

Church History: “The Reformation” 1500-1900

(Part 3)

“The pioneer of the Reformation was Martin Luther. He was prepared to stand alone against the might of the Roman church. But Lutheranism was not the only version of Protestantism. In Zurich, Zwingli began to preach reform at much the same time as Luther. While he was to some extent influenced by Luther, he was an independent thinker and differed from Luther on some matters. Before long Protestantism was split into two streams – Lutheran and Reformed (or Swiss) Protestantism. Zwingli died young and his place was taken by the Frenchman John Calvin, with the result that the Reformed faith is often known as Calvinism.

“Luther and Zwingli were **magisterial Reformers** – that is, they introduced reform in co-operation with the magistrates or rulers. They did not wish to break the link between the church and the state. Their aim was not to found a new church but to reform the old one. While there was reform of **doctrine**, the ideal of the state church, to which all citizens belonged, remained. . . This ideal was challenged by some for whom the protestant Reformation was not radical enough – **the Anabaptists**. The issues of the state church and infant baptism divided them. The radicals’ opposition to infant baptism hardened and in 1525 they began to rebaptize believers. The town council responded by ordering the exile of all those rebaptized, and in the following year the death penalty was introduced for rebaptizing.

Infant baptism was the obvious point of disagreement but the issues were more fundamental. The Anabaptists rejected the state church, to which all were forced to belong. For them, Christian faith was free and voluntary, not to be coerced. The church is a voluntary association of committed disciples. The Reformers recognized that not all citizens were true Christians, but they saw the elect as an unknown number within the state church – we cannot know for sure who they are. The Anabaptists disagreed. They felt that the church should consist only of true believers, of committed disciples. The true church is not the unknown number of the elect within the all-embracing state church – it is a visible group of disciples who have separated themselves from the world. Its purity is to be maintained by excluding unrepentant sinners. All church members are committed Christians and are to be actively involved in spreading the faith. The Anabaptist ideal of the church was rejected in the sixteenth century.

“Christian Thought” Tony Lane pp121,151

“The radicals found their best opportunities to preach in Switzerland, the Rhineland, and Holland. By mid-century three groups appeared in German-speaking Europe: (1) the Swiss Brethren; (2) the Hutterite brethren in Moravia; and (3) the Mennonites in the Netherlands and North Germany.

Major Anabaptist Principles:

Discipleship: The Christian’s relationship with Jesus Christ must go beyond inner experience and acceptance of doctrines. It must involve a daily walk with God, in which Christ’s teaching and example shape a transformed style of life. The consequences of being a disciple, were wide-ranging. To choose only one, the Anabaptists rejected the swearing of oaths, because of Jesus’ clear commandment in the Sermon on the Mount.

Love: In their dealings with non-Anabaptists, they acted as pacifists. They would not go to war, defend themselves against their persecutors, or take part in coercion by the state.

Congregational view of church authority: Decision making rested with the entire membership. In matters of church discipline, the believers also acted corporately. They were expected to assist each other in living out faithfully the meaning of their baptismal commitments.

Separation of church and state: Faith is a free gift of God and civil authorities exceed their competence when they “champion the word of God with a fist.” The Church, said the Anabaptist, is distinct from society, even if society claims to be Christian. Christ’s true followers are a pilgrim people; and his church is a marching demonstration of perpetual aliens.

“Over the centuries the descendants of Anabaptism lost many of the characteristics of their founders. In their search for a pure church, they often became legalistic. In the interests of sheer survival, they lost their evangelistic zeal and became known simply as excellent farmers, good people, and the ‘Quiet in the Land.’ Not until the late nineteenth century did they experience revival and fresh growth. Far beyond the boundaries of the Mennonite and Hutterite communities, however, Christians have embraced one or more of those principles for which the first generation of radicals were willing to die.

“Church History” Bruce L Shelley pp.264,265