THE ANABAPTISTS

"Lights Shining In Darkness"

by

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INTRODUCTION

"Perhaps no group within Christian history has been judged as unfairly as 16th century Anabaptists. Theirs has been the lot of the widely misunderstood, deliberately misrepresented, or completely ignored."[1] Reformed church leaders (Zwingli and others) described Anabaptist opinions as "horrible and absurd," "rotten heresies," and "damnable error." The adherents of these opinions were called "blasphemers" and "vile slaves of proud Lucifer."[2] To a great degree, Anabaptists suffered--and in some places continue to suffer--from such gross misrepresentation. One author even links their doctrinal positions to that of present-day Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses![3]

Why has Anabaptism endured such negative treatment by nearly all historians?

1. Because in past generations scholars gleaned their viewpoint of Anabaptism from unreliable, prejudiced accounts by Zwingli, Bullinger, Luther and others;

2. Because of unavailability of sources, and a lack of interest (by European scholars) and a lack of willingness (by Americans) to deal with the materials which were available.

3. Because of the Munster fanatics, who attempted to set up the kingdom of God by force--that "fiasco" strengthened the position of Anabaptist persecutors and left the name Anabaptist in "odious repute."[4]

The word "Anabaptist" itself in the beginning carried negative connotations. Originating from Zwingli, the word is a Latin derivative of the Greek original "anabaptismos" (re-baptism). The German form, "Wiedertaufer," means "one who re-baptizes." As for the radicals themselves: "They repudiated the name, insisting that infant baptism did not constitute true baptism and that they were not in reality re-baptizers."[5]

Historians have offered many answers to the origin of Anabaptism. Some trace it to the Waldenses and Bohemian Brethren, or to the medieval mystics, or to the evangelical humanists. Though the Anabaptists had much in common with these other anti-papal evangelical groups of

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1 William R. Estep, The Anabaptist Story (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1975), p. 1.

2 Knox, John, A Warning Against the Anabaptists (edited with an Introductory Essay by Kevin Reed) (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage Publishers, 1984), p. 16.

3 Knox, p. 9.

4 Estep, p. 1.

5 Franklin Hamlin Littell, The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1964), p. xv.

medieval origin, "historically, the connection is vague at best. That which is much more evident is the influence of the Scriptures upon those who were maliciously called Anabaptists."[6]

The true Anabaptists were Biblicists--pleading for pure and simple, literal interpretation of and obedience to God's Word, and rejecting what many were willing to tolerate and even embrace for the sake of tradition. It was this which made them distinct from the other religions of their world. And for this they suffered dreadful persecution for three centuries.

6 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 17.

THE BEGINNING OF THE ANABAPTISTS

The truth of Anabaptist thought seemed to dawn in several areas all at about the same time. For the sake of simplification, however, the main Anabaptist movement began in Zurich, Switzerland, in the 1520's. Because of Ulrich Zwingli's attractive and forceful personality (which blended scholar, humanist, and evangelical reformer), a number of gifted young humanists were drawn to him, primarily to study Green classics--among these Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, and George Blaurock. Taking advantage of their love for learning and admiration of Erasmus, Zwingli introduced them to the Greek New Testament. By 1522, these young men had adopted Zwingli's zeal for reform. However, in less than three years, "their convictions had driven them far beyond Zwingli."[7]

In October, 1523, a disputation was held regarding the use of images and the mass. Prior to the debate all the participants had agreed that the Word of God--not the Zurich Council--would determine their program of reform. However, when the Council gave no specific ruling in regard to the abolition of the mass and Conrad Grebel requested that further discussion and then instructions as to the means of its abolition ensue the next day, Zwingli replied, "My lords (the Council) will decide whatever regulations are to be adopted in the future in regards to the mass." Simon Stumpf then exclaimed, "Master Ulrich, you do not have the right to place the decision in the hands of my lords, for the decision has already been made, the Spirit of God decides!"[8] [NOTE: Within two months after Simon Stumpf took this strong stand, he was banished from Zurich]

Although Zwingli agreed with Stumpf's statement and acknowledged that the Council was not over the Word of God, he still obeyed the Council when it did not order the mass to be abolished. He abandoned his previous plans to abolish the mass on Christmas Day, 1523. There is evidence in a letter written by Conrad Grebel at this time that some of Zwingli's most dedicated followers were becoming dissatisfied. In the eyes of the Brethren, Zwingli "had compromised revealed truth in deference to constituted political authority."[9] His dedicated, zealous students felt betrayed. Grebel marked the occasion of the October disputation as the historical divide between himself and Zwingli.

7 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 9-10.
8 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 12.
9 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 13.

In the year following the October disputation, Conrad Grebel emerged as leader of the young radicals, whose number grew to seven--among whom were Felix Manz and Simon Stumpf. After many failed attempts to present a more biblical program of reform, the men finally began meeting quietly in homes of sympathetic friends. The public break between Zwingli and his zealous students came at a disputation in January, 1525. It was the insistence on believer's baptism that led to the fateful meeting.

The Council declared Zwingli the winner, and the radicals faced the alternatives of conforming, fleeing Zurich, or being imprisoned. They chose the last.

In late January, the men who had failed to convince Zwingli to change in the disputation met in the night at the home of Felix Manz. There George Blaurock requested that Conrad Grebel baptize him "with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge." After his baptism, Blaurock then baptized all the others present.

> The newly baptized then pledged themselves as true disciples of Christ to live lives separated from the world and to teach the gospel and to hold the faith. Anabaptism was born.[10]

"The introduction of believer's baptism was clearly the most revolutionary act of the Reformation. [It] was a culmination of an earnest searching of the Scriptures and a corresponding dissatisfaction with Zwingli and his state-supported program of reform." The radicals simply could not find Scriptural support for Zwingli`s state church, and so they could not be a part of it.

With the first believer's baptism, the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren was begun. The name "Brethren" was what the radicals preferred to go by. The Swiss Brethren was not the first to question the validity of infant baptism---~Zwingli himself and some of his contemporaries had expressed doubts earlier in their lives. However, "the Swiss Brethren alone proceeded from opposing infant baptism to the practice of believer's baptism."[11] This sets them apart from other groups sometimes confused with Anabaptists.

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10 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 10-11.

11 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 15.

THE LEADERS OF THE ANABAPTISTS

Conrad Grebel. Conrad Grebel was born to a prominent and wealthy Swiss family. His father served as a magistrate and later held a position on the Council of Zurich. For this reason, Conrad had many educational opportunities, though he did not always fully take advantage of them. He commenced studies at the University of Basal in 1514, where his appetite was first whetted for humanism. The next year he traveled to the University of Vienna, where he was taught by the Swiss humanist known as Vadian, to whom Conrad became very close. Grebel thoroughly adopted the humanism of the Italian Renaissance while studying in Vienna.

> Unfortunately, Vienna was a very immoral city and Grebel was badly influenced.
>
> Grebel's extra-curricular activities included both brawls
>
> and women . . . To his immoral relations with women he attributed a disease from which he suffered the rest of his life . . . All in all Vienna for Grebel may have been a stimulating experience intellectually but it was spiritually and morally debilitating. It is not surprising that he left Vienna without securing a degree.[12]

After Vienna, Grebel returned for further study at Paris , where he began learning Greek and possibly Hebrew. However, his wild lifestyle, ill health and reduced funds from his father finally resulted in an ultimatum from his father that he return home., which he did in July, 1520.

"The next two years were to become the most important of Grebel's life."[13] For the first few months he was filled with indecision regarding his future, but then he and a few other scholars began studying Greek classics under Ulrich Zwingli. The year 1522 brought the answer for the crises in Conrad Grebel's life. After marrying a girl of a lower social class in February, 1522, and facing his parents disapproval, serious financial problems, and poor health, the tension was mounting in Grebel's life. However, somewhere between February and July, 1522, Grebel was converted. In February, he was still a miserable and frustrated young man. By July he publicly defended the gospel and expressed desire to become a minister of the gospel.

> Everything in subsequent years points with unmistakable certainty to such an inner transformation. His letters . . . were filled with references to Christ, the Word of God, and scriptural admonitions . . . His problems had by no means disappeared but he was now on top, not under them. . . The weak, vacillating

12 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 24.

13 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 25.

young humanist had become a soldier of the cross.[14]

Other of the men studying under Zwingli were influenced by his teaching and preaching, were converted, and joined the ranks of the reformers--among these: Heinrich Englehart, Simon Stumpf, and Felix Manz. It was not long after their conversions that they began to question some of the positions of their mentor. Grebel was not the first to break with Zwingli, nor the first to question infant baptism. But it was Grebel who initiated believer's baptism on that night in 1525. Thus, he stands as a "champion of the Anabaptist reformation, along with Blaurock and Manz."[15]

Only one year and eight months were given to Grebel as an Anabaptist preacher. Though they were filled with imprisonments and poor health, they were also filled with phenomenal accomplishments. Following their separation from Zwingli in January, 1525, in February Grebel and Manz went from house to house witnessing, baptizing and conducting the Lord's Supper after the new order of the Swiss Brethren.[16] After two months working in the town of Schaffhausen with some success, Grebel joined some other Anabaptists who had begun to witness in and around St. Gall. Conrad hoped he might be able to win his esteemed friend (and now brother-in-law) Vadian to the Anabaptist cause. The men's labor bore great fruit.

> The climax came on April 9, 1525, when Grebel baptized a huge throng in the Sitter River. Some 500 persons are said to have been baptized by the Brethren during the initial stages of the movement in St. Gall.[17]

Despite a writing campaign launched by Grebel on behalf of the Brethren, it was not long until St. Gall followed Zurich's lead and suppressed the promising growth of Anabaptism there.

From April to June, 1525, Grebel was in hiding in Zurich, fearing arrest by Zwingli. He could not stay idle, though,and suddenly appeared back in the forefront of the movement in latter June--witnessing door-to-door and preaching in his boyhood home of Gruningen. On October 8 while preparing for a service in a field, Grebel and Blaurock were arrested and imprisoned in the castle at Gruningen. Three weeks later Felix Manz was captured and joined them. On November 18, 1525, they were sentenced to an indefinite prison term, in spite of the fact that the

14 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 27.
15 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 27.
16 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 27.
17 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 28.

case against them was weak. The charges were based upon perverted accounts of their teaching on such subjects as the magistracy, "community of goods," and baptism. Zwingli was at the trial, charging them with sedition.

After five months of imprisonment, the "dauntless Grebel" asked permission to have printed a manuscript on baptism, which he had prepared in prison. "Such exasperating audacity provoked an aggravated response."[18] A second trial was held, and the three men were sentenced to life imprisonment on March 7, 1526. At the same time a new mandate was passed making it a crime punishable by death to rebaptize.

Fourteen days after receiving the life sentence, some unknown people aided the prisoners in an escape. Little is known of Grebel's activities in the following months, except that his prison manuscript on baptism was published, and he was seen in the company of Felix Manz. Shortly after that Grebel died alone of the plague, in the summer of 1526.

Felix Manz. "Next to Grebel in importance in the early life of the Anabaptist movement, [Felix] Manz surpassed him in eloquence and popularity."[19] Born in Zurich, possibly in 1498, Manz was an illegitimate son of a Roman Catholic priest. Evidently, he had the educational advantages of the privileged classes, for he was well-taught in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, and was recognized as a Hebrew expert.

Although Manz was a convert of Zwingli's, he was one of the leaders of the opposition party from the beginning. The small band of Christians met in Manz's home and he had a predominant role in these meetings, sometimes teaching form the Hebrew Scriptures.

After the break with Zwingli, Manz and Blaurock spear-headed the door-to-door visitation effort in Zurich, while Grebel worked in other towns. They were all three together, however, on the fateful day when Grebel and Blaurock were arrested. Although Manz escaped on that day, he was seized a few weeks later, on October 31, 1525. The three zealous Anabaptists were imprisoned together, first in the castle at Gruningen, and later at the Witch's Tower in Zurich.

After their escape from the Witch's Tower, Felix Manz continued his work. Following Grebel's death, he was "clearly the foremost leader among the Swiss Brethren. His noble life,

18 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 29.

19 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 30.

eloquence, education, and enthusiasm made him extremely popular with the masses."[20] Almost on the anniversary of his arrest in Gruningen a year before, Manz was captured on October 12, 1526, but was soon released. Two months later, he was arrested again, with Blaurock, in what was to be his last imprisonment

> Manz was a dangerous seditionist as far as Zwingli was concerned. It was a foregone conclusion that if the Swiss Reformation were to continue within the context of a state church, Manz must go. The mandate demanding the death penalty for re-baptizing had been issued the previous March, but it had not as yet been enforced. The time had come for the crucial test, and the first victim was to be Felix Manz.

And so on January 5, 1527, Manz was dragged bound from prison, taken to a boat and drowned in the Limmat River. All along the way, he was witnessing to members of the procession and praising God that he could die for the truth. His mother's voice rose above the crowd, entreating her son to remain true to Christ.

George Blaurock. "George Blaurock, the 'Hercules' of the Anabaptists, surpassed both Grebel and Manz in the extent and effectiveness of his ministry."[21] Born in 1491 in a village in the Grisons, Switzerland, Blaurock's real name was George of the House of Jacob (he was given the nickname "Blaurock" ["blue coat"] because he was wearing a blue coat once when he spoke up about his beliefs at a meeting).

Blaurock was a Roman Catholic priest prior to being converted. When he came to Zurich, he was already married. He was an aggressive and earnest Christian, seeking an audience with Zwingli of Zurich because he believed that town and that man represented the epitome of Reformation zeal. Upon being told that there were men more zealous than Zwingli, Blaurock immediately sought for, found, and cast his lot with the young Swiss radicals.

"Blaurock's zeal sometimes exceeded his judgment."[22] He sometimes disrupted worship services of the Reformed churches, as the following illustration typifies:

> As the minister was making his way to the pulpit, George asked him what he intended to do. "Preach the Word of God," was the reply. "You were not sent to preach, it was I," declared Blaurock. Thereupon he proceeded to the pulpit and

20 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 32.

21 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 33.

22 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 34.

preached.[23]

Zwingli called Blaurock "a fool, who in his presumption counted no one a child of God unless he was a `madman' like himself."[24]

On February 7, 1525, every one of the 24 persons who had been baptized on January 25, including Blaurock, were arrested. Upon release, Blaurock viewed his mission as more urgent than ever and accelerated his pace. He and Felix Manz worked closely together until Manz was drowned. On that same day Blaurock was severely beaten with rods and expelled from Zurich. Shaking the dust from his clothes and shoes to show his spiritual scorn, he left the city never to return. From Zurich, Blaurock travelled to Bern, where he faced Zwingli in a disputation. After being expelled from Bern, he went to Biel, where a large group of Anabaptists existed. The authorities of Biel drove him from the area, and when yet another arrest and banishment followed in April, 1529 (the fourth banishment in four months), Blaurock left Switzerland for good.

Traveling to the Tyrol, "the earnest Anabaptist began what was to become his last and most fruitful ministry."[25] He became pastor of an orphaned Anabaptist congregation whose former pastor had been burned at the stake. Blaurock preached to great crowds, and the number of converts grew. On August 14, 1529, Blaurock and another Anabaptist were taken into custody and cruelly tortured, because the authorities wanted information on the number of Anabaptists in the area. Three weeks later, the two men were burned at the stake near Klausen.

While in prison, Blaurock wrote a devotional epistle to his Brethren, a brief sermon warning the ungodly of God's impending judgment, and two hymns. The following stanza from one of his hymns "breathes the spirit of an unconquerable faith."[26]

Forget me not, O Father, Be near me evermore;

Thy spirit shield and teach me,

That in afflictions great

Thy comfort I may ever prove,

23 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 34.
24 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 34.
25 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 36.
26 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 37.

And valiantly may attain The victory in this fight.[27]

Michael Sattler. Michael Sattler was an Anabaptist whose "superlative witness became a symbol of Anabaptist fidelity in the eyes of the 16th century world wherever the story of his heroic martyrdom found an audience."[28] Sattler was a German monk who, upon studying the Pauline epistles, adopted Lutheran doctrines. He left the monastery, married a godly, faithful woman, and later traveled to Zurich. There, under the influence of Wilhelm Reublin, he became an Anabaptist. Sattler became a prominent preacher, but when the meetings were discovered he was expelled from Zurich. Eventually he went to Strassburg, the freest city in Europe at that time, and his efforts there to convert the Reformed leaders caused his own position to become sharply defined and prepared him for the most important work of his brief career.

Moving on to Germany, Sattler enjoyed a gratifying response there. At a conference of Anabaptists in Schleitheim, Germany, in February, 1527, Sattler preached.

> From this meeting the Scheitheim Confession was approved. Sattler had probably drawn it up prior to the meeting and circulated it among German and Swiss Anabaptists. It is a testimony to his zeal and administrative ability.[29]

While the Schleitheim meeting was in progress, the Anabaptists were discovered by the authorities. When he returned to Horb where he was a pastor, Sattler and his wife and some others were arrested. The government officials quickly realized the importance of Sattler, and although King Ferdinand recommended that he be drowned immediately, the authorities chose to give him a trial.

The charges against Sattler "revealed a gross misunderstanding of the Anabaptist teachings and no sympathy for the teachings which were understood."[30] Sattler presented his own defense in a courteous, calm, skillful, and courageous manner. His patience and composure exasperated the court. At one point, one of the clerks, caught up in an emotional frenzy, threatened to take Sattler's life on the spot. Sattler pled "for an opportunity to discuss the Scriptures with the judges. He expressed fervent hope that the judges would 'repent and receive instruction'."[31]

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27 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 37.
28 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 40.
29 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 41.
30 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 46.
31 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 46.

After one and a half hours deliberation, the judges handed down this verdict:

> Michael Sattler shall be committed to the executioner. The latter shall take him to the square and there first cut out his tongue, and then forge him fast to a wagon, and there with glowing iron tongues twice tear pieces from his body, then on the way to the site of the execution five times more as above and then burn his body to powder as an arch-heretic.[32]

Calm and without bitterness, Michael Sattler prayed for his persecutors as they carried out the sentence. He admonished them to repent and be converted. Then he prayed, in part: "I will with Thy help to this day testify to the truth and seal it with my blood." He was bound to a ladder and pushed into the fire. However, as soon as the ropes on his wrists were burned, Sattler raised the two forefingers of his hands, giving the promised signal to the Brethren that a martyr's death was bearable.[33] Here, truly, was a man who was not a victim, but a victor!

Balthasar Hubmaier. Balthasar Hubmaier was the Simon Peter of Anabaptism: Impetuous and outspoken . . . then his testimony marred by compromise and denial . . . and finally repentance, which led to renewed faith and a courageous death.

Born in 1480-81, Hubmaier was a gifted student who received the doctorate in theology in 1512. He was a well-trained theologian, an eloquent speaker, and a prolific writer who was a great asset to the Anabaptist cause. His writings have preserved the movement's theology.

After receiving his doctor's degree from the University of Ingolstadt, Hubmaier--already a Roman Catholic priest--was appointed university preacher. He rapidly advanced in the church and at the university , and three years later held the position of vice-rector, acting administrator of the school. His fame as a pulpiteer grew so rapidly that one year later he was called to become the chief preacher at a new cathedral in Reginsburg. Not having been that successful as an administrator, Dr. Hubmaier left the university and made the move to the prominent city with its outstanding new cathedral.

Hubmaier was excessively popular with the city authorities and with his parishioners. However, jealousy of some Dominican monks (who claimed their monastery was being impoverished due tot he fact that religious pilgrims preferred instead to visit the Catholic chapel which Hubmaier had renovated from a Jewish synagogue) led Balthasar to leave Regensburg for

32 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 40.

33 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 47.

the smaller, secluded town of Waldshut on the Rhine. Here, he performed the duties of a parish priest faithfully and with much pomp and ceremony. However, a great change was stirring in Balthasar Hubmaier's heart.

The year 1522 was the year of decision for Hubmaier. He had begun to study the Scriptures, especially the Pauline epistles. He traveled to various Swiss cities and viewed the progress of the Reformation. Increasingly, the New Testament became the source of his theology. Looking back a couple of years later, Hubmaier wrote: "Within two years has Christ for the first time come into my heart to thrive. I have never dared to preach Him so boldly as now, by the grace of God."[34]

Within months after his conversion, the people of Regensburg--still missing their eloquent people's priest--called Hubmaier to return. He did return, re-opening his ministry by announcing that he would preach a series through the book of Luke. "The old Hubmaier, the popular but superficial cleric of Regensburg days, had given way to the new Hubmaier, the evangelical preacher of Waldshut."[35] The transformation was more than Regensburg was ready for, and three months later Hubmaier left and went back to Waldshut.

By March 1, 1523, Hubmaier was in contact with Zwingli, and he participated in the October, 1523, disputation. Upon returning to Waldshut from Zurich, Hubmaier attempted to begin a program of reform for the whole area. He removed all pictures and images from the church, and soon married Elizabeth Hubline, who proved to be a courageous help-mate to him.

Since the Zurich disputation, Ferdinand I, Austria's Catholic king, kept track of Hubmaier's activities. He sent commissioners to Waldshut asking that the preacher be expelled from the city. Loyal to their spiritual leader whom they loved, the city bluntly refused the king's orders. After a few months, however, Balthasar left as a fugitive, in order to spare the city the danger of armed intervention by the Austrian government. He fled to Schauffhausen and from there produced several treatises. By October, however, he returned to Waldshut, where he was welcomed as a hero and re-established as their pastor.

Writings of Hubmaier at this time show how rapidly he was moving toward Anabaptism. He was already standing against infant baptism, although he confessed that he still baptized

34 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 55.

35 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 54.

infants when their family insisted. Wilhelm Reublin came to Waldshut in April, 1525, after being driven from Zurich. He baptized Balthasar and sixty others, and on Easter Sunday Hubmaier himself baptized over 300 men "out of a milk pail."[36] They also commenced observing the Lord's Supper in a simple, Biblical manner. Foot-washing was also practiced as Hubmaier attempted to re-produce New Testament church order.

On December 5, 1525, Hubmaier was forced to leave his beloved Waldshut again. Austrian soldiers marched on the city the next day. Due to the number of troops, Hubmaier had few options regarding the direction in which he could flee. Ill and very depressed, he headed for Zurich, where Zwingli soon had him and his wife imprisoned. Bullinger later admitted that Zwingli pushed for Balthasar's arrest because he was so highly regarded by the Anabaptists[37]

Hubmaier in several areas excelled both Zwingli and Luther. Luther was guilty of ridiculously using Scripture to support infant baptism and of scathing treatment of those with whom he disagreed. Neither man matched Hubmaier's spirit of Christian love or his openness to accept Scripture as his authority, simply and completely.

In prison, Hubmaier requested a disputation with Zwingli and other reformers. At the disputation, Hubmaier quoted various statements of Zwingli asserting that children should not be baptized until they could be instructed in the faith. Zwingli replied that Hubmaier misunderstood him. Apparently Balthasar was shocked and dumfounded. By the end of the conference, he agreed to write out his recantation and read it at Zwingli's church on Friday, December 29.

> Once Hubmaier was in the pulpit of the Fraumunster, instead of recanting he began, "Oh, what anguish and travail I have suffered this night over the statements which I myself have made. So I say here and now, I can and I will not recant." He then proceeded to defend believer's baptism. Horrified, Zwingli entered the other pulpit and accused Hubmaier of being devil-possessed. When he still would not back down, he was placed back in prison[38]

With Hubmaier's second Zurich imprisonment, Zwingli, "who failed to defeat him in debate, resorted to the base tactics of an inquisitor."[39] Stretched on the rack, Hubmaier finally

36 Estep, Anabaptism, p. 59.
37 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 61.
38 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 62.
39 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 63.

uttered the required recantation and then put it in writing. Crushed by his weakness and failure and disgraced before his fellow believers, a sorrowful Hubmaier slipped out of Zurich.

Hubmaier and his wife travelled to Nikolsburg, a very tolerant city under Moravian jurisdiction. Here, Hubmaier was received gladly and rapidly made converts. During the period from 1526-27, he baptized at least six thousand people.[40] There were conflicts to face, too, however. Hubmaier took his stand against a group of Anabaptists who held to the principle of community of goods (communism) and another group led by a former Thomas Muntzer follower, who advocated the godly using the sword against the ungodly to set up the kingdom of God.

During this time he busily wrote, producing at least 17 pamphlets in that year. His writings were circulating and influencing an increasing number of people. King Ferdinand of Austria was alarmed by this. Because Moravia had come under his jurisdiction after the death of Hungary's king, Ferdinand moved to eradicate Anabaptist "heresy" from that land, especially from Nikolsburg where his old enemy Balthasar Hubmaier was prospering. A general edict of August 28, 1527, required instant enforcement of the decree of the Diet of Worms. The Moravian barons of Nikolsburg were forced to bring their esteemed pastor to Vienna for imprisonment. After a preliminary hearing, the Hubmaiers were moved to a castle on the Danube. They were held there until March, 1528.

"Hubmaier, under the pressures of ill-health, the inevitable death sentence, and his characteristic openness to the truth, succeeded in seriously compromising his former position at several points."[41] He sent a statement to Ferdinand--hoping that perhaps his life would be spared--in which in at least two points "the broken man affirmed Roman Catholic dogmas which he had forsaken at Waldshut five years before . . . But he refused to back down on baptism, the Lord's Supper and his previous denial of the existence of purgatory."[42]

The Austrian authorities did not accept Hubmaier's attempt at compromise. On March 3, he was returned to Vienna where for seven days he endured the rack and other torture. This time, however, he would not recant but remained strong. On March 10 he was burned at the stake. Three days later his faithful wife followed her husband in martyrdom.

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40 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 66.

41 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 67.

42 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 67.

With Hubmaier dead, the Catholic authorities had to deal with the truth he left behind in his writings. They were burned whenever found, but 100 years later they still were circulating, bearing vivid testimony to the statement which Hubmaier often put at the close of his writings: "Truth is immortal."

Other influential leaders. As Anabaptism spread to different areas, there was variety in its expression. In South Germany, for example, there was a chiliastic (desire to revolt and set up the kingdom of God by force) tendency due primarily to the influence of Hans Hut, a fiery evangelist and church planter, whose early contact with Thomas Muntzer affected his doctrine. His revolutionary tendencies were off-set by the calming influence of Hans Denck, known as the apostle of love in the Anabaptist movement.[43] Denck's doctrine has sometimes been misunderstood, but basically he held firmly to Anabaptist theology, though with slightly different emphases. The main thrust of his ministry was the implementation of love into people's lives. Some authors assert that both Denck and Hut disagreed with the Swiss Brethren on the role of the Bible in the life of the believer.[44]

Another influence in South Germany was Pilgram Marpeck, a highly-respected city engineer who converted to Anabaptism.

> Marpeck became the most influential theologian among the south German Anabaptists . . . He was a layman's theologian. In plausible and simple manner he explained what he understood . . .[45]

Marpeck was among the first to call for baptism by immersion. He also made a tremendous contribution with the distinction he made between the purpose of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament.

Menno Simons, a former Catholic priest who became an Anabaptist in 1536, was the major Dutch Anabaptist theologian. For 25 years he traveled through the Netherlands and North Germany, spreading the Gospel, organizing congregations, calling Anabaptists back to their original vision, continually writing, and suffering almost constant persecution.

> Menno stressed the idea of a community of believers, committed to a new life, sealed by adult baptism, tightly knit (e.g. no marriage outside the community),

43 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 75.

44 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 77.

45 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 86.

> withdrawing from the secular world and its follies (thus, distrust of learning, refusal to take part in politics or bear arms).[46]

Menno became very influential as a writer and preacher. Even before his death in 1561, Anabaptists in the Netherlands were often called Mennonites, which name continues to be used today.

Moravia was "the most influential center of Anabaptist activity on the Continent."[47] The steady stream of Anabaptist refugees fleeing there from different lands when persecution struck led to a divergence of viewpoints. While Balthasar Hubmaier was alive, some degree of order was maintained under his leadership. After his death, though, Jacob Weidemann and his followers (who came to be known as people of the staff [Stabler]) became increasingly vocal. They held the eschatalogical teachings of Hans Hut, the non-resistant principles of the Swiss Brethren, but above all they clung to the doctrine of the community of goods. Making this the mark of a true church, the Stabler withdrew from other Anabaptists to worship separately. Soon they were asked to leave Nikolsburg because of their argumentative spirit. Upon leaving, the group pooled all their possessions and formed the first communal Anabaptist settlement, which was not without problems. In coming years, several of these communities developed, most of them going by the name of their leader (for example, the Philippites, Gabrielites, and the better-known Hutterites).

With increased persecution at the hands of Ferdinand, the Brethren were driven from their communities and suffered greatly. Gradually, they were able to re-establish themselves on estates of some sympathetic Moravian nobles. Almost immediately the Hutterites began missionary endeavors which resulted in the gospel reaching every part of German-speaking Europe despite the fact that an estimated 80% of the missionaries were martyred.[48] The persecution and intolerance continued for the Moravian Brethren. In the 1600's they were driven from Moravia and wandered through Europe seeking respite from the persecution. Eventually they settled in Hungary and Transylvania. One and a half centuries later, however, diabolical Jesuits--under the authority of Empress Maria Theresa--virtually consumed the Anabaptists with their hateful, vicious torture. Some Brethren were forced, after inhuman persecution, to become

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46 J.D. Douglas (ed.), The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1978), p. 650.

47 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 89.

48 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 93.

Catholics. A small remnant survived, however, and eventually reached Russia, still seeking a place where they could worship in peace.

The name "Munster" often appears in documents of Anabaptism and explanation of the tragic events there is unfortunately a necessary part of this study. The "revolutionary motif" was a logical out-working of the "enthusiasm" found in some of Anabaptism's leaders. Muntzer's chiliastic call to revolution did not die with him, but spread to other preachers (for example, Hans Hut and Melchior Hoffman). "The ideas took different phrasing among different groups, but the tone and intention remained constant."[49] These preachers"held that in a short time Christ would come again to earth and institute an historical rule and would bestow upon them the sword of righteousness . . . [50]

Although they were correct to teach a literal Millennium, all the date-setting and expectancy created tremendous pressure in their followers (who understandably were tired of being the persecuted underdog)--"to release the tension, to press ahead bitterly, and at whatever cost to realize the dream."[51] Understanding this mind-set can provide some insight into what led to the tragedy of Munster. "The Munster episode has, it is true, only secondary significance in a historical survey of Anabaptism,"[52] however, it bears mention because the events there did affect the testimony of Anabaptism. Briefly, at Munster they attempted to bring Christ's kingdom forcefully, to set up a community where only baptized "believers" were allowed to be citizens. Some terrible atrocities were committed in the name of Anabaptism. In the end their city was totally destroyed, and the leaders suffered horrible deaths.

49 Littell, p. 29.
50 Littell, p. 28.
51 Littell, p. 29.
52 Littell, p. 28.

THE PERSECUTION OF THE ANABAPTISTS

The first Anabaptist known to have died for his faith was Eberli Bolt, a preacher who was burned at the stake in Switzerland by Catholic authorities.

> With the death of Bolt began a period of martyrdom for the Anabaptists that was to continue to a greater or lesser degree of intensity through three centuries or more.[53]

In March, 1526, when the Council announced that death would be the penalty for re-baptizing, Zwingli wrote: "All earlier battles have been only child's-play. This is revolt, heresy, schism . . ."[54] Ferdinand, the Catholic king of Austria, declared the "third baptism" (drowning) to be the best answer to Anabaptism.

In 1529, a death decree was issued against the Anabaptists by the Second Diet of Speiers. This greatly accelerated the program of extermination already in progress.[55] Severe persecution increasingly became the lot of the Anabaptists. "As far as the 16th Century world was concerned, Anabaptists were nobodies. What difference did it make that another [one] was dead?"[56] How many Anabaptists died for their faith cannot accurately be determined. Often the accounts only gave a partial listing of the martyr's names.

One explanation for the treatment which Anabaptists received is the darkness of the age. Hypocrisy abounded, and civilization became increasingly oblivious to the value of the individual and to human suffering.

One of the most atrocious methods used in the effort to halt Anabaptism from spreading occurred in Swabia. Four hundred special police were hired to hunt down Anabaptists and kill them on the spot. Later, the group was increased to one thousand. The records indicate that the Anabaptists suffered one of the most widely spread persecutions in Christian history. In some areas, the persecution was so thorough that all Anabaptism was virtually stamped out. Where the persecution was not quite as extensive, however, the martyrs' testimonies led to phenomenal growth of the Anabaptist cause. When even mass executions failed to halt the increase of

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53 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 22.

54 Richard Heath, Anabaptism (London: Alexander & Shephard, 1895), p. 45.

55 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 48.

56 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 48.

Anabaptism, the Count of Altzey reportedly said: "What shall I do, the more I execute, the more they increase."[57] One of their torturers wrote:

> I have seen with my own eyes that nothing has been able to bring back the Anabaptists from their errors or to decide them to abjure. The hardest imprisonment, hunger, fire, water, the sword, all sorts of frightful executions have not been able to shake them. I have seen young people, men, women, go to the stake, singing, filled with joy, and I can say that in the course of my whole life nothing has moved me more.[58]

57 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 49.

58 Heath, p. 61.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE ANABAPTISTS

So often the Anabaptists were (and still are in some cases) represented as radical extremists, perfectionists who thought they were "too good" for any regular congregation, teachers of a "faulty hermeneutic" (because they were dispensational!). Yet upon exploration their theology is seen to be thoroughly Biblical. The stand they took in the midst of that dark age is praiseworthy.

Among 16th century Anabaptists there were relatively few theologians who were writers. Among these, three stand out: Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Menno Simons. None, however, were actual systematic theologians. Because the Anabaptists did not follow any particular leader or theologian, their doctrine had variations and differing emphases, though it was unified on most points.

Some historians mistakenly group the Anabaptists together with the Inspirationists and the Rationalists, other branches of what has been termed the "Radical Reformation." Although all three groups were against infant baptism, and although individual theologies were sometimes a blend of two or even three of the different groups, there were also some deep differences between them. The main distinction which differentiates the radical groups from one another is what they chose as the highest authority in the Christian life. For the inspirationists, the Holy Spirit and "special revelations" took precedence over Scripture. For the rationalist, reason--not Scripture--was the highest authority. The Anabaptists were biblicists, however. In every way that they knew how, they sought to reproduce the pattern of what they considered the New Testament faith and practice.

Hermeneutics. The Anabaptists (as enunciated by Pilgram Marpeck) held to a hermeneutical principle comparable to present-day Dispensationalism. Marpeck believed that failure to place the Old and New Testaments in proper sequence and relationship was disastrous.

> For to make the Old Testament normative for the Christian life was to seriously misinterpret the Biblical message. In Marpeck's eyes, the pope, Luther, Zwingli, and the "false Anabaptists" were all guilty of this fundamental error.[59]

In applying this hermeneutical principle, the Anabaptists held that the New Testament alone gave the guidelines for the church and Christian life, and that the Old Testament could

59 William R. Estep, Renaissance and Reformation (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1986), p. 217.

never been used (as it was by Reformed and Lutheran groups) to justify state churches and the persecution of believers.

Church. "Early Swiss and German churches owe their doctrinal and organizational stability"[60] to the Schleitheim Confession, which was written by Michael Sattler. Not intended to be a doctrinal formulation, "the articles are concerned with order and discipline within congregations. Baptism, ex-communication, the Lord's Supper, separation from the world, pastors, the sword, and the oath are the subjects to which attention is given."[61] The term "confession" is somewhat misleading, because the articles contain no strictly doctrinal statements other than a general affirmation of commonly held Christian concepts about God.

Church and State. Two of the most important articles in the Schleitheim Confession were those on separation and the sword. Besides calling for separation from Roman Catholic churches, those assembled at Schleitheim agreed to abstain from all civic affairs, as well as the

> sword, armor, and the like. In the article on the sword, the Brethren recognized that God had given the sword to the **state** for the maintenance of law and order, but they held that the Christian was to have nothing to do with this.[62]

In a summary of their position, the dichotomy between those of the world who use the sword and the Christian who follows Christ is sharply drawn:

> Finally, it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government's magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians' is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christians' citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christians' weapons are spiritual, against the fornication of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are named with the armor or God, with truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In brief, as is the mind of Christ toward us, so shall the mind of the members of the body of Christ be through Him in all things, that there may be no schism in the body through which it would be destroyed.[63]

While Zwingli was willing to defer to the Council on the tempo of the Swiss reformation, the Anabaptists "refused to recognize the jurisdiction of the Zurich Council in matters of faith."[64]

60 Estep, Anabaptist

61 Estep, Anabaptist

62 Estep, Renaissance, p. 200-201.

63 Estep, Renaissance, p. 201.

64 J.C. Wenger, Conrad Grebel's Programmatic Letters of 1524 (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1970), p. 10.

They ascribed no Christian character to the State, but rather saw that it belonged--with the rest of the unbelieving world--to the kingdom of darkness.

Balthasar Hubmaier (whose doctrinal position closely matches present-day Biblicists on many points) held to a more positive position on the state than other Anabaptists. In his work entitled "On the Sword" (June, 1527), he upheld the legitimacy of the state, affirming the state's right to bear the sword. "To the church alone he ascribed authority in spiritual matters. Thus, . . . he departed from the nonresistant principle of earlier Anabaptists"[65] to a certain degree. He even expressed the desirability of a Christian magistrate. It must be noted, however, that his position on the magistracy was never adopted by any sizeable group of Anabaptists.

Conrad Grebel, in a letter written September 5, 1524, to Thomas Muntzer, said:

> The gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor are they thus to protect themselves [contrary to Muntzer's practice] . . . True Christian believers are sheep among wolves, sheep for the slaughter. They must be baptized in anguish and affliction, tribulation, persecution, suffering, and death. They must be tried with fire, and must reach the fatherland of eternal rest, not by killing their bodily [enemies] but by mortifying their spiritual enemies. Neither do they use worldly sword or
>
> war, since all killing has ceased with them . . .[66]

The reformers saw Anabaptist separation as

> an attack not only on the unity of the body of Christ as distinct from civic society but also on the unity of society as a whole. They were afraid of religious pluralism not so much for religious as for social reasons, and their statements on church unity must always be read with this point in mind.[67]

Anabaptists felt that they had to leave the state churches,

however. In their view:

> The state churches are not the true church, because they seek to build the church in an unbiblical manner, reversing the apostolic order of first teaching and then baptizing. They first baptize and then teach, with the result that their sermons are

65 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 65.

66 James M. Stayer, :The Earliest Anabaptists and the Separation-Pacifist Dilemma," Brethren Life and Thought, (Vol. X, No. 1, Winter, 1965), p. 20-21.

67 Walter Klaasen, "The Anabaptist View of the Christian Life," Canadian Journal of Theology (Vol. IX, No. 2, April 1963), p. 424.

> mostly addressed to unbelievers, who do not live the life of faith. . . Believers are called to testify in the congregation, but no mutual exhortation, admonition, or prophetic office is possible where everything depends on the learned discourse of **one** man.[68]

Church practice. The Anabaptists firmly believed in the possibility of realizing a true church without spot or wrinkle in a sinful world. They believed that worship should involve to the fullest the priesthood of all believers in a way unknown among the established churches. The believer not only has the right but the duty to exhort, to share, and to test his understanding among the congregation of the faithful. This means that the sermon in a believer's church is more exhortation than gospel. The gospel is for the unconverted **outside**; those inside are to be reminded of their covenant. The stress upon the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit similarly militate against a formal liturgy, and the Holy Spirit places the believer into a direct relationship with God and with the brethren in worship. Thus, worship becomes both "vertical" and a "horizontal."[69]

The Anabaptists believed in serving one another, and the majority of them believed in sharing with those in need, but not in communism (i.e. a literal community of goods) (except for the Hutterites and the community at Munster).

While the Anabaptists held to many doctrines peculiar to them, it was their concept of the church that gave the movement its unique character and separated it from both the Magisterial reformers and other groups within the Radical Reformation.

Baptism. For the Anabaptists, the point of departure from the standing order always seemed to have been the issue of baptism. On baptism, the Brethren agreed:

> Baptism shall be given to all who have learned repentance and amendment of life, and who believe truly that their sins are taken away by Christ, and all those who walk in the resurrections of Jesus Christ, and wish to be buried with Him in death, so that they may be resurrected with Him, and to all those who with this significance request it [baptism] of us and demand it for themselves. This excludes all infant baptism, the highest and chief abomination of the pope. In this you have the foundation and testimony of the apostles. Matthew 28, Mark 16, Acts 2, 8, 16, 19. This we wish to hold simply, yet firmly and with assurance.[70]

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68 Alvin J. Beachy, "The Theology and Practice of Anabaptist Worship," The Mennonite Quarterly Review (Vol. XL, No. 3, July, 1966), p. 165.

69 Beachy, p. 165-66.

70 William L. Lumpkin, Baptist Confessions of Faith (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), p. 25.

Hubmaier's book, "The Christian Baptism of Believers," is regarded as the classic presentation of teaching on baptism and as one of the best defenses of believer's baptism ever written. He wrote regarding baptism: "Baptism in water is not what cleanses the soul, but the "yes" [of] a good conscience to God, given inwardly by faith."[71] The Anabaptists taught that baptism was "the sign of committed discipleship."[72] While Hubmaier denied that baptism is necessary for salvation, he insisted that it was essential to the life of the church and its discipline:

> Where baptism in water does not exist, there is no Church, no brother, no sister, no brotherly discipline, exclusion or restoration. I speak here of the visible Church as Christ said (Matthew 18). For there must be some outward sign of testimony by which brothers and sisters can know one another, though faith be in the heart alone. By receiving baptism, the candidate testifies publicly that . . . he had submitted himself to his brothers and sisters . . . that is, to the Church.[73]

Infant baptism was viewed as a sign without meaning, as unnecessary, useless, and an abomination before God. Regarding Zwingli's assertion that nowhere in Scripture was infant baptism prohibited, and thus it was allowable, Hubmaier answered that Scripture clearly implied that infant baptism was wrong though it did not say so in express words. He continued humorously:

"May one then baptize [infants]? To that I answer: 'if so, I may baptize my dog or my donkey, or I may circumcise girls.'"[74]

The Lord's Supper. The Anabaptist stand on moral separation is evident in their practice of the Lord's Supper. They assert:

> For as Paul points out we cannot at the same time be partakers of the Lord's table and the table of devils; we cannot at the same time drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of the devil. That is, all those who have fellowship with the dead works of darkness have no part in the light. Therefore, all who follow the devil and the world have no part with those who are called unto God out of the world. All who lie in the evil have no part in the good.[75]

The memorial nature of the Lord's Supper and the prerequisites for it are laid out in the Schleitheim Confession. The Anabaptists held that " all those who wish to break one bread in

71 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 59.
72 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 60.
73 Estep, Renaissance, p. 211.
74 Estep, Anabaptist, p. 60.
75 Lumpkin, p. 25-26.

remembrance of the broken body of Christ, and all who wish to drink of one drink as a remembrance of the shed blood of Christ, shall be united beforehand by baptism in one body of Christ which is the church of God, and whose Head is Christ."[76] For the Anabaptist, partaking of the Lord's Supper was a symbolic expression of the gratitude which they felt in every area of their spiritual life.

Salvation and Christian life. In Balthasar Hubmaier's soteriology, he emphasized the phrase "the new birth"--whereas Luther (for example) upheld the phrase "justification by faith." [While Luther stressed the necessity of faith for salvation, Hubmaier emphasized the fruits of faith (change within man) after salvation.] To Hubmaier, faith was dynamic. It was much more than a mere intellectual response. True faith, according to Hubmaier, "cannot remain passive but must break out to God in thanksgiving and to mankind in all kinds of works of brotherly love."[77]

The Anabaptists called for "real and dynamic regeneration--not just a status act, or a theological formula--and for faith in depth, living faith. They were rightly optimistic that the grace of God in them would produce what God called for and what Christ's resurrection and Pentecost was intended to achieve."[78]

> For the evangelical Anabaptists, faith was evidenced by transformed lives. Through the new birth, believers participated in the new nature, the new community of God's people, and eschatologically speaking, in the new age.[79]

Peter Riedeman expressed the Anabaptist view clearly when

he wrote:

> Now, however, the Lutherans say that Christ is their righteousness and goodness, although they still live in all abomination and lasciviousness, which thing is nought else than to draw near to God with the mouth while the heart is far from Him . . . But we confess Christ to be our righteousness and goodness because He Himself worketh in us righteousness and goodness through which we become loved of God and pleasing to Him.[80]

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76 Lumpkin, p. 25-26.

77 Estep, Renaissance, p. 208.

78 Harold S. Bender, "Walking in the Resurrection," The Mennonite Quarterly Review (Vol. XXXV, No. 2, April, 1961), p. 110.

79 Jarold K. Zeman, "Obedience to Christ: The Heart of Evangelical Anabaptism," Southwestern Journal of Theology (Vol. 21, No. 2, Spring, 1979), p. 45.

80 Klaasen, "Anabaptist View," p. 107.

The Anabaptists believed in living the resurrected life **now!** Because they lived on the "resurrection side of the cross," their theology and ethics were resurrection theology and ethics.

> The new life wrought by God's regenerating grace was essential to new life. They delighted to repeat the appeal of Romans 6:4 - "to walk in the newness of life," a phrase which might well be taken as the Anabaptist motto. They saw this new resurrection life as one in which the Holy Spirit works with power in continuous growth to perfection.[81]

One thing that can be said about Anabaptist theology is that it was not dry, dusty, nor unrelated to life. Their theology manifested itself in changed lifestyles, and thus was a public testimony which compelled many to embrace their faith.

81 Bender, "Walking," p. 96.

CONCLUSION: The Anabaptists of Today

The direct connection of 16th century Anabaptism to groups today cannot always be proven. Anabaptist ancestry has at times been claimed by Unitarians, Baptists, Quakers, and even Communists! Baptists certainly share similar beliefs with the 16th century Anabaptist movement, even if direct connections cannot be proven. Definite, known lineal descendants include the Mennonites, the Hutterites (in a few settlements throughout the world--still speaking their original German and having virtually no contact with the outside world), and the Amish. However, one must question--lineal connection notwithstanding--how much true, spiritual connection exists between those reclusive groups of today who seem to have their light hidden "under a bushel" and the Anabaptists who boldly and lovingly shared their faith door-to-door--and even died--attempting to change their world for Christ.

Truly, the Anabaptist heritage is not merely the possession of one group. It is the legacy of every 20th century civilization where men believe in freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Wherever believers desire to follow the New Testament pattern of the church, to cling only to God's Word as their authority, no matter what the cost--then they have taken part in the rich heritage left by these faithful men who shone as lights in the midst of the darkness.

APPENDIX

THE EFFECT OF THE RENAISSANCE ON THE REFORMATION

The "Renaissance" is a term used by historians to describe a special period of European history, roughly the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries. Etymologically, the word itself is French for "rebirth." The Renaissance, therefore, depicts the revival or rejuvenation of a culture that had been fast asleep. The Renaissance was a period of history marked by one word -- change. New horizons were opening in education and in the communication of ideas (ex. - the invention of the printing press).

The Renaissance made its own unique and indispensable contribution to the intellectual and religious development of the age While historians today still question the exact relationship between the Renaissance, the protestant Reformation and the Anabaptist movement, it is clear that the Renaissance did affect the course of Christian history in several ways. The new spirit of nationalism, the elevation of the middle class, commercial revolution, new discoveries, increased knowledge, a willingness to explore, a desire to branch out and step into areas formerly "forbidden," and most importantly, the Bible in the vernacular provided the catalyst for religious revival.

Two main contributions of the Renaissance stand out as having the greatest influence on religious awakening. The reemergence of independent thinking (as opposed to slavery to blind superstition) and the invention of the printing press (which made Scripture available to the masses) must be credited as major providential influences which benefited the reformers and the Anabaptists.

The Renaissance was born in Italy. It mainly involved achievements in the humanities (language, philosophy, etc.) (hence the name "humanists"), and in the arts. However, it was north of the Alps in the 15th and 16th centuries when the Renaissance became more religious in tone and emphasis. While the southern "humanists" in Italy made intense study of both the form and the content of classical texts, the northern "humanists" (ex. Erasmus) were more interested in the Christian classics (e.g. the N.T. and the Fathers) than in pagan texts.

> They also were concerned with reforming the church according to apostolic principles. Because of their desire to apply humanism to the question of reform, these northern scholars generally are called **"Christian** humanists."[82]

82 Douglas, p. 836.

Christian humanists (like Erasmus) affected the reformers (like Luther and Zwingli), and the reformers affected the Anabaptists. It is interesting to note that each stage of spiritual development went beyond and surpassed the former. While it has been said that "Erasmus laid the egg that Luther hatched,"[83] it may also be stated that Zwingli laid a foundation upon which the Anabaptists built.

> Not only did the Renaissance go a long way toward freeing medieval man from the shackles of ignorance and superstition, but it introduced him to new worlds of art and literature, inspiring him with the desire to learn from the ancient greek and latin sources and providing him the methodology with which to do it.[84]

In its desire to return to the pure fountains of the ancients and its return to Greek and Latin sources of learning, the Renaissance showed the Reformers the way in which they could effect a renaissance (rebirth) in the life of the church.

The Renaissance sparked a new hermeneutic. With the emphasis upon Greek and the field of textual criticism, it created far-reaching consequences upon which Erasmus and the protestant Reformation built.

> the science of textual criticism was a by-product of the new interest in the Greek and Latin classics. The same linguistic tools that made possible critical editions of the Greek text brought about an improved Vulgate and called into question the medieval forgeries, the Donation of Constantine and the Pseudo Isidorian Decretals.[85]

The ability not only to translate the Bible into the common man's language but also to print multitudes of copies so it was readily available was undoubtedly the greatest and most influential occurrence of this time period. Luther was quick to affirm that printing was "God's latest and best work to spread the true religion throughout the world."[86] Before the renaissance (and the invention of printing), manuscripts were very illegible and very expensive. What was available belonged exclusively to the wealthy elite, who had the Latin education necessary to read what was written. "It takes a vivid historical imagination to picture what the world must

83 Douglas, p. 836.

84 Estep, Renaissance, p. xi.

85 Estep, Renaissance, p. 31.

86 Estep, Renaissance, p. 96.

have been like without printed books."[87] The printing press poured forth paperback versions of the New Testament, sermons, and tracts in the language of the people.

> The Bible was beginning to be read as never before. By the time of Luther's translation, fourteen Bibles had appeared in High German and four in Low German. With the appearance of Erasmus' Greek N.T., the N.T. and shortly thereafter the entire Bible began to be translated into various European tongues.[88]

As the Renaissance brought renewed life to most areas of society, so it followed that a revival of religious enthusiasm also took place. The old mystical assumptions formulated by superstitious people in an age of blindness were to be demolished with the age of the Renaissance. Along with the crumbling of former beliefs, came a considerable loss of confidence in the Roman Catholic church, which now found its credibility seriously questioned on a number of fronts.

The Renaissance with all of its independent ambition provided the occasion for a separatist spirit . . . the kind of spirit seen in men like Martin Luther when he nailed up his 95 Theses, in Ulrich Zwingli when he declared that he would expositorally preach through the gospel of Matthew, and most of all in the brave Anabaptists, willing to die rather than forsake the truth in which they believed. And with all the credit that can be given to the Renaissance for its influence, it must be noted that it was still a world where true Bible believers were looked upon as criminals. Despite the fact that it was an age awakening to a new way of life . . . stretching to meet new heights of achievement, exploration, and creativity. . . giving people reason to hope again . . . yet it was still an age in which a man could burn as a heretic. So although the Renaissance can rightfully be credited with paving the way for a spiritual Reformation, at the same time it must be remembered that it was an age living in darkness and seeking every possible way the suppress the true Light. Therefore, any true spiritual awakening is due to God's working, breaking through the shackles of Satan and his world system to let the Light shine through to needy men.

87 Estep, Renaissance, p. 96.

88 Estep, Renaissance, p. 110.

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