

Sunday, June 5, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 35 The Anabaptists and the “Radical” Reformation

The Canons of Dort

- Convening to settle the ongoing doctrinal dispute between the followers of James Arminius and John Calvin, the Synod of Dort was the largest synod ever held of the Reformed Churches. There were eighty-six members of the synod: sixty-one Dutch and twenty-five foreigners. The advice of the foreign delegates was sought to still the differences which had arisen in the churches of the Netherlands, but the dispute was strictly Dutch. (Vance, 59-60)
- “The Synod of Dort convened in November 1618. A month was spent on matter other than the Arminian controversy. Then on December sixth, the Arminians were allowed to make their first appearance to defend their doctrines.” (Vance, 60)
- As one might expect the deck had been stacked against the Remonstrants (term used by the Calvinists to describe the followers of Arminius). Philipp Schaff reports that the fate of the Arminians was decided beforehand. John Wesley remarked years later that Dort was as impartial as the Council of Trent. (Vance, 61)
- “The Synod of Dort closed in May, 1619, after 136 sessions. The Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism were officially adopted and the Canons of Dort were issued. . . The Canons consisted of four articles with a rejection of errors adjoined to each. There were issued not in Dutch, but in Latin, which was still the universal language in scholarly and scientific circles.” (Vance, 61-62)
- “The Canons of Dort actually contain five articles of doctrine: The Five Points of Calvinism, but appearing under four articles, the third and fourth being combined. The order is different from the TULIP designation: Unconditional Election is treated first, followed by Limited Atonement, Total Depravity and Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints. The TULIP acronym is an accurate, although brief, summation of the Canons of Dort.” (Vance, 62)
- Calvinists maintain that if I does not ascribe to the doctrines outlined in the Canons of Dort they are automatically Arminian.
- “The difference between the Canons of Dort and all other creeds and confessions (Westminster) is that the Dort document deals with one specific thing: the Five Points of Calvinism; whereas all other creeds are of a general nature, covering all manner of subject and doctrines. It is the five Points of Calvinism, as embodied in the Canons of Dort that remain the sum and substance of Calvinism.” (Vance, 64)

The Anabaptists

- Thus far in our survey of the Protestant Revolution we have dealt with Lutheranism, and the Reformed/Presbyterian Churches. Both were in many ways a continuation of the Catholic Church in their respective lands. In principle Lutheranism rejected only those features of the Catholic Church which seemed to be expressly forbidden in Scriptures. By contrast, the Reformed Churches retained from Catholicism only what they believed

- to have warrant in the Scripture. Both continued infant baptism and by it endeavored to bring into the visible church all who were born in the community. (Latourette, 778)
- Contemporaneously with Lutheranism and Calvinism there was another form of Protestantism, much more radical than either. In general they looked to the Scriptures and especially to the New Testament for their authority and tended to discard all that they could not find expressly stated in the Word of God. They wished to return to the primitive Christianity of the first century. They thus rejected much more which had come through the Catholic Church than did Lutheran and Reformed traditions. (Latourette, 778)
 - They believed in “gathered” churches, not identical with the community at large, but comprised of those who had received the new birth. Rejecting infant baptism as contrary to the Scriptures, they regarded only that baptism valid which was administered to conscious believers. They were therefore nicknamed Anabaptists, those who baptize a second time. (Latourette, 779)
 - E. H. Broadbent also discusses the origins of the name Anabaptist. He writes, “About 1524, in Germany, many of the churches of the brethren, such as had existed from the earliest times, and in many lands, repeated what had been done at Lhota in 1467; they declared their independence as congregations of believers and their determination to observe and to carry out as churches the teachings of Scripture. . . This gave rise to a new name, a name which they themselves repudiated, for it was attached to them as an offensive epithet in order to convey the impression that they had founded a new sect; the new name was Anabaptist (baptizing again). (Broadbent, 171)
 - In a chapter titled “The Radical Reformation” Matthew A. Price and Michael Collins state the following regarding the beliefs of the Anabaptists. “Known as radical reformers, these Protestant believers firmly rejected the Lutheran position that only those Catholic practices that actually seemed to contradict the Bible should be abolished.” (Price and Collins, 138)
 - “The radical reformers—called Anabaptists (from the Greek, meaning “to baptize again”), as they believed that anyone baptized as an infant had to be “re-cleansed” as an adult—abandon any doctrine, worship practice, or ecclesiastical act that was not clearly sanctioned by the Bible.” (Price and Collins, 138)
 - “The Anabaptist movement originated in Zurich, where radical reformers tired of waiting for the council to put into practice Zwingli’s ideas. They felt that Christians should meet and worship as Scripture commanded, whether or not the secular authorities approved, and so they ignored the city council when it banned them in 1525.” (Hill, 255)
 - Felix Manz, one of Zwingli’s best students, decided to start a weekly Bible study in his home. There, Felix and his “Swiss Brothers” came to an unexpected conclusion: the New Testament never commanded infant baptism. In 1524 the Swiss Brothers openly criticized infant baptism. In January, 1525, one Swiss Brother asked one of his friends, “Baptize me with true Christian baptism, upon my faith.” Water was poured over his head in the name of the threefold God. One by one all the Swiss Brothers, including Felix, received believers’ baptism. That same night the Zurich city council banished the Anabaptists. (Jones, 112)

- “Most Anabaptists fled to nearby villages. Still, they could not escape. Felix Manz was seized and sentenced to life in prison. After five months in a dungeon, he escaped. He was recaptured in October 1526. The Zurich city council sentenced Manz to death. The charge against him? ‘He wanted to gather those who wanted to accept Christ. . . and unite with them through baptism.’ In a cruel mockery of his beliefs, it was by water that Felix Manz died. The executioner tied Manz’s arms behind his back and shoved him into an icy river.” (Jones, 112)
- “The movement spread, as Anabaptist groups, regarding most of Europe as no longer Christian, sprung up in cities across the continent. In 1527 they held a meeting at Schleitheim, where they formed a ‘brotherly union’ or doctrinal agreement.” (Hill, 255)
- In 1527 under the guidance of Michael Sattler and others, the following articles were drawn up:
 - Only believers should be baptized.
 - Discipline should be exercised in the churches
 - The Lord’s Supper should be kept in remembrance of His death
 - Members of the church should not have fellowship with the world
 - It is the duty of shepherds of the church to teach and exhort
 - Christians should not use the sword or go to law
 - A Christian must not take an oath. (Broadbent, 181)
- In addition to their views on Baptism, the Anabaptists were also viewed with distrust by other Reformers over their use of the congregational form of church government. Furthermore, many Anabaptists argued that real Christianity involved demonstrating evidence of obedience to Christ and the commands of Scripture rather than simply believing a set of propositions. (Hill, 255)
- In the end, the Anabaptist tradition is widely varied in terms of the beliefs espoused by its members. One of the reasons for this is that unlike the other Protestant traditions we have looked at the Anabaptist lacked a central leader or center of organization. Consequently, some opposed all force even in resistance to persecution while others advocated for the use of force. Others such as Hans Hetz, proclaimed that the day of the Lord was near and that the saints were the chosen people of whom, as had the children of Israel in conquering Palestine, were to root out the wicked before the visible reign of Christ was set up on the earth. Some also argued for a community of goods among them. (Latourette, 782)

Persecution of the Anabaptists

- “It is often thought that when the Reformation was established, Europe was divided into Protestant (whether Lutheran or Swiss) on the one hand, and Roman Catholic on the other. The large numbers of Christians are overlooked who did not belong to either party, but how most of them, met as independent churches, not relying, as others did on the support of civil power, but endeavoring to carry out the principles of Scripture as in New Testament times. They were so numerous that both the State Church parties feared they might come to threaten their own power and even existence. The reason that so important a movement occupies so small a place in the history of those times is, that by

the relentless use of the power of the State, the great Churches—Catholic and Protestant—were able almost to destroy it, the few adherent who were left being driven abroad or remaining only as weakened and comparatively unimportant companies.” (Broadbent, 181)

- Catholics, Lutherans, and Zwinglians all regard the Anabaptists as dangerous radicals who threatened to bring anarchy to their church states. Therefore, among all three there were those who sought to stamp them out by force. Late in the 1520s and early 1530s hundreds of Anabaptists were killed, some by drowning, some by beheading and other by burning. (Latourette, 782)
- In Rottenburg, Michael Sattler was arrested and condemned to death for his doctrines. In accordance with the sentence of the Court, he was shamefully mutilated (was flayed and had his tongue torn out, (Latourette, 782)) in different parts of the town, then brought to the gate, and what remained of him thrown on the fire. His wife and some other Christian women were drowned, and a number of brethren who were with him in prison were beheaded. These were the first of a terrible series of executions in Rottenburg. Likewise in Augsburg 87 Anabaptists under the leadership of Hans Leupold were beheaded. (Broadbent, 182)
- Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, issued an edict which commanded all rulers and officials in the Empire “. . . that all and every one baptized again or baptizing again, man or woman, of an age to understand, shall be judged and brought from natural life to death with fire and sword or the like according to individual circumstance, without previous inquisition of the spiritual judge.” (Broadbent, 182)
- The worst even occurred at Munster in 1535, where a group of radical Anabaptists had seized power, predicted that imminent arrival of Christ and declared that the Old Testament Law was still valid, including polygamy. Catholic and Protestant forces crushed the movement. (Hill, 255)
- The surviving leaders including Jan of Leiden, were tortured and killed, and the authority of the bishop was reestablished. The effect of the Munster episode was to confirm the bad odour attached to the name of Anabaptist. Reports circulated of the extremes to which Anabaptists fanaticism had gone during the months of stress in community of property, polygamy, and the ruthless suppression of opposition. As is the manner of such reports, they grew as they were told and retold and departed further and further from the facts. (Latourette, 784)

Anabaptist Denominational Tree

- Many different Protestant Denominations found their origin within the Anabaptist movement.
- Menno Simmons salvaged two beliefs from the jumble of heresies attributed to the Anabaptists after the Munster Massacre: 1) the church should baptize only believers, 2) no government should enforce religious beliefs. (Jones, 114)
- Menno’s strict observance of the New Testament led to his refusal to use the term Trinity to describe the Godhead because the word does not appear in the pages of Scripture.

(Price and Collins, 138) In addition, because Jesus washed the disciple's feet at the last supper, Menno washed his followers feet prior to taking communion. (Jones, 114)

- In 1542 Menno's radical ideas landed him on the Empire, most wanted list. Menno escaped capture for 19 years prior to his death from natural causes in 1561. (Jones, 114) "The Mennonite church, which bears his name, survived in large part because of his vigorous church-planting activities and the numerous books he wrote." (Price and Collins, 138)
- "Ammann was a Mennonite elder who lived and worked in Alsace and Switzerland. His zealous attitude toward separation from the rest of the world, as defined in the *18 Articles of Confession of Faith* adopted by the Mennonites in 1362, led him in 1693 to sever relations with other Mennonite churches and, with more than 4,000 followers, to found the Amish Mennonites." (Price and Collins, 139)
- "Today the direct descendants of the Anabaptists are the Mennonites and the Hutterites. Americans probably think of them as bearded farmers and their bonnet-covered wives driving their horses and buggies across some Pennsylvanian or Iowa countryside. No automobiles; no buttons; no zippers." (Shelley, 247)
- "In fact, only one section of the Mennonites, the Old Order Amish, hold tenaciously to the old ways. The majority of Mennonites look like any other Americans and consume their share of energy like the rest of us." (Shelley, 247)
- "What unites the various types of Mennonites is not a style of dress or a mode of transportation but a shared set of beliefs and values. Many of these beliefs are now accepted by other Christians. So the distant relatives of the Anabaptists today include Baptist, the Quakers and, in some sense, the Congregationalists. In fact, in their belief in the separation of church and state the Anabaptists proved to be forerunners of practically all modern Protestants." (Shelley, 248)

The Water Runs Red

- Water baptism is the most divisive doctrine the Christian Church has ever embraced. This single issue has resulted in more aberrant, barbaric, and vicious behavior amongst believers than any other single doctrine. (Barlow, 310)
- "Since most Christians of this generation are generally ignorant of Church history they are unaware of the horror and the terrors that Christians have inflicted on other Christians. Christians have been burned, tortured, dismembered, suffered unbelievable intolerance as those who held different views on the baptism controversy. . . Since most Christians have never read the bible (in its entirety), what they believe is based on personal opinion and traditional religious teaching." (Barlow, 310)
- "This most despicable chapter in the annals of Church history is where we read of one group of professing Christians who maimed and killed others who were followers of Christ, simply because of their differing, highly polarized views on the doctrine of water baptism. The way some Christian sects have so shamelessly treated those who believe differently than themselves has irreparably sullied the reputation of the Christian Church

of Western Civilization and, in the minds of many had reduced it to an object of derision.” (Barlow, 311)

- In the introduction of *The Water That Divides*, Donald Bridge and David Phypers make the following statement regarding water baptism.
 - “One of our Lord’s last recorded commands to his followers was to “go. . . and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Ghost (Matt. 28:19). That his followers have, in general obeyed his command is beyond question. With the rare exception of groups like the Quakers and the Salvation Army, Christians of all traditions, denominations and persuasions have baptized, and have regarded baptism as the means of entry into the church. Yet despite this, perhaps no command of Christ has occasion so much controversy, division, bitterness and mistrust than this one.” (quoted in Barlow, 313)
- Barlow discusses the following aspects of the Baptism controversy:
 - **Who Should Be Baptised?** Who are the proper subjects for water baptism? That is, should infants be baptized or only adults? When only older children who are capable of reason and logic and older are baptized, this is usually referred to as baptism in response to belief in the gospel, i.e., the practice of baptizing only those who have already professed faith in Christ. The prevailing position is that infants should be baptized and that baptism saved the soul of the newly baptized infant and gives it eternal life. (314)
 - **When Should a Person Be Baptized?** Should a person professing faith in the Gospel of Christ be baptized before or after conversion? Or, does the actual baptism effect the conversion? Should infants be baptized? (314)
 - **Why Should A Person Be Baptized?** Most Evangelicals say water baptism is the sign of a good testimony of the fact that they have been converted to Christ and are now being obedient to his command. Many Protestants join with the Roman, Russian and Greek Orthodox position that baptism is a means of calling on the name of the Lord (in order to be saved). To be fair it must be said that the overwhelming majority of professing believers believe that water baptism saved the soul from perdition. Only a small percentage of professing Christians believe that it is a good witness of obedience to Christ. (314)
 - **How Should A Person Be Baptized?** Finally, even the largest segments of Christianity cannot even agree on the question of HOW water baptism should be performed. Most sprinkle, some pour, some immerse, others immerse three times, and there are other not so popular methods. (314)
- When it comes to the issue of water baptism, all sides of the theological conundrum have scores of champions and scholars to validate their cause. Every camp of this philosophical impasse argues their case and talk of “Biblical” and “historical” arguments to support each view.
 - **Sacramental Grace**—Those who believe in “Sacramentalism,” (the doctrine which teaches that observance of the sacraments is necessary for salvation and

that such participation can confer saving grace). They view salvation as a process taking place over a period of a lifetime. (Barlow, 336)

- **Believers Baptism**—Those who believe in what is popularly termed “believers baptism” plead a very interesting argument. It simply says that any ritual or any kind of baptism before one’s personal conversion to Christ is invalid, and that persons, who is now a believer must be baptized (in or with water) again. (Barlow, 336)
- **Infant Baptism**—Thos who plead for infant baptism which saves the soul of the child argue persuasively, but only use arguments form the Patristic theologians of the early centuries of Church History. They offer no valid arguments from the Scripture. (Barlow, 336)
- **Baptismal Regeneration**—I am sure the following remarks will surprise some readers, but those who believe in the position of “baptismal regeneration” for converts, argue the most convincing argument of all the above positions. It is this theological camp that recognized the position that water baptism which affects the salvation of the sinner. The majority of professing Christendom holds this view. (Barlow, 336-337)

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