

The Anabaptists as Puritan Reformers

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In his summary of the chapter on the Radical Reformers Kenneth Scott Latourette observes that

Anabaptists were manifestations of a continuing strain in Christianity which had been present from the very beginning and which before and since the Reformation has expressed itself in many forms. It was seen in the Christians of the first century who, impressed by the wickedness of the world, sought so far as possible to withdraw from it and live in it as distinct communities but not to be of it. Montanists, Marcionites, and Novations were in the tradition. Monasticism in its myriad forms arose from similar convictions. The Paulicans seem to have been originally from a corresponding impulse. The Waldenses, the Lollards, and many another movement of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries both inside and outside the Catholic church were of that kind There is that in the Christian gospel which stirs the consciences of men to be ill content with anything short of full conformity with the ethical standards set forth in the teachings of Jesus and which awakens the hope and the faith that, seemingly impossible of attainment though they are, progress towards them can be made and that they must be sought in communities of those who have committed themselves fully to the Christian idea.¹

Thus the Anabaptists of the early sixteenth century take their place in a long line of puritanical desire. This was a desire to purify the Church.

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1. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, (New York: Harper, 1953), p. 786.

The evils of the Church of the Middle Ages had been multiplied. In order to destroy these evils many forces had arisen throughout Western Europe for at least three centuries prior to the advent of Luther. The culmination of these forces appeared at Wittenberg in 1517. Under the leadership of Luther they were destined to march forward with amazing achievement. A new manifestation of apostolic Christianity made itself felt throughout Germany and then among the masses of other European nations. And so the triumph of Protestantism had become complete, at least in its initial thrust. The power of medieval Romanism had been broken among many of the northern nations.

But even as radical and as thorough-going as Protestantism soon became when compared to the status quo of the old order under the domination of Rome, it was not complete enough to satisfy the desires of these Anabaptist puritans. They would be satisfied with nothing less than a complete renovation and purification of the church. The primitive Christianity of the first century was their objective. The church which they sought must be composed exclusively of the twice-born. This qualification would not only exclude unregenerate adults, but all children. To them the only valid baptism was that which had been administered to conscious believers. And so all children would be barred from this fellowship. The general practice of the church of baptizing children was condemned. The initial requirement for entrance into this purified fellowship was adult or rebaptism. Thus the name Anabaptist.

While this requirement for entrance into the fellowship of believers was emphatic, this ultimate Reformation movement had many other concepts, beliefs, and practices which put it in very direct conflict with the Lutheran and Reformed family as well as with the Roman.

They were antiseccular. That is to say, they refused to participate in the affairs of the state. While the Lutheran reformers were seeking to find the biblical basis for a right relation between the church and the state, the Anabaptists were separating themselves completely from the state, in order as they believed to purify the church. Many of them would completely separate themselves from any responsibility to the state or participation in any of its affairs. In this connection, Philip Schaff incisively points out, the Reformers aimed

to reform the old Church by the Bible; the Radicals attempted to build a new Church from the Bible. The former maintained the historic continuity; the latter went directly to the apostolic age, and ignored the intervening centuries as an apostasy. The Reformers founded a popular state-church, including all citizens with their families; the Anabaptists organized on the

voluntary principle select congregations of baptized believers, separated from the world and from the State. Nothing is more characteristic of radicalism and sectarianism than an utter want of historical sense and respect for the past. In its extreme form it rejects even the Bible as an external authority, and relies on inward inspiration. This was the case with the Zwickau Prophets who threatened to break up Luther's work at Wittenberg.²

Because of their radical opinions and refusal to conform to traditional practices they were cruelly persecuted both by Rome and the Reformers. They were driven from place to place; but as they went, they preached the central Biblical doctrines so that their numbers rapidly increased. Their frequently repeated themes included repentance, faith, grace, and judgment. Their converts were baptized and organized into congregations of rigid discipline. They chose to be known simply as "brethren" or "Christians." They rejected Luther's doctrine of solifidian justification and the real presence. They laid much stress upon the necessity of good works, the possibility of keeping the law and of attaining perfection in Christian love.

As was usually the case with puritan reformers across the centuries, the Anabaptists lived in the hope of completely restoring the simplicity of first century Christianity. This was frequently sought by withdrawal from the world in order to avoid being contaminated by it. The fact that the first generations of Christians seem to have been very much present with the secular world of their day apparently had escaped the attention of the Anabaptists. Likewise they sought to recover the spirit of the early Christian community by maintaining an extreme simplicity in worship. They also believed, as had the Montanists of early times, that the Holy Spirit had chosen to speak directly through them, and that new revelations of God's truth would thus be given. Simplicity was also carried into other areas of life. Habits of conduct, speech, manner, and food were made to conform to the pattern which had been set by the first followers of Christ. Moral and ethical standards were high and demanding, and the exercising of extreme discipline was the order of the day for all who identified themselves with the new movement. The Sermon on the Mount to them was

2. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960-63), VIII, 71.

more than an ethical ideal; it was the pattern and rule of life by which the normal Christian life was to be measured.

One of the earliest expressions of a unified belief among the Anabaptists was presented in the Schleithem Confession, which was drawn up in 1527, most likely by the martyr Michael Sattler of Zurich. The Confession includes seven articles. 1. Baptism shall only be accorded to 'those who have learned repentance and amendment of life . . . and who walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ'. 2. Those in error may only be excommunicated after three warnings, and this must be done before the breaking of bread, so that only a pure and united Church will sit down together. 3. The Lord's Supper is only for the baptized and is a memorial-service. 4. Members must relinquish both popish and anti-popish worship, and take no part in public affairs. 5. They must renounce warfare and 'the unChristian, devilish weapons of force'. 6. Pastors must be supported by congregations in order to read the Scriptures, discipline the church and lead in prayer. If a pastor be banished or martyred, another must immediately be ordained, 'so that God's little flock and people may not be destroyed'. 7. The sword is ordained to be used by the worldly magistrates to punish the wicked, but it must not be used even in self-defence by Christians, who should neither go to law nor serve as magistrates³

Undoubted these articles represent the seed ideas from which most of the subsequent beliefs and practices of the Anabaptists have grown. Though expansive and varied ideas have appeared with the on-going years, the central basic concepts are to be found here in this confession.

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the Schleithem Confession was not intended to be a doctrinal formulation. There are no strictly theological concepts directly asserted in it. Such topics as God, man, the Bible, salvation, the church, and eschatology are not discussed. The articles are concerned with order and discipline within congregations. Baptism, excommunication, the Lord's Supper, separation from the world, pastors, the sword, and the oath are the subjects to which attention is given. The articles are

3. A. G. Dickens, *Reformation and Society in Sixteenth Century Europe*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 135.

in the nature of a church manual, such as the *Didache* of the second century.⁴

A final word concerning the nature of the Anabaptist movement should be spoken about its faithfulness to Christ and the truth as it was understood by those who were willing to die and actually did die as martyrs. The spirit of these martyrs is revealed in a collection of very significant documents which have become known as *The Prison Epistles of the Anabaptists*. One typical letter is that written by Michael Sattler at the time of his approaching death, which concludes thus:

And let no man take away from you the foundation which is laid by the letters of the holy Scriptures, and sealed with the blood of Christ and many witnesses of Jesus The brethren have doubtless informed you, that some of us are in prison; and the brethren being apprehended at Horb, we were afterwards brought to Binsdorf. At this time numerous accusations were preferred against us by our adversaries; at one time they threatened us with the gallows; at another with fire and sword. In this extremity, I surrendered myself; entirely to the Lord's will, and prepared myself, together with all my brethren and my wife, to die for his testimony's sake . . . hence I it necessary to animate you with this exhortation, to follow us in the contest of God, that you may console yourselves with it, and not faint under the chastening of the Lord . . .

In short, beloved brethren and sisters, this letter shall be a valedictory to you all who love God in truth, and follow him . . .

Beware of false brethren; for the Lord will probably call me to him, so take warning. I wait for my God; pray without ceasing for all that are in bonds; God be with you all. Amen.⁵

This says Estep, "is typical of Anabaptist epistles, it abounds in Scripture references, emphasizes love to all men, and is completely devoid of bitterness."

4. William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, (Nashville, Broadman Press, 1964), p.38.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

LASTING INFLUENCE

Latourette at one point of his evaluation concerning the lasting and far-reaching influence of such puritanism, says

Usually Anabaptists were bitterly persecuted by other Protestants and Roman Catholics, for to both they seemed to be dangerous revolutionaries, upsetting the established order. Some may have had a continuity from groups which had been regarded as heretics in the pre-Reformation centuries. Violence all but stamped them out on the Continent. Yet some survived. Moreover, they contributed to the emergence or development of movements in Britain, chiefly the independents, Baptists, and Quakers. Through these, especially the first two, they were to have a profound and growing influence on the Christianity of the eighteenth and notably of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁶

There are also those students of the movement who see in Anabaptism a general similarity with the spiritualists of the sixteenth century. Such a one is A. G. Dickens, who states the following:

Despite the obvious weaknesses of subjectivism, individualism, inapplicability to rank-and-file Christians, we can think of this tradition (Anabaptism as a part of Spiritualism) as abstracting and preserving something from the more liberal elements of three earlier movements: Catholic mysticism, Renaissance Platonism and early Protestant evangelicalism. As Jesuit-led Catholicism lost contact with the old mystical schools, as Protestantism hardened into the Lutheran, Calvinist and Anglican systems, it became important that there should survive ways of thought which valued flexibility in an ever more rigid world, and which insisted that the values of religion lay in the individual soul, not in the power and success of religious institutions.⁷

6. Latourette, p. 779.

7. Dickens, p. 150.