

The Theology of the Reformers and the Anabaptists

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Reformation Men and Theology, lesson 11 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Reformation included the Anabaptists as well as the Reformers, but the theology of these two groups varied tremendously. These differences continue to exist today.
- B. There have been differences in theology on secondary issues among true evangelicals since the time of the Reformation. Each Christian is responsible to search the Scriptures to determine what he thinks the Bible teaches on secondary issues, and to check his own conclusions with the various teachings throughout church history.

II. COMPARISON OF THE DOCTRINAL POSITIONS OF LUTHER, ZWINGLI, CALVIN, AND THE ANABAPTISTS

- A. The Bible: All the Reformers and the Anabaptists believed the Bible to be the inspired written Word of God. They had no real problem with inspiration and authority, but Luther had some problems with the extent of the canon. Luther made his central doctrine of justification by faith a criterion of canonicity.

“He thus placed the material or subjective principle of Protestantism above the formal or objective principle, the truth above the witness of the truth, the doctrine of the gospel above the written Gospel, Christ above the Bible. Romanism, on the contrary, places the church above the Bible. But we must remember that Luther first learnt Christ from the Bible, especially from the Epistles of Paul, which furnished him the key for the understanding of the scheme of salvation” (Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*).

Luther distinguished between the more important and the less important books of the New Testament, putting James, Jude, and Revelation at the end of the German Bible. His greatest conflict was with the Epistle of James because he

could not harmonize it with Paul's teaching on justification by faith without works, going so far as to call James an epistle of straw compared with the genuine apostolic writings (cf. Jas. 2:21).

Zwingli objected only to the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse), and made no doctrinal use of it because he did not feel it was written by the Apostle John. Calvin accepted all the books of the Old and New Testaments, but never attempted to write a commentary on Revelation.

All the Reformed Confessions accept the 66 books of the modern Protestant Bible, but they reject the Apocrypha of the Old Testament which are accepted by Rome.

- B. The Sovereignty of God: The Reformers were all Augustinian in their concepts of sin and salvation. They stressed man's total depravity, and unconditional election and predestination to salvation.

“We condemn man's free will, his strength, his wisdom, and all religion of man's own devising; in short, we say that there is nothing in us able to deserve grace (Martin Luther).”

“This mightily offends our rational nature that God should, of His own mere unbiased will, leave some men to themselves, harden them and condemn them; but He gives abundant demonstration, and does continually, that this is really the case; namely, that the sole cause why some are saved, and others perish, proceeds from His willing the salvation of the former, and the perdition of the latter, according to that of St. Paul, 'He hath mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will He hardeneth'" (Martin Luther).

“Predestination we call the decree of God, by which He has determined in Himself, what He would have to become of every individual of mankind. For they are not all created with a similar destiny: but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestinated either to life or to death” (John Calvin).

“The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of His will, whereby He extendeth or

withholdeth mercy as He pleaseth, for the glory of His sovereign power over His creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of His glorious justice” (Westminster Confession of Faith).

The Anabaptists as a whole prized free will in their theology. They de-emphasized or failed to teach the doctrines of election and predestination. Probably, their aversion to the loose living of many of the Reformed people drove them to this more strict viewpoint on free will.

- C. **The Cross:** All the Reformers and the Anabaptists agreed that Christ made a substitution for the sins of all who would trust in him for salvation. They believed that men were justified by grace through faith in Christ, and that there was no salvation apart from the death and resurrection of Christ. The Reformers and Anabaptists would have disagreed over the extent of the atonement, with the Anabaptists holding to universal redemption and the Reformers to particular redemption.
- D. **The Assurance of Salvation:** The Reformers were reacting to the Roman doctrine that good works contributed to one’s salvation, which left men wondering whether or not they had done enough good works to get into heaven. The Reformers stressed the objective, positional and forensic aspects of salvation. For Luther, assurance became the essence of faith. The Augsburg Confession says men are “freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” (article 4). Calvin traced assurance back to the decrees of God. Calvin also saw assurance as the essence of faith, and left little hope for one who claimed to believe and yet did not know certainly that he was in Christ:

“Wherever this living faith is found, it must necessarily be accompanied by the hope of eternal salvation; for if we have not this hope, however eloquently we may discourse of faith, it is evident that we have none. The opinion consequently stands, that no one can be called a son of God who does not know himself to be such.”

Thus, in these early Reformers we find an extremely close correspondence between assurance and saving faith, such that the lack of assurance indicated the potential absence of saving faith.

The Anabaptists as a whole would have rejected the concept that a person could have assurance of salvation (as the Reformers understood it) because the Anabaptists denied the election of God.

- E. **Baptism:** The Reformers all practiced infant baptism, and sprinkling as the mode of baptism. Calvin and Luther both stated that they thought that immersion for adults was closer to New Testament practice, and Zwingli at one time seriously considered practicing immersion. The Anabaptists felt very strongly about believer's baptism, and thought infant baptism to be a mere invention of men. The Anabaptists at first were not too concerned about the mode of baptism, for they sprinkled or poured. It was not until years later that they accepted the mode of immersion.
- F. **The Lord's Table:** Luther held to consubstantiation, which states that Christ is in the elements (in, under and above), but that no miracle takes place by which the elements actually turn into the body and blood of Christ (as in the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation). Zwingli believed that the Lord's Table was a memorial, and that the elements were only symbolic. He said that Christ was not in the elements at all, but that he was still very real to the believer's faith when partaking of the Lord's Table. Calvin took a mediating position between Luther and Zwingli, holding that although Christ is not actually in the elements, he is somehow spiritually present, and that grace is imparted to the believer through the elements.
- G. **Church Government:** The Reformation as a whole leaned towards a Presbyterian form of government (rule by elders). The Anabaptists held to a more congregational form of government.
- H. **Church and State:** Luther and Zwingli held that the state should have much authority in the affairs of the church, for the state existed to protect the church from political and religious enemies. Calvin believed in the separation of church and state in theory, but felt that the state should listen to the church on matters of morals. The Anabaptists were quite radical in their belief in total separation of church and state. This was carried to extremes in that they were committed to complete pacifism, refusing to take political oaths, to be a part of the military, and to have any part in secular politics.
- I. **Church Purity:** The Reformers believed that the visible, local church would have believers and unbelievers in it, and that this was impossible to avoid. Their reasoning, while true and biblical, was also encouraged by their situation, in which many people simply shed their Roman Church beliefs and

became Protestants without ever really showing any true spirituality. The Anabaptists believed in a pure church consisting only of true Christians who knew what it meant to be saved. They admitted that some in the visible church might be lost, but taught that it was the task of the church to keep its membership as pure as possible. The Anabaptists were also weak on their understanding of the universal church.

- J. Millennialism: All the Reformers were amillennial (no literal earthly millennium) in their theology because they had come from the Roman Church which had stressed amillennial theology for one thousand years. The Reformers believed that Christ would return, and that there would be a judgment of the wicked and a rewarding of the righteous, but they did not believe that there would be a literal kingdom reign of Christ upon the earth for one thousand years. The issue before the Reformers was salvation, not eschatology. The Anabaptists, however, did believe in a physical, earthly millennial reign of Christ, and this was a constant thorn in the flesh to the Reformers.
- K. Ritual: Luther and Zwingli believed that anything not forbidden by the Bible should be permitted as church practice. They kept the altar, candles, images, etc. Calvin insisted that only those things explicitly permitted in the Bible should be used in worship. The Anabaptists, in turn, wanted to tear down the whole medieval church establishment and build a new church on only New Testament principles.
- L. Religious Liberty: The Reformers were very intolerant towards those who disagreed with them. After having secured liberty from the yoke of popery, they acted according to the same persecuting principles of the Roman Church, in which they had been raised. They had no concept of toleration or liberty in our modern sense. They fought for liberty in Christ, not from Christ, for liberty to preach and teach the gospel, not to oppose or pervert it. They felt it to be their duty to God and to themselves to suppress and punish heresy as well as civil crimes.

“Religious persecution arises not only from bigotry and fanaticism, and the base passions of malice, hatred and uncharitableness, but also from mistaken zeal for truth and orthodoxy, from the intensity of religious conviction, and from the alliance of religion with politics or the union of church and state, whereby an offence against the one becomes an offence against the other” (Schaff).

In the areas of religious toleration and the right of the human conscience, the Anabaptists were ahead of their time. They held tenaciously to religious liberty for all men, even when they disagreed with the true gospel of Christ.