

Anabaptists

It was the evening of 21st Jan 1525. Many people could be seen gathering quietly for a house meeting in Zollikon, a village just outside of Zurich. Earlier that day the Zurich council had forbidden such assemblies, or schools as they were called, where scripture was studied in order for it to be obeyed. As the meeting progressed into the night, with prayer and preaching, one by one disciples baptised each other. The Spirit of God fell on the company. The joy of the Lord filled the worshippers with strength and exuberance. In the early hours of the morning as they overflowed into the streets the unsuspecting villagers were awakened with evangelizing exhortations to “wholly follow the Lord”. The response of the authorities was swift. Ulrich Zwingli, who at one time had led in theological studies some of the members who were in the meeting and had agreed with them about believers’ baptism, now led the offensive in fines, imprisonments and executions.

The meeting house was that of Felix Mantz’ mother, Anna. Felix was a scholar, the son of a priest. He was to be the first martyr of these newly founded “brothers”, or just “Christians” as they wished to be called. His mother and a brother urged him to remain steadfast as he, barely two years later on 5th Jan 1527, walked from the fish market praising God to the river of execution. Bullinger, a magisterial reformer, records he was trussed, with a stick thrust between his roped doubledup legs and arms, and as he was being drawn into the icy water sang “Into your hands I commit my spirit”. He was the first Protestant to be put to death by Protestants, thousands more were to follow while many others were to be executed by Catholics. For these bible studying brothers and sisters to have aroused such universal and unifying hatred surely condemns them in the eyes of all true Christians, or so it was thought!

Now this introduction does not seem very irenic or helpful in these days of ecumenism. Please forgive me! However, all, I think, are agreed that something is never put right until it is judged right – not merely ignored! Since these brothers and sisters, called Anabaptists, have been overlooked, dismissed, neglected, ignored and misrepresented I will have to write a little more of their history (please bear with me if you are well informed in these matters) which is very extensive and also demonstrates that much of what they valued, taught, lived and for which they died, God I believe is seeking to recover for all true believers in every

denomination in these more peaceful, reflective and respectful days of ecclesiastical ecumenism. The protestant Bishop Hugh Latimer who also died for his faith, famously remarked “wherever you see persecution there is more than a probability that truth is on the persecuted side”. Of course all kinds of Christians died in the Reformation, but none were so universally and brutally persecuted as these Anabaptists.

Recovering Histories

There had always been in every century, bodies of believers who wished to find their way back to the early and original halcyon days of New Testament Christianity. Indeed since in Western Christianity Constantine virtually took over the church in the 4th century and was later strengthened in this theologically by Augustine in the 5th century, there appeared many groups of radical Christians. These were variously named Priscillians, Bogomiles, Paulicans, Beghards, Donatists, Lollards and Waldensians to name but a few before the Reformation. These resisted the political, governmental assimilation of the church by the state. It is always assumed that they were heretical since, when they were persecuted, they died condemned as heretics and their writings burnt with them. This was even the case in the possibly more enlightened times of the Reformation period. My introduction to church history at Cambridge University, dominated by Gwatkin and Duchesne did not introduce me to the Reformation Radicals. This no doubt was due to the paucity of evidence for their contribution in comparison to large numbers of Protestant and Catholic records. However, over the last 50 years considerable scholarly research, especially in the U.S.A. but also by those delving into European libraries, has exhumed a vast amount of material. Of course much of this is known in academia only, hence the Radical Reformers’ (as we call them) contribution to the Reformation is not well known even though they saw themselves as the true executors of reform in this 16th century Western Church. Even more thoroughly reformed than Protestantism or the Council of Trent!

Dismissive Derision and Smear Names

Another reason for their neglect is the way they have been misrepresented as not worthy of consideration or study. Strangely, at the time of the Reformation, and since, the polygamous

theocracy of MÜNster with all its extreme extravagances has been presented as a warning of where reforming analysis could take us. In 1553/55 Jan Rex Leiden and Jan Mattig, neither of whom were baptized men in the Anabaptist's understanding, set up the Kingdom of God on earth only to be destroyed by the combined forces of both Catholics and Protestants. It was said that Catholics and Protestants must first together remove these Anabaptist extremists and then sort out their own differences. Most true Anabaptists were nonviolent, one group were called Stäbler since they only carried staves and not swords. They were far removed from violent revolutionaries seen at MÜNster. As the 16th Century moved on, groups of believers wishing to practise believers' baptism were springing up all over Switzerland, Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, Rhineland, North Germany, Poland, Holland et al. All were vilified often with the Munster brush and most persecuted. They were driven into exile in Russia and the New World. They made contact into Britain through Holland, where the Mennonites and Water Landers had congregations who associated with "The Brownites" (Brown died in prison under Queen Elizabeth). Coming from all ranks and classes of European life, they were derided and smeared by "bad press" terms from the past. One favourite smear word was "Donatist" which had its origin in the 4th Century when Donatus, following Tertullian of the 2nd Century, said "what has the Emperor got to do with the church?" Constantine in the 4th Century had brought the Church under his protection and consequently control. The Donatists had reacted in line with Tertullian's 2nd Century statement and maintained what had been the universal stance of all congregations until this time. The new view for the Church of Christ at this time is known as the "sacral" society view and the Reformers and Catholics continued with this concept whereas the Anabaptists wished to return to the view which Jesus had uniquely and innovatively brought into a world of sacral communities. All religious societies before Christ were "sacral", religion and politics were one. Israel was "sacral", Moses and the Torah were one. However, Jesus had introduced a clear division between "salt and earth", and "light and world" Matt 5:13-16, between "Caesar and God" Luke 20:25, and to each his own. Anabaptists saw this distinction lost in state political church. Churches backed by governments determined that every child born into the state must by paedobaptism be born into the church. So, believers' baptism and rejection of state church concepts belonged with each other. The wonderful new society introduced by Jesus – "this is my body" – now becomes lost as believers are subsumed into the earthly national entities. Anabaptists had something to say at the Reformation which has been largely lost. In the world today, where for example

British, Russian, American, German etc. values are regarded as so essential, that in some cases oaths of loyalty to such standards are proposed to preserve our benefits and borders. The precious body of Christ, the Church, supernatural and heavenly, bought by the blood of our saviour, surely must take pre-eminence in our world testimony. Are there Anabaptist doctrines crying out for reconsideration through the whole church in our current world scene, along with their unwillingness to take oaths? Hitlers' requirement of such an oath from all priests in the Lutheran state church is a modern day warning and example of this kind of dictatorial government and thought control which the church is here to resist.

The Particular relevance of the Anabaptist for Pentecostals

Before addressing a more general survey of the Anabaptists, it is well to notice particular relevance and parallels these believers have with present day Pentecostals. Ideally, of course, a comprehensive study of both movements would be more satisfactory. Failing this, a few modest pointers might be appropriate to promote further research. The multiplicity of names and places in both histories is immense and can be confusing. In light of this, I will concentrate on the Anabaptists making side glances at today's Pentecostals bearing two things in mind.

First, both movements have been recorded by less than friendly and sympathetic chroniclers as well as by their admirers. Sorting out the wheat from the chaff is not easy.

Secondly, both movements being, as I would maintain, from God have erupted spontaneously, being fuelled by different human experiences and places. This makes it difficult to be strictly definitive as to everyone's practices and beliefs. Equally who influenced this one and that one or none at all. With the above provisos, we shall draw out some points of contact none the less.

The Anabaptist main leaders, from all over Europe, agreed as to the need for the Holy Spirit to interpret and understand the Holy Spirit breathed Scriptures. This point is still unresolved amongst Bible-believing Christians. "Is the message of the Bible interpreted and understood by the unaided rational mind?" Martin Luther thought yes as do most Magisterial Reformers and their followers today. Caspar Schwenckfeld and most Anabaptists said no "We need the

Holy Spirit to unlock the Holy Scriptures”. The reliance of Anabaptists on visions and dreams and inspirations was derided by their enemies but whatever way shows their expectation of God’s living communication as to the Scriptures.

Glossolalia are recorded at the revival that took place at St Gall, Switzerland, as well as elsewhere, from time to time. Zwingli seems to be alluding to tongues and other forms of praying when he complains of their (Anabaptist) murmurings and mutterings and unintelligent words, even though at one time he studied God’s truth together with the Swiss Brethren leaders.

Thomas Müntzer, named by some as “the father of Anabaptist” speaks of the seven fold gifts of the Spirit, alluding to Isaiah Chapter 11, as the goal of redemption. His Prague Manifesto in 1521, refers to the gifts as direct instruction from the Holy Spirit in the form of visions and dreams and ecstatic utterance or inspired exegesis. Also amongst Anabaptists, it was recognised that God’s Spirit is not confined to or by an institution but goes as He wishes.

The first century experience of the Holy Spirit was thought by John Hut and John Denck to come again with flames of fire to anoint the new apostles for the End and the Millennium. Last Day outpourings (Latter Rain?) and end time Apostles sound strangely familiar? Brother Luke who had earlier roots in the Hussite Restoration Movement of the 15th century tells of some adherents “going out in the Spirit” and healings and miracles taking place.

Prophecy was fundamental to all that was happening while preaching even the Scripture without the Holy Spirit was worthless. Most 16th century Anabaptists were pacifist but some fought with the Great Peasant Uprising 1524-5. The same division took place, painfully, at the outbreak of the Great War amongst the newly founded Pentecostal adherents.

All this suggests to me that the spiritual forefathers of today’s Pentecostals are not to be found in the Magisterial Reformers (even if historically they emerged from that stream), but from the Anabaptists of the Reformation.

Characteristics of Anabaptists

In order to give a fairly comprehensive picture of Anabaptism and what it has to contribute to the 21st Century debate of the ecumenical church, I have, with the particular help of G.H. Williams' scholarly work "The Radical Reformation" and others, gathered some 28 points together. Many of course are prized and embraced by many different Christian movements, creeds and denominations. I put them forth fervently, but I hope not arrogantly, recognizing that some are of less importance than others. Some could be held with reservations, and not all Anabaptists held all these points even 500 years ago, and some with variations and qualifications today.

1. The Baptism of Believers by their own free choice. Different modes in different traditions. Matt 28:18-20
2. The repudiation of State Church (Sacral) concepts.
Matt 22:21 and Matt 5:13-16
3. Suffering (Servanthood) is the mark of the true church. Those who will live godly lives shall suffer persecution.
2 Tim 3:12
4. Love is the pre-eminent characteristic of God and His people.
1 John 4:7-8
5. The Leadership of the church is moral and charismatic. i.e. character before abilities and is supernaturally given.
Acts 6:3 and 1 Tim 3:1-9
6. Resistance to fatalistic Predestination.
John 6:37 and 45
7. Reservations regarding "Forensic" view on justification as promoted by Luther, Zwingli and Calvin.
Gen 15:6, 22:2 and James 2:21-25
8. Stronger view on Regeneration "experience" than the Protestant Reformers.
John 3:3-5
9. Charismatic experiences and gifts e.g. prophecy. Calvin the reformer declared these supernatural gifts had ceased.

- 1 Corinthians 14:31
10. Problems with Augustinian "Original Sin" concepts.
Rom 3:23, 5:12
11. "Soon coming" – Imminence of the "Lord's Return" and judgement.
1 Corinthians 16:22
12. Evangelistic fervour, mission, martyrdom and philanthropy.
Matt 28:18-20 and Gal 6:9-10
13. Stress in teaching "Divine Compassion" and correspondingly love to neighbour and all persons, including our enemies.
Matt 23:36-40, John 3:16 and Matt 5:43-45
14. Denunciation of War
Matt 26:52 and Luke 18:20
15. No use of force in Church Discipline – They used the 'Rule of Christ' which was the "ban" or the removal of fellowship.
Matt 18:17
16. Recovering the Apostolic Community of Goods – Some had a common purse, others rejected the use of money altogether.
Act 2:44-45
17. Repudiated the "Invisible Church" concept, but emphasized the unity of the Spirit, while the church is to be visible by baptism (and all baptised believers welcomed at the Lords Table for Bread and Wine) and of course their Christ-like lives.
Eph 4:3 and 1 Cor 10:16, 17
18. Works and Faith issue raised against the magisterial Reformers. Anabaptists loved James' epistle, meanwhile Luther called it an epistle of straw.
James 2:17-26
19. Discipleship all important for all e.g. "Imitating Christ".
Rom 8:29
20. Incarnation investigated and sometimes restated (e.g. Celestial Flesh) and Nicean Trinitarianism re-explored – e.g. Servetus.
John 6:31,35 and John 10:29
21. Divisions in local churches met by inward Discipline, but the churches were externally free churches, autonomous and independent.

Matt 18:17

22. Churches were movements of people, all were Priests and Laity; no clergy as a separate class. 1 Peter 2:5, 10, and 1 Corinthians 5:4-5

23. Recognition of Women's Status, ministry, leadership and equality.

Rom 16:1,3,7 and 1 Corinthians 16:15-16

24. Primacy of N.T. over O.T. in interpretation (2 tiered system) and both over the creeds.

Matt 5:17-18,22,28 and Luke 24:27

25. Corporate Hermeneutic, interpretation from body or collegiate participation.

Acts 2:14, 17:11

26. Abstaining from the use of oaths.

James 5:12 and Matt 5:33-37

27. 'The perfecti' – travelling preachers who followed Jesus' command to the rich young ruler. This term was already in use in previous non conformitst churches for the travelling ministries.

Matt 16:21

28. Catharer or Puritans, separating from evil and evil fellowship – not inclusive but separatist.

While the Catholic and Magisterial Protestant churches sought the continuation and growth of the Corpus Christianum, the Radicals wanted the Corpus Christi to grow.

2 Cor 6:4-18

These twenty eight points are representative of the sort of issues which arose in the 16th Century Church. No doubt careful scrutiny of the period could discover more. Not every one of these theological distinctives would be held necessarily by every one who was called or was named Anabaptist. For example most Anabaptist were pacifist, but some argued for the use of force in self-defence and a few encouraged authorities to use force for public order. Some, like the Hutterites practiced the total community of goods even at times deeming money itself was unnecessary, replacing it by bartering. This latter position led to the smear name "communist". Others, (most) continued to engage with the World's financial systems of economics even if with great suspicion and care. Oath taking was universally rejected since it was so closely related to swearing allegiance to the state and paedobaptism was regarded as such an oath and was regarded in general speech to be contrary to our Lord's injunction

Matt 5:34-37, James 5:12. Despite these and no doubt other diversities of faith, doctrine and practice, the matters which arose from the Anabaptist movement which swept through Europe's scholars and peasants are still with us and require peaceful loving debate if we are sincerely following one who said every jot of written truth was significant, Matt 5:18. The Anabaptists would claim that the reformation only reformed the doctrine of salvation but ignored the reformation of the church even though a few abuses were universally recognized and rectified.

Today we are not killing others with alternative views as the Anabaptists of the 16th Century Church were often killed by those named Christians. Most serious minded Christians' of the 21st Century no matter what stripe they wear are in basic agreement that God is Love, and love is the pre-eminent value of defining God and our relationships with all including our enemies. However I wish to end my advocacy of the Anabaptists and the contribution they made to the 16th Century Church and their relevance for today, with a final story defining what sort of Love our Christian love is.

Dirk Willems was 19 years of ages and a convinced Believer's Baptist. For such he was imprisoned. Dependant on friends visits to feed him since the authorities didn't, he grew extremely thin! In fact he found he was now thin enough to slip through the bars of his cell. One day he did. As he walked away into freedom two soldiers clothed in armour, with heavy weapons, spotted him and began to give chase. Dirk ran. He crossed over a frozen expanse of water. The soldiers followed. However their weight and military garb and equipment being so much greater than a starved young man cracked the ice. The soldiers had little hope of survival as one can imagine. Now some of our 'theologies' of love might shout "Hallelujah, the Lord's Providence" and escape thus recaptivity but Dirk's did not: To love your enemy as Christ loved the church was, for him, to return to save the two soldiers, his enemies, which he did. He was rearrested and burnt in the town square in considerable pain. His young short life, is still remembered and inspires after 500 years. I wonder if mine will? But I think I know where I aspire to belong. The blinding light of Christ which exploded on Paul on the Damascus Road replaced his mind-set and world view, and our commitment and conversion should do the same to ours also. That Christ revealed in us as He was in Pauls conversion, Gal 1:16, is

destined for the total renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2). To see Christ in everything as it will be in the New Creation. This is the message of ultimate total eternal reformation.

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