SOCINIANISM

Prayer
Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:8-13
Hymn: 472 "O Thou Fount of Every Blessing"

The Socinians were the early Unitarians. The movement got its name from two of its early leaders, two Italians, the two Sozzini, uncle and nephew, Lelio Francesco Maria Sozini (the uncle's name is often spelled with only one "z") and Fausto Paolo Sozzini (the nephew's name is spelled with two "z's"), from the town of Siena in Italy. Driven from Italy by fear of the Inquisition, in Poland, Fausto brought many differing elements together in the Socinian Church. The name "Sozini" is often Latinized into "Socinius". The movement is often called "Polish Unitarians" or "Polish Brethren." They were critical of and hated by all the other major Reformation groups--especially Lutherans and Calvinists. The Catholic Inquisition finally drove them from Poland. Often they were confused with Anabaptists who were also driven from Poland by the Inquisition.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE SOCINIANS

The most prominent of the forerunners of Socinianism were Italians. A few Spaniards had an important influence. The immediate background was the Italian Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation, and the Roman Revival. The roots of the movement reach back into Scholasticism and Mysticism of the Late Middle Ages. The Socinians were heirs of the criticisms of the church that played such a large part in the break-up of the Middle Ages.

Many of these forerunners were influenced by the thought of Duns Scotus and his criticisms of the system of Thomas Aquinas--especially Scotus's emphasis on the will of God and man's will since man was created in the image of God.

Just as important was the influence of the Mystics--especially Pantheistic Mysticism. Most of them had difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Christ as set forth in the creeds of the church. Most of them held some theory of "the inner light." Some insisted that the inner light superseded the traditions of the church and even Scripture. Others insisted that the inner light was needed as the interpreter of Tradition and Scripture.

Those who most influenced Socinianism were children of the Italian Renaissance. They were revolting against the Augustinianism of both Catholics and Protestants--the ideas of total depravity, predestination and election, limited atonement, and the impossibility of apostasy. They had a strong sense of the freedom and value of the individual. They had the Renaissance contempt for ecclesiastical dogma. They were given to almost unrestrained speculation.

Most of these forerunners were cultured men, distinguished by learning, pure moral lives, deep piety, and great moral courage. They were highly critical of the corrupt lives of the hierarchy.
and clergy of the church and of the intolerance of the Catholic church. They were impatient with the slowness of the reforms of Roman Revival. They disliked all the sectarian bitterness and strife. The influence of Erasmus with his plea for peace and reasonableness was great. They wanted a pure, peaceful, united church.

Most of these men were "once born" men—often they had little appreciation for the conversion experiences of men like Luther. Their religion put more influence on the intellect and correct understanding than on faith and grace.

Anabaptism exercised considerable influence on the movement. In some circles "rebaptism" was a big issue with emphasis on individual choice. Also strong emphasis was put on the neutrality of the state in religious matters. Socinians inherited a strong emphasis on freedom of conscience.

The strong sense of individuality for a long time kept these non-conformists scattered in a multitude of small circles. Their individualism and strong opposition from both Catholics and Protestants limited them to small discussion groups and conferences that met privately and irregularly. Occasionally they dared to make their criticisms known to both Catholic and Protestants arousing suspicion and repression. Often they were driven to solitary meditation. For years they were more like debating societies gathered around their champions. When they found the Inquisition on their trail they often fled to the Protestants, only to meet with rejection and further persecution. Again and again they were drawn to Wittenberg or Geneva only to find no toleration. They were drawn to Poland where for a time dissenting groups found greater toleration than existed anywhere else in all Europe.

POLAND AS A HAVEN FOR DISSENTERS

Poland, and its neighbors, Transylvania and Hungary, for a time, offered peace and safety for persecuted peoples. Poland and Transylvania were more feudal than Western Europe and powerful independent nobles could receive persecuted peoples on their estates with little fear of being crushed by the central government. The lack of a strong central government made Transylvania a haven for a variety of religious opinions. The Turks of Hungary welcomed the persecuted who found the infidels more tolerant than either Catholic or Protestant princes.

Poland by tradition was a Catholic country. German missionaries brought their Catholic Christianity to Poland in the tenth century. A Polish duke, Miecyslaw, accepted Christianity in 965. In 968 a bishopric was created for Poles at Poznan (Posen); the first two bishops were Germans. Under King Boleslaw I (Boleslaus), 992-1025, Christianity spread rapidly. In 1000 King Boleslaw recognized an archbishopric in Gniezno (Gnesen) and the Polish church became an independent church recognized by Rome. For four centuries Poland was ruled by the Piast dynasty, the last of whom was Casimir the Great (1333-1370) who made Cracow his capital. It became one of the leading cities of eastern Europe. In 1364 he founded Cracow University. In 1386 Jagello, grand-duce of Lithuania, married
Jadwiga, grand-niece of Casimir, and became King Ladislaw (Vladislaw or Wladyslaw) of Poland. Under the Jagellonian dynasty the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom became one of the great powers of Europe. The king's powers were limited by the Parliament elected by the feudal nobility who were powerful and jealous of their rights and privileges. In the fourteenth century, under the Jagellonians, Poland became one of the centers of the Renaissance in northern and eastern Europe. The University of Cracow attracted distinguished lecturers from all over Europe. It produced humanist scholars of great brilliance and drew scholars from abroad. When Sigismund I married the Renaissance princess, Sforza of Milan, their court became one of the bright spots of the Renaissance, attracting scholars, literary figures and artists. Italian architects and their Polish disciples erected some of the finest monuments of the Renaissance north of the Alps. Renaissance humanism spread among the upper classes. The great mass of peasants remained devoutly Catholic. Poland developed a reputation for freedom of thought and great tolerance.

Under Sigismund II (1548-72) the Reformation entered and spread rapidly throughout Poland. First Lutheranism from Germany and Sweden took root in the north. In the Eastern Orthodoxy from Russia spread. Hussite preachers won many converts throughout the non-German parts of Poland. Hussites were especially numerous in the south and southwest nearest Bohemia. Nobles who adopted Hussite convictions were strongly antipapal and anti-German. In the 1540's Calvinism began spreading in Lithuania, Samogitia and Little Poland. Non-German nobles preferred Calvinism to Lutheranism because of the anti-German spirit, because of the recognition of the equality of clergy and laymen, and because Calvinism seemed more fitting for men who prized freedom. The Calvinists held their first synod in Pinczow in 1550. At the synod of Kozminek (August 1555) the Bohemian Brethren who had been expelled from their own country coalesced with the Calvinists. The Calvinists gained such strength and influence in Poland that in 1570 Jan Laski attempted to unite all Polish Protestants in a Reformed Federation. Resolute Lutheran opposition defeated his efforts.

Sigismund II showed his own leanings when he married a Catholic princess of the noble house of Radziwill and allied himself with Austria and the catholic bishops. In 1550 he issued an edict against heresy. Lutheranism and Calvinism had their greatest successes among the nobles and the educated. The peasants tended to remain Catholic. The king's alliance with the catholic clergy and the clergy's highhanded attempts to repress Protestantism resulted in a movement among Hussite, Luther and Calvinistic nobles and other nobles of strong nationalistic spirits to press for a Reformed Polish state church with Polish ritual, independent of Rome, and with a priesthood subject to the government. The king showed some sympathy for this appeal to nationalism. One of the more enlightened monarchs of Europe he used the vernacular instead of Latin in public functions. In 1552 clerical courts were suspended. Between 1555 and 1565 Protestantism flourished. 1558 and 1559 have been considered the high-water mark of Polish Protestantism. For a brief time the majority of the Polish Parliament was Protestant. Demands for a national synod made the
king fear violence from the nobles. There were mounting demands for an end of clerical celibacy. In some places masses were said in Polish and communion administered in both kinds. The king sided with the bishops and refused a national synod. Protestantism began to decline. One factor in the decline was the bitter divisions and rivalry among Protestants. Another was the strong individualism of the Polish nobles. A big factor was the chaos of religious ideas in Poland resulting from the influx of persecuted peoples of all kinds from all over Europe. The unorthodox from everywhere sought a home in Poland. Anabaptists of every kind sought and found refuge on the estates of the nobles. Most alarming to both Catholics and Protestants were the anti-Trinitarian heretics that found refuge and began disturbing Poland.

Pope Paul IV began to pursue a wiser policy toward Poland. He sought good relations with the Polish crown. He was careful to see that new bishops appointed were holy, learned, capable men who were dedicated to seeing that the decrees of the Council of Trent were carried out in Poland. In 1565 the Jesuits began bringing the Catholic Counter Reformation to Poland. Toward the end of the sixteenth century Catholicism was again becoming firmly re-established in Poland and the Inquisition was brought to Poland.

THE RADICALS IN POLAND

The radicals who contributed most to the development of Socinianism were the Italians. Germans, Spaniards, and a number of Anabaptists made contributions to the ferment of ideas.

THE GERMAN RADICALS: CASPAR SCHWENCKFELD AND SEBASTIAN FRANCK

Caspar Schwenckfeld was a devout Silesian noble who had been a knight of the Teutonic Order. He became a follower of Luther in 1518 and for eight years was a strong exponent of Lutheran reform. He developed an iberic and evangelical Spiritualism that led to a break with Luther. He criticized Luther on justification by faith and on the eucharist. He internalized the eucharist. Justification comes through the knowledge of Christ that comes through faith. It is received in the inward feeding upon Christ. For a time he even suspended the outward observance of the Supper. He emphasized the deification of Christ's human nature. He encouraged prayer and study circles but was critical of institutions. He wanted a church of the Spirit. His followers, persecuted by the Lutherans, spread their ideas in Poland.

Sebastian Franck was a German humanist who became a follower of Luther. He went even further than Schwenckfeld in his Spiritualism. He came to oppose all attempts to reform the visible church. The visible church with its organization and sacraments, and the Scriptures were for infants and children. Both Catholics and Reformers were clutching at husks. He was an exponent of the celestial flesh of Christ as the substance of spiritual nourishment. He was a pacifist who advocated complete freedom of thought and an undogmatic Christianity. He emphasized the difference in the Old and New Testaments. He wanted a spiritual church freed from all
externals. He and his followers were persecuted but his ideas became a factor in the ferment of the age.

A SPANISH RADICAL: MICHAEL SERVETUS

Calvin's burning of Servetus in Geneva for anti-Trinitarian heresy was noted by Italian radicals who would carry similar ideas to Poland. Servetus was born in Tudela in Navarre. He studied in Saragossa and Toulouse. He traveled in Italy and Germany. His studies led him to question the doctrine of the Trinity. He visited Melanchthon and Bucer. He corresponded with Oecolampadius. His book, *The Errors of the Trinity,* was published without the name of either author or publisher in 1531. It incensed both Catholics and Protestants. He studied medicine in Paris and became a successful physician, but continued his studies in religion. In 1553 he published another attack on the teachings of both Catholics and Protestants, *The Restitution of Christianity.* It was published anonymously. It continued the attack on the Trinity, denied the divinity of Christ, attacked the ancient creeds, and infant baptism. Calvin discovered that Servetus was the author and informed the Catholic authorities who arrested and imprisoned him. Servetus escaped and fled to Geneva, not knowing that Calvin was responsible for his arrest. In Geneva he attacked the pillars of Calvin such as total depravity, and predestination and denied that such doctrines came from the right interpretation of Scripture. Calvin had him brought to trial and burned.

Italian radicals who were critical of Calvin for burning Servetus carried similar ideas to Poland and spread them.

THE ITALIAN RADICALS:

In the time of the Reformation there were still strong Italian Waldensian communities in the Italian Alps. Waldensian preachers still strongly condemned the corruption in the church, preached apostolic poverty and holy living. Some of them joined the Lutheran Reform. Others joined in with Calvin and Olivetan prepared for them a translation of the Bible for which Calvin wrote the introduction. Some Waldensians joined Anabaptist movements. Still persecuted by the Catholics some Waldensians found refuge in Bohemia and Poland.

John Valdés, a Spaniard from Castile, settled in Naples in 1534 and became the leader of a devout group who wanted reform and spiritual revival in the church. He translated the Psalms and parts of the New Testament into the Italian. He wrote commentaries and devotional books that paved the way for the spread of Protestant ideas in Italy. After his death his friends, Peter Martyr and Ochino, were among those he had influenced who left the Catholic church. His *Christian Alphabet* was an introduction to Christian perfection. His *Dialogue* was a handbook to the Christian life. His *Considerations* was a treatment of the atonement and how Christ's crucifixion resulted in the forgiving and redeeming man and the change this works in the individual. His ideas of the atonement would be carried to Poland and developed by Ochino and Faustus Socinus.
Ochino was the General of the new Counter-Reformation order, the Capuchins. He became convinced of the truth of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith and decided to leave the Catholic church. He escaped to Geneva. He became critical of Calvin, especially of his burning Servetus. He served a Protestant congregation in Augsburg (1545-47), found asylum in England and preached for an Italian church in London, lived for a time in Basel under the assumed name of Corvinus. Finally he fled to Poland where he was accused of anti-Trinitarian ideas and of defending polygamy.

William Postel, a Jesuit, became interested in the cabalist Zohar of the Jews. He became obsessed with the idea of Christ ushering in a Golden Age. He corresponded with Schwenckfeld. His ideas appealed to some of the Italian Spiritualists.

Camillo Renato was claimed by Italian Anabaptists to be the founder of their movement. He was a Sicilian who became a Franciscan in Naples. He was well trained in theology and classical literature and moved in courtly and academic circles. He became a popular preacher. The Inquisition accused him of heresy. He moved to Bologna and in 1540 fled to Modena where he won many converts to his radical ideas. The Dominican Inquisitors brought him to trial in Ferrara. He was accused of teaching that the souls of both righteous and wicked expire with the death of the body and have no existence until the resurrection. Only the righteous will be raised. He was accused of denying the existence of both purgatory and paradise. Also he was accused of denying the value of masses for the dead and the value of vows before God and the saints. He agreed to renounce his teachings and submitted to a solemn penitential procession through the town. He fled to Rhaetia where he resumed his teaching and gathered an Anabaptist community. He declared the baptism of the Catholic church was the work of the Antichrist. Anabaptist communities were scattered throughout the Republic of Rhaetia. Before the arrival of Camillo Renato, Francis Negri had founded a Protestant community in Chiavenna in which Augustine Mainardo, pastor in Chiavenna, became a leader. Camillo was well received by this community and it became Anabaptist. Two other Anabaptist leaders in Rhaetia were Francis of Calabria in the parish of Vetto and Jerome of Milan who led a community in Lavin. The Anabaptist preachers in Rhaetia were called "apostles." A bitter controversy arose between Camillo Renato and Mainardo at Chiavenna in 1548, over the idea that the soul dies with the body. Mainardo and his followers issued a statement in which they damned Camillo Renato and Francis of Calabria and all those who said the soul was mortal and dies with the body and that impious men will not be resurrected at the Last Day. Mainardo maintained the natural immortality of the soul. These Italian Anabaptists corresponded with Anabaptists in Germany and Switzerland. They also consulted Bullinger. Peter Paul Vererio led an attempt to restore peace and unity among Italian Anabaptists.

In Florence Tiziano spread the ideas of Camillo Renato and won for Anabaptism a former priest, Peter Manelfi. Manelfi had been won to Lutheranism by Ochino. Tiziano, Manelfi, Lawrence
Niccoluzzo of Modiano and Joseph of Asolo travelled throughout northern Italy and established Anabaptist communities in the Republic of Venice. These communities were torn by controversy over the Trinity and Christology. Tiziano, Joseph of Asolo and Manelfi took the lead in assembling a synod in Venice in 1550 in which some thirty Anabaptist congregations were represented by two delegates each. The synod met for forty days and finally adopted almost unanimously a statement on ten disputed points. They declared that Jesus was not God, but an exceptional man. They denied the Virgin Birth, saying that he was the natural child of Joseph and Mary and that Mary had other sons and daughters. They declared the human seed had the God given power to produce both soul and body. The elect are justified by the eternal mercy of God. The benefit of Christ consisted solely in his giving instruction in the good life and his sacrificial testimony on the cross to the love of God. They denied the existence of angels and of the devil. They denied the existence of hell, declaring that the only hell was the grave. The souls of the righteous sleep till the Judgment when they are awakened and resurrected. The congregation of Cittadella refused to accept all these points and was excluded from fellowship. The synod appointed teams of apostolic bishops to go about northern Italy in pairs to explain the ten points. The controversies continued until Manelfi became disgusted and returned to the Catholic church. He gave the Inquisition a list of those who had participated in the synod. The Inquisition proceeded with arrests and trials. Several recanted among whom was the former Franciscan, Lawrence Tizzano. A number were executed. George Siculo was executed without a trial. Tiziano escaped to Rhaetia.

In 1551 Camillo Renato was captured. A second time he recanted his heresies. Even the second recantation did little to diminish his popularity among his followers. Some of these followers fled from the Inquisition and carried Camillo Renato's disturbing ideas to Poland and Transylvania.

ITALIAN RADICALS IN GENEVA:

A number of Italian Radicals sought refuge in Geneva from the Inquisition in Italy. Calvin had made Geneva a haven for persecuted Protestants. The Italians soon found that Calvin could be as intolerant as the Inquisition. An Italian congregation was formed in Geneva. Radicals who appeared in the Italian congregation soon clashed with Calvin. Among them were Matthew Gribaldi, a lawyer from Padua; John Valentine Gentile from Calabria who had become a disciple of Valdés before entering the circle of Gribaldi; John Alciati from Piedmont who was granted Genevan citizenship in 1555; also the Piedmont physician, George Blandrata, a specialist in female diseases.

Matthew Gribaldi was a popular professor of law in Padua. He became interested in Lutheranism and then got interested in the anti-Trinitarian ideas of Servetus. He made a bold visit to Geneva to visit Servetus in prison. He tried to intercede with Calvin for Servetus and got into a bitter theological discussion with Calvin.

Calvin at first gave the members of the troubled Italian
congregation freedom to discuss their points of view with him. Alarmed at their heresies Calvin prepared a confession of faith that he demanded they all sign. Alciati and Gribaldi managed to escape from Geneva. John Valentine Gentile was arrested and imprisoned. At first he tried to hold his ground and requested the help of a theologian, requesting Peter Martyr Vermigli. The council refused his request. Gentile finally agreed to make a public recantation, confessing his errors and burning his books. After humiliating himself in Geneva he joined Alciati, Gribaldi and Blandrata at Farges. Gentile was arrested by the Catholics but released when they were impressed with his anti-Calvinism. In Lyons he was arrested again and released. Alciati visited Chiavenna; later he spent a winter term at the University of Basel. In the spring of 1559 he raised a doctrinal controversy in Turin. He returned to Farges. He sent a confession of his faith to the council in Geneva. In 1562 Gentile and Alciati set out for Poland.

Also in 1562 Francis Negri moved to Poland where his son, George, had become pastor of an Italian Anabaptist congregation at Pińczów in Little Poland.

Gribaldi returned to the Catholics and secured a position in the university in Grenoble. He was soon in difficulty with the Catholics and was accused of abstaining from the mass. He was dismissed from his post. He returned to Farges where he died in the plague in 1564.

The Piedmont physician George Blandrata became interested in anti-Trinitarianism. He was invited to Poland where he became court physician to the Queen Bona Sforza at Cracow. He moved to Transylvania where he was court physician to the widow of John Zápolya. About 1553 he returned to Italy. By 1556 he was suspected of heresy by the Inquisition and fled to Geneva. He became an elder in the Italian congregation. He got into a debate on his anti-Trinitarian ideas with the pastor, Martinengo. He had discussions with Calvin who strongly reprimanded him. Fearing further action from Calvin he left the city and returned to Transylvania.

These Italian radicals were typical of the Italian Reformation. It was limited to the wealthy and educated. The masses of Italy were horrified at their heresies and terrified by the Inquisition. The Italian Protestants were highly educated and cultivated men with a strong sense of individuality. Lutherans and Calvinists had no more toleration for them than the Catholics. Their disturbing ideas took root in Poland and played a major part in the forming of the Socinian Church.