

## *The Rise of the Anabaptists*

Many of the saints I shut up in prison... and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often... and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities

Acts 26:10-11

It is night in Zurich on the 21st of January, 1525, and the snow lies thick upon the ground.<sup>1</sup> A lone man, wrapped against the bitter wind and keeping to the shadows, trudges along the street known as Neustadt close by the Grossmunster. He stops, glances furtively about him, then knocks gently upon a door, his breath coming hoary in the frosty air. He rubs his numbed hands together and stamps his feet in the snow. The door is opened a mere crack. For a brief moment the shadowy snow is dimly yellowed by the flickering light from within. The man kicks the snow from his boots and steps quickly across the threshold. The door is closed, the bolt shot home. The street falls dark and silent once more – apart from the mournful moan of the freezing wind.

A second man comes into the street, clinging to the shadows. He also steps inside the house. He is followed by two others; then another... Within a few minutes, twelve or so men are packed into the room of the house which belongs to Felix Manz. Their breath hangs misty, their faces reddened with cold. They blow upon their numb fingers, rub their arms and nervously shuffle their feet. But their spirits are even colder than their bodies. Disappointment, sadness, grief is scored upon their features, especially about their eyes. Their hearts are heavy with anxious care – too full for words. ‘Are we all here? Good! Well, let’s pray then’.

They fall upon their knees. Words come now.

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<sup>1</sup> I have taken this material from my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*, second edition, pp42-60. You may also listen to me reading it on a free download of my audio book (David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

O Lord God Most High in heaven, hear us. You are the God who teaches and guides all hearts, grant us your direction, guide us, show us your mercy. Help us, O Lord, for our flesh is weak. Help us, O Lord, for without your help we shall not be able to withstand the persecution and the suffering which will surely come upon us...

Their prayers come to an end. Slowly they rise to their feet. One, George Blaurock, speaks, his eyes meeting those of one of the others:

Conrad Grebel, I ask you... for God's sake, baptise me... baptise me with the true baptism, with Christian baptism. I acknowledge my faith in Christ. Baptise me, I ask you.

Conrad Grebel obeys the request of his friend and baptises him, following which Blaurock baptises all the others. Each man professes himself to be a true believer in Christ. Each promises to follow Christ as a true disciple should. Each pledges to live his life separated from the world. And they promise to teach the gospel and maintain the faith together.

In this way, on the 21st of January, 1525, in Zurich, Anabaptism was born. That wintry night, the first church of the Anabaptists came into existence. A little more than seven brief years had passed since Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door at Wittenberg when this church was formed. Its members were those, and only those, who had been baptised upon profession of their faith in Christ.

This was a step of the utmost significance. It was nothing short of a revolution. By this act, a mighty blow was struck in the struggle for the church, since this was the greatest, the most complete break with Rome which could have taken place. It is not too much to say that more than a thousand years of the Church system which had been imposed by Rome on millions of men and women, and the slavery which she had enforced by a reign of terror throughout Europe, were broken that night in the house of Felix Manz by this tiny handful of brothers. It is a gross understatement to say that Rome would fight back, but the zenith of her power had passed. These dozen or so men had possessed the audacity to wrench their shackles off! And thousands of enslaved believers would follow them. Thousands upon thousands!

Nevertheless, the first Anabaptists could not have realised just how immense a step they had taken. These Swiss Christians had simply obeyed their understanding of God's word, dared to follow the teaching of Scripture on the doctrine of the church, and in this way a church had been formed on the only basis known in the New Testament. The consequences would be felt throughout Europe; what is more, throughout the world. They will be felt as long as time shall be.

These Swiss believers were not the first to reject infant baptism and the theories of Constantine. Oh no! During the Dark Ages there had been those who denounced the Papacy, and – among other things – baptised only believers. Some formed churches of such. Interestingly, among the scores of abusive labels which had been given to them by the Papists down the centuries, one was Anabaptist! Unfortunately, many of the details of their heroic struggles have been lost as a consequence of the tremendous war Rome unleashed upon them. But men such as Peter of Bruys, who laboured in the south of France, and was burned at the stake in 1124, and Henry of Lausanne, who was condemned at the Council of Rheims in 1148, and languished in solitary confinement and starvation until he died, are all known to God. Also some of the Waldenses and Albigenses were forerunners of the Anabaptists of Zurich. As only to be expected, we mainly – or only – know about these and similar believers through the censures of the Papists. Nevertheless, the scant details we have tell us that Rome did not have it all her own way, not even at the height of her power. God did not leave himself without witness (Acts 14:17). No, not even in the Dark Ages.

But why were the Swiss believers so sad in 1525? And why so furtive?

They were sad because, by their obedience to Christ, they had been forced to forsake their friend Ulrich Zwingli. In the same year that Luther made his protest against Rome, Ulrich Zwingli, a priest in the Roman Church, was reading the recently published Greek New Testament. He was struggling with the things he discovered there, for God was speaking to him about his sin and about the only Saviour of sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ. By 1519, Zwingli

was converted. An outbreak of the plague had concentrated his mind on eternal things, and he found help by the study of the teachings of Luther. Above all, he was led to faith in Christ by his reading of the New Testament.

By 1522, Zwingli was in Zurich in charge of the reformation taking place there. Around him were several young men who had been converted through his ministry. These young men, endowed with outstanding ability, were vigorous in faith and all were eager to learn as they studied the Greek New Testament under Zwingli's instruction. The group included Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, among others. All of them were committed to the furtherance of the gospel; all of them were zealous for Christ; and all of them were more than willing to play their part in the battle which was raging for the recovery of the church. Indeed, they were eager for it.

Sadly, by the end of 1523, sharp differences arose between Zwingli and several of the young men over the correct way to proceed and bring about the full reformation of the church. Zwingli at first agreed with the others that the Scriptures, and only the Scriptures, should determine what was to be done in the church. But he drew back from that position. For example, although he knew the Mass was an abomination according to the teaching of the Bible, he was unwilling to abolish it until the town council gave him the authority. All the same, at one stage he did make up his mind to end the observance of the Mass, and he actually went as far as to set a date for the momentous step – Christmas Day, 1523. However, a short while before the day arrived, he abandoned his plans. The young men felt betrayed by their erstwhile friend and teacher.

The question of baptism was also raised among them – even before the ending of the Mass. Zwingli went so far as to assert that infant baptism was not valid, since it was not warranted by Scripture, and he even preached against it. But in this matter, as in the question of the Mass, he compromised and drew back from his stated position.

All this was a great source of sadness to the young men, and could so easily have shaken their resolve and dampened their ardour. Nonetheless, they knew they must continue to follow

Scripture and obey Christ. If this meant they had to sever the precious bonds of friendship with their former teacher, then so be it. They owed much to Zwingli, but they owed everything to Christ.

Yet why were they so secretive about it? What was there to be afraid of? The answer is, a great deal! Their fears were fully justified and arose directly out of the dominance of Constantine ideas in the Church and State. I referred to this in the previous chapter. We shall look into the matter a little more fully at this point.

### ***Church and State after Constantine***

The step the Anabaptists took that night in the house of Felix Manz amounted to a rejection of the Church system which had dominated Europe since the days of the Roman Emperor Constantine early in the 4th century. As previously explained, Constantine had taken steps which led to the joining together of the State and the Church, fusing it into one body – something completely foreign to the New Testament – thereby forcing Christianity upon men by the power of civil law. Although all the changes did not come in overnight, from that time on, to belong to the State (that is, to be a citizen of a country) would come to mean the same thing as being a member of the Church. In this way, the nonsensical notion of a ‘Christian country’ was born. Although the story is complicated, and there were many twists and turns, it was not long before the pope ousted the Emperor as head of Church and State – there can be only one head! – and from that time the Papacy locked Europe in its iron grip. Shrewdly taking over the apparatus of government – both spiritual and temporal – the Roman hierarchy enforced its will on all the people by what amounted to a virtual police-state throughout the Continent.

Entrance to this Universal Church was brought about by infant baptism at the hand of a priest. Every infant in the State was baptised; every baptised infant was said to be regenerate; every baptised infant was a member of the Church. If any man dared to leave the Church, even if such a thing were possible, he became virtually Stateless. Excommunication by the Church authorities meant the removal of the apostate from the Church, but it also

signalled his or her expulsion from the State. That is a pleasant way of putting it. It meant exile or execution, of course. The cost in human suffering was colossal. Thousands were slaughtered. Thus the huge numbers of men and women who were burned at the stake or strangled or drowned in the name of religion during the Dark Ages, were executed as a direct consequence of the edicts of Constantine. Indeed, the same kind of reasoning has been responsible for the martyrdom of countless men and women in the name of religion – grievously, not excepting ‘Christ’ – ever since. We shall meet the dire practice repeatedly in these pages. It is one of the major threads which binds this history together.

Relations between the Church and the State became very complicated after the Emperor Constantine’s so-called conversion. Until that time the New Testament position largely prevailed; that is, Christians believed that the church and the State were both instituted by God, that they had distinct and separate powers, and it was wrong for either body to trespass on the realm of the other. In other words, the church did not try to organise the State; nor did the church allow itself to be organised by the State. The two kingdoms were separate. However, the State would not long tolerate this independent spiritual body which thrived among its citizens, so it soon began to persecute the church, and many saints were put to death by the civil authorities. This brutality commenced even in New Testament times, as is clear from the many references to it. (See, for example, Matt. 10:17-18,23; Acts 4:1-30; 5:17-18,27-28,40-41; 8:1; 9:1; 12:1-4; 18:12; Heb. 10:32-34; Rev. 2:10,13; see also, perhaps, Acts 21:33; 22:24). Nevertheless, the church continued to prosper spiritually despite – or because of – the persecution, and it generally managed to keep itself free of State influence. But in the early years of the 4th century, Constantine brought the persecution to an end by virtually welding the Church and State into one body, thus forming the monolithic State-Church. Once established, this then became the norm for over a thousand years. It was a tragedy of mammoth dimensions.

From the time of Constantine, either the Church or the State could be master of this man-made monster, the State-Church. But only one of the partners could be master, not both. When it was

offered the chance, the Papacy made sure the Church was dominant over the State. On occasions the roles were reversed, and the State ruled the Church – a condition known as Erastianism, so named after one Thomas Erastus, who was born in Switzerland in 1524. Erastianism, however, existed long before Erastus. For example, it was a feature of the Council of Clarendon in 1164 which proposed that the excommunication of a nobleman should only be allowed with the king's consent. By this dogma, the Church became a mere department of State. The Church of England, for one, adopted Erastian principles.

Between the two extremes – domination of the Church by the State and *vice-versa* – a third expedient was adopted by the Reformers, following Luther's break with Rome. They approved of Constantine's fusion of the Church and State, and they said that both constituents are of equal status, equal partners in the State-Church union. That was the teaching of Luther, Zwingli and, later, John Calvin, along with the rest of the Reformers, as I will show. At least, it was so in theory. I will develop this enigmatic point as the story unfolds. It was the position the Presbyterians would eventually adopt in due course. But the claim of equality for the two partners of the State-Church coalition proved a severely unstable position. So much so, either the one or the other inevitably came to dominate the partnership. The truth is, the measures the Reformers put in place led to a virtual Erastianism in the Reformed Churches; that is, the domination of the Church by the State. But in 1525 all that lay in the future.

As I said, Constantine complicated matters. He did worse than that. Far worse. He started the wholesale corruption of the scriptural relationship between the State and the church, with consequences so vile they are hard to overstate. Spurgeon had something to say about the way many regarded the Emperor through rose-coloured spectacles and even saw him as the glorious fulfilment of the prophecy of the man-child in Revelation 12.

C.H.Spurgeon commented:

If you refer to the expositors you will find that they discover in this passage the dragon-ensign of pagan Rome, and its removal from its position by Constantine, who set up the cross in its stead. I do not believe the Lord took any more interest in Constantine than in any

other sinner, and it seems to me little short of blasphemous to say that he was the man-child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and was caught up to God and to his throne.

Spurgeon went on to say – and his words ought to be weighed very carefully – Constantine’s ‘adoption of Christianity as the State religion was not a thing for glorified spirits to rejoice in, but a dreadful calamity, fitted only to make sport for Pandemonium. No one ever did the church a worse turn than he who first joined her to the State. The act was a piece of State policy and kingcraft and no more, a business utterly unworthy of record by an inspired pen’.

That is the truth of the matter. Yet the Papists and the Reformers thought Constantine was a triumph! In shining contrast, the Anabaptists regarded him – and rightly so – as an unmitigated disaster. They challenged the Constantine doctrine and all that followed from it by their action in Zurich in 1525. What they did was to go back to the New Testament position regarding the relations between the church and the State, and they overthrew the twelve hundred years of almost unbroken wrong-headed practice. Naturally the defenders of Constantine immediately latched on to the most visible aspect of the Anabaptist’s rebellion against the *status quo* – the question of baptism. Infant baptism was central to the entire culture of the Constantine State-Church. It was absolutely basic to it. The Papists and the Reformers put their finger on this vital point when they nicknamed the Swiss brothers ‘Anabaptists’, from the Greek word for ‘again’, because it was said that they baptised again. They ‘re-baptised’. The Anabaptists themselves denied this, and denied it emphatically. They declared that their infant baptism had not been valid; it was no baptism at all. Their baptism as believers was their one and only baptism since the baptism of infants was alien to the New Testament. This stance provoked a severe reaction against them, to put it mildly. It is this response we now look at.

### ***Reaction to the Anabaptists by the Papists and the Reformers***

Naturally, the Papists hated the Anabaptists and all their works and doctrines. No wonder! The ‘heretics’ had struck a blow at the very



foundation of the papal system, and shaken it mightily. They had attacked the Romish method of entrance to the Church; in fact, they had attacked the very notion and basis of the Roman Church altogether. It would not be tolerated! It could not be allowed to go unpunished if the Papacy was to survive. Rome looked to her vested interests, and moved decisively to protect them. There was nothing for it. The Anabaptists must be exterminated. For this reason, Rome poured a torrent of fire upon them.

But sadder still, the Reformers also hated the Anabaptists. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin in his turn, along with many others, were scathing of them. Far worse, the Reformers attacked and abused them with vigour. I emphasise the point I have just made – the Reformers and the Papists held similar views on the union of the Church and State, both asserting that Constantine was a triumph in the history of the church. The ‘heretics’, to the contrary, retorted that both he and his doctrine were utter disasters. The gulf could not have been wider.

The Reformers and the Papists both believed it was the magistrate’s task to enforce discipline in the church, whereas the ‘heretics’ said the magistrate had no power in Christ’s kingdom. This was to prove a battle-ground which would be fought over many times in the next one hundred and fifty years. Alas, the Reformers and the Papists proved unlikely companions in arms against the Anabaptists in the struggle for the recovery of the New Testament church. It was another instance of former enemies made allies against a common foe; almost as bad as Pilate and Herod who, sinking their differences for a while and treating Christ with contempt and mockery, ‘became friends with each other, for before that they had been at enmity with each other’ (Luke 23:11-12). What is more, between them the Papists and the Reformers had a firm grip on the levers of State, and possessed the sword which enabled them to enforce their will upon the masses. Nor did they hesitate to exercise their grisly power – they wielded it with vigour in one form or another. The truth, however, resided with the despised ‘heretics’.

### ***The views of Zwingli and Luther – Luther especially***

Zwingli and his followers were very severe towards the Anabaptists, and persecuted them with savage intensity. He believed firmly in the power of the magistrate to carry out Church discipline. In this he was a virtual Erastian. But what was Luther's attitude towards the Anabaptists? First of all, it is necessary to discover what Luther believed in principle, and then to see how far he worked his understanding out in practice. What did Luther think about relations between the State and the Church? What did he think about uniformity or divergency in religion? Should men be forced to practice a common religion, or could they do as they believed according to their conscience enlightened by Scripture, free of punishment? Unfortunately, there is great difficulty in defining Luther's views on these questions, and the same goes for Calvin. The fact is, Luther's views were complicated and confused, even ambiguous and contradictory.

Now what did Luther think of the Church and State? He simply could not make up his mind. Sometimes he viewed the church in the old Constantine manner, as a mixture of believers and unbelievers lumped together by their infant baptism – wheat and tares; that is, he, like all the Reformers, misapplied the parable of the tares. I will examine this misinterpretation of Scripture in a later chapter. By his mistaken understanding of the parable, Luther could say that 'the temporal authorities are baptised with the same baptism as we'. By this, he meant that the Church and the State were one and the same, they constituted one body. This unity came about through the sacramental rite of infant baptism which made all citizens into Church members.

That is one aspect of his views. Yet at other times Luther regarded the church in the same way as the Anabaptists did. In other words, he thought of the church as the New Testament speaks of it – a company of the regenerate, separate from the State; that is, Luther held similar views to the Anabaptists, who taught that regeneration, followed by faith, followed by baptism, led to New Testament church membership. The State and the church are separate. From time to time, Luther said things along those lines. So much so, it could be said of Luther that 'the true church for him was always the church of the redeemed known only to God, manifest here and there on earth, small, persecuted and often

hidden, at any rate scattered and united only in the bond of the Spirit’.

Reader, you can see how ambiguous Luther was on the make-up of the church. He simply could not decide.

Luther, in common with the Papists, also thought ‘the magistrate should be the nursing father of the Church’. But the consequence of this meant that the Church was somewhat dependent on – even beholden to – the State. Indeed, Luther went further when he made pronouncements and took steps which actually put the Church under the power of the State. For example, Luther – in desperation at the poor spiritual condition of the Church – was prepared to call upon the German nobility to reform it. In this way, he produced a Church which depended on the State to put it right, instead of it being a persecuted remnant within a pagan society, which is the biblical, and Anabaptist, concept of the church. Luther just could not see how a church could reform itself. It needed the outside power of the State to do the necessary work, he thought. Therefore, he looked to the nobility to put the reform of the Church in hand. But by this grossly mistaken view and misguided step, Luther ensured that the Church and the State became more closely linked. And worse, the Church was made subservient to the civil authority. In this appeal to the nobles, Luther actually hoped for the formation of a Christian State, though he did not believe that society could be Christianised! It was a grievous mistake on the part of Luther, born out of fear that the Reformation might collapse unless the political authorities rescued it. He hoped that recourse to the princes might be only temporary. Some hope! The reality is that ‘this timidity, which has been called prudence, did immense injury to the Reformation’, wrote J.H.Merle d’Aubigne. As a result of Luther’s mistaken action, from that time on the Reformed Church would be infiltrated by political agents, dominated by secular forces and thereby manipulated to serve the political ends of the State. If only Luther had followed the Anabaptists back to the New Testament! But he did not, and the Reformed Church became an arm or department of the State. The true church, the scattered remnant, would be persecuted by the secret police which would be formed, inevitably, by the Reformed State-Church.

Luther's conflicting opinions made him into an enigma. D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly said:

Luther's relationship to the Anabaptists is a most fascinating one; it is a kind of ambivalent relationship. He reacted against them, and yet in a sense he admired them and was a little bit jealous of the wonderful discipline that they were able to exercise in their own churches. He had to admit that there was a quality of life in their churches which was absent in the churches to which he belonged.

We shall see the horrendous consequences of Luther's tragic mistakes – mistakes repeated by many others – as we trace the unfolding of the battle for the church during the following hundred years or so. We shall see how this attempt to use the secular arm to establish the church was tried time and time again. And with appalling consequences in blood. Sadly, the desire on the part of some Christians to use political means to gain spiritual ground is not yet dead. With the best of motives, I freely admit – but mistakenly, all the same – believers are still laying their hands on the weapons forged by Constantine. As we go on, I will enlarge upon this.

This brings us to the next point. What about the issue of uniformity in religion and its enforcement by the State? Luther was muddled over it. On the one hand he could rightly say that 'heresy is a spiritual matter and cannot be prevented by constraint... Better to let men err than to drive them to lie'. But, as we shall discover, he was prepared to adopt measures which flatly contradicted this.

The upshot of all this is, Luther's views on these matters were never clear – neither to him nor others. He never resolved his position. He contradicted himself. As d'Aubigne said:

Never perhaps was there so immense a space between the premises laid down by any man and the conduct he adopted... There was some inconsistency in Luther: he often expressed himself in a contradictory manner on what princes ought and ought not to do in the Church. This is a point upon which the Reformer and his age had no very settled opinions.

The last few words just quoted are false. While Luther had no very settled views on these matters, it is not true to say that all the men of his age were as undecided as he. The Anabaptists had very clear

convictions on the questions. And they were basically right in their views; that is, they were scriptural. The consequence of Luther's indecision and mistaken opinions was dreadful.

And he was not alone in that.

### ***The practical effect of Luther's views***

It is time to trace out the practical effects of Luther's views. At first, he tried to form churches according to the New Testament pattern – 'to gather together such ardent souls as could be assembled in a particular locality'. But he failed. His system could not bring about the scriptural pattern. So he fell back to a second and inferior idea. Realising that the Reformed Church was in a desperate condition, he felt he had to form a 'church within the Church', drawing upon an ancient ploy of the Manichaeian heretics. This misguided notion had long been taken over by the Constantine State-Church, but Luther resurrected it, spruced it up, and tried to give it a new lease of life. Nevertheless, despite his best endeavours, it failed miserably, as always. But, even so, it was not the last time this expedient would be used. Luther attempted to set up a spiritual nucleus within the carnal churches. In particular, in 1522 Luther drew up arrangements for the observance of the Lord's supper. He said that not all Church members could take the supper – only those who were truly Christian. What a dreadful mess this Constantine and Reformed view of the church leads to! Non-Christian church members? Should non-Christians be members of the church? It is not a case of non-Christians taking the supper – they ought not be in the church in the first place.

Anyway, Luther tried to restrict the Lord's supper to Christians, barring non-Christian Church members. But he failed. Why? Because things were so bad he just could not tell who the Christians were! A contemporary, Franz Lambert, bluntly called the vast majority of them nothing but heathen! They were Church members, but they needed to be saved. We shall come back to this theme, since it was a vital issue in the battle to recover New Testament church life and order. Luther persisted in his attempt to find the spiritual nucleus of the Reformed Church – 'he still desired to gather true believers into an inner fellowship'. But he

found the procedure difficult, if not beyond him. In any case, it was contradicted by his other views and practices. Hence he drew back, and 'by 1526 he declared his dream to be impossible'. But it was at this very point that the Anabaptists proved him wrong. What is more, though he thought the Anabaptists were so greatly mistaken, they actually fascinated him, for they demonstrated that the New Testament pattern is not to be fobbed-off as an idealistic dream; it is workable. As I noted above, Luther envied the Anabaptists and their churches in spite of himself. He really wanted their spirituality.

Luther now found himself caught in a dilemma, and he never got out of it. He never could decide whether the church is a voluntary body, made up of the regenerate – that is, the New Testament position – or if it is a territorial body, made up of every citizen baptised in infancy – the Constantine position. The Anabaptists plumped for the New Testament order. Luther wanted it, but said it could not be had.

By 1527, Luther was convinced that uniformity was essential. He was appalled at the confusion and chaos throughout Saxony with the multiplicity of separate churches which were springing up, in addition to this lack of spiritual life within the Reformed Church. There was only one solution as far as he could see. And this became 'the big thing' to Luther, his great idea. The Diet of Speyer in 1526 had given political power to the Electors – the heads of the German States. Luther grasped the main chance as he saw it. In every locality, there must be a single religion. There was nothing for it. A uniform religion had to be established. And the political powers would bring it about for him. They would do what he could not. Thus Germany would have one uniform religion. That would put an end to all the nonsense of various churches and carnality within the Reformed Church. But would it? Some hope!

And what about those who disagreed with the one enforced religion? What would Luther do with them? What is more, who would say what this uniform religion ought to be? And who, exactly, would put it into effect and enforce it? Finally, how would it be done? Luther, at first, allowed that those who disagreed with the form of this uniform Church could migrate to lands where they might find a more favourable environment. Further, he turned to

the Elector to set up a board of 'Visitors' under the authority of the politicians, to bring in this one religion. Thus he put the Church into a position where it was under the thumb of the State.

The Anabaptists would have none of it. Not at any price! They were not going to be cowed into submission, nor would they just go away. Therefore just what could Luther do with them? In the beginning, he showed himself unwilling to butcher them, as the Zwinglians were doing. In 1527, he said, in reference to the Anabaptists:

It is not right, and I am deeply troubled that the poor people are so pitifully put to death, burned and cruelly slain. Let everyone believe what he likes. If he is wrong, he will have punishment enough in hell fire. Unless there is sedition, one should oppose them with Scripture... With fire you won't get anywhere.

At this stage, Luther was thinking in terms of the death penalty – in this regard of enforcing religious uniformity – only for the crime of sedition. The Anabaptists were free to believe and practice as they wished, as long as they were not seditious. If they were not rebellious, or did not incite disobedience to the State, they would be allowed liberty. But, of course, since the State and the Reformed Church were fast becoming virtually one and the same body, disagreement with the tenets of the Lutheran Church, and rebellion against the State, became very difficult to distinguish. However, even as late as June, 1528, Luther still thought banishment was sufficient punishment for the Anabaptists. He said: 'I cannot admit that false teachers are to be put to death. It is enough to banish'. But, by 1529, at the Second Diet of Speyer, things had moved, and moved with a vengeance. The death sentence was passed upon Anabaptists, and John, Elector of Saxony, began to execute them.

Luther was caught. He was trapped, enmeshed in the iron cogs of the State-Church machine which he had built, or which he had allowed to be built. By his foolish, misguided words and actions, he had fashioned a monster. He had made, he had forged, the State and the Reformed Church into one body. The engines of persecution, torture and death now began to grind the poor heretics to powder, to ashes. Luther fudged and squirmed. But he could not get free. In 1530, he went further in his opposition to the

Anabaptists, perhaps driven on in spite of himself. He pronounced the death penalty upon them for blasphemy as well as sedition, defining both offences very narrowly. Then, in 1531, Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's fellow-German Reformer, produced a notorious *Memorandum* which Luther duly signed. This defined blasphemy even more tightly. For example, any criticism of the ministerial office – as defined by the enforcing power, that is – was called an 'insufferable blasphemy'. Another infamous *Memorandum* followed in 1536, again from Melanchthon, and again signed by Luther. Now *all* Anabaptists were to be put to death, not merely the political fanatics among them.

An indication of Luther's attitude during this diabolical confusion in which he was entangled by his own mistakes, is to be seen in the case of the thirty Anabaptists held by Philip of Hesse. Philip consulted various bodies – cities and universities – to determine what he should do with his prisoners. He had tried banishment, but they had not yielded. What could he do next? He was unwilling to execute them. Hence he consulted for advice. The sternest replies came from the Lutherans. Melanchthon argued that even passive resistance by the heretics must be met with death, and Luther actually signed the dreadful document. From now on, if anybody protested that it was wrong to punish those who dissented from the one State religion, that in itself was accounted blasphemy and merited death! The Anabaptists, with their practice of believer's baptism and separated churches, were an offence against God. They were an offence against the State-Church. They must die!

Luther tried to salve his conscience by adding postscripts to Melanchthon's *Memoranda*. He wrote: 'I assent. Although it seems cruel to punish them with the sword, it is crueller that they condemn the ministry of the Word and have no well-grounded doctrine and suppress the true, and in this way seek to subvert the civil order'. Contradicting himself, he added an appeal for mercy. But it was no use. It was too late. Things had gone too far, and the State machine was beyond his control. It had a life of its own. It cannot be denied – Luther himself grew hardened as the slaughter went on.



But despite its severity, all the persecution was utterly useless. Take Fritz Erbe as just a single example. Even though Erbe died in the Wartburg after sixteen years imprisonment, it was said that his continued ‘steadfastness... had converted... half of the populace of Eisenach to Anabaptism’. Anabaptist growth was phenomenal.

I have said that Luther acted against his own principles. It hardly seems credible that the man who persecuted the Anabaptists with such savagery, could condemn himself so clearly in his own writings. For example, on the church and the State, he said: ‘One must carefully distinguish between these two governments... one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds’. Again, with homely illustration in order that everybody could understand, he said:

Constantly I must pound in and squeeze in and drive and wedge in this difference between the two kingdoms, even though it is written and said so often that it becomes tedious. The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil’s name the secular leaders always want to be Christ’s masters and teach him how he should run his church and spiritual government... May God hinder him [that is, the devil], amen.

Again he wrote:

The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, when the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God’s government and only misleads souls and destroys them. We want to make this so clear that everyone will grasp it, and that our fine gentlemen, the princes and bishops, will see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing this or that... I think it is clear enough here that the soul is taken out of all human hands and is placed under the authority of God alone.

Luther’s frustration over men who continued to confuse the church and the State came to the surface in the open letter which he penned in 1525. He declared: ‘There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world. I have written this so often that I am surprised that there is anyone who does not know or remember it... Now he who would confuse these

two kingdoms... is the same as putting the devil in heaven and God in hell'.

It certainly seems that Luther had grounds for his frustration. The vast majority did confuse the two kingdoms. But there was one distinguished man above all others who did 'not know or remember' what Luther wrote. There was one man in particular who confused the two kingdoms. Unfortunately, that man was Martin Luther himself.

What is more, it would not have been so bad if he and his friends could have kept their bitterness to words, words which were as harsh as they could think of. Luther vented his spleen when he called the Anabaptists 'sneaks, corner preachers, fanatical enthusiasts, re-baptisers'. That last attack was the nub of it, of course. Another Lutheran gave voice to a blanket criticism; the Anabaptists were attempting 'to pervert everything in this human life', he said. They were the worst heretics of all time, apparently. Bad enough, in all conscience! If only the onslaught could have stayed at that level. Sadly, the Lutherans matched their actions with their words.

The Anabaptists were not perfect, needless to say. They made their mistakes; and some of their mistakes were grievous, and cost them dear. However, it must be borne in mind that there was no organised body that can rightly be called 'The Anabaptists', though, like so many authors, I am forced to write as though there were. Rather, there were thousands of individuals, several factions, and hundreds of separated churches all called Anabaptists, even though no coordinated, homogeneous body ever existed. What is more, their diversity was highly complex. Nor was it possible that these various churches and loose groupings could profess a universal, uniform faith. Also it has to be admitted, to put it bluntly, some adopted heretical views, especially on the person of Christ, and whether salvation depends on the grace of God or the so-called free will of man. Some Anabaptists were themselves intolerant of any dissent. Some spoke of the Reformers in a wild, harsh way, ignoring the vast amount of good which God accomplished through them.

Reader, I hope I have said enough to show you that I do not regard the Anabaptists as perfect. My opinion must be obvious. If I felt that the Anabaptists represented churches closest to the New Testament during the one hundred and twenty years I write of, my book would stop now! What is more, if we all became Anabaptists similar to the way they developed in the 16th century, Utopia would not be ushered in.

Having said that much, it is right to speak of the way the Anabaptists and the Reformers clashed over the connection between the State and the church, and to come to a judgement on it. On that issue, and other connected matters, I have no hesitation in asserting that the Anabaptists were largely in the right, and the Reformers were largely in the wrong. I realise that this is a gross over-simplification of the subject, but a thorough examination of the point would demand another book!

To return to the kaleidoscope presented by the Anabaptists. Some of the fringe element were extremists and they brought much trouble upon the mainstream Anabaptists by their sinful and foolish antics. For example, in 1534 some of them took over the town of Münster, announced the end time had come, and committed horrible sins in the name of Christ. This was an appalling disaster for the Anabaptists as a whole, doing their cause – indeed the cause of God – much harm for many years. But Münster was not their only catastrophe in the 16th century. A later development led some of them to hold and teach defective views on the person of Christ. This again brought much abuse upon them, and many paid for their errors at the stake. All the same, it was wrong to blame all of them for the sins and excesses of a minority like the men of Münster, for instance. And, in any case, what a dreadful act, to burn men for erroneous beliefs! As the Anabaptists aptly remarked, this is no way to convert people! Even so, the Reformers found it very convenient to blacken the character of all the Anabaptists with the sins of a minority, or even with the excesses of the lunatic fringe, and it was a tactic often used throughout the time this book deals with. The unjust smear has been repeated very frequently ever since. All the Anabaptists were branded with the outrages of Münster, even though the evils were committed by only a few of them. And the cheap vilification was a

great wrong! Sad to record, some critics to this day want to tar all Anabaptists with the brush of Münster.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

However all that is to anticipate. We have got ahead of ourselves, somewhat. To go back to 1525...

Zwingli and the Zurich council were especially bitter against the Anabaptists. Such was the ferocity of the persecution which the authorities meted out, the 'heretics' had to flee. But there was precious little respite for them even in that. Wherever they went, the Reformers and the Papists were vehement in their persecution so that the 'heretics' were scattered again and again, driven homeless throughout Europe, being forced to seek temporary refuge wherever they could find it.

Nevertheless, yet again God was working out his purposes for his church. Because of the persecution they had to endure, the doctrine of the Anabaptists was heard throughout the entire Continent; Germany, Poland, Moravia, the Low Countries, Norway, Italy and England, all were drawn into the battle for the church. All these nations heard again the New Testament teaching on church life. It was similar to the experience of the early church, but instead of Saul, now it was Rome and the Reformers who were guilty:

At that time a great persecution arose against the church... and they were all scattered... Saul... made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:1-4).

By this 16th-century scattering, thousands were forced to witness the savage persecution meted out to the Anabaptists, in addition to listening to their preaching, and watch their daily lives – thousands who might never have heard of them otherwise. Thus many flocked to join them, swelling their ranks massively as a direct

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<sup>2</sup> I am delighted to be able to record that there are signs of improvement in recent years. See my *Infant Baptism Tested* and my *Baptist Sacramentalism*.

result. Once again, by the will of God, those who opposed the New Testament teaching on the church actually contributed to their own downfall and to the advance of the church of Christ. The more the Anabaptists were ‘mown down’, the more they grew.

But, to put it mildly, the persecution was dreadful in the extreme. Men, women and *children* suffered agonies and torments beyond the power of words to describe. It is a wonder that flesh and blood could bear it. The Anabaptists were exiled, clapped in irons, kept barely alive on bread and water; they were tied together in chains, the first pushed into the river to drown, each pulling the next in to drown as he died. Many were burned at the stake; some were beheaded; others were branded; others had fingers torn off; some had their tongue pierced through with a stick, or cut out altogether; others had pieces of flesh ripped off with red hot pincers. Some were locked in their meeting houses and burned alive. And all because they would obey Christ as he has revealed his mind in Scripture. They would not baptise their infants, and they would form churches only out of regenerate men and women.

Reader, what do you say to this? What do you say of yourself in the light of such things? Are you obedient to Christ? Do you try to do all that he teaches you in his word? Or are you making excuses for disobedience? These Anabaptists put Christ before everything and everyone; they reckoned that obedience to their Saviour was their one chief concern in life. Although former friends turned against them, hated them and persecuted them, it did not hinder them in their obedience. To speak plainly – what tawdry excuses are often made for rank disobedience to Christ these days. Too often it is a case of anything for a quiet life. Christ comes way down the list of priorities for a great many. Reader, what about you?

Listen to these words of Christ. You know them well enough I am sure, but let me remind you of them:

Therefore whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her

mother-in-law. And a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:32-39).

These words apply to all things in the Christian faith. And this includes church life – your church life. What is your response to Christ, now?

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The first to be executed as an Anabaptist was Felix Manz. He died at the hands of the Zurich authorities under Zwingli. Manz was born the illegitimate son of a papist priest. He was well educated, a thorough Hebrew scholar, and versed in both Latin and Greek. Not only so, he was an eloquent preacher. In the early days at Zurich he was a firm friend of Zwingli and supported him in the reforms. In 1522, he began to question the notion of a State Church and the validity of infant baptism. Manz tried to help Zwingli see the teaching of the New Testament, but Zwingli broke with him. As explained above, it was at the house of Felix Manz that the first Anabaptist church was formed in January, 1525.

After that auspicious day, Manz engaged in preaching the gospel in the fields and in his mother's house. He was arrested and expelled from the town, but he was eventually brought back to be imprisoned at Zurich. He escaped with twenty others, and not long after he was reported to be baptising. The Reformed pastors tried to silence him, but he was resolute. He was arrested again, and accused that he had declared that 'he would seek out those who wished to accept Christ and follow his word, and he would unite with them by baptism'. For this, the death sentence was pronounced upon him:

Manz shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall tie his hands, put him into a boat, take him to the lower hut, there strap his bound hands down over his knees, place a stick between his knees and arms, and thus push him into the water and let him perish in the water... his property shall also be confiscated...

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It is a cold, winter's afternoon about three o'clock, the 5th of January, 1527, and there is a keen, biting edge to the wind. The gate of the Wellenberg prison is thrown open, and Felix Manz is led on his last journey, past the fish market down to a waiting boat. He raises his voice and calls out to the crowds, preaching as he goes, praising God that, even though he is a sinner, he is privileged to die for the truth. His powerful voice declares, among other things, that believer's baptism is the only true baptism.

At last, Felix Manz reaches the river Limmat which flows swiftly and dark in the last light of the wintry afternoon as dusk closes in. The thronging crowds fall silent and still. They catch and hold their breath. A voice rings out across the water; a woman's voice. It is his mother who calls to him:

Remain true to Christ, my son... remain true to Christ. Do not yield to the temptation... do not yield...

The river bank falls silent once more as the echo of her words dies away. The sentence of death is read. Manz is put into the boat. His hands are tied over his knees. The block is thrust between his arms and legs. One last word! Manz cries out in Latin: 'Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit'. He is tied to a hurdle and thrown into the river. The dark, cold waters quickly surge over his head. Down, down he slides. Instinctively, he gasps for air. The struggle proves too much. The river flows gurgling on. Felix Manz is dead. He has proved that his words to the town council were no idle boast:

I hereby resolve that I will remain faithful to Christ, and put my trust in him who knows my every distress, and is mighty to deliver. Amen.

Felix Manz was only twenty-six years old when he gave his life in the conflict for the recovery of the New Testament church. I have no doubt that in his death he experienced the truth of his own words in a richer and fuller sense than ever before:

*With gladness will I sing now;  
My heart delights in God,  
Who showed me such forbearance,  
That I from death was saved*

*Which never hath an end.  
I praise thee, Christ in heaven,  
Who all my sorrow changed.*