

# OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

## LECTURE 21 - RADICAL REFORMERS: (a) ANABAPTISTS

We'll start with a prayer from the period to be studied. Seven Anabaptists were in custody in Germany in the late 1520s, anticipating martyrdom. Meditating on Psalm 130, they all contributed one stanza to a prayer, asking for help to be obedient to God's Word to the end. We'll adopt two of the stanzas:

We ask you, Father and Lord, as your loving children,  
kindle the light through Jesus Christ, even more in your little flock.  
That would be our hearts' desire, that for which we hunger and thirst,  
and would bring us greatest joy.

You have received us in grace, and made us your servants.  
This we have all done willingly, and fulfilled with your help.  
Keep us pure in your Word; we want to be obedient to you;  
give us aid and comfort. Amen.

The rest of this page is an outline of this lecture.

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In preparation, read Cairns, 297-301; Olson, 414-423; Lion, 401-5; Vos, 90-91; Lane, 151-2; Hanks, *Great Events*, 185-190.

## 1. RADICAL REFORMERS GENERALLY

### 1.1. Magisterial Reformers and Radical Reformers

While all C16 Protestant Reformers wanted to recover the true New Testament gospel from layers of medieval tradition, some wanted a more thoroughgoing reform than others.

Luther in Germany and Zwingli in Switzerland, whom we looked at in the last two Lectures, wanted to establish one true Christian church in their country, with the support of magistrates, princes, judges and city council members, so they are known as Magisterial Reformers. They wanted co-operation between Church and State, to drive all Catholics and heretics out of their territories. In other words, Luther's ideal was to have no one but Lutherans in Germany, Zwingli's ideal was to have no one but Reformed Christians in Switzerland.

Others saw this as only halfway toward purifying the Church of Catholic elements. They wanted a more thoroughgoing reform, and so they are known as Radical Reformers - going right back to their roots (radical). Their ideal was to restore the New Testament Church to what it was before Constantine, even if that meant becoming, again, a persecuted minority as the Church in the Roman Empire had been before Constantine. We saw in Lecture 7 that there were both plusses and minuses when the Emperor Constantine began favouring the Church in 313. There have always been Christians, including some today, who say that it is better for the good of the Church to be unconnected with the State, even if that means being like it was before Constantine.

We'll look in this Lecture at the first and best known of the Radical Reformers, the Anabaptists and then, in the next Lecture, at four other groups. We'll look for connections between these groups and communities today.

## 2. ANABAPTISTS

### 2.1 Origin of the Anabaptists

(Cairns, 297-8; Olson, 415-8; Lion, 401-5; Vos, 90-1; Hanks, *Great Events*, 185-90)

The Anabaptists were so called because they insisted (among other things) that people should be baptised, not as infants but as fully aware, professing believers. If they had been baptized in infancy, which almost everyone had been, Catholic or Protestant, they should be re-baptized as believers, or baptized again, Ana-baptist. Zwingli coined the word 'Anabaptist' in May 1525, in a pamphlet against the practice. They rejected the name, because they did not accept that their first baptism, paedobaptism, was valid, and so they were not being baptized 'again'.

While that was their defining name, they stood for other reforms. They opposed a State Church; for them, a New Testament Church was a voluntary association of committed disciples, consisting only of true believers, who have separated themselves from the world, which includes the State Church. This is expanded in section 3.2 of this Lecture.

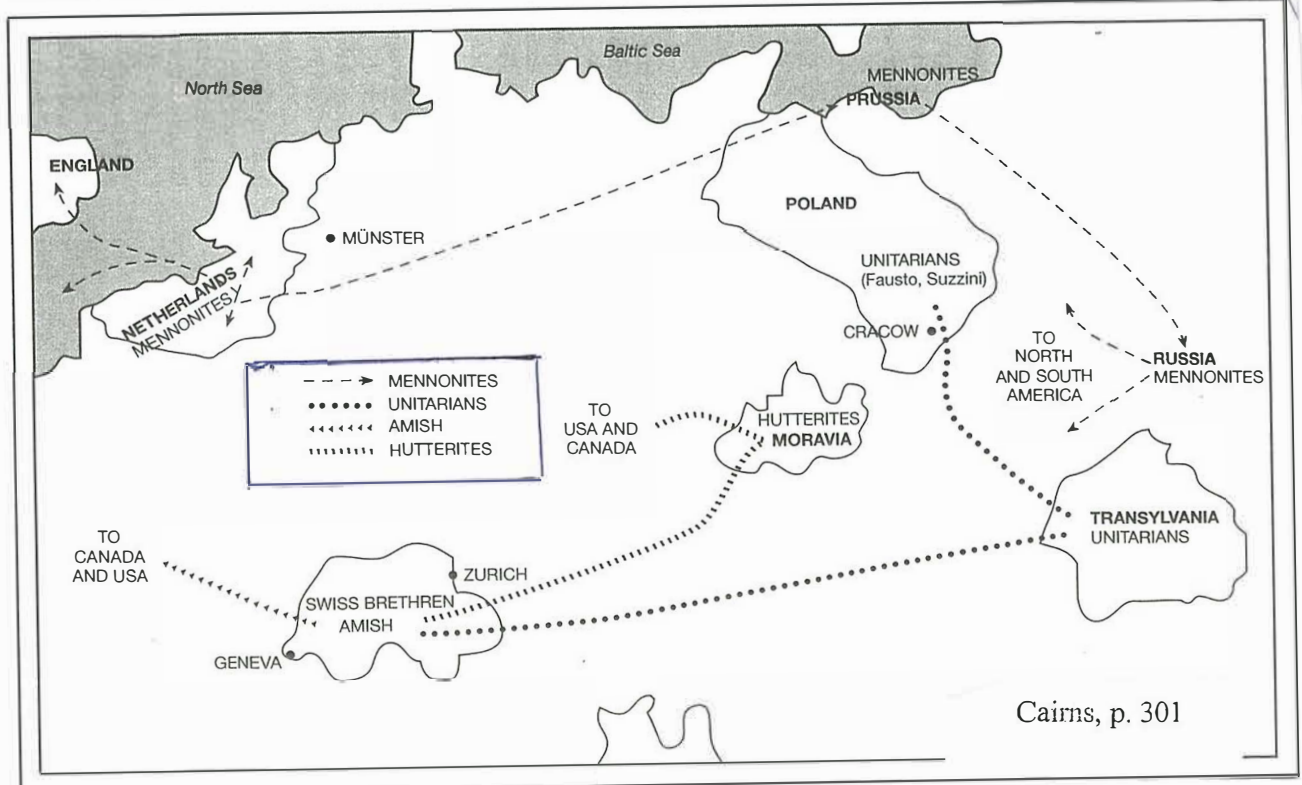
Furthermore, they believed that churches should not have a hierarchical structure, but should be autonomous, with the members of every local church deciding how things should be run for that church - much as Baptists, Christian Brethren and other independent churches do today. Many were pacifists, believing that no Christian should ever use force and, consequently, should not serve as a Magistrate as they had to do this.

The Notes continue on page 4 - the next page has only a chart and a map.

### The Radical Reformation

GROUP	CLASSIFICATION	KEY LEADERS	AREAS OF ACTIVITY	DISTINCTIVES
ANABAPTISTS	Biblical	Conrad Grebel Felix Manz Georg Blaurock Ludwig Hätzer Balthasar Hübmaier	Zurich and elsewhere in Switzerland and Holy Roman Empire	Repudiated church-state ties. Church considered voluntary association of committed believers.
HUTTERITES	Communal	Jacob Hutter	Moravia, later Dakotas and Western Canada	Repudiated infant baptism. Practiced strict church discipline. Were pacifists.
SCHWENK-FELDERS	Mystical	Caspar Schwenkfeld Von Ossig	Germany, later Pennsylvania	Some practiced community of goods. Had religious toleration for all.
MENNONITES	Biblical	Menno Simons	Netherlands, later Pennsylvania and elsewhere	Maintained simplicity of dress and lifestyle. Some followed Michael Sattler's <i>Schleitheim Confession</i> .
AMISH	Biblical	Jacob Ammann	Switzerland, later Pennsylvania and elsewhere	Some had mystical tendencies.

THE RADICAL REFORMATION



These two different understandings of reform came into conflict in Zürich in 1523. In the early years of reform, Zwingli had worked with the radicals, as they were all humanists. However, in October 1523 two leading reformers (named below, the ones with biographies there), became disenchanted with the speed of reform in Zürich and suggested that Zwingli should establish a free church, independent of the State, composed only of voluntary believers who were walking in newness of life, following believers' baptism. Zwingli was horrified. Remember what we called, in Lecture 16, the mediaeval synthesis - the belief that Society was held together by Church and State supporting each other, two sides of the same coin. To achieve that, every member of the State had to be brought into the Church at the earliest opportunity, by baptism, however poorly some later lived up to their religion. The radicals were asking Zwingli to abandon the existing Church structure and set up a rival one, whereas he believed that his God-given responsibility was to reform the existing Church. The State had, he believed, to suppress dissidents by all and any means in order to preserve the glue on which the mediaeval synthesis depended.

## 2.2 Zwingli's response to the Anabaptists

From October 1523 to December 1524, Zwingli engaged in private discussions with these radicals, to see if he could win them back to his point of view. These talks were derailed by an outbreak of violence when other radicals disrupted Zwinglian church services and desecrated a baptismal font. Zwingli arranged for a public debate on baptism in the Zürich Town Hall on 17 January 1525, with himself and Heinrich Bullinger (the subject of our Topic in Lecture 20) representing the position of infant baptism and four leading Anabaptists (named below) advocating their case for believers' baptism. Zwingli had won over the city council to the Reformed position by two public Disputations in 1523, and he was confident of winning this one also. At it, the Anabaptists insisted that the only authority is the Word of God, and advocated immediately setting up congregations of voluntary believers and the immediate cessation of infant baptism. Zwingli advocated reforming the Church only as far and as fast as the city council approved; naturally the council gave the victory to Zwingli and decreed banishment for everyone who refused to baptize infants.

## 2.3 Anabaptist response to Zwingli

After further careful study of the New Testament in its original Greek, and further prayer, two highly educated and socially respectable former followers of Zwingli, Conrad Grebel (1498-1526, from one of the most prominent aristocratic families in Zürich and well versed in Hebrew and Greek) and Felix Mantz (1498-1527, son of one of the canons of the Zürich Cathedral and also an accomplished humanist scholar), joined by two former Catholic priests, Wilhelm Roubli and George Blaurock (1492-1529), who both now shared their views. decided to be (re)baptized as believers. On 21 January 1525, they and twelve other Anabaptists made their way through the snow to Felix Mantz's house, and:

After the prayer, George Blaurock (*the converted Catholic priest*) stood up and asked Conrad Grebel in the name of God to baptise him with true Christian baptism on his faith and recognition of the truth. With this request he knelt down, and Conrad baptised him (*note 1*), since at this time there was no appointed servant of the Word. Then the others turned to George in their turn, asking him to baptise them, which he did. And so, in great fear of God, together they surrendered themselves to the Lord. They confirmed one another for the service of the Gospel and began to teach the faith and to keep it. This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil ways (*note 2*).

*The Chronicle of the Hutterite Brethren*, vol. 1, p. 45.

Note (1): this is not full immersion - it is 'affusion', pouring water on the head;

Note (2): this last sentence is crucial to Anabaptists' understanding of Christian behaviour.

Many others were re-baptised in the following weeks, at least eighty in one single week, and they began celebrating the Lord's Supper among themselves.

#### 2.4. Persecution

In response, Zwingli and the Zürich city council warned the radical leaders in February 1525 to leave Zurich, which they did and thus spread their message widely throughout the areas to which they went. However, the leaders came back into Zürich in October and continued to promulgate their views. This was the last straw for Zwingli and the council, who imprisoned them and then, in March 1526, declared that believers' baptism was heresy, which was a capital offence in the Middle Ages; in November they extending the death penalty to anyone who attended an Anabaptist service.

Meanwhile, Mantz, Grebel and Blaurock had 'escaped' from prison in March 1526, apparently with the connivance of the council, who wanted rid of these trouble-makers. Unbelievably, they reappeared in Zürich in October, still rebaptising, and this time there was no escape from prison. On 5 January 1527, Zwingli consented to, and was present at, the drowning of Felix Mantz, the first Anabaptist martyr. He was bound and thrown into the River Limmat, which ran through Zurich.

With cruel irony, the council called this his 'third baptism' - the first in infancy, the second as a believer, and the third in being thrown into the water to drown. This became the punishment of choice for Anabaptists among both Magisterial Reformers and Catholics - the Catholic cantons were just as opposed to Anabaptists as were the Reformed Protestant cantons.



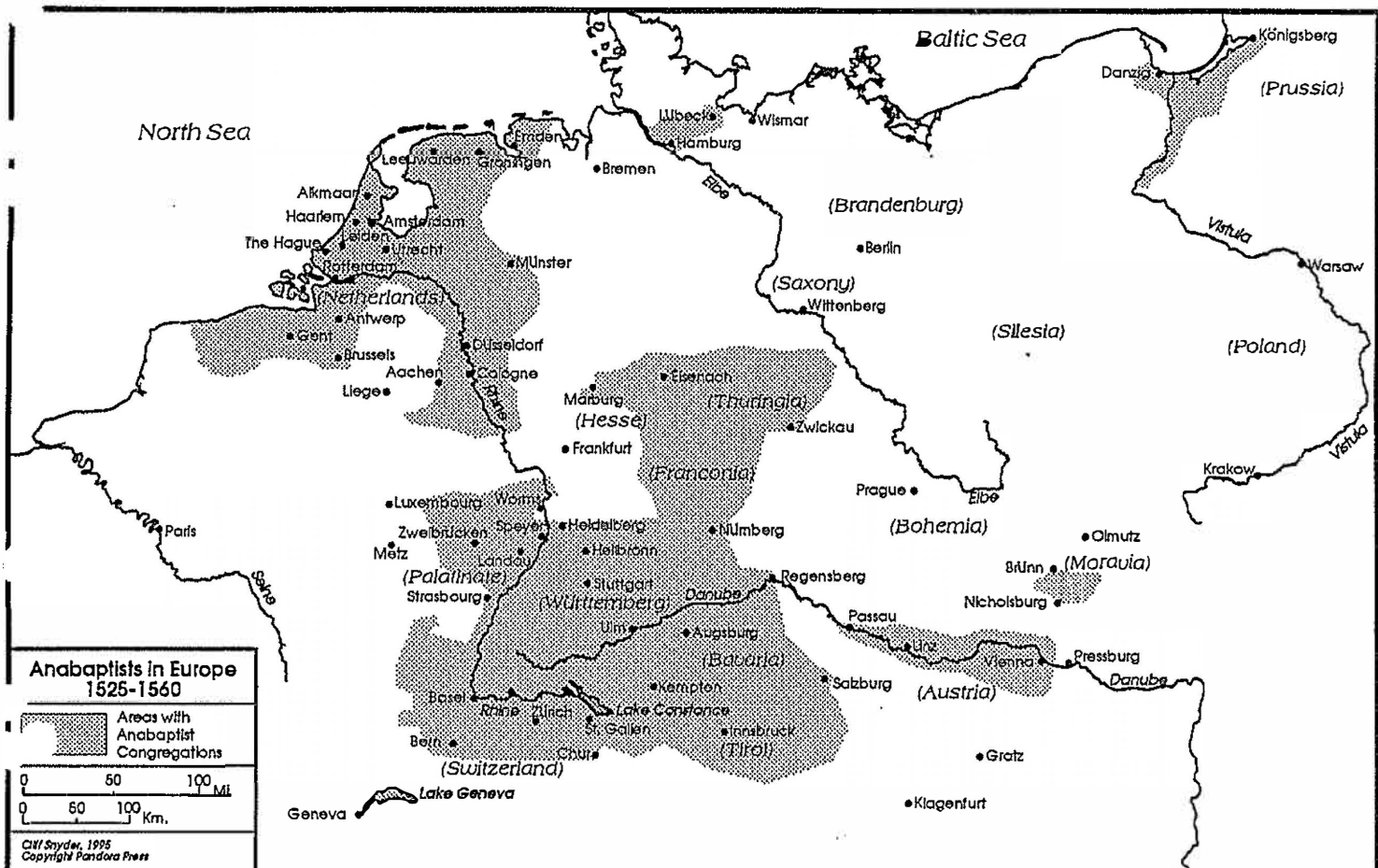
(drawing from Cairns, 298)

Families who refused to have their children baptised by the eighth day were expelled from the city by special police known as Anabaptist-hunters, and many were executed. Children of Anabaptists were taken away and given to families of officially-recognized church bodies. Refusing to baptize infants or encouraging others not to baptize their newborn children was considered a form of child abuse at the time when the child's spiritual well-being was considered just as important as his or her physical well-being.

At least 850 and perhaps as many as 5,000 Anabaptists were (legally) executed by drowning, burning or decapitation. However, although they were persecuted almost to extinction, they were not extinguished, as we'll see in the next Lecture.

One cannot now excuse such persecution, but some Anabaptists were provocative and confrontational, and the council had good reason to treat them as anarchists. For example, they went into Zwinglian churches during worship services and noisily disrupted them, they vandalised baptismal fonts and when they were exiled from the city because of their beliefs, some of them came back and publicly continued their subversive practices.

## 2.5 Spread of Anabaptists



Although there were Anabaptist congregations in the areas with dark shading, they were never a majority in any area, and so did not feature with a colour on the maps in Lecture 19, pages 3 and 5.

## 2.6. The road to Münster

As the Anabaptist movement spread, particularly down the Rhine Valley, it's not surprising that some regional variations developed. Before we come to the major event in the city of Münster, which is our Topic, a brief mention of Melchior Hoffman (1495-1543). He was a Lutheran lay preacher but he became an Anabaptist. For three years he toured the Netherlands and, as you see on the map above, his preaching in the Netherlands won multitudes to the Anabaptist position. However, one of his converts, soon to be one of the Anabaptists who set up the disastrous Kingdom of Münster, prophesied that Hoffman should go to Strasbourg, which you see toward the bottom left of the map, where (the prophecy said) he would be imprisoned for six months and then Christ would return and Hoffman would lead the Anabaptists in triumphal procession around the world. Heady stuff! Hoffman went to Strasbourg, and he was imprisoned, but Christ did not return and he died in prison ten years later. Toward the end, he claimed to be the reincarnation of the prophet Elijah. I mention this to show, as a background to our Topic, how enthusiasm can easily turn into fanaticism, and that brings us to Münster.

TOPIC - ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MÜNSTER, 1534-35 - was taken at this point in the Lecture; here, it is printed at the end of the Notes for this Lecture.

## 2.7. Anabaptists after Münster

Because of the violence of the Anabaptists in Münster, Roman Catholics and almost all Protestants assumed that Radical Reformers were violent enemies of the State, introducing communism, plotting to overthrow the establishment and to introduce practices like polygamy, so Anabaptists were persecuted with a savage ferocity that was otherwise directed only at witches. Peace-loving Radicals suffered because of the fanatical few.

## 3. ANABAPTIST THEOLOGY AND PRACTICES

### 3.1 The Schleitheim Confession (Lane, 151-2)

After an Anabaptist leader had been identified, his life expectancy averaged 18 months. Because of this, they produced little formal theology. However, a number managed to meet in February 1527 at Schleitheim in Switzerland, and they published seven articles of faith. These dealt mostly with Church order and behaviour and not with doctrine. They had no quarrel with the Magisterial Reformers on the Trinity, the humanity and divinity of Jesus, the authority of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers and much else. They just insisted that the Magisterials had not gone far enough in reforming the Church.<sup>1</sup>

The Schleitheim Confession was not meant to be a comprehensive statement of faith, but only to cover the main practical differences between the Anabaptists and the Magisterial Reformers. Here is a précis of the Confession, not the full text - the essential question for the Anabaptists was 'How should a Christian live?'

- (1) Baptism is for those who have consciously decided to be Christians.
- (2) Believers who sin and refuse correction are banned from fellowship. (Note: The 'ban' became the most distinctive feature of Anabaptist church life. To be excluded from Communion was the lesser ban and to be excluded entirely from the church was the ultimate ban.)
- (3) Breaking of bread is a fellowship meal for baptized disciples only.
- (3) Believers are to be separate from this wicked world, which includes Catholic and Protestant State churches. It also meant taking no part in military service, because Jesus forbade violence. (Note: Anabaptists (apart from the hotheads at Münster) were pacifists. This made them unpopular, because the Swiss cantons had no standing army, but relied on citizens to undertake military duties when required, so pacifism was regarded as unpatriotic.)
- (5) Pastors, supported by their flock, to be chosen from men of good repute.
- (6) Christ forbids the use of violence, so Christians cannot be magistrates.
- (7) It is wrong for Christians to swear oaths, in Court or in commerce.

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<sup>1</sup> For the Magisterial Reformers, theology came first and determined everything else. For the Anabaptists, lifestyle came first and their theology followed. As one historian has put it, the Magisterial Reformers asked first of all, 'What must I do to be saved?', while Anabaptists asked first of all, 'How should a Christian live?' This is not the place to pursue where that took them theologically - especially since, apart from baptism and Church/State relationships, it is not part of the Schleitheim Confession. Looking back, we can see that they did not share Zwingli's commitment to Augustine's views of salvation, bondage of the will, original sin and sovereign grace. They made God's grace dependent on human free will for its effect.

### 3.2 Church and State (Lion, 403-4)

The second practical point where Anabaptists differed from Magisterial Reformers was on the relationship of Church and Society. For the Magisterial Reformers, they were two sides of the same coin. Zwingli turned down Grebel's proposal to establish a free church of voluntary believers in Christ, and Luther also decided to retain the national State Church, in which all baptised in infancy were members.

As mentioned earlier, Anabaptists believed that a New Testament church was a voluntary association of true believers, who had separated themselves from the world, including the State Church. For them, church was a stark alternative to civil society, moral purity being preserved by strict use of the 'ban'. Opting *into* their church meant opting *out of* civil society, no oaths, no military service, no involvement in politics. They wanted what we now call 'liberty of conscience', but Magisterial Reformers opposed that - they took the view that a State could not be Christian if it did not suppress by force all views which conflicted with the State's view of Christianity

The Anabaptists' philosophy was that the true church must expect persecution from without; membership of Christ's spiritual kingdom brings suffering now; the glory is in the world to come. There are many throughout the world today who know that only too well, and not just in countries which actively persecute Christians just because they are Christians. The rise of secular society, and the decline of nominal Christianity, has led many churches, of many denominations, to reconsider at least part of the Anabaptist concept of the Church, as an association of committed disciples in a hostile environment.

### 3.3 A family story

One book of Church History opens every chapter with an imaginary story to illustrate the historical situation.<sup>2</sup> On the Anabaptists, a grandmother brings the news that Zwingli has been killed and her sixteen-year-old granddaughter mutters, 'It serves him right'. When the horrified grandmother remonstrates that he had been their pastor and had eaten meals in their house, the girl replies, 'How can I forgive him for what happened to father?'

Five years earlier, when the girl was eleven, her father had told her that the family were not going to church next Sunday. She said that her friend's new baby sister was being baptised and that she had promised to be there and to go home with her to celebrate. Her father explained that he and his friends had come to the view that baptising babies led people into spiritual apathy, believing that baptism alone made them God's children.

When the church noticed that the family were no longer attending, and discovered the reason for this, father moved everyone from the family home to a large cave in the country, and a dozen other families joined them. The cave was cold and damp and miserable. During the day, the men expounded their new understanding of the church in the villages around, and at night they took turns to guard their hideout.

One night there were shouts from the guards and the sound of clashing swords. One man returned, wounded, to say that soldiers had captured the other nine guards. The girl's mother insisted, despite the others warning her of the danger, on going to find Zwingli and to plead for her husband's life. She never returned. Two months later, someone from the city told the fugitives that all the captured men had been bound and thrown into the River Limmat, with mocking shouts, 'So you want to rebaptise - we'll see that you are!' The story ends with the girl saying dully, 'So Zwingli is dead. Please, Lord, bring peace to your church', and the grandmother whispers 'Amen'.

<sup>2</sup> James L. Garlow, *God and His People*, 2004, Kingsway, Victor, pp. 189-93.



## 4. TWO CONSEQUENCES

### 4.1 Zwingli's defence of paedobaptism laid the foundations for 'Covenant Theology'.

At the end of our last Lecture, we looked at areas of agreement between the Lutheran Protestants in Germany and the Zwinglian Protestants in Switzerland, when they met for a conference in the city of Marburg. Article 14 read: 'baptism of infants is right, and that they are thereby received into God's grace and into Christendom'.

Faced with the Radicals' challenge that the true Church was a voluntary society, open only to those who had chosen in maturity to be baptised, Zwingli had to expand on that. He constructed a biblical defence of infant baptism which had enormous consequences for Reformed theology, laying the foundations for what is now known as 'Covenant Theology'.

Zwingli appealed to the analogy of circumcision in the Old Testament, arguing that the children of covenant members were born into the covenant community and so received circumcision as a sign of their membership of the covenant community. In the New Testament, circumcision was replaced by baptism and so the children of covenant-parents should receive baptism as a sign of their New Covenant membership - Zwingli's argument was based on Romans chapter 4. As mentioned, this was the origin of what later became known as 'Covenant Theology', which is today the mainstream Reformed paedobaptist (child baptist) understanding of the sacrament of baptism.

In answer to the Radical challenge that a baby lacks faith and repentance, Zwingli countered that the parents accepted the baptismal obligation on the child's behalf, promising to bring him/her up in the Christian faith.

The Lutheran response to the Anabaptists was significantly different at this point - Luther argued that baptism actually creates a seed of faith in the baptised infant. This is not the place to develop that.

### 4.2 Anabaptists and modern Baptists

What connection, if any, is there between the Anabaptists and Baptists throughout the world today? We're going to see in the next Lecture that after the disaster of Münster, the scattered Anabaptist communities in (what we call) Northern Europe were pastored and led by a man called Menno Simons and so began to call themselves Mennonites rather than Anabaptists, because that name was deeply reviled because of Münster.

Mennonites in Amsterdam gave shelter and support in 1607 to some English dissidents, who had sought refuge there because they were being persecuted for not conforming to the dictates of the Church of England. The leader of the refugees, John Smyth, soon concluded that the Mennonites were right about believers' baptism. In 1609 he baptized himself and then baptized the others, not unlike the situation in Zurich in 1525 (page 4 above) except that Smyth first baptized himself rather than asking someone else to baptize him. Again, it was by affusion, not immersion. They then formed the first known English Baptist congregation. The problem about making a connection from the Mennonites (Anabaptists) to the Baptist congregation is, why did the refugees not ask the Mennonites to baptize them, or at least the first of them? Some years ago, I asked an evangelical Professor, David Bebbington, Professor of History at the University of Stirling, about the link. He said, 'I can give you a definitive answer in three words - 'We don't know.' We'll take up, in Lecture 24, the return of some of the refugees to England in 1611 and the establishment of the first known Baptist Church on English soil.

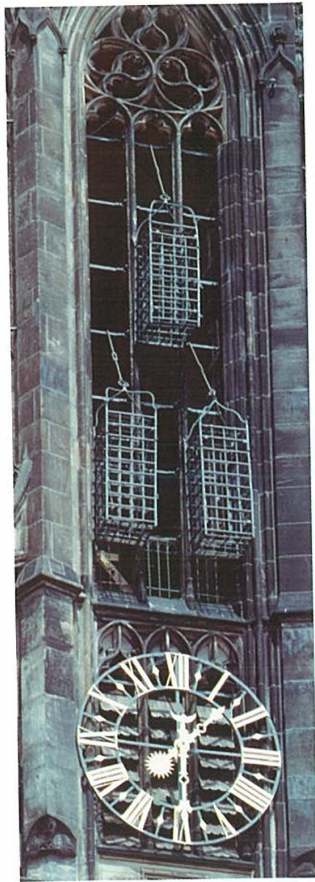
## OVERVIEW OF CHURCH HISTORY IN 36 ILLUSTRATED LECTURES

### TOPIC FOR LECTURE 21 – ANABAPTIST KINGDOM OF MÜNSTER, 1534-35

Please tell us about the bizarre events in the city of Münster in North Germany (Westphalia) between January 1534 and June 1535, with particular reference to Jan Matthys, who claimed that Münster was to become the New Jerusalem of Revelation, and John of Leiden, who introduced polygamy. Tell us also why these events led to all Anabaptists being discredited, throughout Europe, for generations to come.

The Course textbooks hardly mention this - Cairns briefly at pages 298-9, and Olson only in passing - hardly worth looking it up - at page 417. Hanks *Great Events* has a brief account at pages at 190-1, but a search for 'Anabaptist Munster' on the Internet will give you many entries.

Because there is so little in the Course textbooks, there are some notes overleaf about the events.



The leaders of the Anabaptists, including 'King Jan', were killed and their bodies put into large iron cages and hung on the tower of St Lambert's Church in Münster, as a warning and deterrent to others. The cages now there – as in this photo – are Victorian replicas on the 1536 originals, and they are now seen as a tourist site.



Jan Matthys



Jan van Leiden, self-proclaimed king of Münster.

## Background

The city of Münster, close to the Netherlands border, had welcomed the Lutheran Reformation and Lutherans had taken control of the city council.

### Jan Matthys

At the end of 1533, an Anabaptist layman, a baker in Haarlem in Holland, Jan Matthys (picture on page 1), a tall, gaunt figure with a long black beard, went to Münster and said he had received a revelation that God had chosen Münster to become the New Jerusalem of Revelation, and everywhere else was to be destroyed.

On February 25 1534, he preached a sermon at the fish market, proclaiming to the crowd that for the New Jerusalem to come, they had to purify the city of all uncleanness, papists, Lutherans, and anyone else who dissented from Anabaptist teaching. Unlike most Anabaptists, Matthys taught that it was not only permissible, but necessary, use force to achieve their aims.

The Lutheran majority left the city. Matthys recognized only Anabaptists as legal citizens of Münster. Manifestos were sent out, urging Anabaptists in other towns to come with their families, because the rest of the earth was to be destroyed. It was a real apocalyptic stuff - 'the end of the world is nigh'. The duty of the saved was to cleanse the earth in preparation for it. Thousands of Anabaptists came to Münster to await the return of Christ.

The Catholic bishop, expelled when the Lutherans took over, made common cause with the Lutherans and recruited mercenaries to besiege and recapture the city. On Easter Sunday 1534, Matthys received what he believed to be a divine command to attack the besiegers outside the city. He sallied out with only thirty men to help him. Not surprisingly, he was captured, beheaded, and his body hacked to pieces.

### John of Leiden

Matthys' disciple, twenty-five year old John of Leiden, anointed himself king. He introduced polygamy, partly to emulate the Old Testament patriarchs and partly to compensate for the many males killed on military duties. He himself took sixteen wives. All people of marriageable age were ordered to marry; unmarried women had to accept the first man who asked them.

The siege continued for fifteen months; it got grimmer and grimmer for those inside, who were starving to death because they had no supplies and a half-mad leader. In June 1535 the bishop's army entered the city; the leaders of the Anabaptists were killed and their bodies put into large iron cages and hung on the tower of a nearby church (picture overleaf), as an example and warning.

