

The Dissent and Nonconformity Series

Number 11



The Anabaptist View of the Church

Franklin H. Littell



Non dilexerunt animam suam usque ad mortem.

The Latin, *Non dilexerunt animam suam usque ad mortem*, translates, "... they loved not their lives unto the death." Revelation 12:11

On The Cover: *Massacres at Salzburg* took place in 1528 when Prince-Archbishop Cardinal Matthaus Lang of Salzburg issued mandates sending police in search of Anabaptists. Many were captured and killed. This engraving illustrates the sufferings and sacrifices these Dissenters endured when their government, in conjunction with established religion, attempted to coerce and impose uniformity of religious belief. Hence, this picture is a reminder of the cost of religious liberty and the ever-present need to maintain the separation of church and state. We use this art to represent our Dissent and Nonconformity Series.

The Anabaptist View of the Church



Mattheus Mair was drowned in 1592 for steadfast refusal to recant his Anabaptist faith and embrace Roman Catholicism. (See: Thieleman J. van Braght's *Martyr's Mirror*, pages 1089-1090).

The Anabaptist View of the Church

A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism

by *Franklin Hamlin Littell*

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Thou hast given a *standard* to them that fear thee;
that it may be displayed because of the truth.

-- *Psalms 60:4*

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THE WALDENSIAN EMBLEM

lux lucet in tenebris

“The Light Shineth in the Darkness”

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Preface to Revised Edition

This essay was submitted in its original form to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I was then primarily concerned with forms of religious voluntarism and lay initiative in Christian history, and was directed to the study of the Anabaptists and advised throughout by Dr. Roland H. Bainton, Titus Professor of Ecclesiastical History in Yale Divinity School. Dr. Kenneth Scott Latourette, Sterling Professor of Missions and Oriental History, was also generous with time and counsel; to him I owe some understanding of the importance of the missionary mandate in Christian history, especially as a shaping force in the life of Free Churches. From both I learned again how teaching as a vocation implies "a fellowship of teachers and students" (*universitas magistrorum ac scholarium*) as well as the mastery of one or more intellectual disciplines. To them, as well as to my father, Dr. Clair Francis Littell of Cornell College (Iowa), I wish to express deep gratitude for encouragement and assistance, without unburdening myself of responsibility for shortcomings and errors.

The Frank S. Brewer Prize Committee of the American Society of Church History saw fit to sponsor the study in revised form as the 1952 Prize Essay of the Society: Volume 8 of *Studies in Church History*. I wish to thank Professor James Hastings Nichols of Chicago, Professor William Pauck (now of Union Theological Seminary) and Professor L. J. Trinterud of McCormick Theological Seminary for seeing the first edition through publication, a duty made difficult by my residence overseas and by the sudden death of the publisher. Mr. C. H. Sprunger of Berne, Indiana, served the Society devotedly for some years; I hope this word may help to keep memory of his service green.

When *The Anabaptist View of the Church* first appeared it had the good fortune to fall into place in the midst of a revival of historical and theological interest in the Free Church way.

Interest of general students and specialists in the formative period of what Troeltsch called "sectarian Protestantism," in the generation which was coming to be recognized as the classical era of the Free Churches, was high. In spite of a title esoteric by ordinary standards the book sold out almost immediately, to the surprise of author, editors, and publisher.

Preparation of a reprint was made difficult not only by the normal demands of administrative work abroad, but also by the abnormal volume of related studies which have appeared in the last decade. There have been published six new volumes of sources, and another has been read in galleys and another yet in manuscript. In addition to a new *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (two of four volumes being used in this revision) and a complete new translation and edition of *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, more than two dozen new monographs have been published treating some phase of Anabaptist thought and history. The historical collections and studies of Professors Harold S. Bender at Goshen College (Indiana) and Cornelius Krahn at Bethel College (Kansas) attract a growing number of young non-Mennonite scholars. *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* has continued unabated its extensive efforts to make early Free Church history meaningful to Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike; *Church History*, *Theologische Zeitschrift*, and *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* have given increasing space to studies of early Anabaptist problems and personalities. It was originally planned to reprint the first edition. Representatives of the Beacon Press, particularly Mr. Melvin Arnold (now with Harper & Brothers) and Miss Janet Finnie, have been helpful and encouraging. We were soon clear, however, that in the midst of a surge of Anabaptist studies no mere reprint would suffice. The present publication is both an extensive revision and an enlargement.

As things have developed, the propositions originally put forward have stood up under criticism, further research, and the publication of large quantities of new primary sources. There are three new sections: on the tolerance of Philipp of Hesse (Chapter I, third section), on the opposition of the Reformers

to a literal obedience to the Great Commission (Chapter IV, second section), and on the Anabaptists and natural law (Chapter IV, last part of fourth section). For the sake of reader interest, the original Chapter I, "Former Treatments of Anabaptism," has become the last chapter: Chapter V of the present work, "The Changing Reputation of the Anabaptists."

In the former first chapter the charge was made that historians had generally judged the Anabaptists on the basis of secondary polemical sources, and that primary sources were available to those who sought them. "The Anabaptists have commonly been judged on the basis of insufficient evidence. It is time for a re-trial" (p. 18). As this is written it is not too much to say that, while the process of re-trial is not yet complete, the "prisoner at the bar" has a much different countenance from what he had before scholars began to take the evidence of the *Täuferakten* and related reports seriously.

Bad Godesberg/Rhein
Easter, 1957

F. H. L.

INTRODUCTION

A Working Definition of "Anabaptist"

Several serious impediments have customarily blocked the path of those who turned to a discussion of "Anabaptist" church life and thought. These impediments proved fatal to most previous studies. Calling them to the attention of the reader is one of the first tasks of the present study.

Inadequate Information on Anabaptism

First, it is impossible to assume that the average reader has any adequate concept of the "Anabaptists." Information on the groups so termed has been notoriously scarce and has rested in the main upon hostile polemics. Usually those who were cordially inclined have also relied upon secondary sources and attempted to present a friendly or tendentious judgment through selective citation. The conclusions thus reached have not seldom been as unjust to the true Anabaptists as those of their enemies, even if otherwise intended.

In the final chapter we shall discuss the way in which present evidence calls into question four centuries of partisan interpretation by defenders of state-church Protestantism. In addition to Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, the traditional authorities cited have been Justus Menius and Heinrich Bullinger; all of these men were very hostile to the radical groups, and made no attempt to deal fairly with them in the flesh or in writing. We shall see that the typical history of the Reformation in English still rests upon the attacks which these stalwarts made upon those they called "Anabaptists," although a few of the more recent general surveys are cast in a new mold. The reputation of the Anabaptists is in fact changing. Newly published documentary materials and certain German monographs have made imperative a thorough revision of still prevailing judgments regarding those called

"Anabaptist." A reassessment of the entire movement is timely and feasible. Contemporary students who approach the radicals comment quite vigorously upon the paucity of reliable interpretative writing¹ — a paucity the more remarkable because the newer sources obviously make possible a thorough reworking of the field. The linguistic impediment is serious, however, for even a reader fluent in modern German can be defeated by the various dialects used in the middle European area before the modern languages took form. The polemics against the Anabaptists have long been available in English or in modern tongue; the testimonies of the Anabaptists themselves are still primarily the preserve of philologists and historical specialists.

Not only were the students of Anabaptism long plagued by restriction to descriptions of doubtful value, but the complexity of the movement itself provided further difficulties. As we shall see, the groups that broke away from state-church Protestantism on the Continent were marred initially by many confusions and incoherences. It is not easy to extract a central concept or classifying principle. Later interpreters, hostile or friendly, have read into the movement as it finally took shape their own stereotypes: "revolutionaries," "individualists," "liberals," "Biblicists," "enthusiasts" (*Schwärmer*), "Bolsheviki," "Bible Christians." Various attempts at classification will be discussed in this study, and the author will make a recommendation of his own.

The term "Anabaptist" itself gives no assistance to our problem. No word in Christian history has been used more loosely. To attempt to group in a single category all those to whom the term has been applied is as hopeless as the dove's pursuit of a landing place while the waters still covered the earth. Very evidently a study of "the Anabaptist view" will come to grief in an early paragraph unless some more precise use of the word is adopted than has been usual. The word "Anabaptist" wants a definition, as will be plain from review of its history. The precise problem of defining and classifying is discussed in Chapter One. At this point the use of the word must be checked and limited; it has been one of the stumbling blocks for every generation of historians.

What Does "Anabaptist" Mean?

The word "Anabaptist" is a Latin derivative of the Greek original, *anabaptismos* (re-baptism). The German form, *Wiedertäufer*, means "one who re-baptizes." Lutherans and Zwinglians applied it in the beginning to those who separated themselves from the main body of the state churches. 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. Their argument was of no avail. The name was so conveniently elastic that it came to be applied to all those who stood out against authoritative state religion."² We shall see later that even baptism itself was not the primary matter in the testimony of the radical movement.³ The radicals wanted to be known only as "Brüder" (Brethren) or by some other nonsectarian name, and were far indeed from the later insistence of some Baptists on a formal precision in ritual. In the first period of the movement in Switzerland even the Zwinglians called them "Tauffbrüder." Baptism became important only because it was the most obvious dividing line between two patterns of church organization. "Anabaptist" was a popular term with the authorities because it afforded them an excuse for forcefully suppressing the radicals. The enemies of the movement were insistent on use of the term "Wiedertäufer" or "Anabaptistici" because the radical groups thereby became subject to the death penalty. Under the ancient Roman law against the re-baptizers (Donatists), those called "Anabaptist" could be suppressed by the sword,⁴ even though the extension of the law in this fashion was at best of doubtful legality. The campaign of propaganda and suppression succeeded. At Speyer in 1529 the emperor ruled against the "Anabaptists" in final fashion, and persecution by imprisonment and exile and death spread throughout the length and breadth of the Empire.⁵ But the radicals themselves did not admit the truth of the charge. And the movement itself cannot be classified properly in terms of the baptismal rite.

Historically, the term "Anabaptist" became a slippery word, an epithet flung contemptuously, in much the same way the

word "Bolshevik" recently has been hurled at those of unpopular views.⁶ In fact, the term has very limited value, and is used in this study only because it has found a traditional place in historical studies. The terms "Swiss Brethren," "Hutterite Brethren," "Mennonites" are far more precise. "South German Brethren" has also come to carry some meaning since the publication of recent volumes of sources edited by Krebs, Schornbaum, and Franz. In general, however, the Swiss and the South Germans were one party, and they are not always distinguished from each other, even by specialists in Anabaptist affairs. The important point is that the reader should mistrust the use of the term "Anabaptist" unless there is conclusive evidence that the typology derives from a proper use of primary sources.

A Working Hypothesis

When we review the various sixteenth-century groups which broke from the pattern of established religion, we are struck by the degree to which all shared an attitude to history which is technically known as "primitivism." This attitude was expressed in many ways. When we consider the views of those to be termed "Anabaptist," the central significance of the church view stands out. The function of Chapter I is to show how this happened, and the line of argument is developed from a critical review of the history of the movement. The view of the church came to dominate the Anabaptist movement, therefore, although initially there were several grounds for group protest against the state churches. The concern for restitution of the "True Church" was a center about which some groups coalesced. From this center other protesting groups broke away, and these are not properly termed "Anabaptists." They shared with the main-line Anabaptists the vision of a restitution of a lost virtue, but for them the nature of the True Church was subsidiary to other concerns, theological or political.

As the principle of voluntary religious association, accompanied by reactivation of the role of the laity, has come to the center of contemporary Christian discussion, the incidents sur-

rounding the origin and validation of religious voluntarism become vital to both theology and religious sociology. In this perspective a study of the Anabaptist Church view is a study in the origins of "sectarian Protestantism." "Sectarian" is here used in the context of the sociology of religion and not in the popular or polemical sense of a normative judgment!

There has been a marked change in writing about the Anabaptists in recent years. Many scholars are no longer content with sweeping generalizations about the movement based on polemical Lutheran and Reformed writings. In the newer writings various schemes of classification have been attempted, to define various groupings among the radicals.⁷ After studied review of the materials at hand, assayed with attention to evidence yet largely unavailable to the American scholar, the writer has come to the point where an arbitrary definition seems both logical and inevitable. Such a definition can reflect, however, the verdict of history in favor of those radical groups, among many, which were able to resolve certain incoherences and approximate their ideal. For working purposes, *the Anabaptists proper were those in the radical Reformation who gathered and disciplined a "true church" (rechte Kirche) upon the apostolic pattern as they understood it.* In a treatment of the Anabaptists, the doctrine of the church affords the classifying principle of first importance.

Fritz Heyer, in his detailed coverage of the field, came to a similar but less precise proposition about the centrality of the church view. Presuming that the Reformers' judgment must have been correct, he nevertheless attempted to tie the several wings of the radical movement together: "The ultimate significance of the Anabaptism [*Schwärmertum*] of the sixteenth century is grounded in the concept of the church."⁸ His treatment is a rather traditional state-church apologetic, whereas we shall concern ourselves primarily with concrete group experience.

R. J. Smithson, author of one of the few reasonably adequate books on the movement, says: "The real issue between the Anabaptists and the other reformers was on the question of the type of Church which should take the place of the old Church."

He goes on to quote the great church historian Philip Schaff to the effect that “the reformers aimed to reform the old Church by the Bible; the radicals attempted to build a new Church from the Bible.”⁹ According to Cornelius Krahn, an American Mennonite scholar, the central theological concern of the Anabaptists was in the church, and he goes so far as to term their style of thinking “ecclesio-centric.”¹⁰

In a broadly theological context we might use “Anabaptist” (in quotation marks) as Heyer uses the term; but the term is applied most appropriately to those groups who effected a vigorous church life upon what they thought to be the pattern of the primitive church. Chapters II, III and IV will show what they thought that pattern was; Chapter I will discuss the Anabaptist congregations (churches) and the way they developed in the midst of vigorous and various protests against the Catholic and Protestant establishments.

The coalition of church and state (corpus Christianum) has continually had outspoken opponents since its' inception in the 4th century under Constantine. All through the long medieval night of papal terror and up to the present day of accommodation and compromise, there has never been a time when the voice of dissent and nonconformity was not heard, protesting against established religion and coerced uniformity. The most prominent target of that protest has been the arrogant usurpation of Christ's Kingly Authority and Headship over His churches and the souls of men, whether that usurpation was Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, or any other. As it has been, so shall it ever be. This enduring testimony of dissent, this genuine Christian nonconformity arises as the inevitable response of the Christian soul to the internal witness of the Spirit toward the truth and supreme authority of God's Word. Consequently, the origin, nature and history of Christ's churches can never be adequately discerned or explained apart from some grasp of the Biblical Truths advocated and defended throughout the history of genuine Christian Dissent and Nonconformity. As Dr. J. S. Whale, former Professor of Ecclesiastical History, Mansfield College, Oxford University and President of Cheshunt College, Cambridge University, said, *"Dissent, not only from the centralized absolutism of Rome, but also from the State establishments of Protestantism in the Old World is an historic fact of enduring influence. To account for the tradition of liberty in the 'free world' of today without reference to dissent would be to read modern history with one eye shut."*

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