

Anabaptists/the Radical Reformers

Persecuted Proclaimers

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Introduction:

I was asked to write something on the Anabaptists, and allowed to develop that as I saw fit. It will, of choice, be an examination of a grouping, improperly called “anabaptists,” but attempt both an historical consideration, and also the theological ramifications that followed. To clarify, I will usually use the proper naming, calling them the Radical Reformation

Anabaptists, meaning to baptize again, was a term coined in the midst of the Reformation, circa the 1520's. It was a term used for all who were outside the norm, which in this case was outside certainly Catholicism, Lutheranism and Calvin's Reformed tradition. Later it was also used of some in England.

The Anabaptists were the heretics of the Reformation, and often the term was inappropriately applied to all outside the Magisterial Reformation, whether or not they would have been acceptable to the Anabaptists groups or not. But at any rate it was a term used of various and sundry rebels to acceptable religious views . . . or heretics. But what is a heretic?

Heresy Defined:

Heresy is at times lightly described as “what my opponent believes, never what I believe.” It is further described as “the minority opinion which those of the majority opinion have the power to suppress.”

As difficult as it is to describe exactly what is heretical it is also equally difficult to define orthodoxy. History show us that doctrines once accepted as orthodox, themselves become heretical to a later age. Origen is one emblematic, who was once one of the great Christian thinkers, but today is considered heretical by the Catholic church, and others.

David Christie-Murray, in his [A History of Heresy](#), describes the difficulty of finding a clear expression of orthodoxy. Regarding the source of truth, he says, “To the Catholic, Orthodox, high church Episcopalian and many believers in other communions, Christian truth is a living growing organism . . . The Protestant approach to the truth of Christianity is to look for it in the ‘primitive church’, where the faith was pure free of dogmatic accretions, simple and obvious. By the time Paul was writing, heresy and schism were beginning to appear in the churches, since when they have increasingly fouled the history of Christianity. . . The Protestants replaced of the doctrine of the infallible Church with that of an infallible Book.”

This frequently is what those described as heretics, such as “the Anabaptists,” strove to achieve, a return to the primitive church, a church free of dogmatic accretions, and one fouled by the moral failures of the leaders of the Church.

But we need to look within our own numbers and consider how we have, in some measure, deviated from the doctrines of the primitive church. We might consider the issues of women in ministry, baptism as essential for salvation, conscientious objection, etc. We have just recently seen a strong difference between some who are clearly brothers-in-Christ, but differ strongly on prophecy being either defined as historical or futurist. Does that make one camp heretical?

So defining heresy is not always clear, nor is it always about doctrine, but often involves ecclesiology and even politics.

The Struggle for Control:

Throughout the history of Christianity there have been individuals, or even smaller movements that became heretical as defined by the Church. The Roman Catholic church chose itself to become arbiter of what was heretical and what was orthodox. But some never subscribed to their definitions and continued with their convictions concerning doctrines and dogmas based upon their own reading and understanding of the Scriptures.

In A.D. 1054 the Roman church took upon itself the right to declare the Eastern Orthodox church to be in error and issued a papal bull of excommunication, which was then reciprocated. The Roman bull was based upon six issues:

1. The debate over images, or the iconoclastic controversy, in which the eastern church wanted all images done away with to ward off the charges of the Muslims that Christianity was polytheistic, contributed to the division.
2. The conflict over the procession of the Holy Spirit (either from the Father and the Son, or just from the Father) known as the Filioque ("and the Son") Controversy was also instrumental in separating the two bodies.
3. There was an unwillingness on the part of the patriarch of Constantinople and the pope of Rome to be subservient to each other.
4. There was no sharp definition of boundaries of territories to be ruled by Rome and Constantinople, and frequent struggles arose over administration of border areas.
5. There were basic differences in cultural background and influence between East and West — differences which hindered understanding and cooperation.
6. The East was subservient to the emperor while the West insisted on independence from the state and the right of moral superintendence of rulers of state.

From this point on, history divides and our focus remains in the west, where the Roman church dominates culture and religion and finally even the political structure, though the kings and emperors struggled with this issue. They asserted their independence for periods, but there were also times when the popes were clearly superior in authority.

The Reformation, Including the Anabaptists:

Background – Indulgences and Immorality

Culturally the rise of the Renaissance, or spirit of renewal of learning, a re-examination of classical learning was impinging on and beginning to eradicate the darkness of that period termed the Dark Ages.

Politically kings and emperors were asserting themselves more and more. A spirit of nationalism, though only incipient, was slowly emerging. Nations were taking on a sense of themselves. With that came the desire to be free from outside influences, including the Church.

With these changes it is not surprising that even in religion itself, Christians were asking questions regarding dogmas and practices of the Church. In this case, of course, it was the Roman Catholic Church. Even Catholic authorities admit today that the church was fraught with terrible immorality among the church hierarchy, with some popes appointing their bastard children to the rank of cardinals, having mistresses, and simony (selling of church offices). This led to a greater and greater greed, which focused itself on the introduction of indulgences.

It was using the sale of indulgences to raise money for the renovation of St. Peter's in Rome, whereby people could assure themselves and their family members a shorter time in purgatory, that finally brought about Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses to the church's door in Wittenberg. This call for discussion and reform brought about the break that we today term the Reformation.

Five Divisions of the Resulting Reformation movement

1. Luther and Lutheranism

It was on October 31, 1517 that the monk Martin Luther posted 95 theses on the church door in Wittenberg. It was to protest the selling of indulgences to the local people. As part of a fund-raising campaign commissioned by Pope Leo X to finance the renovation of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, John Tetzel, a Dominican priest began the selling of indulgences in the German lands. Albert of Mainz (the Archbishop of Mainz) in Germany had borrowed heavily to pay for his high church rank and was deeply in debt. He agreed to allow the sale of the indulgences in his territory in exchange for a share of the proceeds. Tetzel reputedly had a slogan to the effect, "Each time a coin into my chest rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Whether or not that is accurate, it was that practice that finally determined Luther's stand against them.

As the story goes, he was called to give an account of his charges. Roland Bainton used as the title of his biography of Luther, Luther's statement, "Here I stand. I can do naught else." His defense, based upon Scripture, didn't impress the authorities, and he was declared to be an outlaw unless he recanted his charges. It was societal upset that these reforms seemed to be triggering that made the authorities most worried.

On his way home from the confrontation, he was kidnapped by forces of his political authority and protector, Frederick the Elector, who hid him away in one of his remote castles, and protected him from authorities who supported the Roman church position. It was while he was hidden for a year, that he did his translation of the New Testament into German.

Luther was, of course, the arch-heretic to the Roman church. He was even accused of being anti-trinitarian, guilty of soul-sleep tendencies, which he indeed flirted with, but he and later the Lutherans slipped back into most of the doctrines of orthodoxy.

But this was the first substantial break with the Roman church. It was remarkable because the political authorities were siding with this rebellion against the pope and the Church. These, with Luther, were declared heretical in their views deviating from the self-proclaimed orthodoxy of the Roman church councils, from Nicea (AD 325) onward.

2. Radicals/Anabaptists – Jan. 21, 1525

This amorphous group is very difficult to define. Bainton divided them dependent on their political involvement. Later George Huntston Williams divided them into three sections: 1) the Anabaptists, 2) the Spiritualizers, & 3) the Evangelical Rationalists. These are the divisions that are generally held today, but they are not adequate to fully understand the various groups within each section. I will return later to explore these groups, but felt it necessary to note their chronological order to fully appreciate them.

3. English Catholics, or Anglicans - 1534

Strangely enough this split had nothing to do with theology, but was purely a power struggle between King Henry VIII and the pope. Henry was obsessed with having a male heir to whom he could pass the throne.

His first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was unable to give him a son and he determined to divorce her. However she was the aunt of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor. For the pope to give a bill allowing divorce would be an insult to Catherine and bring her into shame, which would upset the Holy Roman Emperor, who was the power that gave the pope his support and kept him in power.

Thus the pope couldn't give, or allow, Henry to divorce her. Henry was enraged and went ahead with his decision to divorce her, even when it meant pulling the Church out of the Roman system, which he did and nationalized all of the church lands and took them over, substantially enriching the treasury of the king. At that time Henry and England had not moved theologically from Catholicism, except for seeing the pope as head of the church.

It was the start for Henry's shenanigans with his wives. A mnemonic for the fates of Henry's wives is "divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived". Catherine of Aragon (Mary), Anne Boleyn (Elizabeth), Jane Seymour (Edward), Anne of Cleves, Catherine Howard, and Catherine Parr (although Anne of Cleves, after her divorce, became a lady-in-waiting and "sister to the King").

But one of Henry's titles was also Defender of the Faith, granted to him by the pope, who tried to take it back after the King's seizure of the church's English properties. Parliament said it should stay and is in fact part of the present title of the royals today.

4. John Calvin – 1541

He is a fourth segment of the Reformation, located primarily in Geneva, Switzerland. He was finally brought back by the city magistrates, who earlier had cast him out, to bring order to the city.

His Institutes of the Christian Religion may yet be formative for many Protestants, especially of the Reformed churches, and the Presbyterian churches. John Knox, of Scotland, was formative to the Presbyterian church there, and thence to the Canadian and American churches.

In the controversial matter of interpreting prophecy such as that in the Book of Daniel, Calvin was called a preterist, which is to say that he believed most prophecies had already been fulfilled in history. But if he is, many of his immediate successors took a more historicism view and many today look at a future fulfillment. This is an important distinction with many in the Radical Reformation as this issue comes to define the horrors of the Radicals/ Anabaptists as regards Munster.

He also differed with all others in regards to the Eucharist. He rejected the Catholic Transubstantiation view, the Lutheran Consubstantiation view and the Zwinglian view of the Eucharist being merely symbolic.

Since for Calvin the essence of the sacrament was this spiritual feeding upon the humanity of Christ, it was essential that all the people partake. The Supper, precisely because it was a participation in the body of Christ, bound together those who partook as one body in Christ. And finally, since the believer partook of Christ through faith and the secret power of the Holy Spirit (and not through a local, bodily presence), there could be no talk of the unbeliever partaking of Christ in the Supper.

The medieval notion of a rat eating a crumb of Christ's body that had fallen from the altar was nonsense for Calvin. Without faith there was nothing but bread, wine, and the wrath of God. With faith there was a true and real communion with the body and blood of Christ, that is to say, with the incarnate Christ in his death and resurrection. Calvin's rejection of a local bodily presence put him in conflict with Luther and his followers. But Zwinglian's view was even worse.

The issue of his condemnation of Servetus is controversial, with his defenders saying Calvin didn't intend Servetus to be killed. But Servetus even offered to come to Geneva, if invited and given a guarantee of safe passage, to plead his understanding of who Christ was. Calvin declined to offer either. In 1546 Calvin told Farel, "[Servetus] takes it upon him to come hither, if it be agreeable to me. But I am unwilling to pledge my word for his safety, for if he shall come, I shall never permit him to depart alive, provided my authority be of any avail." He cannot be held innocent of Servetus' blood.

5. Catholic Counter-Reformation – circa 1550 –

Pope Paul III (1534-1549) initiated the Council of Trent (1545-1563), a commission of cardinals charged with institutional reform, addressing contentious issues such as corrupt bishops and priests, indulgences, and other financial abuses.

The Council clearly rejected specific Protestant positions and upheld the basic structure of the Medieval Church, its sacramental system, religious orders, and doctrine. It rejected all compromise with the Protestants, restating basic tenets of the Catholic faith.

The Council clearly upheld salvation appropriated by grace through faith *and* works (not just by faith, *sola fide*, as in the Protestants position). Transubstantiation, during which the consecrated bread and wine were held to be transformed wholly and substantially into *the body, blood, humanity and divinity* of Christ, was upheld, along with the other six Sacraments. "The whole liturgical life of the Church revolves around the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments. There are seven sacraments in the Church: Baptism, Confirmation or Chrismation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony."

Other practices that drew the ire of Protestant reformers, such as indulgences, pilgrimages, the veneration of saints and relics, and the veneration of the Virgin Mary were strongly reaffirmed as spiritually vital. The Council also commissioned the Roman Catechism, which still serves as authoritative Church teaching (the Catechism of the Catholic Church, issued in 1992, updates the language and contains modern explications, but does not differ doctrinally).

The Radicals (Anabaptists) – George Huntston Williams

Anabaptists was the name for re-baptizers and ascribed to all who parted ways with all the others of the Protestant Reformation and Catholicism regarding the Magisterium, a term implying cooperation between the political and religious authorities and the practice with paedobaptism, and many others as well. These first two were chiefly used to persecute the Radicals, based upon a Justinian Law against the Donatists.

The term “Anabaptist” is defined as a Protestant sectarian of a radical movement arising in the 16th century and advocating the baptism and church membership of adult believers only, nonresistance, and the separation of church and state

Williams suggests the date of 1532, but, in fact, Alan Eyre, a Christadelphian historian, makes a strong case for January 21, 1525, being more appropriate, when a small group initiated “believer’s baptism,” following the apostolic formulation of “whosoever believeth and is baptized,” meaning to them that one had to be mature enough to be capable of belief, which in their minds an infant could not be.

So in Zollikon, a small village just outside Zurich, Conrad Grebel, acceding to the wishes and request of Georg Blaurock, baptized him as an adult. This was after Grebel and his wife had refused to have their infant sprinkled according to Ulrich Zwingli’s demands. Though not immersion at this instance, that soon became the practice based upon Scripture. Evidence for this is shown in the horrific punishment given them. The Protestant authorities would martyr them by giving them their “third baptism,” by putting them in sacks, or tying a stone around their necks and throwing them into the river. Catholic authorities, and others, preferred burning them at the stake.

This first group of early Radicals/Anabaptists who submitted to adult baptism all died, most as martyrs within 14 months of this early date. It was a dangerous path they had chosen.

In fact from within that grouping there emerges at least three sub-groups (and to be precise many more):

- 1) Anabaptists – The word Anabaptists means literally rebaptizers, and it was employed by contemporary enemies of the radicals, and by later generations as well, to describe the entire left-wing movement. It is, for several reasons, an unfortunate and misleading term. Strictly speaking, none of the religious groups of the Reformation period believed in rebaptizing; many advocated adult baptism, or believers' baptism, convinced that infant baptism was invalid. They, therefore, claimed that the true baptism was not a rebaptism but the only one. Furthermore, though believers' baptism was important to them, it was not the central point in their faith, and it is inaccurate to name them after it. It was convenient for their enemies to call them rebaptizers because this made them liable to prosecution under a provision of the Code of Justinian, originally used against the Donatists, making it a capital offense to rebaptize or deny the Trinity.

The origin and the distinctive characteristics of the Anabaptists are still debated topics. Some scholars emphasize their doctrine of the church. Unlike the Catholics and the chief Protestant groups, which all believed in territorial churches closely connected with the state, the Anabaptists believed in a gathered or voluntary church. In a territorial church, membership was compulsory for all persons living in the area where the church was established, and the civil authorities cooperated with the church in imposing ecclesiastical discipline. For the Anabaptists, the church was a body of the saints, membership was voluntary, and discipline was administered by the church. The most severe form of this discipline was the ban, whereby the erring member was to be completely cut off from any dealings with the faithful and absolutely shunned by them.

It is from the Anabaptists which come today's Brethren churches, Quakers, and they have some connection to the Baptist churches of today. They generally though are orthodox in most respects, except for infant baptism.

- 2) Spiritualizers, are often referred to as Schwenfelders. George Huntston Williams defined the movement as: “The term spiritualism, used in connection with the radicals of the Reformation, refers to a type of religion that minimizes the importance of external forms and organization and that even diminishes the authority of the written word of Scripture. It emphasizes inward religion, the illumination of the heart by the Spirit

through the witness of the inner Word. Stated in such general terms, spiritualism can be found in many places in the Reformation period; there were spiritualist tendencies in Luther himself, though Luther had no sympathy for the spiritualists. By the nature of their outlook, the spiritualists were not founders of churches or of an organized movement, yet some of them had a great influence. While Carlstadt and Müntzer may be called spiritualists, but most of them were peaceful rather than violent. One of the most important was Caspar Schwenckfeld (1489-1561).

A well-to-do Silesian nobleman and landowner, he was for a while a follower of Luther, but in time his views diverged from those of the great reformer. Unlike Luther, he believed that the man who is justified by faith is not a sinner, but can keep God's commandments and achieve sanctification; he was distressed at the absence of regenerated lives among Luther's followers. He also came to renounce the doctrine of the presence of Christ in the bread and wine at the Lord's Supper, adopting a purely spiritual interpretation according to which Christ feeds the soul spiritually but not physically, and only the soul of his true followers. Luther, for his part, treated Schwenckfeld with outstanding rudeness. Schwenckfeld also minimized the importance of the external rite of baptism, though he differed from the Anabaptists; unlike them, he did not repudiate water baptism where it had been performed in infancy, and he did not accept believer's baptism."

This group receives little attention today though they still exist and can be found in small isolated pockets here in the U.S. They did not practice any of the rituals believing them to be spiritual exercises which should be intellectual rather than a rite.

- 3) Evangelical Rationalists are the grouping where we would likely, at least most of us, find our own roots, though which are neither, as usually defined. We certainly are not to be found in the "evangelicals" of today, which are for the most part orthodox and hostile to us, nor would we be comfortable aligning ourselves with the "rationalists" (though we would consider ourselves to be rational). That term has become pejorative as in what it implies. In common theological usage, it indicates a reliance upon purely human reason without faith in the Bible itself.

Several years ago, while traveling with a group of Unitarian-Universalists, while meeting in small groups to introduce ourselves, one of the ladies by way of her introduction explained that she was the president of their church, but that she herself was an atheist.

That is why we have carefully used and tried to define the term Biblical Unitarianism as our position. That we are rational in our approach to Scripture, usually meaning taking it literally, and that we also hold that it is true and trustworthy, or inspired by God.

The Evangelical Rationalists

Those called antitrinitarians appeared in almost all parts of the Reformation, though they were suppressed and disappeared from among most groups. There were three areas where their presence remained evident.

The first area is in the Italian alps-area called the Grisons. In this region there was a willingness to allow for personal differences in understanding of faith. A second area was in what we now call the Netherlands, and a third region in Poland, which at that time encompassed Cluj, now in Romania.

The person's name most often associated with antitrinitarianism is Sozzini, or Socinus. Lelio Socinus (1525-1562) was never clear on his theology, but occasioned some suspicions from Calvin, though he was always vindicated and warmly received by him. He had a questing mind, but never left writings explaining his understanding. His nephew, Fausto Socinus (1539-1604) upon his death, developed from the brief notes left by his uncle a much more detailed antitrinitarian understanding. His theology threatened his life and he fled, finally to Poland, where he met a group known as the Polish

Brethren, who had already posited an antitrinitarian position. Strangely enough, though this antitrinitarianism is often called Socinianism, he was never allowed to join the Polish Brethren as he resisted and did not agree with Adult Believer's Baptism.

At this time Sigismund, the Polish king, was allowing all faiths to worship as they pleased, though he himself remained orthodox. The Polish Brethren flourished during this time and established at Rakw, or Racow, a university, unitarian in nature, that educated thousands of students, so that at one point the Polish Empire nearly became Unitarian. It was only following Sigismund's death, and the subsequent ruler bringing in the Jesuits that stopped that from happening.

As the Jesuits came into power, the Unitarians were first imprisoned, no longer allowed to worship. Their printing presses were destroyed and the university grounds became the Catholic church and monastery.

In our personal travels with the Unitarian-Universalists, a few of our group traveled to Rakw and walked the small village which had been such an important center of unitarianism. We walked by the site where the Unitarians had baptized so many, and walked over the grounds where the university had been, though now the succeeding Catholic buildings had also been razed. It was a very moving experience. We were also able to visit the shrine built near where Socinus' grave had been. The Catholic church had desecrated it and thrown the actual gravestone into the nearby river.

After they were driven from their homes in Poland, they fled across Germany to the Netherlands, and some to the south further into Transylvania. In Transylvania I had the opportunity for a private conversation with the presiding bishop of the Unitarian Church that still exists, but has strayed greatly from its roots. As the local pastor in Oakland, where we were based, was going to have his newborn son "baptized," or sprinkled, I questioned how that practice fit with the tradition of Believer's Baptism. He shrugged, somewhat embarrassedly, and said that unless they had changed, the Catholics would not have allowed them to continue.

There are many brave Christians that deserve to be remembered, though many of the Polish Brethren have names that are nearly unpronounceable. One that should be mentioned is Ferenc (Francis) David (circa 1510-Nov 15, 1579) He was born in Kolozsvar, present day Cluj. He was elected the Calvinist bishop of the Hungarian churches in Transylvania, and was appointed the court preacher to John Sigismund, prince of Transylvania. In 1565 he began to discuss his doubts on the trinity, concerned first with the personality of the Holy Spirit. He felt he could find nothing in Scripture regarding the doctrine of the trinity.

King John II Sigismund, of Hungary, encouraged by David, issued, in 1568, at the Diet of Torda (Turda) the following proclamation, the first indication of religious toleration in Europe, though the Counter-Reformation was nearly upon them:

His majesty, our Lord, in what manner he – together with his realm – legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same matter now, in this Diet, reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearings is by the word of God.

In 1571, John Sigismund was succeeded by Stephen Bathory, a Roman Catholic, and the policy shifted toward persecution of the new religious institutions. Tried as an innovator, Dávid died in prison at Deva in 1579. The ruins of the prison site in the city now hold a memorial for Dávid. It is atop a mountain in the city and the prison itself was a cell-like cistern into which he was thrown where he was allowed little in the way of shelter and perished in the cold winter. His statement, "We need not think alike to love alike," may be reflective of his tolerant attitude.

Biblical Unitarianism from the Reformation

From the Netherlands we can trace Unitarianism to England and from there to the United States. In England, persecution went from muted to intense when Mary (1553-1558) came to the throne. She martyred around 300 non-Catholics.

The years during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) were milder, though not entirely without times of difficulty. There are names such as John Biddle, Joseph Priestley and others that deserve mention, and which we ought to remember.

It was the privilege of Anthony Buzzard and myself to be at the 200th Anniversary remembrance of Joseph Priestley and to participate in the ceremonies at the behest of George Huntston Williams. He insisted we be on the program as true representatives of Priestley's faith. Priestley's entire family has subsequently gone back to Catholicism and knows little for which he stood and believed.

Other names such as John Locke, even Thomas Jefferson had insights into the truths of Scripture as mentioned in Jude 3, "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."

These down through the centuries have stood and died for that faith. I fear for it today, as it is not held strongly and vigorously and seriously by even some among us. We need to **strongly contend for the faith once for all entrusted to us!**