

The Anabaptists

by Dr. Jack L. Arnold

Reformation Men and Theology, lesson 10 of 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Anabaptists were separatists who rejected infant baptism and believed that the outward, external church should consist only of saved and baptized believers. They would rebaptize those who professed Christ who had previously been baptized as infants. The preposition *ana* means “again,” thus *Anabaptists* were those who “baptized again.”
- B. The Anabaptist movement officially began around 1522 in Zurich, Switzerland, when certain men wanted the Reformation to proceed more quickly and to be patterned more along New Testament lines than along those pursued by Ulrich Zwingli. Thus, there was a break between Zwingli and these more radical reformers.
- C. It is very difficult to classify the Anabaptists as a single group, for there was wide diversity among them. Some were fanatics and heretics who brought great shame to the work of the Reformation, but others were not nearly so extreme and fanatical. Some were pantheistic, some extremely mystical, some anti-Trinitarian, some extreme millennialists, while others were quite biblical in most areas of their theology. A good majority of the Anabaptists were spiritual people, dedicated to Christ. They were devoted students of the Bible who felt the Reformers were not purifying the church quickly enough or properly applying the principles taught in the New Testament. The original Anabaptists were called “Brethren” or “The Company of the Committed.”
- D. The Anabaptists were probably the least understood and most persecuted of all the groups of the early Reformation era. The Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists opposed them violently.

II. FAMOUS ANABAPTIST LEADERS

- A. *Introduction:* As a whole, the Anabaptist movement centered around the common people who wanted the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. However, some outstanding, educated men were leaders among the Anabaptists.
- B. *Conrad Grebel:* Grebel was a prominent member of the church in Zurich. He had been led to the evangelical faith by Zwingli, and heartily approved his work of reformation. But he soon became disappointed with Zwingli and Luther because he felt the church was not being reformed along New Testament lines. In January, 1525, a man named Blaurock asked Grebel to baptize him again, although he had been baptized in infancy. Grebel complied. Thereupon, Blaurock rebaptized others. Thus the Anabaptist movement had its beginnings with Conrad Grebel.
- C. *Balthasar Hubmaier:* Hubmaier was one of the better educated men of his day, having received his doctorate in theology. He was a priest, and, during his pastorate in Walshut, a great change came over him as he studied the New Testament. He found many things he had been doing were not biblical, and he began to preach reform. Hubmaier's conscience began to bother him about the Bible's teachings about baptism, the purity of the church, the new birth, discipleship, and evangelism. Hubmaier rebaptized his entire congregation of 300, and the church renounced all fellowship with Rome. He believed in evangelistic preaching, and went into Moravia where thousands were saved. Hubmaier was probably one of the few Anabaptist leaders who believed in election and predestination. He died a martyr in 1527, and two years later his wife was strangled and thrown in a river.
- D. *Jacob Hutter:* Hutter was a godly man who preached in Austria, Moravia, and Poland until his martyrdom in 1536. He founded a sect called the Hutterites,
- E. *Menno Simons:* Simons was a humble man who lived a hard life. A priest of the Roman Catholic Church, he left by his own choice around 1536, believing he could no longer live with his conscience as a Roman Catholic. He felt that neither the Catholics nor the Reformed Church did much for the inner life of a man, that it was all externalism and hypocrisy. He opposed the fanaticism of his day, and could not understand why Christians persecuted one another. He had many struggles over discipleship and holy living, and truly believed that dedicated Christians would receive persecution from the world. Followers of Menno Simon's teachings came to be called Mennonites, and their work later

spread to Russia, the United States and Canada. The Mennonites have always been pacifists, and are earnest, industrious Christians, who have often lived in communal settlements.

III. THE THEOLOGY OF THE ANABAPTISTS COMPARED TO THAT OF THE REFORMERS

- A. *Introduction:* On the basic issues of Christianity, most of the Anabaptists and Reformers were in total agreement. They held to the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the atonement, the authority of the Bible and the second coming of Jesus Christ. The Anabaptists were neither deep theologians nor interested in forming doctrinal creeds, although they did set forth their beliefs about the church in the Schleithem Articles (1527).
- B. *Church and State:* The Anabaptist movement was actually a reaction against the close ties between church and state in both Catholic and Protestant domains. In the Protestant churches great masses of people would come into the church when a city council or prince would join the Reformation. Because most of the citizens of the state were also members of the church, the bond between church and state was very great. In many cases, even though the Reformers took away the external aspects of Roman Church ritual, the personal lives of the people in the external church were not touched. Also, many used the teaching of justification by faith as a license to sin. The Anabaptists demanded a strict separation of church and state, for the purity of the church and for the protection of the church from persecution by the state. This was carried to such an extreme that they were completely pacifistic, opposed to all military service, and took no oaths and held no government offices.
- C. *Liberty of Conscience:* The Anabaptists, because of their doctrine of separation of Church and State, stood for liberty of religion and for a “free church.” They opposed the establishment of any faith by law, asserting freedom of religion, and believing that there should be no basis for persecution whatsoever. They taught that a man was free to believe according to the dictates of his conscience, even though he may be wrong. A person was free under the Reformers in their different domains only as long as he agreed with them. Simply put, there was little or no religious liberty under the Reformers.
- D. *Purity of the Church:* The Anabaptists believed that the external, visible church, as nearly as possible, should be made up of regenerate, baptized people. For them, the church was not an institution as the reformers held, but

simply a local fellowship of believers. They believed in “voluntarism” — that a man comes into the church because he knows he is saved, and that he cannot be born into the church. Often, the Reformers thought that to renounce Rome was enough, but the Anabaptists demanded that a man know that he was saved before entering the external, local church.

Anabaptists believed in the “ban,” which gave the church the right to discipline its members. A Christian came into the church by his own choice and voluntarily placed himself under the government of the church.

- E. *Believer’s Baptism:* Anabaptists were inflexible on this point. They opposed infant baptism as unscriptural, and felt this was the basic reason that so many inside the Catholic and Reformed Churches were not really saved.
- F. *Immersion:* The Anabaptists in their early days did not make any issue over the mode of baptism. We know that many practiced pouring for years before they came to the conviction that immersion was the mode of baptism in the New Testament. They also believed that any Christian could baptize another Christian, and that this was not the responsibility of ordained ministers only.
- G. *Millennialists:* A great many of the Anabaptists believed in the premillennial return of Christ, in which Christ would establish a kingdom on this earth for 1,000 years. A few Anabaptists were fanatical about prophecy and brought a bad name on the Anabaptist movement as a whole. On this point, the Anabaptists opposed the Reformers who were held to amillennial theology. These Anabaptists may have been the only group in the Reformation that was looking far the imminent return of Christ.
- H. *Separation:* The Anabaptists stressed holiness of life and the need to keep unspotted from the world. Sometimes this bordered on legalism and caused isolation of certain groups, but they also opposed worldliness in the local church. They held to complete nonconformity to the customs, thought lives and habits of the world. Being a cultured Christian held no value for an Anabaptist.
- I. *Free Will Theology:* Although it would be difficult to classify all the Anabaptists, the great majority of them probably held to some form of freewill theology, as opposed to the Reformers who strongly held to the sovereignty of God in election and predestination.

- J. *The Lord's Table*: Unlike the Reformers, Anabaptists saw the Lord's Table simply as a memorial in which Christ was in no way present in the elements.
- K. *Evangelism*: The Anabaptists zealously carried out the Great Commission and were missionary-minded.
- L. *Discipleship*: Discipleship was a major tenet in the Anabaptist code of Christian ethics. They wanted to know how it was that many of the Reformers, who held such pious doctrine, lived such sorry lives.
- M. *Pattern of Reform*: The Anabaptists felt that it was impossible to reform the Roman Church, arguing that one could not put life into a spiritually dead organization. They wanted to start a new church based entirely on the New Testament.

IV. THE MUNSTER KINGDOM

- A. One of the most tragic episodes in the entire history of the Christian Church was the attempt of certain radicals to set up an Anabaptist kingdom at Munster in Westphalia, Germany.
- B. Melchior Hofmann, a radical on prophecy, predicted that Christ would return to earth in 1533. Hofmann was bitterly opposed by the Reformers and the Swiss Anabaptists, but multitudes in the Netherlands followed his teaching, including Jan Matthys. Hofmann was imprisoned in Strassburg, and eventually died there.
- C. Matthys declared that he was the prophet Enoch, whom Hofmann had said would appear just before the return of Christ. In 1533 the followers of Matthys made themselves masters of Munster, and Matthys soon took charge. He proclaimed that Munster was going to be the New Jerusalem with community of goods and without law.

These Anabaptists preached a wild millennialism, and insisted that God's day of wrath was about to break in which the saints would dominate the governments of the world.

- D. Soon Munster was besieged by an army of Catholics and Lutherans. After granting a short period of grace in which to leave the city, the Munsterites killed without mercy all those they suspected of being unsympathetic to them. Matthys was killed in battle in April, 1534, after which John of Leyden took

charge. He introduced the practice of polygamy, and in the autumn of 1534 assumed the title of king.

- E. Munster lay under siege for more than a year while these radical Anabaptists held out with great courage. Their sufferings were indescribable. On June 24, 1535, the city was taken. A terrible massacre followed in which the leaders of Munster were maliciously tortured.
- F. Munster is the “black spot” in Anabaptist history, but most of the Anabaptists were not so radical. Many were actually godly Christians.

V. PERSECUTION OF ANABAPTISTS

- A. While many of the persecutions were invited on the Anabaptists by their own fanatics, others who were sound in faith were persecuted for their convictions on the Bible. The doctrinal, political and social views of the Anabaptists were obnoxious to both the Catholics and the Lutherans.
- B. Anabaptists were fined, drowned, burned at the stake, tortured, and persecuted in all the manners of the day for such crimes as refusal to pay tithes, refusal to attend church, refusal to refrain from Bible study groups in private homes, refusal to refrain from preaching, and other offences against the church-state. Thousands of Anabaptists were put to death.
- C. These Anabaptists were most severely persecuted by the Roman Church. In fact, because many believed in immersion, many were put to death by drowning. The Lutherans also put many Anabaptists to death by one form of execution or another. Even John Calvin, though he did not persecute them, could see little good in them.

VI. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ANABAPTISTS

- A. The Anabaptists stood for religious liberty at a time when neither Protestants nor Catholics fully appreciated the importance of freedom of conscience. The Anabaptists made their mark on the world for religious liberty that, indirectly through the Baptists, impacted even America.
- B. Their emphasis on the purity of the external, outward, local church was also very important. Until the Anabaptists, almost every one accepted the idea that a local church should have many unsaved in it.

- C. The Anabaptists had only an indirect influence upon the modern Baptist movement. Modern Baptists who want to place themselves in the Anabaptist tradition need to remember that comparatively few Anabaptists were truly biblical. Furthermore, many of them, while they insisted on water baptism after a conversion experience, did not baptize by immersion. Moreover, the doctrinal position of biblical Anabaptists is more closely related to the modern Mennonite viewpoint than to Baptist theology. Anabaptists were quite ascetic, tended to communism of goods, were pacifistic, opposed the use of oaths and capital punishment, and favored the free will of man as opposed to God's sovereign predestination.