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A Fire That Spread Anabaptist Beginnings

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“Anabaptist” was the nickname given to a group of Christians in the sixteenth century. It simply meant one who baptizes again. A person could not be called a dirtier name in sixteenth century Christian Europe. By its enemies Anabaptism was regarded as a dangerous movement—a program for violent destruction of Europe’s religious and social institutions. Its practices were regarded as odd and anti-social; its beliefs as devil-inspired heresy. At other times and to other people Anabaptism has been an antique social curiosity, the first true fundamentalist movement, or a Christian movement— tough, resilient, and genuine because it was tied to the land and expressed in hard work and simple frugality. Still others have regarded it as the only consistent Protestantism which overcame the perversions of the church of Rome and brought Protestantism to the goal which Martin Luther, Huldreich Zwingli, and John Calvin did not reach.

Anabaptism was a sixteenth-century religious movement which grew out of the popular and widespread religious and social discontent of that age. Its immediate source was the reform movement of Huldreich Zwingli that had begun in Zurich, Switzerland in 1519. Anabaptism began formally in 1525 and spread with great rapidity into nearly all European countries, but especially in the German and Dutch speaking areas of Central Europe.

It was never a unified movement if by unified we imply a common form of church order and common leadership. That was prevented from happening by the Anabaptist policy of congregational autonomy, by the fierce persecution which made Anabaptism become an underground movement, and by geographical barriers. Considerable differences therefore existed between the various Anabaptist groups in interpretation, theology and church practice. The movement was unified however in certain ways which will become clear.

Like most religious movements of that time— including Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican, Anabaptism had its share of black sheep. There was the foolishness of biblical literalism from St. Gall. Because the Gospel said that we must become as little children to enter the Kingdom of God, some people literally behaved like children, playing with toys and babbling like babies. There was the apocalyptic lunacy of certain Anabaptists from Thuringia, one of whom claimed to be the Son of God. Most important of all there was the violent terror of the Kingdom of God of Münster when Anabaptists turned to violence and oppression. In this latter event Anabaptists employed tactics of Catholics and Protestants all over Europe for the coercion of people toward a

religious faith. These are skeletons in the Mennonite family closet, but they represented a minority that never had much support and which was in fact rejected by the majority of persons in the movement.

Like their contemporaries in other Christian groups, Anabaptists were pretty certain that all other groups would inherit not the kingdom of God but his fierce wrath for their intractable stubbornness in rejecting the truth that they the Anabaptists had found. Their conviction that they were the true church was as unpleasant and as unjustified in them as in others. Anabaptists were internally more splintered than other groups because they were persecuted and refused a unity enforced by the sword.

But the Council had begun to drag its feet. The Council's hesitation to move ahead was based, not on biblical or doctrinal grounds, but on economic and political considerations. Grebel, Manz, and others had come to believe that obedience to Christ should not be qualified by either prudence or fear. Moreover they had concluded from their study of the New Testament that the name Christian could be applied only to those who truly followed Jesus and not indiscriminately to all who were baptized. Thirdly, they denied that there was any essential difference between a Christian and a non-Christian government in their political roles. Certainly a so-called Christian government would not make a society Christian.

But Zwingli was unable to share these views. A break developed and Grebel, Manz, and several others began to meet by themselves to study the Bible further. Like two Zurich priests—Wilhelm Reublin and Johannes Brötli who a year earlier in 1524 had begun to preach against infant baptism in the villages of Witikon and Zollikon outside Zurich—this little group came to the conclusion that the Bible did not teach baptism of infants. This was the straw that broke the proverbial back! Zwingli and the Council agreed that the Grebel-Manz group must be put in their place. They had become a threat to the unity and peace of Zurich. Council ordered them to conform to the law of baptism and forbade them to meet as a group.

The men who gathered in Manz's house that winter night were aware of the seriousness of what they were doing. But as the evening wore on they became more and more convinced that they had no choice but to obey God who had led them to their new and dangerous understanding. And then—if the account in the ancient Hutterian Chronicle is accurate—they felt suddenly compelled to take the actual step necessary to give concrete form to their obedience. Amid prayer and the certainty of persecution they baptized one another and in the same moment commissioned each other to build Christ's church on earth.

This action made missionaries of the small group. In the days following others were baptized, especially some farmers from the nearby village of Zollikon. They continued to meet for Bible study and prayer and also to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The persecution they had expected set in immediately. A number of the group were arrested and put in prison. After harassment for three or four months by imprisonment and the threat of exile, this first "free" church disintegrated.

The Birth of Anabaptism

Darkness had already fallen on 21 January 1525, when, one by one, a half dozen men could have been seen furtively entering a house in Zurich's Neustadgasse near the Great Minster. They had reason to be furtive, for they were meeting in violation of a law passed earlier that same day by the City Council prohibiting any assembly by them. The occasion for this meeting behind closed shutters was Bible study and prayer.

Actually group meetings for Bible study were well-known in Zurich. Stimulated by the reformer Huldreich Zwingli, scholars and other interested persons had met frequently since 1520. Zwingli himself had participated. But although some members of these study groups were there that night in January, Zwingli was not.

Major disagreements had arisen between the group represented chiefly by Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz on the one hand and Zwingli on the other, over the role of the City Council in the progress of reform in Zurich. Zwingli had committed himself to letting the Council set the pace. Since he was convinced that the Council was a Christian council, this position was in harmony with his insistence that only Christians could make changes in the church.

From Switzerland to South Germany to Austria to the Netherlands

But the leaders had been busy elsewhere as well. Grebel had preached and baptized in Schaffhausen and St. Gall; George Blaurock, a former monk, went to the Grisons and the Austrian Tyrol. In May 1525, Ebo Bolt became the first Anabaptist martyr. He was burned at the stake for his faith in the canton of Schwyz. A year later Grebel died of the plague away from home, and in January 1527 Manz was publicly executed in Zurich by drowning for the crime of rebaptism.

But by that time, two years after the forming of the first congregation, the movement had spread hundreds of miles beyond its starting point through a unique missionary zeal. By May 1526 there was an Anabaptist assembly in Augsburg under the leadership of the highly gifted Hans Denck. Denck had been expelled from Nuremberg on 21 January 1525 for holding to ideas critical of the Lutheran teaching in that city. Although a restless fugitive from then until his death, Denck exercised a moderating influence on the movement in South Germany with his emphasis on love as the sum of all virtue and his care and reticence in judging others. Denck baptized Hans Hut in the summer of 1526. Hut was one of the most zealous and successful of all Anabaptist missionaries. He founded Anabaptist churches all over Austria. His method was to preach, baptize converts, then immediately appoint other missionaries to be sent out. Although many of these "apostles" were executed, the movement spread rapidly.

Hut's activities also prompted the rise of communal Anabaptism in Moravia. In 1528 a group of Anabaptists no longer welcome in the domains of the Lords of Liechtenstein decided to combine their resources for a common life of work, discipleship, and worship. Their most important early leader was Jacob Hutter, who for seven years worked to rescue Anabaptists from the terror of Hapsburg persecution in the Tyrol to the safety of

Moravia. He was burned at the stake in Innsbruck in 1536. The Hutterian communities thrived under relative toleration and sent successive waves of missionaries as these Anabaptists were called, to many parts of Europe.

Meanwhile Anabaptism had been spreading elsewhere as well. A Lutheran preacher named Melchior Hoffman came to Strassburg in 1529 where he met Anabaptists for the first time. He quickly became one himself. He left Strassburg again the following year, taking his new views northward to the Netherlands and North Germany. Like Hans Hut he was a fiery preacher and baptized many converts. Numerous groups of Melchiorites emerged in the fertile spiritual soil of the Netherlands.

Hoffman had a special interest in the future events of the Second Coming and the Millenium when Christ would reign as King. He was also much occupied with the place of these events and fastened on Strassburg as the New Jerusalem. For this reason he returned there and in 1533 cheerfully went to prison because he believed that his imprisonment would set in motion the sequence of the last events of human history. Instead he died in prison ten years later.

Meanwhile other men had taken over the leadership in the Netherlands. In their hands Hoffman's speculations about the future and their own role in these events turned into dark tragedy in Münster. The city of Münster in Westphalia had become Lutheran and then, by early 1535, had turned in an Anabaptist direction through the preaching of Bernhard Rothmann. When Anabaptists in Amsterdam learned of this and went to see what was happening there, they announced that Münster, not Strassburg, was the New Jerusalem. Jan Matthis and Jan van Leyden, both unstable extremists, gained control of Münster. Whereas Hoffman had urged his followers to await peaceably God's Kingdom, Matthis and Leyden taught that force will bring in the Kingdom. They forced people to receive baptism and to join the movement or leave the city.

The developments in the city alarmed the prince-bishop of Münster and he besieged the city. But before the city was sealed off, thousands of Anabaptists from the Netherlands made a hopeful exodus to Münster in expectation of Christ's triumphant return. Instead, they saw Jan van Leyden crowned as King David ruling with an iron hand and instituting polygamy. In June 1535 the city fell, its inhabitants slaughtered and no apocalypse in sight.

The tragedy became a disaster for Anabaptists. Now their persecutors had what they believed to be ironclad evidence that Anabaptists, with all their insistence on nonviolence, were basically more violent than anyone else. The authorities were convinced that persecution was the only way of containing this potential violence.

But Anabaptists, too, saw Münster as a terrible perversion of the Gospel and resolutely turned away from it. The most important person in the consolidation of nonviolent Anabaptism was the former priest Menno Simons. He helped organize congregations and worked tirelessly for a church order which preserved both love and the integrity of a church composed only of those who had consciously decided to follow Jesus. His congregations were scattered from Amsterdam to Danzig and from Cologne to the North Sea. He continued his

work for twenty-five years, most of that time with an imperial price on his head. He died in 1561. Seventeen years later his followers in the Netherlands were granted toleration.

A contemporary of Menno Simons was Pilgram Marpeck, a civil engineer. His area of activity was South Germany and Switzerland where he picked up the work laid down by Hans Denck and Hans Hut. Both of these men had perished in 1527. Marpeck became the acknowledged leader of a group of Anabaptist fellowships in Alsace, Württemberg and Moravia. He was passionately devoted to the unity of the church, and especially distressed that there was a division between South German Anabaptists and the Swiss Brethren, followers of Conrad Grebel. Marpeck objected to their legalistic use of the ban and their tendency to make hasty judgments about the failings of others. His emphasis on the primacy of love and the necessity for patience in the exercise of church discipline reflects the influence of Hans Denck.

In contrast to the Netherlands, however, toleration did not come to South Germany, Switzerland and Moravia for several more centuries. The movement practically disappeared in South Germany, and was completely eradicated in Austria by fire and sword. It survived in Switzerland in small enclaves, but always under restrictions. The Hutterian brotherhood fared relatively well until 1590 after which its way became again the bitter way of the cross. They survived ultimately only by removal to the Ukraine and from there to America.

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