

Children of Light Scattered Everywhere: The Radicals of the Reformation

One of the great figures of the sixteenth century was a man named Menno Simons. You may recognize from his name that the Mennonite church can be traced back to Menno Simons. His favorite text of Scripture was 1 Corinthians 3:11. He prefaced every book that he wrote with that text, which says, "There is no other foundation that can be laid but the foundation which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ."

Menno Simons is usually described as an Anabaptist. That was one group among many different groups that were not Catholic nor Lutheran nor Reformed. They were something else. Sometimes these people of the sixteenth century have been called the "left wing" of the Reformation. That was a title that was given to people like Menno Simons by the great Yale historian Roland Bainton. By calling these Protestants the "left wing" of the Reformation, Bainton wanted to stress the fact that they moved further from the "right," or the most conservative position, which would have been the Catholic position. They moved all the way across the spectrum to the left. In terms of reform, the left-wing reformers went as far as they could from the Catholic Reformation.

George Williams, who taught church history at Harvard, preferred to call these people the "radicals" of the Reformation. He used the term radical not to mean "extremist," although sometimes some of these people could be rather extreme. He rather used the term radical to stress the fact that they wanted to get to the root of the matter, the root of the Reformation, the basic principles of the Reformation. Unfortunately, they did not agree amongst themselves as to what that root was. All of the radicals, however, were concerned to reform completely and fully away from the Catholic Church.

As we study this group, let us begin with a prayer from the Anabaptists taken from an Anabaptist hymn. These people suffered a greatly in the sixteenth century and throughout their history. As we pray this prayer, we can think of the suffering they went through and the comfort God brought to them, as well as the comfort God brings to us in our lives.

"Our comfort this beneath the rod, whenever we are faint, in Thee, O God, in Thee alone are earthly peace and rest. Who hope on Thee, eternally, are sustained and blessed." Amen.

I want us to consider three episodes that took place in the first part of the sixteenth century. As we do so, we will gain some understanding of what motivated the radicals, what kind of people they were, and what they wanted to do in the church. The first episode took place at the Inn of the Black Bear in Jena, Germany, in Saxony, on August 22, 1524. Jena is located not too many miles from Wittenberg, but it is in the east in an area called Saxony. This episode, which I will describe, took place just three years after Luther's appearance at Worms where he made his great defense before the emperor and after his time at the Wartburg where he translated the New Testament. Luther preached that day in Jena. Later he went to the inn for refreshment and food. Another man appeared at the inn, who was Dr. Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt. Karlstadt was a Lutheran. He was the man who took over the Reformation in Wittenberg while Luther was away at the Wartburg. Karlstadt was professor of biblical studies at the University of Wittenberg. In Luther's absence, Karlstadt was the major Reformer in the town of Wittenberg. During those months when Karlstadt was in charge the Reformation moved much more rapidly. Karlstadt was not patient. He did not want to wait or delay. So during his time, the images began to be taken down from the churches, and the Reformation moved much more quickly. In the process of Karlstadt's leading the Reformation, and Luther's absence, Karlstadt began stressing that the important thing was to listen to what the Holy Spirit was saying. He said that the church ought to be reformed according to the

directions given by God the Holy Spirit. Karlstadt had been in Jena that day, and he had even been in the church where Luther had preached. He had heard Luther's sermon that morning. He had heard Luther call him, along with others, "rioting, murderous spirits." Karlstadt was, of course, not too pleased with that.

During the spring and summer of 1524, in the town of Allstedt, which was not too far from Jena, there was another of Luther's followers. His name was Thomas Muntzer, and he organized armed rebellion of the peasants against some of the lords in the area. In the process of that rebellion, the peasants caused quite a bit of damage. They had destroyed a Catholic shrine. Due to Muntzer's activity in organizing the peasants, he eventually became a Marxist hero. Muntzer delivered a famous sermon at Allstedt castle, which I will describe later, that influenced the constitution of the former German Democratic Republic. One phrase in the constitution reads, "All political power in the German Democratic Republic is exercised by the workers." Muntzer had said, "Power shall be given to the common people." As Muntzer preached, he preached a message like that, which caused people to rebel against the authorities of the time.

Luther had those events in mind when he preached his sermon that morning in Jena that Karlstadt had heard. Luther lumped together rebellion and smashing of images. In the sermon before the princes of Saxony that Muntzer had preached defending his actions at Allstedt, Muntzer depicted himself as Daniel. He could read the signs of the times. He thought he knew what was happening far better than Luther, whom Muntzer called "Brother Fattened-Swine" and "Brother Soft-Life" and "Doctor Liar" and "the Lutheran Pope of all the Scripture Perverters." People did not use soft language in those days, even if they had been colleagues at one time.

Karlstadt was not happy to be lumped together with Muntzer. At the Inn of the Black Bear, Karlstadt denied any connection with Muntzer or the rebellion. When the two met over dinner, he said to Luther, "Why then, Dr. Luther, have you said that there is just one spirit, that is, the murdering spirit of Allstedt?" In other words, Karlstadt was asking why Luther included him in the company of the others. Luther tended to put all of his enemies together and blast them equally. It did not matter much to him who they were. He believed that they were all motivated by a common spirit, a satanic spirit. So he could be hard on Zwingli or on Karlstadt. Karlstadt acknowledged that he had destroyed images, but he said he did it peacefully. He also acknowledged that he disagreed with Luther on the Lord's Supper.

Karlstadt said to Luther that day, "If I had erred, you should have reproved me in a brotherly way, and not have stabbed me and struck me thus." Luther said, "You stabbed me before I stabbed you." Karlstadt said, "No, I did not do that." The discussion was going nowhere, so Dr. Luther fell silent for a while. In the silence, Dr. Karlstadt turned to the others who sat nearby and said, "Dear brothers, I pray you, do not pay attention to my harsh speech."

That encounter at the Inn of the Black Bear exemplifies a very important divergence in the Lutheran Reformation. Two approaches to the Reformation from the Lutheran perspective became evident at that point. One issue that divided the two approaches was the thoroughness and pace of the Reformation. Both sides agreed that the church needed to be reformed and they could no longer be Catholic. The issues were how to do it and how fast to do it. People like Muntzer and Karlstadt wanted to move much faster. They said, "Luther broke the pope's pitcher, but he kept the pieces in his hands." They wanted to get rid of it all—the Mass, the images, and everything else. They wanted to get rid of it right away without waiting. They argued that if it was wrong, then it was sin, and it should be abolished. Whatever it took to abolish it was what they proposed. They wanted to move quickly.

Luther came back to Wittenberg quite dismayed over what had taken place during his absence, in his time at the Wartburg. He said, "The cause is good, but there has been too much haste. For there are still brothers and sisters on the other side who belong to us and must still be won." Luther was in favor of proceeding slowly. He knew that people do not change overnight, and he wanted to give them time.

Karlstadt preached a sermon entitled, "Whether One Should Proceed Slowly." Karlstadt certainly answered no. He said, "If I should see a little innocent child holding a sharp pointed knife in his hand and he wants to keep it, will I show him brotherly love by letting that little child hold that sharp knife and cut himself? Or will I break his will and force that knife out of his hands onto the floor and take it from him? When you take from the child what injures him, you do a fatherly, or brotherly, Christ-like deed." Thus there were two opinions about how the Reformation should proceed.

Not only was the pace of the Reformation in question, but also the shape of the reform was an issue. What was to guide the reform? As the new church was created, what was to be its foundation? We know, of course, that Luther said Scripture alone would be the foundation. He said the church ought to go by what the Scripture says. The radicals, however, although they did not deny the authority of Scripture, began to believe that there was another authority above the Scripture. Many of them believed that, though not all of them. The Holy Spirit, who gave the Scripture in the first place, and was now speaking to them and instructing them as to how the reform should progress, was a higher authority. Thomas Muntzer, thinking of Luther, said, "He who has not the Spirit does not know how to say anything deeply about God, even if he has eaten through a hundred Bibles." Luther, thinking of Muntzer, and especially Karlstadt, described them as people who had "swallowed the Holy Spirit, feathers and all."

Another difference between the two groups was that the radicals, while they did not deny justification by faith, were much more concerned about regeneration, holiness in the Christian life. Luther, while he did not deny the significance of obedience to the Lord, was very concerned to establish the doctrine of the alien righteousness that is ours through Christ's death.

That was the first episode that helps us better understand the mind and heart of the radicals. A few months later in the city of Zurich, Switzerland, something took place that was another important episode. This episode did not have its origin in the Lutheran Reformation, but in the Swiss Reformation. Zurich was the town of Zwingli. On January 21, 1525, a man named Conrad Grebel baptized another man named George Blaurock, who then baptized some other people in the lake. That was the beginning of the "Anabaptist" movement. You might not consider it something to cause great excitement, that somebody had been baptized. But these people, according to Zwingli and almost everybody else, were being re-baptized because they had been baptized as Catholics as infants. These men, on the other hand, had decided that what happened to them as infants was not a true baptism. Thus they did not view themselves as Anabaptists but as people who were following the Lord for the first time as believers in true Christian baptism.

These people were Zwingli's followers and friends. It was his preaching that had stirred them up to do that kind of thing. They believed, like those radicals in Luther's Germany, that the reform ought to move faster. Zwingli was moving faster than Luther, but still not fast enough to satisfy the Anabaptists, or the Swiss Brethren, as they are sometimes called. They pressed for immediate action against the images and the Mass. Their defiant act of baptism was a sign that they were not going to wait for anybody. They would take matters into their own hands. If there was not a church that did what they believed should be done, then they would do it themselves. Thus they baptized each other without waiting for a decision from the city council. Zwingli was saying, "We are deciding. We are moving. The council is meeting."

The more zealous brethren said the decision had already been made by the Spirit of God, so they did not care what the city council did.

It was another troubling episode, because with it the Zwinglian reform broke apart as the Lutheran reform had broken apart. One of the issues that Zwingli's followers fixed on was believer's baptism. They rejected infant baptism, and they rejected it with strong words. One called it "the access and portal of a false Christianity." The Schleitheim Confession describes infant baptism as "The highest and chief abomination of the pope." They believed it was not in the Bible, and therefore it must be completely eradicated from the church.

These Swiss radicals were already quite committed to the Bible-only view, which was Luther's and Zwingli's view. Yet their view was still different. Luther, and Zwingli to a lesser extent, allowed some use of Christian tradition. In other words, the Bible was the authority, but it was the Bible as it had been understood by the best of the church fathers and by the church at its best and purest times in history. All of that was not to be thrown out. The radical brethren, however, saw very little good in it all. As a church history professor, I would not have had a job in a seminary they started because they would only have studied the New Testament. Everything that I teach would have been viewed as rather worthless. One of the Anabaptists said, "Foolish Ambrose, foolish Augustine, foolish Jerome, foolish Gregory, of whom not even one knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of anti-Christ." That states the matter rather strongly, especially when we read Augustine in that list. The radicals were not patient with the slow development of church history. So much of that history was bad, which we can acknowledge. Thus they wanted to throw it all out and start with the Bible only.

They wanted to return to a church that was not the Constantinian church, in which there was a union of church and state. To these people, the conversion of Constantine and the conversion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century was a disaster. They believed that the church had been converted into a worldly church. The church had an allegiance and a connection to the state. The Anabaptists and the other radicals opposed that connection. They said the sword of the state is outside the perfection of Christ. They said there are two kingdoms, and the two have little or nothing to do with each other.

The Swiss Brethren, or the Anabaptists as they are called, created a confession called The Schleitheim Confession. The title they gave to it was, "The Brotherly Union of the True Children of God, Addressed to the Children of Light Scattered Everywhere." It is not a full confession of doctrine, but it is a list of some of the distinctives of the Anabaptist movement, such as believer's baptism, church discipline, separation from the world, separation church and state, and the rejection of oaths. The Anabaptists stressed life and community. They were not strongly concerned about doctrine. Their favorite figure was the penitent thief on the cross. One of the Anabaptists said about the penitent thief that he was "saved without any knowledge of the substance and persons of the Godhead, paedobaptism, consubstantiation, predestination, and so on and so on." Thus they stressed life and community rather than doctrine.

After the beginning of the Anabaptist movement, these people were persecuted by those on all sides. Catholics often burned them. Protestants usually drowned them. Many were persecuted and lost their lives in the sixteenth century because they were believed to be guilty of blasphemy in performing rebaptism. They were also viewed to be guilty of sedition and rebellion, because rebaptism was not only heresy, but it was also against the laws of the land. Their refusal to swear oaths of allegiance to governments and their commitments to pacifism marked them out as dangerous people. So the history of Anabaptism became a sad record of exile and martyrdom. There are many sad parts of the story of the sixteenth century, and this certainly is one of them.

After Luther at the Black Bear and the Anabaptists in Switzerland, the third episode occurred in a city called Munster, in an area called Westphalia in Germany, which is not far from the Dutch border. It was at that place that a group of Anabaptists were able to take over an entire city. The Anabaptists went wherever they could find some safety and peace. There were not many places where they could find such. Eventually, however, many of them migrated to the city of Munster. In time, they took over the city and then became something that they had not been when they began. They became revolutionaries. First they expelled the Catholics and the Protestants from the city. Then they set up an Old Testament theocracy and waited for the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

The city of Munster quickly degenerated into a morass of religious fanaticism, terror, polygamy, elimination of private property, and all kinds of other abuses. That continued until the city was besieged by an army of Catholics and Protestants. Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century almost never did anything together, unless they were fighting the Anabaptists. The city of Munster was besieged and captured. The leaders were executed, and that was the end of that experiment.

The entire Anabaptist movement was marked by Munster. People concluded that such behavior was the necessary result of allowing Anabaptists to have control. When the young John Calvin was writing the first edition of his *Institutes*, which were published in 1536, about the same time Munster took place, he wrote a long preface to Francis I, the king of France, in which one of his main points was this: "We are not Anabaptists." He wanted to stress that the Reformed people in France were not Anabaptists. He had to make that point because he was trying to convince Francis not to persecute the Protestants. If Francis thought the Protestants were Anabaptists, there was no way he would leave them alone.

Out of the debacle of Munster, a great leader arose for the Anabaptists, named Menno Simons. He was a Catholic priest. He saw the Anabaptist movement as a true movement of God. He saw the Anabaptists as sheep without a shepherd. So Menno Simons left the Catholic Church, became an Anabaptist pastor in the Netherlands, and provided leadership for the movement. He wrote a book titled, *Foundation of Christian Doctrine*. Menno Simons was completely orthodox, except in one point. He did not accept the teaching of the church that the flesh of Christ is just like ours. He believed in a "heavenly flesh." His followers have since rejected that doctrine, which the church declared to be heretical. Modern Mennonites do not believe in the heavenly flesh of Christ, but Menno Simons did teach it. He defended Scripture, salvation by faith, and he returned the Anabaptist movement to its earlier convictions of pacifism. Menno Simons said, "Moses and his successors, with their iron sword, have served out their time, and Jesus Christ has now given us a new commandment." Separation from the world became an important teaching again, as the Mennonites and other Anabaptists attempted to live their faith separate from the world, and often from the state as well. They are sometimes described as "the quiet in the land."

Many Christians today have a heritage with the Anabaptists, and they find their Reformation roots with these Anabaptists. The direct descendants of the sixteenth-century Anabaptists are people such as the Mennonites, the Amish, the Hutterites, the Mennonite Brethren, and the Brethren in Christ. There are about a million of these people in 60 different countries of the world. There are also indirect descendants, who are the Baptists. The direct line of Baptist history comes from the English Puritan period. Sometimes Baptists see themselves as directly descending from Anabaptists, and there are some connections that are obvious. Yet it is more accurate to speak of modern-day Baptists as indirect descendants of the Anabaptists. There are also distant cousins to the Anabaptists, who are all of us. The Anabaptist heritage has important implications for all Christians today. The separation of church and state and religious liberty, which are teachings that most Christians in the modern world agree with, trace their origins to the Anabaptist heritage.

There are also some contributions from the larger radical movement, beyond the Anabaptists, that deserve to be noted. The radicals were quite diverse, as I have described. It is difficult to group them together and talk about so many different kinds of people at once. There were 40 to 50 different groups within the movement. I have only described some of the main ones. In terms of numbers, however, there were not large numbers of people in the radical movement. In the sixteenth century, I would guess that if we had 100 people, then one of them would be a radical, maybe two. The radicals did not have a large following like the Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed traditions had.

The radicals, despite their diversity, did emphasize certain themes. The separation of church and state was one theme. Another radical contribution was religious liberty. They believed that people should be allowed to serve God in the way they choose, without force from the state to become Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or anything else. Sometimes it is wondered whether the radicals believed in religious liberty out of conviction or necessity. After all, if a group only represents one percent of the population, it is probably going to argue for religious liberty. The example that is given is the time when radicals attained control of a city, as they did in Munster. There was not any religious liberty there. My answer to the question is that both factors are true. There was some expediency in their belief in religious liberty. Yet there was some real conviction that religion should be a free voluntary choice and not imposed upon anyone. Separation from the world was another theme that was common among the radicals. Sometimes people have viewed the radicals as the primary example of Niebuhr's "Christ against culture." It was not only a separation from the world, but also a separation from culture.

The major radical contribution was to suffer. We are a long way from the place in church history in which people will not be persecuted for their faith. Many people in the world today are being persecuted for their faith. As we study the history of Western Europe, however, persecution for religious conviction was still the dominating idea. It was not until a small colony called Rhode Island was established in America that it would change. As the radicals suffered, they became the conscience of the Reformation. Not only did they suffer, but also Calvinists, Lutherans, and Catholics suffered. Everybody was against everybody. Whoever was in control put to death the people who opposed them. John Foxe, who wrote *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, pled for some condemned Anabaptists during the time of Queen Elizabeth I. Foxe said, "I do not agree with them. I do not support their teaching. I think it is wrong and false. But to burn up with fiery flame the living bodies of men who err through blindness of judgment rather than deliberate will is a hard thing and belongs more to the spirit of Rome than to the Spirit of the Gospel." One new study on the history of the Anabaptists in Europe concluded that 85% of the Anabaptists who were executed were executed by Rome. That still leaves 15% who were executed by Protestants. The suffering of these people began to eventually affect people such as John Foxe, who said that though we can be committed to Christian truth we cannot engage in such persecution.

"Therefore, seeing that we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith" (Hebrews 12:1).