THE REFORMATION—Lesson 17

THE ANABAPTISTS

Prayer
Scripture: I Peter 2:21-25
Hymn: 444 "Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone?"

BRANCHES OF CHRISTENDOM:

In the Reformation Period the church split into five branches. Following the pope and looking to Rome was the church of the Roman Revival or Counter-Reformation. The Protestant portion split into four main branches. The Lutheran Reformation resulted in a German national church, the Lutheran Church, with a following in the Scandinavian countries. The Reformation in England that started with Henry VIII produced the Anglican Church—another national church. The work of Zwingli and Calvin in Switzerland became the International Reform known as the Reformed Churches that spread across national boundaries. These three branches are known as the Magisterial Reform because the churches were allied with the state. The fourth branch, hated and persecuted by all the others, is known as the Radical Reformation or Left Wing Reform. It consisted of a multitude of splinter groups that sprang up all over Europe. The very name "Radical Reformation" is pejorative—the other branches looked on the splinter groups as unbalanced and wild fanatics, as heretics, as anarchists, enemies of all organized society and religion. The "Radicals" were quite vocal and often tactless in their exposure and condemnation of unscriptural practices of both Catholics and Protestants. They were "radical" in their determination to restore the church of the apostles. Everything unscriptural had to go. The programs of the other branches called for "Reformation." The Radicals called for "Restoration." The Radicals proposed to tolerate no compromise.

The Radical Reformation itself can be divided into three branches, each represented by a host of splinters. The three main types of "Radicals" were Anabaptists, Spirituals, and Rationalists—all Evangelical in purpose and expression.

THE ANABAPTISTS:

"Anabaptist" was a nickname given to those who broke away from the established churches and along with many other criticisms condemned infant baptism and preached the baptism of adult penitent believers. "Anabaptist" denoted "re-baptizers." The Anabaptists insisted that infant baptism was no baptism. They declared that there was only one baptism. The big issue was infant versus adult baptism. There were examples of immersion but throughout most of the Reformation Period sprinkling or pouring seems to have been the general practice. Toward the end of the period immersion was challenging sprinkling and pouring.

Some look to late medieval mystical movements and to Carlstadt, Müntzer, and the Zwickau prophets who broke with Luther as the roots or forerunners of the Anabaptists. A part of the heritage of many of the early Anabaptist leaders was the late medieval criticisms of the church. The Peasants' Revolt in Germany supported by Carlstadt and those who broke with Luther did prepare the soil for Anabaptism. Many of the peasants were disillusioned with Luther, pope and emperor. Though many well-trained Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians became Anabaptists, the movement made its greatest conquests numerically among the peasants and artisans.

THE ANABAPTIST PRINCIPLES:

The Anabaptist Movement consisted of many splinters and independent groups that sprang up in different places yet there were ideas that they tended to hold in common. Ideas that tended to characterize all Anabaptist groups were:
1) The sole authority of Scripture. Though all the Protestant groups claimed this ideal, the Anabaptists were the most thorough going and consistent in their application of the principle.

2) The right of the individual to interpret the Scriptures for himself. "The humblest peasant with a Bible in his hand was equal to the greatest doctor—-even Dr. Eck, Dr. Luther, or Dr. Zwingli." There tended to be endless quarrels and divisions among the Anabaptists because they never learned what to do when two peasants disagreed on what Scripture meant.

3) The true church consisted of penitent believers who had been baptized and who covenanted together to form a congregation to observe the Lord's Supper and to help one another in living the Christian life.

4) The autonomy of the local church. There could be no organization over and beyond the local church. It chose its own preacher and exercised discipline over its members.

5) The separation of church and state. The state had no right to meddle in religion. It was the duty of the state to restrain the lawless and to guarantee the rights and freedom of the individual to follow Scripture as directed by his own conscience.

There were principles that characterized the majority of the Anabaptists but from which some dissented:

1) The distinction between Old and New Testaments. Anabaptists in general saw more clearly than any other group in the Reformation the difference in the Testaments. Only the New Testament was binding on Christians. There were isolated examples of Anabaptists who resorted to the Old Testament for authority.

2) Non-violence or pacifism. Anabaptists tended to condemn the use of force or violence in religion. The majority held that Christians could not participate in government. They condemned war. In the main they opposed the taking of oaths and the holding of civil office.

There were ideas held by vocal minority groups or strong individuals among the Anabaptists but denied by the majority:

1) Inner illumination by the Holy Spirit or continuing revelation.

2) Questionable Christologies. Some denied either the humanity or the divinity of Christ.

3) Millennial ideas.

4) Communism of property.

THE SWISS BRETHREN:

Anabaptism had its beginning in Switzerland in what came to be known as "The Swiss Brethren." The early Anabaptist leaders were first strong and enthusiastic disciples of Zwingli. They became impatient and critical of the slowness with which Zwingli moved and his dependence on the councils. They charged Zwingli with being inconsistent and with cowardly compromising in applying his stated principle of doing away with all practices in religion that did not have specific authorization in Scripture. The criticisms began over the hesitancy to remove images and to end the mass and then focused on infant baptism. Among the zealous followers of Zwingli in 1522 were Felix Mantz and Conrad Grebel. Within three years they had moved beyond Zwingli in their vision of reform. They were joined by Wilhelm Reublin, George Blaurock and Balthasar Hubmaier. Conrad Grebel was the son of a prominent and wealthy Swiss family. During his childhood his father had served as a magistrate in Gruningen later moved to Zurich where he became a member of the council. Conrad
Grebel spent six years in the Carolina School of the Grossmunster in Zurich. In 1514 he was a student in the University of Basel, studying with the humanist scholar, Glarean. Grebel spent the next three years in the University of Vienna studying under Vadian. In Basel he turned to wicked ways—drunken brawls and women. He left without taking a degree. He moved to Paris planning to study under his old teacher, Glarean, and during his twenty months in Paris made great progress in Greek and Hebrew. He was expelled for his riotous ways. Returning to Zurich in 1520, he joined the little circle of bright young men to whom Zwingli was teaching the Greek classics. Felix Mantz soon joined the group. Zwingli led the group from the classics to Scripture. 1522 was a crisis year for Grebel. He married a young lady of lower social standing which greatly displeased his parents. He also made up his mind to be a preacher of the gospel. Zwingli had also won for reform Heinrich Engelhart, Simon Stumpf, and Felix Mantz.

By the time of Zwingli's Second Zurich Debate, held October 26-28, 1523, his young disciples had moved ahead of their master in reform ideas. Privately in discussion Zwingli had agreed with his young disciples that the Word of God and not the Zurich council should determine the questions of images and the mass. But in the public debate Zwingli seemed to the disciples to submit the decision to the council. On the first day, October 26, all the participants denounced the images. The second day was devoted to the mass which was denounced as an abomination before God. The young men expected Zwingli to instruct the council to abolish the mass and to remove the images. When the burgomaster announced that the third day would be devoted to purgatory Grebel requested that they settle the subject of the mass before moving to another topic. Zwingli announced that the council would decide on the regulation of the mass. Stumpf declared Zwingli did not have the right to put the matter in the hands of the council when the Word of God had already decided the matter. Zwingli stressed the difference in determining the truth of Scripture and the implementation of the truth. Stumpf announced that if the council went against the decision of God he would preach and act against it. After the heated exchange of the end of the second day, the third day had to be devoted to the mass instead of to purgatory. Grebel spoke first. Balthasar Hubmaier, a priest from Waldshut on the Rhine who had come to the debate, and who had been moving toward reform, spoke. When Grebel saw that there was no hope of the abolition of the mass in the near future he ceased to argue with Zwingli—he had broken with his master. Grebel and the young disciples felt that Zwingli had betrayed them. He had forsaken the principle of reform and had capitulated to the council. The young men's refusal to accept the judgment of the council can be considered the beginning of the "free church" movement. Stumpf's protest was so strong that he was banished from Zurich.

Felix Mantz was born in Zurich, the illegitimate son of a priest of the Grossmünster. He received a good education, including excellent training in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. He shared the dissatisfaction of Stumpf and Grebel with Zwingli's reform. Before Stumpf was exiled the three presented alternate programs of reform to Zwingli and Leo Jud. "then they saw that nothing was going to come from their proposals they began to hold secret meetings in private homes. Their favorite meeting place was the home of Felix Mantz. Grebel was the leader of this little group of radicals whose number increased to seven. Mantz and Höttinger led Bible studies—Mantz teaching from the Hebrew Bible. They corresponded with Carlstadt, Muntzer, and Luther.

During the year, 1524, Wilhelm Reublin, pastor in the neighboring village of Wytikon, raised the question of the validity of infant baptism. Grebel and his associates began to question infant baptism. Three fathers at Zollikon withheld their children from baptism and were defended by the aged priest, Johannes Bröti. Reublin was imprisoned
in August and forced out of Zurich. It was the insistence on believer's baptism by Reublin, Brötli, Grebel and his associates that led to the disputation of January, 1525.

Grebel had been aware that some of Zwingli's followers were privately questioning infant baptism even before Reublin spoke out on the matter. Some at the disputation knew that earlier even Zwingli himself had preached against infant baptism. Oecolampadius, Jud, Grossman and others had expressed doubts about it. The Zwickau prophets had challenged infant baptism as early as 1521. In the debate Huhmaier testified that Zwingli had privately confessed to him that there was no Scripture authority for infant baptism. The debate was held on two successive Tuesdays, January 10 and 17, 1525. Zwingli and Bullinger defended infant baptism and Grebel, Mantz, and Reublin were the chief spokesmen against it. Zwingli knew the council favored infant baptism and he would not go against the council. His former disciples pressed him and provoked him to great anger. They knew they had the best of the argument. Both sides claimed victory. Zwingli announced that because of high public feeling raised by the debate it would be dangerous to continue. The council declared that Zwingli had triumphed and reaffirmed infant baptism. They decreed that all who failed to have their infants baptized within eight days would be exiled. Three days later on January 21, Reublin, Haetzer, Brötli and Andrew Castelberger were expelled as foreigners who were causing trouble in Zurich. Grebel and Mantz were forbidden to hold any more "schools" or private meetings. Castelberger was a bookseller who had come to Zurich from Grisons (Graubünden) and had opened his home to some of the secret meetings.

One foreigner not expelled who had spoken out once in the debate was George Blaurock, a newcomer from Graubünden. He was a priest who had been educated at the University of Leipzig. He had served as vicar at Tirs in the diocese of Cham until he was converted to the Reformation faith and had married. He was a tall, powerful figure and was nicknamed "strong George." He had been attracted to Zurich by the reports of Zwingli but upon hearing that there were reformers more zealous than Zwingli he had sought them out and had cast his lot with the young Swiss radicals who had begun to call themselves "Swiss Brethren" and Christians." He became the most zealous of the circle. When he had spoken out in the debate few knew him and he was identified later as the one in the blue coat. From this he received the name "Blaurock" or "blue coat." His real name was George Cgaibob (George of the House of Jacob).

In the eyes of the young radicals again Zwingli had cowardly compromised with the council and betrayed his basic principle of reform, which was to abolish every practice that had no foundation in Scripture. For months the young reformers had been praying to the Lord for guidance. In spite of the decree of the council on the very evening of January 21 that small band trudged in the darkness through the snow secretly but resolutely to a meeting in the house of Felix Mantz close to the Grossmünster. After a prayer George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him with true Christian baptism upon faith and knowledge. Blaurock then baptized all the others and they pledged themselves as true disciples to live lives separated from an evil world, to keep the faith, and to preach the gospel to the whole world.

This was the birth of Anabaptism and the first church of the Swiss Brethren. It was a revolutionary act—a complete break with Rome. For the first time in the Reformation a group dared to form a church after what they conceived to be the New Testament pattern—without regard to past tradition. It had come from close and long study of Scripture.