlstadt and Munzer became known to them, and they instituted a correspondence with these men. How far the Zurich Anabaptists were influenced by Munzer it is not possible to ascertain. It is certain that they read his writings against Luther and admired them, before September, 1524. It is equally certain that they were not first led to their views of thorough reform by these writings, but were only strengthened and encouraged thereby in their already progressing work.

The letter of Grebel, Manz, and others to Munzer, Sept. 5, 1524, shows that they had already advanced far beyond Munzer in their true views of reform, and that they felt themselves competent to pronounce judgment upon Munzer's inconsistencies and upon his revolutionary utterances. They expostulate with him for having translated the mass instead of abolishing it. They claim that there is no precept or example in the New Testament for the chanting of church services. They insist that what is not expressly taught by word or example is the same as if it were forbidden.

No ceremonies are allowable in connection with the Lord's Supper, except the reading of the Scriptures bearing upon this ordinance. Common bread and common wine, without any idolatrous ceremonies, are to be employed in the Supper. The ordinance is declared to be an act of communion, expressive of the fact that communicants are truly one body. Inasmuch as the ordinance is a communion, no one is to partake of it alone on a sickbed. It should not be celebrated in temples, on account of superstitious associations.

It should be celebrated frequently. They exhort Munzer to abandon all non-scriptural usages, insisting that it is better that a few should believe and act in accordance with the Word of God than that many should believe in a doctrine mingled with falsehood. They are pleased with his theoretical rejection of infant baptism, but grieved that he should continue to practice what he has shown to be unwarranted. Moreover, they have heard that he has been preaching against the magistracy, and maintaining the right of Christians to resist abuses with the sword.

They set forth their conviction that neither are we to protect the gospel nor ourselves with the sword. Thus the Swiss Anabaptists were from the outset free from fanaticism, and they appear even in 1524 not as disciples, but as teachers of Munzer. The opposition to the established church had by this time become so formidable, that the Council appointed a public disputation for Jan. 17, 1525; but there was no intention on the part of the Council or of Zwingle to decide the matter fairly in accordance with the weight of the arguments, and the decision of the Council was, therefore, against the Anabaptists; and a mandate was at once issued requiring the baptism within eight days of every unbaptized child, on pain of the banishment of the responsible parties.

This action was soon followed by a prohibition of the assemblies of the radicals. Grebel and Manz were exhorted to leave off their disputing against infant baptism and in favor of regenerate church membership. In order to insure quiet, Roubli, Hatzer, and others, foreigners, were warned to leave the canton within eight days. This only led to greater boldness on the part of the Anabaptists, and soon George Blaurock, having first been baptized by Grebel, baptized a number of others.

From this time the cause of the Anabaptists, notwithstanding the severe persecution to which they were subjected, made rapid progress. The breaking out of the Peasant's War in 1525 tended to increase the apprehensions of the Swiss authorities, and the rigor towards Anabaptists now became greater. Many, both men and women, were thrown into prison, and released only on the payment of heavy fines and the promise to desist from their heresy, or, in some cases, to leave the canton.

The penalty of returning from banishment was drowning. Grebel, Manz, Hubmaier, and Blaurock were imprisoned and banished. Manz was finally drowned. Though continually harassed, these noble witnesses for Christ were very active, traveling from place to place, preaching at night in private houses to the people, who were anxious to hear. Some preachers baptized hundreds, if not thousands, of persons. From Zurich they spread throughout Switzerland, Southern Germany, the Netherlands, Moravia, etc.

Doctrines of the Swiss Anabaptists.--Although most of the leaders held some views peculiar to themselves, they may be said to have been agreed on the following points, as exhibited in the Confession of 1527, which also forms the basis of Zwingle's "Refutation" of 1527. (1) Baptism of believers. The form of baptism was not commonly discussed, the chief object was to secure believing subjects.) (2) Discipline and exclusion of unworthy members. (3) Communion of baptized believers. (4) Separation from the impure churches and the world. This involved a refusal to have any social intercourse with evil-doers, to attend church services with unbelievers and those in error, to enter into marriage relations with them, etc. This absolute separatism gave them as much trouble, perhaps, as any other single doctrine. (5) They condemned the support of pastors by taxation of the people. The pastors, when they required support, were rather to be supported by voluntary offerings of the members. (6) As to magistracy, they maintained that true Christians, as being entirely subject to the laws of Christ, have no need of magistracy. Yet they did not deny that magistracy is necessary in the ungodly world; neither did they refuse obedience to magistracy in whatever did not come athwart their religious convictions. (7) They rejected oaths on the ground of Christ's command, "Swear not at all." They distinguished, however, between swearing as a promise with an oath to do or be something in the future, and testifying with regard to things past or present. The latter they did not condemn.

The Mystical and Speculative Anabaptists.-- Here may be classed a large number of able and learned men, some who allied themselves with the Anabaptists and were active in evangelical work, as Denk and Haetzer; others who contented themselves with the theoretical rejection of infant baptism, but who either cared so little for ordinances in general as to be unwilling to make rejection of infant baptism a prominent feature of their creed, as Schwenkfeldt, Sebastian, Frank, etc., or else were so occupied with graver doctrinal controversies that their Anabaptist views attracted comparatively little attention, as Michael Servetus, Faustus Socinus, etc. Almost all the Antitrinitarians were rejecters of infant baptism, and several who diverged very widely from accepted views with regard to the person of Christ were especially noted as Anabaptists. With many the unspeakable love and mercy of God came to be a favorite theme. Such being the case, the propitiatory character of Christ's death came to be viewed by some as unnecessary and contrary to God's character. There being thus no need of an infinite sacrifice, many came to deny the absolute eternity of the Son and his absolute equality with the Father. On the other hand, it was perfectly natural that those who went so far as to call in question the great doctrinal formulae should call in question such practices as infant baptism, for which there is no New Testament authority whatever. We are to make a clear distinction between men who were led into error by excessive Mysticism, as Denk, Haetzer, etc., and those who were professed rationalists as Laelius and Faustus Socinus.. (See Denk and Haetzer.)

Anabaptists, The Dutch.--We give separate consideration to the early Dutch Anabaptists, on account of their relation to the Mennonites, who still constitute an important party. We shall have space only for the following remarks. 1. A considerable number of moderate Swiss Anabaptists when persecuted at home took refuge in the Netherlands and made many converts before the time of Hoffman and Matthiesen. 2. Most of these were absorbed by the much more vigorous movement in which Hoffman's influence preponderated (1529--34). 3. A small number of Dutch Anabaptists maintained their moderation even in the time of the Munster uproar. 4. A still larger number were restored to their senses after the suppression of the Munster kingdom. 5. Menno Simon, a Roman Catholic priest, was led through a profound religious experience, gradually and almost independently of the influence to the rejection of infant baptism and the restoration of believer's baptism. After the Munster uproar, the better element of the Anabaptists in the Netherlands repudiated all connection with the Munster men, and with Menno Simon as their leader (1536 onward) soon became an exceedingly strong party. They suffered persecution under the Inquisition, and thousands died at the stake, but they finally secured toleration, and have maintained themselves to the present day. Their doctrines are, in the main, the same as those held by earlier Anabaptists. They reject infant baptism, oaths, the magistracy, the sword, marriage with unbelievers, and communion with the unregenerate. They adopted Hoffman's view as to Christ's body.

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